

## TYOLOGY OF CULTURES AND HISTORY OF EMBLEMS

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From far outside, for I am certainly not a well-versed specialist in the theory or history of emblems, there are three contributions that I hope I will be able to make. I will propose a typological distinction between «presence cultures» and «meaning cultures» that may serve, among several other things, as a toolkit for a historical analysis of the production, circulation, and reception of emblems. On this basis, I want to pursue two specific questions. In the first place, I will ask why emblems turned into such a central fascination within European cultures between the thirteenth and the sixteenth century. And I will then proceed to a more self-reflexive explanation of the fact that emblems and their history have again attracted, with surprising intensity, the attention of scholars during the past few decades of our own time.

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The concepts making up the distinction between «meaning cultures» and «presence cultures» were first inspired by a number of observations that become available to us when we contemplate the period of transition between the late Middle ages and Early Modernity – and these concepts turn out to be useful to understand emblems because the great time of emblems overlapped with this transition. A scholarly consensus seems to exist about what motivated that uniquely profound transformation of the Western cultural world: the specific symbolic system (or «social knowledge») coming from the Middle Ages appeared to be increasingly insufficient for an ever complexifying everyday life, above all in the emerging European cities. As a reaction, a new self-reference of human life in the role of the «Subject» was shaping up, that is a self-reference as a flexible outside observer of the world of objects, as an

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observer that interprets and gives meaning to the world, instead of finding its meaning and its laws in divine revelation. A zone of condensation for this historical transformation was the theology of the Eucharist. If, in medieval times, it must have been perfectly acceptable to point to bread and wine as «Christ's body and blood», a new style of experience relying on the Subject as an observer would transform, in the theology of a reformed Christianity and since the early sixteenth century, a visually not accessible evidence («this is my body») into an act of meaning attribution: bread and wine were shown in the protestant mass as «meaning Christ's body and Christ's blood». Seen from this perspective, the protestant theology of the Eucharist appears as a previous stage to Descartes' –then revolutionary– definition of the ontology of human existence as entirely depending on the act of thinking, as a spiritual act that would always entail the production of meaning. In its continuation, what Max Weber was to describe as «the process of Modernization», based upon rationalization, turned out to become a process of spiritualization that ended up leaving outside the reach of the human mind any kind of material or substantial phenomena.

If the typological distinction between «meaning culture» and «presence culture» was first inspired by a view of the process of Modernization, the concepts that it produces can of course be applied in order to characterize and to analyze the phenomena that Modernization brought forth, among them those artifacts and mental constructs that we refer to as «emblems». But before I indeed use those typological concepts with the goal of promoting a new understanding of emblems, it is necessary to describe our typology of reference in at least some detail. I begin with an explanation of the notions «meaning culture» (we might also say «Subject culture») and «presence culture». What we call «meaning», both in everyday language and in philosophical language, is always supposed to be the result of a selection. Focusing on one phenomenon and not on all the others in my perception of the world, for example, produces an effect of meaning, and so does my using the phenomenon focused upon in a certain way, and not in any other way. It thus becomes clear that, in our relationship with the world of objects, we cannot help and we cannot stop constantly producing meaning (we often speak of «attributing meaning» or «identifying meaning», presupposing that meaning is something that we «find beneath or behind the sheer surface of the world»). The word «presence», by contrast, I want to understand as referring to our spatial relationship with the world of objects. At any given moment, we are in a relation of spatial closeness or distance with all material objects in our world, and we call «present» those objects that are «in reach» for our bodies and that we can therefore touch.

While we seem to have largely bracketed the dimension of «presence» in our average everyday awareness in modern Western culture, it is obvious that

we always and inevitably find ourselves in a double relationship with the things of the world, i.e. in a relationship of meaning attribution and in a relationship of presence. The distinction between «meaning culture» and «presence culture», then, implies that all existing historical cultures contain elements both of the meaning sphere and of the presence sphere; but it also presupposes that this relationship and the ways in which it shapes human life, are never quite symmetrical. Without any doubt, medieval culture was more presence-heavy than, say, Enlightenment culture. The typology that I am presenting is supposed to be capable, precisely, to detect such historically different proportions and the different configurations in which meaning-elements and presence-elements were intertwined in different cultural contexts.

At the beginning of an open series of nine distinctions between the type of «meaning culture» and the type of «presence culture» that I want to present as a conceptual repertoire, we find the contrast between two dominant forms of self-reference. Meaning cultures can be called «Cartesian» because humans, in them, tend to define themselves exclusively by features of consciousness whereas, in presence cultures, they think of themselves as constituted both by their mind and by their body. Therefore and secondly, an ontological hiatus exists in meaning culture between the dominant self-reference of humans and the world of objects, with other words: humans see themselves as eccentric to the world of objects; in a presence culture, they imagine themselves as being part of the world of objects. The bipolarity between humans and the world of objects is, thirdly, the precondition for the interpretative relation with the world that humans maintain in meaning culture as their preferred way of an infinite and accumulative knowledge production; in presence culture, by contrast, humans always conceive of knowledge as revealed knowledge (hence an obsession with its loss or possible erosion), while meaning culture insists on human world interpretation as the exclusive source of insights. Revealed knowledge works as an orientation for individual and collective forms of human life to inscribe themselves into preexisting cosmological structures and regularities, while meaning cultures develop the ambition of using knowledge as a ground for a permanent transformation of the world, a transformation that we call «action» and, referring to the effects of action, «history».

Events in a meaning culture are defined by elements of surprising newness, while they are but the arrival of the cyclic return of certain situations in presence culture. As a sixth distinction, meaning culture develops concepts of fiction as «non serious behavior» against the backdrop of serious actions that are always supposed to change the world, while presence culture lacks a concept of fiction and cultivates the idea of a «world turned upside down» (a world that we often call «carnavalesque») as a functional equivalent. As a consequence, coming from its self-imposed obligation to constantly change the

world, meaning culture emphasizes time, whereas presence culture accentuates the dimension of space as it emerges around the body as a part of human self-reference. Presence culture, therefore, allows for violence, that is for the occupation or for the blocking of spaces with bodies, against the resistance of other bodies; meaning culture, quite regularly, transforms violence into power, that is into a potential of violence that it is not supposed to ever play out. Most importantly for the history of emblems and in conclusion (but remember that this is an open series of distinctions), meaning cultures have shaped and privileged the «Saussurian» conception of the sign that we are now so familiar with: signs are defined as the unity of the difference between a material signifier and an immaterial meaning, with the relationship between both sides being arbitrary; a presence culture conception of the sign, however, brings substance and form into a union that wants itself to appear necessary or «motivated», very much in the spirit of the Aristotelian tradition of thinking about language and expression.

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Now, what phenomena exactly do we have in mind when we use the word «emblem» in a historical context? From a chronological point of view, the age in which emblems seem to have most intensely fascinated Western culture lay between (roughly) 1300 and (roughly) 1700. The years between the beginning of the fourteenth and the ending of the seventeenth century were incomparably more productive than any other period in the invention of coats of arms, of *sententiae* and of mottos heavy with a meaning that was intended to be «profound», and with many other kinds of symbols whose common denominator, in our perception, is a high degree of complexity, condensation, and elaborateness. In 1532 Alciatus' *Emblematum liber* appeared in Augsburg, launching a European fashion that turned into artistic frenzy, a fashion of printed collections of images accompanied by compact transcriptions of the meanings that they were supposed to convey. Those were decades and centuries of a renewed interest in hieroglyphs and many other systems of cryptic writing and in the more or less «secret» meanings carried by certain minerals or animals. In *Les mots et les choses*, his early masterwork from 1966, Michel Foucault described the true semiotic fury with which intellectuals and authors of early modern times, under the concept of *amicitia*, understood in the sense of «substantial affinity», wanted to discover individual relationships between different emblems branching off into endlessly intertwined symbolic networks.

As this authentic explosion in the production of emblems was a historically unique event, I think that, rather than trying to come up with a tran-

sculturally and metahistorically valid definition of emblems (if it were possible at all), we should use our typology for a description that identifies and describes the uniqueness of emblems and of the unique fascination that they caused in the early modern world. My thesis is that emblems materialize the very transition from medieval to early modern culture, inasmuch as they bring together elements from a predominantly presence-centered and from a predominantly meaning-centered culture. The conception of the sign, on the one hand, that the great age of emblem production presupposed, clearly belonged to presence culture. There were no colors, no references to objects, and no spatial distributions in a coat of arms, there were no images and no subscriptions in a book of emblems, that did not pretend to look «motivated», in the sense of being used for a specific reason and to be mutually connected with other phenomena of the same kind on multiple levels. It is this high degree of structural density, I believe, that explains our impression of a specific «heaviness» in the early modern culture of emblems. But this presence culture-typical conception of the sign went together, in the historical moment of transition towards Early Modernity (and strangely somehow in our eyes), with a role of Subjecthood that had the tendency of inserting new meanings, whenever it seemed possible, and that produced an opposite impression of intentionality, an ambition for stylistic individuality, and a drive toward innovation.

As we want the two historical types of «presence culture» and «meaning culture» to be mutually exclusive, we may call this early modern configuration of emblems that joined elements from both sides, «paradoxical» or even «oxymoronic». But as I said before, it is the function of our typology, rather than to facilitate general statements, to help us find and describe the specificity of historical phenomena. Looking at the great age of emblems and at its products from this perspective helps us understand its tendency to unearth and to recycle systems and repertoires of signs from the past whose signifier/signified relationships appeared to be motivated, like hieroglyphs, bestiaries, or lapidaries. At the same time and on the same side, the typology lets us grasp the importance of sensual quality and of substance in the materials and forms that were used for the production of emblems. These sign materials, on the one hand, must have given the contemporary beholder a feeling of belonging to an archaic tradition, but they were, at the same time and on the other typological side, a symptom for individual ambition and for an ambition towards individualization within cultural practice, an ambition towards individualization, finally, that was about to accompany the process of Modernity. Emblem production in the days of the Spanish Catholic monarchs, for example, participated both in that archaic flavor and in this spirit of individualization. In our times, we still encounter individuals who use sign materials in this specifically ambiguous way to produce coats of arms or other

types of individualizing symbols. Different from early Modernity, however, to do so today is embarrassingly bad taste. Perhaps this is the case because we implicitly feel that we have long left behind ourselves any non-Saussurian conception of signification, even within contemporary design.

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Having arrived at our own present allows us to proceed to the second question that we want to pursue: how can we explain the renewed scholarly interest in emblems as trace of a practice of signification that is further away from ours than ever? In order to come close to an answer, we need to concentrate on a different and later segment in the process of Modernization. I am referring to the decades around 1800, when second order observation, that is the self-reflexive observation of the act of observation, became habitual, habitual at least for those persons whom we call «intellectuals» today. Habitual self-reflexivity had two incisive epistemological consequences. One was the discovery that the content and form of every world-observation was contingent upon the observer's specific point of view, which meant that there was, from this time on, a potential infinity of representations, descriptions, or elements of knowledge for each given object. The epistemological «horror vacui» produced by this view, i.e. the fear that an object that would allow for an infinity of representations might in the end not exist at all, was absorbed by a shift from a mirror-like principle of world representation to a world representation by narrative. From that moment on, who wanted to describe Spain had to tell the history of Spain; who wanted to describe an animal had to narrate its evolutionary history; and who wanted to say what the spirit was had to write a book in the form of Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. For the narrative form allowed to integrate and to put together, in a coherent way, the multiplicity of representations produced by the second order observer. The second epistemological consequence of second order observation was the insight, against the grain of orthodox Cartesianism, that there were at least two modalities of world appropriation: world appropriation through concepts, that is what we normally call «experience», and world appropriation through the senses, that is «perception». No immediate solution to the second problem has ever been found, but its emergence can explain why, since the early nineteenth century, substance and form were back in the practice of and the reflection about signification, as the complex debates about the character of the «symbol» can demonstrate, as well as all those forms of poetry that we call «Symbolism».

Narration as a solution to the other, the first problem stemming from the emergence of the second order observer, i.e. the problem of perspectivism or

contingency, was probably the ground for the formation of a new construction of time that soon became so generally accepted that, for almost two hundred years, Western culture, under the name of «History» or «Historicism», took it to be time in and by itself. It was that construction of time within which we believed that we were constantly leaving the past behind ourselves; that in leaving the past behind ourselves we were entering the future as an open horizon of possibilities among which we could choose; and that, between this future and that past, the present was but an imperceptibly short moment of transition. This short present appeared to be the epistemological habitat of the Cartesian world observer who, as sheer consciousness, was able to choose, among the possibilities offered by the future, based on experience from the past that needed to be adapted to the present. This purely spiritual world-observer whose reason of existence it was to interpret the world, found himself at a maximum distance from the world as form and matter, and this also means from the other epistemological challenge of the nineteenth century concerning the relation between experience and perception. It is safe to assume that the institutional formation of the Humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*), as an institutional academic framework based on interpretation as its common denominator, around 1900, was a culminating moment in the unfolding of Historicism and of second order observation.

Within this configuration, that is under the regime of the disembodied world observer, emblems and all kinds of other phenomena with a strong affinity to presence culture were outside of scholarly attention. By now, they may have returned, however, due to a replacement in the construction of time that we are living in, since the third quarter of the twentieth century. Instead of receding further back into the past, our past, today, is a past that inundates the present, as we seem incapable to separate ourselves from anything old; our future is no longer an open horizon of possibilities to choose from but a series of threats (think of «global warming») that are approaching the present; and between this future and that past, the present has been expanding from a mere moment of transition into an ever broadening present of simultaneities. Now, if the short present of Historicism was the habitat and condition of the disembodied observer subject, we can expect that, within a different present, our self-reference must also have undergone a transformation. I associate, with this deductive line of thought, all the cultural and philosophical efforts of the past half century to bring back perception, sensuality, and the body into our experience of the human condition.

Such a profound transformation of the institutional conditions under which we experience and interpret the world and ourselves, both in our everyday and in our academic thought, may well account for a growing awareness regarding the cultural dimension of «presence», as it includes emblems and related forms and practices of signification. For the longest

time, their mere collection and preservation through philological and other curatorial work was all that the Humanities were ready to do, when it came to emblems. Today, the time may have come to think emblems in their full phenomenal complexity and to develop the concepts that we need in order to understand them historically.