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A CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR THE IMAGINARY:
THE ROLE OF SYMBOLS

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Abstract: In life, decisions are not only taken by considering logical reasoning, but they are influenced by images, symbols, and myths. Moreover, in our multicultural and multiracial societies, we must express ourselves with attention, to use careful comparisons and especially neutral expressions. Symbols multiply the effect of words, and consequently, the risk of saying something wrong is increased. Also, if each person one discusses with will know how to decode your words is a wrong assumption. The symbols mentioned are also influenced by other factors, and they are part of a more comprehensive concept, namely the imaginary. This study is a conceptual review of the imaginary concept. There are many disciplines that study the imaginary, and many definitions for it, given by researchers coming from all fields, but there are few papers that explain how the imaginary is formed and how it influences our lives. By reviewing the literature, we have identified major limitations of the theories and models that treat the imaginary. Studying all those studies was useful for us because from the beginning we wanted to understand how the imaginary is formed and how it can be decoded, so we developed our own framework. The key conclusion of this paper is that symbols are a useful concept for understanding imaginary, since they can be seen both as forms of communication of the intangible culture, but also as productions of the imaginary. By settling symbols in the middle of our conceptual model, imaginary can be easier understood and further used in other scientific investigations.

Key words: imaginary, symbolic, real, symbols, imaginary formation, imaginary decoding, stimulus, sensations, perceptions, beliefs.

1. Introduction

The interest in understanding the imaginary is still of great interest in various fields, starting with the socio-human sciences, and ending with computer sciences. The programming language has a lot in common with the way people try to access the imaginary, because it is considered a tool of dialogue, the interface between man and computer. In addition, all programming languages are based on a set of basic symbols (Varga 2016, 3). The definitions given by those in the social sciences will be presented below. Sartre defines the imaginary as “the implicit meaning of the real in every moment.” Anthropologists define the imaginary as the cultural beliefs of individuals (Strauss 2006, 339; Durand and Wunenburger 2016, 28). The imaginary can be, at the same time, a product and a process (Pop 2016, 12). Psychoanalysts define the imaginary as representing the totality of affections, desires, and representations, which together give rise to symbolic forms (Castoriadis 2016, 123-128; Jung 1970, 75).

As it can be observed in the previous definitions, there are two approaches to studying the imaginary. The first is the French one, in which the purpose is to find out the of the imaginary. Here the metaphysical or anthropological foundations of the concept are studied, the approach being rather philosophical. The second approach is the Anglo-Saxon one – by considering this approach researchers are interested in images and ways in which people can be influenced by them, the purpose of the research being to find ways and explanations that can be exploited commercially (Braga 2007, 102-113). There are a multitude of articles that address the imaginary, but most authors are content to define the imaginary and theorize about the concept. Since there are no models that clearly explain how the imaginary is formed and how it can be applied in different fields, in this article we aim to develop a framework which explains how the individual imaginary is formed, and, at the same time, how it can be decoded using the symbols with which the individual resonates.

The main sources on which we based our research are part of the French approach. We chose the French approach because the imaginary seems to be studied by anthropologists who are either psychologists, sociologists or specialized psychiatrists and who manage to present the imaginary in all the cultural layers that history, mythology, linguistics and literature propose. Durand (2000) through his huge work considers that the effectiveness of the imaginary consists in defining the image as a symbol. His critique is directed at the humanities, which in his vision managed to subdue the symbol but compromised its interpretation, depriving it of its primordial, sacred characteristic. Leaning on archetypes and symbols, it highlights the external form and the internal structure of

the imaginary elements. Wunenburger (2009) studies the historical context of the imaginary and the philosophical directions towards which the concept was directed. He emphasizes that the style that has been imposed is one of metaphysical thinking transmitted simultaneously by Christian versions and by the atheists of existentialism. Both versions present the ways in which the inner life of the mind acts on affectivity, the imagination of time and death, considering the imaginary as temporal psychic activity. Boia (2000) presents the imaginary from a historical perspective, presenting all the stages that this concept went through, initially considered to belong to anthropology, and marginalized by the rationalist, materialist sciences throughout history. Chevalier și Gheerbrant (1982, 362), in their reference book, they gathered all the symbols that exist in the world, each with explanations that show us that regardless of the area, many of these symbols describe the same things. They also talk about living symbols and missing symbols. They consider that the symbols that disappear from the current language do not disappear but belong to history.

The structure of the paper is further described. The current context in which the concept of the imaginary is studied, the main definitions, and the approaches towards the concept of imaginary are presented in the first section. The second section consists of a review of the literature focused on the concept of the imaginary, as it is perceived by the French approach. We are also presenting the three paradigms of the imaginary, that are the use of imaginary, accessing the imaginary and the development and transmission of the imaginary. The third section of this paper is presenting our model. Gathering all the information from the reviewed studies about the imaginary, and putting them in place, helped us build a model that explains the way in which the imaginary can be formed, how it is decoded, and the role of symbols. The conclusions are presented in the final chapter of this paper.

2. The concept of imaginary– literature review

Durand, influenced by his mentor, Bachelard, returns to the imaginary discussion in the early twentieth century, creates and leads imaginary centres by bringing together philosophers, psychologists, psychoanalysts, sociologists, anthropologists, and writers. The French researchers of the imaginary consider that “L'imaginaire” has two overlapping meanings: on the one hand, it designates the products of imagination, the passive body of images and representations created by an individual or collective fantasy. Second, “L'imaginaire” is seen on a wider scale as a dynamic human ability to create this complex image system (Durand and Wunenburger 2016, 22). The interdisciplinary research of the imaginary has made that in each domain it is seen differently: for

Castoriadis, the imaginary is a culture's ethos, for Lacan, it is a fantasy, for Anderson and Taylor it is a cognitive scheme, while the historian Le Goff sees it as the translation mental of perceived external reality (Strauss 2006, 322).

In our study, we consulted materials that come mostly from the field of anthropology, psychoanalysis, philosophy, literature, history, and other socio-human sciences. We decided to talk only about the French approach because, unlike the pragmatic, Anglo-Saxon approach, in which researchers are interested in images and the ways in which they can influence people commercially, the focus of our research is on how the imaginary is formed.

Within the French approach, there are three paradigms that study the imaginary. The first paradigm is concerned with the use of imaginary. The merit for the promotion of the imaginary belongs first to philosophers and anthropologists who have conceived the imaginary as a distinct field. They were interested in the whole world of beliefs, ideas, myths, and how they can function as formal structures at the level of both individuals and communities (Braga 2007, 32). Philosophers and anthropologists interested in the beliefs, ideas, and myths of a community, study the imaginary. They aim to find out what role the imaginary plays in the community: ideological, material and/or symbolic.

The second paradigm is concerned with accessing the imaginary. Psychoanalysts appreciate the imaginary and use it in their work using the passive body of images and representations created by the individual or collective imagination. They have taken the term by being directly interested in what is beyond the external nature of people; they emphasized and highlighted the role of symbols in the imaginary, thus bringing a new level of study in the field. They have shown that in rendering feelings, or in trying to explain the intangible, people use a mute language, but full of meaning, namely the symbol that has not only an aesthetic role but brings to the surface the intangible nature of the imaginary. Most of those who have studied the imaginary believe that this is the area of the creative psychic, a map that helps us interpret the world (Drăgan 2009, 12). Psychoanalysts believed that children's fairy tales are useful in helping them understand the emotional experience. Bettelheim proposes that fairy tales are socially developed stories that help children go through the many psychological struggles of childhood and that violence and dark themes that have been gradually removed from them are an essential part of what makes them popular and useful for children. Listeners of these stories indirectly experience these dark stimuli, allowing them to develop strategies for resolving their fears and suffering (Bettelheim 1976, 20-32).

The third paradigm has as goal of research the development and transmission of the imaginary. Writers and artists have theorized a lot about the fact that the imaginary made the historical characters that

existed, in reality, have been preserved in the common memory precisely because of the stories, legends, and myths circulated in human communities. The collective fantasy enriched by the individual or collective representations represents for the researchers the imaginary of the individuals, being an inexhaustible source necessary for the field in which they carry out their activity. Also, the imaginary mediates the individual's relations with the world. The imaginary allows the man to shut himself in, to live in dream and reverie, to detach from reality, not to get involved in the action, at the same time he can offer him the possibility of expression and achievement.

Heroes and narratives about heroes meet important cognitive and emotional needs, including needs for wisdom, meaning hope, inspiration, and growth. Heroes, the narratives of heroes - are extremely effective delivery systems to convey complex truths and to lift people to a higher emotional and behavioral state.

Narratives about heroes meet important psychological needs for both individuals and communities. Deep truths contained in the myths of heroes are difficult to decipher and appreciate, because they are disguised in symbols and metaphors (Allison and Goethals 2016, 187-189).

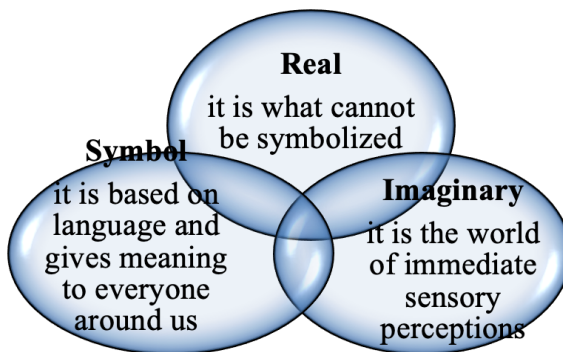
We are currently witnessing the transformation of various symbols, adapted identity images, they are for sale and exercise interest due to the mystical elements in them (Çomak and Pembecioğlu 2018, 164-165). The truths contained in the stories enjoy a timelessness that connects us with the past, present and future. The myths-like also symbols because are transmitted from generation to generation in time between regions and cultures, time and space affect them as they are transmitted and it must be widespread in society to be passed down to the others (Yeniçeri, Korkmaz, and Kökdemir 2015, 1035).

Currently, the concept of imaginary is probably given more importance because we are witnessing a true culture of image /visual, which tends to replace the way we have communicated so far (Jacob 2009, 122). People are often influenced in decision-making by the imaginary that gives rise to symbols when they express desires, feelings, and representations. Depending on what awakens in the imagination of the individual, it can be exploited for commercial, political, ideological, or religious purposes. For the contemporary man, the imagination stimulates the thought, makes it advance the knowledge, and anticipates the creative acts that a society needs to ensure its future. The relationship between the imaginary and the human performance is fulfilled and offered only when the imaginary has become a reality: this is what happens with any scientific discovery.

3. Formation and decoding the imaginary

3.1. Lacan triad of symbolic, imaginary, and real

Lacan uses the Borromean knot to explain the structure of the symbolic, imaginary, and real triad. In the Lacanian model, the imaginary is defined as an independent element. He distinguished the symbolic from the imaginary and both from the real and believed that a full understanding of a personality required the consideration of all three (Lacan 2018, 247-255). These concepts represent the characteristics of early childhood and correlate with 3 main moments of individual development from a psychosexual point of view. Lacan's theory is presented using Freudian notions. He considers as real, stage 0 – 6 months, which he describes as a mixture of perceptions, feelings, and needs. For Lacan, the real is not reality, but the state in which there is nothing but need. The imaginary represents for him a stage of deep narcissism when the individual passes from the primary need to the stage in which he asks. It is also called the mirror stage-specific to the age of 6-18 months. The last component of the triad is the stage in which the individual acquires the language and enters the symbolic order. Lacan believes that between 18 months and 4 years this happens, although the symbolic register is prepared for the child from birth. The way we perceive reality depends absolutely on the relationships that these three registers have with each other; if the connection between any of the circles with the other two had been somehow broken, what we recognize as “reality” would bother us. Like the historian of the medieval imaginary, LeGoff, Lacan considered that the imaginary and the symbol intertwine, working in tension with the real. As a conclusion of the theory, Lacan considers that through the symbol the psyche becomes accessible.



*Figure 1. Triad of psyche development
Source: Lacan (2018)*

The imaginary can only be understood by decoding its productions, the symbols, which are reproduced by plastic means. The absent object is

re-presented to consciousness by an image or an ideogram. Any authentic symbol appeals to a concrete language, uses elements from the visible world, and has as basis in the memories, the gestures of the individuals.

3.2. Mechanism of imaginary

Only in the western civilizations, there was an attempt to distinguish the imaginary from the real, this artificial construction is not found in the oriental cultures, where the imaginary and the real are often confused. In archaic cultures, we do not find this limitation of the imaginary in the life of the rational.

In the creation of images, objects, and phenomena previously not perceived, the system consisting of symbols, real and imaginary is influenced by a variety of stimuli: exciting external, internal sensations (thirst, hunger), pathological aspects, and information is forgotten or ignored during the day. They act at the level of the two forms of the involuntary imagination (the dream during sleep – reverie), and the voluntary one (reproductive, – creative – the dream of perspective).

The sensory knowledge of the real world, the reflection of the object in its entirety, is made by the human by establishing informational relations with objects and phenomena that take place around him in the space that surrounds him and during the time he lives (Jung 1970, 78).

Perceptual space, characterized by three-dimensionality, is the space that we can see and, to a lesser extent, to feel in a tactile way with our bodies. The conceptual, continuous, and abstract space is defined primarily with the help of mathematics and physics, it helps us to explain perceptual locations and physical relationships. The notion of affective space describes the changing psychological landscapes we create around us, each pain that is characterized by its own texture and quality of thoughts / feelings / perceptions. Welwood (1977, 115-116) believes that projection is not the externalization of an unconscious internal content but rather the way in which we draw the atmosphere of the landscape we create around us and which makes us see things from his perspective.

We have direct or indirect contact with an object or event, we experience what attributes that object may have, what feelings it evokes in us and what actions we can take about it. Our response to these experiences does not generally stop with the cataloguing of these affective reactions and the perceived possibilities for action. Often the resulting beliefs that people form about whether the object has desired or unwanted attributes cause individuals to form a general tendency to evaluate, that is, an attitude toward that object (Marsh and Wallace 2005, 6).

3.3. Symbols – the key to understanding the imaginary

Symbols are words, gestures, pictures or objects that carry a particular meaning, which is only recognized by those who share the

culture (Hofstede 2010). Symbols have clearly defined roles in the daily lives of individuals. They make cultural, psycho-social and / or religious references helping to decipher ambiguous messages, although sometimes he is considered to be the interpreted message (Boretz, Sperber, și Morton 1977, 85). Many cultures share symbols. This may happen because one culture descended from another and kept the symbols of its parent culture as it developed. It may also be that one culture was influenced by another and adopted its symbols as its own. The horn, the horseshoe, the four-leaf clover, as universal symbols of luck and are found all over the world. Regardless of the region of the country, the cultural space, these ambivalent symbols have the power of a talisman (Răchișan Delia 2018, 100). At the same time, they arouse feelings and emotions in the groups or communities that promote and decode it. But if the symbol loses its meanings, with which it was endowed, it becomes an allegory or worse, a simple sign to which the individual no longer identifies. Practically, the symbol loses its spiritual value by secularizing itself. The symbol is present in all aspects of human life (Jung 1970, 77), is a precise and crystallized means of expression (Drăgan 2009, 17), is a dynamic reality impregnated with emotional and conceptual values (Jacob 2009, 121 -122). Symbols have been inherited from distant times and have helped humanity maintain its spiritual continuity (Eliade 1994, 35).

Human culture is expressed through symbols, which in turn are expressions of the imaginary. Through symbols inherited from distant times, humanity has preserved its spiritual unity and continuity. From the multitude of purely conventional and arbitrary signs, accepted especially for practical reasons, the great and true culture always tends to return to the multipurpose symbol, full of content and endowed with great suggestive force, which response to the affective needs of people (Boia 2000, 24-26).

The West accepts the symbols only in their desacralized form, which means that they have only a purely conventional role in a form adapted to each subject individually. Symbols are neither fixed nor innate but are rather created and recreated through the actions and meanings of people. Symbol production is an effect of certain features of the stimulus. Symbols cannot be reduced to perceptions, they are important for those who interpret them, usually, people formed and located in the same community or similar communities produce similar representations and images. The reversible evolution of the symbol is given by the dynamics and the multiple meanings impregnated with emotional and conceptual values (Drăgan 2009,19; Cirlot, Sage, and Read 1993, XXIX-XXXII).

To be able to decode the meaning of the symbols expressed by individuals, we must consider their perceptions. This is almost impossible to do because the perception is closely related to the individual's experience of his state of mind, his activity, and the environment in which he lives.

The value of symbols can in some cases exceed a simple informative and useful quality; it can pass into the field of affective when someone vibrates emotionally when in contact with the representation of a certain symbol. The symbol is a source of feelings and emotions, but only for those people, groups, or collectives who promote and decode it. Old symbols do not disappear but become secular. It becomes weak, it becomes an allegory, or even a simple sign or a lifeless image, a supranationalized concept. The authors who studied the symbols pointed out that each symbol has a life cycle that can be resume from the state of simple sign to one which receives supplementary attributes that exceed its real value. (J. Chevalier și Gheerbrant 1969, 395- 398; Eliade 1994, 34; Jung 1970, 77) distinguish live symbols and missing symbols. The living symbols are the ones that keep their original meanings and that can incorporate new meanings, being potentiated by the culture from which they come. The missing ones no longer have an echo either in individual or collective consciousness. They belong only to history, literature, or philosophy. Any symbol temporarily loses its creative unity if it is reduced to a single meaning.

Symbols cannot be reduced to perceptions, they are important for those who interpret them, usually, people formed and located in the same community or similar communities produce similar representations for images, and lifespan differs for a sign that is a simple convention (Jacob 2009, 122).

4. Our model

The vast number of theories about imaginary indicates that there is no coherent way to frame it. It is impossible to make an unambiguous statement about imaginary because numerous variables play a role.

Based on the existing paradigms, we have decided to develop a conceptual model that explains the existence and development of individual imaginary. In the model we have built, we were interested in the way the imaginary is formed, at individual level, and the steps it takes to transform individual imaginary into a collective imaginary. Unlike the Lacanian model that studies the activity of the psyche and explains things through the prism of sexuality, we are interested in understanding why and how the imaginary is formed, and how it can be decoded? In our efforts to understand the imaginary, we have noticed that people use symbols to express in a tangible form a multitude of aspects of human experience on a psycho-social, cultural, and religious level. Mythical tradition and practices, rituals of a group or community create moods and motivations, ways to organize experience and assess reality, ways of regulation, behaviours and ways to form social bonds, which provide resources for building action strategies (Swidler 1986, 273).

The way of representing the world takes two forms: the first in one is using the object – direct, and the other is indirect – an absent object is represented by the use of a symbolic image.

Language, culture, laws, traditions, rituals, and religion await us when we are born. From that moment, the stimuli coming from all these directions act on any individual. Each of us keeps in touch with reality initially through sensations. Sensations reflect different properties of things, acting individually. When they are processed, they turn into perceptions, which reflect the whole object (Cosmovici 2005, 95-98).

The imaginary is closer to the perceptions that affect us than to the abstract conceptions that inhabit the emotional, emotional sphere (Jacob, 2009, 122). Depending on the physical properties of the stimuli, the perceptions are translated into the psychic plane in the form of beliefs. They are basically past perceptions, updated and reused according to the needs of the present. Individual beliefs reinforced and shared by others are the collective imaginary.

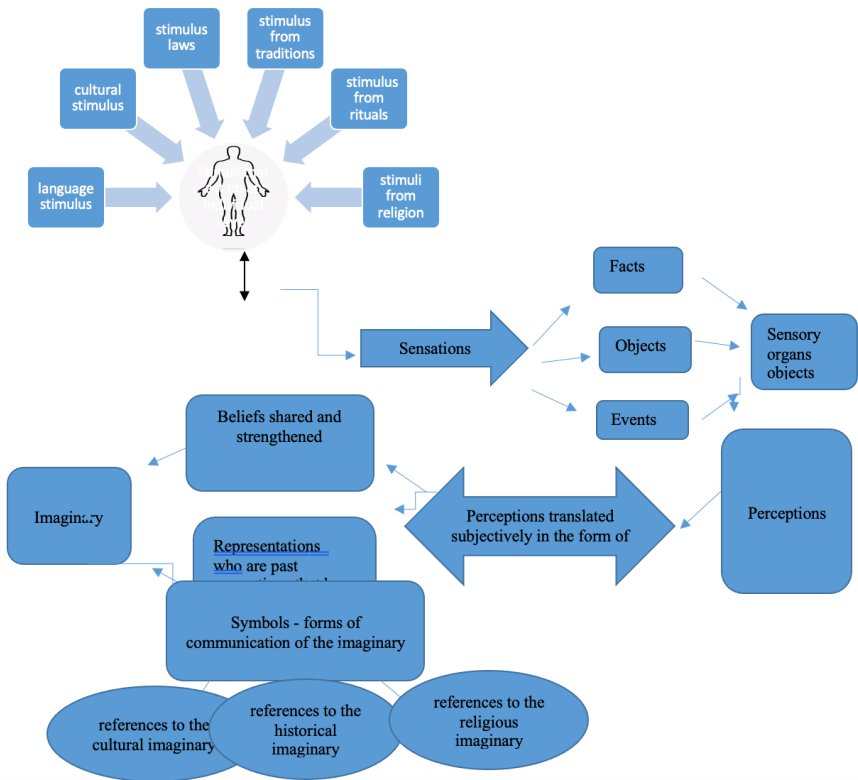


Figure 2. Imaginary formation and decoding
Source: Authors adaptation

In figure 2 we have outlined the steps leading to the formation and decoding of the imaginary.

First step – The sensations that act on an individual level creating an informational connection of man with the reality that surrounds him. Sensations mirror the different features of things. Individual and personal experiences mobilize the emotional and effective participation of the individual and even the masses. They are transmitted through behaviours, symbols, and images.

Step two – Perceptions that manage to subjectively reflect the whole object, also acting individually on the sense organs. After feeling the physical properties of stimuli, the individual translates them into the subjective psychic plane in the form of beliefs and representations. They exceed the limits imposed by the findings of experience.

Step Three – Individual beliefs will be shared and strengthened by others. Representations that are nothing but past perceptions, updated and reused according to the needs of the present. They reproduce things by plastic means.

Step four – Beliefs and representations are the imaginary. The imaginary even if it is initially formed at the level of the individual in time it becomes an inner world of the collective mind, formed according to its own laws, it is the visible result of psychic energy that has its structures both at the level of individuals and communities (Dubois 1992, 20-23). It can be accessed, understood if we can decipher its productions correctly: the symbols.

Step five – Decoding the symbols will be easy if the imaginary is adapted to the system of contemporary values. Symbols as representations of the imaginary constitute a substrate without which the activity of the psyche cannot be understood, the place where the imaginary forms (Wunenburger 2009, 89).

Eliade demonstrated that regardless of the origin of the symbols, what remains in time is the image because the symbols themselves are ephemeral forms of manifestation, they are concrete, and they are of an infinite variety. They are used to record reality and to share what only we have seen, felt.

5. Conclusions

In literature, there is a multitude of imaginary: political, historical, literary, religious, and many others. Almost every field gets its share of the imaginary – some using completely different terms, but talking about the same thing. There are no models that clearly explain how the imaginary is formed and how it can be applied or used.

The purpose of this study was to create a model of the imaginary. For this, we had to understand very well how it is perceived by most researchers who have studied the concept. Based on this conceptual

analysis, we propose a representation of the imaginary with the aim of better understanding this concept.

Having several definitions of the imaginary, we were able to identify the major features of this concept and based on them we built a model. Inspired by the Lacan model and knowing the role of sensations and perceptions at the individual and group level, we built a model through which we show the steps that a sensation makes until it becomes imaginary. We watched how the transition is made from perceptions to beliefs and, finally, to the configuration of the imaginary.

The symbols bring together in a concrete form different facets of human experience on a psychological, cultural, and religious level. The symbols incorporate a multitude of ideas and meanings that are different from one culture to another, and from one epoch to another. The value of symbols in many cases exceeds a simple informative and useful quality, passing into a plan in which personal meanings are attributed to them. The model we have built can be a starting point for future articles that will research the imaginary, or parts of it.

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