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FOREWORD

Exploring the Range of Reality: The Aesthetics of Symbolic Forms

On the occasion of the *Vierter Congress für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* (Hamburg, October 7-9, 1930) Ernst Cassirer closed his talk¹ in front of an audience which included figures like Richard Hamann, Moritz Geiger, Ernst Barthel, Erwin Panofsky, and Albert Görland, by pointing out the necessity to work ceaselessly drawing the “star maps of spirit” (ECW, XVII: 427), a comprehensive outline of all regions of culture. Cassirer’s own three volumes of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* arguably provide extensive reconstructive analyses of the forms and rules of language (1923), of the life of mythical consciousness (1925), of the phenomenological unfolding of science and cognition (1929) – thus mapping the space of symbolic reason with great scope.

In this scheme, however, the role of art and aesthetic experience – their place in the map of spirit – is not immediately evident. Cassirer left us no self-standing volume dedicated to art and aesthetic experience as a symbolic form in its own right, and yet he is adamant when pointing out that both notions obtain a key position in his overall understanding of culture.² Art is, according to Cassirer, no “mere adornment of human life”, but rather one of its “essential conditions” (ECN, VII: 141). Aesthetic experience more generally does not rely on a lower degree of meaningfulness, nor does it entail a deflationist account of signification, for one “who does not understand these intuitive symbols, who cannot feel the life of colours, of shapes, of spatial forms and patterns, of harmony and melody” is ultimately unable to grasp “one of the deepest aspects of reality” (ECN, VII: 177; text amended). Art indeed discloses “a new dimension to human life; it gives to it a depth that we do not reach in our common apprehension of things”.

The aim of this special issue on *The Aesthetics of Symbolic Forms* is to contribute to the project of mapping all regions of culture by exploring different ramifications of Cassirer’s take on a Neo-Kantian aesthetic space in its many facets, and to pay tribute to the wide variety of historiographic and systematic approaches that informed (and followed from) his stance.

If it is true that art and aesthetic experience are philosophical concerns, it is equally true that both essentially relate to different branches of inquiry: from the history of ideas to literature, from cultural studies to theoretical analysis, thus making it possible to establish a fruitful dialogue between scholars concentrating on Cassirer’s aesthetics and interpreters who connect his stance to related works on symbolism and visual culture. To reconstruct and inquire into the space of *The Aesthetics of Symbolic Forms* also means – we believe – to acknowledge the dignity of philosophical aesthetics in its capacity to penetrate into interpretive standpoints that, despite their diversity and multifaceted specific interests, can be inscribed in the framework of human culture.

On the one hand, the interests of this special issue on *The Aesthetics of Symbolic Forms* thus include the systematic reformulation of Cassirer’s account of art and the aesthetic dimension of other symbolic forms, for the influence of Cassirer’s aesthetic standpoint also provides effective tools to cast light on the relationship between language and art, similarities and distinctions between myth and art, and the cognitive import of aesthetic experience itself and its distinctive relatedness to the sphere of feelings. On the other hand, the focus also involves important influences and extensions of Cassirer’s aesthetic thought. Of particular interest here is the route tracking the development – not necessarily linear or always harmonious – of Neo-Kantian aesthetics in the philosophy of Castoriadis and Bourdieu, who both contribute to reconstruct a comprehensive outline of the aesthetics of symbolic forms, but also Cassirer’s legacy in analytic philosophy, namely in Langer and Dewey, and, finally, the extent to which aesthetic symbolic formation interacts with actual arts such as architecture and literature.

Notes

1. Published in 1931 with the title *Mythischer, ästhetischer und theoretischer Raum*. In ECW XVII, 411–432.
2. For an overview of the literature, see the bibliographies of Lauschke 2007, Pollok 2016, Matherne 2021, Filieri 2024.

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