

Abstract

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ABSTRACT OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION CONCEPT
— DEATH OF A MOTH. ATLAS

Problematic aspects

The subject of the doctoral dissertation revolves around the history of ideas and archetypes of death and a dead body, existing in human (un)consciousness. Research concentrates on studies of language and image, relationships between them, and their interpenetration in various symbolic contexts. The area of research interests is determined by: on the one hand, the methods of knowledge organization, systematics, all attempts to organize and arrange the world, and on the other hand, its deconstruction and destruction, and the multiplicity of narratives. I am interested in "the pendulum movement between fantasy and reason"¹, or the conflict between rationalism and what is considered irrational.

What interests me particularly, are the constantly recreated, renewed and unconsciously repeated mental structures and mythical patterns. In my research and artistic work, I reach for Mircea Eliade's conclusions regarding magical thinking and sympathetic magic, Aby Warburg's works on memory and the image (especially expressed in his *Atlas of Images Mnemosyne*) and considerations by Walter Benjamin and W.G. Sebald (*Rings of Saturn*). I think that using stream of consciousness, combining words and images from different orders, finding similarity and difference and intuitive juxtapositions are an appropriate attitude in viewing the multilayered and ambiguous symbols. I believe it is necessary to overcome spatial and temporal homogeneity of axiomatic knowledge and to revise the traditional "truly scientific" deterministic approach. Thus, I refer to the trans-temporal and trans-spatial archeology of knowledge proposed by Michel Foucault, which somehow resembles the postulates concerning nomadic thought and the figure of the rhizome by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. I also refer to the way of perception practised by Georges Didi-Huberman, i.e. the attempts to capture the multitude of meanings briefly, in the 'blink of an eye', a 'glimpse'. This type of perceiving leads to the so-called 'non-knowledge' consisted of fleeting meanings and visions. As in the deliberations of Roger Caillois, absolute separation of reason and imagination or placing them on two opposite extremes, is not my goal. I would like to propose their mutual complementation in the process of thinking. This process is "becoming aware", that is finding the manifestations of the inner, collective unconsciousness in the world of the vernal reality.

Butterflies and moths

During my doctoral studies I was especially interested in the symbolism of butterflies and its duality, which manifests itself in the bright side (day butterfly) and the dark side (moth). As with any symbol, this split makes it complete through opposing meanings. A butterfly can therefore be a sign of a soul flying towards the light (Greek: *Psyche*), or of an evil spirit or melancholic attitude. Moreover, it spreads its meanings between culture and nature, rationality and mysticism, reason and imagination. It is both an emblem of taxonomic, Linnaean systematization and a symbol of transcendental afterlife. An impulse to explore the above-mentioned topics was the essay *Death of the Moth* by Virginia Woolf, in which the author confronts the death of a tiny moth, which becomes epiphany of her own finite nature.

¹ A. Warburg, *Atlas of Images Mnemosyne*.

Following the above, doctoral publication *Death of the Moth. Atlas* was created, trying to capture scattered threads, in relation to the butterfly symbol as an archetype of change, states of transition, death and immortal soul. The publication is accompanied by a kind of supplement, not included in the doctoral dissertation, but further illustrating other methods of comprehensive work on the subject. These are small porcelain objects (butterflies larvae and pupae) made during my doctoral studies, relating to metamorphosis and deconstruction. The holometabolism that butterflies undergo causes the tissues inside the hard shell of an almost immobile pupa to dissolve and then thoroughly rebuild, resulting in a new being: a mature butterfly. As a result of this process, there is an almost complete disintegration of the larva's body. Porcelain forms resembling caterpillars and pupae are a record of transitional states. The use of porcelain consisting of organic and mineral compounds, (especially bone china made of ashed bones), indicates the transition of some substances into other substances, and the constant return of forms.

Atlas

The decision to prepare the publication as the main work summarizing the doctorate was motivated by several reasons. I regard the book as a multifaceted carrier of an artistic idea, a medium that allows the narrative to be conveyed in a specific order defined by the author, but at the same time allows a departure from this rule by enabling an independent reading sequence. In addition, a book allows you to combine words and images, reading its content anywhere and anytime and return to it multiple times.

I. Formal description

Formal features of the publication itself are as follows: a book block in a hardcover in grey bookbinding canvas veneer with embossing on the cover. The embossed pattern is the black silhouettes of four butterflies with unusual shapes, transferred from one of the atlases of butterflies, creating a pattern somewhat reminiscent of the ink stains from the Rorschach test. The title is stamped on the spine of the publication. The format of the book is elongated, corresponding to the dimensions of wooden splints used to prepare butterflies. The book is additionally placed in a sheath with embossing, repeating the pattern from the cover. The sheath serves not only a protective role, but also refers to an entomological drawer in which pinned insect specimens, including butterflies, are kept. The endpaper is a glass negative photograph showing a collection of moths. The whole thing is in black and white tones with dominating grey, also by using paper in a shade of grey.

II. Content structure

The content of the publication is complex and multi-layered. The first part is an introduction (in a form of the author's essay) which is at the same time a theoretical PhD dissertation. The second part is the combination of the encyclopaedic form with a stream of consciousness. It begins with the aforementioned essay by Virginia Woolf, followed by texts and illustrations taken from various sources, which are solely quotations and at the same time a kind of encyclopaedic entries. At the end there is the introduction's bibliography and a list of sources for all the cultural texts contained in the publication. Each of the individual sections of the book are separated by illustrations of butterflies in the middle of the centrefold.

III. Introduction

The introduction does not have the typical structure of a written thesis, it is rather a free flow of thoughts, divided into eight parts.

The first part indicates the origin of myths and tries to understand the cause and process of their formation in human minds, putting the issue of death and the reactions to it at the centre. Due to the specificity of the studied

area (symbolism, collective unconscious, immeasurable experience of one's own death), it required an open and interdisciplinary methodological scope of the study and departure from a purely rational, binary point of view towards relational imagination. This fragment ends with the designation of the aim of the work: a semiotic analysis of issues associated with death in relation to the butterfly archetype.

The second part explains the concept of symbol and presents its characteristics such as a long duration, universalism, relationality, dualism, complexity and ability to express something otherwise inexpressible, etc. The sources from which the symbols flow are both the inner, individual mind and the collective unconsciousness, they are situated between conscious and primary perception. They are forces that are constantly looking for connections in the world around us, which the 'age of reason' has not been able to eradicate, and which are peculiar to the human imagination. Imagination processes, restores, imitates, transforms and, above all, produces images. In this part of the text, along with the thoughts of such researchers as Carl Gustav Jung and Mircea Eliade, there is also mentioned Aby Warburg's method of searching for 'image patterns' (applied in his *Atlas of Images Mnemosyne* which is particularly important for our further deliberations). Finally, a question is asked about the genesis of symbolic thinking, located on the border between (to some extent conscious) human reaction and automatic reaction of other animals, known as instinct. The differences and determinants of instinct and archetype remain unclear, however, both phenomena share an extremely deep and supra-individual character.

The above reasoning is interrupted by a digression in the form of an Interludium, presenting the course and effects of an experiment conducted by entomologist Jean Henri Fabre, concerning the amazing processions of caterpillars from the subfamily of *Thaumetopoeinae*. What we can read from the study is that regardless of whether the instinct and the collective unconsciousness are manifestations of the same strength and have the same sources, both are certainly properties of what is 'alive' (that is, what has the ability to remember and to react to an event). These forces serve survival, but by their ruthlessness, they can, under certain conditions, contribute to destruction.

The third part continues the topic of the characteristics of the symbol, emphasizing its multifacetedness and the inability to narrow down to the concrete. Thus, acquiring and categorizing knowledge cannot take place on the basis of designating a single, obligatory and indisputable interpretation. Further, the presence of affinities and connections in the world is postulated, which do not have to be considered in terms of chronology and history (effects and causes). It is a shift away from traditional methodologies in favour of the perspective of cabinets of curiosities with their non-linear and atopic narratives, and the use of assumptions (e.g. Foucault's *Archeology of Knowledge*, Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, and Roger Caillois' application of comparative biology in the humanities). Then, the special role of destruction and the resulting melancholy is revealed, in making attempts to arrange the world and understand reality through the clash of fantasy and reason. The last thread of the third part is delineated by considerations on mimetism, characterizing it as looking for connections and similarities, and consequently mapping the world in the myth. Through myths, man removes the consciousness of death or symbolically moves beyond its boundaries.

The fourth part of the introduction briefly deals with the various understandings of the concept of natural history, ultimately adopting a modified transformist view, that is, the identity of nature and culture, without applying a clear distinction between them. The end of this part is marked by a thought experiment involving a polemic with the understanding of evolution as a struggle and competition.

The fifth part explains the narrative of the publication, i.e. the application of a stream of consciousness, the starting point of which is an above-mentioned essay by Virginia Woolf. At the beginning, this essay shows the duality of the

symbol manifested in the range of opposing meanings: from the day butterfly to the moth. A butterfly, as a museum object placed in a drawer or a showcase, is first killed and petrified. Together with other remains and objects, it becomes a specimen, a museum relic, blurring the differences between the cultural and natural in the space of the museum-mausoleum. The eponymous death of an inconspicuous moth in Woolf's essay is above all, a realization of our own annihilation. The moth, however, is not entirely a classic, bad omen, but rather a statement that makes us differentiate between human and animal-like, individual and species-like, conscious and unconscious. Virginia Woolf sees her own fate in the death of the moth, and this kind of "non-knowledge" is also postulated by Georges Didi-Huberman, as knowledge caught in passing, in the glimpse, as opposed to rigid knowledge obtained in methodical examination. The presented themes lead to the thesis (also postulated by Peter Wessel Zapffe and Edgar Morin) that man creates his myths and culture in order to distance himself from the poignant awareness of death. At the source of these mythologies lies the ability of empathetic magical thinking, looking for similarities, that is, a specific mimeticism, interplay, blending with the world.

The sixth part tells about a butterfly as an emblem of a collection, a museum exhibit or an archive. This is a beginning of considerations about a dead body and the efforts to preserve it, in spite of its progressive decay. It describes the killing and at the same time preserving power of a museum-mausoleum, where objects are disconnected from their original function, and often their meaning. The museum unites what is natural and cultural, because a dead body is only something special in human concept, which makes it different from other material remnants. However, a traditionally understood museum can transform into the Museum of Imagination (about which Andre Malraux wrote), that is into a different, ever-changing symbolic space, exploring mental structures, leaving room for constant, new interpretations. A space where objects constantly die, but can be reborn in ever newer museum's 'paligenetic' configurations.

The seventh part deals directly with the issue of death, in particular the understanding of a dead body as something that in the process of death, becomes an objectified corpse and must be symbolically recovered, and incorporated back into the community. The caesura of finality is the decomposition of the body, and the method of dealing with its irreversibility is either attempts to preserve it or the immediate destruction and execution of a substitute image. The corpse and its double lead to the reflection on the presence and absence in the image. The methods of handling a dead body, in turn, indicate beliefs about the soul. Not only the biological, but especially the transcendental nature of death makes it possible to exceed its limits only in myth. What remains after the ritual is the image, echo, shadow – *imago*. Sepulchral representations of the *gisant* and *transi* type are discussed in more detail, due to their "suspension in time" between sleep and decay, but also as indicators of symptoms of an increased sense of individuality and fear of losing identity. On the other hand, the representations of the bones and the skeleton themselves indicate something permanent, clean, an image acceptable and bearable in the iconography of death. The fragment ends with a reference to contemporary death, as sterile, hospital, new kind of macabre. Attention was also paid to the obsolescence and incompatibility of the old images of death and the difficulties in creating new ones.

The eighth and final part summarizes the themes undertaken and confirms the continuing strong influence of archetypes on the human mind, including the butterfly archetypes existing in the collective unconsciousness. In addition, butterflies and other insects, as a sensitive indicator of the environment, also point very realistically to the dangers of biodiversity loss. The tiny moth becomes an augury of death. Due to the interdisciplinarity and vague boundaries of fields and specializations in this work, as well as the specificity of cognition itself (symbols and images, archetypes, imaginary patterns, etc.), it was necessary to find an appropriate narrative. The eighth part explains the motivations and decisions that lie behind the formulation of the material in the form of an atlas.

IV. Encyclopedic part

After the introduction, Virginia Woolf's essay *Death of a Moth* is quoted as a starting point. It provides the first entry — "moths". Then, this part of the book has been divided into chapters related to issues referring to the butterfly symbol, concerning taxonomy, natural history, metamorphosis, psyche, vanitas and preparation. The encyclopaedic character is given by the arrangement of the illustrations and the use of key words, entries extracted from the main text by bold and additionally listed in the page header. Bold and header allow an alternative way of reading, and the use of tilde indicates not only the free flow of thoughts, but also the open nature of the publication, the possibility of continuing in other directions and filling the empty spaces indicated by this character. Textual and visual spheres in the publication are treated equally, which is emphasized by the use of the same, continuous numeration. The publication is characterized by the interweaving of motifs and themes associated with butterflies, the heterogeneous origin of texts and images, the lack of a pre-imposed criterion for their selection, mental leaps, dead ends, subjective juxtapositions and interpretive connections. The ever-changing and, depending on the reader's will, linear or non-linear narration is also open to other, new interpretations. Quotation, repetition and enumeration play an important role as examples of the constant, fruitless searching for meaning, which characterizes the melancholic disposition. The use of only quoted passages from 'the past' is deliberate. Notation evokes the past and suggests a certain absence. It is also the loss of "I" in favor of melancholic mimeticism and repetition, that is, creating space for the statements of the dead who are unable to express more than what is written. It is a search for attainable imaginative patterns for otherwise inexpressible death.

The bibliography and the list of sources included at the end of the Atlas occupy a large part of the publication and, apart from their obvious function as references, they place an additional emphasis on the process of quoting and borrowing, which could lead to various, uninhibited narratives, further extending its scope.

