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On Seeing and Being Seen. Some Remarks on the Dimensions of Historical Experience

“Space of experience” and “horizon of expectations” are categories articulating the conditions of the possibility of history understood as development through time and of the concept expressing history understood in this way.¹ “Space of experience” and “horizon of expectations” are metahistorical categories indicating the conditions of the possibility of history and its knowledge.

Several tensions between its components can be seen in the notion of the space of experience. First, the tension between unreflected elements of experience and what the subject of experience has realized and (to a greater or lesser extent) articulated from his experience.² Moreover, in the structure of the space of experience, one can perceive a tension between the sense of proximity and presence of what is experienced as recalled (through feeling and reflection) from the past and the sense that what is experienced does not belong to the present and is no longer in our time. Yet another kind of tension in the space of experience occurs between what is felt as coming from the past and experienced individually and what is brought into the individual space of experience as a collective, community, or group experience, thus including

¹ R. Koselleck, „Przestrzeń doświadczenia” i „horyzont oczekiwań”—dwie kategorie historyczne, [in:] *idem, Semantyka historyczna*, transl. W. Kunicki, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2001, pp. 359-388; cf. M. Bugajewski, *Historiografia między doświadczeniem i oczekiwaniem*, [in:] *Czy przeszłość powinna być inna? Studia z teorii i historii historiografii*, Instytut Historii UAM, Poznań 2008, pp. 253-263. The categories of space of experience and horizon of expectation are well assimilated by today’s humanistic reflection, cf. *Współczesna edukacja historyczna. Doświadczenia. Oczekiwanie*, ed. J. Budzińska, J. Strykowska, Instytut Historii UAM, Poznań 2015.

² My understanding of experiencing the past falls within the framework of hermeneutic reflection on history, for which the basic theme is the phenomenon of belonging to history.

the content that can be given the character of—so to speak—“phantomatic” content when juxtaposed with one’s own experience. The experience of the articulated or the unarticulated, the experience of the present or the absent, the experience of the self, and the experience of the phantomatic (collective) are the tension lines of the dialectical structure of the space of experience.

The first of the indicated internal tensions of the space of experience is based on the distinction between the conscious and unconscious (unarticulated) components of the experience. I distinguish between what is experienced and what is realized (articulated) from what is experienced. Thus, experiencing consists—on the one hand—of being exposed to heterogeneous circumstances, forces and stimuli that jointly determine the situation one finds oneself in, and – on the other hand – of being involuntarily or intentionally aware of and articulating the experienced circumstances, forces and stimuli. The difference between what is experienced and what is articulated never disappears, just as the difference between what is realized and what remains in the realm of the unconscious never disappears.³ The identity of the subject of experience, constituted as the result (product) of experiencing, cannot be fully comprehended and expressed because the factors that form it are also those components of experience that remain beyond the reflection of the experiencing subject. The subject does not fully know who he or she is because he or she is also what remains incomprehensible to him or her—in a sense: unconscious and unarticulated in what he or she experiences. What I do not realize as existing, but what affects me, also belongs to my world and therefore to myself. The tension between the realized and the unconscious is the inner tension of personal identity, making the identity always open to new readings by others and new self-interpretations.⁴ The dialectic of experience (the tension between what is known and what is unknown) has consequences in opening the identity to new (self-)interpretive perspectives.⁵

Like experience and identity, the space of experience of the past is always dynamic. Its instability and openness to successive reinterpretations are due, on the one hand, to the constant pressure of what appears in our

³On the subject of identity, personal identity and narrative identity, see: P. Ricoeur, *O sobie samym jako innym*, introd. by M. Kowalska, transl. B. Chelstowski, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2003, pp. 188-279; B. Skarga, *Tożsamość i różnica. Eseje metafizyczne*, Znak, Kraków 1997, pp. 163-271; J. Jakubowski, *Skończoność egzystencjalna. Studium nad filozofią Paula Ricoeura*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Epigram, Bydgoszcz 2017, pp. 365-443.

⁴See the interview with P. Ricoeur on the fragility of identity (*l'identité fragile*, chapter 36 of the interview): www.entretiens.ina.fr/itineraires/Ricoeur/paul-ricoeur/transcription/1

⁵In Ricoeur’s work, *Time and Narrative*, this interpretive work is referred to as *mimesis I* or by the word *prefiguration*, see *idem, Temps et récit*, vol. 1, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1983, pp. 108-125.

experience from the outside as originally not understood by us, not grasped interpretively, and, on the other hand, to the constant interpretive work accompanying and constituting human practice. Dynamism is present both on the side of the changing factors that exert pressure on the subjects of action and cognition and on the side of the activity of the subjects of action and cognition in history.

In addition, the clash between external pressures and internal accomplishments of the interpreters' subjectivity becomes complicated when we note that there is no clear and distinct boundary between what is learned and articulated in a subjectively (to the interpreters and their interlocutors) comprehensible manner, and what remains beyond their perception and utterances.

The transition of a "phenomenon" from the realm of the unconscious to language is not a leap. Instead, it passes through sensing, feeling, wishing, and desiring phases. Then, finally, comes a vague appearance of something new, sometimes felt as a return of what has already been. Arguably, some of the identifiable and articulable unknown "phenomena", pushing against consciousness and seeking a place in language, wander—like "specters," to use the metaphor—in the realm of vague sensations, vague quasi-recognitions, and, having not received any forms of linguistic articulation, return to where they came from, to the reality pushing against us, which we do not comprehend. Between the unknown and the recognized stretches a vague gray zone of spectrality, in which the contours of that of the "things" we experience, which we still do not understand, appear. What is located between the known and the unknown are different forms of spectrality. In this context, spectrality acquires the status of something that returns from the past, when—uninvited to language, unrecognized as something definite—it returns to the realm of the "phenomena" of experience not captured by consciousness.

The space of experience, in this first approximation, is constantly transfigured as a result of interpretive illumination of the vague contours of objects appearing like specters, and also when this "illumination" fails to produce an effect in the form of a subjectively intelligible articulation of experience, as a result of the return of the "specter" to the realm of what is experienced in an unreflected manner. The space of experience is shaped by the reactions of experiencing interpreters to emerging vague presences on the blurry boundaries of the horizons of their consciousness and perception. We can apply to the analyzed issue the opposition between the object of cognition and the object of study, understanding through the object of cognition the unarticulated (ununderstood) components of experience, and through the object of study what has managed to articulate itself from the experienced reality. Based on this understanding of two types of objects, it

can be said that vague spectral shapes come from the objects of cognition and can be reinterpreted into objects of study, but they can also be lost if the specter is not incorporated into language and thus transformed into something completely different, that is, into an object of study.⁶ In this sense, the phantom is primary to the object of study but secondary to the object of cognition. Spectrality is a form of manifestation of the object of cognition and precisely for this reason it cannot and should not be appropriated by the object of study. We should understand the latter as a reaction to the spectrality of the object of cognition or a specific interpretive variation starting from the impressions and sensations evoked by spectrality. We determine the objects of study by giving shapes and articulating what originally came as a mysterious gift and commitment of experience.

Another internal tension of the space of experience occurs between the sense of the presence of what is experienced and the conviction that this “phenomenon” belongs to the past and is therefore located outside of the present time. If, as before, also in this second tension, we encounter the phenomenon of a specter, this time it will be a specter of not what is present and not grasped by understanding, but a specter of the past.

This tension, too, mobilizes the activity of shaping the space of experience. This dynamism consists of an undertaking, more or less consciously, a game with time, with consequences for understanding one’s identity and thus for understanding one’s location in time and history.⁷ The result of this game is a certain sense of binding oneself to the past or distancing oneself from it. This result is not a cognitive bond but a feeling of connection with the past of an existential character, based on a sense of coming from the past, a feeling of hearing (listening, perceiving) a voice (words, thoughts, meanings) arriving from the past, a feeling of being the object of a gaze that, as it were, the past directs at us. The tension of distance and proximity resolves (or sometimes sharpens) the dilemmas associated with the spectral presence of the past in the present.

The enlivening—within the experiential space—of the voice (or gaze) of the past, in which we perceive and recognize it as vital to us, concerning us, touching us, appealing to us, can take place in various ways, depending on (1) the attitude toward the temporal distance, (2) the relation to the narrative form that can be used to narrate the past, and (3) the attitude of objectifying the past or avoiding such objectification. In all three cases of attitude toward

⁶ In this view, presence in the form of an object or meaning precedes cognition and is external to the activity of interpretation. If cognition is a reaction to the gift of presence, cognition is one of the possible reactions to the gift; another, ethically more fundamental, is gratitude.

⁷ M. de Certeau, *L'Écriture de l'histoire*, Gallimard, Paris 1975, pp. 7-23.

the past, it is ultimately a matter of producing a reference to the death of what was and thus to the anticipated death of the subject to whom we assign the space of experiencing the past. It is in the space of experience (including when it is shaped by memory and historiography) that the judgments are made that determine what kind of ties are formed between the living and the dead, with, therefore, what kind of community of words, coming both from the dead and the living, will become the form of history, in which we exist.

Voices, thoughts, and meanings inherited from the past, taken into “vessels,” which can be considered contemporary interpretive articulations of former voices, can be—this is the first pole of the relation to temporal distance—interpreted by giving them the status of content belonging to the present, adapted to it and thus deprived (to a greater or lesser extent) of the property of being a fraction of the past.⁸ In such a mode of receiving the message of the past, what is assimilated in experience loses its connection with the temporal distance separating (and simultaneously connecting) the past and the present. However, on the other hand, acts of experience activated in the adaptive mode appropriate a message of the past and deprive it of the dimension of pastness. This latter feature determines that it is not the work of the present. They thus revive it, giving it actuality, but in a way that familiarizes the fact that the assimilated voices, meanings, and signs are the voices of the dead. The temporality of the voices of the past, the fact that they come from many places in time, is reduced to a spatiality, in which meanings blend in a way that depends on the needs of the moment and the tendency of individual and social practices, of which experiencing the past is a component. The voice of the past becomes present not as a voice of the dead, but as a voice of the living, who do not perceive that they are thinking and speaking with a speech that is not their own. In the space of experience shaped this way, the bond with the past is maintained, but not seen as a bond with the past. In such a space of experience, the appeal of the past resounds, but it is understood as the voice of the present addressed to itself. By the appeal of the past I mean the questions implied in the voices of the past that have the power to critically challenge the ways of thinking, aspirations, and values belonging to the present. Thus, in the adaptive mode of receiving the message of the past, when the sense of temporal distance disappears, the critical voice of the past is experienced as one of the inner voices in the present’s debate with itself.

⁸ The topic of adaptive interpretation can be considered in the context of the theory of reading developed by P. Ricoeur and based on the assumption that texts from different epochs in the development of culture are open to the readings of the contemporary reader, resulting in a re-figuration of the world and the identity of the reader. See P. Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, vol. 3, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1985, pp. 374-433.

At the other pole of possibilities regarding the attitude to temporal distance, which emerges during the formation of the space of experience, one can place the attitude of considering the message of the past as located outside the present, in the part of the past from which this message comes. Locating the voice of the past in temporal remoteness is a consequence of a gesture of separation from it and a desire to reduce the image of one's own identity to contents associated with a narrowly defined present. The relegation of the message of the past to the past does not mean that the voice of the past ceases to be heard or that it ceases to resound, but it is associated with its neutralization, with the prejudgment that this voice does not concern us, does not question us, is not a valid critical gaze related to us, and does not undermine our engagements and self-interpretations.⁹ While in the case of the adaptive attitude toward the message of the past we are dealing with the revival of the meaning of the voice of the past combined with the rupture of the ties of this voice with the dead, the gesture of pushing the message of the past back into the past, separating from it, means linking this voice with the dead while denying that it is a living, meaningful, timely voice.

A separative attitude to the message of the past taken by the space of experience ostensibly opens our identity to the past, relegating its potential critical impact to a distance from the realm of the present. However, the revival of the transmission of the past in an adaptive attitude also ostensibly opens us to the past, since recognizing assimilated meanings as current in this attitude involves detaching the ties of what we inherit from those from whom we inherit.

A reflection on the shaping of the space of experience assumes the task of seeking ways out of the double closure to the past, into which the consciousness of the past shaped within the space of experience falls.

The strategy of an adaptive revival of the legacy of the past involves suppressing from consciousness the death of the predecessors from whom the legacy originated. They disappear and fall silent as speakers, although their voice, devoid of ties to them, resounds in the internal debate of the present. The adaptive actualization of a voice coming originally from the past and giving it the status of a present utterance is linked in this strategy to the denial of the possibility of the resurrection of the dead, the resurrection understood as granting them—despite their death—the status of equal participants in the debate on identity, values, and obligations in history. The closure to the past in the adaptive reception of the inheritance of the dead

⁹ On the neutralization of the past, see S. Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism. An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, transl. Th. Weyr, Harper & Row, New York 1984, pp. 25-53. On neutralizing the object of study, see B. C. van Fraassen, *The Empirical Stance*, Yale University Press, New Haven—London 2002, pp. 157-158.

has the consequence of depriving oneself of the possibility of understanding and vicariously articulating the anticipated death of oneself. When we do not—as much as possible—recognize the dead in the voice coming from the past, we lose the possibility of thinking of our death as, in some respects, analogous to the death of those from whom we received the gift of inheritance. Separation from the specters of the dead results in a refusal to think about one's spectral dimension, which can be realized in the future in the glimpses of our successors understood as our spectral existence.

A similar refusal to think of our death as analogous to that of our predecessors occurs in the case of the separative strategy of embracing the past through the space of experience. In this case, however, it is a consequence of limiting the identity of the subject of the space of experience to the narrowly conceived sphere of the present. If we relegate the voice of our predecessors to a safe distance in time, denying it the dimension of actuality, their resurrection—understood as recognizing in their voice a living message—becomes alien to us. Relegated to the past, the dead fall silent as real interlocutors in today's debate. Moreover, this relegation has implications for how we anticipate our death. The separative attitude toward the death of the past relegates one's death to a distance at which it becomes still irrelevant, not awaiting reflection and vicarious articulation.

Indifference to the dimension of death in the past—both in the adaptive and separative strategies of the space of experience—results in blindness towards the death of the subjects of experience. The death of the self is thus devoid of the potential for spectral articulation that it could receive if we relate to it, by analogy, not what is formed in an attitude of separation from the dead, but what would appear in us if we considered the voice of the past as the living voice of those who have passed away.

The objectification of the past consists in turning the message of the past into an object of the constructive procedures of the subject assimilating this message, who, during the reception of the message of the past, excludes himself from the stage on which he places the message of the past. The message of the past becomes an object visible in the assimilation procedure, while the subject of this procedure becomes someone invisible, not placed on the stage of the past. Objectification combines three procedures: placing the message of the past in terms appropriate to the interpreter (understood as an individual or collective, group, or culture), neutralizing the message of the past, and removing the interpreter from the image of the message of the past. The procedure of objectification makes the message of the past something dead, not understood as an active voice or glimpse of the past. In this case, the axiological appeal present in the message of the past does not resound.

The objectification of the message of the past, its neutralization, and the removal of the subject from the image of the object are three aspects of the same process. More precisely, they are three aspects of the same attitude of the subject of the space of experience to the message of the past.

The first aspect consists in the fact that a subject with specific cultural resources—such as, for example, concepts, ideas, prejudices about what is real and what is fictional, prejudices about the types of agents acting in history and the deeds to which they are entitled—adapts the message of the past to its cultural resources. The content of the message of the past is processed during reception so that it turns out to be expressible on the basis of the subject's categorical resources. As a result of such a constructive procedure, the image of the message of the past produced by the subject may give the impression that this image primarily reflects the expressive capacity characterizing the subject's categorical resources or that this image is a mirror, in which the subject can subject himself to self-reflection, treating this image as a kind of self-portrait.¹⁰

The objectification of the message of the past is an attitude that the subject of the space of experience can avoid by developing an attitude of openness to the voices of the past that are not confined to the expectations implied in its categorical resources.¹¹ Language is not a trap and a closure to the past, but

¹⁰ In the field of historiographical research, the objectification of the transmission of the past is thoroughly analyzed by Wojciech Wrzosek in numerous works dealing with the topic of cultural imputation. Considering cultural imputation in historical cognition, the author emphasizes such aspects as anthropomorphizing, metaphorization, belonging to the so-called dualistic way of thinking and speaking in the sense of Josef Mitterer. See W. Wrzosek, *History—Culture—Metaphor. The Rise of Non-Classical Historiography*, 2nd edition, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2010, pp. 25-35; *idem*, *O myśleniu historycznym*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Epigram, Bydgoszcz 2009, pp. 13-27. The considerations of Jan Pomorski indicate that historiography is a “self-reflection of a generation,” a record of “cultural self-knowledge.” (J. Pomorski, *Historiografia jako refleksja kultury poznającej*, in: *Świat historii. Prace z metodologii historii i historii historiografii dedykowane Jerzemu Topolskiemu z okazji siedemdziesięciolecia urodzin*, [ed.] W. Wrzosek, Instytut Historii UAM, Poznań 1998, pp. 375-379.) The objectivizing strategies of historical cognition, uncovered by its epistemological interpretations, are a development of the objectivizing attitude already present in pre-historiographical references to the past constituting the space of experience.

¹¹ Cf. Reinhart Koselleck's research on the history of concepts, pointing out continuities and ruptures in the semantic resources expressing the experience of living in history. On the entanglement of historians with the research object, including cognitive entanglement, cf. E. Kleinberg, J.W. Scott, G. Wilder, *Theses on Theory and History* (www.theoryrevolt.com), translation: *Tezy o historii i teorii*, transl. E. Domanska, T. Wisniewski, *Historyka. Studia Metodologiczne*, 2019, vol. 49, pp. 1-12; In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault promotes the category of discontinuity, disavowing the strategy inherent in historiographical cognition of replacing actual ruptures in time with fictional continuities constructed by historical cognition. On the place of the event in M. Foucault's thought, see T. Falkowski,

an opening and a medium, through which the voices of the past can reach the present. Opening to the past is a kind of recognition of the past that opposes the strategy of objectifying the message of the past. Returning to the theme of spectrality, we can say that objectification closes off the present from the infiltration of the specters of the past, while opening to the otherness of the past brings its voice back to language. Juxtaposed with the voice of the present, this voice realizes its spectral character.

Neutralizing the message of the past involves refusing to recognize it as an important voice in the contemporary debate on values. Neutralization makes the various dimensions of the message of the past subject to descriptive analysis. However, it ignores the question of what the voice of the past was formulated for and why it should be listened to today. It is therefore studied for its own sake. It becomes interesting in its own right (after having been constructed on the basis of semantic resources of the examining culture); it is no longer, although that is what it might have originally been, a voice in an axiological controversy.

Axiological neutralization does not mean that the message of the past is stripped of significance on the grounds of this procedure. On the contrary, the message of the past remains important because it comes from the past, from our predecessors, and is a testimony and manifestation of cultural development. However, on the grounds of this attitude, it is denied the role of a living voice concerning the present. In other words, it is denied the dimension of actuality. Axiological neutralization is the relegation of the voice of the past to the past.

Neutralization makes us fail to perceive the message of the past as including ourselves in the project of the future. Thus, we give up recognizing in the voice of the past a critical dimension that we could relate to ourselves and understand how this dimension challenges our own choices and commitments. The attitude of neutralizing the message of the past contributes to producing an understanding of historical succession, that is, an understanding of history that opposes its image, according to which history is a constant mutual questioning of the living and the dead. Neutralization breaks up a dialogue and dispute with the past by distinguishing the importance of the message of the past from its relevance to the present. In this attitude, the dead (through temporal distance) no longer say things that critically question the living, and the latter do not critically question the choices and commitments of their predecessors. In neutralization, indifference (denial of the status of the living voice) and interest (recognition of relevance to the course of history) are combined in an attitude toward the message of the past.

Removing the interpreter from the stage on which the assimilated message of the past is placed is a procedure that artificially removes the interpreter from history, understood as a process of heritage transmission. Such removal gives us the (false) impression that history as a whole is situated in front of us and is at our disposal for our cognitive activity; that we can dispose of history as subjects not belonging to it during cognition, that it is our property, that it belongs to us and is dependent on our activity. Removing the interpreter from history and situating him above it, seen from his perspective in its totality, is a utopian procedure masking the real belonging to history. Moreover, the category of totality implied in this attitude signals the danger of a totalizing way of thinking and relating to the objects perceived by the subject of the space of experience.

It can be pointed out that the message of the past is not only an object of perception and articulation by the interpreter, but it is also an “agency” of this articulation, since the speech used by the interpreter comes from history. The interpreter does not occupy a position external to the message of the past since, at the starting point of interpretation, he belongs to this message. To put it succinctly, the transmission of the past is both the interpreter and the interpreted. Thus, it is paradoxically not only what is listened to, but also listening to what is heard. Interpretation is, in short, a self-reflection of the process of transmitting the heritage.

The danger of totalization I mentioned has two dimensions. One is related to the fact that removing the interpreter from the image of what is assimilated encloses history in an artificially separated whole (totality), closing at the time when interpretation takes place.¹² This totality is stabilized in its image. In consequence, the interpreter closes himself to the reception of the content not included in this totality by separating and closing it. The image of the whole gives the impression of an image that exhausts what can be said about it. The category of totality makes it difficult to hear in the voice of the past what is present in it but was not perceived in its supposedly total picture at the stage of the gesture of closing history. Second, the whole, to which the interpreter does not belong, is easily transformed into an object subject to manipulation. The violence introduced by the interpreter appears as an effect of the encouragement contained in the image of the history, which in its totality gives itself over without complaint to the manipulations of the one in whose possession it is.

¹²Cf. the critique of the totalizing mode of thinking in Hilary Putnam’s study of the thought of Rosenzweig and Lévinas; H. Putnam, *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life*, Rosenzweig, Buber, Lévinas, Wittgenstein, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2008, p. 123; cf. M. Bugajewski, rev: Putnam Hilary, *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life*, *Czas Przeszły*, “Poznańskie Studia Historyczne,” vol. 1, no. 1-2, pp. 169-172.

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Abstract

In this article, I analyze the place of historical cognition within the framework of the relationship between the space of experience and the horizon of expectations. I try to understand what a non-objectifying strategy of knowing the past could consist of. It means giving subjectivity to the voices of the past and the status of spectrality. The past, thus recognized, becomes an active factor in the mutual critique of the past and the present.

Keywords: historical cognition, space experience, totality, spectrality, dialogue.