

## AESTHETICAL FEATURES OF DESCRIPTIVE IMAGINARY IN GARDEN ART

### VALENȚE ESTETICE ALE IMAGINARULUI DESCRIPTIV ÎN ARTA GRĂDINII

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**Abstract.** *The paper focuses on applying the concept of descriptive imaginary in garden aesthetics. Similarly to any other work of art, the gardens could be seen as selective and cultural descriptions of nature from a human point of view. They also reflect the relation between human consciousness and nature, having a complex nature as artistic enterprises that combine the representation with the reconstruction of the artistic object. Some features of the nature are more aesthetically valorized than others, depending of style and period. The artist not only creates significant images using plants, but also discovers some aesthetical qualities of nature. Therefore, the garden becomes the expression of the relation between human consciousness and nature, a relation that helps human beings to define themselves.*

**Rezumat.** *Lucrarea este centrată pe valorificarea conceptului de imaginar descriptiv în estetica grădinii. La fel ca orice altă operă de artă, grădina poate fi privită ca descripție selectivă, culturală a naturii din perspectiva conștiinței umane. Dar ea reflectă totodată și relația dintre om și natură, situându-se ca act artistic între re-prezentare și re-construcție. Anumite trăsături ale naturii sunt valorizate estetic în detrimentul altora, în funcție de stil și de epocă. Artistul nu doar creează imagini semnificative folosind plante, ci descoperă în natură anumite calități estetice, grădina fiind martora relației între conștiința umană și natură, relație ce ajută omul să se redefinească pe el însuși.*

In every day language, we are used to oppose quite often the words “imaginary” and “real”. It is very convenient to suppose that it is possible to make a very sharp distinction between “real things” and “imaginary things”, even though human knowledge arises from a combination of these two categories at the conjunction of human imagination and human cognition with that part of the physical real detectable by our senses.

Western culture is quite suspicious regarding any imaginative excess, especially in the moments when imaginary interposes between human consciousness and the physical world. Those situations are usually associated with psychopathology. This circumspection could be explained by the long time in which Western civilization struggled to eliminate mythical imaginary from the dialogue of human consciousness with nature. In a way, this process was similar with the dissolution of the charm of mythical explanation regarding the world.

Some of the greatest cultures in the world missed the opportunity of inventing modern science just because they hesitated to make a sharp distinction among real world and imaginary worlds. Indian culture is a good example in this

respect (6). One can easily conclude that, in order to give constructive powers to human imagination in the knowledge making process, a great culture has to admit the fictional nature of the conceptual products of human imagination. The distinction between imaginary (as a noun) and real (as a noun, also) represents the first step towards the recognition of the constructive and epistemological function of imaginary. This is equivalent with admitting that descriptive fictions have a provisory and explanatory nature with regard to their part in the scientific discourse, but also in other types of discourses including the artistic one.

In spite of some very important and remarkably early achievements in mathematics and empirical medicine, far-eastern cultures were not able to get rid of mythological imaginary in explaining the world. Consequently, they did not develop a methodology for the optimization of the world descriptions according to some pragmatic criteria. Unable to distinguish descriptive fictions from mythological fictions, they also missed the opportunity to develop a proper descriptive imaginary as part of the scientific discourse about the physical real. Nevertheless, the situation of descriptive fictions in oriental art is quite different, because they play a major role in establishing a very refined aesthetical code suitable for describing and creating an artistic image of physical reality. One can just remember the major influence of Japanese stamps on Vincent van Gogh, for example.

As to the European culture, it has been characterized by a great competition between mythological descriptions of the physical world and logical-structural descriptions of the same physical world. At the end of the XVII-th century, the logical-structural descriptions, based on logical-structural fictions, prevailed upon mythological descriptions. They proved to be more efficient, so – finally – descriptive imaginary prevailed in this culture upon mythological imaginary. A good example for understanding the specific difference between mythological imaginative scenarios and descriptive imaginative scenarios is a comparison of the mythological description of a dragon with a scientific description of a *pterodactyl* in a museum. Many representations of the dragon pay no attention to the proportions of the animal. Especially the head is sometimes far bigger than the wings. So big is the difference that suddenly becomes obvious that such a creature could never fly. However, this aspect has no importance in mythological discourse and simply does not undermine the power of the mythological descriptions. On the contrary, in the scientific description of a *pterodactyl*, the lift of the wings plays a major role and the proportions of the animal are taken very carefully into consideration in order to produce a plausible description of a flying animal. Among other pragmatic criteria, the *one of the concatenation of descriptive representations* is the most important. It demands that each concept with descriptive function within the framework of a scientific theory must *fit* in the conceptual *puzzle* of that theory in such a way that leaves no dark places in the description of the real phenomenon. The concept must be logically linked to other central concepts of the theory in order to assure a minimum efficiency for the scientific description, therefore the concept is shaped

in accordance with the whole theory. This feature distinguishes the scientific discourse in comparison with other types of discourse. But for the moment, we will try to emphasize some of the aesthetical features of *descriptive imaginary* and to understand its constructive role not only in the scientific discourse, but also in garden art.

Recent experiments in cognitive psychology emphasized the primary physiological sensations as being the departure point in the construction of any human concept, no matter how abstract (5). This discovery should not represent a surprise, since human consciousness evolved in a constant dialogue with nature and primary sensations have been used in this dialogue as an interface. Starting from here, Cornelius Castoriadis suggests that human perception is imaginatively structured (3) – a very important aspect in our investigation of descriptive imaginary and confirmed by recent research on human brain (4). Human brain associates abstract concepts with primary sensations in his effort of distinguishing them one to the others. This helps the brain to manipulate easily abstract concepts.

Taking into account all these aspects, we can easily understand that descriptive imaginary plays an important role especially in those cultural activities that combine sensations with abstract thinking. Garden art is such a case. Like any other work of art, the gardens could be seen as selective and cultural descriptions of nature from a human point of view. They also reflect the relation between human consciousness and nature, having a complex nature as artistic enterprises that combine the representation with the reconstruction of the artistic object. But in the garden art case the physical support the aesthetical message is constituted by a fragment of nature itself: the plant. Of course, starting from Antiquity and coming to contemporary gardens, some features of the nature are more aesthetically valorized than others, depending on style and period. The artist not only creates significant images using plants, but also discovers some aesthetical qualities of nature. The artist creates for the viewer not only a suggestion of a parallel universe – the aesthetical one – , but also a complex experience (1,8). The garden “speaks” not only through colors, surfaces, or sounds, but also through smells and textures. Actually, what is remarkable for a garden as artistic description of an aesthetical ideal is the simultaneity of all these channels of communication. The artistic message creates a complex state of mind associated to a specific perception of nature (7), a *guided* one. Therefore, the garden becomes the expression of the relation between human consciousness and nature, a relation that helps human beings to define themselves.

Giving the fact that gardens have good chances to become “spaces” of artistic conscience in which the viewer is invited to begin a self-analysis effort, starting from the posture of an “intruder” and moving towards the posture of a “participant”, is quite ironic that nowadays the crisis of garden art is a metaphysical one (2). It is a crisis of spiritual message in a period of intense pragmatism and tremendous technical achievements. The suggestion we make in order to surmount the present cultural difficulties and to transform the gardens in much more than physical spaces filled with plants refers to the opportunity of

using contemporary scientific representations in the artistic dialogue with the public. One cannot ignore the development of modern science that determined an evolution of scientific representations. At the beginning of human rational inquiries upon nature these representations were mainly qualitative-sensitive. In contemporary science they became predominantly conventional-structural. Their *visuality (their capacity of helping the scientist to visualize physical processes)* changed and became, little by little, a conventional-structural one.

This giving up of sensory intuition simultaneous with a translation towards mathematical abstraction in the historical development of scientific discourse revealed another important aspect concerning scientific representations. Theirs ontological status in the discourse depends on the distinction drawn between the objective physical process and its reflection in the scientist mind.

We are therefore inclined to propose new stylistic synthesis like a fractal garden or a non-Euclidean one. Maybe in contemporary post-modernism there is enough space for a new symbolism that pays enough attention to the fact that behind the visual aspect of scientific representations lays an equation or other sort of analytical reality that allows human minds to “visualize” descriptive structures situated far beyond the limits of our senses. After all, science represents today a major cultural activity of human being in his effort of imagining descriptions of the universe from a human conscious point of view.

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