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Doctoral thesis

CONTRIBUTIONS TOWARDS
A SEMIOTICS OF PLASTIC LANGUAGE:
CONSTANTIN BRANCUSI

- summary -

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SUMMARY

The goal that I had in mind as I set out to write the present paper was to identify, within the realm of plastic arts, the optimal formulas to express the invisible by means of the visible, the idea or the spirit through the mediation of matter - given that, beyond appearances, in any work of art lies an invisible side that is revealed or awaits disclosure - and subsequently to choose the most representative formula among them and explore it using the tools provided by semiology, a discipline defined as “the art of understanding the invisible through the visible” (Traian D. Stănciulescu). This is what brought me to Constantin Brancusi.

The language of plastic arts is a sign language targeting both intuition and reason; we can infer, feel, and experience their meaning and, in a complementary manner, we can discern it through a process of analytical understanding. This twofold path of deciphering plastic signs, as well as the fact that - as Jung argued - in the collective unconscious there are archetypal images to which we all relate, transforms signs into a universal, unifying language of human culture.

Plastic language is the sign code used by the artist to express in an original and, as far as possible, unique manner, the ideas, feelings, emotions etc., through which his inner world is made accessible to the others and exteriorized in a creative form. It is a process of decoding and simultaneously of encoding one’s feelings and inner universe, otherwise impossible to submit to exteriority.

Any type of language employs the *sign* in communication and the study of signs in the process of their communication is equivalent to the disclosure of a *semiosis*. In this *sign-semiosis* relationship, semiotic methodology provides the necessary means for an integrated approach for the purpose of exposing the meanings that plastic art, in general, and sculpture, in particular, encode through their specific object-language. It also reveals the interdependence links between philosophy, aesthetics, art history, etc.

Since it enables the highlighting of innovating functions related to art, semiotic analysis contributes to the expansion of man’s knowledge about himself and his relationship with the broader universe of human creation.

Applied to the particular case of artworks, the research methods specific to semiotics determine an understanding of object-language and of multiple artistic meaning and a complex deciphering of the behaviour of signs through an integrative interpretation activity.

Our approach has a double purpose: we have focused, on the one hand, on the contributions of semiotics to the interpretation of plastic language in general, and of Brancusian language in particular, and on the other hand, on Constantin Brancusi's contributions to the development of plastic (sculptural) language.

CONTENT OF THE THESIS

The first part of the paper - *The language of sculpture: conceptual and methodological horizons* - explores the fundamental issues underlying the doctoral thesis, specifically the conjunction between object-language and its corresponding meta-language.

The first chapter of the thesis (*Landmarks of object-language: from the meanings of plastic language to the symbolism of sculpture*) mainly deals with issues related to the genesis and nature of plastic language in the general context of human communication, and the specific features of this particular language, by analysing its components and the particular case of sculptural language.

First, I presented the types of language used in communication: verbal language and nonverbal language, which includes the gestural code, the musical code and the plastic code, focusing on the organic connection between them. Thus, there is a close connection between verbal language and body language, both being used concomitantly in oral communication, the latter being able to support, contradict or substitute the former. Moreover, musical and verbal language appear to share the common origin in a musical-emotional paralanguage (used to this today in communication through intonation and tone of voice), while plastic language is considered to be derived from gestural language, as the trace left by a gesture on any medium - e.g. clay, sand, etc.

In the following section, I analysed the elements of plastic language - the point, the line, the surface, the shape, the colour and the volume, as signs of a particular visual alphabet - stressing that, although its grammar does include a system of rules of syntactic organisation of its constituent parts, plastic language is characterised by the lack of fixed codes, having a repertoire of given signs with multiple possibilities of interpretation due to the virtually infinite possibilities to combine them.

The expressive force of a plastic language element is dependent upon on the relationship established between itself and the whole, as its components converge

towards sending a clear message, with clear-cut meanings. The plastic elements mentioned above thus become plastic language signs only in light of these meanings and provided they are structured expressively.

As a specific language, plastic language can be translated into words only partially and the attempt to translate the image with the aid of concepts would equate with annulling it as a specific instrument of knowledge (Mircea Eliade). The understanding of the message conveyed by the artist involves not only an intellectual side but also an emotional and imaginative one, as intuition plays a key role in the process of perception and understanding.

The second part of the first chapter includes analysis of the concepts of symbol and symbolising from the philosophical-semiotic standpoint, followed by the exploration of the symbolism of sculptural artworks from the perspective of the two concepts - mimesis and catharsis, and finally, the symbolic constants and variations in Brancusian art correlated with the particular features of native sculptural tradition.

In line with Platonic philosophy, Brancusi argued that it is utterly impossible to express “anything real by imitating the outer surface of things. It is not the outward form that is real, but the *essence* of things”, even though when creating his sculptures, he would always start from the figurative. He viewed anatomy as an obstacle to expressing feelings and ideas, while he dismissed figurative sculptures as “corpses” or “beef steak”, regardless of the artistry of their execution. In his own sculptural language, Brancusi did not discard anatomy, but rather transcended incorporating it in essentialised forms.

As regards the cathartic role of art, Brancusi adhered to a different view from the Aristotelian one. While recognising the essential role of the hardships and trials of life in the formation of a balanced and strong personality, when it came to art, he argued that it is not tragedy that purifies the soul, but peace and joy that art can transmit and cultivate in the viewer: “this feeling of plenitude and joy, completes man’s life ... Art should be joy” and it “has to bring things together, and not to move them away; has to fill in, and not to dig gulfs in our poor souls, already disturbed by questions” (C. Brancusi).

Brancusi is singular in the context of artistic quests of his era owing to his “own manner of understanding the new” (Sergiu Al. George). For him, the new meant not only finding an original language, but also *rediscovering* the original language. From this perspective, his affinity for the Indian world, where he claimed to feel *at home*,

must be connected with the universality of the archaic heritage of all the peoples of the world.

As particular features of the local sculptural tradition, we presented in a separate chapter the dominant archetypal forms of Brancusi's work - i.e. archetypes as the primordial aesthetic signs or archaic forms with fundamental meanings integrated with the language of universal essentialisation:

- the *diamond* motif, as a solar sign with symbolic implications related to fertility worship;
- the *axis mundi* motif, materialised in the Romanian culture in constructions such as the column and the pillar of heaven, in phyto-totems such as the fir-tree, ritual poles (Romulus Vulcanescu);
- the *Maiastra bird* (magic bird) motif, in correspondence with the sacred birds of solar gods;
- the *cosmic egg* motif, as the principle of the birth of the universe, the archetype of life, time and space.

Certain primary symbols of the world, present since prehistory throughout the world, are found as dominant themes in the plastic world of the sculptor - *the egg, the bird, the couple, the pole* and even *the tortoise*. These archetypal images are also means of plastic representation of the cosmogonic act that "expresses in fact the great paradox of the transition from the unity of the infinite absolute to the plurality and finitude of our world" (Sergiu Al. George). Spiritual meaning is rendered by the possibility of transcendence, the reverse of cosmogony, by which the individual subject to finitude can regain the state of unity and plenitude of the pre-cosmogonic being.

Cosmogonic scenarios describe the original unity of the world using the image of the *egg* or the *couple* locked in an embrace, the *column / pillar* denoting the cosmogonic principle, which separates the couple or splits the egg into two, thus giving rise to the manifested universe - the heaven and the earth. Another image of the primordial unity is the *tortoise* with the two sides forming its shell.

All these images constitute essential elements in Brancusi's artworks. However, the artists did not take them on as such from the available *sources*, but rather, as he confessed, he reached those essences after years of struggles and quests aimed at finding the form to incorporate all forms.

The second chapter (*Semiotic methodology, an effective tool for analysing Brancusi's sculpture*) is a presentation of the semiotic organon as the premise for a novel redefining of the symbolic language of Brancusian art, centred on three levels of analysis. First, the dialectic of the relationship between essence and form is explored from a structural view; subsequently, Brancusian symbolism is analysed using a triadic - syntactic (focusing on the relationship between signs), semantic (exploring the relationship between signs and the referential) and pragmatic (looking at the impact of signs on the human actors of communication); finally, the method of situational analysis of creative communication is presented, from the hexadic model to the semiotic graph model, with an open-ended number of parameters.

- Structural analysis: on the dialectics of the essence-form relationship

In terms of semiotics, the text-discourse relationship is similar to that between form and content, between signifier and signified, expression and meaning, surface structure and deep structure, all these being dealt with structural analysis.

Brancusi focused primarily on the relationship of signification between form and content. By repeating a certain theme to limits of the obsessive, he aimed to achieve the sublimation of the form so as to reflect the content and embodied idea as powerfully. Towards the end of his life, Brancusi confessed in an interview that he viewed "his sculptures as steps in the process of realization of an idea, in the search for the form of expression most adequate to the subject", moreover, that "none of his works was definitively finished, except for two: the Endless Column and the Cock". For the goal he had set was hardly easy to achieve - the form that would include in itself the essence of all forms.

Graph theory provides an interesting opportunity for the semiotic interpretation of the creative process by which Brancusi seeks to achieve this form. The vertical relationships can be represented as a semiotic graph whose nodes are the processes / steps required of the creator to achieve his purpose.

Starting from the imitation of nature, Brancusi's drive towards the *idea sculpture* has a double goal: to essentialise the idea content and to simplify the formal aspect.

We consider that series of birds and of female portraits constitute the most eloquent examples illustrating the process of simplification/essentialisation of form/content.

- The semiotic analysis of Brancusian symbolism is conducted on three levels - syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic.

In the syntactic approach to Brancusian forms, we identified the main forms that Brancusi exploited in his works, tracing the path of resumptions and transformations that they were subject to as he attempted to obsessively finish the same path, the same communication channel. Subsequently, I aimed to highlight the relationships established between the signs used by the artist in this cyclical semiosis.

Each series of works is based on a predominant signification strategy - i.e. they have one central form:

- the *ovoid* in the series of muses, heads of sleeping children, female portraits, fish, the new born, the beginning of the world and the sculpture for the blind, and the female torsos;
- the *column* (the series of endless columns, the columns of the Kiss, the birds in space, the cocks, in *Adam and Eve*, etc.);
- the *hourglass* in the series of columns, the seats of the *Table of silence*, in some female portraits, in *Leda*, etc.;
- the *pyramid / triangle* in female torsos;
- the *cluster* in works such as *Penguins* or *Timidity*.

In addition to holding such central roles, these signs also occur secondarily in the syntax of the work. This is the case of the ovoid, which occurs in *The Kiss* where the eyes and lips of the embraced couple are united, which serves to enhance and enrich the meaning.

In terms of their formal structure, one can classify the works of Brancusi as follows:

1. simple, based on a single geometric shape (eg *Beginning of the World*, *Torso of a Young Girl*, *The Fish*, etc..)

2. complex:

- recurring / combining in several simple forms (*Witch*, *Adam and Eve*, *The First Step*, *Penguins*, *Leda*, *Timidity*)
- amalgamations of shapes and sections resulting in “super-images” (Sergiu Al. George)
- ensembles of meaning (combinations of distinct works which Brancusi proposed to be exhibited or photographed).

As regards the semantics of Brancusi’s motifs, we provided both several thematic classifications proposed by various researchers of Brancusi's work and a range of possible interpretations of his main works.

From a pragmatic perspective, Brancusi aimed to reflect in sculpture the spirit of things, their essence, yet not only that, as he also wanted us to partake of his joy in discovering the core lying underneath the play of appearances. Brancusi still kept alive something of the spirit of archaic man who strove to experience as much as possible the realm of sacred objects and aimed to move as much as possible within a sacred space. It is this sacred dimension of space, time and life in its fullness that Brancusi attempted to *reclaim*.

- The section on the situational analysis includes a presentation of the various semiotic models developed throughout history, from the triadic models which emerged as early as antiquity to the modern model of graphs with a variable number of elements (up to 12, in the most complex version) whose interplay involves information *inputs* and *outputs* that can be ordered diachronically.

In view of the fact that this complex model describes at once the synchronic and the diachronic, structural and functional dimension of the creative communication situation, we believe that it addresses most appropriately the need for complex and original analysis of the creative endeavour, encompassing all its parameters and their interplays.

The general model of a communication situation unfolds as a mechanism of gradual signification (which Herbert Mead called *symbolic interaction*), in which four basic steps may be distinguished (Traian D. Stănciulescu):

- *primary signification stage* (the competence of the human subject - as receiver - is mobilised in order to process (re-signify, decode) the information drawn from the environment (external or internal context) and transform it into semiotic language, tailored to one's capacity to exploit such information);
- *message encoding stage* (the human subject - as issuer in this instance - creates (signifies, encodes) based on the terms of his own sign code, a message (text / discourse) carrying a specific content, which he delivers to a (human) recipient, under certain conditions (channel, noise etc.).
- *message transmission stage* (as the target of the message receives the message transmitted by the issuer and processes it (decodes it) in accordance with his own semantic value system (code), constituting the human issuer - receiver complex);
- *the secondary re-signification stage* (the effect that the message generates in the receiver (an end materialised in a specific action) is relayed by feed-back to the

issuer of the message, who thus becomes himself a receiver, defining a new semiosis derived from the first and therefore subordinate to it).

The end result of these stages of interaction is the harmonisation of meaning between the participants in communication, as part of a process that involves all areas of semiotics (i.e., syntactic, semantic, pragmatic).

Part two - **Brancusi's work art and the horizon of semiotic language: an integrating recovery** - represents the key philosophical-semiotic section of the research.

Chapter three, *The symbolism of Brancusi's work from the analytical perspective of the semiotic graph*, illustrates the blending of theory and application, more specifically an exercise in the practical application of the semiotic method in analysing the particular case of the work of the sculptor Constantin.

Based on the "closed" model of polygonal semiosis - the hexadic, in particular - we opted for the methodological "opening up" of the network of communication model, made possible by the "semiotic graph". This choice determines multiple significant advantages (Traian Stănculescu):

- the opportunity of a simultaneous (synchronous) representation of all the structural elements of the creative communication process;
- the opportunity to focus the analysis on one item or another, or on a correlated group of elements, derived from the broader model;
- the representation of the complex relations between structural elements, by recording functional determinations;
- suggesting the idea of processuality of the semiotic-communication act - by bringing into play a diachronic dimension;
- highlighting the structural-functional stages that accompany the genesis of a complex semiotic situation, such as *creative semiosis*.

Situational analysis entails three distinct steps - structural analysis, functional analysis and the optimisation of the communication situation. The first stage involves the thorough research of structural parameters, centred on the following points:

- the national and international art *context* of the era during which Constantin Brancusi configured his own language (with a focus on sculpture);
- the personality of the artist (the *issuer*) viewed through the prism of his work and testimonies of contemporaries;

- potential classifications of Brancusi's work (*content*) in terms of the perspective of situational methodology;
- the symbolic language of Brancusi's art (the *means* of his art) as an instrument of creative spirit;
- the *reception* of the work from the perspective of the audience and critics, considering the opposing views - ranging from scandal to adulation and from subjectivity to objectivity, pointing out the difficulties / "noise" occurring in the communication process.
- assessing whether the artist was able to fulfil his intentions and transform his aspirations into reality (the *purpose*).

Once this step has been completed, it is possible to achieve a functional recovery of the interdependence between the analysed parameters, depending on the particular conditions of the communication situation, i.e. how one parameter affects the manifestation and development of others. One may correlate, for example, the context with the issuer's creative personality, highlighting the extent to which the former shapes the latter; the personalities of the two subjects of communication - the issuer and receiver; the content of the message with the context of its production or with the creative means employed, etc. As such, the development of the work is the outcome of the manifestation of structural parameters and their interactions.

Chapter four, **Brancusi or on the universality of Romanian distinctiveness**, places Brancusi's work in the context of the relationship between the ethnic and the universal, the individual and the social, analysing it in terms of space, time, tradition and foreign influences. A further point is the influence of world art on Constantin Brancusi's work and the latter's echoes in world culture.

The third part of the thesis - ***Brancusi's work, an archetypal remaking of the world*** - is the applied section of the paper, focused on several points viewed as emblematic for the whole of Brancusi's work.

A first step was to analyse two central / key motifs of his work: the *bird* and the meaning of flight, the *column* as the centre and axis of the world - both being ascension motifs, central to Brancusi's two crowning and concluding architectural and sculptural projects, which constitute the subject of the analysis of the latter section to the third part.

The complex construction projects were addressed comparatively, in limited fashion due to the scarcity of data on the Temple of Indore project.

The analysis captures the semiotic meanings of the Targu Jiu Ensemble in syntactic, semantic and pragmatic terms, while the unrealised Temple project is viewed from the hermeneutical perspective of archetypal meanings.

As they emerged in a spiritual context, both ensembles are explored in accordance with the dialectic of the concepts of sacred and profane, aesthetic and spiritual, real and surreal, all of which converge towards a unity of meaning of two distinct traditional cultural spaces, which, at first sight, seem to have nothing in common.

The **open-ended conclusions** of the thesis highlight Constantin Brancusi as an architect of the “essential unity”, who managed to infer and render, in artistic form, the essential principle unifying all (beings and things) that have existed, exist or will exist, the state of relationship, an ontological condition for the existence of things, the universal communion, whose most appropriate mode of communication could only have been the universal language of plastic forms.

Brancusi's presence in Paris at the height of arguably the most effervescent era for the arts in European culture, which engaged artists coming from various parts of the world, meant that a broad range of traditional Romanian values, hitherto never exploited in high-art forms, were brought into play in the vast context of universal culture, ultimately generating an extraordinary synthesis of meanings. One can state, without fear of exaggeration, that Brancusi is the embodiment of the Romanian universe as it opens up to the world.

We may understand therefore, why Brancusi himself could state without lack of modesty: “You cannot realize yet what I am handing down to you.”