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## Géza Balázs: The Birth of Art and Language

Géza Balázs has put forward a serious volume. It is a profound and extensive work sprinkled with quotations and references, and yet it is as readable as a good novel. Only its heroes and events are different. Instead of dreamed-up characters, the greats of scholarship and cultural history figure in it, while excitement is supplied not by unexpected twists, but by sizzling intellectual revelations.

As the title indicates, the author has researched the origins of art and language, and his investigation is so far-reaching, it extends beyond linguistics and the arts to the realms of folklore, psychology and the entire history of culture. That in itself can be deemed arrestingly versatile. Indeed, it seeks to shed light on matters which, in terms of research, are shrouded in mystery; although, as we have long known, both art and language are conditions of becoming human. Nevertheless, the process began some 100,000 years ago, and only a few thousand years of it can be documented. The preceding millennia can only be examined indirectly (through folklore, children's language, depth psychology, primitive races, etc.).

It is no accident that the book considers art and language together. The latter is not simply a masterful system of signs and symbols, but a metaphysical development incorporating all of Humanity, just as art does. In fact, language itself is art – i.e., mimesis – as well as being a creative activity that brings joy. Currently, linguistic signs overwhelmingly count as symbols based on common consensus; whereas, originally, the majority were iconic or indexical signs based on similarities or correspondences – which can often be uncovered. This is also important, since, just like our common dreams, it incorporates Humanity's collective unconsciousness. It informs us of our past, of Mankind that was originally one with the world. Mankind did not think in concepts, but in signs that represented the surrounding reality, whereby the relationship between signifier and signified was still clear.

When and how did the change happen? How did concepts supersede pictorial signs? How did language in today's sense come to be? Here the author is not at pains to express anything new; instead, he summarises the foregoing research,

which has undergone many changes as development accelerated and 'advances' occurred. However, he does present an original hypothesis with regard to the inception of language and the arts. As he sees it, the two have a common source and developed simultaneously. To start with, in the ancient syncretic culture, language and music existed together. In fact, language was practically preceded by melodies based on natural models. This was the dynamic basis upon which expressions were built – at first, monosyllabic and indistinct; then, two-syllable and so on. Indeed, we can still feel the relationship between language and music quite well. Even the 'primeval language' can be approached from different angles. Myth researchers surmise it through mythology. Psychoanalysts following Jung use the collective unconsciousness as revealed in common dreams. Folklorists discern it through spells, working songs, lullabies, dance lyrics, dirges and so on. Today, we find a number of linguistic declarations that lead back to this. As stated in the work: 'Further instinctive declarations, which have received little attention, reveal elementary forms: slips of the tongue; passionate cries; vulgarity; muttering; sighs; prayers; speech during sex, birth or other euphoric states (drug- or alcohol-induced); aphasia and deteriorating speech as the result of senility. These instincts can be easily perceived in rhythmic counting and doodling' (Balázs 2021, 28). The common origin of art and language may also be traced back to certain natural, basic shapes – for example, the circle and the ball, symmetry, or the relationship between signifier and signified.

Géza Balázs expounds upon his message with disarming thoroughness. His conclusions are always to-the-point; and, besides supporting his thesis, they are remarkably interesting on their own. There is no end to the pithy and exciting elaboration. Could there be a more insightful illumination of Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's theory of flow state? 'Often times we just happen to be talking to someone (or some people), and time flies or slips away... the point of flow state is transcending time and space... Therefore, encoded in language is the experience of joy – just as it is, for example, in sexuality and every sort of creative human activity' (Balázs 2021, 84). And could there be a more convincing argument that 'art and language are the basis of our human existence' than one of neurobiologist Tamás Freund's statements? 'Besides physical exercise, people need daily catharsis as well. Artistic exercise provides that, and it is most effective when a person participates in its creation... With a rich inner world, one's scientific or scholarly work is much more effective... I am certain that what I was able to produce from my mind's creative sphere, I produced thanks to music' (Balázs 2021, 167).

I believe *The Birth of Art and Language* represents an original and important work for many branches of scholarship. It connects several disciplines and considers all human history while being cogent and comprehensible. I hereby highlight three of its pioneering features.

The first has to do with method. The author does not approach the theme with worn clichés. He does not think in terms of either/or, promulgated throughout Western scholarship. Instead, whenever possible, he keeps in mind the both/and tradition, rooted in Eastern thought. That is, he does not always unconditionally accept the basic logic principle of the excluded middle – i.e., given two contradictory propositions, one must be true. This approach is both conscious (indicated by the fact that the author devotes a separate chapter to the topic) and especially productive. Otherwise, we could hardly embark on the journey that the book invites us to join. This makes the book no less scholarly, however. In fact, it allows for a truly credible discussion of the theme.

The second important innovation is how he roots his concept in Hungarian tradition. It is related to thinkers whom, in the glory days of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism, Hungarian scholarship was prone to forget, even though they left behind life-works of European standard. Above all, we must highlight here Béla Hamvas, Nándor Várkonyi, Tivadar Thass-Thienemann and Sándor Karácsony, who were original thinkers that paid attention to the total man. They observed the tiniest of details, but never lost sight of the big picture, of Mankind's purpose. Besides them, he cites the work of a number of other scholars from Sándor N. Szilágyi and Vilmos Tánzos to Vilmos Voigt – just to mention a few Hungarian thinkers, although the author has a thorough knowledge of the international literature as well.

Thirdly, we should note that, following in the footsteps of Sándor Karácsony and Béla Hamva, Géza Balázs also observes the total man. Although not explicitly, he seeks answers to the large questions: Who are we? Where did we come from? Where are we headed? From this perspective, the book is unsettling to read. It appears that not only art testifies to modern Mankind's growing alienation. It is also conveyed by the use of language, which is increasingly divorced from tradition and which 'distorts nature, manifesting Mankind's (linguistic) worldview of the world, society and identity' (Balázs 2021, 284).

Balázs Géza. 2021. *A művészet és a nyelv születése. Szemiotika, művészetelmélet, antropológiai nyelvészet*. Budapest: MNYKNT–IKU.