

## How can we communicate with objects?

*Mario Perniola and the feeling as a way of interacting with things*

## Como podemos nos comunicar com os objetos?

*Mario Perniola e o sentir como forma de interagir com as coisas*

## ¿Cómo podemos comunicarnos con los objetos?

*Mario Perniola y el sentir como forma de interactuar con las cosas*

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**Abstract:** The paper aims to expand the possibilities of understanding the meaning of communication, having as its fundamental key the concept of "feeling", formulated by Mario Perniola. By questioning the tradition of Western knowledge and the privilege of thinking over feeling, Perniola postulates how the suspension of subjectivity could lead to new relationships with the world and objects, which we could observe in experiences such as cybersex, the use of hallucinogens and hardcore sounds. In these examples, human reason would give space to modes of accessing the world from outside itself, promoting the "transit" or "osmosis" between interior and exterior, something capable of "putting in common" and, thus, establishing communication between human and thing, in a kind of "neutral" experience. From this perspective, in the same way that we, subjects, could renounce action, objects could act on us, arousing our attention or attracting us, in a kind of "sex appeal of the inorganic".

**Keywords:** *feeling, non-human, thing, philosophy of communication, Mario Perniola.*

**Resumo:** O artigo pretende ampliar as possibilidades de compreensão e releitura do significado de comunicação tendo como chave fundamental o conceito de "sentir", formulado por Mario Perniola. Ao questionar a tradição do conhecimento ocidental e o privilégio do pensar em relação ao sentir, Perniola postula como a suspensão da subjetividade poderia conduzir a novas relações com o mundo e os objetos, o que poderíamos observar, conforme destaca, em experiências como o sexo virtual, o uso de alucinógenos e as sonoridades hardcore. Nesses exemplos, a razão humana daria lugar a modos de acessar o mundo desde fora de si, promovendo o "trânsito" ou a "osmose" entre interior e exterior, algo capaz de "pôr em comum" e, assim, fazer comunicar humano e coisa em um tipo de experiência "neutra". Nessa perspectiva, do mesmo modo que nós, sujeitos, poderíamos renunciar à ação, os objetos poderiam agir sobre nós, despertando nossa atenção ou atraindo-nos, em uma espécie de "sex appeal do inorgânico".

**Palavras-chave:** *sentir, não humano, coisa, filosofia da comunicação, Mario Perniola.*

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**Resumen:** El artículo pretende ampliar las posibilidades de comprensión del significado de comunicación analisando el concepto de "sentir", formulado por Mario Perniola. Al cuestionar la tradición del conocimiento occidental y el privilegio del pensar frente al sentir, Perniola postula cómo la suspensión de la subjetividad podría conducir a nuevas relaciones con el mundo y los objetos, que podríamos observar en experiencias como el cibersexo, el uso de alucinógenos y el rock hardcore. En estos ejemplos, la razón humana daría paso a formas de acceder al mundo desde fuera de sí, promoviendo un "tránsito" u "ósmosis" entre interior y exterior, algo capaz de "poner en común" y, por tanto, hacer comunicar humano y cosa en un tipo de experiencia "neutral". Desde esta perspectiva, de la misma manera que nosotros, los sujetos, podríamos renunciar a la acción, los objetos podrían actuar sobre nosotros, despertando nuestra atención o atrayéndonos, en una especie de "sex appeal de lo inorgánico".

**Palabras clave:** sentir, no humano, cosa, filosofía de la comunicación, Mario Perniola.

### Introduction: the feeling as something inferior to the thinking

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the issue of feeling appears collaterally in the history of knowledge in the West. We can think, for example, how in our civilization feeling something generally occupies a less privileged position than thinking something. In the so-called natural sciences or human sciences, and even on occasions when affections suggest guiding the making-happen of things – as in the sphere of practical politics – what comes from sensations is relegated to an inferior or subordinate place, in comparison to a decision or action allegedly modeled by rationality.

The privilege of thinking over feeling would characterize one of the fundamental hallmarks of the modes of constructing truth within what we call the Western European epistemic matrix. The history of the latter, which could be told to a large extent from the history of Western philosophy itself, reveals clear aspects that help us understand a kind of "original sin" attributed to sensations. This archeology could be built notably based on Plato's rationalism and the duality established between the "true world", the realm of ideas, and the "world of appearance", constituted by what presents itself as material nature, as well as for everything that could attest to the materiality, namely, human senses and sensations.

Plato's rationalism is a fundamental chapter for us to understand this place of depreciation of sensations, conceived by the philosopher as poor copies of true ideas (*forms*),

being averse to knowledge since they are incapable of grasping the essences of things<sup>2</sup>. However, we will focus here on another important chapter in this history: the one directly related to modernity and, consequently, to our time. The separation between feeling and thinking and, above all, the privilege of the second over the first would be particularly enunciated by Descartes' philosophy in his adventure of "inspection of the spirit" and the construction of the great "building of truth", both in *Discourse on the Method*, and – notably – in *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

It is no coincidence that this would be the philosopher's starting point. In the opening paragraphs of his first meditation, Descartes presents the argument of the senses, in which he clarifies the first reason why we should doubt our opinions and conceptions about the world: "Everything that I have received up to now as the most true and assured, I have learned from the senses, or through the senses: but I have sometimes experienced that these senses were deceptive, and it is prudent to never trust entirely in those who once deceived us" (Descartes, 1992, p. 59, translated<sup>3</sup>). The senses would therefore not be a reliable source of certainty and truth. To the *method* it would be appropriate to leave all these impressions in suspension: only the understanding and the thought resulting from it could lead to the obtaining of the truth – which means admitting that it would be easier to know myself, as a consciousness that thinks, than the outside (i.e., what is felt, what I access from the senses).

There are several implications of this argumentative articulation by Descartes, but what is important to highlight here is the philosopher's effort to remove the possibility of secure knowledge from sensations themselves, completely inverting the order of knowledge proclaimed by the scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas, to which sensations were fundamental to the act of knowing. The *Meditations* would be an exercise in applying the *method*, that is, a procedure for the operation of reason, defined by specific and rigorous rules and capable of guaranteeing the legitimacy of the resulting thoughts. It is through the intellect and the judicious conduct of reason that Descartes can lay the foundation stone of his building. All

<sup>2</sup> The theme appears in Plato's works on different occasions, with special emphasis on *Protagoras*, *Theaetetus*, and *Republic*.

<sup>3</sup> Translated from the original: "Tout ce que j'ai reçu jusqu'à présent pour le plus vrai et assuré, je l'ai appris des sens, ou par les sens : or j'ai quelquefois éprouvé que ces sens étaient trompeurs, et il est de la prudence de ne se fier jamais entièrement à ceux qui nous ont une fois trompés".

the certainties in the world will come from a single assertion: by the fact and the condition of "thinking" that I ensure my existence – *"cogito, ergo sum"* ("I think, therefore I am") –, even though nothing other than this very statement, in the first moment after its proclamation, can be attested as true.

If we cannot rely on sensations, because they have deceived us before, any result of feeling could only approach an aspect of certainty when subjected to the assessment of reason, when examined by the intellect. The assumption of doubt about anything or action that does not go through thinking would make feeling something impossible outside the subject. If every existence begins from my thought, it is impossible to conceive, in the realm of certainties, an individual capable of feeling before thinking. At least, according to the Cartesian method, this would not be worthy of truth.

### **Another meaning to the feeling**

What is at stake here is not, in effect, Descartes' philosophy and all the objections it would provoke, but what would survive from it as the cultural heritage of our civilization<sup>4</sup>, its reverberations in what we conventionally understand as science and in its "natural", "human" and "social" ramifications. Ultimately, Descartes seems to suggest a kind of self-referential philosophy, in which reason looks towards itself, even if it later intends to access things in the world through mathematics. "Feeling" would always be a task intersected by thinking, something resulting from a "subject" who feels, a "subject" because endowed with a "subjectivity", a self-awareness.

But, "what if feeling was not necessary to the subject? Did not suit a subjectivity that says 'I'"? This is the question that the Italian philosopher Mario Perniola (2004, p. 8) presents when he problematizes Descartes' movement to the feeling, on this occasion in an even more

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<sup>4</sup> The privilege of thinking and the disqualification of feeling would be present even in fields in which the aesthetic element operates centrally, such as art. In a book I published (see Borges Junior, 2023), I comment on the rational verve that would constitute, for example, both the emergence of art history and the constitution of aesthetics, as disciplines of knowledge. The task of enjoying artistic work and the meanings of beauty are marked by a pronounced "logocentrism".

forceful way. From this provocation, we are invited to think about another conception of feeling. As Perniola points out:

The history of the modern appropriation of feeling by thinking begins precisely with Descartes for whom the thing that feels with immediacy and evidence is not the body but the mind. According to Descartes, from my body, from the extended thing that belongs to me, no clear and distinct knowledge can reach me directly. It is not any more evident to me than external bodies. However, this does not mean that my body is separated from the mind, but only that the mind feels what occurs in it (Perniola, 2004, p. 8).

To what extent could we admit this type of experience as something prior to our condition as subjects? This challenge's complexity can be evidenced by the very lexicon we use to refer to the experience of feeling something. The act of feeling is always linked to a subject – "I feel", "we feel", "they feel" – as if the verb itself, ultimately, involved something "active": feeling as something conducted by subjectivity itself. Feeling would be, at the limit, an experience animated by consciousness. In a way, this helps us understand why themes related to passions, emotions, and affections would be treated as effects that are ultimately "controllable" by the individual, being converted into "weaknesses" precisely when we would not be able to discipline them through the reason – the skill in dealing with sensations would even be one of our main differences compared to other animals.

Perniola proposes a twist on this meaning of feeling, provoking us to think about a type of experience that is original and, to a certain extent, radical – because profound –, in which the logical "I" was not yet present, a feeling free from subjectivity, prior not only to our memories and personality traits, but to how we define ourselves in the world, that is, as beings belonging to a human society, as constituents of an animal kingdom, as beings endowed with life and, ultimately, as "things" belonging to the totality of entities in the world. The transition from a "sentient subject" to a "thing that feels" would not mean a clear and distinct process, but "something opaque, indeterminate and open", which, according to Perniola, "is not self-evident" (Perniola, 2004, p. 9). It is an invitation to an experience of suspension of the world and subjectivity, what the philosopher would call *epoché* (Perniola,

2011) – even broader than that carried out by E. Husserl's phenomenology<sup>5</sup>. Urging us to this "bracketing" of the world and subjectivity, Perniola suggests a new philosophical meaning for feeling, claiming its autonomy in front of the intellect: would it be possible to affirm, therefore, that something can be "felt in me" without that, necessarily, "I feel it"? Or, as Perniola asks: what if "in feeling there was implicit and essential a neutral dimension that compelled us to say: 'one feels', but prevented us from saying: 'I feel'?" (Perniola, 2004, p. 8).

If, on the one hand, M. Merleau-Ponty already approaches this problem by suggesting the distinction between "intellectual consciousness" and "sensitive consciousness", between what I perceive and what is perceived in me (Merleau-Ponty, 1976, pp. 266-267), Perniola focuses intensely on the problem using a series of conceptual devices that help us formulate the possibility of experiencing a feeling outside the workings mediated by consciousness. This would mean, in turn, an attempt to access what was left behind by Western metaphysics: Perniola is extremely interested in the indistinction or porosity of boundaries between organic and inorganic suggested, for example, in engravings from the Paleolithic era, in Egyptian architecture (Perniola, 1995), in baroque aesthetics and, among others, in the very way in which we live with objects today. In a comment on Perniola's theory of the inorganic, S. Contreras-Koterbay offers us a clear description of what this new type of connection with things, or even attraction – a *sex appeal* – that they would have on us:

For example, I want a thermometer so I can accurately measure my son's temperature when he is sick, and my wife wants her hair dryer to dry her hair, and we establish a relationship with these objects analogous to the one we share with other human beings by the fact that we ask them to carry out tasks and we establish emotional bonds with them precisely because they carry out these tasks. Inorganic objects acquire sex appeal – on a generalized aesthetic level in my opinion – in one of the following ways: either through repetitive use, during which we become aware of our emotional attachment, or in our initial exposure to them, when we fall in love of them at first glance. Over time, we rely on them the same way we rely on the humans we have relationships with, and we come to love them and even feel betrayed by them when they disappoint us (Contreras-Koterbay, 2021, p. 47, translated<sup>6</sup>).

<sup>5</sup> For more details, consult Husserl, 1947; Borges Junior, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Translated from the original: "Per esempio, desidero un termometro per poter misurare in modo accurato la temperatura di mio figlio quando è malato, e mia moglie vuole che il suo asciugacapelli le asciughi i capelli, e instauriamo un rapporto con questi oggetti analogo a quello che condividiamo con gli altri esseri umani per il fatto che gli chiediamo di svolgere dei compiti e

This state of affairs suggests a kind of confusion, ambivalence, or openness in which the individual's self-consciousness gives way to another type of relationship with the world. Subject and object suggest positioning themselves on an equivalent level of relationship: we could think, for example, of the moments in which we speak to our virtual assistants or even of our outbursts of anger against *gadgets* malfunctioning. Perniola seems to suggest that, although we have an intellect that offers the possibility of rational action, this may not be the only way we relate – and communicate – with what constitutes our own experience. To a certain extent, it is as if something we have, which was below or beyond our logical apparatus, could communicate with the objects themselves, especially in moments of spontaneity – that is, during those in which reason would be distracted or disinterested. It is at this moment when, perhaps, we could say that we "become things", establishing a kind of irrational dialogue with the objects that accompany us.

### **Feeling like a subject and feeling like a thing**

What does "becoming a thing" actually mean when interacting in the world? Perniola's reading of this fundamental notion of philosophy – the "thing" – can help us think about a feeling prior to Western metaphysics. Firstly, it is necessary to clarify how Perniola's approach differs from the perspective on the "thing" coming from critical theory, notably that of a Marxian strand. As E. Bianchi (2022, pp. 86-87) explains, Perniola presents a particular theory<sup>7</sup> in which the notion of "thing" distances itself from that of the product or result of the reification of the human, of a process that steals (or usurps) from it the condition of subject, holder of the reins of its own life, its actions and its destiny. Perniola suggests that the

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instauriamo dei legami emotivi con essi proprio perché assolvono questi compiti. Gli oggetti inorganici acquisiscono sex appeal – a un livello estetico generalizzato a mio avviso – in uno dei seguenti modi: o attraverso un utilizzo ripetitivo, durante il quale si prende consapevolezza del nostro attaccamento emotivo, oppure nella nostra esposizione iniziale ad essi, quando ci innamoriamo di loro a prima vista. Col passare del tempo, ci affidiamo a loro nello stesso modo in cui ci affidiamo agli esseri umani con cui abbiamo dei rapporti, e arriviamo ad amarli e persino a sentirci traditi da essi quando ci deludono".

<sup>7</sup> According to Bianchi, a "theory of the thing" can be identified in Perniola, 1976; 1995; 1982; 2005; 1997; 1985.

problematic element of Marx's perspective is precisely the centrality of the notion of subject, denoted by the German philosopher's concern with the loss of this status – already attested in the presentation of the concept of "alienation", in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, and, even more evidently, in the analysis of the capitalist process of division of labor in *The Capital*. As Bianchi points out from Perniola's philosophy, Marx's approach – due to his defense of subjectivity – would inherit strong traits from Western metaphysics, which would mean, in turn, to remain one of the most problematic components of the latter: the separation between subject and object, human and thing (or nature), giving the first a place of autonomy and the second, of mere passivity.

By claiming human dignity in the face of other beings in the world, Marx would have made the mistake of reaffirming the anthropocentrism of Western metaphysics. In doing so, it would not only resonate the Aristotelian distinction of *zoon politikon* ("political animal"), but also everything that it would imply: its alleged superiority – converted into legitimacy – to exercise dominance, and also the possession<sup>8</sup> about other creatures of nature – non-human animals, forests, rivers, mineral resources. It is in this sense that – we could suggest – the Marxian approach seems to resort to a kind of metaphysics of the thing, conceiving the latter as opposed to a human being – in the end also metaphysical since elevated to a privileged level over other entities. In this regard, Bianchi's passage is exemplary, according to which "the Marxist critique, in other words, mystifies the thing", "it remains anchored to metaphysical moralism, for which the human has a dignity superior to the thing" (Bianchi, 2022, p. 87) – and, in a forceful way, risking an approximation between Marx and Descartes, asserting that:

In so doing, the Marxist critique of alienation meets Cartesian anthropocentrism. Although these two traditions of thought depart from incompatible premises and reach divergent conclusions, they both share the assumption that subjects (humans) are superior to objects (nonhuman entities), and that objects are ultimately inferior (Bianchi, 2022, p. 87).

<sup>8</sup> See Paolo Bortoloni's work, *Objects in Italian Life and Culture: Fiction, Migration, and Artificiality* (2016), cited by Bianchi (2022, p. 85).

In this sense, the thing, both in Descartes and in Marx, would assume an instrumental perspective, meaning it would be relegated to a necessarily degenerate or less important role within the total set of entities in the world: in common discourse, the act of equating a person with a thing is generally interpreted as a type of offense or reproach.

Contrary to this approach and undertaking an amoral effort, Perniola seeks to demonstrate that our relationship with things would go beyond the dimension of usability or fetishized consumption (as part of Frankfurt's critical theory used to highlight): it would be possible to identify a kind of mutuality between us and them, porosity through which organic and inorganic would become confused in a dynamic of appeal between inertia and life. The movement of attraction towards the inorganic could be observed at the same time, in an increasingly pronounced way, in phenomena such as our forms of attachment and adhesion to technological devices, in the cult of the bodily figure based on aesthetic procedures, as well as in the human affinity for certain chemical substances that are able to perform some kind of stimulation and escape from the state of consciousness.

Added to these previous examples is the advent of cybersex and "virtual reality" technologies, which would mean not the mere immaterialization of physical actions, but "the access, so to speak, to another ontologically different dimension" (Perniola, 2004, p. 30), intermediate and paradoxical, atypical and strange, since it is neither strictly corporeal nor merely technological. For Perniola, we could identify these shifts in subjectivity also in the field of arts, based on certain sounds like rock *hardcore*, capable of going beyond the notion of music as an affective meaning and turning to the performative expression of sounds in which the word would aim much more at its sign dimension than at the proclamation of an idea or thought. In addition to hardcore, Perniola mentions the types of experimental theater from the 1960s onwards, combined with performance and installation, marked by emancipation to text and literature, by "the challenge of the separation between actors and spectators", and, above all, by "the overcoming of the distinction between scene and reality" (Perniola, 2004, p. 142). All these phenomena would help us to think about a type of "impersonal feeling" (Perniola, 2004, p. 65), in which our condition as subjects seems to seek

another kind of experience: a condition in which, in "a formidable objectifying impulse" (Perniola, 1995, p. 45), we aim to overcome our self-consciousness and ally ourselves with other things, fascinated by the *sex appeal* of the inorganic.

### **The feeling as a possibility of communication between the living and the non-living**

It is in this vein that, as Bianchi explains, Perniola formulates a particular notion of "thing" from the "neutral" dimension, defined as the "osmosis between organic and inorganic", living and inanimate, not meaning, however, a "neutralization" of affections or feelings, but rather the condition of "opening up to what was left behind by traditional metaphysics: the inorganic realm" (Bianchi, 2022, pp. 5-6). Perniola presents us with two fundamental examples in which this experience of the neutral could be very well observed. In *Enigmas*, the philosopher focuses on Egyptian art and its productive relational elements – capable of putting in common and, in this specific sense, of enabling communication – between organic and inorganic, such as statues that, in addition to inert matter, would possess life and they would be able to observe and watch over the temples.

This appeal radiated by the inorganic could be recognized in even earlier manifestations, such as in the abstract and geometric figures of the Paleolithic rock art site in the Côa Valley in Portugal (Perniola, 2010). For Perniola, the individuals who produced these images related to them in an alternative way to that narrated by the history of art – which, resonating the intellectualist aspects of Western metaphysics, would operate within an idea of searching for transcendentality. As he argues, its authors did not intend, using these specimens, to carry out some type of mystical or spiritual contact with superior entities, seeking ways of elevation to a divine or extraterrestrial dimension. Instead, to leap into subjectivity itself, they would aim at direct access to the drawn forms, aspiring to a kind of emancipation from human status and, with it, their conversion into natural entities themselves, at which point they would become vivid: "one of the most mysterious aspects of the remains of the Côa Valley is the animation of some figures carved into the rock, whose

movements are represented synchronously. It is as if the stone itself were animated" (Perniola, 2010, p. 87). As Bianchi adds:

Perniola underlines that by searching for movement and life through abstract and geometric figures, the incisions show a sort of suspended and artificial life, a 'living mechanics' (...) in which the limits of organic mobility are transgressed and 'energy is poured into the dead lines of the stone' (...). In addition, many engravings represent abstract anthropomorphic figures, which, Perniola argues, introduce other perspectives of the perception of the human body, felt more abstract, more material and closer to an enigmatic life infused by the 'stone that vibrates' (Bianchi, 2022, p. 89).

The neutral dimension that appears here from the osmosis between organic and inorganic helps us see how this other type of relationship with the thing would occur in contexts different from that of Western metaphysics. Perniola wants to awaken our attention to this other type of feeling experience that we can glimpse today, for example, in our interaction with robots and artificial intelligence, as well as in the contemporary phenomena that we previously reinvigorated. The idea of "becoming a thing that feels" has as its fundamental principle the renunciation of Western metaphysics and its dualisms, for which reality is what is distant and transcendent or what is close, material and "alive" (Bianchi, 2022, p. 90). Always assuming this tone, "metaphysics goes only upwards or downwards: what is organic remains separate from the inorganic". It is imperative, however, to break with this logic by evoking lateralities, opening oneself to indefiniteness, the uncertain, and the unclassifiable as a way of conceiving a different type of experience; It is, therefore, in this sense that "the philosophy developed by Perniola can be understood only if classical polar oppositions and dualisms are left behind" (Bianchi, 2022, p. 90).

From the assumption of a "neutral" dimension, which does not deny the organic or the inorganic, but admits the "transit" between one and the other without having to experience a transfiguration or a complete transmutation of materiality, Perniola ends up problematizing the very boundaries between what is considered as interior and exterior to the individual: if subjective consciousness gives way to the experience of an impersonal

feeling and if, at the same time, the thing can become alive, the idea of "one's own" is also demobilized, of an immutable essence or substance, at the same time that the world reveals itself as a multifaceted experience, in which beings – no longer defined by unbreakable cores – can appear in the world from different shapes and profiles. If this operation were logically impossible for the expedients of Western metaphysics, the same would not occur in the context of Paleolithic and Egyptian societies. We can compose these examples with the practice of shamanism, in which the assumption of the perspective of other beings in the world is not prohibited by a supposed hardcore shaped by consciousness. On the contrary, in this procedure, the shaman assumes and transfigures himself into these other forms.

Seeking to overcome the rational categories that define what would be the interiority and exteriority of an individual, and, with it, the duality between subject and object, Perniola presents us with a new and interesting approach to the meaning of communication, beyond the finalist perspective of transmitting or exchanging something aimed at a certain effect, but, on the contrary, conceiving it as the possibility of assuming a different position in front of the world, of experimentation from the perspective of the thing with which we communicate and, thereby, weakening the distinctions between sender and receiver – since such functions interpenetrate, being, strictly speaking, indelimitable. It would not be by chance that Perniola's criticism of the distinction between subject and object, between an active entity and a being that receives the action, would appear as a fundamental substrate of authors' thought dedicated to reflection on the forms of communication in digital networks<sup>9</sup>.

The movement between forms of life and heterogeneous entities appears in Perniola's philosophy also from the notion of "transit", conceived by "a passing from the same to the same, without rupture" (Perniola, 2004, p. 114). This ambivalent and indeterminate idea of the conception of being refers directly to the philosophy of Heraclitus and what he calls "enantiodromia" [from the Greek, ἐνάντιος (*enantios*) = opposite + δρόμος (*drómos*) = running track, Olympic exercise space], a term by which a being is understood as a coincidence of opposite elements. Therefore, moving away from the notion of essence or immutable substance, "being" would mean "becoming", a perpetual state of change that, at

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Di Felice, 2009, and also Di Felice, Pireddu, 2010.

the limit, could result in its opposite. Both "enantiodromia" and "transit" appear as key concepts through which we could recognize the atopic condition not only of philosophical thought but also of communication itself: "the adjective *atopic*, from Greek *atopos*, means both 'a-topos' ('devoid of a place', 'placelessness') and 'singular', 'unusual' or 'unclassifiable'. The very history of philosophy, for Perniola, can be understood through this concept" (Bianchi, 2022, p. 113).

Without falling into the logical trap, Perniola builds his argument to show how something immutable could be seen in different ways. Reaffirming that this would be an experience we have already had in common life, the author uses the famous example of the figure of the duck-rabbit (Perniola, 2004, p. 127), presented by Jastrow and commented on by L. Wittgenstein (2022, 1999), in which the same thing – the drawing as mentioned above – can be seen as different things, without a transmutation of the figure itself. Here we would be faced with an example in which feeling – seeing – would behave in an unforeseen and non-rational way:

Wittgenstein is particularly interested in the rapidity of the process through which I see something under a new aspect, the sudden lightening of a new feeling, the assertion, in a sensorily indisputable way, of an unforeseen and unexpected sensation. How is it that I can see in the same design, at the same time, a hare instead of a duck? How is it that this new aspect is accompanied by a greater intensity, a sparkling, the lighting of its semblance? (Perniola, 2004, p. 128).

Challenging the essentialist perspective of Western metaphysics, Perniola helps us think about new relationships with things as they could assume different modes of existence in the world. By unlinking existence from its substance, the philosopher helps us think about a way of existing – of establishing difference and generating action in the world – established not by thought, but by sensation. In this sense, the Italian philosopher's perspective seems close to the reflection carried out by Étienne Souriau on different modes of existence. For Souriau, existing does not mean having a kind of hard core, which remains despite the infinity

of reality's accidents. Nor does it state the opposite, that there would be no essence. What the French philosopher does is shift what characterizes existence to the possibility of appearance in the world and it is because of these different possibilities of expressing a thing that it could then "exist" in various ways. This would make us differentiate, for example, a block of clay from an unfinished work of art:

With each new action of the demiurge, the statue little by little emerges from its limbo. It goes towards existence – towards this existence which at the end will burst forth with present, intense and accomplished presence. It is only as the mass of earth is devoted to being this work that it is a statue. At first weakly existing, through its distant relationship with the final object which gives it its soul, the statue gradually emerges, takes shape, exists (Souriau, 2018, p. 107, translated<sup>10</sup>).

Existing would ultimately mean the possibility of establishing a new state of things, of reorganizing the relationships between the elements of reality based on a new way of being present. As Souriau states, in *Having a Soul: Essay on Virtual Existences*<sup>11</sup>, to exist is to "make reality": it is, therefore, "movement" and not fixity. Referring to another of his examples: Hamlet could exist both as a character in a novel, as an actor on a stage, or as an illustrated image: everyone would exist in their own way because they would establish a type of presence in the world based on their gestures. It can be noted, therefore, that the organic or inorganic condition of the entity ceases to assume importance in the verdict on its existence<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Translated from the original: "À chaque nouvelle action du démiurge, la statue peu à peu sort de ses limbes. Elle va vers l'existence – vers cette existence qui à la fin éclatera de présence actuelle, intense et accomplie. C'est seulement en tant que la masse de terre est dévouée à être cette œuvre qu'elle est statue. D'abord faiblement existante, par son rapport lointain avec l'objet final qui lui donne son âme, la statue peu à peu se dégage, se forme, existe".

<sup>11</sup> Translated from the original: *Avoir une âme: essai sur les existences virtuelles* (Souriau, 1938, p. 25).

<sup>12</sup> The possibility of thinking about different modes of existence is the theoretical key that I use in order to carry out a phenomenology of digital images. I am interested in the way these images are enjoyed, analyzing the experience of sensoriality through which they would assume a new position within what we consider, in the public sphere, as existing or non-existent, true or false. This new way of relating to the images we produce and which are produced by our technologies would ultimately be related to a crisis of what we conceive as truth, based on the dissolution of old criteria – such as the materiality of objects (Borges Junior, 2023).

## The feeling: relating to the world in a gesture of freedom

Both Souriau and Perniola, challenging the essentialist heredity of Western metaphysics, reveal to us other possibilities of relating to things, seeking to dissolve the criteria that until then established fundamental distinctions between human and non-human elements. Admitting, therefore, a new kind of relationship between things – including us in the latter – would a new type of arrangement and organization of them also be possible? How could Perniola's perspective help us understand, in an extremely innovative way, the set of systemic crises – of a social, economic, political, and ecological nature – that we are currently experiencing?

Without intending to answer this question, we would like to present it as an axis to be discussed in future texts. It is worth highlighting now the exceptionality of Perniola's perspective of feeling as he ventures to overcome the dualities between subject and object, organic and inorganic. Perniola restores our condition as things in the world – he does not take away human dignity: rather, he restores dignity to objects, present in the magical and enchanted world of myth, but undermined by Western anthropocentrism and, later, by the well-finished form of capitalist rationality and – using the original expression created by M. Weber (2004; 1985) – of his "disenchantment of the world" [*Entzauberung der Welt*]. Extremely timely for our time, his vision is consistent, in its way, with what the original cosmologies present in their practice of attributing forms of life to objects, re-discussing the limits between life and non-life.

The possibility of a "*sentire dal di fuori*", a feeling from the outside, external, impersonal, a feeling beyond the limits of subjectivity, promoting other experiences of encounter and communication with the things of the world, could allow a new type of connection with nature – or even reconnection –, with that which the purifying effort of Western metaphysics insisted on separating. In addition to all the developments that the notions of "neutral", "osmosis" and "transit" would take on in Perniola's philosophy, it is important to highlight his courageous impetus towards disintegrating the distinctions between life and non-life, to allow us to problematize – even if he does not do so in these

terms – what this distinction would mean in terms of power and domination: the subject as the one who acts, submits, and possesses, and the object, as that to be mastered. His thought can therefore represent fertile material for us to think about new epistemic matrices and forms of communication. The radicality of Perniola's thought and his expanded *epoché*, by suspending the world and the subjectivity, expand our way of conceiving experience and constructing meanings about the world: it is in this sense that we could say that, ultimately, these forms of interaction with things would become a true gesture of freedom.

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