Meeting the cultural other. A phenomenology of intercultural encounters

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MEETING THE CULTURAL OTHER.
A PHENOMENOLOGY OF INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

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Abstract

This paper proposes an investigation of intercultural encounters as a phenomenology of faces, surfaces and appearances. The moment of encounter with the cultural other can be considered as an “open” moment, as one in which one transgresses own ways of representing the other as well as of self. This open instance is the space, the interval, in which the play of the intercultural encounter takes place, in which something that belongs not only to me and not only to the other is initiated, it is in-between us.

**Keywords:** Intercultural Encounters, Person, Face, Artifact.

I. Introduction

What is special and different when encountering the other, if the encounter it’s with the cultural other, when the other comes with the cultural alterity? I will try to answer this question by following two aspects, in which and through which the cultural encounter takes place with the other: the face and the surface. What appears in the experience of the cultural encounter is especially the visibility, what is in sight. Making visible is what happens through the ecstatic movement toward the other. The visibility refers as much to your cultural signs, as well as the other’s, as imprinted on surfaces, the passive support of the encounter, medium and indicator of cultural marks. It is the scenario mediated by artifacts: the artifact, as a product

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of a cultural tradition, codifies and sums up the marks that form the ethos of that tradition, being the guide that directs and channels the ways of meeting with the other, but equally constantly guides to your own cultural identity. It is a cultural mediation with multiple facets and roles, forming in an inter-cultural environment.

II. Encountering the Cultural Other: An Ecstatic Experience

The encounter with the cultural other is a complex phenomenon, an experience with aspects that make it distinct from other instances of meeting the other. To argue that, it would be appropriate to start from evaluating the significance and value of the encountering the cultural other, making it so significant for the experience, evolution and perfection of the person.

Alfonso Lopez Quintas in *Human Love, Its Meaning and Scope. A Phenomenology of Gift and Encounter* provides an analysis of the encounter with the other from the perspective of a phenomenology of what constitutes it:

> If it is neither by mere impact nor by juxtaposition, but an intermingling of ambits giving place in turn to another ambit, it must be difficult to achieve. Offering one’s own possibilities to another person implies opening one’s spirit and generosity, a wish to share and to create something together. Taking the possibilities which the other offers me implies, for my part, a capacity for listening and the humility to admit that I am in need of help. (…) If I do not show myself to you as I am, when you notice this you realize that I do not wish to make you a gift of my real person, but only of a false copy. I hide something of myself and keep something back. This lack of honesty on my part makes you mistrust (…). (Quintas 2004, 11)

More than that, Quintas describes the human person is “a being of encounter” (Quintas 2004, 12).

The experience of meeting with the other involves a way of opening that is fundamental to wo/man, and which is put by this instance, which is related to his *ecstatic* dimension. A dimension that some authors consider to be the ultimate nature of person. The notion of *person* finds first wording in the context of a redefinition of the human
way of being, in the fourth century AD, when authors such as Gregory of Nyssa or Basil the Great, involved the Greek term *hypostasis* in the new description of human. *Hypostasis* is the unique and unrepeatable way through which human nature manifests. *Hypostasis* is, ultimately, *ec-stasis*, that is, the essential movement of the person is to go beyond itself, to overcome toward the other, and not to be an autonomous and self-sufficient monad.

If this can be an ontological description of the ultimate aspects of what characterizes our way of being in the person’s “data”, these aspects are visible, manifested, on the existential level. Quintas has interesting remarks about this ecstatic nature:

Ecstasy links one to what is precious and makes one truly free. It does not produce a gloomy freedom that separates one from others, but joins one in a genuine community of life, but does not take one out of oneself, but elevates one to what is the best within oneself. (Quintas 2004, 17)

Either in the plane of affections as nothing is more important in the human structure than a maximum stimulation of enthusiasm for values and giving due importance to the inner joy aroused by taking something or joining with someone who invites us to adopt the great values they encompass. (Quintas 2004, 31)

The deepest of the person’s mode of being is a “movement” toward the other and toward the others. Meeting with the other is a need that comes from the inner movement of the person, but it took place in the context of the world, and especially in the context of a specific cultural data. This context is the one that crystallizes additional frames of difference with the other. And if the other was embodied in a different cultural horizon than yours, encountering him brings a special kind of challenges and stakes.

**III. The Face of Cultural Other**

The special character of the encountering the other who is culturally different can be questioned starting from several facts. The radical aspect I am discussing is related to the very moment of the intercultural encounter, is the question of what distinguishes it from other ways of
experiencing the encounter with the other. It’s about the experience of difference, of something very complex and very different. It is a radical experience, of putting you with all of yours in this kind of meeting. It can be said that you are being exposed in a totally different way, and even if you try to anticipate, the effectiveness of meeting with the cultural other brings something surprising and novel.

This always different of what happens when experiencing the other’s cultural difference may be better appropriate starting from a language that aims to describe what appears in the concreteness of the meeting. What is experienced during the time of the encounter is what appears, what is shown: the appearance of the other, with all aspects involved when exposed to you. When face-to-face meeting, what is happening by ex-posing to the cultural alterity of the other, is that the other is not supposed or imagined, is here, present, is the concreteness of his ways of being here and now, to be in my presence. Anticipating and theorizing the cultural encounter is a “poor” experience, the one of generalizing reductionism that tries to depict an essence that should basically describe intercultural encounters. Repeatability, predictability, classifiable, methods in the natural sciences, when applied to the concreteness of meeting with the cultural other as a fact of life, can provide only a standardized morphology of the “living organism” of the encounter. The challenge of meeting with the other is that no anticipation can prepare enough for it, instead anticipation, as pre-conceiving the meeting, affects its effectiveness.

IV. The Cultural Other as Person

The face of the cultural other is the paradoxical situation of what is both familiar and alien: familiar since the humanity of the other is like your own, yet he/she is a neighbor but a cultural alien, mysterious and unknown by what the different cultural horizon produces in he/she. The impossibility of predicting or anticipating the effectiveness of the encounter with the cultural other comes from the fact that although he/she is your neighbor in everything you share as human, is not only different in the cultural horizon that has formed him/her but also has
uniqueness, as he/she is a *person*. It is the personal dimension that means the unrepeatable, which is unique in him/her, but it is at the same time the unique way in which the cultural horizon he/she embodies. So, although it shares the cultural data of the horizon in which was formed, he/she embodies and expresses it in own way, in the unique fashion of personal way of living and being. Giving, therefore, a face to that cultural horizon that has formed him/her and, in those frames, embodied him or her. That face is what you meet and encounter in the experience of contact, proximity to the one that is the cultural other. This is why the cultural encounter cannot receive a pertinent and genuine preparatory anticipation. Because you cannot predict and you cannot prepare for the concreteness of the other’s cultural face, the uniqueness and instantness. It’s the cultural incarnation of what is noticeably visible, something that leads to wonder or perplexity. The cultural incarnation of the other has not only the specificity of his or her person but also of a dynamism that is the face that *expresses*. We can better understand this if we look at how the notion of person was formed in an attempt to find and indicate what is truly proper to human, what makes wo/man different from the rest of beings. Christos Yannaras says that the original term that indicates the central aspect of person is the Greek *prosopon*, etymologically drawn from the *pros* and *ops*, which means *glance*, *eyes*, *appearance*, *looks*, *face*. As Yannaras has pointed out, by composition, the emerging signification is “I have my eyes, my face focused on something or someone, I stand face to face with something or someone” (Yannaras 2007, 21). The face, the fundamental element of the personal way of being, is to be directed to show and to indicate, is the opening to the other, to the one who can *receive* what is shown in and through the expression of the *face*.

In the expression of the face is what is considered the most important aspect of the person, namely *freedom*, that is the ability to express in a way what is beyond the conditions and contexts, beyond the determination that comes from the sum of factors that are present in what is the human way of being, from the genetic inheritance to the events of life. This fundamental aspect, freedom, is the way the person shows uniqueness and unrepeatability. If it is to use the phenomenological language proposed by Jean-Luc Marion, it is the way the person is being *donated*.
From such perspective, the intercultural encounters are a phenomenon of special complexity, as they are multi-leveled and have multiple instances. These instances of person in opening with the other intertwine, but the distinct appearance that constantly appears is a certain kind of difference, which is always observed and always noticeable in the multiple levels of the person’s own manifestation/donation. A difference that comes from the frames of a cultural horizon that has formed him or her and which are present and manifested in many aspects, starting from the way he/she moves the body to the way he/she manifests emotions or articulates thoughts.

V. Cultural Clothes and the New Places

The meeting with the other highlights and reveals a certain kind of appearance, a certain kind of garments, the cultural clothes. These clothes are not just those that covers the body or shapes our reactions, but are intimately present in many of our inner articulations (Nellas 1987, 79). And the question that arises is how deep are these garments in us, are really part of us? We may ask whether there is something of a neutral human essence that has a universal, neutral character, one beyond the cultural space in which we were born? Is the cultural embodiment rather an epiphenomenon, is it just the fruit of the instruction received or of the community environment? Or if a certain inculturation can be loosened, rejected, or replaced at some point? The answers to these questions are by no means simple, because new research in neuroscience indicates the level at which emotions are incorporated up to the cell or DNA level, so they are the most intimate and concrete in our being. Cultural garments are those through which we are acting, we cannot deny them, and we cannot exist in a way that is a-cultural. And the awareness of the existence of these clothes is intensified by exposure to other culture, to the other with other clothes, with a different garment. And we become more aware that we are wearing these clothes when meeting with the other, discovering how deep our inculturation is, and especially that the inculturation is very intimate to the subtlest of our inner articulations.
In addition, it is inappropriate to state that man has a body: the body is not a mere object and cannot be an object of possession or disposal. A human being is body or corporeal at the same time and for the same reason that he or she is a person. The encounters take place between ambits, not objects. While objects are juxtaposed or collide but do not meet, only ambits can intermingle, offer each other possibilities and take up those that are offered (Quintas 2004, 10).

Since the moment of encounter with the cultural other does not allow the anticipation of the content of that experience, it can be considered as an “open” moment as one in which one transgresses one’s own ways of representing the other as well as the self. This open instance is the space, the interval in which the play of the cultural encounter takes place, in which something that belongs not only to me and not only to the other is initiated among us. The interplay of the cultural encounter with the other is initiated and takes its contours exclusively into the mutual opening which means tattering, advancement, connection, empathy, everything that is being moved by each of those who experience the encounter. It initiates and develops something unique in this scenario of the intercultural encounter, outlines a meeting environment, a place. Everything that follows the initiation of the cultural encounter with the other is confined to this space, the interval of that encounter. It’s something that is created, what would not have been if that meeting did not happen. What is happening in each of the actors of the meeting is the constitution of that space. A space that is not neutral, nor has autonomy, and cannot be sustained by only one of those who initiate it. It’s in between us.

VI. Artifacts as Meeting Guides

The space of meeting with the other is the place that is made and is transformed by the dynamics of cultural outreach, the exposition of your cultural face into and the encounter with the cultural face of the other. But in that meeting, there are not only faces but also sur-faces, those instances that are identifiable as objects, but which are in a more special condition as they contribute to the contours that the dynamics of the cultural encounter initiate. It is the condition of the artifact, the
exceptional and privileged product of a cultural and spiritual horizon: that object that receives crystallization of encodings and symbols as fundamental landmarks of that horizon. The artifact that constitutes the symbol or mark of a culture is the object that sums up and gathers very much in very little. The essential artifacts of a culture are not very many, but they can express a lot. Even when the symbols in them are reproduced or replicated in the products of that culture, they provide the landmarks for a cultural horizon.

The experience of the alien artifact, the one produced by the cultural horizon of the other, is the special instance that mediates and provokes at the same time: to sense the difference, on what is a cultural different code, and which, insofar as it expresses something through a code of signs fixed in the object, creates the consciousness of difference, of what escapes you, even though it is in front of you. The artifact plays a complex role of guidance, focusing on the way in which the experience of meeting with the cultural other must grow.

It is the artifact that, through its surface, through the various ways in which it appears, is the medium and guide for the cultural encounter with the other, plays a critical role in this encounter as it provides the signs that shapes the space of the encounter, gives coordinates and cadres. It is the artifact that brings a place of mediation and meeting, where the actors of intercultural experience open each other. Interaction with the artifact is an active one, because putting it as a meeting hallmark, also means working with it, as a continuous hermeneutical activity meant to always enlarge the horizon of meeting, the place. The artifact produces the visible signs and the markings of an emotional, cognitive, experiential horizon, offers no less space for game, for the creative advance in the unfolding of meeting with the other. The experience of complex decipherment of the traces that the fundamental traditions of a culture put into the artifact implies a creative dimension in which the recognition of those traces is carried forward to the intuition of what is not only the spirit of those codifications but also what that spirit produces during the articulations and developments of the intercultural encounter, concretely and in exactly that unique and unrepeatable time of encounter.
VII. Strangification

The scenarios of meeting with the other are scenarios of proximity, self-out initiative and empathic opening to something different, to the other’s alterity. Vincent Shen implies a concept designed to indicate the possibility and nature of openness that interculturality can produce. It is the concept of *strangification*, which can describe several dimensions of the stakes of cultural encounter with the other\(^2\). Speaking of what the ontological dimension of the strangification act calls into the intercultural encounter experience, Shen sees that

our direct experience with Reality Itself can nourish our language and our dialogue with others. When it comes to cultural and religious beliefs, I should say that, if a value/cultural expression/religious belief is universalizable by being able to be translated into a value/cultural expression/religious belief claimed by another culture or religious community, then it has a larger or universalizable validity. In other words, its validity is limited only to its own world, and reflection must be made on the limits of one's own value/expression/belief. Also, if one value/expression/belief is universalizable and applicable in other social and pragmatic contexts, this means that it has a higher validity than its own context of origin. Finally, a value/expression/belief, when universalizable by a detour of experiencing Reality Itself, (for example, direct experience with other people, with Nature or even with Ultimate Reality) would be very helpful for mutual understanding among different cultural and religious worlds. (Shen 2008, 286)

Vincent Shen’s understanding of the nature and virtues of intercultural experience questions the universalization dimension that openness to the cultural other should have. A cultural or spiritual

\(^{2}\) “The concept of strangification was first proposed by Prof. Fritz Wallner, my colleague in Constructive Realism, as an epistemological strategy for interdisciplinary research. According to Constructive Realism, different scientific disciplines, because of their methods and languages, construct accordingly different micro-worlds, only to be bridged by the strategy of strangification.” Vincent Shen, “Appropriating The Other and Transforming Consciousness into Wisdom: Some Philosophical Reflections on Chinese Buddhism”, in *The Dialogue of Cultural Traditions: A Global Perspective*, Ed. by William Sweet, George F. McLean, Tomonobu Imamichi, Safak Ural, O. Faruk Akyol (Washington, D.C: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008), 285.
expression is universal insofar as it can be translated into the frameworks of a cultural or spiritual expression belonging to another horizon.

VIII. Concluding: Same and/as Different

Continuing the thoughts of Vincent Shen (he was a bright scholar and a dear friend of mine), I would add that the universalization can be recognized in the cultural other as embodied by him or her, it is the interplay of the same and the other. The fact that the other, when his face/surface is revealed to you, leads you to your own, is the kind of universalization that each one finds itself better through the other. But, no less, is the experience of the other’s cultural face, is the evidence of the difference, of his identity mark. Just because it is and remains different from you, as being within the cultural frame that give it his or her identity, the cultural other can deliver you the extraordinary chance to make a self-experience that no other instance would allow it such way. It’s a genuine and unique discovery by which you can reach your very self as never before. It is an exceptional occasion of authenticity; it is the situation in which you make an authentic self-discovery and the discovery of the other. And this opportunity constitutes and is constituted by a place, a novel dimension of reality, the one that offers the possibility of the experiencing beyond self of what it delivers you to yourself: perhaps this is the most important dimension of the cultural difference and of meeting with the other by and with this difference.

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