

# Roberta Moretti

---

## Magic as a Science of Imagination in the work of Ioan P. Culianu (1950-1991)

---

Studia Humanistyczne AGH 16/4, 59-67

---

2017

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

**Roberta Moretti\***

## MAGIC AS A SCIENCE OF IMAGINATION IN THE WORK OF IOAN P. CULIANU (1950–1991)

*The freedom of thinking out everything to  
its ultimate consequences should never be  
interfered with by any authority.*

*The dangers of freedom are not lessened by its  
suppression.*

Ioan P. Culianu, *The Tree of Gnosis*

The powerful spreading of new technologies and the mass media civilization have had a subtle, stealthy effect on the human imagination, a process that has its counterpart in external reality, in historical changes and in society. The role of imagination through historical changes was extensively explored by Ioan P. Culianu, a Romanian historian of religions and specialist in Late Antiquity and gnosticism, whose research was brutally interrupted by his assassination on May 21, 1991. He was shot to death around midday inside of a toilet at the Department of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago where he was teaching. He was only 41 years old. One of his main books is *Eros and magic in the Renaissance* (The University of Chicago Press, 1987), which has been translated into many languages and is probably one of the most complex and interesting 20<sup>th</sup>-century studies on magic. He points out that the working of fantasy was fundamental to comprehend magical processes in the Renaissance, since magic was primarily directed to affect human imagination through the manipulation of *phantams* ('images' in Greek). He has been also a pioneer in the study of the historical vicissitudes that caused imagination to change from a civilization based on magic, as in the Renaissance, to a modern one based on science. To the scholar, the transition from a magic-based society to a modern one is explicable primarily by a *change in the imaginary*.

One of the purposes of this paper is to shed light on the work of Ioan P. Culianu, especially on his research on magic, which he carried out throughout his life. Particularly interesting are the articles published in the last period of his life (1990–1991), when he was trying to develop a new paradigm of knowledge in the Humanities, concentrating on the study of the mind. He was shaping an original but uncompleted theory where the 'cognitive revolution' was to be applied across and beyond the contexts of human science.

Keywords: magic, mind, imagination, Ioan P. Culianu, history of ideas, sociology

---

\* Corresponding author: Roberta Moretti, Via F. Redi 19, 52010 Capolona (AR), Italy; e-mail: robertamoretti1@gmail.com.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the purposes of this paper is to shed light on the work of Ioan P. Culianu, particularly on his research into magic, a topic he worked on throughout his life. He was a controversial and somewhat provocative scholar, whose book *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance* is probably one of the most important studies on magic in the 20th Century. Some may remember his name also due to his brutal assassination on May 21st 1991 by a mysterious killer at the Department of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, where he was teaching. He was only 41 years old.

Culianu went to Chicago in 1986, to the department of his compatriot and mentor Mircea Eliade, who had given strong impetus to the history of religions in the United States thanks to, among other work, the journal *History of Religions*, which he founded in 1961.

## ANALYSIS OF THE STUDIES INTO MAGIC

In his later years in the US Culianu worked on an impressive number of publishing projects and at the time of his death left behind several drafts both in the scientific and literary fields. The largest book project in the pipeline was a proposed multivolume *Encyclopaedia of Magic* for Oxford University Press. His model was Lynn Thorndike's eight-volume *History of Magic and Experimental Science* that, according to the scholar, suffered from a shallow understanding of and "contempt" for magic. In his new *Encyclopaedia of Magic* he wanted to "chronicle worldwide metaphysical arts and practices that sought to reunite the conscious and the unconscious" (Anton 1996: 2016).

The analysis of the phenomenon from a cognitive point of view has been a peculiar trait in Culianu's work, which became stronger in his last years as shown by the journal he founded in 1989: *Incognita. International Journal for Cognitive Studies in the Humanities*. It was a transdisciplinary journal with the aim of bringing the benefits of the cognitive revolution into the study of the humanities. In the foreword of the first issue in 1990, Culianu brought up his growing concern about the future of Western academic institutions, "especially as far as the humanities are concerned, which, in their present form, may not even exist within a few generations" (Culianu 1990: 1).

His intention was to bring new life to a somewhat outdated field, not open to the innovations emerging from other scientific fields of knowledge. For this reason, he wished for the adoption of an interdisciplinary perspective and felt the need to explore the nature of the human mind, a path from which, most likely, he could see a way out from the dead end of the humanities.

His goal was to establish a new paradigm of knowledge, as exposed in the essay "System and History" (Culianu 1990: 6–17), where he adopted a bold perspective stemming from the theory of relativity and the fourth dimension in order to observe the materials of history, whose objects are recognized primarily as a product of human minds. According to Culianu we should not assume the intrinsic nature of history as diachronic, since human minds produce

diachronic data from an extra dimension that has shown to be synchronic. In our case, it is the historian's mind which distributes his objects diachronically according to a peculiar cognitive process that involves the factor of time. The blend of the epistemological and historical approaches is a constant in the scholar's methodology.

The topic of the January 1991 issue of *Incognita* was magic, and Culianu received an unexpected amount of material. He underlines that a rather large number of recent publications of his time were approaching the topic of magic from three main perspectives: anthropology, history, and history of science. This issue contains one of his last articles on magic, where he mounts a strong critical attack on the research and interpretation of magic since 1870, holding that "most of the later XXth century elaborations on magic are redundant, increasing entropy not knowledge" (Culianu 1991: 3).

Amongst the many schools he mentions from Tylor (E.B. Tylor, J.G. Frazer), to Durkheim (M. Mauss, H. Hubert, H. Webster), to B. Malinowski, he detects a breakthrough "in the exchange of platitudes" in Claude Lévi-Strauss's 1950 *Introduction à l'oeuvre de Marcel Mauss*, because of its far-reaching implications. According to Culianu, this essay highlights the weakness of any anthropological discourse on magic, since it "showed indirectly that the separation of the spheres of 'religion', 'science' and 'magic' is inadequate as long as these three areas are not structurally defined". In other words, it cannot be demonstrated that magic "displays a method (or form of computation) of reality which is entirely different from the method of 'religion' and 'science'" unless we can define structural borderlines among the three (Culianu 1991: 3–4).

Whereas in Lévi-Strauss' own intention it means the abandonment of the old anthropological paradigm, to Culianu, it paradoxically reinstates sociology as the only discipline capable of defining magic for – he suggests – "if magic, religion and science do not exist as separate modalities of knowledge, they still exist as *social constructs*". According to the Romanian scholar, any research on magic following Lévi-Strauss could only have two orientations: (1) a sociological one, and (2) a cognitive one. The latter, however, can be applied to magic only in so far as magic is first *socially* defined; otherwise, he clarifies, cognitive analysis would not have a determined object (Culianu 1991: 5).

He therefore focuses on the increased interest of his time in the social history of magic, sometimes with an integration of the concept of "science". Such orientation is, however, missing a crucial aspect, a clue that Culianu adds to the puzzle of knowledge in the studies of magic. He introduces the current technological expansion as a practical representation of scientific thought and of a collective imagination rooted in magic.

## THE PLOUGH THEORY

Culianu examined the limits of various schools of thought on magic up to the most recent studies of his contemporaries, who related magic to the social aspect and the concept of science. As far as the science is concerned, the scholar criticizes the fact that these studies focus only on the theoretical aspect, without considering its opposite: the practical and thus

technological aspect. As he writes: “The understanding of the peculiar position of magic in relation to technology would have stood to gain from the recognition of the theoretical character of science, as opposed to the practical character of technology” (Culianu 1991: 6).

In *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance* we find the path that led him to assert that what magic has in common with modern technology is that it claims to arrive, by other means, at the same ends. How are these two opposite realities linked, and how did he come to such a conclusion? In this book he attempted to solve what he felt was a “an enigma of history”: the ideological reasons that caused human thinking to rotate towards the development of the modern scientific and technological civilization. He believed that the two visions of the world, the Renaissance one – based on magic – and the modern one – based on science – represent two diverse systems, incommensurable with one other. By rejecting the idea of a linear and cumulative advancement of knowledge, he claimed that every great civilization of the past is like a system whose worldview is not inferior to any other civilizations, but they are all valid, all far from Truth, and that there is no continuity between them.

In his attempt to understand what caused the advent of modern science he adopted the original perspective of examining the modern expansion of technology, at the level of the *imaginary* rather than at the level of scientific *discoveries*, on the assumption that a discovery is made possible only by a particular horizon of knowledge and beliefs relating to its possibilities. For this he states that:

Historians have been wrong in concluding that magic disappeared with the advent of ‘quantitative science’. The latter has simply substituted itself for a part of magic while extending its dreams and its goals by means of technology. Electricity, rapid transport, radio and television, the airplane, and the computer have merely carried into effect the promises first formulated by magic, resulting from the supernatural processes of the magician: to produce light, to move instantaneously from one point in space to another, to communicate with faraway regions of space, to fly through the air, and to have an infallible memory at one’s disposal. Technology, it can be said, is a democratic magic that allows everyone to enjoy the extraordinary capabilities of which the magician used to boast (Culianu 1987: 104).

This forces us to reflect on the importance of imagination with respect to the configuration of our concrete and external reality. In *Magic and Cognition* Culianu formulates his “theory of the plough”: the plough is an instrument cognitively surrounded by a whole aura of associations and beliefs closer to religion rather than science, and that is the “theory”, the “science” whose application is the plough. We can call the theory either religion or science since they are functionally the same, while the technological application is the plough itself.

In other words, according to this theory, cognitively there can be no separation of “science”, “religion” and “magic” since these are theoretical constructs. However, as Culianu explains, “there can be a rather clear demarcation of all these social territories from ‘technology’, to the extent that the latter translates into implements meant to be put in direct practical use” (Culianu 1991: 6). With his thesis Culianu prompts the reflection on whether a cognitive definition of magic is possible and suggests that there is a vast and significant territory of the mind that does not translate into technology. This, for the Romanian scholar, is the place where magic has to be sought after.

## CAUSES OF CHANGE IN THE IMAGINARY

Technological development and the advent of multimedia and mass communication is a peculiar trait of our time, which clearly distinguishes us from the Renaissance where, however, we can find seeds that would have sprouted in modern times. Francis A. Yates (1899–1981) has highlighted the fact that, at a certain point, some Renaissance thinkers such as Cornelio Agrippa<sup>1</sup> addressed the number as a possible operational key. This German alchemist and philosopher insisted on the necessity for the magician to be an expert in math so that he could perform, only by mechanical means, wondrous operations. After about a hundred years, as Yates points out, this hint was carried out by the Calabrian monk Tommaso Campanella (1568–1639) in *Magia e grazia*, where he classifies different kinds of magic; he also mentions a “real artificial magic” (Yates 1998: 167).

Both Culianu and Yates agreed on seeing signs of magic thought at the roots of the modern world, although they diverge in identifying the causes that opened the way. According to Dama Yates, in the Renaissance we find the first signs of a will descending into an operational level and detaching from the dominant values looking at the metaphysical and contemplative sphere as the only real purpose of human existence. According to Culianu, we should instead observe the imaginary dimension and its change caused by the strong ideological pressures of the Reformation aimed at eradicating magical thinking and imposing strong censorship over the imagination. Giordano Bruno and his tragic end at the stake are indeed a symbol of this obscuration of knowledge over the great intellectual vitality of the Renaissance.

## UNAWARE MANIPULATOR OF PHANTASMS...

In his survey the Romanian scholar identifies other areas in modern times where magic is surprisingly active, but we nevertheless fail to recognize it since its action (which is the idea of magic itself) does not cross the threshold of consciousness. Magical phenomena, according to Renaissance knowledge, are closely linked to eros (or love), which is involved in the widest sense in the relationship between individuals. Quoting Culianu, “the whole existence of an individual lies in the sphere of natural magic”: the manipulator is the only one who, having understood such a mechanism, can take advantage of it. Human society would be then “magic at work” and all beings in this *inter-subjective* place “take part in a magic process” (Culianu 1987: 103) that’s because, according to Renaissance knowledge, “magic is a phantasmic process that makes use of the continuity of the individual pneuma and universal pneuma” (Culianu 1987: 88).

Culianu points out that intersubjective relationships have been carefully examined for years by applied psycho-sociology and by the sciences dealing with the formation of individuals. The direct forerunner of this modern discipline is, in the author’s thesis, the magician as exposed by Giordano Bruno in *De vinculis in general* (“A general account of bonding”),

---

<sup>1</sup> C. Agrippa (Colonia 1486 – Grenoble 1535) taught in several Universities in Europe, and in 1515 established in Pavia an academy for the study of the occult sciences.

a manual of the magician, teaching him how to manipulate individuals according to their emotional natures. It also deals with psychological mass manipulation: “Nowadays”, writes Culianu “the magician engages himself with public relations, propaganda, market research, sociological surveys, advertising, information, counter-information and misinformation” (Culianu 1987: 104) and so on.

According to the Romanian scholar a careful examination of magic in its essence and methodology would help us to grasp the way certain mechanisms of control of the masses and their psychology work. We clearly see the spreading of implicit erotic signals in advertising and the influence of life-style models projected by the media. Everything would work to build an imagination in accordance with a governable society on the basis of certain principles and values that, as we all know, are nowadays mostly driven by economic interests that fuel consumerism and therefore the capitalist power.

This kind of magic is a science of manipulation of phantasms that compose the human imagination through lasting impressions coming from emotions. It is called natural or pneumatic magic and Bruno mainly deduces it from Marsilio Ficino. Everyone is part of this human interactive network in which imagination can be manipulated to the highest degree today by mass media and also by an organized educational system. This is the way we shape an external world of consumer goods, illusory pleasures that attract us, desire being the pursuit of a phantasm. The imaginary is built up by elaborated models, and the smarter the manipulator of phantasms (images), the stronger these will be imprinted in our imagination, arousing desires and social inclinations. However, this is no longer Renaissance magic, as Culianu points out in the Italian essay *Alcune riflessioni sulla magia e la sua fine*, where he writes that the magical paradigm as explained by Marsilio Ficino is deceased at the end of the seventeenth century: “his funeral is a matter of fact” (Culianu 1991a: 182).

The great difference between today’s man and that of the Renaissance lies in the relationship with their imaginary processes. In *Eros and Magic...* Culianu highlights the great mastery Renaissance men had over their imaginary processes, as demonstrated for instance by the art of memory, which is the capacity of the mind of storing and controlling a large amount of information. Today we have shifted from this kind of active imagination to a passive one, due, among others, to the images projected by media and passively absorbed by our minds. The loss of mastery over imaginary processes has therefore modified the relationship between conscious and unconscious, and magic can be considered, according to Culianu, a means to reestablish a peaceful coexistence between the two (Culianu 1987: 126).

## INSIGHTS FOR THE FUTURE. CONCLUSIONS

I would like to retrieve some of Culianu’s considerations published in a short article in Italy in 1991, where he shows a research path that, in my opinion, stimulates a profound reflection. The title is itself significant: *A cosa serve la religione?* (“What is religion for?”) (Culianu 1991b: 13–14). The point is to start reflecting on the use we may make of the massive amount of information gathered on the phenomenon of religions.

He clarifies his scientific approach, calling himself a “cognitive historian”, whose interest is in the operation of human mind. To him, this task does not differ from that of a biologist striving to complete the genome map, or that of a physicist or mathematician seeking the origins of the cosmos and of life. According to Culianu, religions are like “mental programs”, which expand and transmit themselves through education. It is a very delicate issue for which he warns that not every program is equally acceptable due to the high concerns at stake: the meaning of human existence and the fate of humanity. He writes: “As men we wonder on the quality of a religious message; but as scientists we question the program.”

Among the purposes of his research is the removal of the boundary of the “religious” sphere. In the cognitive sciences there is no room for old assumptions that separate the body from the soul, because in his new hypothesis, “everything is mind”. Accordingly, a man is a “conglomerate of information”, whose main function is to think. Nevertheless, he sadly concludes that the poor use made today of the mind, whose main incentive is economic, “may not be enough to keep mankind out of the chaos”<sup>2</sup> (Culianu 1991b: 13–14).

Culianu’s last writings somewhat bring to light a sort of vision that, about 25 years after his death, stimulates a deep reflection both on human sciences and on the role of Western academic institutions. He draws attention to the nature of the human mind, whose space, probably infinite, is without boundaries except for those conventionally determined. From his hypotheses, as outlined above, it would emerge that the mind is a kind of manipulable space, interdependent from our reality and all other beings, and would be consequently *programmable*, mainly by educational programs. A reason why, as he points out, its contents should be carefully examined for the sake of both mankind and its environment.

In conclusion, the study of the potentialities of the human mind leads to ancient practices, which include mental trainings alongside metaphysical arts that Culianu wanted to recover with his *Encyclopaedia of Magic* in order to reunite the conscious with the unconscious. These ancient practices were familiar to meditators, ascetics and Renaissance magicians, and we should admit the difficulty in properly addressing the topic of magic without considering the mental processes underlying such practices. One should not be too surprised by how Culianu, during a lecture on magic, would propose to his American students to test the tarot cards themselves, and thus practice “in the field” how their own intuitive dimension works. It was clear that the academic world was not ready to accept such a lecture, and it probably still is not.

Most of human science’s disciplines, such as philosophy and the study of religions, are today mainly considered as theoretical studies. Ancient philosophers were seekers of wisdom, and their purpose was to form wise people, especially those who had the responsibility to rule a society. Mere instruction, even great instruction, cannot be considered as enough to develop the wisdom required for a peaceful and thus flourishing society. Wisdom includes practical mental training, which has to reflect in every action, involving the highest human qualities dwelling in everyone. Let take as example the explanation given by the French doctor and traveler André Migot while reflecting on the great debate whether Buddhism is a religion or a philosophy. He recognised that this issue could have a meaning only for a Westerner, where

---

<sup>2</sup> Translated here from Italian.

philosophy is simply a branch of knowledge, like mathematics or botany, where philosophers are generally professors who, while teaching a certain doctrine, back home lives just like his notary or his dentist, that is without being influenced by the doctrine he teaches on his way of life. If in the East there are professors of philosophy, says Migot, such a philosopher is a spiritual master who *lives* his doctrine, surrounded by disciples who want to follow his example. His doctrine is never mere intellectual curiosity, it has value only by its realization (Migot 1957: 138).

I think that in a certain way Culianu was trying to recover such a method where knowledge acquire also a human practical value, shifting the current paradigm of knowledge towards a wider perspective which focus at the study of mind as a crucial issue in order to understand its contents. A study that can be carried out without conventional borders imposed by different disciplines, which seems to be in contrast with the unlimited internal “mindspace”, where multiple forms can be imagined as demonstrated also by the great civilizations appeared in our history, along with their own relative system of thoughts.

Culianu was trying also to find an effective and practical use of religion materials in order to enhance the quality of mental programs in our chaotic, and for many aspects, let's say, dangerous, historical time. Although abruptly terminated in 1991, his insights are inspiring and offer a rare summary of disconcerting modernity.

## REFERENCES

- Anton, Ted. 1996. *Eros, Magic, and the Murder of Professor Culianu*, Northwestern University Press.
- Bruno, Giordano. 1986. *De magia. De vinculis in genere*, trans. A. Biondi, Edizioni Biblioteca dell'Immagine: Pordenone.
- Culianu, Ioan Petru. 1987. *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, The University of Chicago Press.
- Culianu, Ioan Petru. 1990. *System and History*, “Incognita: International Journal for Cognitive Studies in the Humanities” I, 1: 6–17.
- Culianu, Ioan Petru. 1991. *Magic and Cognition*, “Incognita: International Journal for Cognitive Studies in the Humanities” II, 1: 2–8.
- Culianu, Ioan Petru. 1991a. *Alcune riflessioni sulla magia e la sua fine*, in: Grazia Marchianò (ed.), *La religione della Terra: vie sciamaniche, universi immaginali, iperspazi virtuali nell'esperienza sacrale della vita*, Red Como, pp. 181–193.
- Culianu, Ioan Petru. 1991b. *A che cosa serve la religione?*, “Leggere”, no. 32, giugno 1991, pp. 13–14.
- Culianu, Ioan Petru. 1992. *The Tree of Gnosis*, Harper: San Francisco.
- Culianu, Ioan Petru. 2017. *Iocari serio. Scienza e arte nel pensiero del Rinascimento*, H.C. Ci-cortas (ed.), Lindau: Turin.
- Migot, Andre. 1957. *Le Boudha*, Le club francais du livre: Paris.
- Yates, Francis. 1998. *Giordano Bruno e la tradizione ermetica*, Laterza: Rome.

MAGIA JAKO NAUKA WYOBRAŹNI W DZIELE IOANA P. CULIANU (1950–1991)

Dynamiczne rozprzestrzenianie się nowych technologii i cywilizacja mass mediów wywierają subtelny wpływ na ludzką wyobraźnię. Proces ten ma swoje przełożenie na rzeczywistość zewnętrzną, historyczne przemiany i na społeczeństwo. Rola wyobraźni w kontekście przemian historycznych była szeroko badana przez Ioana P. Culianu, rumuńskiego historyka religii i specjalistę od późnego antyku i gnostycyzmu, którego prace zostały brutalnie przerwane przez zamach 21 maja 1991 roku. Został on bowiem wówczas zastrzelony około południa w toalecie Divinity University of Chicago, gdzie nauczał. Miał tylko czterdzieści jeden lat.

Jedną z jego głównych książek jest *Eros i magia w renesansie* (The University of Chicago Press, 1987), która została przetłumaczona na wiele języków i jest prawdopodobnie jednym z najbardziej złożonych i interesujących XX-wiecznych studiów, dotyczących tematyki magii. Podkreśla on, że znaczenie fantazji było fundamentalne dla zrozumienia renesansowych poglądów, dotyczących możliwości przeprowadzenia magicznych działań, ponieważ magię rozumiano wtedy jako wpływ na ludzką wyobraźnię przez manipulowanie fantomami (czyli „obrazami” w języku greckim). Culianu był także pionierem w badaniu historycznych uwarunkowań przekształcenia wyobraźni magicznej w wyobraźnię świata opartego na nauce. Według uczonego przejście od społeczności posługujących się zabiegami magicznymi do współczesności można wytłumaczyć przede wszystkim zmianą wyobrażeń. Jednym z celów tego artykułu jest przedstawienie twórczości Ioana P. Culianu, a szczególnie jego badań nad magią, które prowadził przez całe życie. Szczególnie interesujące są artykuły opublikowane w ostatnim okresie jego życia (1990–1991), kiedy to próbował on opracować nowy paradygmat wiedzy w naukach humanistycznych, zogniskowany na badaniach umysłu. Culianu wypracował oryginalną, chociaż niedokończoną teorię, w której idea „rewolucji kognitywnej” miała być stosowana zarówno w kontekście nauki, jak i poza nim.

Słowa kluczowe: magia, umysł, wyobraźnia, Ioan P. Culianu, historia idei, socjologia