



Directions of objectivity. Cassirer on art as a symbolic language

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that 1) art is, for Cassirer, a symbolic language whereby images (or poetic expressions) work analogously to verbal signs in order to frame and codify meaningful objective contents, namely symbolic formations that constitute objects in a specific region of culture. I claim that 2a) both art and language rely on what I call symbolic-poietic mimesis: a function meant to 2b) combine imitative and constructive states in order to shape a proto-meaningful core according to its symbolic pregnance and 3a) employ forms that are, on the one hand, pure (not derived from experience) and, on the other hand, sensuous (figurative signs). The idea is that while 4a) both language and art are oriented towards objectivity as the constitution of cultural objects, 4b) they also differ in their respective directions. On the one hand, language pursues stable and fixed verbal references. On the other, art relies on moving and living forms meant to codify a dynamic web of aesthetic values.

Keywords Symbolic-poietic mimesis · Language · Art · Objectivity · Symbolic formation

1 Introduction

Objectivity is, for Cassirer, a task.¹ The world we live in and make experience of—in a linguistic, mythical, aesthetical and scientific way—is no given datum, but rather the outcome of the activity of symbolic formation. Symbolic forms—the regions of

¹ Cassirer (1942b, pp. 159–160). See also Cassirer (1932, p. 116). English translation in Cassirer (2013, p. 339); Cassirer (1923, p. 4).

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the domain of culture—deal with different layers of and methods for objectivity. All particular symbolic formations—from words to rituals, from paintings to the mass-energy equation—entail an objectifying formative moment, in that all cultural objects follow from the different directions of one overarching function. In general, a symbol “would not be a symbol if it did not lay claim to a kind of truth.” A sign “detached from every relation to something that is to be signified or to a *signification* that it grasps and brings to expression would thereby no longer be a sign.”²

In this paper, I deal with both language’s and art’s methods for objective symbolic formation—i.e., their directions towards objectivity—and argue that art can be understood as a symbolic language. Art either employs different sets of symbols (images, aesthetic signs more generally) or makes an aesthetic use of verbal symbols. In both cases, art consists in a formative moment meant to codify a meaning by means of symbols constituting, in turn, the objects of this very region of culture. Artworks convey feelings, a metamorphosis of nature meant to express the core of human emotionality. All related outcomes are constitutive elements of our shared cultural world: objectively valid symbolic formations.

My aim is to show that both verbal and artistic signs play the role of linguistic-communicative means with an objective import, namely symbolic formations originating the objects of two different regions of culture. Accordingly, instead of framing the distinction between language and art by relying on the alleged identity between language and verbal signs,³ I propose a different taxonomy of symbolic formations according to which language—in a more general sense, not as the specific symbolic form—may pursue *either* a genuinely verbal-linguistic method towards stable and fixed objectivity *or* an aesthetic-dynamic way of shaping symbolic formations.

In order to defend this view, I aim to address the following issues. First, both verbal and artistic symbolic formations—and in a way the very function of symbolic formation itself—rely on what I call symbolic-poietic mimesis. As I try to show in Sect. 2—after a summary of Cassirer’s comparative views on language and art in Sect. 1—the function of symbolic formation combines mimetic states meant to identify and reproduce the meaningful elements of all basic phenomena with the active energies of objective signification.

Moreover, both verbal and artistic signs deploy forms that are both pure and sensuous. Both a word or sentence and a sketch or shade (as well as the lines engraved in stone in the case of sculpture) combine a (sensuous) figurative-expressive drive with a (pure) logical-conceptual one. All attempts at signification, according to the key tenets of Cassirer’s critical idealism, cannot have experience as their ground—for rather experience (knowledge more generally) follows from the signification at stake. The very definition of symbolic formation requires us to understand it as a specific—constitutive—connection between a sign and what it is being signified.⁴ *Signification*, as it were, means the synthetic unity between the sign and

² Cassirer (1927, p. 269). English translation in Cassirer (2013, p. 269). See also Cassirer (1943, p. 190): “An energy that does not prove its power in the organization of our actual and concrete human life, would be sterile.”

³ On the distinction between the iconic and the verbal, see Matteucci (2010, pp. 36–39).

⁴ See Hoel (2011, p. 81): Cassirer’s “notion of conceptuality [...] incorporates the intuitive factor.”

the object, between the symbol and the related concept. According to this background, I will address in Sect. 3 the issue of *pure sensuous forms* as belonging to both language and art.

In Sect. 4 I will then clarify how this general framework for both verbal and aesthetic language takes on two different directions towards objectivity. While language's objectivity takes the shape of the propositional *convergence* onto a single unified item (a word), the objectivity of art weaves a dynamic⁵ *weft* of meanings. Yet this does not undermine the view that art has an objective import, nor does this compromise the linguistic-communicative dimension of art itself. Symbols of art may play the same role as words do in order to express and share an objective meaning. The direction of verbal-linguistic objectivity is the most appropriate as we have to frame a stable and consistent world, as we have to fix the flow of perceptions and the *fieri* of experience. However, the direction of art's objectivity is a more suitable candidate as we have to account for feelings and emotions, as we have to make sense of our inner experience. The attempt at fixing what is constitutively living and moving may well bring no meaningful outcome. This is why artistic formations, Cassirer writes, entail *moving* and *living* forms.⁶

In order to explore Cassirer's views on language and art and the linguistic dimension of art itself, I will focus mainly on three originally unpublished lectures that Cassirer gave in 1942 and 1943 at Cornell University and at Yale University: *Language and Art* (1942a), *Language, Myth, Art* (1942b), *The Educational Value of Art* (1943).⁷ I choose to focus on these pages since they contain a comparison between the sphere of language and that of art and the recognition of the symbolic-objective import of art in terms of a specific language. These issues, along with the issue of the place of art in the system of symbolic forms, will be more explicitly addressed by Cassirer in his *Essay on Man* (1944).

Cassirer's account of art and aesthetic experience more generally has been discussed by several scholars. Eggers follows Cassirer's aesthetic path from language to poetry and literature.⁸ Bayer focuses on the educational role of art as an answer to the Platonic quarrel with imitation and intuitive representations of the ideas.⁹ Lauschke reconstructs the developmental origin of Cassirer's aesthetic and accounts for the key features of art as a symbolic form.¹⁰ Matteucci outlines the key features of aesthetic form-giving.¹¹ Pollok expands on Langer and accounts

⁵ Obviously, both the convergence (language) and the dynamic weft of meanings (art) relate to the determination of specific symbolic formations, not to the a priori framework of symbolic forms. Cassirer's understanding of Kant's Copernican turn relies indeed on a dynamic notion of the a priori of culture. The distinction here thus relates to the specific determinations of language and art—more stable and fixed in the former, more dynamic (moving and living) in the latter. Cassirer's symbolic a priori is constitutively dynamic and not restricted to an allegedly static set of abstract logical structures.

⁶ Cassirer (1943, p. 200).

⁷ These essays are also collected by Verene (Cassirer 1979), who provides different titles: the first two essays from the *Nachlass* (ECN 7) are titled, respectively, *Language and Art I*; *Language and Art II*.

⁸ Eggers (1971).

⁹ Bayer (2006).

¹⁰ Lauschke (2007).

¹¹ Matteucci (2010).

for the intersubjective import of art as a key to the social (and political) dimension of aesthetic communication.¹² Matherne locates art in the system of symbolic forms by highlighting the coexistence between its subjective and objective import, as well as between the expressive and the presentative function.¹³ All mentioned works provide illuminating insights and make the case for art as symbolic form in the proper sense. However, they do not take into account the structural analogies between language and art.

Reading art as a language—by showing that art and language differ in their specific directional objective articulation of the function of symbolic formation—will provide new arguments, contribute to the debate, fill interpretive gaps, and hopefully widen the discussion on the topic. As noticed by Capeillères, as early as in 1962, Kubler, in *The Shape of Time*, hinted at “Cassirer’s partial definition of art as a symbolic language.”¹⁴ The aim of this paper is to provide the fundamental arguments required to show that Cassirer’s definition is more than partial—as it consistently follows from the comparative analysis between language and art.

On the one hand, I will refer to Cassirer’s statements on language and art in order to show that both are ultimately symbolic *languages* that do not deal with the mere reproduction of a given content, either meant as a verbal description or a figurative representation of a given reality.¹⁵ They rather involve a *mimesis* that belongs to *poiesis*, namely a re-production which consists in a new production, i.e., the production of a new spiritual form. By *mimesis*, Cassirer means the activity of recognizing, highlighting and restructuring the constitutive elements of perception: “passive reproduction never consists in a mere retracing, feature for feature, of a determinate content of reality but rather in singling out a pregnant element” and extracting an outline “of its shape” [*Gestalt*].¹⁶ *Poiesis* thus consists in expressing this element by means of meaningful symbols. This symbolic formative activity is the ground of a meaningful cultural object. Once we produce and assign a symbol to, for example, the elements we may perceive when looking at the stars, we are responsible of their *re-production* and, as a consequence, of the *production* of a new form and an original meaning. This *re-producing* implies a second-order—specifically *symbolic*—production; by no means a mere imitation or copy-production.

On the other hand, I will focus more specifically on the formative powers of art, with the purpose of arguing that art consists in a symbolic language able to perform a kind of experience which constitutively diverges from the linguistic one. Against the more abstract objectivity of language, Cassirer writes, art indeed opposes an intimate relation to the sphere of concrete lived experience and emotions.

I see no hypostatic or content-related sharp distinction between language and art. Rather, the distinction lies in the directions of the respective formative methods. While ordinary and scientific languages aim to determine and describe state of

¹² Pollok (2016).

¹³ Matherne (2021b).

¹⁴ Capeillères (2013, p. 92, note 3).

¹⁵ Hoel (2011, pp. 84–85) frames Cassirer’s non-mimetic account of language in terms of a “differential deixis.”

¹⁶ Cassirer (1923, p. 129). English translation in Cassirer (2020, p. 130).

affairs, art's purpose is, so to say, to see more than meets the eye. Art may *speak* of the emotional sphere with an unparalleled proximity—as in the case of poetry and literature¹⁷ more generally.

2 Cassirer on language and art

In the essays mentioned above, as well as in *The Meaning of the Problem of Language for the Emergence of Modern Philosophy* (1927) and *Language and the Construction of the World of Objects* (1932) Cassirer states that linguistic formations represent the essential elements and conditions of our objective world. It is through words that we objectify all sense-data by providing them with a (verbal-linguistic) conceptual unity and a permanent reality. The synthetic unification of a flow of perceptions implies an activity, a spontaneous act of the mind. By this, Cassirer wants to stress the fact that language is no mimetic reproduction of the external reality. In giving a name to something, we create a new “focus of thought”¹⁸ and provide a *datum* with a new conceptual form. Linguistic formations are no mere copies of existing things, but rather specific conceptual formations which no given *datum* could ever provide. The concept of *name* contains “the whole problem in a nutshell,” as it presupposes the transition to the symbolic function “in its strict and proper sense.”¹⁹ The latter “implies a new step of objectification” able to maintain and preserve the “objective identity”²⁰ of the name.

The linguistic approach to reality is necessary, for the very possibility of an objective world relies on linguistic configurations. However, this does not mean that the external reality can be approached through linguistic means only. To be sure, language is so to say inescapable, but it is not the only option. There is another symbolic region which owns an internal structure and meaning: art. Artistic symbols may either differ from words—as in painting and sculpture—or consist in a specific use of words—as in poetry.

It is true that by means of language we abstract from the particular and create general concepts—as it is only by means of words that we move from isolated items to more complex descriptions of reality and take the path of science. Take for example the laws of thermodynamics. They are general laws: they do not consider any particular phenomenon, for they instead demand to be valid for any possible event. This tendency towards abstraction represents for Cassirer both a cultural gain and a severe loss. There would be no science if we would not abstract from the immediacy of experience and establish universal principles. Thus, the abstracting import of language is one of the most powerful cognitive means. At the same time, however, the immediacy and concreteness of experience risks being lost.

The task of art is precisely to regain this immediacy and concreteness by counterbalancing language's tendency towards abstraction. Artistic forms are still

¹⁷ On this issue see Eggers (1971).

¹⁸ Cassirer (1942a, pp. 145–146); Cassirer (1942b, pp. 172–173).

¹⁹ Cassirer (1942b, p. 170).

²⁰ Cassirer (1942b, pp. 171–172).

symbolic forms—like verbal-linguistic forms—but they accomplish their task by following a peculiar method.²¹ This does not mean to appeal to the sphere of art as if it were a separate metaphysical world. On the contrary, the place of art is essentially in-between. Art lies midway between our empirical reality and the inner personal and emotional life and it can be said to represent the place where the one speaks through the other.²²

Yet art does not rely on an independent function sharing no elements with language. Rather, art's most distinctive feature lies in the direction of its objective form-creation. Artistic forms—again, like verbal-linguistic forms—do not merely reproduce and imitate the external reality. However, differently from language, artistic forms take the opposite route of language's tendency towards abstraction. If language can be said to go *higher*, art goes instead *deeper*, towards the core of human emotionality.

Language cannot per se reach the inner emotional life; it can do so if and only if words—as in the case of poetry—cease to be used propositionally and descriptively. What we experience in art is a new way to construct and structure a world where (1) things are seen with different eyes; (2) things show different qualities; (3) the outer world is connected with the inner world of emotion. The power of the (artistic) form is particularly evident in the case of poetry, where words are “fused and melted with their meanings.”²³ Verbal symbols— i.e., names, words—work as general concepts. Yet it is also important to preserve another kind of approach to reality that does not rely on mere concepts—for we can “intuit” reality “in its concrete and individual shape.”²⁴ Art does not proceed “to more and more general concepts,” as it is rather “absorbed in individual intuitions.” In art we “perceptualize the world.”²⁵ This aesthetic sight entails no lower degree of objectification, for one “who does not understand these intuitive symbols, who cannot feel the life of colors, of shapes, of spatial forms and patterns, of harmony and melody” is not only “secluded from the works of art” and “deprived of aesthetic pleasure,” but also unable to grasp “one of the deepest aspects of reality.”²⁶

In order to complete this section, let me schematically list the main points of Cassirer's comparison between language and art as it follows from *Language and Art* (1942a), *Language, Myth, Art* (1942b), *The Educational Value of Art* (1943).

²¹ On this topic see Bundgaard (2011), who expands on the *grammar* of aesthetic intuition, and Carter (2015), who follows the historical development of Cassirer's views. On the relevance of Cassirer's aesthetic for contemporary debates see Sauer (2019).

²² On this point see Lauschke (2007, pp. 218–222).

²³ Cassirer (1942a, p. 152).

²⁴ Cassirer (1942b, p. 174).

²⁵ Cassirer (1942b, p. 176). See also Cassirer (1943, p. 192): “The artist has not to give a simple copy of nature; he has to perfect, to beautify, to idealize nature.” For an analysis of the role of perception in art, see Endres (2020, pp. 124–129).

²⁶ Cassirer (1942b, p. 177). Text amended. See also Cassirer (1943, p. 196). Art adds “a new dimension to human life; it gives to it a depth that we do not reach in our common apprehension of things.” Matherne (2021b, p. 35) argues that art is a lawful way to advance culture.

Language	Art
Activities	
“Permanent objects,” “solidification,” “coalescence,” “fixation,” “intellectual consolidation,” “fixed center,” “new focus of thought” [Cassirer (1942a, pp. 145–146; 1942b, pp. 172–173)].	We “perceptualize” the world [Cassirer (1942b, p. 176)]; “transfiguration,” “transubstantiation” [Cassirer (1942b, p. 182)]. The artist “has to perfect, to beautify, to idealize nature” [Cassirer (1943, p. 192)], “transformation and transubstantiation” [Cassirer (1943, p. 196)].
Aims	
“Conceptual unity” [Cassirer (1942a, p. 145)], “objective identity” [Cassirer (1942a, p. 146)].	“Concrete intuition” [Cassirer (1942b, p. 174)].
Methods	
<i>Convergence</i> onto one single determined unity, “conceptual” objectification [Cassirer (1942b, p. 178)].	<i>Weft</i> of non-determined and non-fixed meanings, “intuitive or contemplative objectification” [Cassirer (1942b, p. 178)].
Achievements	
“Objective world” [Cassirer (1942a, p. 146)], “world of concepts” [Cassirer (1942a, p. 147)], “the objective relations of ideas and the concatenation of things” [Cassirer (1942a, p. 148)].	“Sphere of the plastic, architectural, musical forms, of shapes and designs, of melodies and rhythms” [Cassirer (1942a, p. 150)], “realm of forms,” “world of pure forms” [Cassirer (1942a, p. 156)], “sphere of pure forms” [Cassirer (1942b, p. 177)], “world of moving and living forms” [Cassirer (1943, p. 200)], “sphere of pure sensuous forms” [Cassirer (1943, p. 194)].
Forms	
“Verbal symbols” [Cassirer (1942a, p. 146)], “intellectual symbols” [Cassirer (1942a, p. 148)], “abstract signs” [Cassirer (1942a, p. 150)].	“Sensuous form” [Cassirer (1942a, p. 150)], “creative emotion” [Cassirer (1942a, p. 152)], “living forms” [Cassirer (1942a, p. 153)], “the moment of form,” “the power of aesthetic form” [Cassirer (1943, p. 196)].
Propositional language: Words are “significant in an abstract way” [Cassirer (1942a, p. 152)].	Poetry: Words are “fused and melted with their meanings” [Cassirer (1942a, p. 152)]. The poet is “an alchemist” [Cassirer (1942a, p. 154)].

In what follows, I aim to make sense of: symbolic-poietic mimesis as the core function of both verbal-linguistic and artistic formations (Sect. 2); the *pure* and *sensuous* status of both verbal and artistic forms (Sect. 3); the different directions of objectification—and the corresponding forms of objectivity—in language and art (Sect. 4).

3 Symbolic-poietic mimesis

In the first volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Cassirer deals with the issues of the genesis of language and the mimetic, onomatopoeic and even pantomimic ways of expression. Drawing from Aristotle, Cassirer points out that *imitation*:

[I]s used here in a broader sense and in a deeper significance according to which [...] it appears not only as the origin of language but also the origin of artistic activity. Understood in this way, μίμησις [mimesis] belongs to the domain of ποίησις [poïesis, production], of the creative and configuring activity. [...] this element, which emerges purely and independently in the form of artistic con-

figuration, extends down to the elementary beginnings of all seemingly purely passive reproduction.²⁷

Cassirer reiterates this parallelism between language and art also by appealing to (and quoting a passage from) Wundt: in the “*presentative* gesture,” writes Wundt “the image of an object is more freely configured, in the same sense as fine art [*bildende Kunst*] is freer than mere imitative technique.”²⁸ Art, alongside cognition, becomes the counterpart of language as Cassirer, this time—finally—without any reference to other authors, points out that the empty schema concerning the three stages of linguistic expression (mimetic, analogical, symbolic):

[F]ills with concrete content [*Gehalt*] to the extent that it is shown not only that it can serve as a principle of classification of given linguistic phenomena but also that the functional lawfulness of the *construction* of language that is exhibited in it has its very determinate and characteristic counterpart in other domains, such as art or cognition.²⁹

The poietic status of mimesis exhibits a kind of general lawfulness we rely on when symbolically forming—a lawfulness shared by all other symbolic forms. If so, there is then no hierarchy according to which language would allegedly represent the rule while art would represent one of its instances. Cassirer’s point is—more methodologically—to show that the functional law at the core of the otherwise paradoxical idea of a *poietic mimesis* we find in linguistic formations is, as such—i.e., as a law—at the core of all symbolic formations. To re-produce an object in a properly symbolic way means to grasp “its structural relationships.” This takes place only insofar as, at the same time, “consciousness constructively produces them.”³⁰

This means, in turn, that the source of the meaningfulness of language is not one of its exclusive prerogatives, for, rather, art as well may convey meanings by constituting its respective objects—either by employing words in a peculiar way or by relying on a specifically figurative set of different signs. The productive status of reproduction is the common feature of both linguistic and artistic formations, in that it is one key feature of the very function of symbolic formation.

As I am going to show, this is basically the same point at stake in the essays from the *Nachlass* (ECN 7). Despite their respective characterizing features, both language and art originate in the activity of symbolic formation: both symbolic universes depend on a constitutive process we may define in terms of symbolic-poietic mimesis. This is the common root language and art share.

The comparative analysis between language and art is meant to show that they both follow from a specific—symbolic—reciprocity between an imitative and a constructive moment. Cassirer writes that: “passive reproduction” does not mean to make copies of outward existing entities but, rather, to single out “a pregnant

²⁷ Cassirer (1923, p. 129). English translation in Cassirer (2020, p. 130).

²⁸ Cassirer (1923, p. 130). English translation in Cassirer (2020, p. 130).

²⁹ Cassirer (1923, p. 137). English translation in Cassirer (2020, p. 136).

³⁰ Cassirer (1923, p. 129). English translation in Cassirer (2020, p. 130).

element” in order to extract its structural-formal outline.³¹ It goes without saying that *singling out* and *extracting* the element at stake require much more than a mere imitative process. Imitation involves presentation; reproduction involves productive construction. In the essays on language and art Cassirer recalls this point at a number of occurrences:

What is common to language and art is the fact that neither of them can be considered as a mere reproduction or imitation of a ready-made, given, outward reality.³²

Art is expression, but it is an active, not passive mode of expression. It is imagination, but it is productive, not merely reproductive imagination.³³

[Art and language] possess not only a reproductive, but a really productive and constructive character and value.³⁴

Passivity itself is turned into activity; mere receptivity is changed into spontaneity.³⁵

The picture we get is utterly consistent with Cassirer’s general framing of the problem. Moreover, it does not seem to take verbal language in a paradigmatic way,³⁶ as if it would display a general *linguistic* law. In the latter case, whereby language would run out in verbal signs and propositional expressions—art would then risk being the bearer of a deflationist account of objectivity. We have a chance to avoid this conclusion if we further discuss the formative laws of art—thereby also making full sense of the comparative analysis between language and art itself. More precisely, we are required to let a further dualism fall alongside with the opposition between *μίμησις* and *ποίησις*—namely the alternative between either *pure* or *sensuous* forms.

Before getting to this point in Sect. 3, let me add some further considerations on symbolic-poietic mimesis. Words and scientific formulas, as well as artworks, do not consist in copies of a given reality, nor are they meant to imitatively describe an actual state of affairs. That of forming symbolically is, for Cassirer, an activity by virtue of which a spiritual content is connected with and, simultaneously, expressed through a sensible sign, namely a symbol. The power of symbolic imagination is both

³¹ Cassirer (1923, pp. 129–130). English translation in Cassirer (2020, p. 130).

³² Cassirer (1942a, p. 148).

³³ Cassirer (1942a, p. 152).

³⁴ Cassirer (1942a, p. 157).

³⁵ Cassirer (1943, p. 197).

³⁶ See Krois (2011). I share the view that language—as a specific symbolic form—has no primacy over art, myth, science: the primacy belongs to the very function of symbolic formation. This is compatible with arguing that artistic, mythical, and scientific *languages* all rely on the function of symbolic formation and the notion of symbolic pregnance.

performative (productive) and mimetic,³⁷ and Cassirer brings the very *constitution of the world of culture* into play.³⁸ The whole of our reality in the whole of its cognitive, aesthetic and even moral claims is experienced through symbols. By symbolically framing what one may improperly call the *external* reality we are able to recognize, but not to create, its internal structures. However, by means of the function of symbolic formation, we are able to identify, highlight and ultimately translate those structures into symbols—that is we are able to create objective *meaning*—i.e., the objects of the regions of culture.

The objective world is thus a result, not a premise. As the etymology suggests, the activity of symbolic formation consists in putting together a spiritual content with a cognitive form, so broadly conceived that from a huge amount of various signs a specific sign comes to play the role of a symbol: from the mass equation which makes us understand the size of the *Sirius* star³⁹ to *Orion*'s mythical figure in the starry heaven. Before such a connection—a meaningful formation of an objective content—the only feature of reality would be that of being mostly unknown or, apparently, merely given or just external. Reality however—properly conceived as *our* reality—begins with names and rituals, pictures and sounds, and so on and so forth towards the laws of physics and those equations which allow us to guide a space probe to the edge of the solar system. Cassirer writes:

The Ego, the individual mind, cannot create reality. Man is surrounded by a reality that he did not make, that he has to accept as an ultimate fact. But it is to him to interpret reality, to make it coherent, understandable, intelligible – and this task is performed in different ways in the various human activities, in religion and art, in science and philosophy. In all of them man proves to be not only the passive recipient of an external world; he is active and creative. But what he creates is not a new substantial thing; it is a representation, an objective description of the empirical world.⁴⁰

Symbolic formation is no substantial creation of new entities. Yet it is the fundamental function and the very condition of possibility of the objective regions of culture the different symbolic forms consist in. The concept of symbolic pregnancy⁴¹ is meant to get rid of both an alleged brute givenness of objects to be subsequently

³⁷ Plümacher (2021, pp. 240–241) goes as far as to claim that, for Cassirer, “the standards and criteria of the respective symbolic forms are correlated with different forms of imagination.”

³⁸ More precisely, in the case of art we are dealing with “the *constitutive principles* of an aesthetic world,” Capeillères (2013, p. 99).

³⁹ It is worth noticing that, from the standpoint of language formation, the name *Sirius* comes from the ancient Greek Σείριος, which means *bright, shining, burning*. Indeed, *Sirius* was known to be one of brightest stars—something which is actually true nowadays, also from a scientific point of view.

⁴⁰ Cassirer (1942b, p. 184).

⁴¹ Matherne (2021a, p. 138) rightly stresses the hylomorphic status of symbolic pregnancy: “To say that something is symbolically pregnant is to say that it is full of what it symbolizes, imprinted with and shaped by that meaning.” This co-implication between the symbolic shape and the objective meaning requires us to understand that “it is a mistake to think that there is any matter that we are brutally given, which has not been shaped by some form.” Cassirer also mentions a kind of *symbolic empathy* [*Einfühlung*] “of the internal with the external.” Cassirer (1927, p. 260). English translation in Cassirer (2013, p. 261).

symbolically shaped and the idea of a material-substantial creation of new forms out of nothing. The givenness of reality is, as it were, a mere abstraction. Reality, said differently, is a term and a concept we can lawfully employ if and only if we presuppose the function through which reality is—from the very outset—shaped and therefore constituted. All symbolic formations require, on the one hand, a mimetic moment meant to identify, isolate and grasp the virtual meaningfulness of otherwise allegedly given objects. On the other hand, symbolic formation is an activity, a form of spontaneity by means of which we codify the meaningfulness at stake in terms of symbols as the constitutive elements—the objects—of the different regions of culture. More than complementary, the mimetic and the poietic moments are actually reciprocal—as two sides of the same coin. In language as well as in art, the two moments coexist and make full sense the one through the other, as they jointly innervate the respective forms: from verbal symbols and propositions to several kinds of artworks and the artistic use—in the case of poetry—of words themselves. The core method of symbolic-poietic mimesis, is, therefore, the common ground of both symbolic forms.

Before making sense of the different applications and directions this overarching general method takes on in language and art (Sect. 4), it is now important to account for the features of both verbal-linguistic and artistic forms and show, in Sect. 3, that both are, I argue, *pure* and *sensuous* forms.

4 Pure sensuous forms

In the essays we are dealing with, Cassirer states that the forms of art are at once *pure* and *sensuous*.⁴² There are two ways to make sense of this twofold characterization—and I think both have something to say concerning the distinctive features of linguistic and artistic forms. On the one hand, both verbal and artistic forms are pure—as mirroring a logical-conceptual attempt to give a certain meaning to basic phenomena (a meaning that is not empirical, for experience cannot provide us with allegedly given cognitions), and sensuous—as consisting of figurative signs. The coexistence of the two aspects—the pure and the sensuous—adequately accounts for a feature I think language and art share. On the other hand, we may construe Cassirer's claim in terms of *purely sensuous* forms—as belonging to art exclusively. In this case, there would be a merging of the logical and the figurative moment—whereby artistic forms make it impossible to isolate, —not even by abstraction, the meaning from its sign. Said differently, in the case of art we cannot even raise the question of the primacy between the expressive and the presentative function. The “nature of the aesthetic itself” excludes every relation “of earlier and later.” It is indeed the pure “merging [*Aufgehen*] of the one *into* the other, the ideal balance that presents itself between them, that constitutes aesthetic comportment as well as the aesthetic object.”⁴³

⁴² Cassirer (1943, p. 194). Following a different yet complementary nomenclature, Matherne (2021b, p. 43) describes the intuitive forms of art as both subjective and objective.

⁴³ Cassirer (1927, pp. 267–268). English translation in Cassirer (2013, pp. 268–269). Matherne (2021a, p. 165): “These reciprocally related impulses toward expression and presentation thus provide the context of signification in which we produce artistic objects and develop artistic practices.” Lauschke (2007, pp. 291–298) puts it in terms of the self-reflective presentation [*Darstellung*] of expression.

Now, one may say that Cassirer's latter way to describe the distinctive features of aesthetic forms is driven by the aim to make sense of art's specifically dynamic *direction*, and I think that this is undoubtedly also the case. Yet this does not prevent us from raising a question.

So far, we have been understanding the status of art by contrasting it with language.⁴⁴ We have also seen that language and art share symbolic-poietic mimesis and that, while the forms at stake in language are abstract, solid, conceptual, those of art would allegedly be *pure sensuous* forms, i.e., moving, living forms. I take this part of the story to be correct. Yet I take it as such, as a part of a broader picture.

What I want to suggest is that—even though Cassirer contrasts art with language and takes his bearings from the latter—we may follow the opposite route and refer to art first in order to get further insight into the status of verbal signs. This interpretative inversion has a peculiar advantage. Just as language makes us acquainted with the general law at the core of any symbolic formations whatever (symbolic-poietic mimesis), art can help us grasping one general feature of symbolic formations—a feature we may overlook when focusing on language as an allegedly paradigmatic case.

By discussing language we have learned that art too relies on symbolic-poietic mimesis. What if by discussing art we may come to see that linguistic forms as well are pure *and* sensuous? The question I would raise is the following: Should we perhaps think that the forms of language are just *pure* forms, namely logical-conceptual tools utterly independent of any figurative, sensible contamination? Or should we rather acknowledge that Cassirer's dealing with this seemingly specific feature of art helps us get insight into the fundamental structures of language as well? Said differently, what may prevent us from thinking that art, in a sense, returns the favor to language by making it clear how words—verbal signs—combine a figurative-expressive drive with a logical-conceptual one?

⁴⁴ Cassirer also contrasts art with myth. Art is no “mere adornment of human life,” but rather it is one of its “essential conditions,” Cassirer (1942a, p. 141). This is particularly evident in the early—mythical—stages of human culture. Myth objectifies emotions as the first answers to those *phenomena* which cannot be rationally grasped. Mythical things are not mere things: they live and feel; they are “impregnated with emotions,” Cassirer (1942b, p. 165). Mythical thought is grounded upon an emotional logic and it is no coincidence that such a logic is expressed aesthetically. On this point see Serio (2013, pp. 85–91) and Krois (1987, pp. 85–102). Myth consists in a variety of symbolic formations which rest upon the identity of imagination and thought: myth brings “a rule of its own,” Cassirer (1942b, p. 166). Forces and spirits do not represent *another* supersensible reality, but rather the first form of knowledge, emotional and immediately intuitive, of the experienced world (see Hamburg 1956, pp. 99–103). However, while it is true that both art and myth gain proximity to the concreteness of experience and its emotional import, myth is so close to the immediacy of concrete experience that it can be said to mirror this immediacy directly. The mythical world is a holy and magical world. A world that takes a life of its own. The world of artistic forms is, so to say, located on a higher level. The space of art “is also filled and permeated with the most intensive values of expression; it is vitalized and moved by the strongest dynamic, antithetical oppositions. And yet, this movement is not identical with the very *immediate* movement of life, which expresses itself in the basic mythical affections of hope and fear, in magical attraction and rejection, in the all-encompassing desire of seizing the “sacred” and in the horror of the touch of the forbidden and unholy. For as the content of artistic presentation, the object [*Objekt*] shifts to a new distance, to remoteness from the I; only in this does it gain its own independent being and create a new form of ‘objectivity.’ It is this new objectivity that distinguishes aesthetic space. The demonic of the mythical world is conquered and broken in it” Cassirer (1931, pp. 422–423). English translation in Cassirer (2013, p. 328).

If it is true that passivity turns into spontaneity—as μίμησις belongs to ποίησις—in both language's and art's case, then we should not spare the effort of making sense of symbolic formations being both sensuous and pure in the two spheres of culture here at stake. A word, either written or pronounced, has indeed a sensuous side: it is a sign. More precisely, it must be a sign if it demands to count as a symbolic formation, for the concept the word entails has no objective meaning independently of the sign through which it is expressed.⁴⁵ The concept lives in the sign of the word: this is at once the condition and the seal of its meaningfulness. In this regard, all figurative elements we could ever find in all kinds of artworks are meaningful signs as well, for their sensuous shapes are the means through which a basic emotional phenomenon is brought to aesthetic life and meaning by the artist's creative drives. In both cases, the logical-conceptual and the sensible-figurative elements combine: this is what symbolic formation consists in.

My interpretative hypothesis is that Cassirer's overcoming the two dualisms here at stake mirrors a genuinely methodological point. Language provides us with one effective case for the symbolic coexistence and reciprocity between μίμησις and ποίησις—as much as art provides us with one striking example of the symbolic coexistence and reciprocity between a pure and a sensuous element in all symbolic formations.

Μίμησις could not be symbolically poietic if it would just rely on either merely sensuous or merely pure forms. The forms of our forming activity have to be at once both pure and sensuous, as they both spring out from the spontaneity of spirit and figuratively shape the proto-meaningful core of experience. Forms that are both pure and sensuous, be they linguistic, mythical, artistic, scientific, codify the inner structure of a reality we would otherwise improperly call “given” and frame this very structural, proto-meaningful core by means of symbols: symbolic pregnance and symbolic formation are mirror-terms.

Let us now look closer at artistic forms. A purely logical-conceptual form could not be appropriate to the intuitiveness of reality. This is why aesthetic phenomena are endowed with a specific difference: “What we intuit in the medium of art and artistic forms is a double reality, the reality of nature and of human life.”⁴⁶ For Cassirer, all artworks entail a symbolic reconfiguration: not of a single spiritual content but, more specifically, of the interaction between the world of nature and our emotional sight.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Volume 4 of the *Nachlass* (Cassirer 2011) contains relevant manuscript notes on the notion of symbolic pregnance as the counterpart of symbolic formation. Though the relationship between these two notions is not the main focus of the present comparative study on language and art, one might also construe the bond between pregnance and signification as the common source not only of the pure and sensuous status of both artistic and linguistic formations, but also of the reciprocity between mimesis and poiesis. The sensible is sense-bearer (*Sinn-Träger*, p. 6) in that it conveys symbolic intentions (p. 16). No distinction between sense and sensibility is legitimate, for the very function of the sensible is to embody and display a meaning.

⁴⁶ Cassirer (1942a, p. 150).

⁴⁷ Take for example Van Gogh's *Thatched Cottages at Cordeville* (1890), Musée d'Orsay, Paris: <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/artworks/chaumes-de-cordeville-auvers-sur-oise-754>. No verbal description of the actual cottage may ever equate to the aesthetic re-configuration this painting consists in. Its patterns and lines draw a movement mirroring the artist's sight. To understand this painting as an instance of the

Moreover, artworks display forms that cannot be found in nature and, nonetheless, forms able to express something—of nature—that would otherwise be left hidden: namely, its emotional import.

These two joint features of the artistic form are essential. An artistic form is both a pure creative creation of the mind—namely something that nature cannot provide—and at once also a form which does not merely apply to an empirical content, for rather artistic forms—like the words of poems—are “fused and melted with their meanings.”⁴⁸

This aesthetic logic is no lower-degree method. It is, instead, a genuinely linguistic logic to the extent that it conveys objective meaning to be shared. Perceiving the beautiful form does not mean using beauty as an attribute of things. By quoting Goethe’s claim that art “is formative long before it is beautiful”⁴⁹ Cassirer refers to a certain use of the imagination which is able to “produce pure sensuous forms.”⁵⁰ Artistic forms exist only insofar as they are perceived as such and, simultaneously, produced as such. Otherwise, they could not be “living forms.”⁵¹

If the move of language consists in abstracting and conceptually objectifying the world, art’s spiritual move instead involves a perceptualization of the same world. And again, this does not mean reproduction, at least not apart from active production. It is no matter of making copies of sensible impressions but of creating new forms, new symbols. It is “to perfect, to beautify, to idealize nature.”⁵² In short, it is to create the elements of a new language. In this way, art counterbalances the primacy of *logos* in language by expressing the strengths of the intuitive and emotional sides of experience.

The word *landscape* is, for example, a concept meant to describe—in a general way—an object in the realm of language. By using this verbal-linguistic tool I can share my thoughts and describe actual states of affairs. More importantly, the very fact that I can use this concept mirrors the constitution of the concept *landscape* itself. This word is a verbal-linguistic symbolic formation constituting an object in a specific region of culture: it does not come from experience (it is pure) and it is a figurative sign (it is sensuous). Painting a landscape is a symbolic formation sharing these two features, yet it is not directed to a determined concept describing an empirical object.⁵³ A landscape-painting may well not work as a descriptive tool, yet it frames and expresses a specific meaning⁵⁴ that no purely verbal-linguistic approach

empirical concept *cottage* would require us to understand it statically, thereby depriving it of its aesthetic life.

⁴⁸ Cassirer (1942a, p. 152).

⁴⁹ Cassirer (1944, p. 152). On Goethe’s influence on Cassirer see Lauschke (2007, pp. 123–125).

⁵⁰ Cassirer (1944, p. 177; p. 161). Plümacher (2021) expands on symbolic imagination in technology, religion, and language.

⁵¹ Cassirer 1944, p. 164; p. 180). See Capeillères (2013, p. 113): “aesthetic experience involves [...] a somehow living, dynamic presence.”

⁵² Cassirer (1943, p. 192).

⁵³ On the features of the artistic object see Bayer (2006, p. 57).

⁵⁴ Matherne (2021a, p. 164) pertinently suggests that Cassirer defends “a kind of cognitivism, according to which art promises us knowledge of the intuitive forms we experience in an immediate, sensuous, and concrete way.”

could ever reach.⁵⁵ The artistic eye so to speak draws a new form, by re-producing (mimesis) and giving a new shape (poiesis) to natural elements: “Artistic imagination and contemplation does not give us the aspect of a dead physical things or of mute sense-qualities. It gives us a world of moving and living forms—a balance of lights and shadows, rhythms, and melodies, of lines and contours, of patterns and designs.”⁵⁶ All of this cannot be merely perceived. It involves a framing attitude which simultaneously produces and allows for the fruition of aesthetic experience: in art, “the forms that I behold are not only my states, but my acts.”⁵⁷

It is true that words—verbal-linguistic forms—are not *purely sensuous*. In the case of propositional language, for example, they work in a more abstract and general way than in the case of poetry. Yet it is also true that words are *pure* and *sensuous* forms. They do not run out in the sensuous moment as much as they do not run out in the purely logical-conceptual moment, and this is a feature they share with artworks. According to this picture, an artwork may well be understood as “an excerpt and expression of an artistic language.”⁵⁸ In a sense, “all art may be said to be language,” though it “is not a language of verbal symbols.”⁵⁹ We are now in the position to understand why it is so by making full sense of the directional distinction between language and art in their respective routes towards objectivity.

5 Directions of objectivity

Both verbal language and art can be said to be objective in that they imply a reference to an object (be it a tree, a statutory article, a painting, or Michelangelo’s *Pietà*) involving an objectifying move—as the outcomes of both our words, propositions and artworks are meant to constitute and express universally shareable meaningful contents.

Two further remarks. First, the reference to an object and the objective reference are two sides of the same coin, for our attempt at understanding does not just run out in an arbitrary employment of empty logical structures to ready-made given entities. Our relation to the object is at once the constitution of an object, a step further in the

⁵⁵ Indeed, for verbal language to reach that meaning, it must turn into poetry—which is art.

⁵⁶ Cassirer (1943, p. 200). See Hamada (2016, pp. 84–85).

⁵⁷ Cassirer (1943, p. 200). In order to enjoy the forms of art we have to create these forms. Even as mere spectators, we experience our participation to the artist’s idea. The emotional import of art does not follow from an emotional reaction. It rather entails an emotional drive that the artist is able to reconfigure in his or her work and that the audience is able to recognize and, in a way, reproduce. An artistic emotion is inherently creative. Art “gives form to what was previously an obscurely felt aspect of ourselves as emotive and rational agents in continual exchange with each other. Such an understanding of aesthetic experience accounts both for the experience of the artist and the audience. This formative experience is, to a degree, cognitive in that it is akin to telling us a truth (in explicitly small caption) about human life. Such truth, however, eludes the full explanatory power of rational thinking, in particular because it is situated beyond and perhaps even before rational life.” Pollok (2016, p. 3).

⁵⁸ Cassirer (1927, p. 257). English translation in Cassirer (2013, p. 258).

⁵⁹ Cassirer (1942b, p. 177).

constitution of an objective world. Second, the two complementary references here at stake follow different directions:

Common language develops in the direction of generalization and abstraction; and by this effort it finally leads to a new stage, to the stage of scientific language. But in art this process of abstraction and generalization is, so to speak, arrested by a new effort; it is brought to a standstill. Here we take the opposite route. Art is not a process of classifying our sense-data. Far from proceeding to more and more general concepts it is absorbed in individual intuitions. In art we do not conceptualize the world, we perceptualize it.⁶⁰

Speaking in terms of *directions* is quite a good strategy,⁶¹ for we are eased to see that verbal language is directed towards the convergence onto one single linguistic item—following from the unifying import of a proposition—while artworks may be said to be directed towards the constitution of a weft of different intertwined meanings that we cannot exhaustively determine once and for all. To fix these meanings in the same way as propositional language would basically mean to deprive the artwork of its inner life. Cassirer's words are quite telling: art's forms are living and moving, while the path of verbal language leads to an always increasing degree of determination and, say, solid, stable objectivity. By no means do we find at the end of this path the laws of mathematical sciences (broadly conceived), i.e., the highest level of abstraction and the highest degree of determined objectivity.

Cassirer never questions the objective import and status of art when contrasting it to language—as he is instead just limiting himself to distinguish two different directions of the same activity of symbolic formation. If we focus on the core of the activity upon which both verbal language and art rely, we see that the world of art is not a world displaying a lower degree of objectivity but, rather, the very same objectifying power we deal with as we create linguistic forms. The difference between the two regions of culture is, to recall Cassirer's words, *directional*. Language and art do not display two different separated worlds but two different ways of achieving an objective outcome according to autonomous articulations of the very same symbolic activity.

We have seen that the direction of art's method can be defined in terms of a perceptual framing of dynamic formations mirroring the expression and presentation of emotions and feeling. In order to further characterize the direction of language we may recall the quest for stable and fixed meanings and add the following. In the essay *Language and the Construction of the World of Objects* (1932) Cassirer employs a sharp phrase when dealing with the objective identity of the name. The latter is “a point of crystallization for the manifold of representations: in which the in-themselves heterogeneous phenomena become homogeneous and similar, in that they relate to a common center.”⁶² It is hard to think of a better way to put it: verbal languages objectify its contents by means of a synthetic constitution of a stable,

⁶⁰ Cassirer (1942b, p. 176).

⁶¹ One that Cassirer adopts in several occasions: (1942b, p. 176; p. 178); (1927, p. 259); (1932, p. 121).

⁶² Cassirer (1932, p. 119). English translation in Cassirer (2013, p. 343).

determined meaning. Language, as it were, freezes the *feri* of experience and the flow of perceptions. This is the “highest objective determination” of “the *logical-objective* direction of our thinking.”⁶³

Cassirer’s arguments seem to take the following shape.

- 1) The outward reality’s existence—which is a mere abstraction—does not depend on our cognitive powers and the function of symbolic formation.
- 2) Yet this outward reality cannot be the world of culture unless we symbolically frame it: the objectivity of our approach to outward reality is a task; it does depend on our cognitive powers and the function of symbolic formation.
- 3) Our symbolic objectifying activity requires us to perform symbolic-poietic mimesis, that is to recognize, single out, extract and frame a proto-meaningful core in entities existing independently of our cognitive grasp.
- 4) Point 3) implies that the entities at stake display an inner proto-meaningful core we can interact with. This is the notion of symbolic pregnance.
- 5) Our symbolic forming does not mean to arbitrarily choose a sign for a content according to merely subjective intentional attempts at understanding. Rather, it requires us to codify (*poiesis*) the core we recognize (*mimesis*), in a way that has to be also consistent with its own internal proto-meaningfulness (its symbolic pregnance).
- 6) The nature of this core being crucial, our symbolic forming follows different but equally lawful directions in order to adequately frame, codify and express different kinds of basic phenomena—whereby my verbal-descriptive approach to the concept *landscape* is different from my figurative, aesthetic, and emotional framing a landscape.
- 7) The direction language follows is one of these directions, and it is meant to grasp, frame, and crystallize those cognitive contents that represent the very first genetic moments of our objective world.
- 8) The direction art follows is meant to grasp, frame and express the emotional import of our dealing with the outward reality in order to make sense of second-order meanings flowing from what we may call one of the most distinctive constitutive dimensions of human beings: the sphere of feelings and emotions.
- 9) Art thus employs a different directional articulation of the same law of language without employing its symbols—or, eventually, by employing its symbols in a different way. Because of 4), 5) and 6), the status of the symbol cannot be utterly detached from the status of the core the symbol is meant to frame.
- 10) Art exemplarily shows that our symbolic formations have to be both pure—in that they follow from the spontaneity of our cognitive powers—and sensuous—in that they figuratively refer to either an outer or an inner sphere we get, quite literally, in touch with.
- 11) Far from implying a kind of dogmatic dualism, Cassirer’s critical idealism shows that symbolic forms and culture are ways to recognize the rational in any phenomenal display whatever and to cognitively frame it according to symbols that have to be consistent with the proto-meaningful core they codify. The *crystals* of

⁶³ Cassirer (1932, p. 121). English translation in Cassirer (2013, p. 344).

language are different from art's *moving and living forms*; yet both are pure and sensuous.

Recall that the “forms that I behold are not only my states, but my acts.”⁶⁴ No doubt, Cassirer is here speaking of artistic forms. States that are at once also acts adequately account for both the reciprocity between *μίμησις* and *ποίησις* and the peculiar features of artistic forms—as being pure sensuous forms.

The question is, according to the comparative method of the previous sections: Do or do not linguistic forms involve states that follow directly from my spontaneous acts? I think they do, for if it is true that the general lawfulness of language is shared by art, then we see that one general feature of artistic forms is not just an artistic feature. It rather belongs to the overarching framework of symbolic formation, as it is the counterpart of the reciprocity between *μίμησις* and *ποίησις*.

Let me point this out clearly: I do not think that the plasticity of Michelangelo's *Pietà* is a formation of the same kind as the mass-energy equation or the name of the “Phosphoglycerate dehydrogenase.” The latter two are indeed objective in a fixed sense the former could never share. The latter two are verbal, the former is aesthetic. Yet both are sensuous *and* pure, for otherwise they could not be *symbolic* formations. The abstract status of verbal signs does not make them less sensuous—as far as their reference is concerned; the living and moving status of the artistic forms does not make them less pure—as far as their genetic source is concerned.

6 Conclusion

Directions always irradiate from a core-point. My aim in this paper was to show that the core at stake is, for language as well as for art, the very function of symbolic formation itself—accounted for in terms of symbolic-poietic mimesis in order to make full sense of the coexistence between imitative and constructive states. Cassirer frames it also in terms of the *architectonic connection* “in every sphere of objectivity.” This cannot “by the simple imitation and rendering of some pre-given being, evidence the truth and objectivity that characteristically belongs to it,” for it rather accomplishes this task “in the meaningful order of the construction that it carries out by virtue of an original principle of *giving form*.”⁶⁵

If language crystallizes its contents by means of words, art pursues a plastic-perceptual arrangement of its own formations. The respective directions language and art follow thus give rise to different kinds of symbolic formations. Yet—this is another structural analogy I aimed to point out—in both cases these formations entail a pure (logical-conceptual) moment as well as a figurative-expressive one. Words and artworks are signs: pure signs in that they cannot be found nor conceived of as given—for they must rather be produced; sensuous signs in that they constitute the figurative elements of two different ways to signify the objects of our cultural world. No verbal description of concepts like *ambition* or *pride* may ever equate in efficacy

⁶⁴ Cassirer (1943, p. 200).

⁶⁵ Cassirer (1927, p. 269). English translation in Cassirer (2013, p. 270).

Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Art will always be able to make us *understand* and *feel* some key features of the concepts at stake in a way that lies far beyond the means of verbal language. Art objectifies dynamically, as it were. Yet it constitutes objects whose meaning can be shared and lawfully communicated. This is why we can construe Cassirer's account of art in terms of a symbolic language.

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