

From the Reasons of Myth to the Myth of Reason: Europe in a Verbo-visual Investigation

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ABSTRACT. This article explores the construction of Europe’s image through the interplay of myth, iconography and cartography, demonstrating how these visual and narrative devices contribute to the formation of the European collective imaginary. Starting from the paradoxes of cartographic representation, I try to analyse the evolution of Europa/e from a mythical figure to a political and geographical allegory, highlighting the role of images in defining identity and political-cultural hierarchies. Far from being opposed to myth, modern rationality thus appears to be founded upon and constantly anchored to the processes of mythologisation that underpin its claim to universality. Finally, through modern and contemporary artistic examples that contribute to a critical reconfiguration of the image of Europe, I suggest the adoption of a de-teleological perspective open to the redefinition of its cultural and geopolitical status.

Keywords: Myth; Reason; Imaginary; Iconography; Cartography

0. Introduction

In order to explore the relationship between idea, imagination and reality in which the name Europe operates, this article aims to offer a historical and artistic overview – spanning literature, visual arts and cartography – that ponders on the creation of the image of Europe, or rather its constitution as an image. I believe, in fact, that this is important not only because the image of “Europe” reflects and

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celebrates the transformations and aspirations of a particular area geographic and geopolitical but, more precisely, because it actively contributes to its constitution. The *image* is the essential tool of the construction of the collective imaginary. Its *picture*, therefore, is to be understood as the *device* through which *Europe imagines* itself; it is the instrument through which it gives itself to be seen. My aim is then to show how the geopolitical and cultural idea of Europe is rooted in a specific narrative and in cohesive and legitimizing images that establish its mythical foundation, and how this imaginary affects, even at present, Europe's perception of itself and the goals it sets for itself.

1. Of the paradoxes of maps

To open this verbo-visual exploration, I will begin by considering two paradoxes of cartography—briefly outlining them before setting them aside, to be revisited later.

Let us start with the first. Borges' famous short story on mapping the Empire contains, in perfect Borgesian style, one of the most semiotic paradoxes ever. The short story, written in 1935 and included under the title *Del rigor en la ciencia* in the collection *Historia universal de la infamia*, tells of an extraordinary time when exceptional Cartographers from an unspecified empire produced a 1:1 scale map, that is, a map of such perfection that it reproduced the territories in their exact extent: a map paradoxical, coextensive with the entire territory of the empire. Umberto Eco, in *Dell'impossibilità di costruire la carta dell'impero 1 a 1* (*On the Impossibility of Constructing the 1:1 Map of the Empire*), dwells with irony on the logical implications of Borges' fiction, laying out the paradoxes to which such a representation would lead. Among these, one is particularly noteworthy, as it recalls the Russell–Frege paradox:

Dal momento in cui la mappa è installata ricoprendo tutto il territorio (sia essa stesa o sospesa), il territorio dell'impero è caratterizzato dal fatto di essere un territorio integralmente ricoperto da una mappa. Di questa caratteristica la mappa non rende ragione. A meno che sulla mappa non fosse collocata un'altra mappa che rappresenta il territorio più la mappa sottostante. Ma il processo sarebbe infinito (argomento del terzo uomo). In ogni caso, se il processo si arresta, si dà una mappa finale che rappresenta tutte le mappe fraposte tra sé e il territorio ma non rappresenta se stessa. (...) Di qui i seguenti due corollari:

1. Ogni mappa uno a uno riproduce il territorio sempre infedelmente.
2. Nel momento in cui realizza la mappa, l'impero diventa irrappresentabile¹.

¹ U. Eco, *Dell'impossibilità di costruire la carta dell'impero 1 a 1*, in Id., *Il secondo diario minimo*. Milano: Bompiani, 1992, pp. 157–163. Here is my translation into English: "From the moment the map is installed covering the whole territory (whether lying or hanging), the territory of the empire

However, this is not the only paradox into which the art of cartography can fall. There exists, in addition, a *projective paradox*, which we might call the *point-of-view paradox*.

Contrary to Borges' narrative, the cartographic representation of Europe, and indeed the history of European cartography, does not operate in the direction of *scale extension* but rather of *scale projection*. This projection varies according to the chosen cartographic model, since the relationship between the size of territories on the map and their real extent changes depending on the projection adopted. Among the most significant are two well-known models: the *planispheric projection* proposed by Gerardus Mercator for marine navigation², and the later projection developed in 1963 by Canadian cartographer Arthur H. Robinson, published in 1988 by *National Geographic*.

The first, also called *hexagonal* or *conformal*, constructs parallels and meridians through a Cartesian grid of orthogonal lines, ensuring precision in shapes and directions but progressively elongating the depicted areas as one moves from the equator toward the poles. The second projection, by contrast, minimizes such distortions by distributing them across the various geopolitical areas; in doing so, however, it sacrifices strict adherence to the classical conventions of cartographic representation concerning equivalence, equidistance, and isogony. In other words, it relinquishes mathematical accuracy for visual balance.

Naturally, no "true" projection exists. A perfectly accurate one would require a simultaneous point of view encompassing the entire spherical surface of the globe. That is, it should correspond to the impossible tabular plane drawing of a paradoxical *global viewpoint*³.

What happens to Europe under these two mapping systems? In Robinson's projection, the European continent appears overall compressed, its visual centrality diminished. In Mercator's, by contrast, Europe occupies a longitudinally larger area than Africa or South America. This disproportion, though seemingly innocuous, cannot be dismissed as without consequence for Europe's perception of itself.

is characterized by the fact that it is a territory integrally covered by a map. Of this characteristic the map does not account for it. Unless another map was placed on the map that represents the territory plus the map below. But the process would be endless (third man's argument). In any case, if the process stops, it gives a final map that represents all the maps between itself and the territory but does not represent itself. We call this map Normal Map (...) Hence the following two corollaries:

1. Each one-to-one map always reproduces the territory unfaithfully.
2. The moment it realizes the map, the empire becomes unrepresentable".

² We refer to the Flemish geographer and cartographer Gerardus Mercator: *Nova et aucta orbis terrae descriptio ad usum navigantium emendate accommodata*, 1569.

³ G. Boffi, *Per altri atlanti*, Orthotes, 2014, p. 136.

The question thus becomes: which distortion should one adopt? And, implicitly, within which narrative does each map operate? For the map is never a neutral depiction: it is always both *description* and *narrative*, both a measuring tool and a device for constructing narratives.

2. Europe: towards a geographical designation

A first step toward understanding the visual construction of Europe requires us to clarify the very notion of “Europe” as a geographical designation. This means identifying when and how the term begins to acquire meaning as a spatial and political entity, and how that meaning becomes visible—literally *represented*—in the history of images and maps. In fact, the narrative of *Europa* and *Europe* takes shape and gains coherence through the interplay of myth, cartography, and art. In order to explore this original intertwining of images and narratives, we will start from Greek mythology, or rather from the reasons behind the myth to which the name Europa refers and through which originally “imagines” (becomes an image) itself.

The name of Europa first appears in myth with Homer and Hesiod (*Theogony*, 7th century BCE) associated with the story of the Phoenician princess of Tyre kidnapped by Zeus who, in the guise of magnificent white bull, drags her with him across the sea to Crete⁴.

The etymology of the name Europa is rather uncertain. While some hypotheses trace the name to its geographic matrix, whereby the term “*erek*” would mean “west”, others trace the name to its mythical-cultural meaning, whereby it would be related to “face” or “broad face”, in reference to the Minoan lunar goddess Ellotis (Europa), thus to the full moon. From this perspective, Europa can be traced to the Cretan festivals called Ellotie, fertility rites celebrating the union of the lunar goddess with the bull-Zeus, associated with the name Asterios, or god of the stars⁵.

Consistent with the geographical connotations of her name, the composition of Europa’s family in the myth—specifically her brothers Phoenix, Cilix, and Cadmus—appears to reflect a corresponding geographical etymology. Such an interpretation would suggest the memory of ancient ethnic movements directed toward the Aegean-Anatolian sphere, and more precisely toward Crete and the Greek mainland. Within this framework, the myth may be understood as encoding the oppositional polarity

⁴ Although linked to Greek culture, the mythical story of Europa, centred on the union between the female and bull elements, represents a truly complex mythological archetype that finds some resonance in Palaeolithic art. Furthermore, three children were born from the union between Zeus and Europa: Sarpedon, Adamantus and Minos. It is with the latter that the archetypal story of the union between women and bulls will continue; from the union between his wife Pasiphaë and a bull sent by Poseidon, as is well known, the mythical Minotaur will be born.

⁵ See F. Calabi, *Il sogno di Europa e il ratto di Zeus*, in “Materiali di Estetica”, n. 6. 2: 2019, p. 8.

between “east” and “west,” embodied respectively in the foundations attributed to Cadmus and his lineage on the eastern side, and to Europa on the western⁶.

In the name “Europa”, therefore, we can recognize on the one hand a religious-cultural component, on the other hand a mythical core to which is associated, however, a fluctuating geographical location, which changes according to the texts.

At times, Europa’s geographical location is described with a certain precision, as in Homer’s *Hymn to Apollo*, where she is associated with the territories north of the Aegean Sea, and thus with mainland Greece. In other instances, however, her placement is more general and ambiguous, as in Hesiod, where it derives from a simple contrast between Europa—mythical daughter of Oceanus and Tethys—and another Oceanid named Asia. Finally, there are cases in which her geographical position becomes altogether indeterminate, and Europa appears both as a mythical figure and as a land to be sought. This is the case in the account of the Alexandrian author Moschus (2nd century CE), who narrates the abduction of Europa and specifies that her father, Agenor, commanded her brothers to set out in search of her and not to return until they had found her. Having failed in their goal, the brothers stayed in other places and founded respectively: Thebes (Greece), Cilicia (southeastern Turkey) and Phoenicia (Lebanon). In this version, therefore, Europa is not found, and it is precisely the highly symbolic search for her that establishes her.

From these premises, we can focus on some crucial aspects. First, the myth seems to have to do with ethnic migratory flows and the foundation of the Cretan (Minoan) civilisation, which had a decisive influence on Greek civilisation. Secondly, the geographical location of Europa is deeply ambiguous, if not impossible. Finally, Europa is a female geographical figure, a woman-land often contrasted with Asia.

In addition to the progressive shift from heroine to geographic designation, there is the shift from mythical figure to political concept, which finds a decisive moment in the Middle Ages, both in an anti-Pagan and anti-Arab function, thus founded on religious glue. In this historical phase, it is no accident that we witness a profound transformation of the image of Europe and the name, to which is preferred, very significantly, that of *Christianity*. This is perhaps the first moment of profound geographical and geopolitical definition for Europe.

3. Europe as a feminine allegory

The iconographic evolution of the myth of Europa, across sculpture, decoration, painting, and cartography, bears clear witness to these transformations leading to

⁶ G. Facchetti, D. Cermesoni, O. Khalaf, *Il mito di Europa e il mito dell’Europa*, in “De Europa”, Special Issue, 2021, p. 23.

its conceptualisation and, in fact, constitutes the principal medium through which this change is articulated.

If pre-Hellenic iconography depicts the priestess of the moon galloping triumphantly over the solar bull, as revealed by an ornate glass plaque, the seventh century B.C. with a *pithos* preserved at the Biliotèque National in Paris marks the first depiction of the myth, coeval with the literary production of Hesiod. From here on there are numerous depictions with minor variations. In the Metope of the Acropolis of Selinunte, for example, Europa is depicted with the bull and not on it. In addition, she is girded with a veil puffed up by the wind⁷.

In medieval times, Europa is transformed from a maiden kidnapped by a bull-god – established since the 7th Century b.C. – to a woman harnessed as a warrior. Or, even more interestingly, she changes gender and becomes Japheth (son of Noah and progenitor of the European peoples). Of course, this change goes hand in hand with what was pointed out earlier with respect to the naming of the continent, which changes from Europe to Christianity. In this phase, the undoubtedly most important figure is Charlemagne who, moreover, is hailed as "*rex pater Europae*", whose triumph emerges in contrast to Arab expansion. To what extent the Holy Roman Empire was "Roman" and not already *in nuce* "European" is a great subject for debate. However, what is important to note is that, despite the unraveling that would follow Charlemagne's death, the European continent, whose partitioning among his grandsons already shows a rather recognizable configuration for us of the pre-national territories, Europe would, all things considered, find greater unity by virtue of religion acting as the real glue.

The sixteenth century is extraordinarily rich. From a historical point of view, it is a century ravaged by wars of religion and in which stands the very important figure of Charles V, a figure to be understood as the real starting point of a truly European history animated by a project of establishing a universal Christian monarchy. It is also so for the stabilization of the iconographic code of Europa and its relation to cartographic art. Indeed, this phase witnesses the definitive entry of a Europa-allegory into maps. An allegorization unthinkable without the passage through the numerous *Commentaries* to the work the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid⁸, such as the *Ovidius moralizatus*, which betray the need to reconcile myth with moral and religious dictates, that is, to make it compatible with Holy Scripture. In fact, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which literally act as a hinge between Greek and Latin cultures,

⁷ See F. Calabi, *Il sogno di Europa e il ratto di Zeus*, p. 13, image 5.

⁸ Among them: *Ovidius moralizatus*; *Allegoriae super Ovidii Metamorphosin* by Arnulf of Orleans (12th century), the *Insegnamenta super Ovidium Metamorphoseos* by John of Garlandia (13th century), the *Expositio and Allegoriae librorum Ovidii Metamorphoseos* by John of Virgil (early 14th century); 1557 *La Metamorphose d'Ovide figurée*.

sanction the triumphant entry of the myth of Europa into the Renaissance and fix its iconography, particularly with respect to the position of Europa, who looks back toward the shore and is depicted riding the bull, that is, being carried by the animal.

Like Europe, other continents are also increasingly personified by female figures at this stage, which are three, of course, in the period leading up to the colonization of the American continent and in which the link between continent and female figure is, in the aftermath of the brief medieval period, definitely re-established⁹.

This association between female figure and continent, certainly dictated by an initial kinship between mythical figure and geographical designation, is much deeper than it might appear at first glance. Take, for example, the very concept of a “somatopic map”, the most famous of which also appeared in Sebastian Münster’s *Cosmography* (1550-1554): *Europa in forma virginis* drawn in 1537 by John (“Bucius”) Putsch. In this map, *soma* and *topos* end up coinciding. This is an extremely significant identification as it tells us three things simultaneously: it establishes a complex link between female body and land, perhaps in part by ascribing to the land the value of “potential space of conquest”; the anatomical and biopolitical hierarchy of the body, dictated by specific philosophical and moral values, is transposed to the geopolitical plane and is validated as a geopolitical hierarchy within Europe and outside it; it sanctions an important passage through the identification between head/reason, crown and expansion.

In this map, Europe is not represented as a mythical maiden, but as a continent in the allegorical form of a woman-queen, whose head seems to me to have relevance on the philosophical level as well. It is *Ratio* in its dual philosophical-political connotation that is implicitly exalted in this representation. This is perhaps one of the most relevant passages in the path that I would call, anticipating some aspects that we will take up later, of mythicization of reason. Or, if you prefer, it is one of the most refined tools of the European “mythological machine”¹⁰. In fact, here Europe is depicted in the silhouette of a queen, in which the strategic position of the various countries can be seen in different anatomical parts.

With Africa on the left and Asia at the bottom, thus with an orientation of the “global” chessboard turned 90 degrees, Europe is depicted with Spain, the protagonist of the colonial affair, at the head, literally, and the northeastern countries, including Greece on the edge of the skirt (Greece being lost to Ottoman hands at that time) and Russia at the foot. This “periphery” of the body, as well as periphery of the map that refers to the subjugation of the more “humble” areas of the body to the

⁹ After all, just like continents, cities too are personified by female characters, often resorting to the figure of the turreted woman. Maps are descriptive-narrative texts that resort to personifying even landscapes. Mountains, for example, are rendered allegorically through the depiction of wild hermits.

¹⁰ See: F. Jesi, *Il tempo della festa*, Nottetempo Ed., 2019.

head, is very important because it represents in the most incisive way something that will be increasingly evident in the following centuries; namely the fact that this area, or frontier, has a “defensive” character. It is a defensive border as opposed to the reigning head, which constitutes, instead, an “expansive” border.

This link between cartography and anatomy, moreover, is far from coincidental. From the 16th century, as Giuliana Bruno in her *Atlante delle emozioni* reconstructs, atlases began to frequently use the same figurative codes used to depict bodies in anatomy books. Geography and anatomy, particularly with Vesalius, imagine the body in the same way, establishing reversible relationships. *Geography anatomized* is in fact the title of one of the texts of the time. Thus, anatomical illustrations also become real maps, where at the edges of the frames of the anatomical drawings stripes are drawn, a kind of tabular grid in every way analogous to those in use in cartography¹¹.

The process of Europa’s transformation from myth to allegory, enabled by the literary proliferation of the *Metamorphoses*, its *Commentaries* – as well as Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus claris*, who considered the mythical maiden Europa a *woman worthy of giving her name to a continent* –, fosters the presence of female figures, between the 16th and 18th centuries, in the field of geography representation. Indeed, the masculine figure of Atlas, who holds the globe on his shoulders and offers it to view, is associated with a series of female figures, or “powerful women” who inhabit maps¹². Not only, then, allegories of the continents, each with a specific iconography, but also women depicted in the act of “delineating” a knowledge that seems to be more than just cartographic. Tools such as compasses and easels are often associated with these figures (e.g., 1622: Atlas by Willem Blaeu or 1611: World Map by Jodocus Hondius, which shows a woman pointing a compass at a globe and surrounded by an array of knowledge tools). These are aspects that also characterize seventeenth-century Dutch portraits, in which a woman often appears, in the center, leaning on the globe (often, moreover, a symbol of vanity).

Among these examples, there is one of particular importance for the fortune the text will enjoy. It is Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia* (1593). Here it is Geography itself that is a woman measuring the globe and pointing a compass toward the sky. Interesting that in his *Iconology*, Theory itself becomes a map. Theory, a figure associated by the Greeks with vision and contemplation, here is depicted in architectural form and redefined in geographical terms. She is a young woman looking up, holding her joined hands with an open compass with its points toward Heaven, is dressed in blue, and is depicted in the act of descending from the top of a ladder.

¹¹ See: G. Bruno, *Atlante delle emozioni. In viaggio tra arte, architettura e cinema*, Joahn & Levi, 2015, p. 256.

¹² *Ibid.*

In the description of Theory provided by Cesare Ripa, writes Giuliana Bruno, the geographical ascent takes haptic form. The compass, literally stuck in the woman's head, becomes a cognitive prosthesis. *This epistemic headset* is quite spacious, as the compass is wide open to the world. Similar to a set of hands and receivers, it figuratively transforms into her antennae, her spatial sensors¹³.

Within this allegory of Theory entwined with Geography, one may discern a passage of exceptional significance. A profound correspondence unfolds between reason as a cognitive and contemplative power – *theoria* (*théorein*) as its specific exercise – and the practice of “drawing the world”. This represents one of the moments of greatest expansion of the head–reason, of that “expansive frontier” that *Europa in forma virginis* seems to anticipate. It is the compass stuck in the head: the compass as a cognitive prosthesis.

Further on, with Jan Barend Elwe's Atlas we find a female geographical allegory. Atlas, the male mythical figure holding the globe is relegated to the background and the figuration of geographic knowledge is dominated by two women who seem to be literally creating geography. One standing holds a compass over the globe while her other hand skims its surface. She is painting a map, or charting the globe–“drawing the world”. The earth here is not feminized but, on the contrary, the female figure appears to be the subject of a decisive act of mapping. The other woman, in the foreground of the image, sits in front of the globe and is drawing. Once again the link between spatial knowledge and female figures is enshrined. Here, moreover, the act of figuration itself is also portrayed.

Although these female figures do not strictly represent Europa, it is perhaps possible to recognise a connection between the progressive stabilisation of the code of the European aristocratic woman that emerges in these figures and the personification of Europa. In fact, not only is there a correspondence between these allegorical figures (which literally determine the code of European women¹⁴) and the allegory of Europa in the codes adopted, but it is even possible to identify behind each allegorical female figure a sort of Europa, who is continually forged and claimed thanks to them.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

¹⁴ Giuliana Bruno highlights this connection between mapping and designing the code of European women. As she observes in her Atlas, through the work of mapping, a real act of “modelling” was taking place, whereby the decoration of maps became a way of “designing” difference and inscribing it in the geographical terrain. Moreover, it is interesting to note the transposition of the figurative codes in a circularity that fully restores the deep semantic relationship between different spheres, such that, “if the cartographer resorted to the figurative codes of the costume books to describe the body-sexual, the costume book in turn borrowed from geography and travel culture to ‘model’ the body. See: G. Bruno, *Atlante delle emozioni*, p. 257.

Parallel to its iconographic evolution in cartography, the allegorical figure of Europa also underwent decisive transformations in the fine arts, to be considered literally at the service of the geopolitical and identity construction of Europe. In particular, its image changed radically from the 16th century onwards and from a kidnapped maiden she is often transformed into a sovereign or matron. This transition marks the triumph of Europa and Eurocentrism: the female figure now takes on a very strong political connotation. Therefore, some of these elements present in the myth are also replaced.

This is a transformation already present in Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, in which we see a Europe, described as the "first and principal part of the world", endowed with tools, such as: owl; temple (as a symbol of "perfect and most true religion"); cornucopia and horse instead of bull.

The replacement of the symbolic animal from the bull (symbol of energy, fertility and sacrifice) to the horse is very important because it introduces a real iconographic phase¹⁵. It is worth noting that this replacement can be interpreted as a transition towards the exaltation of Europe's military power. (After all, as historian Daniel R. Headrick pointed out in *The Dominance of the West: Technology, Environment, Imperialism*, the horse was the first technology of war). We find Europe represented with the horse in Francesco Trevisani's preparatory paintings (1709) for the mosaics in the vestibule of the chapel of the baptistery of St. Peter's, for example, where she is enriched with a series of symbols that combine temporal and religious power (such as the papal tiara, tabernacle, arms, sceptre and crown).

In the context of this iconographic transformation, however, often only the position of the female figure changes¹⁶. From sitting on the bull's rump and looking toward the shore, which in Greek myth refers to the passivity of Europa as a victim of Zeus's ransom, she is found at the bull's side. But the bull has also changed; it is now a tame, well-fed animal, often with its horns adorned with garlands. In Veronese's painting "The Rape of Europa" (1580), for example, Europa is depicted next to an adorned bull and displays all the richness and refinement of the fabrics of her clothes. In the background, a pyramid, symbol of wisdom, can also be glimpsed. Sometimes, however, she is found in a triumphant position, seated on a cloud. This is what Tiepolo depicts in a famous fresco whose spatial organization all converges on the part dedicated to her. Of course, there are also different representations, such as that of

¹⁵ This period also consolidated the iconography of the other continents, which were also associated with a symbolic animal: Europe-bull (or horse)-was joined by Africa, associated with the elephant or crocodile, Asia associated with the camel, and America associated with the alligator.

¹⁶ In selecting some of the iconographic references presented in this article, I was inspired by the notes from the seminar given by: Y. Guaiana, *Europa tra mito e realtà: Europa: mito, semantica e caratteri geografici*, Università degli Studi di Milano – Bicocca, 2008.

Rubens who, in *The Consequences of War*, depicts Europa as a woman mourning the loss of her children. The question that arises, however, is how incisive these isolated representations are in the construction of the European imaginary. Or, again, Europa is depicted in a semi-reclining, languid position, much like a river goddess. A true *pathos formel*, to use the term adopted by Aby Warburg in his psycho-historical exploration. It is no coincidence, in this sense, that it is possible to discern a reversibility between the figure of Europa and that of the River. In fact, the allegory of Europa, on some occasions, abandons the female figure to be replaced by that of the River, or river deity. This is the case with the fountain in Piazza Navona in Rome, where we have the representation of the four continents through the rivers that symbolise them: the Danube for Europe, the Rio de la Plata for the Americas, the Ganges for Asia and the Nile for Africa. It is therefore not surprising that behind the Danube there is a horse, as if leaping out of the rock.

From this reconstruction of the iconographic evolution of *Europa*, a complex process of transformation clearly emerges. First, the figure of Europa undergoes a gradual metamorphosis from maiden to matron, a passage that reflects not only a change in iconographic conventions but also a shift in symbolic meaning. Alongside this, the relationship between Europa and the symbolic animal evolves: the wild bull of the ancient myth is progressively domesticated, at times replaced by the horse or by a tamed bull, both signs of a reason that subdues and governs instinct.

This evolution also entails a broader iconographic reconfiguration in which Europa is often depicted in association with new symbolic elements – such as the pyramid or the refinement of clothing – or is concealed behind the many female figures who populate the visual and conceptual domain of geography. In this way, Europa herself comes to embody an “image of thought”: an allegory of scientific reason increasingly defined in opposition to the mythical or “savage” thought that, during the age of the Conquest, is projected onto the Other beyond Europa.

Finally, this iconography makes visible the significant dyad of *war and knowledge*, a tension that underlies the very process by which the image of Europa becomes both an instrument and a symbol of intellectual and territorial domination.

4. The European imaginary between contrastive and historicist logic

These transformations constitute a fundamental mechanism in the construction of a European political identity and cultural imaginary. In fact, despite the persistence of internal conflicts between states, the continent begins to unify around a nascent idea of Europe—held together by subtle symbolic and conceptual bonds that serve as its cohesive force.

From a historical point of view, from the sixteenth century onward it is the moral-religious question that strengthens European cultural identity both in contrast to the American continent (recall the controversy between Bartolomé de Las Casas and Sepúlveda about indigenous people)¹⁷, and, later, against Russia and Asia. Europe, in this sense, is formed in the semantically different space between *expansive border* (spreading westward from the geographic frontier fixed by the oceanic coast) and *defensive border* (mobile and ambiguous border that underwent numerous transformations and had, as geopolitical focus the Ural mountain range, while as cultural focus the Russian question in its uncertain European or Asian definition)¹⁸.

This position “between” America and Asia will change over time but without much alteration in political and cultural perceptions toward the eastern border. Europe will even be threatened as much by the political-economic growth of the U.S. as by that of Russia, but if in the West the confrontation is played out, rather, on the terrain of the discussion about the relations of political filiation (see Tocqueville’s essay *Democracy in America*), in the East it is played out, on the other hand, in that of the clash with models that are difficult to reconcile with the European ones that are thought on the basis of the Greco-Roman one.

Indeed, the European continent, which is highly fragmented (geographically and politically) and has no real *Kernland*, seems to base, therefore, its cultural identity on a *contrastive logic* (of constructing otherness) but also, at the same time, on a *historicist logic*.

Hence Europe’s “civilizing mission” anchored on the *Progress-Civilization* dyad (particularly with the Enlightenment), on the opposition between the savage and the modern and, by virtue of this opposition, on the polarization between myth and *logos* as the foundation of modern Reason¹⁹.

However, the “modern” expulsion of the mythical element from the domain of reason, which utilises and reinforces the fundamental separation between *mythos* and *logos*, seems to me to need reinterpretation. In particular, it should be re-examined

¹⁷ In this sense, defining (by contrast) its own moral and educational standards leads to a process of *secularization of the idea of Europe*. Facchetti, G., Cermesoni, D., Khalaf, O., *Il mito di Europa e il mito dell’Europa*, in “De Europa”, Special Issue, 2021, p. 8.

¹⁸ Y. Guaiana, *Europa tra mito e realtà: Europa: mito, semantica e caratteri geografici*, Università degli Studi di Milano – Bicocca, 2008, Seminar notes: *Europa tra mito e realtà: Europa: mito, semantica e caratteri geografici*.

¹⁹ I believe it is also appropriate to emphasise the importance that will have, particularly with idealism, the historiographic category of “Greekness” as the historical presupposition and mythical-foundational horizon of Europe. Incidentally, it should be noted that “Greekness” as a category is realized on a twofold operation: improper attribution of the oppositional barbarian-civilized pair to classical Greece, and of the “Western” character to Greek culture (also contested by not a few historians, who are more willing to see the Greeks as Eastern).

in light of a process of *mythologisation of reason* that has characterised and continues to characterise modernity, and which legitimises itself precisely in this act of presumed purification from the mythical component of thought.

The illusion of this purification of reason perhaps sanctions the birth act of the modern age, which, however, proves to make use of “mythical” formulations or narratives that serve precisely to legitimize it. One thinks of the narrative connected with the theme of the “savage” that properly inaugurates “modern” thought by placing it in the “historicist” or historical-teleological perspective of “civilization”, that is, by establishing a *spatialized timeline* in which contemporary peoples would paradoxically stand backward in the linear path of Reason²⁰. The mythical formulation of the savage does not exclusively sanction the otherness of peoples – peoples therefore “non-European”, in a logic based on the argument of an “identity by negation” which, at the same time, opens up a whole exploration of the anthropological presuppositions (good savage, *homo lupus*, etc.) of political community-making –, but also the otherness of Reason which is thus established in its exclusion and exclusivity, and which *from a historical concept becomes spatialized*, contributing to the formation of the very “idea” of Europe. In this same perspective, consider also how much the myth of the Golden Age affects the mythical representation of democracy²¹, which will be established, in the aftermath of World War II, as the only form of government that Reason can really validate.

After all, as Wunenburger points out by taking up some of Pascal’s “Pensées”, without an imaginary horizon, social life, that is, norms and institutions, are extremely fragile and appear arbitrary. This justification occurs properly through “myths”, particularly through myths of origin that legitimize institutions and history, and fix their fate. The resulting imaginary, then, performs the function of “practical institutive orientation”²². Among the “mythogenetic” elements observed by Wunenburger relating to the origin myths of cities should be mentioned: the filiation of the urban space from the world of the gods, which invests the space with sacredness; the fact that the foundation takes the form of a sacred rite and thus implies the establishment of a *mundus* that attests to the “urban” adventure in the non-natural and transformative character that it cannot have unless integrated into a sacred symbolism; finally, the birth of the city in connection with a violence assimilated and overcome, an inaugural violence that allows a new order to overcome the defeated disorder. Although this

²⁰ Amoroso, P., *Il mito della Ragione e il posto dell'Europa. Dalla crisi della Civilisation alla necessità di nuovi paradigmi*, in M. Iofrida, *La crisi dell'Occidente. Verso una nuova civilisation?*, Mucchi Editore, 2023, pp. 99-114.

²¹ See: J.J. Wunenburger, *Une utopie de la raison. Essai sur la politique moderne*, La Table ronde, 2002; see J.J. Wunenburger, *L'immaginario*, p. 78.

²² *Ibid.*

discourse is related to the city, I believe it can be reread in a broader perspective. The presence and exaltation of the myth of Europa, which refers precisely to an affair of original violence (though not fratricidal as in the more classical model of this myth but of kidnapping and violation of the female body), occurs from precise historical stages and, in its union with other mythical elements (myths of the future, utopia), serves precisely for the constitution of a collective imaginary within which Europe can attempt to constitute itself as a political-cultural unity.

The autonomy of rationality, after all, has been repeatedly questioned, particularly in the wake of the reversal of logical-philosophical absolutizations inaugurated by Nietzsche. If a certain “historicist” tradition had denounced the imaginary as responsible for “anchoring reason in a prescientific state”, epistemologies such as Michel Cazenave’s or Gilbert Durand’s have had the merit of reevaluating the role of the imaginary in the formation of scientific knowledge (geographical, physical, historical, etc.) or of studying its structures, showing how rationality itself is to be understood within a broader and deeper logic that governs both images (symbols and myths) and concepts. From this perspective, the imaginary is to be understood not as a compensatory function of what science fails to come to explain, like the myth as presented by Plato, i.e., as a “second-level discourse”, albeit a fundamental one, but as a heuristic and poetic framework within which rationality necessarily moves, albeit in the claim or promise of a definitive distinction²³. Similarly, Levi-Strauss observed how magical (or mythical) thinking is not at all to be understood in a timeline as a pre-scientific dimension, but rather as a complex system independent of that which constructs science. This its function of “cognitive orientation”, as Wunenburger notes, which consists in offering techniques of symbolic and analogical thinking (myth, symbol, metaphor, design), which interfere at various levels with cognitive processes²⁴ and which, therefore, interpenetrate with the techniques precipitous to “rational” thinking.

In this perspective, it is possible to interpret the very image of Europe that we find in visual art and cartography as an essential tool of the European “mythological machine”²⁵. A “machine” that is far from inactive and that still makes use, more or less consciously, of that image fixed by modern iconography.

5. Europe: from cartographic art to cartography in art

This mythical representation of Europa and Europe undergoes a radical resemantization in twentieth-century art, which, working in parallel on myth and cartography, aspires to a problematization and even a reconfiguration of the imaginary.

²³ J.J. Wunenburger, *L'immaginario*, Il Nuovo Melangolo, 2008, p. 75.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ F. Jesi, *Il tempo della festa*, edited by A. Cavalletti, Milan, Ed. Nottetempo, 2019, p. 67.

This already occurs in the context of the struggle between Nazifascism and antagonistic forces. With Max Beckman, for example, we return to see a bull represented in its animal strength, where, however, animality is understood as an active moral category in defining human and the enemy. The bull, in fact, is brown and recalls the color of the Nazi uniform, while the woman, presumably a German woman, is seen as a victim of his brutality.

Max Ernst, however, returns to the theme of Europe in two paintings with the same title but very different from each other. It is "Europe after the Rain I" and "Europe after the Rain II". The first depicts a continent that is unrecognizable, except in the Mediterranean area, because it has been devastated by a universal flood that evidently refers back to the upheavals that occurred in the early decades of the twentieth century. The image support is a plaster relief that limits the viewer's spatial and visual perception of the image. Despite all the distortions that the image of Europe shows, the geographical inclusion of the entire (then) Soviet Union supports the viewer's recognition of the continent. Likewise, the Mediterranean, in which, however, the "Italian boot" and the Iberian Peninsula have disappeared; in their place, new imaginary boundary lines are intercepted here and there, suggesting the creation of new geopolitical areas. The Black Sea, on the other hand, is shifted from east to west, as if Europe had been bent along the north-south axis. To the alienating impression and disquiet aroused by such a transformation, however, is added a sign of life given by the subtle trace of maritime routes. The second work on the theme, on the other hand, presents the myth of Europa in a context of ambiguous, undone forms in which, however, it is possible to recognize Europa from the bull that emerges from a kind of temple, also dissolved.

Another interesting work is the one Tim Ulrichs does in a 1972 photomontage in which "Europe on the bull" is literally depicted. In fact, there appears a white spotted ox on which the map of Europe is reproduced, showing the territory from the Atlantic to the Urals (remember that it is 1972 and we are in the midst of the Cold War) but in which Turkey is missing.

This mixing of two representative domains that leads with increasing frequency in the twentieth century from the art of cartography to cartography in art responds to different needs. If in the 1960s and 1970s there is a need to work in the direction of the construction of a European political and cultural unity, currently the presence of cartography in art is dictated, rather, and by critical instances against the policies adopted and the need to make art a space for the reconfiguration of the European political and cultural imaginary.

Among the most famous examples is Michelangelo Pistoletto's table, a work-installation entitled *Love difference - Mediterranean Sea*, which features a table with the sea the Mediterranean in the center and all around chairs of different colors. After all, this table that is a meeting place of cultures is, at the same time, a decision-making seat that refers back to European policies on immigration and international relations.

Another significant example are Alighiero Boetti's famous maps in which not only Europe but the entire planisphere appears and in which different countries are recognized through the flags that identify them. It is particularly their making that is of interest, as these map-works are tapestries that Boetti has made by Afghan weavers. These weavers are, in a sense, the cartographers of this map who, with their personal style, add an unpredictable and utterly subjective element to the objectivity and scientificity of the map. Europe emerges as a kaleidoscope of colors, moreover woven "from the outside" of the artisan hands of Afghan weavers. They are works, among other things, that attest to the historical transition from the phase before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They are, therefore, map-works that aspire to stage differences and establish, or more appropriately, claim a very close kinship between the art of weaving and the art of narration.

In this way, Boetti reinvents and reimagines the scene, showing that "mettere al mondo il mondo" (bring the world into being), as the artist liked to say, is "a game that can still be played"²⁶.

6. "A game that can still be played": conclusions in form of image and paradoxes

With this reflection, I sought to show how the iconography of Europe is structured and what underlies the image that Europe has of itself. I am convinced that the European collective imaginary continues to include these narratives and images, which still play an active role. It seems to me, in fact, that particularly in these recent years, Europe has been coming to terms with an image of itself that still corresponds to that of the matron on horseback found in modern iconography, an exaltation of Reason (unique and universal) built upon the expulsion of the mythical-narrative component. Yet this image appears increasingly unable to contend with a changed global geopolitical situation and the challenges it poses.

The European imaginary seems rooted in, and even inclined to take refuge within, a dimension that is in some ways mythical and narrative, yet one that is not perceived as such, precisely because it constructs the image of Europe, its cultural unity and identity, on the exaltation (or mythologisation) of reason through the purging of narrative and mythic elements from thought. In this sense, examining its iconographic apparatus – understood as an essential instrument in this construction – can foster awareness and perhaps suggest new (iconographic and philosophical) postures. To this end, rather than proposing new images, it seems more meaningful to return to the iconographic path already travelled.

²⁶ G. Boffi, *Per altri atlanti*, p. 137.

There is a particularly effective image – or rather, a striking posture – within the iconography of the myth of Europa to which it is worth returning, this time with the intention of re-semanticising it, of shifting its meaning. In one of the earliest iconographic phases, Europa is often depicted seated on the back of the bull, looking back toward the shore. This gesture can be read not as an expression of nostalgia, conservatism, or a return to an original *arché*, but rather as a symbolic act of reorientation – a backward glance that signals a change in perspective.

The gaze toward the shore may thus be understood as a look at the past that opens the possibility of thinking differently about reason itself, and, by extension, about mythical thought, no longer as its opposite or as a pre-scientific form, but as a complementary mode of understanding. This symbolic gesture therefore becomes an exercise: a sustained practice of analysis and interpretation of mythical narratives, past and present, always intertwined with cultural and geopolitical perspectives. In this sense, the image of Europa turning her gaze toward the shore could be taken as a figure of de-teleologisation: a gesture that invites us to rethink Europe beyond any mythical or fatalistic horizon. It may also suggest a redefinition of Europe as a geo-historical space rather than a “political-military bloc”, definitively distancing it from the traditional representation of the continent as a matron on horseback.

Once this first conclusion has been outlined through a symbolic image, conceived as a visual reconfiguration of the idea of Europe, it becomes possible to return to the two cartographic paradoxes introduced earlier, proceeding, as it were, in reverse order, from the second to the first.

The second paradox concerns the impossibility of producing a truly objective map. In Mercator’s projection, for example, Europe is stretched longitudinally. Every map, after all, serves to organise space so that it may be perceived in a particular way; it is, ultimately, the instrument through which a city, a state, or a continent presents itself according to a *dessein/dessin*, a “design” that is at once descriptive and projective, functioning both as a tool of representation and as the expression of a political or utopian model. Even more recent projections, which we may prefer for practical reasons, are not exempt from distortion; they too participate in an epistemological and representational framework inseparable from narrative structures. Thus, the scientific rationality that Europe has historically promoted and exported must itself be understood as embedded within a system of representation that is never neutral, and therefore never free from “myth”.

The first paradox, that of the one-to-one map, touches upon the epistemological aspiration to totality. This implicitly reveals the desire, at the heart of any mapping practice, and indeed of Reason itself as configured through modern Western epistemology, to obtain an exhaustive representation. The exponential development of cartographic and visualisation systems (from Google Earth and Google Maps to

Street View) attests to this panoptic impulse, the contemporary extension of a rationality that aims to render the world entirely visible. Yet such Reason inevitably encounters its own limit: the impossibility of representing itself, the threshold of the unrepresentable.

This, finally, is what the second corollary expresses: when the 1:1 map is achieved, the empire, and the rationality that sustains it, becomes unrepresentable.

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