

## **Interaction of Nature and Man after Ernst Cassirer: Expressive Phenomena as Indicators.**

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### Introduction

According to the neo-Kantian and cultural anthropologist Ernst Cassirer, man always interacts with nature. This assumption forms the basis for his philosophical approach to the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* of 1929. It is based on the thesis that we do not conceive nature as objects ('Ding-Wahrnehmung'), but immediately feel and suffer nature through the so-called 'perception of expression' ('Ausdrucks-Wahrnehmung'). Thus, our understanding of the world is based on interaction with nature, because feeling and suffering depend on something we feel and suffer about. Thus, Cassirer developed already a theory of Enaktivismus, embodiment, and respectively to modern film theories of immersion. The thesis of the following paper is based on these findings of Cassirer and states that the expressive phenomena that we gain from nature through the 'perception of expression' can be understood as indicators of the state of nature.

It is therefore necessary to ask: what do we perceive of nature so that we suffer and, beyond that so that we can interpret what we have suffered as indicators of the state of nature? Cassirer gives us a first answer and concludes that there must already be something significant for us to respond. Here I agree with Cassirer that the perception

of nature as things does not provide relevant information about nature so that we behave appropriately and meet our needs.<sup>1</sup> So Cassirer already asked:

If there is "any possibility [...] to break through the layer of the simply symbolic or significative in order to find behind it the immediate, the unveiled world (...)" (Cassirer 1964 (1929), 27, translation into Engl., MS)<sup>2</sup>

Cassirer assumes, that the answer is not be found at 'outside' but only in our consciousness. (Ibid.) Therefore, Cassirer concludes it is obvious that even the highest form of consciousness, the conceptual understanding must depend on a form of perception prior to symbolic interpretation. In this regard he agrees with his opponent Martin Heidegger and thus distances himself from Kant, as far as there must be 'a free activity of mind', on which our understanding of the world is based. (Ibid., 14–15, see also the connection between Heidegger and Cassirer, Sauer 2014) With reference to this idea, Cassirer presented the concept of the 'perception of expression' ('Ausdrucks-Wahrnehmung'). (Ibid., chapter I–III, 53–121)

Behind this background and the thesis, the order of my paper follows four steps. First, the premise of the 'perception of expression' of man should be presented. Secondly, it is about showing the reason why expressive phenomena produced by man can be understood as indicators of the state of nature. Thirdly, it should be made clear why a process of distancing or alienating from nature nevertheless begins. Fourthly, finally, it is a matter of showing ways back to nature. In summary, I would like to conclude with a few words about the assumption that there is no dichotomy between nature and man.

1 Cf. the same conclusion of Whitehead in 2000 (1927).

2 Cassirer 1964 (1929), 27: "Wenn wir fragen, ob für das Denken „irgendeine Möglichkeit besteht, die Schicht des bloß Symbolischen und Signifikativen zu durchstoßen, um hinter ihr die „unmittelbare“, die entschleierte Wirklichkeit zu erfassen - (...)"

### I. Premise of the Perception of Expression – ‘Ausdrucks-Wahrnehmung’

Behind the background of the thesis and due to the topic of the anthology and its previous conference *Critical Zone* in Hamburg in February 2019, it is of interest how Cassirer defines the ‘perception of expression’. In this interest, it is remarkable that Cassirer does not rely on a theory of projection which had been invented by the Speculative Philosophy in the 19th century and here in particular by the German philosopher Friedrich Theodor Vischer, whose writings he knew. In concrete terms this means, that Cassirer neither assumes that man imposes a symbolic meaning on nature that suits him best, nor does he support the idea that the meaning is already determined by something higher e. g. laws of divinity.<sup>3</sup> (Ibid., 85) Finally, he also rejects the idea of Sensualism that our understanding of reality depends on materials preconditions, and is thus a copy of sensual data. (Cassirer 2007 (1944), 63) Contrary to these practices and theories, Cassirer, as it is said in the beginning, assumes that the feeling and suffering which characterize the ‘perception of expression’ depend on something we react and from which we cannot differentiate ourselves. (Cassirer 1964 (1964 (1929)), 95-96) In this context, Cassirer refers to man’s ability not only to react but to respond to their first perceptual impressions. These first perceptual impressions are, as he describes them, forms of movements and spatial forms; and these forms cannot be captured either linguistically or conceptually, but only by feeling their abstract-formal appearances as ‘characters or properties’:

“Instead of describing the form of movement as such, as the form of an objective spatial-temporal event, the state is named and linguistically fixed of which the movement in question is the expression. ‘Rash’, ‘slowness’ and, if necessary, ‘angularity’, Ludwig Klages says [...], may be understood in a purely mathematical sense, whereas ‘force’, ‘haste’, ‘inhibition’, ‘circumstantiality’, ‘exaggeration’ are just as much names for states of life as they are for movements, and in truth they are described by their *characters*. Those who want to characterize forms of movement and spatial forms are suddenly entangled in a characterization of soulful characteristics, because forms and movements have been *experienced* as soulful phenomena before

3 Cf. Vischer 1922 (1887), 1866, Cassirer 1923 (1921), Pinotti 2008: 129–132, see as well Sauer 2018.

they are *judged* by the intellect from the point of view of objectivity, and because the linguistic pronouncement of the concepts is only mediated by impressions." (Cassirer 1964 (1929), 94, italic fonts are locked in the original, translation into Engl., MS)<sup>4</sup>

As Cassirer describes it, our access to nature is characterized by different arousal patterns that characterize our feelings of 'spatial forms' and 'forms of movement'. Finally, when we realize the effects of different expressive sensations, they allow us not only to react but to respond properly. Cassirer himself never developed these thoughts into a clear concept of the perception of man, even when he has discussed its anthropological findings in various articles and books. It is therefore a concept so far barely noticed. Nevertheless, it is precisely today that the far-reaching conclusions that can be drawn from this approach are of general interest due to recent research. (Cf. Sauer 2008, and the comment from Wiesing 2009)

## II. Expressive Phenomena as Indicators

The conclusion to be drawn from this concept is that it is feelings which indicate people what is happening outside of them. They mirror the state of that what comes into contact with us. The verb 'happen' – in this case in quotation marks – signals the double effect of moving and spatial forms as well as our entire sensitive system, which transforms the former into feelings and finally induces actions as responses. The former is therefore indispensable not only for immediate reactions, which are also important for animals, but also for responses of man, which are concrete actions. Experience is therefore

4 Cassirer 1964 (1929): 94: „[...] statt die Form der Bewegung als solche, als Form eines objektiven raum-zeitlichen Geschehens zu beschreiben, wird vielmehr der Zustand genannt und sprachlich fixiert, von dem die betreffende Bewegung der Ausdruck ist. ‚Raschheit‘, ‚Langsamkeit‘ und zur Not noch ‚Eckigkeit‘, so heißt es bei Ludwig Klages [...] mögen rein mathematisch verstanden werden; dagegen ‚Wucht‘, ‚Hast‘, ‚Gehemtheit‘, ‚Umständlichkeit‘, ‚Übertriebenheit‘ sind ebenso sehr Namen für Lebenszustände, wie für Bewegungsweisen und beschreiben in Wahrheit diese durch Angabe ihrer Charaktere. Wer Bewegungsgestalten und Raumformen kennzeichnen will, findet sich unversehens in eine Kennzeichnung von Seeleneigenschaften verstrickt, weil Formen und Bewegungen als Seelenerscheinungen erlebt worden sind, ehe sie aus dem Gesichtspunkt der Gegenständlichkeit vom Verstande beurteilt werden, und weil die sprachliche Verlautbarung der Sachbegriffe nur durch Vermittlung von Eindruckserlebnissen stattfindet.“

different for humans than for animals. (Cassirer 1944, 49) In order to understand this, the process of perception, which Cassirer called ‘perception of expression’ (‘Ausdrucks-Wahrnehmung’) is fundamental. With regard to the human being, this kind of perception is based on two moments, namely feeling and response. The former is characterized by an unclouded unity of impressions and feelings and the latter by a distance when the feelings become conscious. The first part of the process can be understood as a mechanism of immediate reactions to perceptible expressive phenomena in nature, while the second part influences human decisions and actions. But contrary to the latter effect, the first was not further elaborated by Cassirer. But in view of my contribution to the anthology’s focus on the *Critical Zone*, the first is of basic importance. For it is the unity of feeling and responding that can be held as prerequisites for the unique development of man. On the basis of this conclusion, not only the connection between feelings and actions and thus events with historical and cultural effects becomes clear, but also their conditions, which are to be looked for in the interaction of human feelings and reactions to nature.

Looking back on Cassirer’s conclusions, which refer to the cultural development of man, he says that man only becomes aware of himself as part of this world through the feeling of his connection to nature, to others, and finally to himself, even if he simply forgets the premise. This means, consciousness is dependent on the “basic and primal layer of perception” (“Grund- und Urschicht der Wahrnehmung”) the so-called perception of expression (‘Ausdrucks-Wahrnehmung’) which is unconscious. (Cassirer 1964 (1929), 85–86, 94, 99–100, cf. Cassirer 2007 (1944), 55)

This connection of human consciousness with unconscious processes of perception is of essential importance for our understanding of the world. What we realize of the world is not given as a ‘thing’ that lies before us, but as “living effectiveness that we experience“ (“als lebendige Wirksamkeit, die wir erfahren“, Cassirer 1964 (1929), 86) This becomes obvious by the fact that, if this connection did not exist, we would not understand much – perhaps even nothing

– of that what encounters us in the world. This effect will be illustrated by an example: With regard to the last summer in Germany (2018) it can be declared that when at that time of the year the sun was shining brightly and hotly from the sky into the front yards, and the surrounding meadows of the villages have been earthy brown-yellow and short, these phenomena could not provide any sustainable information about nature. For pure observation and the nameable state of nature give us no impulse for action. In contrast, it is obvious, that only the feelings of heat and drought allow us to have a deeper knowledge about the state of nature and our room for maneuver, be it as a first reaction to look for shadow.

The correctness of this connection had already clearly pointed out the developmental psychologist Heinz Werner, who shared at the beginning of his research at the University of Hamburg an office with Ernst Cassirer. In referring to Cassirer, he writes in 1926 in his well-known and repeatedly published book *Introduction in Development Psychology*: “There are no optically-objective, but physiognomically-value-oriented measurements that dominate the spatial experience.”<sup>5</sup> To this he added, that all our senses are involved in this process. In conclusion he says, man is characterized by a ‘amodal sensing of vitality’ (‘amodale Vitalempfindung’, *Ibid.*, 14–17):

This physiognomic or expressive consideration of things is conditioned by the essential participation of the affective dynamic overall behavior in the formation of objects.<sup>6</sup> (*Ibid.*, 45–47, 46, translation into Engl. MS)

In the 1980s, the American developmental psychologist Daniel N. Stern followed Werner’s idea with his research on *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*. With respect to the perception of man, Stern speaks of a process of encoding that forms the realm of human expressiveness into a yet puzzling, amodal abstract representation that is recognizable in every sense. Already in the first days after birth,

5 Werner 1959 (1926), 121: „Nicht optisch-sachliche, sondern physiognomisch-werthafte Maßstäbe messen den Raum aus.“ (Translation into Engl. MS.)

6 *Idid.*, 45–47, cf. 46: „Diese physiognomische oder ausdrucksmäßige Betrachtung der Dinge ist bedingt durch die wesentliche Mitbeteiligung des affektiven dynamischen Gesamtverhaltens an der Gegenstandsgestaltung.“ (Translation into Engl. MS)

infants are able to generate these abstract representations and align their actions with them. These are not

images, sounds, haptic impressions and nameable objects, but rather forms, grads of intensities and time patterns – the more global characteristics of experience. (Stern 1992 (1986), 74–103, 80, translation into Engl. MS)

In addition, Stern notes, following Werner, that these recorded characteristics of perception are translated in characteristics of feeling. Stern calls them ‘vitality affects’. By designating them as such, he distinguishes them from discrete emotions such as fear or happiness. In contrast to the latter, the ‘vitality affects’ have to be described by dynamic, kinetic terms such as ‘bubbling up’, ‘fading’, ‘exploding’, ‘fading away’, ‘bursting’, ‘attracting’. (Ibid., 83) This ability to notice the differences in what is perceived on this most basic level as abstract representations and their evaluation as ‘vitality forms’ or rather as bodily sensitive ‘vitality affects’ also correspond to the results of Cassirer. Finally, Stern says that this ability is necessary for infants to ensure social interaction with their parents or other immediate caregivers, to interpret impressions from others and nature for to respond adequately to them. A proper understanding of non-verbal affective signs of caregivers is therefore urgently needed for to survive. In this respect, their concrete and adequate responses to impressions of the world and others depend on the correct evaluation of forms, grads of intensity and time patterns of sounds and haptic impressions of the caregivers. This dependence on the correct understanding of the ‘vitality forms’ of the caregivers decreases, when the child begins to communicate with the language between the 15th and 18th month. Nevertheless, even as an adult the reception and evaluation of abstract representations as kinetic forms or as ‘vitality affects’ preserve. (Ibid., 247–258) Like the concepts of Werner and Stern, Cassirer’s research is based on the same idea by assuming that the ability of ‘perception of expression’ (*‘Ausdrucks-Wahrnehmung’*) is constitutive for perception in general. Furthermore, he postulates that this kind of perception is necessary for all further processes of consciousness, be it mythical, pictorial, linguistic or conceptual processes of making sense. (Cassirer 1964 (1929), 94) In summary, this means that

life is at any time a 'life in the sense' ('Leben im Sinn'). (Ibid., 222–237, cf. 234–235)

This means that Cassirer, referring to this first original level, already indirectly assumes that man and nature belong together. Both are connected in reciprocal interaction. We respond to what we feel. What we feel is the state of nature. Her state is our state. This is, because we bodily feel every change of nature, and therefore we respond automatically to her. So, there is originally never any dichotomy between man and nature, because we are both dependent on each other. Obviously, this idea also shows Cassirer's closeness to his other fellow at the University of Hamburg, the biologist Jakob von Uexküll, who was the first to introduce Environmental Theory in 1909 with his book *Environment and Internal World of the Animals*. This theory follows the idea that in an ongoing process of self- or alien movement, each thing or being influences the development of the other. (Uexkuell 1909, cf. Cassirer 2007 (1944), 47–51, and with respect to Cassirer's connection to Uexkuell, cf. Krois 2011 (2004), 114–130)

### III. Process of Distancing or Alienating from Nature

However, this natural connection of all species, including man with nature becomes mutually disconnected by feeling consciously. Only man responds, it seems, not only to influences of impulses from nature, but consciously respond to them. Therefore, Cassirer concludes, man can interpret the consciously felt exterior world as something independent. In view of this findings, Cassirer's research focused on the question of how this is possible. Thus, he distinguishes between three phases of development, which always belong to us for anthropological reasons. On the first level, says Cassirer, where everything seems alive, whether it is a thing or not, man is connected with the world in a so-called 'You'-consciousness ('Du-Bewusstsein'). The description of this phenomenon is the subject of his second volume of *the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* about *The Mythical Thinking* which Cassirer published in 1924/25. Only on a second level do people argue that there is a difference between 'things' and living



beings. The new understanding of man is changing, as Cassirer summarizes in his third volume on the *Philosophie of Symbolic Forms* with respect to the *Phenomenology of Knowledge*. In this context, Cassirer speaks of a so-called 'It'-consciousness ('Es'-Bewusstsein). Only on a third level does man notice himself as the one who recognizes others and nature, and thus can speak of himself as an "I". (Cassirer 1964 (1929), 73-107) Thus, Cassirer comes to the conclusion, man is in an ongoing process of dissociation or alienation ('Entäußerung') from the 'perception of expression', whose security and truth is, "so to speak, a pre-mythic, pre-logical and pre-aesthetic one; it forms the common ground from which all these creations are in some way derived and from which they remain arrested." (Ibid., 99-100. cf. 95, translation into Engl. MS). So, it is remarkable, that the world opens itself to man by forgetting the roots of perception. Parallel to Cassirer it was Heidegger who followed the same idea and also came to the conclusion that man forgot to be thrown into the world and thus forgot to be originally in an affective mood. This fact also prompts Heidegger to assume that man only learns to understand the world on this basis. Thus, he comes to the conclusion that human beings only learn to know the world in such a way, that man "ecstatically closes himself off from the origin (and thus from his 'being thrown' into the world, MS), and himself into one with it." (indem der Mensch "ekstatisch das Wovor (und damit seine Geworfenheit in die Welt, MS) verschließt und in eins damit sich selbst". (Heidegger 1984 (1927), 339, translation into Engl. MS, cf. further 334-350, cf. with respect to the differences between Cassirer und Heidegger, Sauer 2014, 118)

This process of forgetting and at the same time distancing and alienating, says Cassirer, is based on the 'image-driven and action-driven' ability of man ('Bildkraft und Tatkraft des Menschen'). This is, because the process of not only reacting but responding to the world and thus of producing sense that was originally triggered by the 'perception of expression' as Cassirer describes it, mirrors the fact that man has the ability "to present an image of the future before us (a representation) and to align our actions with it." (Cassirer 1964

(1929), 211–213, translation into Engl. MS, cf. Cassirer 2007 (1944), 83-91) The first paves the way for the second. The symbol – this means that what becomes an image – rushes ahead of reality. The meaning of the preview (or the symbolic act) does not lie in the evidence of the being “but in the process of acting and forming”. This means, the process of acting and forming guides the understanding of the world. Through action, sense takes form. To make the difference between ‘vitality affects’, feeling them consciously and thus evaluating them as meaningful, ends in an image that guides our actions. The process itself is a form to give the future a direction. Both, presenting the future in form of an image before us as well as doing the same with events in the past shows and proves the original function of bringing into view and representation. Getting to know nature and world is not an act of grasping a finished and existing form, but lies in how the form takes shape, and thus in the understanding of the act itself as a process or way of giving and understanding form. (Ibid., 219–221, cf. 221, Cassirer 2007 (1944), 83-91, cf. 87)

Through this process of distancing, objectivating and at last alienating, our ‘image-driven and action-driven’ ability allows to respond to the impressions of nature. This means, that we are in an everlasting process less of knowing but of producing an image of nature and ways of responding to her. Thus, our image of nature is a product of a cultural process which realizes itself in language, in art, in theory, and science. Thereby, our image of the world finds not only an expression but rather is its conciseness (‘Prägnanz’), which is not nature. What is remarkable in this context is that it is necessary to make a rift with the original world of experience, because this ‘living world’ is not compatible with the new concept of things and the causal understanding that dominates our everyday life.

#### IV. Ways Back to Nature

Even if Cassirer and Heidegger as well as Werner and Stern say, that it is natural that we have to lose our connections to our feelings and thus to nature in order to represent the world ahead, everyone assumes that the connection to our original feelings, and thus to nature

is not lost. Cassirer gives as reasons for this that man has the ability to produce not only mental images, but real images of our impressions of nature and the world through art, and looking at art gives us back the lively experiences of our feelings. Thus, through art, we become aware of these original feelings. In this way it becomes clear, that with the help of art as media world and nature prove to be a product of our activity. In our everyday life we lose this knowledge, but with art we become aware of it. Art preserve this ‘expressive being’ of nature (*‘Sein des Ausdrucks’*) which we feel originally. In addition, art realizes this ‘expressive being’ of nature and world in an elevated, stronger form. Parallel to the potential of the ‘perception of expression’ to feel the liveliness of moving forms and spatial forms of nature, it is in relation to art, as Cassirer says, the experience of ‘living forms’ (*‘lebendigen Formen’*) that dominates the process of understanding. Cassirer gives us an example by describing a picture of a landscape which has been realized by an artist:

I (this is the recipient, MS) am beginning to produce an image of it (of the landscape, MS). So, I put my feet on a new terrain that is not the field of ‘living things’ but of ‘living forms’. I no longer stand in the middle of the instantaneous reality of things, but move in the rhythm of spatial forms, with the harmony and contrasts of colors, with the balance of light and shadow. The entry into the dynamics of form is the basis of the aesthetic experience. (Cassirer 2007 (1944): 233–234, translation into Engl. MS)

The difference between the perception of artworks and nature, says Cassirer, is to feel the ‘being of expression’ (*‘Sein des Ausdrucks’*) in works of art that are free of random and accidental designations. This is, because the artist can grasp and capture the expression of the essence of nature. (Ibid., 212–234) The image is thus a creative expression or translation of the percept. Behind this background, Cassirer sees the artist as someone for whom the power of feelings is transformed into a concrete ‘image-making and form-giving power’. (Ibid., 229) As a result, the feelings of the recipient also change when he perceives the image of nature, his original expressive feelings lose their action-driven power. Art transforms them into motion and not emotion, and this is a dynamic process of inner life that man can consciously feel. (Ibid., 212–234, cf. 229–230.) This power of the art to animate (*‘verlebendigen’*) is used for the subject. Unlike language

and science, which are abbreviations of reality, “art is an intensification of reality”. (Ibid., 221, translation into Engl. MS) The tools with which the artist evokes these feelings are colors and forms, light and shadow, which are brought into a chosen order.<sup>7</sup>

#### Final Words: There is No Dichotomy Between Nature and Man

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that Cassirer cites the arts as proof of the assumption that man is dominated by processes of ‘perception of expression’ that enables him to experience what becomes reality in works of art. In this way, the detour via works of art gives people an original impression of how they originally feel and suffer the world and thus nature. This ultimately means that on this original level the feelings of the artist as well as of everyone are to be understood as indicators of nature. As Cassirer shows, this is due to the fact, that human perception is characterized by a ‘perception of expression’. In addition, Cassirer reveals her original function for our ability to think and act by pointing out her connection to our ‘image-driven and action-driven’ power. This capacity of man is based on feeling abstract representations as living, moving and spatial forms. By feeling and suffering we are able to experience their ‘lively being’. Related to the developmental psychological research of Werner and Stern, which is based on amodal and transmodal conditions, and assumes that all our senses are involved in the expressive perception of nature and art, it can be added that human beings not only see and feel but touch and feel, hear and feel, smell and feel as well as taste and feel. Thus, the feelings of all our senses convey the state of nature (as well as a view of it in the art) in different, but compatible and interchangeable ways.

7 Cf. to the latter the image concept of Bernhard Waldenfels, the so-called ‘Iconopathy’, which is based on „what is being met and affected with“ („Worauf eines Getroffen- oder Affiziertseins“), that is transformed into a ‘response’ („Worauf eines Antwortens“). Parallel to Cassirer, it is forms and colors, that excite the ‘pathos’, and that are answered by a ‘response’. (Ibid. 2008: 50–60., 57 and cf. Waldenfels 2010, 105–132)

Finally, an important aspect that should be considered more closely is the inclusion of artists as mediators between the information obtained about nature and its translation into works of art. In this context, abstract representations become important again, this time as tools or means of design to adequately convey the impressions or feelings of nature. To describe only one artistic field namely the fine arts, it must be noted that their tools for evoking feelings in the recipients are brush strokes that set colors and forms. But it is precisely this dependence of the arts on techniques that triggers irritation. Because they are techniques, it is obvious, that they can be used to evoke any kind of feeling. The effects realized by artists and felt by recipients therefore depend on the will of the producer or the client. It is this condition that allows some restrictions on Cassirer's original assumption. It is not absolutely necessary to believe that the artist uses these tools only in relation to what he receives from nature as information. Accepting this proves to be an idealistic concept. In contrast to a perception of the world that cannot be fooled, because it depends on nature and not on human action, the producer of works of art can realize an image as if it mirrors the state of nature. In other words, it can become a fake news.

But even if we exclude art as a mechanism of properly mirroring the state of nature, it seems to be a fact that when man encounters world and images of him, he depends on the 'perception of expression'. So, when we consider that nature itself can be randomly or intentionally transformed by man, we also respond to this changed nature in the same way. In addition, it becomes clear that, when the state of nature changes, we become aware of her as a *Critical Zone*. This is, because we feel and therefore know what has changed. This is possible because, as Cassirer emphasized, man has the capacity – with respect to his 'image-driven and action-driven ability' – to compare our current feelings, images and actions with earlier feelings, images and actions. In summary, this means that, in contrast to our experiences with art, our experiences with nature then and now can each be considered as real indicators of the state of nature. There is no dichotomy between nature and man.

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