

## Archetypal Aesthetics in Various Branches of Art

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**Abstract.** *The term archetype may be defined as the original model of things and represents “an inventory of human experiences, but also of the experience accumulated by lower forms of animal life”, manifested as “symbolic elements in dreams, in the hallucinations of mad people, in myths, in folk legends. It also operates as forms or schemata organizing individual experience” (Encyclopaedia 2004, 62).*

*Despina Petecel Theodoru notices that each creative phenomenon is ultimately based on two or three antique concepts which act as a matrix: mimesis (imitation)<sup>2</sup> and arché (the archetype), whose sole purpose is alétheia (the truth) (Petecel 2003, 1).*

*This is the foundation of an important orientation in the cultural life of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – archetypalism –, displayed in many branches of art (music, painting, sculpture, philosophy, literature).*

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### 1. The archetypal aesthetics in sculpture. Constantin Brancusi

The interest for archetypal forms, myths and legends is the result of symbolistic art and literature which were widely spread, and later brought about surrealism and expressionism.

In the Romanian context, a famous representative of this current is the sculptor Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957); during the same period there were also the sculptor Dimitrie Paciurea (1873-1932) – with the works *The Sphynx* (1913), the series *Chimeras* (1931), *Pan* (1931), the painter George Demetrescu Mirea (1852-1934) – the author of the huge canvas *Vârful cu Dor* [The Lovely Peak] (1884), and

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<sup>2</sup> In the sense of acknowledgement, not copy or identical replica.

the sculptor Cornel Medrea (1888-1964) author of *Dragoș Vodă și Zimbrul* [The Ruler Dragoș and the Wisent] (1937).

As for Constantin Brancusi, he was able to shine a new light on old ideas and universal truths, reviving the myths “at the level of contemporary thought and acceptance under new spiritual shapes” [our translation] (Deac 1982, 7). He is the first sculptor who gave up classical beauty, who refused Michelangelo’s and Rodin’s conservatism, and set out to render expressiveness reduced to the essential, a new element which is dominated not only by contemplation but also by content, at the same time, offering sculpture the possibility to become a specific form of communication among people. The archetypal forms are the ones which satisfied his imagination and offered him the possibility to combine the real representation with the pure form.

The relationship between the simplicity of the form and the essence of reality is direct in Brancusi’s work, from this point of view we can notice the successive stages in changing the fundamental form, the artist planned to create sculptures “for to all times” by eliminating the features which “might reflect a certain era or period” [our translation] (Mocioi 1987, 41); crucial for Brancusi’s artistic vision was “the belief in the eternal return of human and natural, fundamental phenomena, which transcend history, linking permanently the present and the mythical past” [our translation] (Welcker 1981, 83).

Thus, we witness the creation of works built on a series of basic principles – simplification (reducing the artistic form in order to render the absolute universally valid dimension), styling (modelling the concrete shape in order to reach the equilibrium, perfection), the purity of the shape (and obtaining the absolute spiritual emotion), essentializing (in the philosophical sense of the quest for the idea, reaching durability and the universe), moving from the real to the symbol in the search for human signification, as the end result of creation.

The main themes which stem from ancient myths and legends and which the sculptor chose to approach and render in its works are: the origin of the world, the myth of the bird and of flight, the myth of death and of sleep, the myth of the centre of the world, the theme of love and fertility as derived directly from mythology – *Laocoon* (1900), *Prometheus* (1911), *Narcissus* (1914), *Caryatide* (1915), *Chimera* (1918), *Leda* (I -1920, II- 1923), *Adam and Eve* (1921), *Ulysses* (1922) – or the Romanian superstitions – *Witch* (1916), *Cock Welcoming the Sun* (1922), *The Ancestral Gate* (1937), *The Table* (1937).

His first works already reveal his interest in the meaning of folklore, of Romanian legends and traditions; inspired by the custom from Gorj region of

planting two trees at the gate of family homes where relatives are buried (especially at the resting place of two spouses). The branches of the two trees would become mingled in time as a symbol of eternal union. This is the origin of *The Kiss* (1907), work characterized by simplicity and, at the same time, depth, by great symbolic power. Another example is *The Gate of the Kiss* (1937) itself where the two eyes (of the two characters) merging into one under the form of a circle or the missing arms are reference points in expressing the essence of the work in question.

Another work which refers to archetypal forms is *The Sleep* (1908). Subsequently, the sculptor will modify its compositional structure, striving for the purity of the shape, thus coming closer to the universality of the ideas he embraced. He deals with the same topic in the *Sleeping Muse* – in its 12 versions (1909-1912), because Brancusi stylized and simplified until he came close to the purest volume, which could attest the archetypal value of a work representing the dormant human being.

The ovality specific to the *Muse* is also present in *Prometheus* (1911) – a modern representation of the beginning of liberating the thought, of the birth of consciousness, of the rational man. Because Prometheus represents the spirit, the form of Brancusi's sculpture is the most adequate to illustrate the increasing distance from physical or historical details.

One of the sculptor's favourite themes was to symbolize fertility. The first work dedicated to this is the *Wisdom of the Earth*, which was later continued by the *Sleeping Muse*, *Princess X* (1916), *Mademoiselle Pogany* (1913), *White Negress* (1923), *Blond Negress* (1924), *Eve* (1921), and others.

The oval shape – primary and universal expression of these symbols – materializes in figurative representations of the sense of the world's origin, in the 7 versions of the *Newborn* (1915-1930). This continual rendering of the essence pursued permanently by Brancusi can also be found in the *Beginning of the World* (1920), with the origin myths coming into contact through the philosophy of the Tibetan Milarepa. The myth about the birth of the world from an egg is common to many ancient peoples and is considered a universal symbol. In most myths, the cosmic egg comes from the primordial waters; once it surfaces, it separates creating the earth and the sky.

Broadening the research of this myth, we learn about the bird that participates in bringing the seed (the cosmic egg) at the water surface. For Brancusi, this is theme of the 7 versions of *Maiestra* and the 22 versions of *Bird in Space*. We must not forget that the sculptor uses myths to reach the synthesizing

figurative form, to acquire the certainty of creation; he is not preoccupied to illustrate but to render the modern shape, widely generalizing, with contemporary meanings. He believes *The Bird* to be the symbol of the relationship between the sky and the earth.

Another representative work is the *Fish* (1927). Set on a polished aluminium plate to suggest the idea of floating, this is a symbol of the primordial element – water –, rendered in mythography through the image of the fish. The essence of the work is to capture floating, movement, life.

The idea of movement and of flight is encountered also in the *Turtle* (1940) and the *Flying Turtle* (1943). In old myths, it represented the image of the Universe, underlining its stability – although it moves slowly, it possesses longevity, durability.

An overview of the aesthetics promoted by the sculptor Constantin Brancusi would be incomplete without mentioning the sculptural ensemble in Târgu Jiu, made up of the *Endless Column*, *The Gate of the Kiss* and *The Table of Silence*.

*The Gate* is the symbol of home, and for the Romanian peasant it has a spiritual value. The upper part represents a dowry chest like the ones found in authentic peasant houses. The drawings suggest a hora, a peasant wedding, and the image is repeated from the sculpture *The Kiss*.

*The Table of Silence* is surrounded by 12 chairs and can be associated with *The Last Supper*, in which the 12 apostles surround Jesus – thus, the 12 chairs represent the Apostles, while the table stands for Jesus Himself. Another possible interpretation is the table as a symbol of family reunion and meditation, signalling Brancusi's wish to determine people to adopt this ancient custom again.

The *Endless Column* remains the central piece of the ensemble, amazing through its suppleness and the force of the plastic thinking. In fact, it represents the conquest of space by joining the earth and the sky, an open shape towards infinity (so ascending stairs) signifying creation, birth, dramatic death and rebirth in a continuous cycle on the vertical or in a spiral, a new shape of the Universe including the most sublime and modern meaning.

In conclusion, the revelation which results from approaching archetypal themes in Constantin Brancusi's sculptures is symbolic, because he eliminated from his creation the illustration, the narrative, which might have tempted him upon reading the myths and legends. The sculptor managed to render the unity of form and content by universalizing ideas, by finding meaning, purity.

## 2. The archetypal aesthetics in composer Octavian Nemescu's work

Octavian Nemescu (born in 1940) is one of the composers who played a decisive role in imposing the archetypal movement in Romania, "remaining faithful to this idea, transformed into ideal, that he serves through his creation and his entire spiritual existence, in a permanent quest for fundamental truths and ways to symbolically represent them" [our translation] (Anghel 1997, 83).

As we can see from other works by the same composer – *Natural-Cultural, Combinations in circles, Metabyzanthinirikohn* – Nemescu implements in his piece *Concentric*, a *triadic relationship* – through the concepts *natural, cultural, transcultural* – that, in his opinion, are the only basis to discover the archetypal as a means and universal form of existing and of expressing the cultural; thus, it becomes the living proof of implementing his artistic vision concerning the archetypal orientation.

*Concentric* is, in fact, his first work which brings to the fore the idea of archetype, inaugurating concomitantly two important contemporary aesthetical orientations: the accompanying spectral one and the new non-serial complexity. The first audition of the work, along with the piece *AUM* by Corneliu Cezar, took place at an unofficial concert organized at the State Central Library, in July 1969, and the following one was organized in Darmstadt in August 1972; in 1980 *Concentric* was awarded with the prize of the Group of Experimental Music of Bourges (G.M.E.B., France).

The piece was made up of three overlapping layers: the *deep layer* – A (in pp) and the *medial layer* – B (mp-p), which can be found on magnetic tape, and the *surface layer* – C, which represents the instrumental reality and consists of numerous short events which create ascending and/or descending waves or ephemeral existences; thus, the piece is built on two important coordinates: the spectacular one, that of the music performed on stage, and the non-spectacular one, that of the music recorded in electronic form, in order to overlap them during the performance.

Coming back to the layers which make up the structure of the piece, several comments should be made: the *deep layer* A contains the many basic tones (natural harmonics) of the fundamental tone, of undulating intensities as the sounds of big bells. This reality represents a *natural archetype*.

The *medial layer* B includes the many musical *cultural archetypes*, specific of certain regions or geographic areas, and of different musical epochs (so of different musical styles), in evolution according to the historical chronology and composed

of *cadential* rhythmic and melodic motifs (extracted from various music types) which take place obsessively over a certain period of time. B is tuned with A. Consequently, the sounds of the cadential motifs must generally be resonant harmonic for the fundamental A.

As for the *surface layer C*, it is obtained from acoustic instruments: clarinet, violin, alto, violoncello and piano, and represents the layer of the upper harmonic areas, acute (the lower areas are covered by the recorded tape). There is also a legend of the way in which certain effects are noted. For example, for percussion there are specific drawings which are associated with the gong, the Chinese bells, the harmonica, castanets, cymbal, marimba, vibraphone, etc. Each instrument will take over and play different percussion instruments, according to the composer's notation.

The work starts with the sound of the harmonics of the fundamental tone A presented on the tape, which corresponds to the *deep layer A* in ppp – an ancient archetypal sound. At the same time, the clarinet initiates a gong strike which is left vibrating for 45 seconds (according to the composer's notation).

Next, the other instruments of the surface layer C start playing, creating a sonorous atmosphere in which one can identify the harmonic sounds in the A spectrum, presented as a heterophony. There are certain reference points marking the fundamental notes which start the series of harmonics, for each individual instrument (for example, the violin player has as reference points the tones E and B). The temporary notation on the score for each instrument (15, 20 and 25 seconds, respectively) which contributes to this game built on fundamentals is followed by an artificial harmonic fourth and by sequences of harmonics which become the key elements in the musical discourse. During this time, the piano operates at the back of the resonance chamber (pizzicato sound effects). Here the composition includes a random moment, of improvisation in the second measure of system 1, page 2, when each instrument starts improvising.

The most concrete drawing is meant at this point for the violin which, after improvising for a short interval, emits clear sounds which, naturally, belong to the A spectrum. After this moment all the instruments start centring on clear sounds – with the mention that the violoncellist plays on the vibraphone at this point in the composition, and the pianist uses the bells – until a new heterophony is reached in system 1, measure 2, page 3, with an extremely concrete notation, in ff; the clarinetist must use the percussion again, more precisely the gong (page 3, system 2, measure 1); next, the drawing suggests an imitative polyphony (page 4, system 1, measure 1) after which a homophony can be identified (page 4, system 1, measure 1).

Thus, the composition is defined as a play between layers A-B of the low harmonics and layer C, of instruments emitting harmonics in a syntactic construction which is in perfect agreement with the composer's clear indications. From time to time, moments of heterophony and (isolated) polyphony are created, the clarinet reaches a climatic point (page 5, system 1), the human voice is featured at certain moments without becoming too conspicuous, and from page 11 the composer abandons on the tape the stationary chord of A and B and tries to decompose it into component notes.

### 3. Conclusion

The aim of the archetypal approach is to recover the archetypal elements and aspects pertaining to all traditions (irrespective of the branch of art), and to strip them of their cultural, contextual, conventional implications, in order to bring them closer to their natural state (Anghel 1997, 87).

The surge of this orientation was natural, because it represents the consequence of the saturation brought by the representatives of structuralism and serial composition. It is worth noting that these orientations combine harmoniously, and are even supported by the other branches of art, creating a complex image of the artistic act.

Some of the most important representatives of the Romanian cultural school embraced archetypalism, as shown by their creations which expressed the same universal truth, promoted the same cultural values, although they are based on different (sonorous/visual) materials.

The supporters of this movement are multicultural, they are familiar with numerous traditions belonging to different peoples, they are intellectuals thirsty for knowledge and, for this reason, the aesthetics they promote through archetypalism fully demonstrates its supporters' aspiration, their ascension to universal forms.

### 4. References

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