

ON THE EMOTIONAL FOOTPRINT
IN THE THINGS AND PLACES¹

Objects, by definition, usually are considered inanimate and inert: just matter, form, colour and function, which do not contain emotions even if they can elicit them. In themselves, they carry neither joy nor pain. Our glance tells us that a hammer is just a hammer, a pencil is graphite and wood and a dress is cloth, cut and sewn. Nobody, I think, harbours any doubt that this is so and the material and quantitative knowledge of things that is the basis of science education taught at all levels of school introduced us at a young age to this way of thinking. Anyone who would claim that a hammer or a dress carries emotions – let alone soul – would easily be taken for a madman or a joker, and his words would be seen as expressions of madness, nonsense or romanticism.

Maybe this is so, but – to propose an example – in a toy put together by a child in South-East Asia, tied to a sweatshop assembly line in a situation of distress and constriction, a toy made for the distraction and enjoyment of her western peers does nothing really remain of that pain and constriction? Not even a glimmer, an emotional footprint? Can what is born in pain really can offer distraction and fun? Let me ask once more: can this toy, built by children forced to work in conditions that are unacceptable to us, bring happiness to the children of the richest countries without carrying any trace of that pain and exploitation?

Again: what kind of light can shine from the diamonds mined in South Africa under violent conditions, often by children who can most easily squeeze into the narrow mine-shafts? Is there a relationship between the soulless, mass-produced objects and the progressive depletion of our being, emptier and emptier and more and more encased in a polished shell as it is (and I speak of us who, in our turn, multiply images and poses, our behaviour increasingly serial, like Andy Warhol photos)²? Is there really any appreciable difference between the table crafted by my local carpenter and the one – presumably identical – produced by Ikea and cloned for the whole world? I think that from this point of view, quite apart from a sociological or economical or humanitarian position³, the mass production of goods that is sweeping away craftsmanship and the relocation of this production to areas where labour is less protected might encourage us to rethink our relationship with the objects we encounter and use in everyday life. In Latin (“ponderare”) “to think” is “to weigh”: can we “weigh” what surrounds us?

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato suggests, indicating the metaphysical space of ideas – to which everything conforms, as a double, translating the essence into existence – that objects are not as inert and without that intimate ontological nature as centuries of materialistic

¹ Translation revised by Etain Addey.

² With reference to the media and entertainment society, Marc Fumaroli calls this seriality “tautology”, labelling it the rudderless hammer of persuasive marketing cacophony, a shuddering mechanism like a machine gun, which has become the winning technique in every contemporary military strategy. (FUMAROLI 2009)

³ The destructive side effects of serial production on conviviality are analysed by ILLICH 1978.

training have led us to think (with heavy repercussions on our sensitivity). And there is ample literature on the soul of things, the vital spirit with which matter is imbued in the animistic worldview, wherein objects become the home of the ancestors, as in the case of the *sumange* in Malaysia or the *semangat*, its Indonesian analogue⁴.

But is not about this that I wish to talk to you – the reflection of the archetype in the phenomenal world, nor of the animistic perspective of the world – but about something very different: something similar to sled tracks in the snow, or the fossil cast of the trilobite in sandstone, or the mysterious, devastating molecules of suffering left in the air by the passage of animals heading for the slaughterhouse⁵, something perhaps analogous with the hypothesis put forward by Jacques Benveniste in 1988 and, in recent years, by Luc Montagnier, on possibility that water keeps track of the elements with which it has come into contact⁶; or, again, something similar to the memory of the past of which we meet the tracks in our collective dreams⁷.

Is it possible that matter in general, like water in the theory proposed by Jacques Benveniste and, later, Luc Montagnier, retains a fingerprint, an *emotional* fingerprint, of the manner and the conditions in which it was produced, processed and used?

The idea of an emotional charge present in things has not been successful in the history of thought as it has flourished in our West; perhaps this idea needs a level of sensitivity that has yet to be born. Meanwhile there is a first glimpse of the theme in the pages of Freya Mathews, who reflected on the objects “that have served as perennial instruments of torment in our lives – for example, the father’s strap hanging on the nail behind the door; the barbed wire fence surrounding the compound; the bed of the unhappy, abusive marriage”⁸. In the panpsychist view she proposed in *Reinhabiting Reality*, all objects, both natural and manmade, even though they may be damaging or harmful, by the mere fact of existence, have a place in our lives and bring with them traces of feelings and memories and this is enough for them not to be considered completely separate from us or indifferent to our welfare.

To treat whatever exists, whether living or non-living, animated or inert, with care, with love, carries its spirit along and creates resonances that do not disappear or become diluted over time and don’t fade with increasing distance. And this attitude can vibrate chords in our choices and allow us to decide whether to produce and build things with care or with indifference, whether to surround ourselves with objects that testify to and communicate creativity and harmony or coercion and exploitation. We know very well that this is why food prepared by a mother can never harm her children, regardless of the ingredients and the methods of preparation and cooking.

If we think about people, I think you may easily understand what the emotional footprint means. It is what constitutes the strongest and most vital feelings in the mind and body; is what echoes from trauma, from dreams and fantasies when they have leave an impact in the depths of our being; it is what – after a bad fright or awesome image – could be read in the shape and appearance of the newborn, as was accepted in the scientific world until the nineteenth century, and is still known today among the people

⁴ ENDICOTT 1981 (1970): 47 ss; HAY 2004 (2001): 143-144.

⁵ TAMARO 2011: 131-132.

⁶ BENVENISTE 2005, MONTAGNIER 2011.

⁷ On collective dreams: HARK 1985. Hark’s positions explicitly refer to the laying down of memory in the collective unconscious as theorised by Carl G. Jung: see JUNG 1916.

⁸ MATHEWS 2005: 210 (note 12).

who know that images penetrate the mind and impress their imprints, guide thoughts and passions, arouse emotions and that the most intense emotions or violence experienced by mothers during pregnancy can lead to fatal consequences for the child in the womb⁹. Ethical studies within the health professions and neuroscience begin to talk of the footprint that can be left in the synapses of our neurons¹⁰, but we can also add that the same emotional traces form a central pillar in the construction of the psychotherapeutic relationship. On this theme, we can glimpse the traces of the trauma in the psyche, but never the objective footprint. The traces of trauma are the means by which the patient and the analyst have to try to reconstruct the forgotten, traumatic past¹¹.

The emotional footprint at work deep inside us is expressed at the thresholds where we come into contact with the world; so our face, our wrinkles, but also our behavior can be read as the diary of the life we have known: a handshake recounts and reveals more than a confession. Seen from this perspective, suffering speaks the language of the violence that caused it; and by the suffering that we feel and that we also inflict, we express and bear witness to the violence we have known and that has poisoned us and which surrounds us: fear and aggression bear witness to it. And all that violence and suffering, already so difficult to grasp consciously in other people (were this not so, I like to believe that we would show much greater attention and respect in our relationships than is currently the case), how more difficult is it to see it in animals, plants, and – I push myself to the limits of what can be said – in objects? It is increasingly difficult because our hearts, increasingly arid and shut off, do not listen, are not longer capable of listening to the world that speaks to us.

So when we speak of objects, the self evidence of the matter, already frail with reference to people, shinks to vanishing point . In the absence of such evidence, the question remains whether there is any difference between an object manufactured with a certain respect for the creativity and personality of the worker and for a fair wage and a similar object produced in a climate of coercion, anonymity and exploitation, which is independent of our own individual sensitivity and of the information which we have about them. We can assume that, to an extent unknown to us, matter itself is somehow "alive", and not merely mutable – and it is certainly mutable for it is subject to erosion, decline and decay – but alive, although inert and unable to move, and somehow manages to hold and bear witness to the emotions of those with whom it came into contact, those who produced it?

These are not just rhetorical questions, because the reflections behind them are not connected to social policies or to the ethics of relationships (in that case, I love to imagine that the response would be shared without too much trepidation) but rather to the ontological aspect of things, their intimate nature, the vibration that things send forth apart from their appearance.

I am aware that in the context of ethics and before the question of the moral legitimacy of choice in the face of suffering, this theme is a borderline enquiry.

In order to come closer to the idea of the emotional footprint of what is inert, like objects are, I would like to mention the same footprint, but with reference to places, assuming that this perception is closer to our common experience and, therefore, more easily communicable.

⁹ ANGELINI 2012.

¹⁰ ALFIERI 2010: 117.

¹¹ LUCHETTI 2009.

A place that has known an exceptional measure of suffering, suffering that was not to be borne with a light heart without taking refuge in desensitization or psychosis, is saturated in that suffering like a sponge full of water or the smoker's clothes impregnated with smoke, or like the insult of which the language of those who talk down to people is redolent¹².

I suppose that this is the unspoken reason – and not only for the insult to memory – why we cannot with impunity build an amusement park in Auschwitz or make a nightclub into the Ardeatine caves. If we did not assume the existence of an emotional footprint in things that leads us to *feel for matter*, only indignation or brief memory would be there to prevent such steps. And memory is very short, if you look at how nowadays the places where Napoleonic massacres happened are seen as entertainment parks or places of touristic interest, and how we, like children at carnival, organise mock reconstructions of battles, ignoring or forgetting that those places were the scenes of a huge slaughter over a frenzy for empire that led to a death toll in Europe comparable to the Armenian genocide and the Stalin purges. The memory is slight, manipulable and ephemeral: sometimes it lasts no longer than the memory of a dream upon waking, sometimes it lasts longer but only at the price of making a caricature of what we would like to pass on, just like the memories of our youth, corrected and purified by time.

Or else only the emotion, the anger stays with us, which, through a place or an object, makes plain the personal stance on right and wrong. But as long as it is personal and not shared as a common heritage and collectively reflected on over time, the position on right and wrong is ephemeral, as ephemeral is memory, as the subjective evaluation of what is good, true and beautiful. When emotions are not grafted onto the lasting and common stock of understanding, they follow the ebb and flow of time, the fashions of the moment, and have no more weight than an opinion, no more strength than a point of view.

There are at least two objective criteria, regardless of religious belief or philosophical position, which can help in the recognition of the ontological value of that which exists and can help steer us towards an understanding of what is in itself good, true, and beautiful, without falling into the schism of their separation and into relativity¹³. One criterion is the consensus of generations, when the common feeling of the people holds over time and braves the fluctuations and the whims of fashion and ideologies; and the other is the light, without which there can be no beauty and life ceases to live.

Like the consensus of many generations on the truth of things, so the light offers a sure criterion for an assessment of what is beautiful and what is not, and these two sources of value are not separate from that of the good. Goodness, truth, and beauty: the absence of one of these aspects expresses a partial light, makes room for shadows, invalidates the other aspects, allows the perversion of reality, allows for its distortion to the point of caricature. Respect for the truth requires equal attention to the common and individual good and does not create disharmony. The truth cannot harm, cannot brutalize, if it hurts it is already "less true"¹⁴. Without goodness or beauty there is no truth, only blind justice, the only criterion of which is equilibrium or a cynical adherence to the facts: every fundamentalism feeds on this perversion; thus the search for beauty without

¹² We know that by using allusion, one can be vulgar and insulting without ever using the actual words of insult or injury.

¹³ Commenting on Dostoevskij, EVDOKIMOV 1972.

¹⁴ BONHOEFFER 1942, in V. Mancuso, *La vita autentica*, Cortina, Milano 2009: 111 ss.

goodness and truth turns into the pursuit of individual pleasure which is blind to the damage that it can cause or the pain that it can generate. This much is obvious in lives which are based on the violent exploitation of the body or of the earth for the purpose of pleasure¹⁵. And without beauty and truth there is no place for real goodness, but only for utopias and totalitarian practices with their concentration camps.

The consensus of generations and the light ...

With regard to light, I observe that the places and the objects that bear witness to suffering are not light: they have dark spaces, opaque areas and an ambiguous or disturbing light, like the faces of people who are hiding something or who are capable of inflicting suffering or colluding with those who inflict it. Do you know houses which make you feel uncomfortable just to look at them, even if you do not know who lives there or what happened there? Go to the places where people – of all political persuasions - were massacred between 1944 and 1946. I am thinking here of Benedicta or Pian Manfrei behind Genova¹⁶. I have never heard the birds singing there, only the wind and a gloomy and ambiguous silence. I have known people who, without knowing what had happened there, just wanted to get away, and people in general keep away from those places. This happens in many, many places, as if one felt the fossil trace of something terrible that happened and that you are aware of deep down in some way, even when there is no longer any evidence.

So, trusting our intuition or our dreams, we might ask ourselves not only about these sites but also about objects, those that surround us in our everyday life, just as we usually do with people when we first meet them and we feel that there is something in them that we do not like, something that unsettles us or makes us feel uncertain about them. There are men and women who, when I am near them, make me feel diffidence despite their outward behaviour, their pleasant words, their politeness. And I have noticed that we are almost never wrong when we trust these deep feelings. But for this reason we need to feel *with* the things that surround us, and not distance ourselves from them; we need to hear what they say, what they bring with them, in order not to leave anything out of the world's deep pattern where everything is connected, everything tells a story, everything is a symbol of what is below and behind. An expert painter of liturgical art, Marko I. Rupnik, writes that to think with matter, one should possess the kind of intelligence that knows to enter in contact with the symbols¹⁷. Only thus can one enter in relation with the inanimate world and abide there, that world without which – as the Orthodox theologian Nicholas Berdyaev said – man cannot achieve his own “transfiguration”¹⁸.

¹⁵ BERRY 1988.

¹⁶ At Benedicta, between 7th and 11th April 1944, 147 people (partisans and men who had taken to the woods to avoid being sent to concentration camps) were killed by fascist and nazis soldiers. At Pian Manfrei, at the beginning of May 1945, 200 fascist soldiers were shot after surrendering to the partisans. Both sites are located in North-western Italy, behind Genoa.

¹⁷ RUPNIK 2010.

¹⁸ “My salvation and my transformation are not only connected to those of other men, but to those of the animals, plants and minerals, to their inclusion in the Kingdom of God, which depends on my creative endeavours”: BERDIAEV 1935.

The color scale is always the same: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, those who follow reductionism read in it the range of frequencies from infrared to ultraviolet, but the wisdom of the people recognize it in the rainbow. Analytical thinking is not competent in the world of complexity, cannot talk about it because it takes only a few items at a time, separates and isolates them from each other, and I doubt that the emotional footprint could ever be measured: measurement provides information on the amount and intensity, never on the quality and the nature of relationships. Perhaps one day the reductionists will indeed detect it with instruments or deduct it with syllogisms: that day they will report it all in "Nature" or the "Scientific American"; but we, knowing that reason denies the existence of whatever lies beyond its horizon and whatever cannot be deduced and understood from its laws, we can not wait for that day. Meanwhile I trust the shared common knowledge arising from the consensus of generations, I trust the light, I trust what I feel and what comes to me from the depths.

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