

Wiesna Mond-Kozłowska

The Ignatianum Academy

Faculty of Philosophy

ul. Kopernika 26, Kraków, Polska

E-mail: wiesna.mond@ignatianum.edu.pl

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RHYTHMS OF NATURE AND CULTURE IN THE ART OF M. K. ČIURLIONIS

This article aims to grasp the ontological constitutional principle known as correspondances des artes. The affinity of arts is usually interpreted as a functional quality, while the author holds that it is of ontic character as well. This results from the shared ontological reference of all natural phenomena of human life and, consequently, human creative work. Experimental knowledge of this metaphysical truth, according to the composer-synaesthetic Olivier Messiaen, is within the reach of very few people, even less so amongst the artists themselves. Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, the Lithuanian composer and painter, was one of those very few. The main argument of the article, which is developed in the realm of the ontology of a piece of art, is the premise that the rhythm factor can serve as grounds for discussion to investigate the nature of the correspondances des artes. This was also the subject matter of the French phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne's writings (Dufrenne 1992, pp. 323–324).

In addition, the author argues that all so-called organic aesthetics (Tatarkiewicz 1985, p. 84), those who claim that the laws of the creative process depend on the laws of nature, prove the existence of the common and shared ontic base of the world, logos. This base belongs to both natural and created ontological phenomena. The synaesthetic pictorial and musical oeuvre of Čiurlionis is the research field for inferring the initial argument of the paper.

KEY WORDS: *synaesthesia, correspondances des artes, mimesis, rhythm, arché, nature – culture, creative process, aesthetic experience.*

The idea of my paper concerns the ancient problem of the interrelated coexistence of nature and culture in human civilisation, with the emphasis that nature is perceived as the source of an individual's creative process. The classical Greek concept of an artist conceived him as a wise figure, capable of deep insights into *physis*, *φύσις*; this implied the artistic revelation of nature's laws in the creative procedures. This is clearly revealed in the unique form of the meander, which is the aesthetic symbol of life forces and serves as a typical example

of the human effort to bridge the physical environment with the world of ideas and creativity inherent to human nature. Whether they assume the dynamics of the processes of *natura naturata* or *natura naturans*, the mimetic procedures ceaselessly aim to grasp the essence of both the inner and outer worlds.

Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis's *oeuvre* covers two fields of apparently differing natures: music, which is expressive and temporal, and painting, which is constructive and spatial. They will be investi-

gated with the goal of tracing the relationship of nature and culture in the chosen works of art.

The crucial argument of my paper is that rhythm is a linking factor, an element present in natural phenomena and in human art; rhythm allows us to detect the underlying organic pulsation that links nature with culture. Thus I start by defining nature, culture, and the phenomenon of rhythm in the physical world. I continue by instantiating the argument in question on the ground of music and painting as well. Finally, the introduced methodological approach is applied to some formal analysis under the aspect of the rhythmical structure discerned in the selected works, both musical and pictorial, of Čiurlionis.

It was Aristotle who bound the notion of nature (*physis/φύσις* in Greek, *gamta* in Lithuanian, and in Polish, *natura*, which is a cliché from Latin) to the phenomenon of movement, as we read in his *Physics*: “nature is a principle of motion and change” (Aristotle 1968, p.65). He re-states and develops this in his *Metaphysics*, first stating that “nature is one of the kinds of Being... whereas philosophy of nature is some wisdom, but not the first one,” and later presents six definitions which gradually express the cumulative notion, namely, that “nature is the substance of the things occurring in the environment¹ in the sense that some people call nature the primordial scheme of all things.” He finally concludes that “nature in its first and paramount meaning is substance, which contains in itself the source of motion” (Aristotle 1999, p. 231).

The Greek word *rheo* “I flow,” *rhein* “to flow” is believed to be the etymologi-

cal root of the word rhythm: Greek *rithmos*, Lithuanian *ritmas*, Polish *rytm* (*ritminis vienetas/protos chronos*). In his *Laws*, Plato (1968, 665A) calls rhythm the order of motion, *taxis kineseos*, but the ancient Greek theory of rhythm was elaborated most prominently and thoroughly by Aristoxenus, one of the Aristotle’s closest disciples. He stressed that the essence of rhythm was the continuous alteration of two opposite elements, as for example: up – down, start – stop, short – long, movement – pause. Such alterations generate a kind of pulsation of matter. It is pointless to present here at length Aristoxenus’s aesthetic views in this respect (Aristoxenus 1980), as they are strictly related to Greek music, dance and poetry, the triple unity (called *chorea*), and reflect the Greekness of the music culture of his time. Nevertheless there is one important reason to refer to him. He was said to have followed the Pythagorean lines in musical studies, in which the mathematical factor was an important element in the understanding and explanation of reality in general, and music and art in particular.

In modern times, close to Čiurlionis’s circle, Andriej Biely’s father, Nikolai Bugaev (1837–1903), a founder of the Moscow school of mathematics, called rhythm a branch of mathematics (Obolevitch 2010, pp. 561–577). Mostly due to the *ratio/logos* between the elements of rhythm patterns, which are called *schema* by Aristoxenus himself in his *Elementa Rhythmica*, the Greek word *schema* can be understood as place, shape and form. In facing the reality of rhythm, the Greek philosopher discerns the *rhythmizomenon*, or *miellieu* of rhythm occurrence, or something that is shaped in contrast to a shape itself, something that can be “rhythimized.” Another of his theoretical distinctions is *rhythmopoeia*, that

¹ Called Mother Nature (W.M.K.).

is, the way a given *rhythmizomenon* was ordered.

Curt Sachs, in his book *Rhythm and Tempo*, justly confirms that the definition of rhythm is very complex. We would add that its *definiendum* seems to be described by developing the *definiens* through growing human understanding over time. His basic division is into organic and non-organic rhythm, the first belonging to the realm of nature, the second to human invention and the world of ideas that we call “culture” (Sachs 1953).

Obviously, different methodological approaches to the rhythm issue are to be expected from different fields of science and the humanities, as determined by their specific research methods and scopes. Nevertheless, whether it is an acoustic or optic phenomenon, it can be explained by the terms of *discipline*, *succession* and *sequence*, *endurance* and *periodical alteration* and *intensity of articulation*. Such properties can be grasped objectively, since rhythm is a part of phenomena and is attributed to them. Aristoxenus synthesized duration with time, saying that rhythm is “the ordered duration, an alteration of endurance and strength of the sound;” these are the aesthetic qualities that generate rhythm.

Rene Dumesnil (1949) posed the question in the Kantian spirit, asking whether rhythm is an *a priori* category in the human mind, complementary to time and space. When we experience rhythm, we feel joy and pleasure as if rhythm answers some need of the soul; needless to say, one’s initial apperception of rhythm is strictly related to the workings of physiology. And in fact, primitive musical rhythm structures reflect the rhythms of nature: the heart beating, breathing, and other pulsations.

It is worth mentioning here that quite recently, Andrzej Szczeklik, the Polish cardiologist and writer (Szczeklik 2010, p. 109), argued that Chopin’s aesthetic concept of *tempo rubato*, adapted by him from the Polish folk songs/dances *kujawiak* and *mazurek*, draws on the physiological mechanism of the heartbeat. According to Szczeklik, the very act of perceiving *tempo rubato* in Chopin’s mazurkas, for instance, is equivalent to getting to know the approximate heartbeat of the Polish composer.

Vincent d’Indy (1851–1931) argued that “*le rythme est l’ordre e la proportion dans l’espace et dans le temps*”, hence it is the primary common element of all arts: the arrangement of lines, forms, colours, movements and sounds (Dumesnil 1949, p. 11).

Thus we can rightly state that *Am Anfang war de Rytmus* (in the beginning was rhythm) by adding Hans de Bulow’s claim, namely that the *Vulgata* turned Greek *logos* into Latin *verbum*, introducing by this category the issue of ratio and proportion to human thought (Dumesnil 1949, p. 13). But at the outset of the academic or proto-academic approach to the rhythm issue, it was the Pythagoreans who claimed that the world moves according to the rhythm and harmony of sacred numbers. According to them, number, rhythm and measure are principles of mathematics, physics, music and all the arts. Boetio, in his neo-Pythagorean development of this cosmological concept, coined the terms *Musica Mundana*, *Musica Humana* and *Musica Instrumentalis*, linking the world of nature with the world of culture through human beings, and I think their presupposed identities were grounded on the corresponding rhythmical pulsations detectable in all of them (Boethius 1990).

It seems that the best summary of what has been said so far is contained in Herbert Spencer's thought that rhythm is a manifestation of natural physical forces. Rhythm is considered to be a psycho-physiological function of being, a dynamic force of the Universe. It is not just a receptacle but its constituting principle.

Having referred to the classical sources of European philosophical thought on nature and rhythm, it would only be consistent to draw on the same or at least similar thinking to define culture, the other notional extreme of the nature – culture juxtaposition. My choice is Werner Jaeger's definition from his *Paideia*; in the chapter "The place of the Greeks in the world history of instruction" he presents an original definition of culture, one that goes beyond the traditional anthropological and merely descriptive notion in which "culture is understood as the whole body of all life's forms and its manifestations characteristic of a given nation." Instead, Jaeger comes up with a basically *paideutic* concept of what culture is: *kateskeu e tu biu*, the external apparatus of life, which is energized and beamed out by its primary sense, rooted in archaic origins. Culture perceived on such a basis inevitably focuses on the single value of each particular soul and its spiritual autonomy, as grounded in the Greek conviction of the dignity of every single person (Jaeger 2001, pp. 29–47). In that grasp, culture is understood as a life-long process aiming at the articulation of this idea through planned instruction. It resounds in the Microcosm/Macrocosm epistemological concept of Western philosophy, where the ontological potential of a human being reflects the workings of the Universe. This echoes in the apparently distant Koranic thought that every soul is a Universe.

In claiming this, one cannot help evoking the Čiurlionis painting *The Sun in Sagittarius*, tempera on paper, the 11th of the 12-painting *Zodiac cycle* (1906/07), which testifies both to man's dignified position in the Universe and to his/her noble ambition to hit home, or even to hit directly. My suggested alternative title for that painting is Aristotle's claim that *Omnes homines natura scire desiderant* (the desire to know is innate in every single human being). "Who does not hit a gate?" asks the same Aristotle, adding that inquiry into truth is easy on the one hand, and difficult on the other. *De veritate theoria sic quidem difficilis est, sic vero facilis* (Aristotle 1999, pp. 84–85).

The epistemological whole unifying physics with metaphysics and nature with culture echoes in another interrelated pair of complementary fields of being: thought and art. And following Aristotle's remark that the will to know is man's innate privilege, vocation, bliss and damnation, we claim that Čiurlionis is a philosopher and an artist – for he wanted to know. He was chosen to see something, but we do not know exactly what he saw, as we don't know what the exact beat of his heart was. The original Being simply called him to be, as modestly witnessed and confirmed in the exclamation "*Stai sie!*" ("Become!") in the cycle *Pasaulio sutvėrimas* ("The creation of the world," 1905/1906). What he saw, he transferred into his art, making an effort to express himself simultaneously in both paint and sound. He makes us be aware of a kind of mystical experience of the world, one which resulted in his creation of a system of signs regulated by some internal rhythm that generates a kind of artistic, individual metaphysics.

Viacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949), a contemporary of Čiurlionis, himself a poet

with unquestionable insight into visible and invisible matters through his innate clairvoyant artistic gift, wrote that:

The painter's testimony about HOW he sees the visible world (which we also see, but differently) is the real mystery of a painter, the inspired expression which removes the blindfold from our eyes and forever enriches mankind with new visions. Because true creative artists above all communicate what they perceive in the visible universe. We begin to see clearly not through their dreams but through the interpretation of reality and what this interpretation contributed to their dream world (Ivanov 1994, p. 76).

Further on, the Russian poet brilliantly carries out his discourse on the presence of the unseen and seen reality in Čiurlionis's works by indicating a specific artistic entity, the art of synaesthesia, which aims at revealing the multi-complex character of the world without splitting it into either the spatial or temporal aspects of human experience. Thus contemplating the metaphysical art of the Lithuanian musician/painter, we not only pass *a realibus ad realiora*, but we participate in them simultaneously in the very act of the aesthetic experience. It is an experience that has nothing to do with the reducing hedonistic pleasure of the Kantian *Annehmlichkeit*, but is understood rather from Goodman's perspective, attributing to it an indisputable cognitive value.

The nature – culture concept is as old as the hills, and the hills refer to the ancient art of Greek classical origins. Władysław Tatarkiewicz calls Greek aesthetics “the organic one,” thus explaining the character of art that imitates nature, both in its *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* aspects. In that aesthetic framework, the status of the artist equals that of the thinker or philosopher. His vocation and task is to fol-

low both the apparent and hidden laws of nature and then to render this knowledge in works of art, which, among other things, reveal universal truths to common people. From this ancient Greek perspective it is pointless to collide on the issue of whether or not Čiurlionis was a philosopher. To be a philosopher does not require coming up with a philosophical system, or defending the tribune of the pure mind; though that would be much desired, assuming it were valuable, of course. I support the claim that Čiurlionis was a philosopher following Sellars's definition of what philosophy is: “it is an attempt to see how the things hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.”

A century later, Eco raised the issue of weak vs. strong thinking through an epistemological inquiry into meaning in which the first party claims that there are no facts but only interpretations of facts, while the second party holds that the human mind is able to have a direct insight into the Absolute. Eco advocates strong thinking, and I claim that Čiurlionis did as well. Naked thoughts and objective entities of the truth were incarnated in the temporal and spatial signs of his art.

There are some traces in Čiurlionis's letters (Goštautas 1992, p. 253) of similar experiences, for example, “It is all too beautiful to have to observe this beauty with someone else,” or “the boom of the waves and the mysterious language of the age-old forest, from the twinkling of the stars, from our songs and our immeasurable grief,” and finally “the rhythmical monotone is one of the most essential and beautiful qualities of our songs. Their monotone reminds one of the gentle movement of the waves, resounding with a divine melancholy and unearthly sadness.”

In terms of aesthetic experience, Čiurlionis's art moves and enchants with its magic, mythopoetic power (despite its occasional lack of technical mastery) on the one hand, but inspires criticism of its *epistemic message* on the other. It requires considerable effort to comprehend any expected, desired or detectable meaning, for the sense of human life is included in the message. It seems, eventually and obviously, that our unique challenge in this world is to be saved through self-salvation, which is why it is essential to be able to trust any go-between, whether it is an artistic or a theological message. To strengthen the credibility of works of art, Eco raises a semiotic issue of modalities of transformations of the natural world into art, as openly stated in his recent book *Dall'albero al labirinto. Studi storici sul segno e l'interpretazione* (2007). To trust openly means to understand clearly the nature of the modalities in question and to enter, through personal cognitive effort, into the artistic/aesthetic *statu nascendi* of the works of art.

I claim that Čiurlionis's method in this respect was the artistic treatment of the elements of visual perception according to a principle derived from music, namely rhythm. This rhythmic structure, together with the aesthetic application of Chopin's *tempo rubato* – the so-called representation of the human heart beating according to Andrzej Szczeklik – can be heard for example in Čiurlionis's *Aštuonios mazurkos* (1899–1900): *Mazurka g-dur* (I) (VL 170) or *Mazurka d-moll* (VII) (VL 194) and also seen in his musical pictures. Other works of note include *The Creation of the World*, *The Hymn*, several *Sonatas*, *The Summer*, and the particular rhythmic flow that circulates through his *Raigardas*, the triptych of

1907, pulsating and glimmering across his whole *oeuvre* as well.

Hans Georg Gadamer holds that “the reality of a work of art cannot be limited to the original historical horizon, where the spectator is a contemporary of the artist. Instead, a piece of art is always timeless and simply present, its proper being is what it is able to say; this basically goes beyond historical limits. If a work of art says something to us, which it does through an act of self-presentation, it belongs to category of what we are to understand; and if so, the work of art is an object of hermeneutics”. Gadamer defines hermeneutics as an art of explanation and intermediary communication through its own effort of exegesis of what is comprehensible in a person's direct act of communication. Hermeneutics covers a spiritual distance and assimilates the strangeness of another spirit. When one understands the message of art, one meets oneself. To understand a piece of art is something more than to get inside the author's mind, *mentis auctoris*. The very act of understanding, through the aesthetic experience, requires a research effort that defines the object of understanding. Ερμης (Hermes) translates a divine message, says Gadamer, whose meaning is symbolized; while the concept of a symbol shows the impossibility of taking into account all references. The common union of ontological references is hidden from us – this is why it must be discovered. Gadamer emphasizes the transformative power and character of the aesthetic experience resulting from such an eye-to-eye encounter. In other words, the meeting between a piece of art and its preceptor occurs when an absolute presence encounters an individual presence (Gadamer 1992, pp. 41–54).

In this perspective, a Čiurlionis paint-

ing can be called an ontological piece of art², which, instead of showing Being, makes it present through the involvement and co-participation of an onlooker in the aesthetic situation.

Conclusions

If we believe that music is a kind of semi-otic system, we can rightly say the same about painting, and even more so about Čiurlionis's two generic artistic entities, whose *entelecheia* was somehow stopped by the premature physical death of the artist. He was a go-between or a messenger, a prophet, a wise man more than a craftsman. I do not pretend to compete with the symbolists or the later researchers in naming both the aesthetic and the mystical position he was anointed by his contemporaries and followers. I am interested in as deep as possible an interpretation of the meaning of his art and in finding a balance in the aesthetic experience between the enchanted soul and the demanding mind, which always struggle for the truth when faced with Čiurlionis's *oeuvre*.

Charles Sanders Peirce proposed his metaphysics as founded on semiotics. To the latter is attributed (by Giannmatteo Mameli) the task of researching human experience under the aspect of truth, or to consider experience in its ability to signify or reveal whether something is true or not. Inevitably, any art which is so richly imbued with a philosophical understanding of the world as Čiurlionis's is requires a strong methodological approach in read-

ing the meaning of the signs and ordering them within a framework of justified and unshaken thought.

According to the American semiologist, a real land of meaning stands between an object and its sign, and is called *interpretant*. From this metaphysical standpoint, a sign communicating the existence of the "other" opens to the infinity of the "other's" felt inference.

Giannmatteo Mameli charges contemporary philosophy, after Umberto Eco, with the post-Kantian problematic of knowability – that is, what is true in what we see and how truly we see in order not to lose the dignity of the true knower. In the realm of intelligibility or the capability of being understood, comprehensible, clear, philosophically this is apprehensible by the mind only, conceptual (Mameli 1997).

The context for issues of rhythm in Western painting is analysed at length and richly instantiated with images in the valuable Karin von Maur book *Vom Klang der Bilder* (1985). In the chapter "From Sequential Image to Film Sequence," in her examination of Robert Delaunay's painting *Windows of the City* she writes about his technique expressing both musical and picturesque properties: "simultaneous contrasts, as 'synchronic action,' the temporal principle as a sequential development of the rhythmic dynamism of colours... [T]he progressive flux of time is almost imperatively evoked hereby an added juxtaposition of forms on the plane" (Maur 1985, p. 54). To determine what purpose the rendering of the felt essence of life serves in the artist's endeavour, one might evoke Hans Richter's (1888–1976) commentary on *Fugue 23*, his silk-screen print of 1923/76:

The rhythm of the work is identical with the idea of the whole. Rhythm is that which

² This is explained on the ground of Chinese aesthetics with the concept of the ontological work of art, which is believed to reveal the ontic laws and, through a spectator's intentional act, an active participation in Being.

conveys ideas, that which runs through the whole: its meaning = principle, from which each individual work derives its significance. Rhythm is not a definitive, regular sequence of time and space, it is the unity which ties all the parts into a whole (Richter 1973).

The question of whether this understanding of the rhythm phenomenon might attribute to it the metaphysical status of *apeiron* or *logos* deserves further study. Yet in Arthur Schopenhauer's aesthetic writings, the connection with that ancient Greek philosophical thread can easily be spotted, for he tends to consider rhythm to

be a psycho-physiological function of Being and a dynamogenic condition of the Universe³.

³ This is what Rene Dumesnil infers from his metaphysical writings in general, since analyzing strictly the term of the musical rhythm, Schopenhauer follows Plato/Aristotle's stand in calling it *taksis* (Gr. order). In the passage dedicated to the analysis of the music phenomenon in its temporal aspect, the German philosopher calls rhythm "symmetry in time", in comparison to architecture which he finds to be "symmetry in space". Symmetry in space is for him "the division into equal and interrelated parts". (Schopenhauer 2009, p.p. 641–642). As we can see, this proposition is reduced solely to the 19th century concept of musical rhythm for the sake of investigating the nature of music as art itself.

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Wiesna Mond-Kozłowska

Akademia Ignatianum, Polska

Zainteresowania naukowe: estetyka porównawcza z naciskiem na badanie natury doświadczenia estetycznego w estetyce zachodniej i wschodniej oraz zagadnienie synestetycznego pokrewieństwa sztuk

RYTMY NATURY I KULTURY W SZTUCE MIKOŁAJA KONSTANTEGO ČIURLIONISA

Streszczenie

Artykuł stara się uchwycić ontyczną zasadę konstrukcyjną występującą w zjawisku korespondencji sztuk. Pokrewieństwo sztuk zazwyczaj interpretuje się jako funkcjonalne, autorka zaś uważa, że ma ono charakter bytowy i wynika z istnienia wspólnego ontologicznego odniesienia wszystkich naturalnych przejawów życia człowieka, a więc i owoców jego pracy twórczej. Doświadczalna znajomość tej metafizycznej prawdy, jak twierdzi kompozytor synestetyk Olivier Messiaen, dostępna jest niewielu ludziom, a tym bardziej nielicznym artystom. Do ich grona należał litewski muzyk i malarz Mikołaj Konstanty Čiurlionis. Głównym argumentem artykułu, wywiedzionym z rozważań na temat ontologii dzieła sztuki, jest przesłanka, że to element rytmu może stanowić podstawę rozważań o pokrewieństwie sztuk, na co wskazywał także francuski fenomenolog Michel Dufrenne (Dufrenne 1992, s. 323–324).

Autorka uważa, że wszystkie estetyki organiczne (Tatarkiewicz 1985, s. 84), a więc takie, które głoszą zależność praw sztuki od praw natury, stanowią dowód na istnienie wspólnej pod-

Wiesna Mond-Kozłowska

Ignacijaus filosofijos ir švietimo universitetas Krokovoje, Lenkija

Moksliniai interesai: lyginamoji estetika, šokio estetika, correspondances des artes, sinestezija

GAMOS RITMAI IR KULTŪRA M. K. ČIURLIONIO KŪRYBOJE

Santrauka

Straipsnyje siekiama perteikti ontologinį konstrukcinį principą, žinomą menų sintezės srities tyrinėtojų. Menų panašumas, atitikimas (correspondances des artes) dažnai yra laikomas funkciniu, tačiau straipsnio autorė mano, kad jis yra taip pat ir ontinio pobūdžio. Tai žmogaus viso gyvenimo, vadinasi ir kūrybos, natūralių reiškinių bendrosios ontologinės referencijos rezultatas. Šią eksperimentinę metafizinę tiesą, pasak kompozitoriaus Oliviero Messiaeno, suvokia tik labai nedaugelis, o menininkai net rečiau nei kiti. Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, lietuvių kompozitorius ir tapytojas, buvo vienas iš nedaugelio. Pagrindinis straipsnio argumentas yra prielaida, kad ritmas gali tapti diskusijos pagrindu, leidžiančiu gilintis į menų panašumo, atitikmenų (correspondances des artes) prigimtį. Šią sritį savo darbuose tyrė ir prancūzas Mikelis Dufrenne'as (1992, p. 323–324).

Autorė siekia įrodyti, kad visi vadinamieji „organiški“ estetai (Tatarkiewicz 1985, p. 84), teigiantys, kad kūrybos proceso dėsniai priklauso nuo gamtos dėsnių, atskleidžia paprasto ir bendrojo ontinio pasaulio pagrindo egzistavimą. Tai ženklai, būdingi tiek visiems gamtos, tiek ir sukurtiems ontologiniams reiškiniams. Straipsnio

stawy ontycznej świata, logosu, będącego czymś wspólnym i inherentnym dla naturalnych i stworzonych przejawów bytu. Malarska i muzyczna synestetyczna twórczość Čiurlionisa stanowi punkt odniesienia dla dowodzenia tych metafizycznych przesłanek na gruncie ontologii dzieła sztuki.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: synestezja, *correspondances des artes*, mimesis: *natura naturata*, *natura naturans*, rytm, *arché*, natura – kultura, proces twórczy, doświadczenie estetyczne.

tyrimo laukas – sinesteziniai vaizdiniai ir muzikiniai Mikalojaus Konstantino Čiurlionio kūriniai.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: sinestezija, *correspondances des artes*, mimesė, *natura naturata*, *natura naturans*, ritmas, *arché*, gamta-kultūra, kūrybinis procesas, estetinė patirtis.

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