

# Books reviews

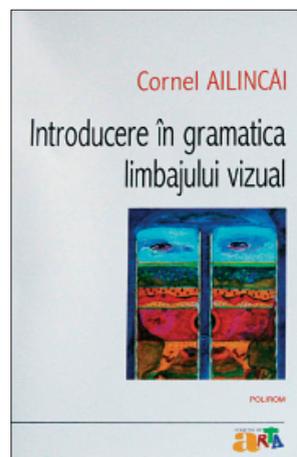
## Explaining a grammar of visual forms

“Introduction to the grammar of visual language” (*Introducere în gramatica limbajului vizual*, Polirom, 2010), by Cornel Ailincăi, is a revised edition of his previously published work, entitled “The grammar of visual forms” (*Gramatica formelor vizuale*, Paralela 45, 2000). The intent of the author is self evident from the change of the title - moving from a “grammar of forms” towards a “grammar of visual language” gives up the intent, it comes from the understanding of the need for a much broader definition.

Very much dependent on the theories of Gestalt and the definitions of plastic artists like Kandinsky, who was preoccupied by the rules of form and their movement into artistic expression, Ailincăi, in order to elaborate a grammar of forms, based on understanding the laws of organizing visual language, de-fines this grammar in terms that are fundamentally structuralist. Using Kandinsky’s question on the nature of art, followed by its “organic” response it becomes fundamental with Ailincăi to use the principles that make a work of art as means to give humanity access to a spiritual, read natural, level of significance – all the more important in a “skeptical world”. The need for a grammar of forms is to find “the outward expression of the inner meaning of art” that is, the manifestation in the visible world of that which is invisible. As in

the case of Kandinsky, who found his resources for painting in the reproduction of natural forms and phenomena, Ailincăi looks into the natural world for structures that would allow the development of a visual language.

Although the starting point of Ailincăi is very pragmatic – he begins with the idea that there is a need for visual education – there is the need for visual language training because we (as modern men) live in a period when we (as non-aesthetic beings) witness a rift between artists and their publics. The hypothesis that there is a separation between the “new public” (unable to understand art) and the “old” artists, who have skills based on a more profound perception of culture is farfetched. Although it is true that artistic culture is more and more specialized, thus generating a separation between the receiver and the producer of artistic objects, it is not evident why the



“education” is more needed today than in the past. The author is convinced that such an introduction to “the grammar of visual language” would help breaching this separation between modern arts and their publics, but claims that also specialists, like students in the field of arts, the artists themselves, or even artistic critics, would benefit from such approach.

Going back to the explanation level, the premise of Ailincăi is that one must first understand how forms are organized in order to generate significance within the artistic object, thus content is described as fundamentally dependent on physical expression. For him, such introduction would provide two levels of interpretation, one based on concepts from a visual syntax, and another based on cultural semiotics. Thus, to conceptualize visual language, it means to describe a specificity of the visual “artistic text”. In order to understand an artistic object the observer needs to have a certain level of culture and the visual education. Without this education, the consumption of visual information is only superficial. Also, in order to overcome this fundamental separation, to understand the general purpose of a visual work, the receiver needs specialized “laws”, which enables the access to significant.

Such introduction is designed not only as an educational tool, but also a practical instrument. The author starts to explain visual language from the point of view of an artist, for whom understanding artistic expression is based on elements that are usable – most of the examples

for this practical visual grammar are extracted from the works of the author as a professor, and also from photographs made by the author himself and by some of his colleagues. In order to explain theory, Ailincăi gives practical examples.

Another access to explanations in visual arts is possible by developing a study both forms and structures, and the author starts with perceptive laws of all the visual phenomena, thus looking for laws of representation in the most important sciences. Biology, geology, physics, they all are used to provide elements for the structural explanations, which lead and last to the compositional procedures of artistic discourse. For Ailincăi to come to an understanding of arts one needs to understand the artistic language which has “a history and a life of his own”.

This means to look for codes of the artistic signs, such as visual practices, and these elements can be put into a broader theoretical frame. The artists have tried to develop such “laws” since Renaissance, and interpreting both forms and structures allows the receiver to interpret the content. But these “rules and languages” identifiable in contemporary art are sometimes separated from the previous centuries, and the development of the laws of color and composition before modern, read conceptual, art is sometimes forced.

Visual perception provides, according to the author, the characteristics that generate significance in the work of art. Using Gestalt and the psychology of forms, Ailincăi uses the premise

that visual perception is constrained to organize and reorganize the elements that are perceived – the classical example of Rubin, showing the relationship between figure and background – leads the author to wider discussions about phenomenology and the mental, about intentional levels in the understanding of artistic object. Transferring these elements into an artistic language can be resumed to the main construction and expression of artistic forms – lines, surfaces, volumes or forms.

For Ailincăi these elements are imported from the natural world and to understand how these languages work, it means elaborating a “grammar” of artistic expressions. The basis for this grammar is to use operating criteria, principles, laws, convention. The sources for such “criteria” are everywhere, as in the second chapter, dedicated to “the world of natural forms”. The holistic view of visual forms includes cosmic forms, like formations seen in the universe – the argument being that cosmic bodies, like planets, are perfect spheres. So, the elementary geometric forms become the primordial circles and spirals. Here the author finds organizational forms, ones that the human beings have perceived “from the beginning of culture”. Later, since he needs another source for understanding visual structures, this is found in the relationship of human beings with the surface of the earth. Here the elements are the very primary elements that give a significance to the natural world – the lines over the fields, the morphology of rocks, and the dynamics of the rivers.

They all become rhythms and visible expressions, later to be integrated in an internal, artistic, structure. Elements like symmetry or size manifested in human creativity basic forms, drawn by nature, are easily observed by the artist and then used in the artistic process. Using examples like Cézanne, or Henry Moore in sculpture, Ailincăi justifies the juxtaposition between contemporary arts and the origin, or original, forms. In order to understand art, we have to understand and study the nature of earthly forms since they are projected into the fantasy and creativity, the aesthetics of pure forms. The morphology of vegetal life represents another possible formal resource for visual information. The mechanisms of vegetal life, like the proportions and rhythms of different elements of natural life – like trees, cacti, palm trees and so on – can show the characteristics that are transferrable into the field of arts. Spectacular forms, rhythms and notifications, tensions into the development of life, become the resources of the universe of art. Plants are prototypes for art, forms later to be included in plastic representations. Of course contemporary conceptualism is based on the observation of nature, mineral, vegetal, cosmic or earthly forms are fully organic manifestations of the visual, but it is a leap of argumentation from here to an universal “grammar” of the visual.

One relevant point is that these “secret mechanisms”, that link the space of mankind and the space of nature, can provide explanations is coming

from interactions, from the continuous interaction between man and the natural world. This is not only saying we witness an imitation of natural forms, it is the search for one of the fundamental impulses that will mark artistic expressions – making visible objects that express, visual forms that communicate is a part of the humanity's interaction with nature. Integrating plastic form in the metamorphosis of natural expressions gives the theory the formal relations necessary to explain the structure of what means the use of art forms. The tension between biosphere and techno-sphere is similar to the tension between an art that can be expressed in a grammar, and one that is highly conceptualized.

Defining the artist as a human that has lost his learnings from nature, and manifesting the need for harmony and unity, the author of plastic objects needs to go back to nature in order to reestablish his connection with profound artistic and spiritual relevance. In order to do that, the author moves to the third chapter, dedicated to the structure of visual forms, and here Ailincăi describes the world by itself as a structure, a repetitive model, geometrically ordered or mathematically modeled object – here the fundamental concept is, again, that of constructivism. To be a creator of pictorial images means to organize the very character of the image according to a plan and according to a previously existing intent. So formalizing means to structurally understand nature and nature's phenomena and to transfer them

into aesthetics. Of course, the symmetry models aren't new to our understanding of art – they were practiced from the very beginning of human artistic expression. Bi-dimensional forms and structures have allowed the division and subdivision of complex and simple configurations, but this does not explain, again, the grammatical transformation in the visual arts. Understanding space means both understanding the organization of natural structures and of geometrical structures – an ontology of forms – which comes from an explicit phenomenological approach to visual forms. Using patterns in order to explain visual structures leads to generalize the principal concepts of geometry and other complex structures. But representing object in space means more than describing structural qualities. Cubism was one of the artistic expressions of such distrust of traditional representations yet still acknowledges the importance of organizing the visual space. Using mathematical representations from the early years of history, like the principles of mathematical perspective in Renaissance are, as Gombrich and Panofsky demonstrated, only ideological moments. The first scientific approach to space and to the objects in this space were based on “politics” and not on “syntax”.

Still, space configuration and space organization of objects – using free spatial parameters like length, width and height – allows to understand the possibilities of spatial organization, yet the psychological relationship between space and object, as in this book, can very

well explains the relationship between perception and the organization of objects. Size, form, orientation, texture and density are scientific proofs for the existence of a grammar for forms. Topology is another approach design to explain how structures „materialize” in space, using spacial constructs and their position into space, and explain the dynamics and the energetic possibilities in visual expression. The fourth chapter is about the dynamic expression of forms. Movement is fundamental in the syntax of visual form. Representing the visual impression of movement was always key to both artists and critics. Using concepts like force, balance or composition of forces, the use of the horizontal and vertical, the formal manifestation of movement into the space, which is generated by tension, the balance between tension and movement which is essential for plastic expression, the author defines a internal organization of the works of art – thus a grammar.

Quoting Kandinsky’s work (*Dot, Line and Surface*), Ailincăi presents a biological theory of art. The last chapter actually interprets the elements of composition, where the biological need of humanity (who places himself in the artistic unit and wants to communicate) is described as the desire to visually manifest its passions and expectations. The conscience of forms is a just another name for the desire for organization. So fundamental principles of composition – like balance, symmetry and rhythm – are to be found from figurative representation

of cave art, to the Egyptian and Greek art. These principles of organization, found in any visual field, function as a practical guide for the artist and a grammar of artistic objects for the viewer. For Ailincăi the laws that come from the psychology of forms, the elements of spatial organization, geometrical structures, and of course “the Golden rule”, become explanatory for the artistic direction of such language. Anyways, all these combinations are not enough to become a grammar of visual language, since it lacks references to the application of these laws.

Interpreting visual forms without a coherent methodology, that stands for operating criteria which could provide the replicability of such an approach, on different artistic expression, is only a half-way process. Moving from a grammar of visual forms to an “introduction” to the visual language grammar needs more than a conceptual change, and the author does not seem to be able to fill this gap. There is no explanation for how “grammar” is defined, nor what the visual language is, since visual forms are not equivalent with visual language. A language that is universal cannot be used only with conventions or structures, but needs an integrative view of the entire field.

Still, this is a fundamental study that opens the way towards a wider perspective, one which should include the multiple layers of significance in “visual languages”. The visual nature of the contemporary world does not limit to artistic expressions, or to the aesthetic

explanations. Painting, sculpting, drawing and other artistic expressions considered to be “traditional” are making way for new ways of expression, which should belong to visual language

grammar. Any study should include several “languages” of the visual fields into a unified discipline of studying the imagined and imaginary manifestations of humanity into artistic forms.

### Inside the structure of paintings

“The composition in painting” (*Compoziția în pictură*, Polirom, 2009) by M.J. Bartos is a study dedicated to understanding the internal forces that generate meaning in the world of arts. For Bartos the visual expressions should be analyzed as a unity between the artistic form and content and, without being a truly structuralist approach, his work is fundamentally dependent to the concepts of artistic expression elaborated by György Képes (who is not extensively quoted in the book, but present altogether). This approach is based on the belief that understanding the organization, the construction and the ordering of elements within the visual object, leads to the ultimate understanding of the work of art as a whole. As it was for Képes, the explanation of visual structures – and his view was based on analyzing the concept of “plastic organization” (in *Language of Vision*) – provide an explanation of the message of the visual works of art. All visual messages, all vision-languages in the end, are determined by the relationship between structure and order, thus identifying these elements, explaining the process of internal organization allows the “reader” of visual art to get inside the deep meaning. For Bartos also, the key “visual tools” are identical as those described by Képes,

and his examination is very similar: when we define the internal constraints of the plastic space, with all its compositional structures, we end up with a general understanding of the artistic intent, be it of psychological consequences, or of aesthetic relevance.

In order to develop a general theory of the composition, the author defines visual arts as a broad field – and this is one of the strong points in the argument Bartos makes – he is including plastic arts, decorative arts, photographic arts, design and architecture in a general “visual field”, responding to identical compositional tensions. These visual artistic manifestations are seen as structural visual systems, a coherent unity based on the relations between the internal, plastic, elements.



A fundamental concept for Bartos is that of structure, thus studying geometrical and plastic structures within the visual image – horrible notion, which shows a lack of methodology – must start with the understanding of the logic of the artistic object, having an internal logic and an external one, the general ordering of the plastic image. The author wants to find a historical evolution for composition, thanks to the references from antiquity to Renaissance he reviews the most important means to define the principles of evaluating a work of art. For operating these criteria, the author describes a set of compositional factors, both objective and subjective, that would allow to analyze a work of art. The transfer from the historical to the plastic language practice is made possible by the simple organization of the formal elements within the work of art. Here the interpretive possibilities are extracted from the organization – introducing order in the field of perception equals with using rules and formula that will arrange art objects. These elements are limited: balance, symmetry, harmony and unity. Starting with the definition of the plastic space, which is considered to be the main element of formal manifestation, the description goes to the configuring aspects of visual objects. In this context the structural approach for scene analysis allows the interpretation of the relationship between the artistic meaning and the development of the work of art. In the compositional “evolution”, describing the evolution of the artistic object from

form, to color, to shading, then texture and finally the movement, denotes the conviction of the author that significance is built up, is constructed.

But organizing the internal formal elements remains a problem that has been long debated, and the fact that representation exists by sheer forms is only one approach. Bartos does not give the reader any critical views of this very profound debate in the history of arts and the aesthetics of art. Another questionable approach is that Bartos is using a very much evolutionary, deterministic historical approach – starting with the utterly graphic representations in the Mesolithic era, he moves to finding elements of organization in several historical moments of the human art, which takes the author (and the reader) into temporal jumps, over several millennia, without producing evidence for a clear continuity of forms.

Since structure is the fundamental concept, at the core of his explanations the author uses two main definitions of structure: one that has to do with the formal organization – the discrete level of structure – of the visual, and one that manifests as an external representation, at the explicit art object. Here Bartos is following Rudolf Arnheim in his search for the principles of formal significance, and the author proceeds to a extremely structural definition – we have symmetrical structures, projected structures, modular structures, points-based structures, linear structures – all these give away a level of significance

production in the work of art. Using as central argument the existence of geometric forms (like the triangle, the square, the rectangle, the circle and so on), the author develops a series of semiotic interpretations of these geometric forms. Again, considering forms as essential entities and applying them to the composition of artistic forms, the author tries to explain the relationship between such external computations and the structure of plastic object, not always on the point. As in every formalist approach, Bartos believes that there is an evolution of the forms, from the simplest to the more complex, in a very deterministic manner: the meaning „grows” from point to line, from plane to volume, so every work of art „evolves” into a masterpiece.

Since he realizes that this is not the case in visual arts as a generalized rule, the author is looking further for the simplest laws of composition and this preoccupation for specifications and specificity leads into a sort of structural universality. Using concepts like unity and diversity, order and disorder, harmony and balance, symmetry, proportion, rhythm, we can get to an understanding of the artistic expression, but not to the definition of absolute artistic mechanisms. All these elements of expression are described as internal manifestations of the plastic language.

The problems appear when the visual arts – substituting the plastic arts – are considered to be specific forms of communication, which have multiple possibilities of interpretation. Only at the

profound level of the artistic image we can identify structures and the semantic that are specific to this language, affirms Bartos. But this narrow understanding of what is “the visual” – where visual equals artistic – does not allow a wider use of such principles.

Building on a presupposed “grammar of the artistic” the visual language is considered to be limited to the system of rules of organizing the elements, the means of expression, of the work of art. Fundamentally structured in an analogy with linguistics, the author uses freely the notions of morphology and syntax. The simplest elements of plastic language, like the point, the line, or to color are considered to be “an alphabet” that would later generate a specific grammar. The problem is that there is no syntax which explains the shift from basic elements, as the point or the line, towards more complex elements like the surface, the form, the color, the value or the volume and how these relate in a syntax. Associating symbolic meaning to the formal elements is one method that the author uses to overcome this lack at the level of organizing the internal structure of visual forms – and very well so. Intending to move from the formal to the syntactic part of the visual language, the author feels the need to enrich the vocabulary of this visual grammar – and the only obvious solution is to define some means of „plastic expression”, of non-formal expressivity. Unfortunately the loose distinction between plastic, pictorial and what it is generally visual

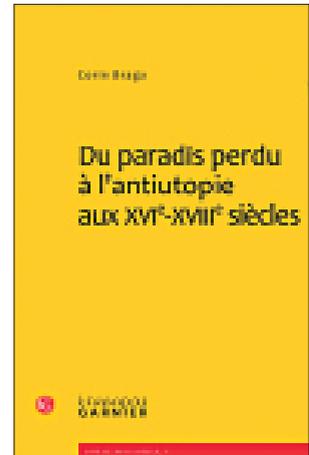
becomes extremely counter-productive, and does not allow a coherent argument in favor of such (useful) transfer.

The best part of the book is the last chapter, entitled “Forms and types of compositions in painting” where the author analyzes several works of art, in a series of content analyses, starting with *The Spring* of Botticelli and continuing with works from Renoir or Andrei Rublev. The applied nature of such an

approach becomes more than relevant. At this very practical level the formal nature of composition gathers momentum and allows us to add the connotations and the symbols, backing any form of interpretation. It is here that Bartos provides a conceptual and aesthetic development of his theoretical efforts. It is here that the book becomes a useful instrument for specialists and students of visual arts and culture.

### Imaginary maps to and from Paradise

The search for the lost Eden and the desire for an Utopia on Earth (and the succeeding relationship between the Ideal Society and the Anti-Utopias of modernity) has long been a research problem, which was put into various interpretative contexts. To better understand this “obsession” with utopias we need to use the classical conceptualization of Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, who extensively discussed the “utopian imaginary”. In this respect, the analysis of utopianism can provide an understanding of the ideal of social organization, as it was (is) constructed in various works, from literature to philosophy, and from theology to arts. As a matter of fact, Utopia and utopianism can be considered as one of the most important concepts in the study of imaginary, specially that coming from the tradition of the French school of studying the imaginary structures (starting with Durand and ending with Wunenburger). In this perspective, images and imaginary constructions are considered the forces that drive societies, and the study of their development should generate a deeper view of how our culture is shaped through time.



This is what the research of Corin Braga (*Du paradis perdu à l'antiutopie aux XVIe-XVIIIe siècles*, Editions Classiques Garnier, Paris, 2010) is doing – the author is reviewing the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, from the perspective of a narrow conceptual dialogue: paradise and utopia. This allows the author to describe an evolutionary map of the imaginary through space and time, producing an archetypal description of civilization, followed by metaphysical connections. Following the key definition

of the imaginary as a composite form of social behavior and self-assessment – basically a “mental production” of the reality, in the terms of Wunenburger – Braga is focusing on cultural productions of two centuries. The premise being that these two hundred years of history are fundamental for the development of the modern civilization.

As Wunenburger already explained in his 1979 book (*L'utopie ou La crise de l'imaginaire*) the modern imaginary is “socialized” by means of addressing utopianism. Continuing the logic of Wunenburger’s analysis, Braga develops this view into an integrated reading of Late Medieval to Early Modern references to Utopia and Paradise. These two concepts (as ideal/ imaginary spaces and times) are both opposed and identifiable. This is not a new connection, it was already proved and explained in the works of Jacques Le Goff (in his *L'Imaginaire médiéval*, 1985), or Roger Caillois (*La Pieuvre. Essai sur la logique de l'imaginaire*, 1973). The novelty of the research developed by Corin Braga infers to another level of connotation. Using what Jean Servier (from *Histoire de l'utopie*, 1967) has already noted, that the “golden age” of utopias coincides with the golden age of geographical discoveries, and that the great travels of the XVIIth century influenced profoundly the social constructions following, Braga takes the interpretation a notch deeper. The author notes – and digs into textual references – for changes in the imaginary, changes that are happening in the transition from the Christian paradigms towards

the humanistic utopia. He is proving that these changes produced symbolic shifts, paradigmatic transformations of images and imaginary structures, and, while the fantastic descriptions of the new geographical discoveries are added to European (and not just European) mentalities, there is also a transformation of entire social forms of organization. The link seems obvious – the maritime crossings of the Atlantic Ocean and the discovery of the New World were followed by social and imaginary changes. Braga is giving us cultural, literary and theological explanations for why this is an all circulating theme, and is built around the desire of humanity to find an Ideal place (both in terms of imagination, of social construction and of mental representations).

By “socializing the imaginary” the interpreter produces explanations for the apparition of new forms of social life, and Braga generates the necessary cultural relationships between Paradise and Utopia – as a better and ideal place in a period when the collective imaginary was under heavy transformation. Modern imagination – as modeled by the fantasies of such spaces (places, times) – is yet to be totally understood. Those were convulsive ages, looking for an Ideal City on Earth was confronted with its reverse, the search for a counter-Utopia, and the tension between these two views on the world are responsible for some of the most important transformation in the collective imagination.

The author searches also for the historical resources of Utopia, not only

for literary and mythological ones, and is starting with the earliest possible resources, as they have been expressed by the Old Testament and other Oriental sources. Observing that the religions in the Middle East were fundamentally dependent on Millenary fantasies, Braga is actually explaining the way these themes evolved centuries later. Waiting for the new Paradise or the dreaming for the loss of a primordial place can be considered as similar in the movement of imaginary structures. The negation of the access into such a perfect place was developed into philosophy, and this ensured a further development of disciplines that gave access to other imaginary perfect places. So alchemy, astrology, theology, hermetism, the Kabbalah or the neo-platonism are to be considered such efforts to find a fantastic universe, ones that provide the backgrounds for contemporary ways of thinking.

It is remarkable that Braga avoids any references to ideology and ideological formalizing of the imaginary – even when dealing with very difficult topics (like church censorship) he maintains a neutral, yet objective view on the evolution of concepts. Discussing the role played by the institution of the Church and the development of modern forms of organization, the impact on concepts like liberty and conscience, theology and society, religious imaginary and institutional morality, the relationship with authorities, are all evoked in an early stage of modern imagination formations,

before the end of Renaissance and the beginning of a European consciousness. The theme of the lost paradise, the voyage and search for an ideal space are seen as the main forces behind the shift in imaginary. Moving from “the city of God” towards the City of Men allows the author to analyze how immortality and morality changes, how the nature of humanity and the philosophies concerning identity are constructions of an imaginary demands for the affirmation of fundamental concepts belonging to the Judeo-Christian mythology.

The books is not only a list of discourses about Utopia, it is also an in-depth, psycho-geographical interpretation, one that offers access both to geographical metaphors and to mythological symbolisms. And when the search for conceptual “archaeology” of Utopia coincides with a history of Paradise, in the same time following the search for sacredness of humanity, the analytical discourse gains momentum. Fundamental theological notions like primordial sin, or the idea of salvation and others come from the same roots as the imaginary search for Paradise and Utopia. Questioning why the Paradise and the Milenary empire were at the extremities of Christianity world view, why replacing cosmic eschatology with the promises of an empire on Earth are fundamental ideas of modernity, means to find the roots of some of the most important ideas in the contemporary world. Progress, dynamics of a history, perfection in society, modern utopias and the ability of humanity to

control its history, they all stem from these fundamental issues. The author starts with the hypothesis that Paradise does not have a *topos* localized in a single geography and is not limited to a single space. Ancient civilizations continue to transfer their imaginary structures to contemporary cultures, so interpretation and re-interpretation of texts like Genesis chapters 2 and 3, or from the fathers of the early Church, to Thomas More, and from Casanova to Campanella, and in counter-utopias like Jonathan Swift and Guyot Desfontaines, toward the Baroque literature, from Robinson (Crusoe) to Adam (from Eden), can all be connected by reusing the same fundamental mythological imaginary structure.

In order to have a better understanding of the line of arguments in this study, one example is to be found in the way Braga looks for the main hypotheses of utopianism in medieval mythologies and in the Middle Ages interpretations for the symbols of the garden. Re-reading, for example, the works of Thomas More, provides access into an important moment of mythical imaginary, one that would move towards larger projects, that would

be socially relevant. Also, the fantastic imaginary of medieval rhetoric re-oriented towards civilization practices, utopian projects mean a symbolic representation of humanity. So, in this logic, interpreting the voyages in the early modernity should be based on the same imaginary fantasies. The search for Terra Nova, Terra Firma and other „Biblical Edens” to the West stem from the symbolic location for an earthly Paradise.

The study Corin Braga puts forward proves that these are ever returning concepts, ones that shape the way we understand today humanity and social identity. With a good knowledge of medieval sources and theological references, the author provides a deep understanding of the heritage of modernity. This adds up into a global mapping of imaginaries, looking for “utopias” and the problems of this concept from America to Africa, and then back to Europe, the author presents a well documented history of imaginary. We have at the end an intellectual map of imaginary structures and geographies, with examples from literature and philosophy, all brought together into a clear explanation.