

THE FIXITY OF IMAGES AND THE PERCEPTION OF TIME

In this paper I will try to focus my attention not on external time, that is on the flow of events, of which the subject has little or no control, but on internal time, on the perception of time, on how each subject tends to experience it and live it. We could say, with a certain approximation, that external time coincides with the movement of the stars, with geological transformations, but also with the uncontrollable deterioration and progressive aging of all living beings. In this sense, external time coincides with transience, with the change to which all things, and in particular living beings, are subject. I will purposefully leave out the important theme of history, the changes and repetitions it brings about, in that it is too broad and not directly connected to what I would like to talk about. Instead, what I would like to address here is the subjective perception of time, experienced from a particular point of view. A common experience is that by which some of our mental products have a fixed nature. By fixed I mean the property of maintaining a perceptive regularity in time, a kind of unchangeable rigidity. The objects subjected to this fixity, display some characteristics, which I will try to illustrate.

The first characteristic concerns a particular perceptive intensity. It is as if these objects were illuminated, not from the outside but from the inside, and were for this reason made stable and unchangeable. It is as if these objects had no shadow, or nuance, or variable tonality, but a fixed and motionless tone. A second trait is related to their continuity. Despite the attempts to connect them, contextualise them, integrate them in something that may contain them, make them become figures of a possible background containing them, these objects seem to be suspended in a void, which is filled only by them: they are a totality in themselves. A third trait is related to their tendency not to be

symbolised. They are not so much signs of something, they do not refer to a context of associations, they do not flow, so to speak, towards something or in some direction; rather, they are motionless, as it were, filled only with themselves. Any attempt to use them as symbols seems destined to fail, because of a sort of intrinsic, unmodifiable, concreteness.

Any object may acquire this fixity: a pet, an insect, a specific part of our body, a blindfold on an eye, the hook of the captain in Peter Pan, a moustache. It is important to underline that we are talking about objects, that is, things, with a particular perceptive intensity. In this sense also, a person can fall into this category: though in this case he or she also becomes a thing, a motionless persistence. These objects are therefore not comparable to the internal objects of British psychoanalysis (Klein 1926, 1932; Heinmann 1949). Internal objects, in fact, are real people with whom the subject has had a meaningful and important relationship and with whom he or she has established a partial or total identification. Such identification may undergo changes or it may become crystallised, but in any case, it contributes in laying the foundations for a possible construction of a personality or character.

These objects are not even phantoms, representations of a figure, modified by defence mechanisms or desires, made persistent, precisely because they are invested by desires or defence mechanisms. We know that identifications and phantoms occupy the mind in an important way and often block it, limiting its openness, the possibilities of knowledge and love. They are more similar to, although they do not coincide with, Winnicott's transitional objects (1953): we are talking about real objects, which exist in the world, but which have an almost 'sacred' character, in the sense of being separated from the world, despite their very concrete nature. In short, these objects are real but have a particularly powerful perceptive force. We could say that they are indeed very similar to these types of objects, but that they possess a force, which refers to something unknown, immeasurable, strongly invested with interest and attraction, at times eroticised; that they are bearers of destiny or of magic, but that they are never symbols of something possible and other. We could say that they are symbols of a force, of a power, of an unfathomable energy and that moving beyond them creates a sense of fear and of emptiness.

What has been said has another consequence. These objects detach themselves from the context, they seem to appear not against a background, but as emerging from a productive, dark and mysterious nothingness. In psychoanalytical terms, we could say that they are split objects, separated, with a life of their own, and are not susceptible to enter into connections, or form links, branches. The only way to treat them is to broaden the horizon, to observe them closely, to better understand their functions and similarities, without trying to hastily define their meaning. However, before carrying out a more in-depth investigation to establish which categories these objects belong to, we must clarify why we have chosen this fixity in order to talk about the perception of time.

We can certainly say, in line with a rich philosophical tradition (e.g. Arist. *Phys.* IV), that time essentially coincides with a movement. Movement of bodies in space, movement of thoughts and images in our mind: the connection between two thoughts, or between an image and a thought or a real object and its memory, a recovered connection between a memory and its real object, an association, a link, a similarity. All these functions determine a sense of time: time is born within us when something connects to something else, like a train connecting two cities. This fluidity, this shift from one point to another, is experienced by the subject as new time, as something unfolding, moving within him or herself. It is this movement that accompanies the alternating of day and night, the time of seasons, cyclical time, but it also accompanies the succession of our physiological states - hunger, sleep, sexual arousal - which appear each time as the same, and that each time introduce some differences in this sameness, a new detail in this repetition. It is as if at least two parallel axes shifted inside the subject: the inevitable movement of the body, with its variations - always paradoxically the same - of its functions, and the movement of the mind towards a progressive and ever increasing fluidity.

We could consider mental illness as a partial loss of this internal movement, as the predominance of a physical rigidity that, instead of fluidity, continues to bring about sameness. This is why the fixed objects we are talking about halt time: their fixity immobilises the flow, it fixates the object to something that is unchangeable and always the same, as if the time surrounding that object were still. A grasshopper sitting motionless in the sun can

be an insect, a particular or distressing presence, something inspiring curiosity, a pleasant novelty, or perhaps company, or danger. But under certain conditions, and soon we will see which ones, that grasshopper becomes a logo, a brand, an immobile and unchangeable perception, imbued with enigmatic and mysterious qualities, that will never move again. It is important, however, at this point, to specify the conditions under which the object, separated from the context, becomes autonomous and blocks the internal movement that contributes to the perception of time. Before doing this, I would, however, like to provide a further clarification, which relates to artistic language, and in particular pictorial language, in the hope that this will help to better clarify my thought.

In many paintings, one can clearly perceive that the fascination of the work resides in a dialectic relationship between geometry and the absence of organization. Geometry is present in perspective, in the reading of the work as a set of structured geometric forms, such as volume ratios, circumferences, cubes, cones, parallelepipeds. It is also present in the distance between objects and colours, in the symmetry between parts, in the mysterious presentification of simple forms concealed behind images, which however constitute the images themselves. The unorganised element is the part of the painting that escapes the geometric rule, though never completely. It seems that the geometric and the unorganised element chase each other continuously, in an endless dialogue, in which neither must prevail definitely. If one takes a painting by Canaletto, for instance, the predominant geometry of palaces, spires, streets and canals may give rise to a sense of oppression or even boredom. But the soft colour of the light, the casual stroll of a passer-by, the flight of a bird, give a melancholic and dreamy quality to the background geometry. Geometry turns into nostalgia. The bird acquires meaning because it is inserted into the geometric element and this element acquires meaning because it is enlivened by the flight of the seagull.

This also holds true of the mind. The rigidity of the perceptual structure is enlivened by the unexpected connections that continually impose themselves on the structure itself. But if these connections are blocked, if the objects become fixed and, so to speak, hallucinated, no movement is generated and the perceptive structure does not grasp an object to be rendered fluid

inside a context, but a split body placed in an unconnected terrain. We will soon see how these objects are formed and their function. However, in the context of this paper, it is fundamental to grasp the paralysing nature of temporality, which these objects tend to bring about. If these fixed modalities prevail, the mental world becomes more rigid, it becomes a sort of museum displaying statues and objects, beautiful or ugly, but all the same immobile, as if we were wandering through a deserted or no longer inhabited house, where objects acquire a kind of enigmatic and fixed life of their own.

We can now indicate the forms by which this process of fixity is modified. There are essentially three main forms. The first relates to psychosis. In this condition, especially in connection with the crisis of presence, the object involved becomes hyper-concrete and therefore unchangeable. The second relates to traumatic objects, which accompany traumatic experiences and immobilise them over time. The third relates to fetish, that is, an object that is immobile and immobilised but that is also eroticized, which performs a function of saturation of a void placed elsewhere, a void the object has the task of saturating. We will now analyse them one at a time.

Fixity in psychosis

An essential characteristic of a psychotic state is the fact that when a break occurs in a fundamental relationship with an important other, thought acquires a visionary and, to a certain extent, immobile quality. This visionary modality is characterised by the particular intensity of sensory data, by the fact that this sensory data is experienced as being suspended, not linked to any context, seemingly fallen from the sky, and it, therefore, displays the qualities of sacredness, or at the very least it seems to have originated in an unknown world. Psychotics, in fact, need to have a very powerful and protective relationship with a reference figure; at the beginning of life it is the mother and then a brother, a relative, sometimes a father, more rarely, a companion, or a friend. When a rift occurs in this relationship, the psychotic subject is faced with frightening anxieties caused by a sense of loss. The world becomes a foreign place, everyday reality becomes mysterious and bizarre, as if the missing person were able, with his or her presence alone, to ensure a reality check and

participation in a world made familiar, and his or her absence causes their disappearance.

The break may be brought on by actual disappearance, bereavement, abandonment, an important life event, such as an illness, a change of job, but it can also be caused by the appearance, in the loved one, of some element that creates doubt, strangeness, an unexpected trait: this person is not what I thought! The sense of loss is distressing and almost unbearable. For this reason, the psychotic subject resorts to a kind of invocation of sensory aspects, which may restore the threatened world, its subjectivity, with the idea that a sort of presence continues to exist. This presence, however, has two characters. The first one indicates that it is fragmented, broken up, partial. The second that it is decontextualised, not inserted into a figure-background relationship, which may provide this presence with a space-time collocation. Things therefore appear as if through a collapse of space-time coordinates, in which the subject is collocated. This collapse of space and time must be filled immediately because the loneliness it creates and the sense of annulment of subjectivity are intolerable. A hallucinated sensoriality therefore forms, filling the subject with fixed, but mysterious, stable, though extraneous elements, which somehow fill the void, but at the same time may terrorise the subject.

Even when they do not terrorise the subject, they still present themselves as enigmatic: the subject becomes worn out, and spends a lot of time interrogating them. Much of the distracted, absorbed, or confused behaviour of psychotic subjects derives from the fact that they must continually concentrate on these hallucinated presences, which absorb their energies and prevent them from focusing on elements of the real world. In an important passage of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud hypothesises that in the event of a crisis of consciousness, the subject retroactively invests some sensory fragments of past experiences, which thus acquire a significant perceptive modality, but also escape any possible contextualisation. The way in which a psychotic tries to master this dramatic situation is to construct a delirium. A bizarre and unreal explanation, which however has the advantage of contextualising, in a possibly unitary pattern, albeit unreal, what otherwise would continue to be unbearable chaos.

The fixed images we have talked about can be located at a bodily level, or at the level of external reality. In the first case it is an emptied body, a mysterious obstruction in the area of the mind and body, a profound alteration of the balance of the organs, the belief that blood is not blood but a liquid inadequate for the purpose, that the sex organ is an appendix, hateful or too powerful, or even omnipotent, followed by other beliefs of the same kind. In the case of the outside world, images may be a position of the head, of the person who is present, a gesture, a pair of glasses, a smell, a specific part of the body, a flame, a puddle. These images are all invested with this mysterious and inaccessible quality, which fill and empty, at the same time. It should be added that these images contain within them both the emotional state of the subject, and the relationship with the other that determined this state. They are hyper condensed images that the psychotic cannot decipher because they are experienced as being fragmented and dispersed, though they contain, in a condensed way, the history of the relationship.

For the purposes of the theme dealt with by this study, it is not relevant to indicate how to treat these phenomena in therapy, but to indicate the fact that time stops: in these moments the sense of time of the psychotic is absorbed by still images, blocked and blocking, that question him and that he questions, without ever reaching an answer, i.e. an answer that is not delirium, in turn fixed and motionless. Time can be reconstituted if these images dilate and restore a sense which is always that of a story between the psychotic subject and the other of reference.

Fixity in trauma

We may say that behind the traumatic experience is a particular intensity of the violence of experience itself, which carries a threat to the life or mental balance of the subject, a subject who is not prepared to face it. In this case, the experience is not recorded in the usual way, nor can it be repressed, that is, recorded and then blocked out – which is how the process of repression takes place. Instead, experience acquires a very powerful emotional quality that is not accompanied by a thought, but by a fragmentation of sensory data, which remain in the mind as such, and do not lead to an identification of the traumatising scenario.

It is as if the human mind, in the face of traumatic experience, were not able to form a scene that somehow reflects the experience itself, but undergoes a split: on the one hand the emotional factor is overpowering, on the other the appearance of fixed hallucinatory elements maintains the emotional state of the mind. The emotion we are talking about can be unbearable anguish, a sense of death, a sense of disappearance, of a precipice, an explosion. Life is questioned, but more importantly, the mental capacity to maintain a degree of control over the event is also questioned. The sensory fragments are pieces of the scene, they bear a threat, a sense of unbearable penetration, of emptiness, but they too are somewhat split off from the overall scenario. The difference with psychosis is that in the case of trauma fixed images are not perceived as coming from another world, they are powerfully inserted in the real world. It is the real world that becomes violent, as if the world were no longer a place where it is possible for living beings to live in a certain orderly manner alongside the inanimate world, but a place where at any time a violent element may appear, threatening life and mental health.

Many traumatised subjects have lost faith in the world, in a place of possible peaceful coexistence: they experience the world as a continuous and constantly impending storm, which is perhaps subject to momentary pause, but somehow always on the verge of occurring. What interests us for the purposes of the present work, is that also the life of traumatised subjects is structured around fixed sensory elements, which remain stable over time. Unlike psychosis, these elements appear and reappear, but are always lurking, so to speak, and can be rekindled at any time. Here too, these elements are fragments of gestures, the tone of someone's voice, words experienced as insults, unbearable criticisms, but also noises, flashes of lightning, animals experienced as dangerous, dogs barking, frightening insects, such as grasshoppers, cockroaches, spiders. In short, life becomes a concentrate of images that carry danger. The traumatised person manages this situation becoming angry and irritated, developing paranoia, or social isolation, or adopting an aggressive and violent attitude, which create the delusion the subject is dominating the world, rather than being dominated, the feeling that he or she is a threat to the world, instead of the world being a threat to him or her. Here too there is a certain stillness of time, there is no development, but a sort of fixed scenario, in which the victim is always confronted by a persecutor, and all possible movement is

experienced as being blocked by this hallucinatory permanence. Unlike the psychotic, there is no development towards delirium, but a stillness in the perception of a world, which is sensed as being permanently bad and unmanageable. Time perception can be reconstituted very slowly, when a personal relationship is able to foster elements that breach the perception of danger, pointing to trust, hinting to a possible relationship in which the violent dimension is certainly not totally eliminated, though it is at least contextualised inside a broader space, in which there is room also for different types of feelings.

Fixity in fetishism

Fetishism is not only a sexual perversion, indeed it can become, in many cases, a way of relating to the world and to things. If, however, we limit ourselves to considering the original nucleus of this posture, we may say that the fetishist cannot bear the sight of a void, internal or external. With reference to its sexual connotation, this void is connected to the fetishist's inability to acknowledge the difference between genders: this difference is experienced not only as something enigmatic and mysterious, but as a void to be filled, and as a risk of becoming lost in it. In particular, the female body is not viewed as something other with respect to the male body, but as a challenge to the integrity and the wholeness of the male body. The sense of inner emptiness that the fetishist experiences is projected onto this difference, and the sight of a female body becomes an unbearable spectacle.

Before falling into this void, the fetishist attaches himself to the details that surround this void, and that have the task of slowing the fall. In other words, some images connected to the female body, a fur, a pair of shoes, hair, a scarf, a button, nail polish, are experienced as plugs that fill the void itself, replacing the missing object with subsidiary objects, invested with powerful excitement. Freud (1927) emphasises that not only does the fetishist attach himself to these fixed objects, but that he also eroticises them, turning them into a powerfully sexualised source, so that the relationship with femininity is replaced by the relationship with these objects, which substitute the real object and excite more than the female body in its entirety. This posture, which Freud describes in detail, is accompanied by a deep vertical split. On the one hand, this void is recognised, but on the other hand, all truth is denied to the void. In short, it is denial of the void

itself, which is filled by the fetishised object. But what are the characteristics of these objects? A wig, a boot, a shoe, nail polish, are fixed objects, used in a way that is repeated and always the same. These objects do not symbolise something, they do not replace something; they are objects that merely fill something that does not exist. They are therefore not subject to mental development: their characteristic is precisely that of not being symbols, because they were not used for developing thought, but for another purpose: to deny lack, and to transform lack into excitement.

It is useful to draw a comparison with Winnicott's transitional object (1953). Transitional objects contain both an element of reality and an illusion, therefore they always have a double value, a double statute, in that they allow us to identify a missing object in the object itself, which, however, can be recalled and is open to development. The fetish object, on the other hand, is immobile in time and space, it only serves to excite, and its relationship with lack is metonymic, not metaphorical. One could say, in a somewhat picturesque way, that this is the last thing the subject saw before being exposed to the void: the choice for this object is therefore made not because it is a symbol, but because it is close to the void without having fallen into it.

It is possible to extend this concept to a modality of relating to objects that is widespread in the social sphere. Is it possible to hypothesise that a certain employment of goods, a certain investment defined so far as consumerist, has the purpose of eroticising buyers with something that has only the function of filling and not of embellishing or making them dream? The frantic quest for accumulation, the sense of dissatisfaction with something that is never enough, the excitement generated by the interest for an object, the exteriorisation of objects in the personal sphere, Are these not somewhat similar to the fetishist's modality of relating to things? Perhaps it is possible to recall the distinction made by Marx (1959) between use value and exchange value and compare them with fetishism. What counts is not so much the way one uses an object, but the value of the object itself as something that is eroticised and sparkling, which serves to be shown off and thus enhance the social image of a subject, but also serves as the illusion that the subject can take possession of something the subject continues to lack. As far as the choice of the object of fetishism is concerned, Freud (1927) underlines that the type of

object pertains to the desired other, though it has the function of filling the void that the desired other carries within him or herself and in which the subject is left. An example could be that of a child who is unable to have an affectionate and intimate relationship with his mother, and who goes to his mother's wardrobe and smells her underwear, her clothes, when she is not there. The illusion consists in achieving sensory stimulation through an object belonging to the mother, which is filling and fulfilling, unlike the void in the object and the void to which the object condemns the subject. The relationship with the chosen object is therefore a relationship of closeness. Since I cannot love you, I will obtain excitement with your clothes, and this way I will control you. It is easier to control a clothes item than a person.

For the purposes of the topic addressed here, attention has been given to fixed elements, which in this case are not carriers of enigmas, as in psychosis, or of violence, as in the case of trauma, but are carriers of a powerful erotic excitement, which gives the subject the illusion that the sexualisation of an object can fill the absence of a relationship, the anguish caused by the discovery of unbearable faults in the other and in oneself. Time is frozen also here, because the relentless search for a fetish immobilises the subject in eternal repetition, in search of that excitement which ignites but does not warm, in which the transient pleasure of a delimited sexuality never succeeds in replacing the pleasure derived from opening up to the object and manifesting one's availability to it.

Conclusions

My intention was to approach three very different conditions – psychosis, trauma, fetishism – which all have the effect of obstructing the mind with very powerful and very rigid perceptual elements, which occupy the subject with a constant, impending and overbearing pressure and which neutralise the idea that there is a time that evolves, a movement towards the other or towards the future, a possibility of change.

It is as if, in all three cases, despite their enormous differences, there were a persecutory sensorialised object, which requires the subject's constant attention, and delimits his or her horizon, preventing an opening up to something new, to the unknown, to something foreign, to what poses questions not in a

blocked way, but in an open way. We could say that the perception of time is accompanied by a certain sense of freedom: the more the subject can free him or herself from these fixed elements, the more he or she experiences time, not only as a distressing, impossible and unstoppable arrow, but also as richness to be used. No doubt time is both a friend and an enemy: it is impossible to stop time, but at least one may use it. Biological time of aging carries with it a sense of anguish. But it is possible to contain it in part if we think of the fact that the more time passes, the more one acquires a certain inner freedom. This freedom is, however, achievable only if there are no fixed elements that somehow imprison the subject, with their rigid and immovable presence.

In this paper I have purposefully left out another way of controlling time which is the obsessive modality, so well described in *La freccia ferma* by Elvio Facchinelli (1979). In the case of obsessive subjects, time is blocked because the subject is anguished by death, degradation, violence, and a fictitious and very rigid order imposed on things gives him or her the illusion of controlling these feelings. Transforming life into a ceremonial immobilises time inside an everlasting ritual, nourishes the fantasy that life is a fixed point, not something which develops. This very important theme, however, is not so much about the fixed elements of the mind, rather it is about the ceremonial imposed on things. For this reason, I did not address the obsessive modality, not because it is not important, but because my intention was to highlight how some stable elements of mental production can obstruct the idea of development, and thus interrupt the idea of time as a flow. The identification of these fixed elements and their treatment can have an important effect, the reactivation of a sense of time, which on the one hand inevitably gives rise to melancholy, but on the other shapes the idea of the development of a possible opening, which will bring joy, and which at least in part can compensate for the inevitable acknowledgment of the passage of things.

ANTONELLO CORREALE

Abbreviations

Arist. *Phys.* Aristotle. *Physics*. Volume I: Books 1-4 (trans.) P. H. Wicksteed and F. M. Cornford. Loeb Classical Library 228. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957.

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