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A World of Signs: Baroque Pansemioticism, the *Polyhistor* and the Early Modern *Wunderkammer*

Jan C. Westerhoff

This paper is an attempt to argue that there existed a very prominent view of signs and signification in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe which can help us to understand several puzzling aspects of baroque culture. This view, called here “pansemioticism,” constituted a fundamental part of the baroque conception of the world. After sketching the content and importance of pansemioticism, I will show how it can help us to understand the (from a modern perspective) rather puzzling concept of the polymath, or *polyhistor*, which constituted the ideal of the baroque scientist. In this context I will also discuss a seventeenth century phenomenon essentially connected with polyhistorism, namely that of the early modern polyhistorical collections, the *Wunderkammern*. Since such a study needs a clearly determined focal point, we will concentrate on the last three quarters of the seventeenth century and will mainly discuss works by German authors of the time.¹

The Pansemiotic World View

The particular view of signs and significations mentioned above is sometimes called “emblematic world view”² or “*emblematischer Weltentwurf*.”³ This is the idea that every object, whether natural or artificial signifies one or several other objects (which can in turn be abstract qualities, virtues or vices, or par-

¹ See William Ashworth, “Natural History and the Emblematic World View,” *Reappraisals of Scientific Revolutions*, ed. David Lindberg and Robert Westman (Cambridge, 1993), 303-32; 317-18.

² Ashworth, “Natural History,” 305, 312-13; and see also Giuseppe Olmi, *L’inventario del Mondo. Catalogazione della natura e luoghi del sapere nella prima età moderna* (Bologna, 1992), 157-58.

³ Albrecht Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama im Zeitalter des Barock* (Munich, 1964), 48.

ticular states of affairs or events).⁴ Although the notion of an emblem is intimately connected with such a conception of signs, as we shall see below, its existence is in no way necessary for the formulation of such a theory. I therefore prefer to borrow a term of Eco's and call the above baroque "pansemioticism"⁵ in order to indicate that the use of emblems is no cause, but rather an effect of a fundamental semiotic theory.⁶

This notion of pansemioticism seems to be a central idea which allows one to make sense of a number of baroque phenomena. Indeed, its importance for understanding baroque culture can hardly be overestimated.⁷ Some evidence for this pansemiotic world view can be gained from the baroque fascination with things as diverse as hieroglyphics, antique coins, or epigrams. Hieroglyphics promised to reveal the most ancient wisdom of Egypt,⁸ gave an example of a marvelous language which was believed to convey mystical knowledge in symbolic, iconographical form⁹ and, most importantly, described the meaning behind natural objects.

The meaning of the hieroglyphic sign for a certain animal given by Horapollon was considered as the hidden meaning of the animal itself, "Animals were the living characters in the language of the creator..."¹⁰ This view of hieroglyphics was not restricted to animals, but was assumed to hold in general.¹¹ Francis Quarles stated in his emblem book *Hieroglyphikes of the Life of Man* (1638) that, "before the knowledge of letters, GOD was known by Hieroglyphicks;

⁴ Cf. Ashworth, "Natural History," 312 "[E]very kind of thing in the cosmos has myriad hidden meanings..."; Schöne, *Emblematik*, 45. "Everything ... existing ... signifies as a res significans something beyond itself." Cf. Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris, 1966), 32-40.

⁵ Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language* (Oxford, 1995), 25, applying this term to Kabbalism. See also Jan Westerhoff, *Poesis Combinatoria. Relations between the Project of the Characteristica Universalis and German Baroque Poetry*. Beiträge zur Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft, 8 (1998), 209-44, 217-18, 232-33.

⁶ Alanus ab Insulis' "Omnis mundi creatura/ quasi liber et pictura/ nobis est et speculum" seems already to contain the conceptual core of the whole issue. See Schöne, *Emblematik*, 45-50, and the criticism in Dieter Sulzer, "Poetik synthetisierender Künste und Interpretation der Emblematik," Herbert Anton Bernhard Gajek and Peter Pfaff (eds.), *Geist und Zeichen. Festschrift für Arthur Henkel* (Heidelberg, 1977), 401-26; Ashworth "Natural History," 312-13; *Außerliterarische Wirkungen barocker Emblembücher. Emblematik in Ludwigsburg, Gaarz und Pommersfelden*, ed. Wolfgang Harms and Hartmut Freytag (Munich, 1975), 10; Peter Daly, *Literature in the Light of the Emblem: Structural Parallels between the Emblem and Literature in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Buffalo, 1979), 32-35, 42-43, 83.

⁷ Cf. Ashworth, "Natural History," 305, 313; Muriel Bradbrook quoted in Daly, *Literature*, 185: "observes that today 'we accept the pansy on its own merits,' but for people of the baroque age to do so was 'almost unthinkable.'"

⁸ Eco, *Perfect Language*, 145.

⁹ Ashworth, "Natural History," 307; Eco, *Perfect Language*, 154-55.

¹⁰ Ashworth, "Natural History," 308.

¹¹ Cf. Gustav René Hocke, *Manierismus in der Literatur. Sprach-Alchimie und esoterische Kombinationskunst*. Rowohlt (Hamburg, 1959), 176-77.

And, indeed, what are the Heavens, the Earth, nay every creature but Hieroglyphicks and Emblemes of His glory?"¹²

Antique coins usually showed a portrait on one side and an image with a symbolic meaning on the reverse. Renaissance and baroque medals were constructed as imitations of such coins.¹³ Medals were particularly attractive for the seventeenth-century mind because they fulfilled a double function. On the one hand they provided authentic information about ancient symbolism at a time where ancient civilizations were still considered to be in the possession of particularly valuable insights into the hidden significations of things, which were later lost or destroyed.¹⁴ On the other hand the construction of the medal allowed to show how every thing literally had two sides,¹⁵ one open and manifest (the recto side with the portrait), and one concealed and unseen side (the verso side with the symbolic image) which only made sense to those who knew how to interpret the hidden significations of phenomena.¹⁶

The Renaissance and baroque conception of the epigram, heavily influenced by Erasmus's *Adages*,¹⁷ which in turn relied on the *Anthologia Graeca*,¹⁸ demanded two key properties that an epigram had to possess: *argutia* and *brevitas*. The first required that the epigram should express an ingenious idea or thought,¹⁹ which was often constituted by the interpretation of the hidden meaning of some natural phenomena. The *brevitas* of the epigram made it possible for the author to concentrate on just one symbolic aspect of the phenomenon discussed. The shortness allowed the hidden signification to have maximal impact on the hearer or reader. The connections of epigrams both with proverbs (as exemplified in Erasmus's collection)²⁰ and with the rhetorical traditions of antiquity are hard to overlook.²¹ Furthermore, the shortness of the epigram rendered it fit for employment in all kinds of artistic and decorative contexts. A short, ingenious message

¹² Cited in Karl-Josef Höltingen, "Francis Quarles's Second Emblem Book Hieroglyphikes of the Life of Man," Karl-Josef Höltingen, Peter Daly, and Wolfgang Lottes (eds.), *Word and Visual Imagination: Studies in the Interaction of English Literature and the Visual Arts* (Erlangen, 1988), 183-207. See also Hocke, *Manierismus*, 177; *Die Welt als Labyrinth. Manier und Manie in der europäischen Kunst. Beiträge zur Ikonographie und Formgeschichte der europäischen Kunst von 1520 bis 1650 und der Gegenwart* (Hamburg, 1957), 40-41.

¹³ See Daly, *Literature*, 25-27.

¹⁴ Peter Vodosek, *Das Emblem in der deutschen Literatur der Renaissance und des Barock* (*Jahrbuch des Wiener Goethe-Vereins*, 1964), 68, 5-40; 1964: 16; Schöne, *Emblematik*, 35.

¹⁵ Daly, *Literature*, 81.

¹⁶ See Leon Battista Alberti's medal, reproduced in Daly, *Literature*, 26; also Ashworth, "Natural History," III, 308, 311; Vodosek, *Emblem*, 17-18.

¹⁷ Ashworth, "Natural History," 310. for a translation see Margaret Mann Philips, *The "Adages" of Erasmus. A Study with Translation* (Cambridge, 1964).

¹⁸ Vodosek, *Emblem*, 12-13; Daly, *Literature*, 9.

¹⁹ Cf. Jutta Weisz, *Das deutsche Epigramm des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 1979), 31.

²⁰ Ashworth, "Natural History," 310; Weisz, *Epigramm*, 94.

²¹ See Weisz, *Epigramm*, 29, 142-46.

could be easily added to all kinds of representations, thus increasing the intellectual sophistication of the whole work.

In fact we see that all of the above three phenomena, which are connected in a particular way with the pansemiotic world-view can be taken to be unified in the emblem,²² the (perhaps hieroglyphic) picture would provide the *pictura*,²³ the adage and epigram the *inscriptio* and *subscriptio*,²⁴ and the form of the medal corresponds to the (frequently round) boundaries of the emblem which gave it a compact form that allowed its use in all sorts of contexts: in emblem books, as a decorative element, an *impresa*, a mural, etc.²⁵ The fact that all of the above specimens of the pansemiotic world view are contained in the emblem gives it a particular importance for the study of this conception of signs and significations and, given the significance of this view, for the study of the intellectual background of the whole of baroque culture.²⁶

First of all, emblems were everywhere:

[T]hey are found in stained-glass windows, jewelry, tapestry, needlework, painting and architecture. Veritable emblem programmes may be found adorning the walls of private residences and ecclesiastical buildings. Emblems were used in theatrical properties in dramas and street processions. Poets and preachers, writers and dramatists frequently employed emblems....²⁷

Georg Philipp Harsdörffer's collection of one hundred emblems states that they can be used "on flags, medals, family albums, tapestries, cups, glasses, bottles, bowls, plates, in tragic and in humorous poetry, and for other decorations, ad libitum."²⁸ "There are mystical and edifying emblems on the balustrade of a choir of a palace church..., on the bookplates of noblemen, cut into goblets..., on fayences used in private or in public functions,... in the decorative panelling of a university room."²⁹

²² Ashworth, "Natural History," 311.

²³ See Schöne *Emblematik*, 34-42.

²⁴ See Weisz, *Epigramm*, 93-95.

²⁵ Cf. Schöne, *Emblematik*, 37; and see Cornelia Kemp, *Angewandte Emblematik in süddeutschen Barockkirchen* (Munich, 1981), 22-52; Schöne, *Emblematik*, 18-26.

²⁶ Peter Daly, "The Emblematic Tradition and Baroque Poetry," Gerhart Hoffmeister (ed.), *German Baroque Literature* (New York, 1983), 53.

²⁷ Daly, "Emblematic Tradition," 53; and see Kemp, *Angewandte Emblematik*.

²⁸ Included as an appendix in Georg Philipp Harsdörffer, *Der Grosse Schauplatz jämmerlicher Mordgeschichten ...* (Hamburg 1656; repr., Hildesheim, 1975), 2; also §§ 3, 24, 25, 42, and 50.

²⁹ Harms and Freytag, *Außerliterarische Wirkungen*, 8; and see Kemp, *Angewandte Emblematik*, 13-21; Schöne, *Emblematik*, 57-63.

Men and women of the baroque age were surrounded by emblems. What was the reason for this practice of imprinting emblems on nearly every kind of object, big or small, private or public, cheap or expensive? The reason should be sought in the baroque view of signs and significations. It seems convincing that a culture which assumed that every object also signified something else considered it as natural to display this belief in its everyday surroundings. Emblems would perform a moral role by reminding people of virtues and vices, but many were just intended to give intellectual delight to those who could figure out the “meaning” of a particular emblem.³⁰ If emblems are to be understood as indicators of the pansemiotic world view, they have to fulfil at least two conditions, that of universality and that of objectivity. If every object has some signification, the material for the construction of emblems should be fairly comprehensive, it must not be some confined canon of things which have a signification, while all other objects fail to do so. Furthermore, this universality of scope should be accompanied by a universality of understanding. The understanding of emblems should not be a phenomenon restricted to the educated classes, but should be fairly widespread. Secondly, the signification of an object must be seen as being relatively independent of the person conceiving it. If an emblem is just considered as a formulation of the author’s intention that the object depicted should signify something beyond itself, then emblems can hardly be evidence of the ontological commitments of the pansemiotic world view.

Daly states that, “the truth is that in the seventeenth century any object or motif could be used emblematically”³¹ and quotes Harsdörffer in support: “Everything visible is represented by painting, the invisible, however, can be comprehended through emblematics, or through the *subscriptio*.”³² Of course this does not prove the point since it only shows that Harsdörffer thought that every abstract quality could be depicted emblematically. Daly, however, wants to show that every concrete object could be used in an emblem to depict something else. Support for this can be gained from the following passage, “Those who treat emblematics in an exact way will not allow anything into emblematics which is not either found in nature or in art, which is its successor.”³³

This “restriction” seems to be sufficiently broad to allow all objects to figure in emblems, all natural objects,³⁴ and amongst them animals and humans,³⁵

³⁰ See Kemp, *Angewandte Emblematik*, 22, n. 4, Herbert Cysarz, “Vom Geist des deutschen Literatur-Barocks,” Richard Alewyn (ed.), *Deutsche Barockforschung: Dokumentation einer Epoche* (Cologne, 1965), 24-25.

³¹ Daly, *Literature*, 71.

³² Georg Philipp Harsdörffer, *Frauenzimmer Gesprächsspiele* (8 vols.; Nuremberg, 1641-49; repr. Tübingen, 1968), IV, 169, cf. also 176.

³³ Harsdörffer, *Frauenzimmer Gesprächsspiele*, I, 66. See also Schöne, *Emblematik*, 28-29.

³⁴ Harsdörffer, *Schauplatz*, Appendix § 16.

³⁵ See Harsdörffer, *Schauplatz*, Appendix § 14; Kemp, *Angewandte Emblematik*, 23-25.

as well as all artificial objects,³⁶ and scenes from history and mythology³⁷ (to the extent to which they can be depicted in works of art themselves). This conforms to Balbinus's statement that "nulla res est sub sole, quae materiam Emblematis dare non possit."³⁸ Although there is some difference on the fine details,³⁹ the universality of scope of the objects used in emblems seems to have been generally accepted.⁴⁰ Kemp comes to the conclusion that, "everything can function as an emblem as long as its meaning can be understood and it is in accordance with the nature of things."⁴¹ The full complexity of emblematic culture could only be grasped by educated people. Only they possessed sufficient knowledge of history, mythology, and natural science to understand the significance of most of the emblems. Emblems could only be comprehended by having a considerable amount of background knowledge relating to the objects depicted in the emblem. Harsdörffer makes this clear in his discussion of emblems by claiming "that one cannot evaluate any emblem, unless one has studied in detail the nature and properties of the objects shown. Since these are often hidden and cannot be depicted, the meaning of the emblem is then often obscure and difficult to grasp."⁴²

However, this does not imply that the use of emblems was confined only to a tiny minority. This is due to the saturation of nearly all aspects of seventeenth-century life with emblems. People simply could not avoid encountering them, they were present in churches, public buildings, books, plates, glasses, jewelry, and so forth. Furthermore,

the illiterate were also made aware of emblems by the preacher in his sermons; they saw and heard emblems on the stage and in pageants and processions; they were surrounded by emblematic motifs in the visual arts: in church-windows, coats-of-arms, paintings and decorations.⁴³... The emblem informed and helped shape virtually every form of verbal and visual communication during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁴⁴... the emblem taught people how to live in the widest sense, and also how to die.⁴⁵

³⁶ Harsdörffer, *Schauplatz*, Appendix § 17.

³⁷ But see Harsdörffer, *Schauplatz*, Appendix § 11; also Schöne, *Emblematik*, 29-30.

³⁸ Bohuslaus Balbinus, *Verisimilia humaniorum disciplinarum seu iudicium privatum de omni literarum (quas humaniores appellant) artificio ...* (Augsburg, 1710), 234.

³⁹ See Kemp, *Angewandte Emblematik*, 22-27.

⁴⁰ Justus Georg Schottel, *Ausführliche Arbeit von der teutschen HauptSprache* (Zilliger, 1663; repr. Tübingen, 1967), 1106.

⁴¹ Kemp, *Angewandte Emblematik*, 26; and see Weisz, *Epigramm*, 34, quoting Cottunius "Materia autem epigrammatis..., unico verbos; sunt res omnes."

⁴² Harsdörffer, *Frauenzimmer Gesprächsspiele*, 244.

⁴³ Daly, *Literature*, 186.

⁴⁴ Daly, "Emblematic Tradition," 53.

⁴⁵ Daly, "Emblematic Tradition," 60.

Finally, the hidden signification of things, which is brought to light by the use of emblems was not regarded as subjective. The author of an emblem is no designer of the object's symbolization, but its discoverer: "Since the *res picta* appears meaningful and symbolic to the emblemist, the meaning is clearly not invented in relation to the picture, but discovered in it (as something which is already present). One of the preconditions of emblematics is that all phenomena are taken to be filled with secret correspondences and hidden significations."⁴⁶ Pansemioticism and a subjectivist view of the "significations" of phenomena are inconsistent. According to Jöns, "The emblematic quality of an object is not to be understood as a subjective decision on the part of its designer, but rests on the fact that the object 'depicts' something which transcends the physical and factual dimension of its existence."⁴⁷ The construction of a particular emblem is still the product of the *ingenium* of its author, and can thus be more or less sophisticated. The meaning depicted in the emblem, however, is objective. It is no internal relationship of the object and its intended signification in the mind of the author, but an external relationship, between the object and the thing it symbolizes.⁴⁸

The widespread use of emblems thus appears to be strong evidence for the presence of the pansemiotic world view in the seventeenth century. The fact that every object was considered as being surrounded by a number of hidden meanings and significations provided the necessary ontological and semiotic background for the employment of all kinds of phenomena in emblems. "All that exists in *historia naturalis vel artificialis*, and which the enormous encyclopedia of images the emblem-books are constituting contains is mirrored in the *res pictae*, and thus, as a *res significans*, signifies something beyond itself."⁴⁹ Each object does not just exist in itself but has a hidden reverse, just like a baroque medal, which contains reference to phenomena invisible to the casual observer. "The emblem satisfies the desire for taking everything as having two or more meanings, it contains the desire to puzzle out a sense beyond and within the visible reality, to find an 'and that signifies,' the desire to conceive of every thing not in its everyday, but in its metaphorical meaning, to take it as the bearer and messenger of secrets, as a container of sense and spirit, as a visible riddle."⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Schöne, *Emblematik*, 41.

⁴⁷ Dietrich Jöns, *Das "Sinnen-Bild." Studien zur allegorischen Bildlichkeit bei Andreas Gryphius* (Stuttgart, 1966), 79.

⁴⁸ Daly, *Literature*, 86; Arthur Henkel and Albrecht Schöne, *Emblemata. Handbuch zur Sinnbildkunst des XVI. und XVII. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 1967), 16.

⁴⁹ Schöne, *Emblematik*, 48.

⁵⁰ Gerhard Fricke, *Die Bildlichkeit in der Dichtung des A. Gryphius* (Darmstadt, 1967), 29.

The *Polyhistor*

What light does the notion of the pansemiotic world view throw on the “typical” seventeenth-century phenomena of the *polyhistor* and the polyhistorical collection? The history of polyhistorism or polymathy is a subject on which little work has been done up to now.⁵¹ The following observations are not intended to apply to the polyhistorical traditions of antiquity, the Middle Ages⁵² or the early enlightenment⁵³ but only to the baroque polyhistorism of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. There seem to be good reasons to regard this as the most characteristic form of polyhistorism. According to Jaumann,

... If one does not confine oneself to the horizon of early modern intellectual history, one realizes that the tradition of polymathy does not refer to some universal knowledge as an all-encompassing system regarding which there would be no outside. Only early modern polymathy at least claims to go into this direction. This is the main difference between it and the classical tradition of polymathy....⁵⁴

The two most important characteristics of baroque polyhistorism were the desires for encyclopedism and universalism. Encyclopedism is to be understood as the desire to include every discipline, science as well as arts,⁵⁵ in the scope of polyhistoric knowledge,⁵⁶ universalism as the desire to penetrate every science which is in the scope of the *polyhistor* down to the most minute details.⁵⁷ It will appear strange to the modern mind, brought up in the present highly specialized scientific culture, that this hubristic conception of the *polyhistor*, which seems to be as mind-boggling as obviously unattainable, once formed the ideal of a scientist.⁵⁸ It seems to be evident that such demands could only lead either to total failure or to extremely superficial results. Indeed, the thinkers of the early

⁵¹ See Herbert Jaumann, “Was ist ein Polyhistor? Gehversuche auf einem verlassenen Terrain,” *Studia Leibnitiana*, 22 (1990), 76-89; also Anthony Grafton, “The World of the Polyhistor: Humanism and Encyclopedism,” *Central European History*, 18 (1985), 31-47; Christoph Daxelmüller, *Disputationes Curiosae. Zum “volkskundlichen” Polyhistorismus an den Universitäten des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts* (Würzburg, 1979), and Conrad Wiedemann “Polyhistorien Glück und Ende. Von Daniel Georg Morhof zum jungen Lessing,” Heinz Otto Burger and Klaus von See (eds.), *Festschrift Gottfried Weber zu seinem 70. Geburtstag überreicht von Frankfurter Kollegen und Schülern* (Berlin, 1967), 215-35.

⁵² Jaumann, “Polyhistor,” 77-82.

⁵³ Wiedemann, “Polyhistorien Glück,” 217.

⁵⁴ Jaumann, “Polyhistor,” 83. See also Wiedemann, “Polyhistorien Glück,” 232: “Polyhistorism reached its climax [...] during the period between 1690 and 1720.”

⁵⁵ Grafton, “Polyhistorien,” 41.

⁵⁶ Grafton, “Polyhistorien,” 37-42.

⁵⁷ See Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, *Topica Universalis. Eine Modellgeschichte humanistischer und barocker Wissenschaft* (Hamburg, 1983) for a detailed survey.

⁵⁸ Cf. Grafton, “Polyhistorien,” 37, 39, 41; Daxelmüller, *Disputationes*, 50.

enlightenment were only too quick to ridicule the ideal of the *polyhistor*. Zedler's *Universal-Lexicon* has this to say under the entry "Polyhistorie": "Polymathy is something one should not occupy oneself with. Therefore one will realize that the greatest polymaths did not do such a great service to the world, simply because they are polymaths *and therefore occupied themselves with trifles.*"⁵⁹ Diderot's *Encyclopédie* judges in a similar vein: "Polymathy is often nothing but a confused mass of useless knowledge which one lets out ready-witted and out of place to put on a show."⁶⁰

Something must have happened in the meantime which caused this remarkable change of intellectual ideals, since not the polymath but the specialist became the model of the scientist in the middle of the eighteenth century. It appears that the notion of the pansemiotic world view helps in explaining both the popularity of the ideal of the *polyhistor* as well as its decline. The assumption that natural phenomena do not lead an isolated existence but are connected with one another in a complex web of significations implies the rejection of specialist investigations in favor of generalist, polyhistorical inquiries. This is because the notion of pansemioticism implies that it is not possible to recognize the full complexity of a phenomenon by just studying that phenomenon in isolation from everything else. It is necessary to know what else this phenomenon signifies: its place in mythology, art and poetry, its moral signification, its astronomical, mystical, numerological, linguistic, and religious meaning, etc. "To know the peacock,... one must know not only what the peacock looks like, but what its name means, in every language; what kind of proverbial associations it has; what it symbolizes to both pagans and Christians; what other animals it has sympathies or affinities with; and any other possible connection it might have with stars, plants, minerals, numbers, coins or whatever."⁶¹ Clearly that can best be achieved by a scholar who knows all these different disciplines and can connect them in his research of a particular topic. What appears to today as the *scientia supervacua* and pointless erudition of the *polyhistor*, consisting of dozens of (from a modern perspective) unconnected disciplines, presented itself to the baroque mind as the crowning achievement of scientific investigation. Compared to this, the specialist's inquiries would have seemed to be hopelessly incomplete.

⁵⁹ Johann Heinrich Zedler, *Großes vollständiges Universal-Lexicon Aller Wissenschaften und Künste....* (Halle, 1741), 28, column 1319. For discussion of similar criticism see Daniel Georg Morhof, *Polyhistor, Literarius, Philosophicus et Practicus ... Editio Quarta.... Petrus Boeckmann* (Lübeck, 1747), Tom. I, Lib. I, Cap. I, §§11-13; Wiedemann, "Polyhistor's Glück"; Daxelmüller, *Disputationes Curiosae*, 64-68; Grafton, "Polyhistor," 31-33. Italics mine.

⁶⁰ Denis Diderot, *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers....* Soc. Typ., Lausanne, Berne 1718: 12: 944-945. Cf. Morhof, *Polyhistor*, Tom. I, Lib. I, Cap. I, §11 "Una disciplina, cui prater ceteris immoremur, seligenda est." Also Daxelmüller, *Disputationes*, 66.

⁶¹ William Ashworth, "Remarkable Humans and Singular Beasts." Joy Kenseth (ed.), *The Age of the Marvelous* (Hanover, N.H., 1991), 113-43. Ashworth, "Natural History," 312; see also Foucault, *Mots*, 54-55.

Nevertheless, the notion of pansemioticism disappeared at the beginning of the early enlightenment, and this implied the decline of the ideal of the *polyhistor*. “[T]he baroque resigns, and with it its stilistic extasies, its universalistic experiments, its habit to think in analogies, its figurative world view, and a new *homo literatus* enters the scene, who prides himself on his *bona mens*, his *ingenium* and his *judicium*...”⁶² As it no longer appeared evident that things signified phenomena outside themselves, as it was questioned whether all the facts which were interpreted symbolically (that the peacock is ashamed of its feet, that the crocodile weeps whilst devouring its victims, that the lion sleeps with its eyes open, etc.)⁶³ were in fact true, the demand for the comprehensive view of a *polyhistor* disappeared. On the contrary, people started to stress the uselessness of polyhistoric knowledge, which did not allow the focusing of one’s intellectual concentration on individual phenomena. In fact this criticism was justified but only under the assumption that there are such things as “individual phenomena,” which exist without connections with other objects, an assumption which evidently the baroque pansemioticism did not share. The ideal of the *polyhistor* is finally overcome when he appears as the object of ridicule on the stage and in literature, most prominently in Lessing’s comedy *Der junge Gelehrte* and Schlegel’s fable *Der Polyhistor und der Tod*.⁶⁴

The Baroque *Wunderkammer*

Besides these more general remarks on the relation between polyhistorism and pansemioticism, there exist also a number of more special topics connected with polyhistorism on which the notion of pansemioticism can shed some light. We will begin here by considering the museum collections of the *polyhistor*s or *Wunderkammern*, in particular the museum-theorist Samuel Quicchelberg and the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, “one of the most universal minds of the seventeenth century,”⁶⁵ who assembled a collection later to become famous as the *Museum Kircherianum*, one of the great and famous *Wunderkammern* of the seventeenth century,⁶⁶ sometimes even described as Kircher’s “greatest accomplishment.”⁶⁷

⁶² Wiedemann, “Polyhistor’s Glück,” 225.

⁶³ Ashworth, “Natural History,” 319-20.

⁶⁴ See Wiedemann, “Polyhistor’s Glück,” 215-18.

⁶⁵ Daly, *Literature*, 20.

⁶⁶ See Silvio Bedini, “Citadels of Learning. The Museo Kircheriano and other Seventeenth Century Science Collections,” Maristella Casciato, Grazia Maria Ianello, and Maria Vitale (eds.), *Enciclopedismo in Roma barocca. Athanasius Kircher e il Museo del Collegio Romano tra Wunderkammer e museo scientifico* (Venice, 1986), 249-67 and the papers by Fletcher, Rezzi, Hein, and Cialdea in the same volume. See also G. Lafaye, “Le Musée Kircher,” *Revue Archéologique*, 37 (1879), 239-42; and Michele Garrucci, “Origine e vicende del Museo Kircher dal 1651 al 1773,” *Civiltà Cattolica*, 12 (1879), 727-39.

⁶⁷ Bedini, “Citadels,” 263.

Today we sometimes find it quite difficult to make sense of baroque collections which appear extremely alien in their indiscriminate accumulation of curiosities, rarities, and marvels, where works of art find a place next to precious stones, unicorn horns, clocks and automata, antique statues next to renaissance medals, stuffed crocodiles, coconut shells and monstrous births, astronomical and mathematical instruments next to Egyptian mummies, optical devices, crystals, and curiously shaped fruit.⁶⁸ We tend to regard these collections as reflections of the chaotic mind of their inventors, “the image of the mind of a learned man, who, for all his originality, became absorbed into too many different studies at one time for succeeding in all.”⁶⁹ The relation between the supposed chaos in the mind of the *polyhistor* and the chaos in his collection is expressed nicely by Malebranche:

They transform their heads into some kind of furniture storehouses, in which they pile everything on top of everything else without distinction and without order, everything which has some air of erudition.... They pride themselves on resembling those cabinets of curiosities and antiquities, where nothing has any real worth, and where the price depends solely on imagination, on passion and on chance.⁷⁰

One might assume that the *polyhistor*'s collections were results of the same all-encompassing encyclopedic desire for knowledge mentioned above,⁷¹ but this implies overlooking that in general collections did not contain objects of every kind and that they were not intended to do so.⁷²

Early modern collections excluded 99.9 percent of the known universe, both natural and artificial—namely all that was ordinary, regular and common. They therefore cannot qualify as a representative sample in the usual sense.... To label the *Wunderkammern* “encyclopedic” because they included so many different kinds of things arranged against the grain of familiar classifications is to mistake variety for universality.⁷³

⁶⁸ See Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor, *The Origins of Museums. The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Oxford, 1985).

⁶⁹ Lafaye, “Musée Kircher,” 241 on the *Museum Kircherianum*.

⁷⁰ Nicolas Malebranche, *De la recherche de la vérité où l'on traite de la nature de l'esprit de l'homme...*, ed. Geneviève Rodis-Lewis (Paris, 1965), XV.

⁷¹ E.g., Sven Alfons, “The Museum as Image of the World.” Jane Chapman, Carol Rathman, Jaime Roberts (eds.), *The Arcimboldo Effect: Transformations of the Face from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Milan, 1987), 69-72; see also Joy Kenseth, “A World of Wonders in one Closet Shut,” Kenseth (ed.), *Age*, 83-86.

⁷² But see Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150-1750* (New York, 1998), 272; Bedini, “Citadels,” 249.

⁷³ Daston and Park, *Wonders*, 272. See also Ashworth, “Remarkable,” 113.

What is the unifying idea behind these early modern collections? It would be presumptuous to try to formulate a unique principle which explained the membership of each object in each individual *Wunderkammer*, given that a great amount of their constitution depended on the means and personal predilections of the collectors.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, it seems justified to say that a considerable part of the collections of the *polyhistor*s can be explained by taking the pansemiotic world view into account. The first thing that is surprising about these collections is their apparent lack of order. It is not just that these they contained the most disparate accumulation of objects, “resisting all attempts at generalization and categorization”;⁷⁵ it is also that these were not displayed in some kind of orderly arrangement but were allowed to mingle freely with one another, *naturalia* next to *artificialia*, works of art next to automata, dubious curiosities next to really exceptional exhibits.⁷⁶ Bredekamp was one of the first to notice that this was not just the result of lack of ability or interest in the collections but rested on independent conceptual reasons,

The *Kunstammern* did not offer merely a link between artifacts from historically, geographically and ethnically foreign cultures and all realms of nature; they also provided an opportunity for experimentation in merging form and meaning....⁷⁷ They [i.e., the objects] are displayed in such a way as to play down the boundaries between them and, as *Kunstammer* theorist Johann Daniel Major expressed a short time later, in reference to *artificialia* in his own collection, so that they can appear to be “in a scattered, deliberate disorder.” The arrangement of the genera did not serve to separate all the various areas, instead, it built visual bridges to emphasize the playfulness of nature through the associative powers of sight.⁷⁸

Given the pansemiotic world view, the extreme disorder of the *Wunderkammern* does not seem to be that surprising after all. Given the assumption that various objects do not exist in isolation but are connected with one another through various intricately structured significations, not always discernible at first sight, the “unordered” form of presentation seems to be the most ontologically

⁷⁴ Daston and Park, *Wonders*, 266.

⁷⁵ Daston and Park, *Wonders*, 266.

⁷⁶ See e.g., the picture of Kircher’s museum in Georgius de Sepibus, *Romani Collegii Societatis Jesu Musaeum Celeberrimum ... P. Athanasius Kircherus Soc. Jesu novis & raris inventis locupletatum ... Ex Officina Janssonio-Waesbergiana* (Amsterdam, 1678; repr. in Valerio Rivosecchi, *Esotismo in Roma barocca. Studi sul Padre Kircher* [Roma, 1982]), fig. 168, also the examples given in Daston/Park, *Wonders*, 268-71.

⁷⁷ Horst Bredekamp, *The Love of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine: The Kunstammern and the Evaluation of Nature, Art and Technology* (Princeton, 1995), 110.

⁷⁸ Bredekamp, *Love*, 73.

natural. Only if one presupposes that there is a unique hierarchy of natural entities and that the nature of these entities is completely specified by this classification, a modern, rigorously structured organization, which arranged objects according to their types seems preferable. In fact the baroque *Wunderkammer* was far from being a chaotic array of curiosities without order, but its order was rather an order which arranged things in such a way that they could communicate with one another, thus making their hidden interrelations visible.

This conception of order is also brought out in Quicchelberg's writings on the organization of the collection in his *Inscriptiones vel Tituli Theatri amplissimi* of 1565,⁷⁹ which suggests that the cabinets for displaying the collection should be made in the form of the marvels of the world, adding to each the name of the planetary deities which dominated them,

In the present inscription we mentioned cabinets in the form of triumphal arches, towers and pyramids.... We will relate how these marvels of the world ... are dominated by the seven planets, as we know without doubt from manifold occurrences: Under Saturn there are the Egyptian pyramids and certain mausolea, under Jupiter the temple of Diana, the statue of Jupiter and the palace of Cyrus, under Mars, the walls of Babylon....⁸⁰

The objects were not ordered by type but were imbedded in a web of significations. The cabinets containing them functioned as signs of the marvelous nature of the objects in them by having the form of the marvels of the world and simultaneously referred to the system of planetary influences to which both the marvels represented by the cabinets, as well as their contents, were subjects.

It is thus not without reason that Quicchelberg's discussion refers to Camillo's *theatrum* several times, which he calls a "semicircular museum."⁸¹ This "theater," a rather large, wooden construction filled with allegorical paintings of

⁷⁹ See Julius von Schlosser, *Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance* (Leipzig, 1908), 73-76; Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Los Angeles, 1994), 137.

⁸⁰ Samuel Quicchelberg, *Inscriptiones vel Tituli Theatri amplissimi ...* (Munich, 1565). Giii a. It should be noted that there is at least one other passage (Div a) where Quicchelberg criticizes the planetary order of things and argues for one following the "forms of things." It seems to be inappropriate, however, to infer from this passage that Quicchelberg rejected the whole astrological system *tout court* and adopted a "progressive" attitude concerned more with practical museology than with metaphysics, as Rudolf Berliner, "Zur älteren Museumslehre in Deutschland," *Müchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Künste, Neue Folge*, 5 (1928), 330-31, has done. See also Elizabeth Hajós, "References to Giulio Camillo in Samuel Quicchelberg's 'Inscriptiones vel Tituli Theatri amplissimi,'" *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 25 (1963), 209-10, n. 5.

⁸¹ Quicchelberg, *Inscriptiones*, Diii b. and Div a. Giii a. See Hajós, "References." Olmi, *Inventario*, 176, n. 40.

mythical and astrological nature was supposed to serve as a gigantic aid for the memory.⁸² Quicchelberg's reference to this *theatrum memoriae* as a museum has consequences for the pansemiotic conception of collections as a whole.

Baroque culture assumed memory and collections to be similar in a number of respects.⁸³ First of all, both were considered to be spatially extended. Memory was taken to be an array of different *loci* where the objects to be remembered could be deposited, a space like "a house, an intercolumnar space, a recess, an arch, or the like"⁸⁴—places which were the usual locations of early modern collections.⁸⁵ Secondly, both the collection and the theater of memory were supposed to mirror the innermost structure of the world. Camillo's theater represents "a vision of the world and of the nature of things seen from a height, from the stars themselves and even from the supercelestial founts of wisdom beyond them."⁸⁶ Collections like *stanzoni* of Francesco I de' Medici or the *Kunstammer* of Rudolph II were arranged in a way which was supposed to correspond to the metaphysical order of the world.⁸⁷

In the case of Kircher's *Museum Kircherianum* this ordering is brought out by the emblematic decorations on the ceiling.⁸⁸ As the picture of Kircher's museum given in the frontispiece of de Sepibus's catalogue shows, a main part of the interior decorations consisted of five circular allegories along the ceiling of the museum.⁸⁹ Five obelisks were placed exactly under these paintings, which showed things like a salamander surrounded by flames, a man emptying a vase filled with water, or the zodiac. All of these pictures are interpreted in de Sepibus's catalogue, related to quotations from different authors and explained regarding their general significance for the collection.⁹⁰ Far from being idle ornaments, they constituted essential clues for understanding the structure and purpose of the *Museum Kircherianum*, which was supposed to correspond to the structure and purpose of the world.

The parallel between collection and memory most important for our purposes, however, is those between the "exhibits" in the collection and the "exhibits" placed at the different *loci* of memory. These exhibits, which the Auctor ad

⁸² See Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London, 1996), 135-74.

⁸³ See Lina Bolzoni, "Das Sammeln und die ars memoriae," Andreas Grote (ed.), *Macrocosmos in Microcosmo. Die Welt in der Stube. Zur Geschichte des Sammelns 1450-1800* (Opladen, 1994), 129-68.

⁸⁴ *Ad C. Herennium*, tr. Harry Caplan (London, 1981), III, 16. See also 17-20.

⁸⁵ Findlen, *Possessing*, 97-150; and see S. Aurelii Augustini Confessionum libri XIII. Martin Skutella et al. (eds) (Stuttgart, 1996), X, 8.

⁸⁶ Yates, *Memory*, 148.

⁸⁷ Bolzoni, "Sammeln," 143; Findlen, *Possessing*, 113; Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, "From Treasury to Museum: The Collections of the Austrian Habsburgs," John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (eds.), *The Cultures of Collecting* (London, 1994), 145.

⁸⁸ See de Sepibus, *Musaeum*, 4-5 and Rivosecchi, *Esotismo*, 141-50.

⁸⁹ Reprinted in Casciato, Ianello, and Vitale (eds.), *Enciclopedismo*, fig. 168.

⁹⁰ See also Rivosecchi, *Esotismo*, 146.

Herennium calls “imagines” are supposed to be signs for something else, namely the objects to be remembered. If we want to remember the role of a witness in a law case, we will place some *testiculi arietini* (suggesting *testes*, witnesses) at a suitable *locus* in our memory.⁹¹ In this way the whole of the artificial memory is filled with inherently signifying objects which point towards objects other than themselves, which one wishes to remember. Given the close relationship between these collections of the memory and actual collections, it becomes clear that the exhibits of the latter were regarded as inherently signifying as well. Quiccheberg’s references to Camillo’s *theatrum* as a kind of museum carries with them the assumption of the signficatory nature of the objects in the museums. Both were collections of objects being collected to a great extent because the objects in them brought out particularly well their ability to act as signs for something else, which is present in all objects.

A particularly interesting case of an overlap between a virtual and a real collection of such signifying objects is mentioned by Bolzoni, who reports that Agostino del Riccio writes in a treatise on memory from 1595 that a good example for a perfect *imago* for memory is a statue with two heads, which can only be seen by looking at it from two different sides.⁹² Such a statue, he continues, can be found in the cabinet of curiosities of a *cavaliere* of his acquaintance, Niccolò Gaddi. The very same object can occur in an actual collection and in the theater of memory. The reason for its admission into both is its inherent signficatory quality. Both the *Wunderkammer* and the *theatrum memoriae* were filled with objects which were especially capable of documenting the pansemiotic nature of things.

Baroque *Kunstkammern* thus contained numerous objects which, so to speak, communicated out of themselves, that is, which brought to light the above interrelations by their very structure. Medals formed an indispensable part of every early modern collection; apart from their antiquity and rarity they possessed an explicit connection with pansemioticism mentioned above. All kinds of hybrid objects were also very popular, such as paintings on alabaster where the natural structure of the stone formed a fitting background of clouds and landscapes⁹³ or, even better, figured stones in which various motifs seemed to have appeared spontaneously.⁹⁴ These objects crossed the boundaries between art and nature and thus were of interest because they manifested a context of interaction and signification between different levels of creation.⁹⁵ A further example of such

⁹¹ Ad C. Herennium: III, 20.

⁹² Bolzoni, “Sammeln,” 147.

⁹³ Daston and Park, *Wonders*, 278.

⁹⁴ Joy Kenseth, “World,” 89, fig. 4.

⁹⁵ “A *Kunst- und Wunderkammer* ... represented the universal connection of all phenomena. This conception of a universal context of signification which connects everything with everything else is justly regarded as the determining property of the period between the early 16th and the late 18th century....” Hans Holländer, *Kunst- und Wunderkammern. Konturen eines*

inherently signifying objects were monstrous births,⁹⁶ which were rather common elements of well-furnished early modern collections.

In Mantua,... Isabella d'Este's two-bodied puppy found a place alongside cameos, medals, antique vases, corals, nautilus shells and her precious unicorn horn. By the late sixteenth century, the Gonzaga collection also included a human fetus with four eyes and two mouths, while the collection of Ferdinand II of Tyrol, at Ambras, contained portraits of a giant and a hairy man from Teneriffe.... Monsters also appeared in the collections of doctors and apothecaries: the image of Ferrante Imperato's museum in Naples clearly shows a two-headed snake and a lizard with two bodies joined to a single head.⁹⁷

These "monsters" (from *monere*, to remind) were supposed to be simultaneous manifestations of God's wrath about the sins of the world and of His mercy in being a sign to grant the sinners a last chance of repentance. Monstrous births were thus assumed to be quite concrete significations of the particular sins committed. To give an example from the description of the sixteenth-century Ravenna monster discussed in detail by Daston and Park,⁹⁸ "The horn (indicates) pride, the wings, mental frivolity and inconstancy; the lack of arms, a lack of good works; the raptors's foot, rapaciousness, usury and every sort of avarice; the eye on the knee, a mental orientation solely towards earthly things, the double sex, sodomy...."⁹⁹

These births were thus regarded as an extremely colorful and rather important manifestation of a pansemiotic connection of things. They were not just natural aberrations but possessed a complex and specific signification.¹⁰⁰ Monsters also establish another link between the cultures of collecting and the *ars memoriae*. The images of monstrous births, published in broadsides often resembled pictures used in the art of memory, where each part of the figure repre-

unvollendbaren Projektes. Wunderkammer des Abendlandes. Museum und Sammlung im Spiegel der Zeit. Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Bonn, 1994), 144, 139; also 30.

⁹⁶ See Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, "Unnatural Conceptions: The Study of Monsters in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France and England," *Past and Present*, 92 (1981), 20-54, *Wonders*, 173-214.

⁹⁷ Daston and Park, *Wonders*, 193; 194-95.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 177-82.

⁹⁹ The contemporary chronicler Johannes Multivallis quoted in Daston and Park, *Wonders*, 182, and 187-89, on the famous figures of the pope-ass and the monk-calf used in protestant propaganda. Cf. Ashworth, "Remarkable Humans," 134.

¹⁰⁰ See also Carl von Linné (1765) reprinted in *Nemesis Divina*, ed. Wolfgang Lepenies and Lars Gustafsson (Munich, 1981).

sented one aspect to be recalled.¹⁰¹ This shows another connection between the inherently signifying *imagines* of memory and the exhibits in the *Wunderkammern*, which were particularly attractive for the collectors because they brought out clearly the web of significations which connected all phenomena.

A similar fascination was evoked by Arcimboldo's well-known paintings of composite heads which were painted chiefly for the *Kunstkammern* of Maximilian II and his son Rudolph II.¹⁰² His pictures of the four seasons, for example, were constructed in such a way that every element composing the personification of a particular season signified the season itself.¹⁰³ Arcimboldo showed how the typical natural phenomena found e.g., in autumn (as brown leaves, ripe fruit, and grapes) formed the face of the personification of autumn itself¹⁰⁴ or, in the case of the portrait of Rudolph II, how objects from all seasons make up the face of the emperor who is, as Vertumnus, both the metamorphizing god of the seasons as well as that which all the seasons signify.¹⁰⁵ The products of the different times of the year were not just considered as existing in themselves, separate from other phenomena, but were connected by a complex web of significations to such things as the abstract concept and the personification of the particular seasons, to the god of all the seasons and to the Holy Roman Emperor. The Emperor was thus shown to be the axis around which all the seasons revolve and therefore fundamentally the center of time.¹⁰⁶

Thus we see that the notion of the pansemiotic world-view can help us to analyze and to unify several distinct and sometimes puzzling aspects of seventeenth-century culture, such as hieroglyphics, medals, epigrams, emblems, *polyhistor*s, the art of memory, and polyhistorical collections. However, as is the case with all universal assumptions about "the" culture of a particular time, we have to withstand the temptation to subsume absolutely every phenomenon from this period which comes to our knowledge under it, in order to avoid what may be called Mr Shandy's fallacy, which relies on the assumption that "it is in the nature of an hypothesis, when once a man has conceived it, that it assimilates every thing to itself as proper nourishment ... and grows the stronger by every thing you see, hear, read or understand."

¹⁰¹ See illustrations 5.2.1-3 in Daston and Park, *Wonders*, 178-79; also Bolzoni, "Sammeln"; Jurgis Baltrusaitis, *Réveils et prodiges: Le gothique fantastique* (Paris, 1960), 305-13.

¹⁰² See Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, "The Allegories and their Meaning," *Arcimboldo Effect*, ed. Chapman, Rathman, and Roberts, 89; Daston and Park, *Wonders*, 267. Cf. also Arcimboldo's portrait of Rudolph II (owner of a famous collection of curiosities himself) as the god Vertumnus, reproduced in Daston and Park, *Wonders*, 211. Cf. also Kenseth, "World of Wonders," 85.

¹⁰³ See Chapman, Rathman, and Roberts, *Arcimboldo Effect*.

¹⁰⁴ See DaCosta Kaufmann, "Allegories," 100-103, 99-100.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. DaCosta Kaufmann, "Allegories," 96, 103-4.

¹⁰⁶ The idea of the pansemiotic world view can help to explain further popular areas of early modern collecting such as anamorphic and trompe-l'oeil paintings or clocks and automata, for the latter see Holländer, "Wunderkammern," 141-45.

Nevertheless, I think there are at least two more aspects of baroque culture which can be rendered more intelligible by taking the pansemiotic assumption into account. The first encompasses the seventeenth-century universal language projects, which tried to develop a kind of universal symbolism which should incorporate everything knowable. These projects derive a considerable part of their attraction from the assumption that different phenomena have a multitude of significations, while each individual symbolism can only bring out a limited number of these. Thus a “universal symbolism” which incorporated all the limited special symbolisms, managing to convey the full complexity of an object’s significations appeared to be highly desirable.

The second aspect is the idea of the *poeta doctus*, the educated poet. The idea that one needs a comprehensive university education to be a good poet appears to be somewhat bizarre from a modern perspective. Against the background of the pansemiotic assumption, however, we realize that the *poeta doctus* is something like the intellectual twin of the *polyhistor*. If we assume, as baroque poetry did, that the poet should deliver a faithful picture of the nature of things and also presuppose that phenomena are surrounded by a complex web of significations, it is clear that the poet needs to have quasi-polyhistorical knowledge, knowledge of different symbolisms and of the different significations of things in order to deliver an adequate picture of the innermost nature of reality. So it appears that the conception of the pansemiotic world-view can be of some help in explaining a fair number of the otherwise alien and perplexing aspects of European baroque culture.

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