

## Notes

- 1 Vassilakis Takis and Sinclair Beiles, 'Programme Élaboré en 1961', in Takis, Alfred Pacquement, and Véronique Dabin, *Takis: Retrospektive*, Paris, 1993, 100.
- 2 Quoted in Bertram Gabriel, 'Works of Earth', *Horizon*, 1, January–February 1982, 48.
- 3 See, for example, John J. Curley, *A Conspiracy of Images: Andy Warhol, Gerhard Richter, and the Art of the Cold War*, New Haven, CT, 2013; Joshua Shannon, *The Recording Machine: Art and Fact during the Cold War*, New Haven, CT, 2017; and Jaleh Mansoor, *Marshall Plan Modernism: Italian Postwar Abstraction and the Beginnings of Autonomia*, Durham, NC, 2016.
- 4 Harry S. Truman, 'Statement by the President Announcing the Use of the A-Bomb at Hiroshima', 6 August 1945. Harry Truman Papers, University of Missouri. <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/93/statement-president-announcing-use-bomb-hiroshima>. Accessed 1 June 2020.
- 5 James Nisbet offers a different take on the same comparison between 2001 and this generation of land artists in terms of the film's resonance with environmental anxieties, in contrast to Slifkin's focus on militarism. See James Nisbet, *Ecologies, Environments, and Energy Systems in Art of the 1960s and 1970s*, Cambridge, MA, 2014.
- 6 A similar tendency to equate the loss of vision with the loss of temporal reference colours Heizer's interest in trenches and depressions that eliminate visible signs of landscape for viewers situated within.
- 7 See, for example, Susan L. Stoops, ed., *More than Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the '70s*, Waltham, MA, 1996. Although postminimalist sculpture's topological thinking might also index a far more complex interpolation of feedback that witnesses cybernetics' transition from the realm of predictive military technology to a generalized information economy. See Eric de Bruyn, 'Topological Pathways of Post-Minimalism', *Grey Room*, 25, Fall 2006, 32–63.
- 8 See the recent English translation of Maurizio Lazzarato, *Videophilosophy: The Perception of Time in Post-Fordism*, ed. and trans. Jay Hetrick, New York, 2019; and Ina Blom, *The Autobiography of Video: The Life and Times of a Memory Technology*, Berlin, 2016.
- 9 See Ina Blom, *On the Style Site: Art, Sociality and Media Culture*, Berlin, 2007.

## On the Possibility of Meaning in Science and Art

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**A Forest of Symbols: Art, Science, and Truth in the Long Nineteenth Century, by Andrei Pop, New York: Zone Books, 2019, 320 pp., 15 col. and 101 b. & w. illus., hardback, \$32.95**

The symbolist art that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century has often been characterized as an art of subjectivity. It arose in reaction to the alleged objectivity of realism and impressionism, its central assertion being that – instead of focusing on exterior appearances – art should orient itself towards interior experiences. But how can subjective experiences be communicated to others? This fundamental question, addressed by late nineteenth-century artists and scientists alike, provides the basis for Andrei Pop's recent book.

This ambitious and original study presents an entirely new interpretation of symbolist art centred on questions of subjectivity and the possibility of meaning. To begin with, the author provides a 'conceptual' definition of symbolist art as all art that is self-conscious about its modes of making meaning. This rather unconventional definition is neither stylistically nor historically founded, but the focus of Pop's study is nevertheless on the timeframe typically associated with symbolism. In his broad interrogation of this artistic phenomenon, Pop argues convincingly that during the nineteenth century it was not only artists who were concerned with symbolism and its relevance to meaning-making and communication. Such issues were also central within science and philosophy; for example, the dissatisfaction with empiricism that has typically been associated with symbolism was also shared by many nineteenth-century mathematicians and logicians. Instead of receding to the realm of irrationalism and solipsism, as has sometimes been claimed, symbolist artists were deeply concerned with the logical structures of knowledge and communication that made visual meaning possible.

After an introductory chapter that charts the symbolist phenomenon as defined by Pop, his second chapter provides a detailed discussion of a paradigmatic symbolist work (and also one according to more conventional definitions), Edgar Allan Poe's poem 'The

Raven' in Stéphane Mallarmé's French translation as illustrated by Edouard Manet (plate 1). The purpose of this analysis is to examine the symbolist method and its ways of dealing with the difficulties involved in communicating subjective experience. While the complex, multi-authored work of art that is at the centre of Pop's careful analysis may not provide a solution to the problem, it certainly tackles the issue in a manner that has aesthetic and philosophical power in itself.

The following chapter shifts attention from drawing to colour and shows how scientific debates on the subjectivity of sense experiences were reflected in symbolist art theory and practice (plate 2). Identifying an inherent paradoxicality in the realist and impressionist efforts to represent the world as perceived by an individual, Pop explains how these attempts inevitably result in a doubling of subjective experience. In short, this means that when a subjective sense-impression is presented in a work of art it becomes the object of another subjective perception – that of the spectator. After carefully laying out the centrality of this problem of doubling in artistic as well as scientific material, the author moves on to a more abstract treatment of the topic, reflecting on pictorial theories based on

**1** Edouard Manet, *Le Corbeau*, 1875, second image ('La Croisée'). Transfer lithograph. London: British Museum.

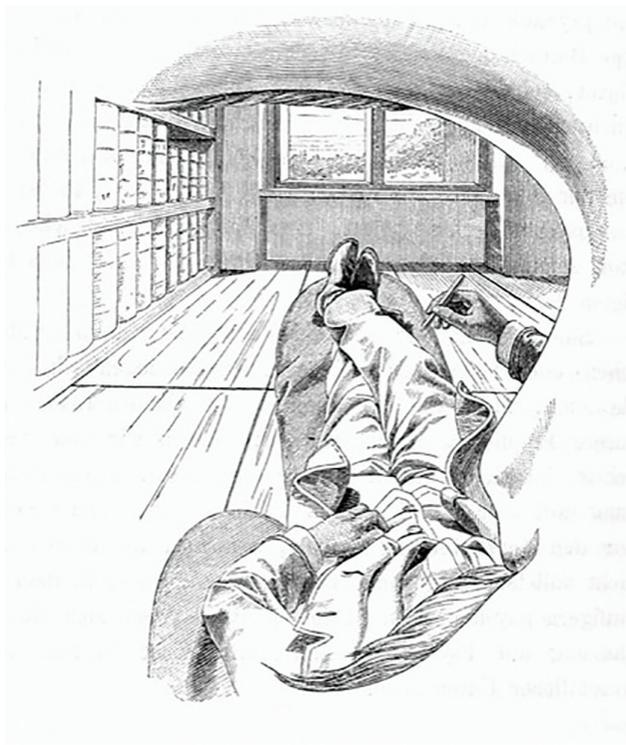


Friedrich L. Gottlob Frege's and Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophical approaches. The final chapter explores such theories in later artistic and philosophical formulations, thus proclaiming the significance of this logical basis for symbolism in the twentieth century.

What makes Pop's treatment of his subject different from more conventional art-historical studies is that, instead of examining how individual artists reacted to questions drawn from contemporary science, this study takes broad philosophical concerns with subjectivity and truth as its point of departure and approaches artistic questions from a theoretical perspective. Works of art are hence seen as active participants in various scientific and philosophical debates instead of merely reflecting them. The author argues for a rational and logical basis for symbolist art, his claim being that most previous scholars of the late nineteenth century in general and of symbolism in particular have been too preoccupied with irrational and esoteric tendencies to pay enough attention to that period's commitment to revolutionary science. Hence, in Pop's interpretation symbolism is fundamentally perceived as a new way of looking at the world instead of turning away from it. Symbolist art, accordingly, is about a critical questioning of empiricism and its tendency to equate truth with the perceptible or verifiable. The meaningfulness of this kind of art emerges by virtue of its efforts to make subjective experience intelligible.

The philosophically oriented approach of *A Forest of Symbols* contributes significantly to many recent debates on nineteenth-century art, and its central theses are delivered persuasively. Pop's method of bringing together visual as well as theoretical material from a wide spectrum of sources is both informative and enlightening. Yet, in some sections of the book, the author's detailed line of reasoning has a tendency to become quite technical, and these parts may not be easily approachable even for someone who is well versed in theoretical debates surrounding the symbolist phenomenon. It is therefore not entirely clear who might comprise the intended audience for this study. While it has the potential to provide very useful insights for readers interested in both philosophical and artistic approaches to meaning-making, one needs to have substantial background in both fields to grasp all aspects of Pop's argumentation fully.

Another slightly problematic issue arises from the fact that the author does very little to position himself within the field of existing scholarship on symbolism and its engagement with science. Even if his precise



**2 Ernst Mach, *Beiträge zur Analyse der Empfindungen*, Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1886, page 14, pen and wash drawing. Munich: Deutsches Museum.**

point is to offer a different perspective, it would be quite helpful to start out with a brief discussion on what has been said before. While there has been – and perhaps still is to some extent – a propensity to perceive symbolism as irrational, bound towards mysticism and opposed to science, in more recent research these kinds of views have been broadly questioned. Robert Michael Brain and Allison Morehead, for example, have provided important perspectives on the parallels between experimental science and late nineteenth-century art.<sup>1</sup> These kinds of novel approaches have also made it clear that the symbolists' interest in esoteric phenomena, such as spiritualism or theosophy, should not be so unproblematically equated with an inclination towards irrationality. On the contrary, there were many links and joint efforts between art, science and esotericism, and all these pursuits were sincerely committed to making sense of reality in a manner that at least insisted on being rational. Even if one finds the rationalist claims of nineteenth-century esotericism unconvincing, it is important to keep in mind that many artists and intellectuals took them very seriously. Therefore, the strict dividing line that Pop appears to be drawing between esotericism and science is anachronistic as well as a little outdated in the light of recent scholarship. Of course, it may be argued that these debates are not at

the centre of the book, which has its focus elsewhere. But some engagement with them would have made its content more approachable and its argument sounder. As it stands, readers are left to establish for themselves how Pop's philosophical treatment of the intellectual basis of symbolism actually relates to the more historically or stylistically oriented formulations to be found in most studies of this kind of art.

Hence, while *A Forest of Symbols* does indeed present the reader with an interesting new perspective on late nineteenth-century art it may run the risk of seeming too idiosyncratic. I certainly hope this is not the case, because the book does provide a significant example of the kind of art-historical scholarship that actively and critically engages with works of art, highlighting their meaningfulness and power, while drawing attention to the fact that taking pictures seriously does not have to entail treating them as linguistic utterances. Moreover, Pop's characterization of symbolism as a kind of 'meta-art', constantly reflecting on the possibility of communicating subjective sensation, thoughts and ideas through visual means is an insightful way of understanding this artistic phenomenon; one that has proven quite difficult to define.

#### Note

- 1 Robert Michael Brain, *The Pulse of Modernism: Physiological Aesthetics in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*, Seattle, 2015; Allison Morehead, *Nature's Experiments and the Search for Symbolist Form*, University Park, 2017.