

SYMBOLS

OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

edited by Monika Banaś and Elżbieta Wiącek



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MONIKA BANAŚ & ELŻBIETA WIĄCEK



Kraków

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Table of contents

Introduction.....	7
Elżbieta Wiącek, <i>Old Symbol in Contemporary Culture. Turkish Evil Eye Bead – from Ancient Amulets to Commercial Gifts</i>	15
Piotr Winskowski, <i>Symbolic Space. From Narrative to Experience</i>	23
Ryszard M. Czarny, <i>Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in the High North</i>	51
Monika Banaś, <i>Symbolic Types – Journalism and Politics</i>	71
Filiz Sulejman, <i>Sufi Motives in Elif Shafak’s Writing Perceived as a Bridge between East and West</i>	85
Olena Berezovska Picciocchi, <i>The Book as Polemic Symbol of Magic Powers in the Carpathian and in the Siberian Tradition</i>	95
Rita Cavallotti, <i>The Legacy of John Paul II. Teachings on Work-Family Balance from the “Bard of the Civilization of Love”</i>	111
Renata Czekalska, Agnieszka Kuczkiewicz-Fraś, <i>The Symbolism of Continuity and Change. Narendra Modi</i>	129
Desislava Damyanova, <i>The Symbols of Protest Culture in Bulgaria 2013-2014. Performance, Artifacts and New Modes of Civil Activity</i>	151
Anna Slatinská, Jana Pecníková, <i>The Historical and Modern Architecture in Aesthetic and Symbolic Metamorphosis over Time</i>	175
Monika Lichowska-Płonka, <i>The Role of New Social Movements in the Shaping of Space</i>	185
Marta Hoffmann, <i>The Lego Brick. A Re-Construction of a Contemporary Culture</i>	201
Post-Scriptum.....	215
Biograms	217
Index	221

Introduction

Symbols have accompanied humans for centuries. It seems that almost from the dawn, even of pre-history, symbols were present in the human mind as images, memories, thoughts, ideas, which later evolved into specific intellectual structures. Once present in the mental dimension, symbols demanded materialization. They obtained a graphic form over time, complemented (or in some cases replaced) by colour, gesture, sound, melody, and composites of sounds, in the end, more complete and coherent manifestations. Symbols are all around us. We can find some prominent examples in St Peter's Square in the Vatican, when white smoke signals a new Pope's election, and when black smoke indicates that the cardinals have been unable to reach a consensus and will deliberate further. Elsewhere, the gesture of the placing of a crown on a new monarch's head becomes a symbol of anointment, of a transfer of power and of the exaltation of this particular person and not any other member of the community.

A sound or melody can also carry a symbolic meaning and become a symbol – e.g. on the 1st August each year at 5pm, in most Polish cities and towns, sirens are sounded for one minute to commemorate the “W” hour, the official start of the Warsaw rising in 1944. A sound that was originally produced as a warning has become a symbol of determination and the Polish people's fight for freedom to liberate themselves and their country from German occupation. Other examples of complex sound symbols transmitting specific messages are national anthems or Passion songs.

Man entangled in a symbolic web

According to a tradition reaching back at least as far as Aristotle, human beings are set apart from other terrestrial creatures by their rationality, which transforms all of their principal mental powers. The term “rational animal” refers to a classical definition of humanity and of human nature.

Although the historical roots of this tradition run deep, many contemporary philosophers have regarded it with suspicion. The German philosopher Ernst Cassirer, in his work *An Essay on Man*, altered Aristotle's definition of man. According to Cassirer, "(...) reason is a very inadequate term with which to comprehend the forms of man's cultural life in all their richness and variety. But all these forms are symbolic forms. Hence, instead of defining man as an *animal rationale*, we should define him as *animal symbolicum*."¹ Cassirer wrote this statement in exile, in the early forties of 20th century, at a time during the Second World War when what he saw as rationality had little to do with human existence. Rationality became too utopian an ideal. Symbolic forms were the next best thing. Interestingly, this notion that man is characterized by symbol-making appears already in the Book of Genesis of Old Testament. God creates the first man and asks him to name every living creature: "And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field (...)."²

Symbol-making is then the very first competence given to man and performed by him. As a result of this symbolizing activity, man is entangled in a symbolic web. This web of symbolic forms or symbolic universe mediates between men and the physical universe, reality. For Cassirer, language, art, and religion are the varied strands which weave the symbolic net. All human progress in thought and experience refines and strengthens this net. No longer can man confront reality immediately, as it were, face to face.³

The word "symbol" derives from the Greek *symbolon* (σύμβολον), meaning token or watchword. *Symbolon* often described a clay seal that was broken in half and given to two people, serving as a sign of recognition between them. For example, if I left a valuable possession with a shopkeeper, we would break the seal and he would keep one half and I would take the other. When the two pieces were drawn together and matched up perfectly, it confirmed my identity as the true owner and my relationship with the shopkeeper. The meaning of *symbolon* at the time was then two halves of a whole, neither one being complete until they were reunited. Hence, symbol in this original meaning already had its double structure: it was an "outward sign" of something. The meaning "something which stands for something else" was first recorded in 1590, in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*⁴. However, symbol is not just a synonym for any sign. Symbol always "points beyond itself" to something that is unquantifiable and mysterious: the symbol's "depth dimension"⁵. Symbols are complex, and their meanings can evolve as the individual or culture evolves.

¹ E. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man. An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, New Haven 1974, p. 25-26.

² *Genesis 2:10, The Holy Bible. King James Version*, 1989 by T. Nelson, Nashville–Dallas–Mexico City–Rio de Janeiro, p. 3. Elżbieta Wiącek thanks Theodore Lagasse for pointing out this analogy.

³ E. Cassirer, op.cit., p. 24-25.

⁴ "Symbol", *Online Etymological Dictionary*, [on line] http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=symbol&searchmode=none.

⁵ P. Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, Oxford 1964, p. 54.

Symbolism is then as old as the human ability to link ideas and beliefs with objects and occurrences in the world. In western civilization, the Middle Ages was the “Golden Age” of symbolic presence in every aspect of culture. For people of those times, the world was a book written by God, a book full of a variety of symbols. The aim of human beings was to explore and express this symbolic universe. The Renaissance also showed great interest in symbolism, although in a manner more individualistic and cultured, more profane, secular, literary and aesthetic⁶. In 15th century painting, there is abundant evidence of this interest in symbolism (Botticelli, Mantegna, for example); later, during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, this interest tended toward the allegorical. In the baroque epoch, to express moral and philosophical ideas in a symbolic way, the artist commonly took inspiration from visual glossaries of symbols and allegories. The side-effect of this tendency was the stereotyped, “mechanical” use of well-known symbols. The visionary Romantic artist opposed the baroque and neoclassical tendency and coined new notions of symbol – based on unique personal experience (William Blake). In the process of artistic creation they did not use “ready-made symbols” from glossaries, but symbols which were newborn in their imagination. Most of the literature of the first half of the 19th century, especially the northern European, presupposes a feeling for the symbolic, for the significant. In German Romanticism, an interest in the deeper layers of psychic life – in dreams and their meaning, in the unconscious – was the fount which has given rise to the present-day interest in symbology.

Sophisticated forms of sound, arranged in a *tune* create a language that can also serve as symbol as well. This sonic approach was audible in the symbolic poetry of the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, including authors such as Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Maurice Maeterlinck, Andrei Bely, Kazimierz Tetmajer, Stanisław Wyspiański, Stanisław Przybyszewski and Zenon Przesmycki. The form of a symbol may thus vary and may refer not only to a graphic shape but also to the frequency with which it appears. However, this is not the main problem of the considerations about symbols.

The main problem concerns rather the relations between symbols and archetypes, signs, emblems, logos, or more complex – metaphors and allegories. A simple experiment shows how differently the above-mentioned terms can be understood and defined. Let us try to successively define: “symbol”, “archetype”, “sign”, “emblem” and “logo”.

How are these terms understood by other people? Coming from the same or from other cultural backgrounds? We can easily assume that the responses received will be different. Moreover, different responses may not be the only definitional difficulty. Additional differences may occur with more complex compositions such as metaphors or allegories, and going even further – with art.

As we will see, symbols can bear two kinds of difficulties associated with them: 1) the way we define the symbol itself, and 2) its interpretation. On the other hand

⁶ J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Taylor & Francis e-Library 2001, p. XXII.

the number of necessary components through which a symbol is realized remains stable. These elements include material, context and cultural knowledge.

Given a specific graphic form, a symbol seldom occurs on its own but is always accompanied by other signs or symbols.

Baudelaire's "forest of symbols" in turn, requires an in-depth cultural competence, allowing the correct interpretation of the meaning of symbols, a meaning that is sometimes wobbly, blurred or varying in time and place.

Indeed – then do symbols convey a meaning? Or do they rather refer to something else that is not possible to be included in a graphic or in words, to something that is transcendent, to something that extends beyond the material and physical realm? If so, then symbol would become a key to access what remains unnamed; what cannot be grasped by words, gesture, melody because it is not of this "world". Symbol, understood in this way, would therefore become a specific, condensed form of communication and transmission of information available to the "insiders" with appropriate knowledge (cultural disposition). It would be both the matter and the maker of a special relationship among individuals who are able to read it and understand it. Development of a sense of belonging to a group united under a particular symbol indicates symbols' commanding nature. Through influence on individuals, as Alfred Whitehead notes, symbol can mobilize, collect, direct or restrain.

Joseph Campbell assigns to a symbol even more of an influence – an executive power, seeing it as an agent "(...) A symbol is an energy evoking, and directing agent." So formulated, the disposition of the symbol seems to be questionable as symbols on their own are deprived of consciousness, and they work only through a person who uses them or becomes a symbol themselves.

Symbol as an autonomous way of cognition

Disappointed with rationalism, positivism and scientism, in the second quarter of 20th century, Europe turned back to symbol as way of cognition or forgotten language. According to Mircea Eliade, the re-discovery of symbol in the Western civilization (linked with growing popularity of psychoanalysis) was both the reference to Western tradition and to non-European cultures.⁷ Given our contemporary psychoanalytic concept of the "unconscious", we must accept the placing within it of all those dynamic forms which give rise to symbols; for, according to Jung's way of thinking, the unconscious is "the matrix of the human mind and its inventions".

In the ancient world, symbolic characters wandered from culture to country along the trade routes and were exchanged with goods and ideas. They often gained importance in places distant from their place of origin. But what are the paths that symbols travel today? Will the new ways of distribution also affect their fate? Is

⁷ M. Eliade, *Obrazy i symbole*, Warszawa 1998, p. 11.

degradation of certain old symbols a result of the way in which these symbols are used (and abused) by their creators?

Many symbols have not changed for thousands of years, but at the same time new symbols are born in every epoch. In our collected essays we would like to address the question: what kind of role do symbols play in contemporary culture?

The adjective “contemporary” used in the title can be misleading as in most cases symbols are born and gain their complex of meanings as a result of long historical process. We can find the proofs of this process in the article by Renata Czekalska and Agnieszka Kuczkiewicz-Fraś – *The Symbolism of Continuity and Change. Narendra Modi*. The authors analyse the symbolism of gestures and props used by Narendra Modi, the current Prime Minister of India, referring them to the religious and theatrical tradition of ancient India. The ancient symbol and its historical evolution is also the subject of Elżbieta Wiącek’s article – *Old Symbol in Contemporary Culture. Turkish Evil Eye Bead – from Ancient Amulets to Commercial Gifts*. Wiącek traces how the protective talisman became popular tourist souvenir and the sign used in promotion of Turkey as tourist destination. Another case study which considers historical perspective is *The Book as the Polemic Symbol of Magic Powers in the Carpathian and in the Siberian Tradition* by Olena Berezovska Picciocchi. Generally, the book links closely with the symbolism of writing but in the traditional oral culture maybe used as the ritual object. Picciocchi analyses the symbolic function of book in shamanic tradition and proposes to compare the book’s symbol in the magical-religious traditions of Carpathian and in Siberian oral cultures.

One of the main “symbolic forms” distinguished by Cassirer is language. In his article *Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in the High North* Ryszard M. Czarny examines the role of the indigenous languages of the Arctic in preserving the cultural identity of indigenous population in the region. The author points out that although it is commonly assumed that all Inuit of the world use the same language, in some cases its dialects are much different from one another. Czarny underlines also that the names attributed to those dialects are most of the time quite symbolic and serve rather the linguists than the people who actually use them.

Another “symbolic form” – literature – is the topic of text *Sufi Motives in Elif Shafak’s Writing Perceived as a Bridge between East and West* by Filiz Sulejman. The author argues that Elif Shafak’s writing may be perceived as one of the symbols of contemporary culture. The novels by well-known Turkish writer perfectly combine symbols of Eastern and Western, feminism and tradition, the local, the folk and the global, mysticism and rationalism. Her literature represents a modern world which is not unitary, but multidimensional. Sulejman claims that also Shafak itself is a symbol of contemporary culture – her biography, beliefs, views – all of them are permeated with symbolism.

Symbolic types and symbolic actions are discussed in the article written by Monika Banaś. The author in *Symbolic Types – Journalism and Politics* undertakes two cases of well-known personalities: Ryszard Kapuściński and Stieg Larsson, stemming from Polish and Swedish culture, respectively. The process

of reconstructing successive affirmation of their works in postmodern societies exemplifies human inclination to establish or invent individuals who may serve as a social and moral authority. Constantly ongoing negotiation between the chosen individual (as required authority) and society results in establishing symbolic types which disturb and deconstruct reality to make a new one. If a better one – remains an open question.

Another case study of person who became a symbol represents the article by Rita Cavallotti: *The Legacy of John Paul II. Teachings on Work-Family Balance from the “Bard of the Civilization of Love”*. Pope John Paul II became an acknowledged reference point for hundreds of millions of people, both believers and non-believers, who, flocked to him and his teachings for answers to a variety of questions on the challenges of contemporary life. As a tireless advocate of peace, and a true pioneer in interfaith dialogue, John Paul II also *became* a worldwide *symbol of hope* for the human future. For Cavallotti the reference point is his teachings on relationships within the family relationships and work.

Many authors are interested in symbolic aspects of architectural space. The art of architecture ought to remain symbolic if it wants to be vital and meaningful. Piotr Winskowski’s case study: *Symbolic Space. From Narrative to Experience* concerns the museum and park in Bramsche-Kalkriese in western Germany constructed in the years 2000-2009. It is the site of the Teutoburg Forest battle which took place in 9 AD between the Germanic tribes and Roman legions. The article concentrates on spatial instruments and the manner of their use, which serve for the symbolization of “soft”, complex contents of contemporary culture, compared with the earlier, simpler manner of symbolization of “hard” contents. Winskowski argues that Bramsche-Kalkriese constitute signals referring to the known and recent past, and further to the much older one, whose value is just discovered and defined again on a broad social forum. In his opinion, pavilions, the tower and museum in Kalkriese offer a deepened experience which allows individuals to return to their community having been changed.

The following text about architectural form by Anna Slatinská and Jana Pecníková, also proves that both historical and modern architecture reflect in a visible and direct way the coexistence of cultural values regarding past and present days (*The Historical and Modern Architecture in Aesthetic and Symbolic Metamorphosis over Time*). The authors examine some of the most famous examples of historical and new architecture interconnection for example: the Pyramid in the Louvre in Paris, The Art Museum of the Archdiocese of Cologne in Germany and The Jewish Museum in Berlin. Analysing this case studies, Slatinská and Pecníková assume that the intervention into urban or architectural city environment was carried out in a cultivated and aesthetic way respecting historical background.

Each epoch creates its own myths and values, which are later interpreted as its symbolic and meaningful elements. According to Monika Lichowska-Płonka such a symbolic element of contemporary time the development of so called “slow design” and “co-” movements („coworking” and “cohousing”), or participatory design and sustainable development in the design of space (*The Role of New Social Movements*

in the *Shaping of Space*). The author analyzes the rise of new social movements and discusses their influence on space, as well as their relationship to the cultural value of place as an element shaping personal identity. The article seeks to present new worldviews and their consequences for spatial design as an attempt to recreate values such as tradition, family and friendship, values that have been somehow lost in postmodern reality.

Symbol not only takes a form of material objects or graphic signs but also a form of action. A symbolic action is an action that has no, or little, practical effect but symbolizes, or signals, what the actor wants or believes and conveys meaning to the viewers. Desislava Damyanova who writes about *The Symbols of Protest Culture in Bulgaria 2013-2014. Performance, Artifacts and New Modes of Civil Activity* examines the elements of protest actions such as: time, place, dramaturgy, equipment and normative requirements. The author analyses the symbolic function of artifacts of the protest (whistles, masks, human body, musical instruments, costumes). Damyanova shows how slogans and posters, may overlap with performances, such as cardboard burning. She argues that the theatrical and burlesque aspects of symbolic protest actions ultimately reverted to styles of parody and mocking that blurred and invalidated elements of active resistance.

The symbol of contemporary culture can also take form of toy. Marta Hoffmann argues that the LEGO bricks has the main attributes of symbol: simplicity of structure, and nature that reflect the main features of present-day society (*The LEGO Brick. A Re-construction of a Contemporary Culture*). In her opinion, LEGO bricks are recognizable for people who go beyond the main group of its users and also the history and strategy of LEGO's management board mirrors many features of modern culture. According to Hoffman the symbolism of LEGO lies not only in its popularity, but in it being a proper metaphor of (post)modern tendencies. The world of LEGO is one of the narrations about culture but also the universal, intercultural and cross-generational communicative code.

The symbol related problems briefly outlined in this introduction are further developed in the subsequent articles of this publication. In the following texts the reader will find a number of different perspectives, addressing symbol as a specific – using Charles Peirce's phrase – iconic sign present in different areas of public life; a particular arrangement of open space and closed space; a complex form of community existence of ethnic and cultural groups – increasingly present in the discourse on postmodern society. Symbols will be also presented as gestures, actions, persons.

Diversity of symbols explored by the authors in different fields of culture: architecture, literature, shamanism, politics, theology, proves that symbol still constitutes important feature of our lives.

Let us look how various forms and places are being picked by symbols for their existence and functioning in the broadly defined postmodern culture.

Monika Banaś
Elżbieta Wiqcek

A discourse on symbol constituting the content of this book has been presented in various cultural and temporal contexts. In particular articles we find different axionormative dimensions, where objects, actions, pictures, buildings, material and non-material artefacts get symbolic meanings. All the essays addressing different cultural traditions and historical backgrounds stress the immanent, everlasting feature of symbol, namely, "pointing beyond itself" to something that is unquantifiable and mysterious.

By this transcendent process we may get closer or even touch spaces, times, thoughts and feelings of previous generations, which makes us conscious actors and agents of the human past, present and even future. This extraordinary competence, however, cannot be practiced when one remains ignorant to symbolic phenomena.

Reading these collected essays, we are provided with a relevant general notion that the postmodern human, depending so much on technology and science, still remains in need of symbols.



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