

Zeitschrift: Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Herausgeber: Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Band: - (2023)

Heft: 43

Artikel: Forest, heart and dream : a silence journey through symbology

Autor: Álvarez Sánchez, Emmanuel

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051774>

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«This moment of stillness and introspection leads us to become aware of our existence, creating a journey from the infinity of the universe to the infinity within us.»

FOREST, HEART AND DREAM: A SILENCE JOURNEY THROUGH SYMBOLOGY

Emmanuel Álvarez Sánchez

Emmanuel Álvarez Sánchez, born 1994, graduated in Architecture from Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid (ETSAM). His education took him to Switzerland for two years, first as a student in Mendrisio and later as an architect in Zurich. Upon his return in 2019, he co-founded Casa Antillón, an art and architecture studio that explores spatial construction through experimentation and imagination. He has taught at universities such as ETSAM, Politécnico di Milano, Istituto Europeo di Design, TAI Madrid and CCC Barcelona. Today he is working on his PhD, pursuing research that explores the Spanish mode of thought in relation to architecture.

This essay (1) talks about the relation between silence and imagination. Through the words of different Spanish thinkers, we will trace a journey in which the silence found in the middle of the forest highlights the heart sounds, a subtle situation that reveals to us the capacity of dreaming. And these transformations — silence, forest, heart and dream — will be possible thanks to the theory of symbol, where «everything can be transformed into everything because nothing is really nothing» (2).

FOREST

The forest has always symbolized the most dangerous aspect of the unconscious. (3) There is something mysterious inside it: the animals, the strange noises, the darkness, the wind and the shadow of the trees. Things that create a magical situation that takes us into the deepest part of our existence, where fear, danger and terror invade our heart.

Nevertheless, this hostile situation can turn into something very different when the sun brightens and a peaceful silence is spreading. This is the kind of forest that María Zambrano describes in her book «Claros del bosque» (Forest Clearings) published in 1977. In this book, Zambrano uses the symbol of forest to talk about life, in which there are moments of opacity, darkness and density; and moments of light, transparency and silence. Those moments (the clearings) are places where «silence reveals the existence of our heart» (4).

María Zambrano points to heart sound here, found in the silence of a forest, as a revelation of life. A life guided by the tick-tack of our heart, that becomes not only the motor of our existence but also the rhythm of the universe, to which we belong: «And thus, the steps of humans upon the Earth appear to be the imprint of the sound of their heart, urging them to march, to go forth in a kind of procession [...] in perfect serenity, when they feel moving in harmony with the stars and even with the firmament, and with the silent rolling of the Earth.» (5) And here, all of a sudden, we find an interesting object of study, where the heart beat inside us can be related to the infinity of the universe, which means, and this is a very powerful insight, that we can use this understanding the other way around: if there is infinity out there, it is also inside of us.

Deeply connected to this thinking, years earlier in 1914, the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset wrote his «Meditaciones del Quijote» (Meditations on Don Quixote) (6), where he also explored the links between the silence of nature, the heart sound and the knowledge derived from this situation (the cosmic relation between everything and us). I cannot resist from relating this beautiful paragraph here, that perfectly explains his approach: «The twilight blue had flooded the entire landscape. The voices of the birds lay asleep in their tiny throats. As I moved away from the flowing waters, I entered a zone of absolute silence. And then, my heart emerged from the depths of things like an actor stepping forward on the stage to deliver the final dramatic lines. Thump... thump... The rhythmic pounding began, and through it,

an earthly emotion seeped into my soul. Up above, a twinkling star beat in the same rhythm, as if it were a celestial heart, a twin brother to mine, filled with wonder and tenderness for the marvelousness of the world.»(7)

These two examples serve to contemplate how silence, found somewhere in nature, helps us to close our eyes and listen to ourselves. This moment of stillness and introspection leads us to become aware of our existence, creating a journey from the infinity of the universe to the infinity within us. And this observation, apparently simple, highlights the extraordinary capacity we have to think, abstract and imagine.

HEART

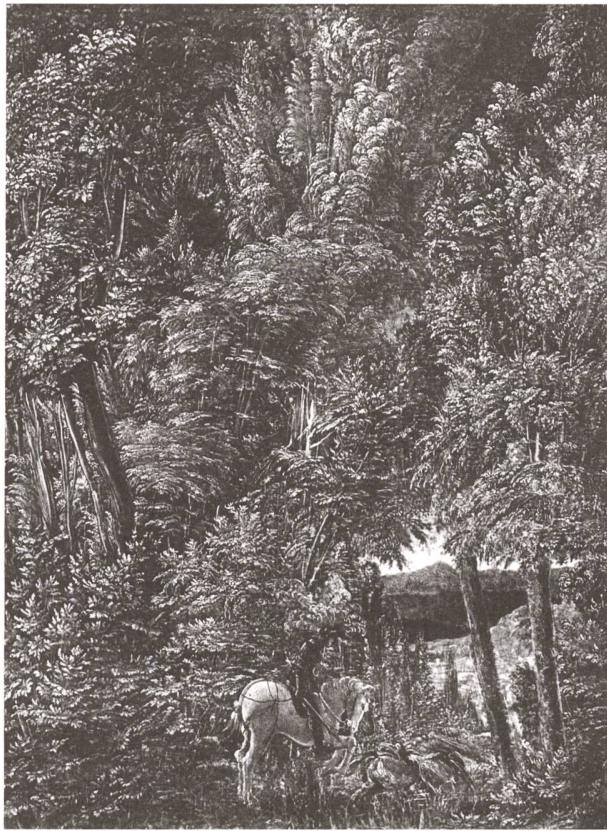
According to Juan Eduardo Cirlot, «the constellations, the animals and the plants, the stones and the elements of the landscape were the masters of the primitive humanity.»(8) For the same reason, the forest has helped us to remember something that our ancestors already knew: the importance of our pulse.

Before the human heart was associated with passion and love, it was understood in a very different way. Richard Lewinsohn, who was both a writer and a medical doctor, explained the first meaning of the heart by means of intuition and irrationality, terms that belong to the beginning of the world: «the primitive people lived in an imaginary realm of the supernatural. They were laden with complexes, atavisms, mythical, and symbolic representations.»(9) In this ancient world, humans listened with horror to the hammering of their hearts, which alerted them to danger. And this first impression gave this meaning to the heart.

It is curious, in terms of symbol, how forest and heart, in direct relation with silence, have a similar beginning of fear and terror. But soon after the heart was seen as a center of life and their representations gave it its current meaning. Lewinsohn places this moment of change with the Gilgamesch story(10), in which «the heart appears in a very different light compared to how it appears among natural peoples. It no longer causes or reflects fear. There is no need to even fear palpitations, as excessive heartbeats can have very pleasant reasons. The heart is now an organ that radiates joy and love.»(11)

Ancient Egyptian culture also understood heart as the center of life, which meant everything: intelligence, feelings, and all hidden secrets of human existence could be found in this organ. There was something mysterious that Egyptians adored in this unknown muscle located somewhere in the center of the body. This tradition was preserved in the Greek culture, which absorbed the oriental knowledge. And philosophers like Aristotle concentrated all of the human soul in this particular organ on which all others seemed to depend.

This philosophy arrived in Europe through the texts from the Toledo School of Translators, where the interpreters transcribed the words of Aristotle as well as other



(fig. a) Forest: «Saint George in the Forest», 1510, Albrecht Altdorfer. Image: Alte Pinakothek, Munich.



(fig. b) Heart: The Elephant in Love, Pindal cave in Asturias, Spain. Painted 13,000–18,000 years ago. Image: Pablo Batalla Cueto, 2018



(fig. c) Dream: «Ecstasy of Saint Teresa», 1652, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Rome. Image: Benjamín Núñez González, 2019

classical philosophers'. Over time, his words spread to both Muslims and Christians, religions that coexisted during seven hundred years on the Iberian Peninsula. There, this philosophy of love became one of its most interesting topics. Creating first the «Andalusí» literature in the Muslim part, where we can mention the beautiful book «El collar de la Paloma», by Ibn Hazm from Córdoba (994–1064), who wrote such beautiful words as «the stars at night are symbols of fire and love, lit in the darkness of my mind.»(12) And hundreds of years later, when the country was already Catholic, this thought gave rise to Spanish mysticism, which used the love of God in order to dream.

DREAM

As we have seen, the silence in the forest has allowed humans to find themselves, where the heart sound became the main character of the scene. In this situation, the symbol of heart acquired its different meanings: first fear and horror, second life and love. This last meaning, which continues with us today, allowed some women and men to delve into the depths of knowledge when history was obscurantist and inquisitive. And this way of love transformed their thinking into imagination.

One of those women was Santa Teresa de Jesús. Born in Avila in 1515, this nun had the ability to speak directly with God as well as other celestial creatures. It is important to remark the fact that she was a woman because she saw a breath of freedom in that religious time period that marked the end of The Middle Ages.(13) The most extraordinary thing is that she did not stop there: She not only had visions, but she also felt the need to write about them. In this way, one of the most important texts is the renown «Ecstasy of Saint Teresa», which reads:

«Beside me, on the left hand, appeared an angel in bodily form, such as I am not in the habit of seeing except very rarely. [...] He was not tall but short, and very beautiful; and his face was so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest rank of angels, who seem to be all on fire. They must be of the kind called cherubim, [...] In his hands I saw a great golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he pulled it out, I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God.»

«Vía un ángel cabe mí hacia el lado izquierdo en forma corporal; lo que no suelo ver sino por maravilla. [...] No era grande, sino pequeño, hermoso mucho, el rostro tan encendido que parecía de los ángeles muy subidos, que parecen todos se abrasan. Deben ser los que llaman Querubines. [...] Veíale en las manos un dardo de oro largo, y al fin del hierro me parecía tener un poco de fuego. Éste me parecía meter por el corazón algunas veces, y que me llegaba a las entrañas. Al sacarle, me parecía las llevaba consigo, y me dejaba toda abrasada en amor grande de Dios.»(14)

Although the «Ecstasy of Saint Teresa» is one of the most expressive parts of her story, she also tells us how she began her communication with God, and we cannot be surprised that it happened precisely in the search for silence and stillness, walking through a garden. A silence that comes from her radical meditation: «because if the stillness is great, it can be foolish to speak». (15) It is a silence that can only be broken by the voice of God. «When I reached his conversion and heard that voice in the Garden, it seems to me as if the Lord gave it to me according to how my heart felt...» (16) It is also curious how Santa Teresa refers to her heart at this moment.

Nevertheless, we are faced here with one of the most imaginative stories of all times. Stories that we cannot completely understand because they seem distant and strange to us, but the power of this woman is astonishing. She could express herself in a very personal way, transforming her reality into a kind of dream, convincing people that her story was important, and convincing herself that the story was the truth, because her visions were so powerful that she could not even believe how those stories could be real: «And God has given me a way of dreaming in life, which almost always seems to me that I am dreaming what I see.» (17)

CONCLUSIONS

Life and dream, imagination and reality. Santa Teresa tells us how her visions, which can be seen as very lucid dreams, had the power to change her real life. Somehow, I can relate this to any creative process in which the ideas of our imagination are transformed into real constructions. An artist makes a sculpture, an architect designs a building, Santa Teresa had her visions, and those visions became reality through her words. Words that were chiselled by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, in 1652, creating one of the most beautiful sculptures of the Italian Baroque: the «Ecstasy of Saint Teresa» in Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. The dream of Santa Teresa was, at last, real.

And this is actually the important point of this text. It is difficult to find silence in our busy, noisy lives. But we have demonstrated how silence can help us to dream. And when we say dream, we also say think, imagine, design. Terms that belong to any creative process as the one that occurs when we design architecture. But even more important than that, dreaming also leads to self-knowledge. Delving into our personal and unique existence, which is the only thing we really are.

For this reason, we have tried to bring along here, to this text, our capacity to imagine. A magical and ancestral tool that we have invoked by calling upon the symbol of silence, which was hidden somewhere in nature, in the middle of our heart. This human tool, powerful if well used, can make everything change: dreams can now become real, reality can now be dreamt.