

NATURE BETWEEN IMAGINARY AND REALITY IN POSTMODERN AGE

NATURA ÎNTRE IMAGINAR ȘI REALITATE ÎN ERA POSTMODERNĂ

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***Abstract.** The present paper aims to discuss the problematic of nature within the Postmodern Age, starting from the fact that Postmodernism questions intensively the concept of reality. Therefore, the concept of nature evolves into a new context, being simultaneously associated with imaginary and reality, while the old and somehow exclusive link that modernity traced between nature and rationality seems to be no longer satisfactory.*

Key words: nature, reality, postmodern society

***Rezumat.** Lucrarea de față își propune luarea în discuție a problematicii naturii în cadrul epocii postmoderne, plecând de la faptul că postmodernismul pune intens în discuție conceptual de realitate. De aceea, conceptual de natură evoluează într-un context nou, fiind în același timp asociat imaginarului și realității, în vreme ce vechea și oarecum exclusivă conexiune instituită de modernitate între natură și raționalitate pare să nu mai fie suficientă.*

Cuvinte cheie: natură, realitate, societate postmodernă

INTRODUCTION

The birth of postmodern society is a very complex phenomenon most of all because globalization, as economic process, had major cultural consequences. These consequences regard the generalization and the spreading of a consumer mentality throughout global society and the stratification of social perception of culture, including art (Goulding, 2003). As far as art and philosophy are concerned, such an evolution involved a new attitude towards nature, especially regarding its relations with the concept of reality. As we are going to see, such a relation is mediated by a third concept, whose history was a pretty tormented one throughout different development stages of European philosophy: the concept of imagination.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

What interests us in the present paper is the understanding of the differences between modernism and postmodernism as regards the relation between nature and reality. Such understanding reflects on multiple levels of nowadays society. Science itself witnessed major changes concerning the importance of scientific realism within the most important theories. Classical attitude of modern scientists towards the features of nature was centered on the assumption that a clear description of them

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was perfectly compliant with classical realism. Quantum Age in contemporary science introduced a quite uncomfortable gap between scientific account of the features of nature and classical realism. Quantum Mechanics remained up to the present an objective theory, but despite numerous efforts of unifying the various interpretations of its formalism, it remains in a generally complicated and difficult relation with one of the most important philosophical doctrines that radically influenced the rise of modern science: classical scientific realism. Thus, starting from this situation, one can easily observe that nowadays the general coordinates of the relation among nature, imagination and reality changed dramatically in comparison with modern times, due to fundamental changes within ontology of scientific discourse. On another level, the same mutations from modernism to postmodernism affected the triad nature-imagination-reality as regards the evolution of postmodern culture. The consequences were important not only for the fine arts in general, but also as regards the garden art as well. Maybe more than in the case of painting, sculpture or architecture, in landscape and garden art the relation between nature and reality reached in postmodern times a new level, a level in which the intermediating influence of imagination became indispensable for the conceptual pair mentioned above. Furthermore, not only the relation between nature and reality changed in that of conceiving nature as part of reality or in that of conceiving reality in relation with nature. This transformation regards the way in which the link between nature and reality is mediated by human mind with the use of imaginative faculty. In fact, among other historical causes; a profound mutation regarding the meaning of all three concepts influenced decisively the postmodern perspective upon nature, reality and imagination, individualizing it in comparison with the modern one. The very significance of nature changed in its relation with human society, in the same time with important meaning transgressions of imagination and reality. In fact, at the very core of modern perspective upon nature lays the confidence in industrialism, as a rational way of conquering and exploiting nature. (Macfarlane, 2002) In contrast with modern attitude towards nature, postmodern attitude is inspired by the coordinates and specificity of post-industrial society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The relation with nature represents maybe the most important coordinate that changed in postmodern times. For modernism the relation with nature was not a central point in judging the refinement level of a culture. On the contrary, in modern period of time technological progress allowed human society to distance itself from nature, opposing to it the industrial civilization. Nature was regarded primarily as a source of natural resources able to be conquered and exploited by human mind in a rational way, using its imaginative products, be they rational systems of thinking or technologies, scientific theories or ideologies. The paradigm within which such creations were developed was a unitary one in its rationalistic enthusiasm inherited from Enlightenment age, while the postmodern paradigm is a pluralistic one in this respect (Grenz, 1996). Gathering a wide range of attitudes regarding nature and being more focused on environmental ethics, postmodernism favors the multiplication of interpretations concerning the philosophical meaning of the concept of nature. Different cultures become valuable and interesting in postmodern times just because of their specific way of conceiving a certain relation with nature.

This happens because the postmodern attitude towards nature is more refined and complex in its essence than the modern one (Baker Steve, 2008). Nature is regarded as the original and indispensable environment of all terrestrial forms of life. Being the source of life for human beings, nature becomes a vital element for humanity. The rational reductionist attitude towards nature dominant in modern period was replaced by a more open minded attitude that pays attention not only to rational aspects, but also to intuition and other forms of subtle dialogue between human mind and nature. This change in the general attitude towards nature, which is in fact a sign of profound philosophical mutations regarding the positioning of contemporary people in the problem of nature-culture dichotomy, reflected also in the various forms of contemporary Art. Garden Art represented always a domain of artistic expression in which multiple artistic principles are applied, having in the same time strong connections with Aesthetics, with Philosophy in general, but also with Biology and other natural sciences. Starting from here, it becomes obvious that the postmodern tendencies in garden and landscape art become symptomatic for other deep cultural tendencies that define postmodern age. For example, in English Garden history postmodernism can be more easily linked to the classic period dominated by eclectic style than to modernism, mainly because the abstractionist tendencies of modern style in Garden Art didn't face too much enthusiasm in England, where the combination between three fundamental aesthetic concepts - beauty, picturesque and sublime - has long been the ground for cultivating various strategies of creating an explicit meaningful artistic discourse within Garden Art (Turner, 1996). In the same time, the Human Being, as part of nature, proved to be a quite difficult subject for rational description, especially in its complex social behaviors and organizational patterns, giving the fact that rationalistic systems of scientific knowledge failed to solve cultural problems of humanity in Atomic era. Imagination was long misunderstood in its constructive functions regarding the development of rational and objective knowledge. Finally, productive imagination was understood correctly, together with its influence on social level, the term imaginary being used more often. In the same time, reality itself became plural, not only objective and rational for postmodernism, by contrast with rationalistic modern view that claimed the positive value per se of human knowledge, no matter how neutrally moral it was, which led to destructive effects due to the power of human technology used without moral preoccupation.

Up to the XIX-th century physical reality was considered as being unitary, able to be described objectively and somehow unitary by theories like Newtonian and Lagrangean Mechanics, Thermodynamics or Electromagnetism. In the beginning of the XX-th century an important change took place within the main physical theories. Newtonian Mechanics and classical Electrodynamics were replaced by the Restrained Theory of Relativity and classical Thermodynamics was deeply transformed by the introduction of quantum hypothesis. The important mutation that took place concerned mainly the specific properties of the micro-universe and those of the macro-universe. Around the middle of the century

General Relativity was used to describe the properties of physical systems at astronomic scale, while Quantum Mechanics was used to describe the properties of physical systems at quantum scale. Discoveries like Uncertainty Principle, wave-corpucle duality of elementary particles, distance entanglement etc. revealed the fact that each level of organization of matter has its own distinct properties. Therefore, physical reality proved not to be as unitary as the theories of classical natural science assumed. Later on, the situation complicated further by the fact that neither physical theories that describe each level of matter organization proved to be entirely compatible one to the other, nor the four fundamental forces in nature used to explain the dynamics of various physical systems at different levels of matter organization. This way, a unitary description of a unique physical reality seemed to be a much far away ideal than was in the modern period. Simultaneously, the idea of a fractured reality and the difficult relation to it of human mind manifested their influence upon various contemporary disciplines, from psychology to art. As a consequence, postmodern attitude towards reality in general, be that reality physical, psychological, or symbolic in the artistic sense, became very distinct from the modern one. Reality is plural and non-linear in its manifestations for the postmodern culture, in which it can be signified and decrypted in various ways, depending on axiological options, personal identity or social history of individuals. The postmodern correspondent tendency in Gardening Art was that of mixing various design elements into a narration with elaborated significance that provoke the viewer to decrypt it (Turner, 1996). A process of adaptation to individual wishes and preferences of each individual in respect of his strategy of signifying and "building" reality for himself took place as well in postmodern Garden Art. Within such a process a major part plays the imaginative faculty of human mind. But imagination itself as a concept registered an important transformation throughout the XX-th century together with some quite recent mutations in cultural anthropology. Gradually, a process of translation and replacement of the term "imagination" with the term "imaginary" took place. There are two main reasons for that change. First of all, imagination was for a long time despised and avoided as term in what regards its possible link to knowledge, be the last one religious or scientific. Fictional products of imagination were considered equally dangerous for religious knowledge as they were for objective, rational knowledge of reality cultivated by platonic tradition. That is why fictions were considered elements of heresy in Middle Age or pure speculative discursive entities in the period of modern science arousal (Védrine, 1990). The solely exception in this respect could be considered the cultivation of Aristotelian "phantasia" in Renaissance by refined intellectuals as Marsilio Ficino or Giordano Bruno. Long ago philosophers seem to consider imagination as inappropriate for philosophical investigation of reality as it was for religious understanding of human existence or for the objective description of nature in natural sciences. However, by the end of the XX-th century a decisive mutation took place in this regard, and the term "imaginary" was considered suitable to describe the collective dynamics of

representations within communities and social networks by authors of French School like Gaston Bachelard, Gilbert Durand, Jacques Le Goff and , more recently, Jean Jacques Wunemburger. This trend increased steadily in magnitude and imaginary became a favorite subject for many historians and anthropologists preoccupied with cultural evolution and history of mentalities. In contrast with imagination, which functioned like an individual faculty of mind, imaginary refers to the social dynamics of representations within a specific community or group of people. Since its products help people to represent themselves in the middle of their own reality well-defined in cultural and scientific sense, imaginary become an indispensable element of adherence to their own collective identity. Each culture and each community, be it a scientific one, an artistic one or of other kind has its own specific set of collective representations regarding the structure of the world, the narrative pattern of its religion or its own place in history. Following the occurrence and the evolution of these representations within the main works of that community, one can identify the crucial points in its evolution. Giving all these aspects, there is no surprise that each cultural epoch, each artistic trend, each scientific theory has its own specific imaginary. Therefore, the translation from modernism to postmodernism involves profound mutations as regards the relation between imaginary and reality, especially in case of nature. Postmodern understanding of nature inherits its richness, its diversity and its locality from the very core of postmodern culture, which on his turn is less rationalistic and unitary than the modern one (Grenz, 1996). All these changes are reflected on Postmodern Garden Art as a generally favorable attitude towards mixed irregular shapes, simplicity and explicit meaning of artistic discourse, in contrast with modern preference for straight lines, angular shapes and abstract character of artistic discourse (Turner, 1996). Beyond all these, the lack of a profound spiritual meaning of life could be considered the major cultural problem of postmodern society. One of the main causes of that is represented by the real gap between the external meaning of life centered on false needs – for example the obsession of gathering things, as it is promoted by advertising culture - , and individual need for an autonomous, more profound sense of existence (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2000). This has important social consequences as regards the specific sensitivity of the general public towards postmodern artistic discourse. “Protests against rationality and uniformity are seen, as well, in the successive waves of youth cultures and religious revivals that have marked late industrial society. Objectively, it is clear that the large-scale bureaucratic institutions of society continue to give the main direction to national life. All revolts break against their indispensability to modern society. But subjectively these institutions are incapable of satisfying the emotional and social needs of individuals. The consequence is the repeated rise of subcultures, often of bizarre mystical or hedonistic kinds, which aim in their practice to reverse the main features of modernity and which give their members a sense of participation and belonging of an almost tribal nature”(Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2000). An interesting aspect of those subcultures is represented by their local and non-local characteristics. There are big differences between modern

society and postmodern society in this respect. For example, the local specific features of different communities in the American society determined The Carnegie Commission named by the Congress to adopt the Localism Principle concerning the national strategy in media cultural policy. Localism has long been considered as one of the central guiding principles in American communications policymaking and has been a fundamental principle of broadcast even since the Radio Act of 1927 (Napoli and Philip, 2000).

CONCLUSIONS

The collision between geographical stratification of society and its non-spatial "virtual" stratification is characteristic for postmodern period. As a consequence, contemporary aesthetic frames and aesthetic mentalities have a complex genealogy, because postmodern cultural trends combine local traditions and local usage of artistic imagination with non-local ones. To understand better such a complexity, we should not forget the work of art has a central communicational purpose: the dialogue between the individuality of the artist and the eclectic postmodern public, which is very often a non-spatial defined public. As a conclusion, recent postmodern tendencies within non-local stratification process of contemporary society determine the unique complexity and diversity of recent aesthetic trends and aesthetic mentalities that reflect in Garden Art domain the new coordinates of the relation among nature, imaginary and reality.

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