

## THE FOREST AND THE LABYRINTH SYMBOLISMS IN THE CRIPTA GAUDÍ

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### Abstract:

This paper lies on the crossing of historiography of art and historiography of semiotics. It aims to criticise why semiotics is not so widely approached when art is discussed, and how both its histories intersect. To do so, this paper starts by outlining a brief history of art criticism and history of architecture, along with semioticians works, forming a theoretical basis using Umberto Eco's tree and labyrinth structure of concept building, that will be generalised beyond its original use, and applied to a spatial configuration: a church designed by Gaudí in Colonia Güell, named Cripta Gaudí.

**Keywords:** Gaudí, Symbolism, Semiotics, Art Nouveau, Historiography, Concept Building, Architecture

### Resumen:

Este artículo se encuentra en el cruce de la historiografía del arte y la historiografía de la semiótica. Su objetivo es criticar la razón por la cual la semiótica no es tan ampliamente utilizada cuando se discute el arte, y cómo se cruzan sus dos historias. Para esto, este trabajo comienza con la descripción de una breve historia de la crítica de arte y la historia de la arquitectura, junto con obras semiotica, formando una base teórica y utilizando la estructura del árbol y del laberinto de Umberto Eco para construir el concepto, que se generaliza más allá de su uso original, y aplicada a una configuración espacial: una iglesia diseñada por Gaudí en la Colonia Güell, llamada Cripta Gaudí.

**Palabras clave:** Gaudí, Simbolismo, Semiótica, Art Nouveau, Historiografía, Construcción de Conceptos, Arquitectura

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## THE THEORETICAL BASIS

“Art being a thing of the mind, it follows that any scientific study of art will be psychology. It may be other things as well, but psychology it will always be.” With this quote by Max. J. Friedländer, Gombrich opens his book *Art and Illusion*<sup>1</sup>, in which he discusses how important it is to conceive stylistic features and other aspects of art in a wider approach than just sheer iconographic studies or techniques used. It is of the uttermost importance to take into account the society and the individual that created a certain work of art.

As important as this may be, not many art historians consider this side of the problem when talking about pieces of art or a certain artist. A general context of the time may be provided, but it usually does not go much farther. What this paper proposes is that future historians and historiographers consider not only the overall historical qualities from the period in which something or someone is analysed, but also how that society from that period influenced in its economics, semiotics and culture; forming a social memory that got perpetrated. A way to analyse this social memory is suggested here.

To understand how one may gather this basis, we must make a connection among some important authors in art theory and semiotics: Jan Assmann, Umberto Eco and Peter Sloterdijk. Some other works will be used, but as a mean to make this basis applicable to architectural works, specially gothic and art nouveau - which has a ‘return to the vernacular, to the ornaments’ aspect intrinsic to it, therefore making it valuable for both these periods.

First of all, Umberto Eco introduces us to the idea of the tree as a ‘con-

cept builder<sup>2</sup>, based on Aristotle’s (*Posterior Analytics*, II, iii, 90b 30) saying that “what is defined is the essence or essential nature”. Eco believes the dictionary is too rigid a form to express a concept, and says we should be choosing a more flexible classification system, akin to an encyclopedia. The tree, or the dictionary, with its roots being the essence of the concept, is too stuck in a certain facet of the concept; a labyrinth of never ending pathways would be a more intelligent and open solution.

Thus, we gain the freedom to pursue new connections among different knowledges, helping to better understand an art work within its historical context in a more complete way. So, in that sense, this paper is also a historiographic work about Eco’s argument of historical interpretation. We must keep in mind this way of formulating and analysing concepts, but must also be able to see both the tree and the labyrinth as iconographical metaphors of the Christian canon.

From Umberto Eco, it is important to analyse two things, albeit the second one is more crucial to this work: the first is to grasp the concepts of beauty and see how much it affects architecture, compared to other artworks<sup>3</sup>, the second is the idea of the tree as a way to build concepts<sup>4</sup>. This will help to create a way to facilitate the systematisation of concepts, so as to insert them in this theoretical basis losing less of their original premise.

This structure is more than an idea of conceptual analysis: the idea of labyrinth is structured by the relation between concepts. This echoes recent evidence in cognitive science<sup>5</sup> about concepts and taxonomy formation in human minds. In this sense, the historiography of semiology is not only an analysis of a given topic, it is itself a theoretical proposition to analyze art

2. Umberto Eco, *From the Tree to the Labyrinth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 12.

3. Umberto Eco, *História da Beleza* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 2010), 17.

4. Umberto Eco, *From the Tree to the Labyrinth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 12.

5. Charles Kemp and Joshua B. Tenenbaum, «The discovery of structural form». *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 105.31 (2008), 10687.

1. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3.

history based in the human behaviour.

In the first essay published in *Religion and Cultural Memory*<sup>6</sup>, Assmann reverts the social memory into how it is represented in landscapes and as background for art works. This author makes a wide explanation of what is the canon, in the rest of the studies in this book, relating of course, religion and social memory to do so, and this is fundamental to understand how catholic societies were deeply affected by it in forming its collective memories and its identity as a folk.

All this goes to show how the spatial memory, as a representation of the landscape, as previously cited, will be analysed as to find out how the physical spaces represent spiritual spaces. This means that memory is the basis for iconographical representation and a psychological and semiotical study must be developed in order to comprehend further how a certain iconography has come to be. This is of uttermost importance, as one cannot just get its origins from the canon, without contextualising fully how it was affected by the society that created it.

## THE BUILT AND NON-BUILT SPACES

As for the architecture part, the most important aspect here is to know how we decided to differentiate it from other forms of art, such as paintings and sculptures. That is the reason Bruno Zevi<sup>7</sup> was the only author that writes about architecture in this study, for his definition of the “4th dimension” of architecture, which only exists from the moment one walks through a building and has a unique experience of it. In a manner of speaking, this would be analogous to time. This is important because it is the most

peculiar aspect of architecture, the one that sets it apart from all the others and has a particular function in the Cripta Gaudí.

The built space may also be a metaphor for the whole of the city the church is in, as it also reflects so much of the society that chooses and builds a certain religious canon. The building is a synthesis of the whole concept, also being walkable and perceivable by many senses. Also, it may help generate a new identity for the place in which it is, building new social memories with its existence and its interaction with society.

The theories by Assmann are quite useful for examining this connection between mental, social and built spaces, as one is tightly interwoven in the other: the people that help imagine and built the collective memory are the same that keep it alive and perpetrate it, building it up in stories, tales and buildings. They are transformed in a space, allocated in a physical mean. These people were guided by the context of their time, and that is why it is important to always remember to analyse them with that certain context in mind<sup>8</sup>.

An anecdote of how the canon and the memory of the people and the material is present in the church studied in this paper is shown below:

“The basalt columns from the Cripta Güell were placed just like they left the quarry, but it didn't please anyone, not even Eusebi Güell or the workers. One worker asked about it and Gaudí answered that, in the Old Testament, God said to Moses that, when you build a temple in stone, for Him, you must not profanity it by working it, but you must place it just like it has left the quarry, so as to avoid loud noises, not pleasing to the Lord.”

This is a very simple way to show in which way the holy scriptures and the telling of a history may present itself in a building. Not only in recrea-

6. Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2005), 24.

7. Bruno Zevi, *Saber Ver a Arquitetura* (São Paulo: Livraria Martins Fontes Editora Ltda, 2009), 12.

8. Michael Lambeck, *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 6.

9. <https://www.facebook.com/GaudiCriptaColonIaguell/photos/a.613979272080551.1073741830.611304085681403/819867388158404/?type=3&theater>. This is an official content of The Gaudí Research Institute, and can be found in their Facebook page, in public display.

ting nature in the most diverse forms and with many symbolisms, but also in the way nature is present inside the temple.

## THE TREE AND THE LABYRINTH: TWO WAYS OF SEEING A CONCEPT FORMATION

With all that has been explained, we have enough material to comprehend how the tree can be applied in Eco's concept. The example chosen for our case is in the symbology of a tree, meaning: the tree is the center, the more immutable and pragmatical of things. In a church, we can consider this being the built part, more specifically, its structural part. The tree is the thing that keeps all other together, as well as the sole definition of something; its roots sustain other concepts or parts of the whole - such as the beams and the ceiling. It is a tridimensional representation, and it alone does not make a space. That is were we must introduce our final concept, the one that brings 'time' into our analysis, both in itself and in the aspect proposed by Bruno Zevi<sup>10</sup>.

The final piece, to form the labyrinth both expanding Eco's tree<sup>11</sup> and to put the fourth dimension in display along with it, is to study the *mnemotopo*. In the words of Peter Sloterdijk, "whereby a group at learning constitutes itself as the custodian of its continuum of experience and remains as the central repository of truth with its own claim to validity and its own counterfeiting risk."<sup>12</sup> It is quite simple to realise how this is intimately connected with Eco's tree and labyrinth concepts.

The *mnemotopo* allows us to make an in-depth analysis of the spatial configuration of a certain church in a way as to reconstruct the way the

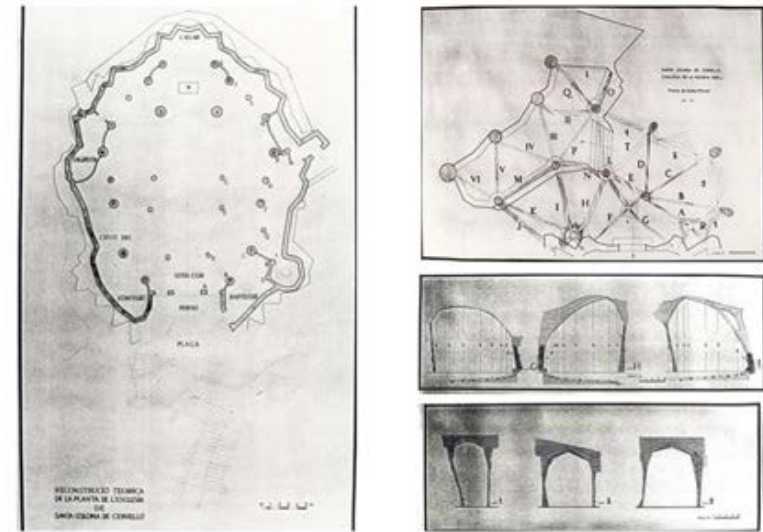


Figure 1: Original plans and drawings from the construction. Property of The Gaudí Research Institute, courtesy of the cited.

memories were activated and chosen to compose that built space. To do so, it is necessary to see how these memories were placed in the imaginary space -such as the tridimensional void that composes as space when it is surrounded by built structures<sup>13</sup>- and how they were represented by both structures and decorative elements. The walls, the ceiling, the columns, etc, are the guidelines and the limits that constrain the free space, and that is where memory comes alive and shows itself.

## SYMBOLISM OF THE FOREST: THE TREE

The tree is a necessary constituent part of the forest; which is, by definition of Cambridge dictionary "a large area of land covered with trees and

10. Bruno Zevi, *Saber Ver a Arquitetura* (São Paulo: Livraria Martins Fontes Editora Ltda, 2009), 12.

11. Umberto Eco, *From the Tree to the Labyrinth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 20.

12. Peter Sloterdijk, *Esferas I: Burbujas* (Madrid: Siruela, 2014), 49.

13. Bruno Zevi, *Saber Ver a Arquitetura*, 18.

plants, usually larger than a wood, or the trees and plants themselves”<sup>14</sup>. Using this approach, we can identify the columns as the trees, and the ceiling as the top of those trees, united as a dense wood, enclosing the vertical space.

This configuration can be perceived if looking at figure 1, which presents the plan - with the column distribution -, cross-sections - that show how the basalt columns had a specific calculation for each, as they were not treated for an even weight distribution when they left the quarry -, and a ceiling plan - which shows all the vaults formed by the connection of the capitels to the ceiling (figure 2), all of them with a unique calculation of weight distribution, according to the previous elements.



Figure 2 : Photograph taken by the author

All of this, combined with stones and other constructive materials deriving from nearby places, helps to ensure the very nature-like characteristics of the Cripta Gaudí. The structure follows organic patterns and there is not a single line in sight, just like a real wood would be like. In the center of the tree concept, this metaphor strikes the main point and shows its validation within the proposed theoretical basis.

### SYMBOLISM OF THE PINE CONE

The pine cone is the reproductive organ of the conifer trees, widely present in Catalan forests. The presence of this representation, a symbol of rebirth and new beginnings is quite representative here, apart from being a very popular tree species in the surroundings of the church. The windows, from where all the light comes in, filled with meanings relating to the Holy Spirit and the knowledge it brings, filtered by brightly coloured vitrals, have a shape akin to a section of a pine cone, as can be seen in the comparison showed in figure 3.



Figure 3: Image taken from the Cripta Gaudí official Facebook Page, for public access and use.

14. <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/forest>

Many believe that its shape was based on butterfly wings, but it is not true. Once again, we can regain the memory present in the building - here, in an ornate window - and present it with its true meaning. The semiotics behind the pine cone symbolism is much more filled with meaning when analysed within the architect's context; that it is so important to search for the center of the concept, and later, to make it come through a larger and more applicable approach.

### THE SPATIAL CONFIGURATION OF THE CRIPTA GAUDÍ

The Cripta Gaudí, as many other works from Antoni Gaudí, draws inspiration from nature - not only for the ornamentation, but also conceptual and structure-wise. In this specific little church, two motives are crucial: the forest - physically - and the labyrinth - metaphorically. The application of the tree and the labyrinth concepts has already been discussed in the previous section, and also how it was drawn from Eco's so, now, we will only discuss how their applications are pertinent in this particular case.

### ABOUT THE LABYRINTH

In Eco's proposal, the labyrinth is a way to expand a concept analysis in a sense close to an encyclopedia, and here, we aim to bring back the origin of the labyrinth in the christian tradition in order to broaden it and apply to this particular art nouveau church.

The labyrinth is present at the ground of Chartres Cathedral, one of the first examples of pure french gothic. In the Catholic Church, the walk through the labyrinth would portray a certain rediscovery of Christian spirituality. Some believe that medieval christians walked through labyrinths as a substitute for pilgrimages to the Holy Land<sup>15</sup>.

The labyrinth has not been expressly used since medieval times, but with this methodology being applied to the Cripta Gaudí, we have reasons to believe that its symbolism remains. Now, not as such a clear metaphor, but with the origins known and the meaning of a faithful searching for oneself's inner spirituality and connection to God.

### THE FOREST AS A LABYRINTH

Here, the forest would be the body of the labyrinth. The trees/columns are the tridimensional representation of the otherwise drawn boundaries on the floor. Unlike a maze, a labyrinth only has one choice of pathway<sup>16</sup>, and this might mean that there is only one way to God: through prayers, through the Church.



Figure 4: Photograph taken by the author

15. Philip Ball, *Universe Of Stone* (Nova York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 8

16. <http://www.labyrinthos.net/typology.html>

As God's home on Earth, there could be no better way to build it than like a homage to nature, His greatest creation. So, through it you pass, among prayers, in order to get closer to Him. The labyrinth expands into the built space and the meaning of the praying site is present in the hole of it. The church itself is a labyrinth; the space inside it, a pathway to God. The walls and details are filled with the memory of the place, as we could see with the pine cone example.

In Cripta Gaudí, all of this meaning is visually quite clear, as the columns and decoration resemble a forest in its simplest form, and the visual focus - or the middle of the labyrinth - is the altar, as can be seen in figure 4. Gaudí was clear in his message while building to God and to the people of Catalonia; it was up to us to read his true meanings.

## CONCLUSION

This study of historiography of art and semiotics went through four steps in order to create a proposed methodology applicable to assess studies of diverse churches. These studies will have its base in a more assertive and open way of analysing concepts regarding its constructive parts, ornaments and their semiotics, in order to achieve the meaning behind them, without actual cloudings or formerly constructed traditions.

The steps went as follow: first, we draw from Eco's tree and labyrinth about concept analysis. The tree is akin to a dictionary, more rigid and with a core meaning, as the labyrinth is a sort of an extrapolation of this, with concepts intertwining with each other as a way to express them in a more fluid way.

The second step was to take these concepts and apply them to a theoretical basis of chosen authors that talk about architecture, history and social memory, mainly focused on Christianity. This is where the historiographical study was crucial. Having applied it, we could move on to the third step, which is choosing a couple of metaphors pertinent to the analysis of the Cripta Gaudí: the tree and the labyrinth. They were chosen for both their intrinsic meaning within the

Catholic canon and iconography, and for how they may also be a metaphor for Eco's homonym concepts.

The fourth step was applying these appropriated concepts - remember, they were already subjected to Eco's - to the building and its constituents parts. Thus we could give meaning based on the social memory of the people, of the canon and of Gaudí's Bible interpretation.

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