

DURATION OF THINGS AND DURATION OF CULTURE

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Culture creates two infinities unknown to nature. The first was noticed by Thomas Mann in the introduction to *Joseph and his Brothers*. By examining artefacts, ideas, symbols and human habits, we instinctively seek their sources, believing that in this way we will understand them better. But we never reach the final source – revealing the next antecedences and trying to understand them, we are inevitably guided towards even earlier events and content, and then to even earlier ones. ‘The deeper we delve and the farther we press and grope into the underworld of the past, the more totally unfathomable become those first foundations of humankind, of its history and civilization, for again and again they retreat farther into the bottomless depths’ (Mann 2005: 3). Mann called this phenomenon a well of the past and speaks of an amazing paradox, as this infinity of genesis exists after all in the finite time that was given to man on Earth. The second infinity is heading in the opposite direction, towards the future and is connected with the everlasting being of a historical event. In nature, previous events change into new ones and only in the latter they continue to exist, completely absorbed by them, but the human event, the state of things endowed with meaning, knows no such absorption. Once it has been created, subsequent events cannot erase it. The philosopher Karl Raimund Popper (1979) even came to the radical conclusion that beings endowed with meaning have a distinct way of existence and he coined the name World₃ for them, distinguishing it from the World₁ (physical objects) and the World₂ (mental processes). However, Popper’s World₃ does not exist in time, its everlasting being stems rather from their position beyond time. The French philosopher and musicologist, Vladimir Jankélévitch, took the same riddle differently,

including time and duration in it: 'He who has been, from then on cannot not have been: henceforth this mysterious and profoundly obscure fact of having been is his viaticum for all eternity' (the sentence used as a motto in: Ricoeur 2004). He did not make the problem easier, but somewhat richer. Popper's lasting objects of culture are a matter of cognition focused on timeless meanings, while Jankélévitch also includes a sense of history.

At school, we were taught history as if it was a series of events with emptiness lying in between. We know, however, that apart from great battles and famous founding acts, normal days and hours and minutes of human lives passed by. Emptiness separates historical testimonies (the worry of all historians), but there is no emptiness in history. It does not only last in transient events and their representations, which are prone to destruction: documents, artefacts. We can sometimes perceive those missing days and times by discovering them in ordinary things that do not show signs of being a witness. History exists in them in a hidden, but perfectly continuous way. When the last World War passed, many simple events and things gained a new meaning – lost their innocence and could no longer return to their former senses: knocking at the door, wall, train, canal, forest, basement, barbed wire, barrack. In Polish films from the 1950s (e.g. directed by Wojciech Jerzy Has or Jerzy Kawalerowicz), the camera often looks at things in this way – suspiciously, with fear that the world of cruelty hidden in them will suddenly wake up, as if life entangled in this history were lasting in things, and could not return to balance (see: Piłat 2000).

In the column by Zbigniew Herbert, written in 1951 in connection with the new archaeological discoveries in Gdansk, three methods of the archaeological reconstruction of objects are distinguished. The first is to restore what has been destroyed by time. It is a perennial conflict between man and time, raised to the level of art, resistance, which Roman Ingarden (1973: 17) wrote so suggestively about in his essay *Człowiek i przyroda* (*Man and Nature*):

Culture creations created by man are nothing more than a kind of shadow of reality, being only purely intentional creations. They wear only the appearance of existence that characterizes all spiritual human works, such as works of art or various other products of human culture, regardless of whether they are works of a particular man or the whole

human community. They are formed on the ground of things and processes of the innate world, adapted to this by man, and their properties go beyond the limits of the material objects' remuneration, covering them with a new layer of meaning and new phenomena. Transcending these things with it, they lose their fullness and autonomy of existence and have no power of reality independent of man and his spiritual acts. They can satisfy man's aspirations for life elevated above nature only on the condition of his extraordinary spiritual activity and fall back into complete non-existence, as soon as he loses the will to transcend his simple inborn nature and renounces his creative activity of consciousness.

In harmony with the observations by the philosopher, Herbert (2001: 633) describes the scene that made a great impression on him:

Through the open door, you can see the scientific laboratory of the Museum's unnamed artists. Above a huge pile of tiny fragments that look like a scattered mosaic, the heads bend down and their sniptious fingers draw out the last piece of the 18th century plate. Now the subtle ornament of blue flowers shone with all its splendour. The wise fingers have restored fragile art its former beauty [emphasis mine – R.P.].

Another sense of lasting of things according to Herbert is survival. The poet was fascinated by the processes that, in happy conditions, allow things to sustain much longer than they would if things took the natural course:

In the town, the level of hygiene was not high, and the piles of dirt lying in the streets, along with moisture, bark waste – gave tannin, betulin and methane, thanks to which preservation was better and more than in other early medieval castles in Poland, especially such things as: coloured fabrics, plant and animal remains, bristles, feathers, as well as a hen's egg, on which fierce arguments of visitors take place, whether it is even possible (ibid. 646; emphasis mine – R.P.).

In the same passage, Herbert recognizes the third aspect of duration of material objects – in human cognition and understanding: 'These objects are seemingly trivial, but really allow deep penetration into the social, economic, cultural and political structure of those times [emphasis mine – R.P.]. All three of the poet's observations surprise with a certain positivist

spirit and faith in the power of knowledge and technical mastery, which allows you to snatch history's dormant and seemingly inaccessible secrets. By reproducing, preservation, understanding, we recreate the same history that created us. All attempts to understand history, however, are associated with a deep paradox. Recognizing our genesis leads to owning ourselves, holding ourselves within the scope of understanding perception. However, the relationship to oneself can hardly be described as possession. This metaphor: being in possession of oneself, has accompanied philosophy for ages. It used to express intimacy with oneself, being a friend of oneself. However, it is not the most fortunate metaphor, because it creates an infinite regression of having one who possesses one who possesses one, etc. A man who possesses himself (grasps himself, looks at himself) turns out (paradoxically) to be hidden from himself forever, and this is why the cognitive paradigm did not fully meet the hopes of regulating human communing with history.

Considering cultural objects implies a richer, more promising hermeneutics. In fact, in Herbert's later work, communing with cultural artefacts has a different function. It is no longer a cognitive task, tearing the past of its riddles, but rather, as the poet writes in the volume of the *Mistrz z Delft (Master of Delft)*, searching for signs and traces of a lost community. Also the word 'object' in the earlier famous book of poems *Studium przedmiotu (Study of the Object)*, refers to the work of an artist or a person of the drama, not the discoverer – the object appears completely immersed in human fate.

The artefact, which lasts in the most mysterious and peculiar way, is a book. Its physical form today, in the era of electronic memory, is only one of the possible carriers of text and image, which is why many foretell its end. However, this twilight does not happen. On the contrary, the physical garment of a book attracts book lovers, publishers, artists – it is a matter of cognition and expression, not limited to the text itself. Therefore, the passion of restoring splendour to old scrolls, codes and volumes does not cease. The materiality of a book is very special: it lasts in time like other artefacts, but on the other hand, the text contained in it has its own time – the one in which the meanings, ideas and styles last. Both of those components of a book refer to different time structures, but they seem to support each other. It seems that the cover of a book, covered with a patina of time, is a clue for the reader. It triggers his unconscious anticipation that

the text will emerge not only from the pages of the book, but also from the depths of history.

Let an anecdote illustrate this mutual dependence of material and content in the books. The writer of these words studied philosophy in ATK (Academy of Catholic Theology in Warsaw), and naturally, he used to sit in the Academy's reading room. Once upon a time, a book ordered by him was extracted from the magazine, a two-volume English commentary on Immanuel Kant published at the end of XIX century. All it took was to open the cover to reveal that the book had been left unopened for the entire century. The seals in the book showed that the volume originally belonged to the library in Königsberg, from where it went to post-war Poland, marked by the seals of new libraries, carefully cancelled and replaced by the new ones when the book changed its place of residence. Finally, it found its way to the Warsaw's district Bielany, to the ATK library – a thick volume moved around with effort and care of many librarians – catalogued, preserved but not read by anyone¹. What content and what feelings does one expect while cutting these uncut pages? Will it be a discovery of an unknown genius? Or will it turn out a worthless graphomania? Whatever it is, it is not an ordinary book – under the guidance of yellowed paper and a faded ridge, the book invites to a serious encounter with history.

The efforts of conservators are accompanied by the search for the original. He is the guardian of the truth. The mind, which is supposed to be the nest of truth, must be protected from its own tendency to fantasize, speculate and bend its own knowledge according to some interest and against the original meaning. The conservator protect the original meaning by protecting the original artefact. The concept of the original is, however, unclear. In the field of graphics, for example, there's a concept of a posthumous original, that is, prints made after the artist's death from the matrix prepared by him. However, even in such a peculiar case, efforts are made to preserve the intuition of the original. A good example is a research program lasting

¹ Unfortunately, despite the efforts of recollection, I am not able to top this anecdote with an effective punch line and give the title of the work. Thirty years have passed since that time, erasing the notes and weakening the memory. I think, however, that some readers, most probably book lovers, will remember their own similar discoveries.

for several years, which aimed to examine the originality of Rembrandt's prints owned by the Poznan museum. The curator of the exhibition crowning these efforts, Grażyna Hałas, tells in an interview for the Polish Radio II Program about the titanic work, subtle techniques and brilliant deductions, which led to dethroning several items and raising several others to the level of the original. The listener to her words has no doubt that this work was not only exciting, but also fruitful. But what is this fruit we're talking about here? Achievement, after all, does not lie in establishing the process of causal or material primacy of one artefact in relation to another. I would say, that the discovery of the original (or 'unmasking' of the copy) is the guiding principle of understanding – it announces the content, opens the legitimate (and longed for) path to interpretation. This phenomenon of opening is accompanied by strong emotions, creating what can be called the experience of the original. As Tim Hitchcock (2008: 83) wrote: 'When you unwrap a parchment document enclosing the 200-years-old evidence given at a coroner's inquest, and the sand used to blot the ink spills into your lap, it is difficult to maintain an appropriate distance'.

On the other hand, Warcin Wilkowski (2012) notices that 'If we recognize that only direct contact with the original has a full value, we reduce the range of archives impact only to a narrow group of specialists, museums – to people who can come to the exhibition (they are able to buy a ticket and get to the place), libraries – to people who will be given the opportunity to take a crumbling codex into their hands'. The emotional relationship Hitchcock writes about, though real and authentic, has a rather ephemeral status. It is difficult to accurately characterize it, measure it, and estimate its significance. Should the original remain a paradigm of access to culture? Wilkowski formulates doubts in this matter, joining a lively contemporary discussion on the subject.

Looking for the original is not about a purely retrospective act of tracing the determining causation, but it is about a prospective act of opening a new interpretation. Causality in the natural sciences binds these two aspects – this is what its cognitive value is all about. By determining the regularities that took place earlier, we are given the opportunity to predict. It is similar in cultural studies, although the bridging is different, lacking the form of mathematical equations. Here the causality gives something similar to Ariadne's thread in the work of interpretation.

There are other ontic properties of the world (in addition to causality), which are of great importance in the search for the original. The first is the identity of the studied objects over time. If one were to take material reality in its entirety, the problem of identity would be trivial – it would appear a priori, because the world in which everything changes is after all and as a whole the same with each other. But with regard to individual objects, works, people, the problem of continuity turns out to be very difficult. For centuries, philosophers have been pondering over the question at which moment the object that changes from moment to moment ceases to be the same subject. They did not stop trying to solve puzzles, like the one with the ship, which during the renovation gets a new plating, frames, deck, masts and equipment, and yet it is (some do not think so) the same ship. In more recent times, the question has been brought back in a more serious context by the British philosopher Derek Parfit (1984) arguing that in human and moral philosophy we do not need a category of personal identity – a gradual and non-transitive category of continuity is enough for practical and moral purposes.

The last category that is associated with the search for the original is the source. The original is not only the leading thread in the search for interpretation, but also directs to its source. Finding a source seems to promise better understanding. However, the difficulties pointed out by Thomas Mann in *Joseph and his Brothers* show that understanding it is not only about the beginning, but about a meaningful point of reference. The search for the beginning can become obsessive and lead to the conviction that the whole truth lies in the past, whereas the only task of contemporaries is to assimilate and store it. But one does not have to be obsessed with the idea of the source. It suffices to recognize the normative power of the past forms of culture. They are a challenge in virtue of the sheer fact that they have already been around, History is the history of normative reference to sources. We take up the commitments arising from these sources, albeit transforming them in reinterpretation. This phenomenon was described by Harold Bloom (1997) as a ‘fear of influence’ – the dramatic work of the poet, who must build his originality from the existed symbols and styles.

In the process of normalizing the culture, a special role belongs to the world of things. An interesting view on this issue was proposed by a French philosopher, Michel Foucault (1979). He was an influential critic

of the concept of subjectivity, which he interpreted as an artificial construct, serving the purpose of social control rather than the purpose of shaping one's own life. He regarded human subjectivity as an invented internal point of view, which makes it possible to ascribe people agency and responsibility for their statements, deeds, attitudes or gestures. To people themselves, this imposes a strong command of self-knowledge, which allows them to participate in this social game of control on an equal footing. The subject is someone who knows what and why he has done, and as such is able to face social judgement. Foucault proposed to change the optics: instead of determining *truths* about yourself – about the sense and value of your experiences, deeds and relationships with others – you have to see your life as a set of *techniques* by which you create yourself. Foucault claimed that the one-sided emphasis on self-knowledge deprives the other registers of self-management of any worth and thus deprives life of what has traditionally been called *decorum* – cultural dispositions, qualities, abilities, states of pleasure and habits, all of them contributing to the desired form of life. An important part of this *decorum* is the world of human products – products of culture. To be sure, in Foucault's philosophy the subject disappears, but thanks to the study of culture he proposes instead, it is possible to set a certain *line*, which can be called a subjective line – a sequence of content contained in things that have created us as we are today. It is impossible to give the rules of this process. It is an art in which one can improve oneself, but whose final riddles cannot be known – not because they are deeply hidden, but because they are simply not there. The art of being yourself is not a cipher written in culture, like a cryptogram, but it is simply the art of being in culture. In this way, Foucault summarized a certain current present in European thought from the Renaissance, especially expressed in the *Essays* by Michel de Montaigne.

The technique of shaping oneself involves things. They become the bearers of culture, and this in turn becomes the very essence of a human being. Personally, I think Foucault's diagnosis is too exaggerated, because I suppose that if we get rid of the metaphysics of a man (however elusive it might be) and replace it with culture, we will not maintain the ability of normative thinking. However, this is a topic for a separate discussion. In the present remarks, I would like to emphasize what is clever and creative in this diagnosis. It namely shows that our life among things is far from

one-dimensional pragmatism. Things are witnesses and guards of meanings, which are necessary for life. Their function does not disappear even when they are physically destroyed. There is still a place left for them in the realm of meaning. It seems that not only educated researchers of culture, but everyone who is looking for an intense experience and understanding of the world, finds delight in contemplating what is no longer there. Formerly, these were primarily ruins, as a sign of what it was – the original, available in fractions, but still materially present. Today, this form of experiencing the world is even more refined: we are wandering around non-existent cities, we are putting old maps on today's areas, we imagine the already abolished political borders, we see the destroyed walls of the Warsaw ghetto and the Berlin wall, we are watching the orphaned column base in the church destroyed in Napoleon's army in Cluny, we look in the empty sky after the World Trade Center. I think that for people who have devoted themselves to the understanding and preservation of material culture, new fields of activity are opening up. Placing the past within the present is no longer either ordinary reading texts, or storing material things, but making the old world present and giving testimony.

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Summary

This article discusses the relation between temporal existence of things and the persistence of culture. The material and the immaterial aspects of culture are quite different in relation to time. According to philosopher Karl R. Popper, meanings, senses and ideas belong to a separate non-temporal realm of being. They come about in time but henceforth they exist non-temporarily. Their existence, unlike that of physical objects, does not depend on keeping a delicate balance between the change and identity – it is not based on struggle against time. But on the other hand, their seemingly non-temporal subsistence is strictly connected to the temporal existence of things. The latter do not carry meaning in virtue of sheer convention, but rather by means of subtle connection between their material structure and the properties of sentient and intelligent beings. Books hold a very special place in this framework. Physical properties of books are intertwined with their content very strongly albeit mysteriously. It is safe to say that reducing books to their content – by conveying the content to digital carriers alone – would result in a serious impoverishing of culture. In reference to early journalist works by the poet Zbigniew Herbert, three functions of preserving and studying artefacts are distinguished: reconstruction, preserving and learning. In studying artefacts there is always a quest for originals and considerable efforts are made in order to distinguish them from copies and derivatives. The article gives a brief account of recent debate concerning the value of these pursuits. Finally, a discussion with Michel Foucault is presented, concerning the role of things in self-formation.

Keywords: artefact, preservation, original, history, Zbigniew Herbert, Michel Foucault