

# The *Weltbild* Concept According to Ernst Cassirer\*

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## ABSTRACT

The intention of this paper is to ask Cassirer, within the framework of an ideal dialogue, a fundamental question: does the notion of *Weltbild* exist and, if it does, how has it taken shape in his philosophy? In order to do so, the paper briefly defines Cassirer's theoretical reference background and then it analyzes the question of the construction of the "worlds of sense", focusing in particular on their connections with language, myth, art, and knowledge.

## Conceptual and Methodological Background. *Weltbild* and Autotelia of Symbolic Forms

The intention of this paper is to ask Cassirer, within the framework of an ideal dialogue, a fundamental question: does the notion of *Weltbild* exist and, if it does, how has it taken shape in his philosophy? In order to do so, our essential strategy requires firstly to briefly define his theoretical reference background in a conceptual way which is neither philological nor historiographical.

The ideal background for Cassirer's argument consists, on the one hand, of the phenomenological approach, which justifies the "natural" symbolism of consciousness. It was this approach, with its gnoseological-style validity, which Cassirer, ever a fervent upholder of phenomenism, employed in order to outline his very first indirect debate, with the views upheld by the young Heidegger, in the two-year period from 1912 to 1914. On the other hand, the reference background consists of the genealogical analysis of the forms of construction of the truly human dimension, or rather, the symbolic-cultural dimension;

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such forms are defined by Cassirer, in his later years, as autonomous and autotelic spiritual functions, capable of producing not only specifically designated individual symbolic constructs, but also the cultural spheres, or worlds of sense which these constructs include: language, myth, art, science. The dynamic principle of autotelia characterises the function which creates the particular symbol and configures the symbolic reference sphere: this means that this function *self-determines dynamically*, not just once and for all, continually setting out conditions for itself and rejecting hetero-determinations. This dynamicity, although free, is also oriented towards individualisation and is mirrored, during “periods of grace” in history (and not only the history of culture), by a typical and “model” precipitate of history. That is to say, it is mirrored in a symbolic construct, which is of an extremely relevance due to the fact that the universal and the particular come together perfectly within it; it is an «oeuvre», yet also an act, a rite, a momentous historical event (Cassirer, 1929, p. 25), in which the specific formative function is condensed and realised. It is this “special” model, prototypical and altogether inexhaustible, which is defined by Cassirer as the original symbolic phenomenon [*Urphänomen*]: *what simply is, is, with no more explanation needed.*

That said, Cassirer points out the fundamental difference between *Urphänomen* and the «basic phenomena» which form the grammar of symbolic consciousness, taking us back to where we started talking about the conceptual reference background; it is the network of creative functions of «objectivity» in which the reality of culture *sui generis* leads the way for being the anthropological «signature» of our species. Man is an *animal symbolicum* due to his mental and conscious make-up. The fact that this topic can define the philosopher’s entire theoretical outlook is demonstrated by the fact that the cornerstone of the primacy of the natural phenomenology of consciousness reappears, in simple terms, also in the *Nachlass*; in particular, it appears in the collection of notes and observations contained in the first volume of the unedited manuscripts, which should have been the fourth volume of Cassirer’s systematic work, the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, let us now turn our attention to the phenomenological investigation of consciousness. We are never walled-in behind our intra-subjective con-

<sup>1</sup> The late J.M. Krois, curator of the critical edition of Cassirer’s posthumous writings and fine interpreter of the philosopher’s works, rightly entitled this text *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen*; see Cassirer, 1995.

sciousness; on the contrary, not only do we *experience* it perceptively as passers-by from one state to another, but also as *agents* and *operators*. The three basic phenomena, which we are unable to explain any further since they constitute the key to reality, are 1) the phenomenon of the “I”, 2) The phenomenon of action and 3) the phenomenon of work (Cassirer, 1995, p. 170). In Cassirer’s words: the Self, the Other, the World. The third phenomenon corresponds to the object, to reality, where the construction of sense takes place in the perceptive, acting, working consciousness. It is upon this basic and transversal selective and constructive grid that the individual directions of consciousness are rooted. Let us not, however, think that strict divisions exist between the three basic phenomena; on the contrary, as Cassirer states paradigmatically for all forms, starting with language itself, the living flow which connects these phenomena is the spontaneity of their vital and spiritual energies, necessarily projected towards their own symbolic embodiments. That is to say: the forms of perceptive and sensorial elaboration which, through their own making, primarily reveal “the real” to human vision according to a specific orientation of sense, which is also a figural style, are referred to by the philosopher as *symbolic forms*. Axes (functions) of symbolic consciousness, individual and unmistakable products, spheres or worlds of sense, all these meanings merge in the conceptual constellation of symbolic forms. The latter are autotelic: having a purpose in and not apart from themselves [*Selbstzweck*].

These arguments lead us to state that the typical styles of construction for each formative function can be equated to the notion of *Weltbild*, and can be declined to the plural [*Weltbilder*] right from the outset. This wording, whenever it appears in Cassirer’s writings, could be translated as: *the world of myth*, *the world of science*, etc. (Cassirer, 1999, p. 89). It is not a case of advocating one particular hypostatisation over another, something that Cassirer would find inconceivable, but of suggesting an equivalent, to indicate in the autotelia the typical constituent and auto-descriptive structure of each symbolic principle *as much towards itself as towards the sphere of its own self-realizations*. Such a thesis is highly premature here and comes from the analysis of the fundamental systematic function performed in relation to Hermann Cohen’s overall idea of the ethical doctrine of freedom as an autotelic form, which self-determines dynamically and not just once, continually setting out conditions and creating challenges for itself. This careful scrutiny occurred in the same period (1912–14) as the debate between Cassirer, adherent to the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism, and the young Heidegger, at that time restless inter-

locutor of Rickert. This debate had already touched on the question of reality and the question of truth as correspondence, a topic which Heidegger later took up, in perpetual conflict with Marburg neo-Kantianism, both in *Kant und das problem der Metaphysik* (Heidegger, 1973<sup>4</sup>, p. 83–84) and in *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit*.

In order to understand and “unravel” the philosophical-political implications of this topic, our brief sketch of Cassirer’s theoretical background needs a third step, i.e. we must take for granted the theoretical heart of the *Realitätproblem*, whilst making reference to the historiographical and historical-conceptual reconstructions set out elsewhere (Henry, 1990, pp. 445–458). We must do this in order to understand how the constant and well-discussed rejection of the definition of gnoseological realism paved the way for Cassirer’s own theoretical view of it as the philosophy and science of culture. As such, his thinking inspired some decisive acquisitions within the qualitatively-inspired social sciences, as well as within aesthetics as an interpretative discipline of the symbolic-perceptive phenomena of present time. In fact, if we look at the direction of the gnoseological debate over the last fifty years, it becomes unnecessary to point out the distinction between sensation and perception, insofar as it is not in itself worthless; however that may be, and finding ourselves with Cassirer at the heart of the philosophy of neo-criticism, let us remember that perception designates a complex and structured cognitive process which includes a wide range of individual feelings and refers them to a given “quid” which differs in respect of both the percipient and the other givens. The single symbolic function colours and shapes the numerous perceptions it addresses according to its own characterising form.

### 1. A Question of Reality, the Truth of Being, Styles of Construction of the Worlds of Sense

Question: What is Being? What is Reality?

Answer, from an enchanted illustrated children’s book: If this [a sheep ridden by a Martian] lives in a book, then this sheep also exists. (Cousseau, 2010, p. 7)

In other words: could we picture an image which consists of nothing other than its external aspect, without validating the objection that the most important thing is missing? The answer to the question about validity is yet another question, or a need – the need for there to exist a construct endowed with sense, in

the form of an image of the world. From the above, we know that, according to Cassirer, every symbolic form contributes in a particular way (modality) to the formation of both the concept of the “I” and the concept of the “world”. The modality is understood as a principle of the context and style of construction, since it circumscribes and gives rise to the semantic sphere which gives sense to that which it contains. For example, certain spatial configurations can be adequately represented as an artistic ornament in one case and as a geometrical figure or a mythical-magical iconic formula in other cases.

This can occur because language, myth, art and knowledge are not merely mirrors which do nothing more than reflect the images of a datum of the internal or external self (the being): they are not images duplicated within the two selves, but rather they are the truly bright sources, the conditions of seeing itself, just as they are the source of all formative activities.

Cassirer follows a dual strategy. On the one hand, he puts forward arguments against the mimetic theory of knowledge assuming only the original or natural symbolism of consciousness, the representation of consciousness in its entirety, which is already contained in or about to develop in every instant of conscious activity itself. On the other hand, he introduces a formative spontaneity (which is poetic only in terms of the consistency of its individual precipitates) into the cultural, linguistic, mythical, artistic, logical-mathematical products and into the reality *sui generis* of culture. It is a reality which is in conflict with us, which resists us and which we must confront, with a modality and a structural style which differs from the way in which science apprehends and processes reality. Even the mathematical formulae with which physical sciences decipher natural phenomena are a result of the very same symbolic consciousness. It is not actually acceptable to conceive of an insurmountable duality between the principle of validity and formation on the one hand, and the world of effects which such a principle puts into action and renders consistent, tangible, accessible and capable of being interpreted, on the other hand. This is the unifying motive between all the functions of symbolic productivity, from language and myth to science, by way of art. In fact, Cassirer’s purpose was always to achieve a reconciliation between the universality of the formative code and the particularity of the single result, not in an abstract way but through the unity of living manifestations, that is through individual cultural artefacts which are themselves conceived and limited in the individualised context/world of sense. This world of sense is indeed the only thing that can make

them open to the interpretation and reflection of single symbolic worlds, these clearly being intrahistorical and potentially universalizable.

As a confirmation of this, what Cassirer disagreed with in his writings and in public debate was Heidegger's stance with regard to the problem of knowledge, starting from the early years of the last century, up to the posthumous notes in Cassirer's *Nachlass*, which concentrate on the contradictions of Heidegger's later gnoseological ideas. The origin of the deviation lies in the gnoseological theory, the theory of ways in which a valid apprehension, i.e. one that is true to reality, is activated, and consequently, the epistemological theory, the reflection on assumptions and on the status of the different sciences which, in their reciprocal autonomy, analyze the different aspects of their own configurations. Of particular relevance are Cassirer's observations on *Kulturwissenschaften*. In the pages of the *Nachlass* which deal with the persistent confusion, both in *Sein und Zeit* and in the works of Heidegger's *Kehre*, we read that:

It is not possible to separate the ontological from the ontic, the individual from the universal, as Heidegger seeks to do – as the one is found only in the other. We [Cassirer] conceive the universal as “objective spirit” and objective *culture*. [...] It is here where we differ fundamentally from Heidegger – for us, the objective spirit is not born and does not die in the structure of daily life – the “impersonal” does not only consist of the vague social form of the mean, but rather in the form of the *supra*-personal sense – and this supra-personal aspect means that Heidegger's philosophy has no basis.

We might, if we are feeling generous, believe that such a basic theoretical irregularity disappears with the *Kehre*. This is not the case, however. Let us consider Heidegger's notion of *Unverborgenheit* [unhiddenness]; according to this, we can *autonomously develop* (and hopefully with adequate critical efficiency) the reading perspectives already identified by Cassirer in order to weaken his opponent's structure. We will see how this notion comes into play particularly in the Heideggerian definition of the connection between the truthfulness of vision as non-concealment and the ontological validity of that which is acquired from the vision itself. It is, therefore, necessary to retrace in a

stylised yet exhaustive way the stages of the retranscription of the myth of the cave, carried out by Heidegger in his essay course *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit*.<sup>2</sup>

Let us make clear to start with that, according to Heidegger, the veiling as an initial condition of the existence-Being connection, as well as the entity in its own effectual singularity, progress through stages and that the unveiling of the entity, and the entity's increasing visibility from the point of view of the human being is connected to the progress of the unveiling of the Being, as a condition of seeing the entity. From this perspective, if we consider the Platonic metaphor referred to by Heidegger, the human being always has a connection with the non-veiling, even when s/he finds her/himself at their lowest point, chained at the back of the cave. In that condition, s/he sees only shadows and is unaware as to whether s/he is perceiving only the image of the entities and not the entities themselves. In the second stage, the human being is released from his chains. Now s/he can turn around and look at the entities in the light of day, in a place of brightness and clarity where s/he can finally grasp them as phenomena and no longer as images of entities; these phenomena have an added ontological value since, according to Heidegger's reading of Plato, they are more "ontic" and therefore more real than the shadows.<sup>3</sup> In the third stage, the human being chooses light, chooses to free himself and take shelter in the light. In the Platonic lexicon, s/he contemplates the Idea, as a source and fountain of the viewable and visual perceptive faculty. To my view, this is Heidegger's interpretation of Plato.

In the previous transposition of Heidegger's philosophy, the parallel between the definitive Truth of Being and the unveiling of the Being should be obvious. The unveiling which the philosopher describes in his three stages takes place exclusively in the visual dimension. The metaphor of the sight of the entity revealing itself to the Being and of the interrelated perceptive processes, is reflected in the definition of *θεορία*. This is a somewhat weighty legacy, if we also consider it as the exclusive strategy for apprehending the Being.

<sup>2</sup> I have drawn frequently on the clear reformulation by E. Caruso *Die Wahrheit bei Heidegger*, an unpublished manuscript presented at the Philosophisches Kolloquium organised by Volker Gerhardt, Humboldt University, Berlin, 20 January 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Against this misunderstanding see Rudolph, 2011: «Long before the contemporary debate on image sciences [*Bildwissenschaften*] Ernst Cassirer anticipated this diagnosis in his Warburg essay *Eidos und Eidolon*, in the context of an exegesis of Plato. There he observes that in Plato the relationship between archetype [*Urbild*] (*eidōs*) and image [*Bild*] (*eidolon*) is primarily characterized not by *mimesis*, but rather by participation, by *methexis*. Original and copy share in one of the other».

In this case, the Heideggerian legacy becomes occlusive, limiting the scope of human perceptive elaboration to a single, exclusive and binding dimension, organised in the same way as an ontological hierarchy, composed of assiologically structured stages between ontological substance and the unveiling of the Being. We must finish by developing the observations made by Cassirer and Goodman on the all-consuming supremacy of the logical-visual paradigm, in order to dignify the different symbolic modalities of sublimation/interpenetration of substance in multiple images of the world, complete and hospitable for the human beings who created them.

## 2. Transmission of Sense due to the Contamination of Artistic Genres. Beyond the Original-Copy Dualism

To start with, we must seriously consider this last possibility, that is, we must assume the reasonableness of an anti-foundationalist and anti-representationist perspective which asymptotically seeks the completeness and beauty of the symbolic construct in terms of its quality and level of significance. We must do this, albeit in an interlocutory manner; if we are not willing to take this step it would mean that we would still feel obliged today, perhaps unknowingly, to pay tribute to the legacy of Heidegger's onerous and despotic ontology, and to a philosophical approach based on the relationship between the epiphany of the being and the truth of the entity, especially in the purely theoretical dimension.

In contrast with this undue supremacy, Volker Gerhardt tells us that: in the times of sundials, the shadow which marked the position of the daily star in the sky was the corporeal, authentic and existent sign of the temporal instant, something fundamental in the sequence of the individual and collective lives of the human aggregations living in a given time, in a given place.<sup>4</sup> In actual fact, the word *Abbild* has three meanings in the German language:

1. (*Bild*) image, portrait.
2. (*Wiedergabe*) copy, reproduction.
3. (*Darstellung*) representation.

<sup>4</sup> Citation taken from the debate occurred at the Philosophisches Kolloquium, cited in the previous note.



By affirming the full autonomy – *alias* autotelia – of the constituent forms of viewing the world as independent yet, at the same time, monadic and autarchic dimensions of sense, Cassirer remains throughout his entire philosophical and biographical journey one of the most consistent adversaries of the supporters of realistic gnoseology, based on *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, surpassed in this only by Nelson Goodman. If we imagine a perfect, heated debate, we can defend all the more, in respect of Cassirer (who was the precursor to and the inspiration behind Goodman), the views of an Italian observer who wrote of the American philosopher:

The symbol is an activity of union which implies a dynamic of abstraction and which unifies, in the end, by means of a conventionalistic criterion. Between the symbol and the object to which the symbol alludes there is no relationship constrained by the quality of the object. The linguistic mechanisms which allude to an object are arbitrarily constructed: what is said in respect of an object does not imply the symbol's capacity to translate the quality of the object. In order for there to be a symbol, it is sufficient for the linguistic mechanism for constructing the symbol to fulfil criteria of arbitrary coherency, a coherency between the symbol's linguistic quality and the criteria which establish the *construction style* of the symbol. (Chiodo, 2011)

The severing of the link between the *Abbild* (alias *Bild*) and an underlying essence does not in fact mean that it is not possible to establish – within the code and according to the figural style (the construction style), typical of every single form of construction in the world – highly recognisable degrees of completeness, quality and harmony comparatively inferior or superior to a standard stipulatively considered to be a primary model, which can invalidate further “updates”. In turn, these display the unmistakable mark of the symbolic form we are dealing with, either as creators of symbols or as interpreters of the energetic processes and the final oeuvres. Furthermore: a specific symbolic form may be characterised in terms of style and modality of the faculty of representation [*Darstellung*] just like art, without this involving a connection arising from an ontological original or from a pre-constituted immediate essence, which, as would occur with an incision into a cast or in relief, could link the projections/copies in the form of artistic configuration. If this can appear plausible, starting with the most material and ontic of all artistic symbolic forms, perhaps the way will be paved for more ambitious results.

### 3. A World in Motion Also Requires Sculpture to Move<sup>5</sup>

Sculpture is one of the very first subjects of photography. Thanks to experimental framing, selective focussing, variable optics, extremely close shots and focussed lighting, as well as techniques of collage, montage, assembly, and darkroom processing, photographers have not only reinterpreted sculptures but produced unexpected, novel creations. The three-dimensional, tactile, dense and heavy manifestation of plastic art has, over a period of time, been transformed reflexively and technically, at least since the beginning of the last century and thanks to its interweaving with arts originally considered as being of minor importance, due to being structurally reproductive – those arts which copy the original by reflecting it in the second grade eye-mirror of the camera or the movie camera. Let us not forget the opinion of Louis Aragon, who in the 1930s said that photographic art originated in the artist's workshop and had become filmic, through reportages of scenes of daily life or special collective events. Against every Heideggerian prediction, the experience of photography has become the experience of human existence.

Something which still causes a stir and utter confusion is the success of the dematerialising and perspectival *modality* through which such an ethereal and derived expressive medium as photography has managed to enter the creative interpretation of sculpture so forcefully and how photographs have influenced and challenged our understanding of sculpture. Why? Perhaps because plasticity is the most immediate manifestation of the substantial immediacy of the being still subject to Heideggerian legacy. Or perhaps because, as a cultural unsaid, its “objective” and substantive autonomy would be more valuable than the subjective forms of apprehension. Would this still occur nowadays? If it did, the gradual but continuous, unrelentless activity of anti-representationist conceptions – in other words, their positive, constructionistic formulation – would have been pointless.

Despite the persistent essentialistic legacy, the subtle pervasivity of constructionism is evident in all areas of the contemporary – multiple, polycentric, polyarchic, unshakeable and fragmentary – constellations of world visions. We must still dispel this doubt with counter-arguments. In this present condition, the *Zeitdiagnose*, which, for many observers, corresponds to the most sophis-

<sup>5</sup> «Eine Welt in Bewegung erfordert dass auch Die Skulptur sich bewegt», in the words of Ernesto Luginbühl.

ticated degree of reproducibility in *Technischen Zeitalter*,<sup>6</sup> is seen both as the era of a true or assumed dematerialisation of things and objects of use, as well as the era of subjective relationships with regard to the economic treatment of these things.<sup>7</sup> This is true on the one hand. On the other hand, and relative to the first aspect, the mark of the present time would be the predominant contamination not only of genres and forms in all their meanings, but also of the life situations and experiences, the same social behaviours in respect of plasticity and manipulability of human corporeity, transformed into a changing «totalen Kunstwerk». Let us refer to a crucial and provocative event in the artistic-scientific sphere:

The question about feasibility [*Machbarkeit*] in all ambits of human life is not negotiated only between science and politics. Here popular culture plays a fundamental role in all its graduations between artistic comparison, media communication of knowledge and criticism, and drastic matter of pain and desire: movies, music, comics, magazines, television and YouTube produce visions, nightmares, “explanations”, ties, myths [...] of the new conceivability and feasibility.

Since their beginning, Science Fiction und Horror reflect the development of life sciences and biology. This is not a one-sided relationship: so as popular culture serves science, the last one serves vice versa popular culture not only as a mean, but rather as a quarry of ideas, pictures, and rhetoric.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> «It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the “authentic” work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value. This ritualistic basis, however remote, is still recognizable as secularized ritual even in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty» (Benjamin 1968, p. 233).

<sup>7</sup> As can be read on the webpage <http://www.sellingthe.net/>: «The originals are free. On the other hand, a unique piece [*Unikat*] exists only through purchasing. Every unique piece [*Unikat*] is a part of the multiple. [...] Then a unique piece [*Unikat*] exists if, in the framework of purchasing, an original is autographed and provided with the rules of the multiple by a buyer and an artist».

<sup>8</sup> The reference is to the event of great impact and enormous profile which started with the Kulturstiftung des Bundes in collaboration with Kampnagel Internationale Kulturfabrik and the Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaft: the Congress and Mise-en-scène *Die Untoten – Life Science & Pulp Fiction* (Kampnagel, Hamburg, 12-14 May 2011). Responsibility for the overall concept, from which the previous passages are taken, lies with Dr. Karin Harrasser, Dr. Oliver Müller, Georg Seeßlen, Markus Metz (scientific curators), and Dr. Alexander Klose (Kulturstiftung des Bundes). There is an urgent need for the social and philosophical sciences to recommence a reading of the signs of the times, to reinterpret with courage and restlessness the visual, artistic and literary languages of the present day, avoiding hierarchies and purisms, accepting inter-genre contaminations

And yet... if this seems indubitable, what does remain palpable in this kaleidoscope of conversational and imaginative records is a kind of nostalgia for the myth of immediacy and eternity, the search for something primordial, intact and authentic, something that is and will remain under and beyond its transient manifestations. The myth of the origins of the self and the “we” is still something that people go in search of, as if seeking the “vestals of the holy grail”, so that, once its eternal essence has been obtained, this essential, substantiating nucleus can instil a sense of security and guarantee the duration of the self for everyone and the duration of the world itself, at the inevitable end of individual and collective life.

On one side, Mircea Eliade prompted us to search in escapist literature (and artistic expressions) for the imaginary and myths which we believe have vanished from our civilisation. Myths, as symbolic constructs capable of giving sense to many aspects of individual and social life, must never be condemned, and certainly not ignored, nor misunderstood, in that they are structuring elements of the global mass society. Cassirer’s lesson is illuminating as far as the question on the proper way of coping with myth is concerned. Symbols and representations are equally useful tools and, potentially, very dangerous, “light” arms, that is pervasive and effective in the most hidden recesses of the sphere of construction of the individual and collective self. How to address and deconstruct them is the first, unavoidable skill to be learned.

#### 4. Cultures and Construction of Sense. Political Myths and *Wesenkerne*

With regard to the polyphonic, not always peaceful, connection between these styles and modalities of apprehension and the configuration of the world, and the respective historical-cultural concretisations, Cassirer prematurely pointed out one of the paths which, although well travelled by some particularly sharp and accredited intellectuals and social scientists, has yet to become the main road. Cassirer immediately rules out the idea that formative worlds – the spheres of sense created from symbolic forms – are also carriers of symbolic contents *given once and for all*, which have also made up the foundational nucleus, the *Wesenkerne*, of interrelated historical communities.

(artistic, literary, visual) and rejecting the superciliousness that gives preference to the knowledge of high culture over the knowledge and practices of low culture.

On reading again Cassirer's posthumous works we discover an explicit and detailed critique of the monadic and self-centred vision of plural monoculturalism, of the contemporary phenomenon of multicultural societies "woven like a mosaic", opposed even by Amartya Sen. Many years ago, Cassirer believed that cultures were units of function, layers for bringing up to date the "sense"; these layers cannot be considered as being limited in time or as something certain or predetermined which is deployed in time, but as the inexhaustible act of pure placement, of beginning itself. Once again: "culture" (but also "nation") is a relationship concept which encompasses the *connection* between something historically given with a dimension of *sense* and therefore with something which is always newly assigned; the notion of culture encompasses a factor which in principle is not empirically perceptible, a pure factor of sense (Cassirer, 1995, p. 283).

We are well aware that, in direct antithesis to a formal-structural perspective such as that of Cassirer, cultures were formed into cultural nuclei, made up of myths, customs, artistic productions and specific and well-defined behaviours. We also know how these "cores" were depicted as molecules, better still as monads, which produce exclusion, indifference, hostility and aggressiveness towards others. This inauspicious circumstance does not, however, exclude the fact that cultures can be an additional and free source for anyone seeking their own identity in the dimension of belonging to a group, on the condition, nevertheless, that these cultures are correctly designed, that is to say, as possibilities for deploying the sense, according to an open generative code. Unfortunately, this does not always happen. Much more frequently cultures are unduly petrified and molecularised by their adherents who concretize them in immoveable essences, transforming them into social factors of indifference, if not quite hostility, towards their non-companions. In fact, tolerance, understood as the indifferent sentiment of the "live and let die" approach, is an attitude which is inadequate for capturing and confronting the pluri-cultural and asymmetric reality of modern-day societies.

The implementational problems of a genuine, not false, peaceful co-existence between explanatory mythographies of cultures can already be seen within the context of a non-extreme, albeit consistent, *cultural* pluralism, as in the case of Europe. In fact, we should look at the example of Spain in order to guard against the risk that could be incurred if the European myths were considered as being equal to the essential cores [*Wesenkerne*] of individual cultural-national identities, that is as "fixed" components of Europe's pluralist

physiognomy, or if, as a matter of course, they were to be accepted within a framework of tolerance of manner and therefore ephemeral (to be understood, both in its meaning of moral behaviour and political practice, as well as reciprocal indifference). Behaviours and practices inspired by tolerance would be misleading, since they would substantiate false visions – visions that were essentialistic, static and monadic – of national identities and myths. We would fall into a sort of essentialistic naturalisation of foundational myths. As a solution, we can list and reveal the components which are common to rival myths, for example, the myths of the Reconquest and Al-Andalus, in order to highlight their normal, instrumental nature. Both these myths are constructs which originated on the stage of Spain's national history in order to achieve supremacy as the nation's main symbolic representations, in terms of its education, its collective memory and, in short, its political culture. The three aspects which are equally present in both these myths are: their nature as artefact, their instrumentality in terms of ideals of socio-political integration (even if these are assiologically opposed) and – the most important aspect in this argument – their *basic narrative structure*. Understanding the flexibility of such a narrative draft to produce *assiologically opposed* myths is a way of escaping from the dualistic and oppositional logic of the mythical nuclei, should it ever be discovered that, despite the pretext of originality, purity and distinctiveness, these rival myths are the product of contaminations and transformations of an important common story-line, one which is essential for both versions of the crucial events concerning the same theme, the mythologem, which is the same plot and narrative of sense being susceptible to multiple variations.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> In 711 a.D., armed units of Arabs and Berbers landed near Gibraltar and conquered most of the Iberian Peninsula. The resident population put up minimal resistance. One hundred and fifty years later, the complex situation had stabilised; the land which the Romans had called "Hispania" now had a new name – "Al-Andalus". In the north of the peninsula, however, kingdoms characterised by a distinct anti-Moslem political identity were formed. From a certain point onwards, the Christian rulers conducted a military campaign of expansion which was to last for centuries, up until the conquest of Granada, the last Arabic stronghold on the peninsula, by Isabella of Castile and Alfonso of Aragon in 1492. The myth of the Reconquest was actually created in the ninth century, in order to justify the Christian rulers' military expansion towards the south of the peninsula; nevertheless, the myth spread, gaining full recognition in later centuries and huge plausibility, since it contributed to the consolidation of a political identity based on a centralised, unified state, in the same way as has been the experience of modern-day Spain. For a detailed reconstruction of the origins and narratives structures of both myths see Henry, 2000.

As we can see from the previous example, the more general, and as yet unresolved, problem is the difficulty in making a scientifically accredited version not only of the notion of “cultural nuclei”, but of the notion of culture itself, prevailing in public language. We should systematically turn to a vision which inspires us or which grants heuristic validity to the *standards* of qualitative social sciences and to the most sophisticated and advanced standards of the *Kulturwissenschaften*. This, at least, is the job of those who carry out intellectual activities.

As a crucial remark: here the reflexive paradigm/pattern is explicitly adopted, against the ascriptive one, in order to define collectivities such as cultural aggregations. According to the first pattern, human groups are extremely relevant as active interpreters of their own practices. In many cases there exists a “we”, an aggregation of individuals that adopt the first person plural to define themselves, recognising themselves in a series of common features, but not without opacity and conflicts (Henry, 2008, 2010). From the other side, the *identity* of “we” is not a substantial unity of convictions, of rules, of objectivised rituals or materials, but it is rather a combination of routines and symbolic practices, a mobile background of references for the actions of the subjects (men and women) involved in often conflictual and asymmetric symbolic exchanges. Let us consider the corresponding human aggregates encompassing diverse combinations of such *Weltbilder* (linguistic, mythic, artistic style of grasping and creating their own worlds); they are collectivities in progress, porous, permeable, and able to produce as outfits specific interlacements (*imbrications*, the French *géographie sociale*) between socio-cultural relations and spatial and temporal relations, in turn subject to germination through contact and impact (Elden, 2005). Human aggregations outside of a social-cultural structure of space and time are not conceivable. They are what they are only by means of prototypical ways of apprehending and constructing living worlds as textures of meaning. So far, in this contemporary assumption held by some contemporary social scientists, we can recognise as general inspiration the notion of symbolic form; it indicates, as we know, an autotelic and dynamic symbolic world, a specific way of texturing meaning according to a generative code open to free and diverse outputs. This model was coined and developed by Ernst Cassirer as opposite model to an essentialistic, monolithic idea of culture/s.

So far, we agree that cultures as results of such symbolical intercourses are texture and worlds of meaning, always open to controversial and conflictual

reinterpretations. They are neither essences that determine us, nor things that we possess. We could also dismantle the holistic myth of cultural belonging like the merely individualistic belonging of the global cultural consumer. Cultures are shared practices, they are routines, sets of played games, dynamic, conflictual frameworks for culture-interchanging subjects.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, first of all, we need to learn how to play and the constraints and capabilities cannot be easily or automatically universalized. We have to take part in the game, to “be” part of the game itself, if we want to play. Namely, to be inside the cultural game, inside the texture of meaning, to be part of the elementary interchange practices. If we were born and brought up enmeshed in these practices, in this game, it would not be difficult to follow them. Equilibrium between strategic and creative action is needed in order not only to give birth to, but even to endorse and implement the intercourse between each individual and his/her group. Given such highly specific conditions of being part of a so-called culture – a game, in order to make the players’ circle more inclusive along the way – we need to produce similar complex conditions and processes of primary and secondary socialisation in the polities we all, according to asymmetrical patterns of integration, still live in.

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<sup>10</sup> See Marramao, 2009; Henry, 2008, 2010, 2011.



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