

The role of expression in the emergence of cultural forms and symbolic types

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Abstract

This study explores the correlation between historical events and their emergence as singular expressions of a society or culture. When reliable sources permit an understanding of such moments as manifestations of universal volitions—namely, moral will—they offer a framework for interpreting both the modalities of their emergence and their relation to historical phenomena. The analysis focuses on cultural forms and symbolic types, examined as constituent elements within broader cultural systems. Simultaneously, attention is directed toward the symbolic environments in which these forms were constituted and through which they emerged. These environments will be approached through the epistemic categories of theoretical and practical knowledge. Particular emphasis will be placed on the role of aesthetic supervision as the primary level of theoretical cognition, preceding logical operations and intersecting with practical reason, individual volition, and ethical orientation.

Keywords: expression, cultural forms, culture, reality, symbolic types, Aesthetics, conceptual knowledge, volition morality, theoretical mind, practical mind

The emergence of historical moments does not occur spontaneously but rather follows certain stereotypical signs or systems of signs to which members of an organized social group respond consistently. These signs, upon transmission, assume a specific form that, according to Etienne Vermeersh¹, is unique and distinct from other sign systems. Cultural forms, thus, as universally recognized systems of signs, encompass states of mind (knowledge, ideas, attitudes, values, morality), habits, customs, skills, institutions, and human behaviors².

Cultural forms are dynamic rather than static, evolving according to the demands of particular historical contexts, yet often exhibiting caution toward external interventions. In other words, they represent closed systems of reference points that define the identity of a given historical moment. Historical moments themselves are not systematic or methodical arrangements of reality's elements, nor do they intentionally align with preceding or succeeding historical moments. Instead, they serve the immediate purpose of encapsulating and maintaining their own boundaries of reality. Each historical moment, therefore, possesses inherent integrity, originating and concluding within a concrete reality shaped by universally accepted theoretical and practical components. These components are unique, and the judgments defin-

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1. Vermeersh Etienne, *An Analysis of the Concept of Culture*, στο "The Concept and Dynamics of Culture, Editor Bernardo Bernardi, Mouton Publishers · The Hague · Paris Distributed in the USA and Canada by Adline, Chicago, 1976, pg. 41.

2. Gizelis, G. (1980). *To politismiko systema: O simio-*

tikos kai epikoinoniakos charaktiras tou [The cultural system: Its semiotic and communicational character]. p. 59 Athens: Grigoropoulos Editions.

ing them accord with general rational and moral sensibilities. Consequently, the ethics and logic of any historical moment derive from the practicality of its purposes. Even the concepts of power and authority, which frequently subordinate collective wills to minority interests, are rationalized through notions of a natural hierarchy with intrinsic objectives.

The categorization of mental principles through theoretical and practical criteria is not stable across historical moments, since their constitutive elements—cultural forms—do not establish precise terms but rather proportions or boundaries within which historical moments unfold. The constancy in cultural forms is the purposiveness directed toward generalizing their utility. The comprehension of this generalizing function precedes the definition of specific terms, which themselves are transient and vital only for interpreting the syntactic structures of sign systems essential for transmitting cultural forms. Therefore, prior to being recognized as content measures, cultural forms elucidate the common methods used by individuals to distinguish and recognize meanings and moral values as stereotypical markers.

The primary purpose contained within cultural forms is not embedded explicitly in content but rather in the form of information, conveyed aesthetically rather than logically. Aesthetic knowledge takes on a unique form, which, following Vermeersh³, distinctly separates it from other sign systems. Cultural forms, thus universally acknowledged systems of signs referring to mental states, habits, customs, skills, institutions, and human behaviors, are both objects of learning and capable of dissemination⁴.

However, if experience is considered a system of recorded knowledge, what ensures its suitability? The selection of suitable knowledge, guided by

predictive principles, extends beyond theoretical contemplation. Suitability is inherently linked to utility, since knowledge is ineffective if confined solely to theoretical domains and unable to motivate rational actors to alter reality. Efficiency, as an evaluative measure of logically informed actions, is classified in our experience according to the degree of practical realization. Foresight, therefore, constitutes logical intentions, which stimulate rational mechanisms aimed at transforming reality to align with mental purposes. Within this context, ethics emerges as a universally recognized framework of useful cognitive and evaluative relationships, revealing the logical nature of intended goals and resultant actions.

The appropriateness of cultural forms is assessed according to necessity relative to specific moments, while their definitions depend on classification systems that organize perceptions of the surrounding world⁵. A common taxonomic system employs identification as a characteristic for collectively organizing sensory inputs, meanings, concepts, and emotions. Through such relations, common experiential systems emerge, shaping individual interactions with reality. As Max Weber notes, technological, moral, and aesthetic relationships to reality—though not providing a comprehensive portrayal of social groups—are nevertheless principal means for interpreting and classifying anthropogenic and natural environments⁶.

Synthesizing theoretical and practical functions, however, remains challenging, as bridging the gap between utility and effectiveness equates to bridging individual and collective experiences. How can an individual's experience reliably align with collective experience? Conversely, how can collective groups reliably infer from individual experiences guided by the common good? Here, we must consider the mind's capability to create integrated forms—representations or patterns of complex associations—recognized as unique knowledge. The individuality of forms represents the theoretical mind's initial expression, preceding conceptualization. A parallel phenomenon occurs

3. Vermeersh Etienne, *An Analysis of the Concept of Culture*, στο *"The Concept and Dynamics of Culture"*, Editor Bernardo Bernardi, Mouton Publishers· The Hague · Paris Distributed in the USA and Canada by Adline, Chicago, 1976, pg. 41.

4. Gizelis, G. (1980). *To politismiko systima: O simiotikos kai epikoinoniakos charaktiras tou* [The cultural system: Its semiotic and communicational character]. p. 59 Athens: Grigoropoulos Editions.

5. *Ibid*, pg. 59.

6. *Ibid*, pg. 60.

on the practical level, where individual intentions manifest as personalized purposes aimed at altering reality based on subjective criteria⁷.

This raises critical questions: How does the individual mind connect with the collective? How does the individual's purposeful demand for belonging, aimed at altering reality, transition into the broader, generalized context?

The capacity of the individualized theoretical mind to delineate the boundaries of experiential moments through integrated forms constitutes knowledge. The content of this knowledge is subsequently perceived and systematically analyzed by the next cognitive level of the theoretical mind—logic. Mastery over forms is discernible through the distinctiveness of the boundaries it establishes relative to any conceptually analyzed knowledge and by the nature of the content enclosed within them. The boundaries thus provide the form, while the content embodies the dynamic forces operating within, giving rise to its structure. Logic operates similarly: the boundaries of universally accepted logical knowledge define the scope of its experiential environment, while the content specifies the kinds of cognitive movements from which logical descriptions emerge.

According to this view, the two philosophical levels of the mind, along with their associated categories, fully manifest within cultural forms: the individualized theoretical level, or aesthetic supervision, generates uniquely expressed forms of reality's terms, subsequently analyzed by logical knowledge, the universal theoretical level. Criteria such as genres, historical moments, boundaries, and the suitability of cultural forms result from the interactive energy of individualized aesthetic expressions. However, since logical knowledge pertains to the universal mind, it must include a criterion comprehensible within a more general system of understanding. This generalizing criterion is inherently collective, unlike aesthetic knowledge, and must encompass both knowledge and purposive objectives. Therefore, to qualify as rational knowledge appropriate for generalization

within a given historical context, it must contain factual descriptions, analyses, conclusions, and, significantly, motives, intentions, and actions to varying extents, responsive to situational demands. Consequently, cultural forms are composites of individual and universal knowledge, as well as individual and collective wills. Given that these characteristics are amenable to learning, they can consequently be disseminated. Yet, one may question how individualized aesthetic supervision, given its inherently unique forms, can itself be disseminated.

Contrary to individualized practical categories—wills, which elevate to morality upon reaching universality—aesthetic knowledge neither includes evaluative criteria nor can be conceptually articulated. Wills encompass goals whose fulfillment leads to measurable changes in reality, evaluable through the intentions of the agent; hence, their effectiveness can readily be judged appropriate or inappropriate relative to their consequences⁸. Rational knowledge similarly proceeds through a deliberate and voluntary process, which, although not judged by moral standards, nevertheless adheres to logical causality, establishing rational knowledge according to principles of logical consistency.

In cultural forms, theoretical and practical activities collaborate through the convergence of the individual and universal practical categories—individual will and morality—and the universal theoretical category of rational knowledge. Aesthetic supervision, as the individualized category of theoretical cognition, thus appears supplementary, tasked primarily with defining unique boundaries between historical moments: as noted previously, these boundaries shape the forms, and their content embodies the dynamics of their cultural environment.

The function of aesthetic knowledge, however, is not limited merely to the delineation of categorical boundaries. If it were, cultural systems could be perceived solely as mental states corresponding to indisputable realities, interpreting parts in relation to wholes analogously to meanings in re-

7. Benedetto Croce, *Estetica Come Scienza dell'Espressione e Linguistica Generale*, Bari, Gius. Laterza e Figli, Bari, 1908, pg. 11.

8. Mario Buonajuto, *Benedetto Croce: l'Etica e la Politica*, Editore Itinerari, Lanciano, 1983, pg. 15.

lation to the meaningful. Such a hypothetical system would exclude authentic human nature from participating in the creation of cultural forms, lacking reference to the creative principle. Under these circumstances, cultural forms would merely represent an entropic organizational system defined by rigid, predetermined experiences, inevitably resulting in predictable behaviors. However, the term “stereotypical,” applied to cultural forms, is not intended to denote rigid dogmas of coexistence but rather to underscore their dynamic role in facilitating the coexistence of diversity and multiplicity within a unified whole. How then does aesthetic supervision contribute to this process?

To answer this, we must explore another function of aesthetic supervision within cultural forms. Observing reality reveals that members of an organized group respond to symbols representing social entities, concepts, or forms, even when absent. Social individuals thus develop sign and symbol systems representing experiential reality. Historical inquiry into signs and their communicative effectiveness began with ancient Greek physicians who interpreted physical changes signifying human health conditions. The theoretical foundation of semiotics originated among classical philosophers and sophists, with substantial elaboration by Hellenistic thinkers who advanced sign theory⁹.

The transmission and reception of signs are accomplished through sensory channels and cognitively decoded. However, the diverse and substantial volume of cognitive information cannot solely be conveyed conceptually due to the limited capacity of human memory. Semantics, as the discipline examining relationships between signs and their symbolic meanings, recognizes that the associations among symbols entail specific characteristics, condensing logical or metaphorical expressions of their central meanings¹⁰. Thus, symbolic units are structured not on the volume or complexity of information but on abstraction and simplicity. Operating abstractly, these units permeate cultural forms, shaping syntactic relationships based not on concepts but on forms that

encode an unlimited array of specialized classifications. The transmission and reception of these forms, therefore, constitute integrated knowledge, symbolically—that is, aesthetically—understood through a commonly recognized symbolic process.

The abstract function of aesthetic supervision as integrated knowledge, placed equivalently alongside conceptual knowledge, presupposes a preliminary stage during which social individuals have collectively learned to interpret social phenomena and structures in a unified manner. Moreover, since cultural forms are not imposed norms but methods of revealing a community’s will to coexist harmoniously, aesthetic supervision—as an individual’s knowledge—must pre-exist within the mind as a latent experience, destined to surface upon encountering an appropriate spiritual context. In this sense, aesthetic supervision refers to the individual’s ability to utilize symbols to represent material experiences and transmit information without requiring the immediate presence of physical objects¹¹. Aesthetic supervision thus predominantly facilitates the expression of creative human energy—primarily artistic rather than logical, volitional, or moral.

Addressing the role of aesthetic supervision in facilitating coexistence between individuality and collective identity, knowledge of forms manifests expressively: expression—a concept philosophically synonymous with aesthetic supervision—connects present experiential knowledge with an idealized state of reality. The artist, as the originator of aesthetic supervision, expresses personal perspectives rather than collective norms. The social group, consequently, observes and evaluates these forms according to its aesthetic criteria, approving or rejecting artistic creations based on their alignment with communal objectives. Expressive consensus, therefore, reflects a collective preference for a particular aesthetic approach to articulating reality rather than for a specific creator. It represents a cultural determination toward comprehending forms and their boundaries through shared experiences. Consequently,

9. *Ibid*, pg. 60.

10. *Ibid*, pg. 56.

11. Benedetto Croce, *Estetica Come Scienza dell’Espressione e Linguistica Generale*, pg. 17.

although aesthetic supervision constitutes individual knowledge reflecting unique personal expression, it also serves universally as a means of validating such expressiveness¹². Aesthetic supervision, despite generating subjective critical evaluations, inherently contains criteria of expressive preference: the concepts of beauty or ugliness are expressions of collective approval or rejection, not of specific artworks but of the aesthetic mode of expression itself, linked to creative imagination, emotional resonance, and individual experiences. In conclusion, aesthetic supervision is receptive to an unlimited number of specialized classifications extending beyond art, encompassing and transmitting diverse combinations of knowledge from all dimensions of human cognition.

In conclusion, cultural forms constitute the mediating structures through which individualized experiences and collective norms converge. As systems of signs and symbols, they generate an indefinite number of specific classifications that guide perception, organize conceptual unities, and ultimately direct experience into action. Their function, however, is not limited to conceptual mediation. Cultural forms are also practical entities, intrinsically connected to volitions, purposes, and the transformative capacities of the mind. They mobilize reason and intention toward the alteration of reality, not by transmitting abstract concepts directly, but through the expressive transmission of symbolic forms.

This symbolic function follows an aesthetic, rather than a strictly logical, path. What is conveyed is not the content of concepts per se, but complexes of forms—structured symbolic types with distinct characteristics—that refer to underlying logical-semantic frameworks. The transformation of conceptual or normative content into form is made possible by an innate aesthetic capacity to respond to symbols representing absent social entities or states. Thus, the transmission of cultural forms proceeds analogously to artistic expression, where meaning is not imposed but evoked through an expressive structure.

Aesthetic supervision, therefore, emerges not as a supplementary function but as the originary

theoretical mode through which the mind delineates and configures meaning. It precedes both logical articulation and moral evaluation, establishing the expressive boundaries within which historical moments and normative systems unfold. Through a shared symbolic economy—a community of ideas, feelings, and representations—cultural forms do not merely reflect social reality; they shape an exemplary field of coexistence by encoding the tensions between individuality and collectivity, spontaneity and necessity, expression and comprehension.

Consequently, cultural forms are not inert carriers of inherited meaning but living systems of reference. They are bound to transformation, yet governed by purposive logic and ethical intelligibility. It is within this expressive and dynamic tension that culture must be philosophically apprehended—not as an aggregate of isolated symbols, nor as a universal abstraction, but as the irreducible medium of mediated human coexistence.

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12. Benedetto Croce, *La Poesia*, Laterza, Bari, 1980, p. 9.