

**Material Idea.
On the Legibility of Culture**

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Introduction: Rewriting Culture between the Lines

Making the world more legible by explaining it – has this not always been the dream of science? Works of art occasionally achieve the same aim, opening up new spaces of legibility between the observer's position and the observed objects. However, art mostly seeks to attain precisely the contrary, suggesting further questions after having contributed to following its own particular quests, its own lines of searching.

Art may blur horizons – and this often happens just when it seems to make them clearer – just as it may also displace them: by focusing on its object in a close-up, art stirs and rebuilds whole systems and, therefore, re-defines contexts and perspectives. Moreover, some works of art that touch us are particularly able to open all our senses as well as recall the memories of our body.

We might see culture theories as being positioned in a middle-field between science and art, reaching out towards both and choosing their research objects within significant spaces in the so-called living realm, where human deeds may be testified to and human configurations may be interpreted. Such spaces are generously wide but not always easy to precisely grasp. Furthermore, setting limits to the task of contextualizing an object proves rather impossible and accordingly impossible to stick to any single theory unless one actively decides to do so out of some act of willingness. Theorizing and analyzing belong together in a kind of dialectic teamwork which also decides about the choice of the moment needed for research closure out of the mere pragmatic reason of getting work done.

As well as always finding ourselves among marked and unmarked spaces, we are bound to combine those theoretical approaches we may find more suitable as regards specific objects of analysis. Marked spaces are relevant not only for a culture, for a group, for a nation, but also for ourselves in a strictly personal way. In spite of not always being consciously assumed, they are vital to helping configure collective and personal identities.

A space of mind, of memory unavoidably also becomes a space of affection, irrespective of whether positive, negative or ambiguous. In such a disposal, and by framing timely traces, spaces become places in processes creating a complex mosaic of significations, which is the proper working

field of a culture analyst. In other words, a culture analyst perceives in each object and situation a complex field, full of attractors and meaning knots. It remains his/her task to establish the suitable frames and reading protocols.

A theoretical view may also be perceived as a kind of marked space. Therefore, the openness of culture theory, alongside its changing position in the palette of possibilities, may find its own *closure* – together with its own *disclosure* – within the relationship with the object of analysis. The attempt to make the world (or at least our research objects) more legible represents a dynamic issue, an attempt to find a way to overcome a huge number of barriers we are otherwise unable to surmount, to cross or to decipher even should we try to overfly them and to integrate them from a panoramic perspective.

Between the (at least apparent) regularity of scientific laws and the labyrinthine character of artistic configurations, the lines of a theoretical cultural work cannot but move slowly forward as far as they remain hostage to the tensions and contradictions generated by all kinds of relationships. Such tensions and contradictions might also be a warning to prevent cultural mappings from becoming dogmatically rigid out of a (vain) search for timeless validity for instance.

The quest for legibility might therefore actually be, as we are constantly experiencing, a task of Sisyphus, most of all when insisting on the pursuit of a functional scheme instead of playing the game provided by perspective views and hypothetic challenges. This requires hermeneutic flexibility. Goethe could still aphoristically say that one person should quietly venerate the issues that cannot be immediately understood (Goethe, 1982: 12, 467). Alternatively, as his contemporary fellow-writer Schiller had already seen some years before in his third medicine dissertation: we put aside a book that may seem illegible to us at one precise moment, in order to rediscover it some decades later when able to understand it better (cf. SW V, 324). However, a further question arises here: is a wider horizon, given by life experience, a sure guide for a better reading, or does it just provide a possibility of getting more proper insights, cautioned by timely distance?

Schiller mentioned a book, but we might also say image, assertion, as well as text or sentence in any book – or even in any e-book. The relationship between the observer (together with the conditions of his or her mis/understanding) and the object of analysis remains as a condition of possibility for the building of a non-dogmatic culture theory.

And here we stand alone, at least for a first moment while facing such a task anew, but not on totally unknown ground. Such a ground may be called “the real”.

Nevertheless, what we call “the real” also proves the result of a protocol of reading. Such a reading is unavoidably historical and contingent as a product of a specific temporary sense. This also incorporates a complex correlation of marked and unmarked spaces and therefore additionally in a spatial sense. But this last facet also carries the evidence of time. Such “marks”, taken as individual projections or choices, are not only constantly changing, for instance, according to the daylight (or nocturnal illumination or twilight palettes), to the instant temper or mood, to the physical conditions and the cultural antecedents of the perceiving and exposing subject – to sum up, according to a whole package of conditions and circumstances. Should we put together the myriads of individuals on the global surface, we constantly have to redraw the lines of intersection and re-read the mappings of an interactive geography made up of partly individual options, partly mimetic movements. Like ruins, views are constantly destroyed and rebuilt; like lines, they are constantly erased and rewritten. However, this never happens completely anew. Culture work may also be seen as a patient attempt to read palimpsests – which are, as we well known, marked spaces par excellence.

“Objectivity” is therefore obtained by closeness to the object(s) that corresponds rather to a sculpted reconfiguration than to any plain “thick description” (Clifford Geertz). Such “objectivity” is the product of multiple intersections, which are also interwoven with forms of materialized subjectivity. We do not need to ascribe worldly reality to a “fetish character” – in analogy with the Marxist analysis of commodities – in order to realize how such corresponds to a permanent configuration of materialized intentions, plans, perspectives, as well as emotions, passions, in a perpetual crossroad of insights, obsessions, *Irrungen*, *Wirrungen* (Theodor Fontane) – wandering perambulations not only in the open labyrinths of modernity but also in the representations produced by our own historical readings. We easily come to such insights by demanding and practicing finer, more differentiated forms of reading the endless fields, the multiple fabrics of the world. Enriched with information from all sources and channels, the reading-of-a-book metaphor still works as a package packed with plural significances.

Relying upon the insights of neurophysiologic research into the indissolubility of reason and feelings, coming together as emotional intelligence, we may regard both instances as a further step beyond the discussions often

taking place precisely around the postulate of some opposition existing between them. In fact, the testimonies of such discussions throughout the centuries – beginning with the platonic school and culminating in Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s *Dialectics of Enlightenment* – provide us with a considerable amount of marked spaces, examples of what we call here *material ideas*. Since emotions (and passions) are always as present and alive as flesh and blood in our complex psychosomatic system, they are not only interwoven with the representation of the alleged “tyrannical reason” that is supposed to repress them but they also contribute to configuring and intensifying reason based discourses. In this view, I would like to stress the hypothesis according to which the highest forms of the so-called “repression by reason” might by the same token be called the highest forms of “passion of reason”. In other words, we should finally ask whether reason has not hitherto been a rather more fragile part, grasped, manipulated and configured by emotions and passions. This assertion may of course seem disputable. However what does seem undeniable is the following: as a construct, reason is a culture product, *natura naturata*, while passions are endowed with energy sources, *natura naturans*.

This brings us to the title of this volume. As an expression in itself, “material idea” has been here borrowed from a text written by Friedrich Schiller when a 19-year old medicine student. The description of the constituting processes of such ideas, although remaining within the philosophical-medical discourses of the late Enlightenment that proposed the first psychosomatic, anthropological perspectives (Riedel, 1985: 61ff), may shed light upon the building processes of ideologies. According to the young Schiller, such ideas “stir the soul” by forcing themselves “on the understanding more potently in all associations” (SW V, 266). In a kind of zero degree, according to Schiller, the “soul” or conscientiousness develops an attentiveness that points to balanced conditions in the possibility of developing free judgments, free forms of willing and acting. The gap between such situations and the grasping of the “soul” or conscientiousness by materialized ideas such as obsessions was left unexplained by Schiller. Nevertheless, his hypothesis still opens a number of thrilling questions.

This text was presented to a jury at the Stuttgart Military Academy (Karlsschule) as a medical dissertation submitted to qualify as a physician. It was rejected on the grounds of being considered too speculative. In order to gain his medical degree, and following a more academic discourse, Schiller wrote two more dissertations, one in Latin about the differences between

two kinds of fever, the other in German about the correlations between the animal and spiritual aspects of human nature. This third essay develops further pioneering insights about the psychosomatic correlations between body and soul and the display of such correlations. Ironically, Schiller quotes from his utmost secret dramatic project *Die Räuber* [*The Robbers*] – which some months later became a great success on the Mannheim stage – portrayed as coming from the feather of an English author, “Krake”, somehow inspired by Shakespeare (cf. SW V, 309). As far as we know, such boldness remained unnoticed by the Karlsschule jury members.

The expression “material idea” is here supposed to take on a broader meaning than Schiller intended. It reaches out to multiple senses in the context of the dialectics of being-in-the-world and the paradoxes of a culture conception that always keeps an eye on contrasts whilst trying to discern the varieties among them. Therefore, this draws attention to culture configurations as spaces marked by form creations, following action memories, as well as their in-between traces and configurations.

As far as we know, modernity has dislocated the charge of meanings from older symbols to newer signs. Without being erased, the former often become easily overruled through their own inability or unavailability to move according to the proper speed of the communications. The dynamics of modernity seem to obliterate former significances, which had been settled by a patient work of meaning projections or, at the least, not caring primarily for their preservation or rescue. In the last four centuries, the Cartesian *res extensa* appears to have become full of mobile spaces, changing the scope for naming and identifying their marked and unmarked counterparts.

But is this really so – or should we not instead speak about forms of re-configuration, re-absorption, re-creation? Should we not mistrust a “current rhetoric of impossibility and unrepresentability” as a “counter-productive over-dramatization” (Rorty, 2001: 36)? In other words, as Siegfried Kracauer already suspected in his “Film Theory”, we probably live not only among ruins of old believed contents with only a shadowy conscientiousness of things in their plenitude (cf. Kracauer, 1964: 379). The closeness to Walter Benjamin (our not really mysterious “WB”) can neither be denied nor concealed. However, this closeness might also mean a simple recognition of the power of literature and art as an indispensable complement to scientific perspectives. Artistic codes and features provide synthetic insights that might fill the spaces within the grids of significance provided by scientific conceptions.

The indispensable distinction between moments of thinking, willing and judging, not only on a timely basis but also as spatial instances, is also connected with the relationship between them and the realms of the invisible and the visible. As a matter of fact, no cultural analysis can give up – or deny the existence of – the hidden enormity of the iceberg, implying the contextualizing task within the same analysis. Such a process of thinking simultaneously works as a kind of store for potential operations of willing and judging. The latter draw the premises for political action (in the sense of the Arendtian praxis and Habermasian communicative action) and take place, on the one hand, in the realm of appearances. On the other hand, prior to any decision that probably leads to action, on the basis of the perception of such appearances, we may set limits to our study of objects (cf. Arendt, 1982: 3). Thus, we *detach* them so to say from their respective space-time contexts and yet without *clipping* them *off* entirely.

Such a procedure brings us back to those realms where abstract and concrete elements, invisible and proto-visible aspects, continuously tend to merge. These work as flexible and open structures, constantly bringing about sense proposals. These are inseparable from the indispensable (self-) critical observation. Without this perspective, any cognitive mapping of an object of analysis would risk simultaneously becoming a work of both Sisyphus and Penelope. The caducity of the work itself, also due to the tendency towards the crystallization of any mappings, even the most complex and thickest, such caducity becomes evident in the confrontation with the permanent mutation that the actual context imposes on an object. The visibility of contingency hereby shows a fluid *polycontextuality* in a process of mutation of unpredictable speed (or slowness). At this point, the frequent lamentation (not only among older people) about the changes brought about by new technologies, about the threat these may pose to the life of books, appears as an expression, eventually pathetic, of a withdrawal from the indispensable task of starting building steps, bridges, drawing the attention to unmarked, intermediary spaces. Such a start might prove a simple result from a slight movement, of the eye, of the head, of the body, of the spirit-and-soul: “In order to understand other realities, it is enough to have the possibility of observing things in another way” (Innerarity, 2010: 148).

Some of the most powerful barriers to cultural analysis regarding the complementary tendencies in the materialization of ideas and the idealization of matter involve assertions with an absolute, conclusive character. For Schiller, these represented the most radical forms of “material ideas”. Our

deployment of that expression proves less radical and more concerned with the connections of invisible, *protovisible* and visible elements and aspects in a cultural context as these belong together within a whole system (as our analytical objects) and its environment. They provide a reliable ground for object contextualization.

Marked spaces also display, as already asserted, evident historical dimensions. By reading how symbolic constitution may provide grids for reading History, we cannot be as sure as Marc Augé, in quoting Saussure, that the dominant aspects are forms of persistence of the ancient. While processual sedimentations take on an undeniable degree of stability, nevertheless, by setting and configuring marked spaces that have more chances to be universally recognized, it may happen that sheer violence, either as accelerated dynamics, or as an expression of power will, or as a response to injustice, repression or unfortunate living conditions, or even simply out of the blue of welfare boredom, leaves deep traces which need reading as modalities of memory, as well as what has been silenced, forgotten or distorted (cf. Augé, 1994: 18ss).

The determinative choices of marked spaces, as well as the forms of indifference towards unmarked spaces or spaces in-between, all of this is culturally conditioned and yet to different degrees and forms. We could enquire, almost in a tone of provocation, in just how many regions of our planet a person would easily agree with George Allan's assertion, according to which "persons are condemned to be free, but they are also condemned to be organic bodies and denizens of a culture" (Allan, 2001: 115). Surely, one might begin by asking to which degree one is allowed to be free since the two other aspects possess a more evident status. Even if we further agree that "these neighboring systems are [...] so tightly intertwined that it is nearly impossible to distinguish among nature, nurture, and free choice in the constitution of any actual person" (ib., 115f), the appearances of free choice seem clearer in our individual-based, Western guilt-cultures. However, perhaps this constitutes a false question when deciding to speak instead of "meaningful systems" (ib., 263) that enable us to integrate all kinds of differences and contradictions as well as "alternatives that might have been and alternatives that yet might be" (ib.). Traditionalism may lurk in situations where individuals, feeling insecure, reach out a help searching hand to old paradigms and not only in shame-cultures.

Between an "assertoric gaze", in its dogmatic narrowness, and an "alethic gaze", which "tends to see from a multiplicity of standpoints and

perspectives, and is multiple, pluralistic, democratic” (Pallasmaa, 2005: 36), there can be no question about the choice. However, this represents only the beginning of a path that encounters a succession of crossroads with no formula prescribing any decision about which turn to take.

This volume’s texts are divided into two groups. The six articles in the first group (“On Marked Spaces and Spaces In-between”) contain specific themes interrelating with the main concern of thinking and presenting problems within their time and space contexts. They were originally conference papers and thus far unpublished and now completely rewritten in order to make the interconnections between marked, unmarked and intermediary spaces clearer.

However, we may also say that a culture analyst is entitled to follow further purposes beyond the simple will to understand complexity. He or she may quest, for instance, for a spirit of peace that has to begin by analyzing practices of conflict in order to keep its presence alive, both as a historical experience and as a threat and opportunity to switch from or into violence. War and conflict must not only be regarded as necessary *heterotopias* of peace (cf. Foucault, 2001: 1571ff) but as its nourishing soil. We could call them, analogically, *heterochronias* of peace. Without the pulsing, close memory of violence (that may surely be recalled by consequent culture work), there is no possibility of setting and keeping solid ground for a lasting peace as experienced in the recent post-war decades in most European countries. We rapidly realize how important this issue becomes when recalling all the conditions of possibility to produce and practice culture in its widest sense.

This is the main thematic thread extending through the short essays in the second part of this volume (“Searching for the Birth of Peace out of the Spirit of Conflict”). They are all dated, in order to mark the circumstances of their genesis, and contributions to discussions within the frame of the writers’ meetings organized yearly by the Writers for Peace Committee of PEN International and taking place at Bled, Slovenia. They have only been published as internal conference papers for meeting participants. They have also been completely rewritten for this volume.

Such discussions have never concealed the perplexity of the double nature of PEN members around the world – as citizens and as creators – and the awareness of the fragile balance between deeds and works, between *praxis* and *poiesis*. The polemical character of most of these texts interconnects with great concern over the frequent forms of misreading the nature

of violence. As I wrote elsewhere, we should never forget the assertion that the “wounds provoked by violence always leave scars which should be read within the great book of life and hence enable us in this way to think historically about the effects of violence and to act in order to avoid injustice, cruelty and arbitrariness” (Salema, 2007: 75). Such might be suitable reading protocols, as lessons taught by marked spaces – as time scars.

Nevertheless, the scope for such violently marked spaces to release new opportunities and create forms of peaceful interchange may be opened by cultural conscientiousness of what is at stake. The reading protocol of historical memories, as well as the building of consensual practices anew, is a process that shall always remain a challenge not only for cultural analysts but most of all also for denizens in general. As George Allan puts it, “the rules of a game do not dictate the movements of the players” (Allan, 2001: 265) – they set many unmarked spaces free, which wait to be marked for the best and for the worst.

Out of all cases and situations, however problematic they might appear, there is always the possibility of taking productive yet unavoidably provisory conclusions.

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