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Words that touch

THE PREDOMINANCE OF SIGHT

Will the power of evoking images of things that are not there continue to develop in a human race increasingly inundated by a flood of prefabricated images? (...) The memory is littered with bits and pieces of images, like a rubbish dump, and it is more and more unlikely that any one form among so many will succeed in standing out.

Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, 1988.

Because of its focus on images and technologies, the Western culture has attributed to the sense of sight a hegemonic role in the perception of reality. In the last decades, we had a so quick and remarkable increase in the number of visual images that our lives appear to be almost saturated by them. From Google to Instagram, to videogames and installation art, this transformation has produced a sort of global visual society that brings confusion: not only we can see the world, but we can repeatedly reproduce it through images, by sharing and exchanging them with others (Mirzoeff, 2015).

Italo Calvino (1988, p. 57) writes: *“We live in an unending rainfall of images. The most powerful media transform the world into images and multiply it by means of the phantasmagoric play of mirrors. These are images stripped of the inner inevitability that ought to mark every image as form and as meaning, as a claim on the attention and as a source of possible meanings. Much of this cloud of visual images fades at once, like the dreams that leave no trace in the memory, but what does not fade is a feeling of alienation and discomfort.”*

Luce Irigaray (2011) stresses how, although the touch is at the heart of the dialectic of all our existential relationships, our culture is dominated by the sight. This means that we *look at* and thus we assume the logic of possession rather than of contemplation.

Therefore, the dictatorship of the sense of sight has overshadowed the aim of the other senses. This is valid not only for the sense of touch, but also of that of smell, for example. This is

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despite the fact that, in our experience, touching and smelling are fundamental sensory modalities for producing knowledge about the world and integrating it with the knowledge of ourselves.

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE SENSE OF TOUCH

All along its development, psychoanalysis has given value to the sense of touch by understanding it not only as a physical expression but mainly as an emotional and relational expression.

Sandor Ferenczi (1928, p. 89) defines the sense of touch (or tact) as “(...) *the capacity of for empathy. (...) It is above all a question of psychological tact whether or when one should tell the patient some particular thing, when the material he has produced should be considered sufficient to draw conclusions, in what form these should be presented to the patient, how one should react to an unexpected or bewildering reaction on the patient’s part, when one should keep silent and await further associations, and at what point the further maintenance of silence would result only in causing the patient useless suffering (...).*”

On the 1st January 1928 Ferenczi sent his controversial essay *The Elasticity of Psychoanalytic Technique* to Freud with an accompanying letter. Three days later Freud responded to Ferenczi: he praised the essay, but he made notice that, if we accept all the essay’s claims, we risk that “*all those who have no tact will see in this a justification of arbitrariness, i.e., of the subjective factor (...).*” (p. 332)

On the 15th January Ferenczi replied to Freud’s objections in a letter: “*Tact,*” as I view it, does not intend to be a concession to the arbitrariness of the subjective factor (...) I only think that one should put oneself first and foremost into the patient’s position, one must “*empathize*” (...).”

Like Ferenczi, Glauco Carloni (1984, pp. 196-197, my translation) points out that the term “tact” metaphorically means “*the art of dealing with the others, a mix of shrewdness, timeliness, opportunity, prudence, grace, and measure. It is something that requires to be elastic and smart, that is, to be adaptative and inventive in order to understand and solve new problems. (...) As well as one feels and makes experience through the physical tact, one observes, feels, and studies how the other is disposed, structured, and influenced by his or her vulnerability. Of course, the psychical tact makes use of the sense of touch as well as of the other four senses and of that sixth sense we call ‘empathy.’ Since the tact is so acute in our hands, it is easy to understand, at both physical and figurative level, how the tact is so exposed to those forms of falsification and pollution known as manipulations or maneuvers (...).*”

Emmanuelle Chervet (2017) describes the analyst's tact as his or her ability to adapt to the patient's 'admissibility' ('recevabilité') needs, that is, his or her ability to listen to the patient's listening and tuning in it.

Since psychoanalysts strongly oppose to the predominance of the sense of sight and appreciate the tact, in our consulting rooms we hold together our different senses and thus we are in touch with all our perception. This allows to consider the contact between the analyst and the analysand as a multisensorial experience.

Wilfred Bion (1992, p. 10) writes about 'common sense' through a nice word pun, that is, about making all the senses work together in order to benefit from all the different sense-perceptive sources: "(...) *the term, 'common sense', is felt to be an adequate description covering an experience felt to be supported by all the senses without disharmony.*"

A disharmony among the different sense-perceptions indicates a lack of contact with reality and thus a weakening of our ability to learn from experience.

In an interview with Anthony Molino (1997), Michael Eigen points out that our senses do provide not only simple information, but also different worlds with their different qualities, different ways to live. More precisely, they do not provide only information to elaborate and process, but also different manners to deal with the world, with the sense of touch or the other senses.

THE LOSS OF PHYSICAL CONTACT AND THE VALORIZATION OF THE SENSE OF HEARING

The abolition of the visual and tactile contact is clearly a form of psychical deprivation. The looks meeting or avoiding each other, the intensity of a handshake or the breadth of the contact surface of the skin when we hug someone else are some clear examples of the hierarchy of our feelings and emotions in our lives. This hierarchy is radically questioned in traumatic situations like the present COVID-19 outbreak, (Mazzucco, 2020).

About this outbreak, in the mailing list of SPI (the Italian Psychoanalytic Society), Carlo Pasino (2020) nostalgically remembers when he could use all his senses also in the complex analytic situations. Furthermore, he argues that now he feels forced to work as if he were in a diving bell and fantasizing of flying like a butterfly.

The great value of the contact in a relationship can be clearly observed in the increasingly accurate obstetrical maneuvers used to assist in childbirth. The newborn is not abruptly separated from his or her mother through traumatically cutting the umbilical cord. Rather,

the newborn is placed over his or her mother in order to make the separation less traumatic not only for him or her, but also for the mother herself, in a penumbra similar to the intrauterine quiet.

And how many times we have seen the baby sleeping with his or her head attached to a border of the cradle in order to find the lost uterine containment! Or his or her beaming smile when he or she passes from crawling to standing upright and thus staggers the first steps for reaching the reward of receiving the mummy's or daddy's embrace!

Some days ago, in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak, I went out to buy the newspaper. I saw two girls running one attached to the other, as two Siamese twins. I made them notice to take the distance one from the other. They immediately took this distance but, after a while, I took a look at them again and I saw that they continued to run one attached to the other: it was as if an invisible thread pulled them and they felt the need to run but, at the same time, to stay in contact. Although they were aware of my notice and responded adequately at the conscious level, the attractive force of the contact worked as an unconscious magnet.

We know how separations can be painful. But we also know how separations can be necessary and, above all, how separations need to be faced and worked through in order to not activate anti-economic defense mechanisms. Personally, in a situation in which the physical contact is not possible, I prefer the telephone to the *online* visual communication. For me, this is because *online* visual communication risks being a mere surrogate of the visual contact: they can to produce estrangement and fantasies of control, distort our perception and our immediate experience, and intrude the other's intimacy.

As Marshall Mc Luhan (1967) pointed out, the medium is the message. Of course, this is valid also for the telephonic conversations, but I believe that the disadvantages or the collateral damages are less in this case than in the Skype conversations.

If the physical contact is a mean of contagion and thus a risk for survival, so we must deal with the brute reality. That is, we have to accept reality its limitations, but also to try to think, imagine, dream which communicative possibilities, although not perfect, are able to realistically gather some of those properties that we cannot implement.

Perhaps, in order to give value to the communicative channels different from the sense of sight, it can be helpful to appeal to the discovery of neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity is that feature of the human brain to modify itself and find new ways of functioning. This discovery put into question the theory that the anatomy of the brain is immutable.

According to some experimental data, the brain can modify its structure at the level of each specialized function. It can improve its circuits so to adapt them more efficiently for the task it

has to perfect. In other words, the brain seems to be able to reorganize all its parts for obviating to those flaws caused by traumatic damages and injuries, neurological problems considered incurable, or the effects of ageing (Doidge, 2007).

The theory of neuroplasticity permits to think that, after the traumatic interruption of the physical contacts, it can become highly important what I call “the imaginative hearing”. It is the possibility that the acoustic pathways acquire additional functions, functions that, in normal conditions, pertain to the senses of sight, touch, and smell. Very briefly, the imaginative hearing can be able to condense that multi-sensoriality that risks being lost.

Marion Milner (1952) argues that the essence of experience is what we add to what we see and that, without any effort from ourselves, we do not see anything.

Danielle Quinodoz (2002, p. 50) points out that “(...) *the absence of visual support during analytic sessions may facilitate consciousness of a bodily experience. This is so particularly if the experience is relatively undifferentiated and involves internal sensations that are difficult to localize – for example, proprioceptive sensations, or sensations relating to the body as a whole, sometimes bound up with attitudes and positions.*”

Quinodoz attempts to find ‘the words that touch’ for those persons distressed lacking internal cohesion and fearing to lose the feeling of their identity. She defines these persons as heterogeneous patients who precisely need an *incarnate language* in order to be free and creative. They need a language able to touch their phantasies, thoughts, feelings, and sensations.

On the basis of Quinodoz’s considerations, we can think of a wise use of our voice not only at the technical level, but also and foremost at the emotional and affective level. In this sense, could our voice transmit those words that touch (and the related emotions) that can substitute, although not completely, the senses of touch and sight that cannot find a full expression in this historical contingency?

I think that today it is crucial to give more value to a good and wise use of our voice and listening in the telephonic conversations. Recently, these conversations have highly increased and assumed a polyvalence of meanings that they have never had before or, at best, they minimally had.

*A VOCE SOLA*²

² *A voce sola* (solo voice) is a musical term for indicating arias, jingles and recitatives by basso continuo the composer Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) created for harpsichord and piano.

In a recent interview, the Genoese singer and songwriter Ivano Fossati argues that the sound of voice is similar to our look and comes before the words. When we listen to a musical instrument's solo, we clearly understand if those phrases are sincere or if the musician is making mere virtuositities or exercises. Psychoanalysts such as Thomas Ogden (1999), Antonio Di Benedetto (2000), Mauro Mancina (2002), and Fausto Petrella (2018) studied the features of the voice. All these authors stress the importance of the intonation, the timbre, the volume of the voice, the rhythm, the prosody, the syntax, and the timing of the language. Even in case of remote communication, all these features can constitute of a frame of acoustic intimacy in which the unconscious affects can emerge as meaningful singing signs that escape the conscious control, more or less as the Freudian slips (or parapraxes).

Lucia Monterosa (2013, p. 585, my translation) writes: *“In the consulting room, sometimes we hear faint voices that force us to stand still in order to not make any noise when we focus our attention on the analysand, like a mother who goes close to her child’s cradle to be sure that he breathes. Sometimes we hear strongly dissenting voices; sometimes we hear voices that look like foreign bodies. Sometimes we hear insistent and inexpressive voices (...). The analyst’s work is that of containing and harmonizing all these sounds and voices: it is a sort of bodily adaptation of what the analysand’s body expresses.”*

In these days of the COVID-19 outbreak, it is crucial for our wellbeing to distinguish between the cacophony of the ambulance sirens echoing in the unreal silence of city streets and the euphony of the voices expressing those silent thoughts that need a mean for containing and transporting them respectfully.

In a 2013 interview, Thomas Ogden (pp. 634-635) points out that, in an analysis, *“Conversation, in which two people are talking with one another, involves a different sort of structuring of language and structuring of experience. The spoken conversation resonates with an unconscious conversation in which the two people are thinking together (...). It takes two people to think; that is, it requires the creation of a form of unconscious thinking comprised of the conjoint thinking and feeling of two people, which enables them to think in a way that neither individual alone could think/feel. It is that experience of thinking with another person with whom one is in conversation consciously and unconsciously that I believe has the potential to create conditions in which psychological change may occur in both the patient and the analyst.”*

In an interview with Anthony Molino, Adam Phillips (1997) writes that it is extraordinary that, when we have a good conversation, we forget of the conversation itself. It is as if the conversation had a life of its own. For him, psychoanalysis must be considered as a continuous

conversation, interesting for both the parties, the analyst and the analysand, who ignore the reason why they appreciate the conversation, but intend to continue it.

The true spirit of psychoanalysis is first in the direct experience of a couple communicating during a session, then in the process of analysis. Of course, it is not forbidden to examine a piece of music after having listened to it, decomposing it in its parts, examining its harmonies and tonalities. But, before all these operations, it is necessary to get simply carried by the sound of music. Similarly, the analytic sessions must be experienced ‘without memory or desire’, in the *hic et nunc* (here and now), in order to allow an authentic and genuine communication. Only later the sessions could be articulated and developed in their polysemy. Wisława Szymborska (2002) expresses similar concepts in an effective manner in the poem *The Silence of Plants*:

“(...) we share a common journey.

When traveling together, it's normal to talk, (...)

We wouldn't run out of topics

for so much connects us.

The same star keeps us in reach.

We cast shadows according to the same laws.

Both of us at least try to know something,

each in our own way,

and even in what we don't know

there lies a resemblance.”

Of course, I am not a trained and expert phonologist. But I wonder whether the telephone can permit a sort of unusual and necessary journey in which different and distant trains with the same destination and their passengers talk and invent a new language in a common imaginary compartment.

In *The Little Prince* (de Saint-Exupéry, 1943, p. 82), the Little Prince repeats to himself what the fox told him, that is, “*one sees clearly only with the heart. What is essential is invisible to the eyes.*”

Can the music of words permit to express and understand this *essential*?

The therapeutic function is certainly a universal anthropological feature of music. This is valid either for those persons who activate inside of them the creative processes and symbolically communicate some features of their mental lives through the musical forms and

those persons who benefit of the artistic products. Because of its nature, the experience of listening music can never be separated from the sensibility of the listener, from the listener's capacity to be open to the music so that some unknown or forgotten parts of him or her can be reached. This process implies that the experience of the beauty cannot exclude the experience of the uncanny.

It is a long time that radio, television, records, computers, etc. play and reproduce music, sounds, and words in a remote manner. This implies a different kind of listening in purely perceptive terms, as well as a different coenaesthesia based on the distance and the separation. I think that, even in a remote manner (and thus also in the telephonic conversations), words and sounds can mean something more than simply giving names to things: they imply not only a more or less obsessively detailed exposition of what happens, but also a rich and creative representational capacity. Of course, it is a matter of fact that, in this dramatic period, this capacity can be biased and distorted because of the ineliminable anxiety pervading all of us. The descriptions can be accepted as gifts, as bold attempts to act the discriminative capacity of our emotions and feelings in the relationships, even in a remote manner and with our mobile phone in hands.

Mauro Mancina (2004, p. 62) refers to the features of the voice when he points out that, “(...) *on the clinical level (...) may emerge (...) the ‘musical dimension’ of the transference. This dimension may be detectable in the patient’s communications, particularly in the tone, timbre, and volume of the voice, and in the rhythm, stresses, syntax and timing of the language.*”

All these features allow to acoustically (if not musically) share our experiences, hopes, anxieties, and fears, and thus to express ourselves in relation with the others.

I want to remember *Une belle matinée* (A lovely morning), a Marguerite Yourcenar's short story (1981). The main character is a child who lives and works in a hotel-brothel. He loves theater and spies the rehearsals of an old actor through the keyhole of the actor's room. It is many years that the actor lives in this hotel room and has an affair with the hotel-brothel's mistress. The child listens to the old actor's voice and observes that it can change every time he desires. It can become the beautiful voice of a young man, a voice that makes think to full lips and perfect teeth. But it can also become the voice of a smiling and laughing sweet girl. Furthermore, it can also become the many voices of the farmers quarreling among them. For the boy, the most beautiful moment is when the voice becomes grand and slow like that of a bishop or a king.

Is it possible that our telephonic communications with our analysands permit to express this plurality of voices, I mean, that plurality of meanings and sounds, that music made of words

and pauses that had so much fascinated the child in the Yourcenar's short story and that certainly go beyond the reach of our conscious intentionality?

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