

The Encountering Body: Natural Metaphysics

By Lapo Chittaro

You and I are here, and I hope that Christ is between us as a third

Aelred of Rievaulx

Eyes (I-Thou)

Our lives are made up of everyday gestures, words, conversations, and dialogues. By relating, we enact daily exchanges. In this cluster of communicative exchanges, it sometimes happens that we meet the other with whom we are relating in the present moment. When such authentic encounters can take place, it is the gaze that allows us to participate in the intersubjective and interpersonal sphere. Each of us holds in our invisible interiority our own *visage*. Although in our daily exchanges we often come into contact only with the superficial part of the person in front of us, it can happen that in the authentic encounter one meets the *inner face* of the person, the *hidden face* of our interlocutor. If we, in the first place, are in contact with our inner face (*visage*), then our gaze can become a bridge to *commune* with the invisible face of the other person. Here the true encounter can be described as the contact between a living gaze and a present *visage*. In this deep dimension of interpersonal interaction, the gaze transcends the level of everyday communication to become an organ of *personal communion*.

If we look at speech from the point of view of this silent interaction between gaze and *visage*, it becomes clear how speech and discourse are often used as a shield that guards against an *intimacy* that one does not want to experience. The mass of everyday words and gestures can be seen as

a construction of walls to prevent the possibility of intimate communion between *gaze* and *visage*. It happens, however, that even words, on certain happy occasions, can be welcomed into the intimate space of communion generated by the *creative tension* between gaze and *visage* and, in its being said, can retain the *aura* of silence. Then silence and words are no longer two opposites that exclude each other but two elements that combine to create the intimate communion of the encounter; the same can be said of the gestures of the body.

Levinas is the great philosopher of the *visage*. He taught us that the *visage* is a transcendent reality that constitutes the person; the *visage* is the symbol of personal uniqueness. The *visage* is a trace of the infinite, with which we can make contact. An authentic encounter is always an encounter between two singulars. The very recognition of uniqueness opens the doorway to the dimension of authenticity and the truth of the encounter. The encounter between singulars, to avoid a fusion that would nullify the encounter, must take place in the dimension of *distance*. In the everyday dimension of distance, it is possible for two distant singulars, through the gaze, to become *neighbors*. Distance makes it possible for each to be sufficiently *gathered* to welcome the other and sufficiently *open* for contact to take place. The *place held open* by distance is the prerequisite for the encounter to happen.

In the space of everyday distance, it also happens that the gaze is absorbed and captured by screens, and then the *visage* remains unseen; abandoned to itself, it loses the intensity of existence. The gazes dispersed in the screens create a shared context of life *poor in gaze* and leave inner faces *unattended*. The eyes that meet the screen become isolated from the gaze. The digital user is distinguished by his or her particular way of looking, which belongs to the attitude of the eye that Byung-Chul Han defined as the *optics of*

the information hunter.¹ Eyes functioning as mini-cameras taking pictures of what is shown makes attention too superficial, too scattered to allow the encounter between a loving gaze and a vibrant *visage*; moreover, the act of looking as a kind of video recording becomes forgetful of the possibility of being a *gift of attention* for the other. In the *tactile gaze* at work in the encounter, on the other hand, one is still dealing with an embodied gaze, not separated from the synesthesia of perception. In the gaze the *body*, *soul*, and *spirit* of the person looking are present, therefore not separated from love. The *mutual gaze* thus becomes that act capable of generating a field of loving-kindness to guard personal existence, in which the *visage* is guarded by the gaze of the other. The other's gaze embracing my *visage* makes me exist more intensely, makes me discover that I am a gift of the other's gaze illuminating my uniqueness. The gaze of encounter is finally revealed as the privileged place for the embodiment of love in the interpersonal dimension.

From the text *Spiritual Friendship*,² we are gifted with an allusion to a very evocative ritual gesture enacted by two monks about to have an intimate dialogue that would like to reach out to and touch the truth. To begin their meeting of gaze and *visage*, of listening and speaking, the two light a lamp or a candle in the hope that their encounter will also be attended by a third person: Christ, who guards the faces and guides them on the path of truth.

In fact, the authentic encounter is always a grace; one has the impression that there is a third party, the Spirit, to guide us, to rescue us from dispersion, and to make our *vis-*

1 Han, Byung-Chul, *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017.

2 of Rievaulx, Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Lawrence C. Braceland, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010.

ages land in the safekeeping of the other's gaze and invite us, in turn, to safekeep the other's face in our gaze.

The *gaze of love* can open a breach in the world of daily shielding, forgetfulness, inauthenticity, and anonymous impersonality by resurrecting us to the experience of Life; it is one of the ways the infinity of Life makes itself present by regenerating as You. The gaze of the other, as a bent candle with its flame, rekindles our candle, and the face shines again.

Mouth (I-Thou)

The meeting of faces through the tactile gaze is defined in a new way by Luce Irigaray. In chapter 11 of her text *To Be Born: Genesis of a New Human Being*,³ she proposes a way of knowing the world and entering into a relationship with its original living entities—a mode of cognitive relationship she calls *recognition*.

If in our meeting we can access the mode of recognition, we can experience a *true and authentic encounter* instead of an *impersonal communicative exchange*. To recognize is to relearn to perceive the here-and-now in which the encounter can happen. Encountering in the mode of recognizing makes us attentive to the presence of the other in the here-and-now; the continuous *attention* and *concentration* that we place in encountering lead to a process of unification of perceptions of the recognized other that will culminate in the *contemplation* of the other's *visage*; then the gaze will reveal itself as a bridge capable of connecting our *visages*; we will be a whole in communion with a whole, two unique ones recognizing each other as such in a living relationship.

To come to this living encounter, typical of the mode of *recognition*, it is necessary to renew our relationship with language. The relationship to speech must be such that we do not

3 Irigaray, Luce, *To Be Born: Genesis of a New Human Being*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

enclose ourselves and the other in a totality of signs that could deaden the living encounter, which can happen only when living here-and-now. Preliminary to the new perception of the other's face is to unlearn all preconceived ideas and beliefs that come to us from memory and everyday language; another necessary element to the true encounter is a certain degree of recollection capable of putting us in touch, in the first place, with our *inner face*, the source of the radiance of our presence in the present. To keep alive the new perception of the other in the present moment, it is also necessary to learn a new relationship and a new use of *speech and language* that does not seek to designate and capture the presence of the other in a series of terms but rather makes space around the other's *visage* to give it a place from which its inimitable word can flow. It will then be a matter of abandoning that cognitive posture that tends to *objectify* the other and reduce the one we meet to an object of knowledge or a source of information. Too often in objectifying meetings, we forget the infinite complexity of the other, the dimensions of soul and spirit, his or her being You. From the cognitive subject-object logic, we must leap to the logic of *intersubjectivity* capable of revolutionizing the perception of the other in the dynamic of the living encounter. We recognize in the living encounter the energy, the breath, the soul, and the spirit in the one to whom we turn our gaze, and the encounter takes place in life, in the living word, and not in the impersonal space of objectifying language.

Finally, we can emphasize that the other's word is also a concrete and carnal emission of breath. By speaking, the other also generates an atmosphere with his breath, and I, in some subtle way, breathe in his words with my nose and bowels. When this happens, we are in *Conspiratio*, in an amicable atmosphere involving the presence of the other's gaze and speech, felt viscerally. Together we generate and feel a *common atmosphere* in which we also live. The encounter in

which we are together has its own *aura*.

Here it may be interesting to pay close attention to an author much loved by Ivan Illich, namely Aelred of Rievaulx, a Cistercian monk who lived in the 12th century. The text *Spiritual Friendship* is a successful attempt to bring the classical ideal of *philia* into the Christian context by transfiguring it in the light of the Gospel. In particular, the text can also be seen as a Christian rewriting of Cicero's famous dialogue on friendship, the *Lelio* that Aelred had surely read in his adolescence, during his formative years at the court of King David I of Scotland. In *Spiritual Friendship*, our author addresses the theme of *Conspiratio* in the section entitled *Various Kinds of Friendship: The Three Kisses*.

21. Hence a friend clinging to a friend in the spirit of Christ becomes *one heart and one soul with him*. Thus mounting the steps of love to the friendship of Christ, a friend becomes one with him in the one kiss of the spirit. Sighing for this kiss, one holy soul cried out, "*Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth!*"

22. Let us consider the characteristics of this kiss of the flesh, that from what is of the flesh we may rise to the spirit, from what is human to the divine. Life is sustained by two sources of nourishment: food and air. Without food one can survive for some time, but without air not even an hour. Through our lips, then, for survival, we inhale and exhale. What is inhaled or exhaled receives the name *breath* or *spirit*.

23. In a kiss, therefore, two spirits meet, blend, and unite. Begotten from these two spirits, a sweetness of mind awakens and engages the affection of those who exchange a kiss.

24. So there exist physical kisses and intellectual kisses. The physical kiss is made with the joining of spirits and the intellectual kiss with the infusion of grace by the spirit

of God. The physical kiss should be offered or accepted only for fixed and honest reasons. Here are some examples: as a sign of reconciliation, when those who have previously been mutual enemies become friends; as a sign of peace, when those about to communicate in church show their inner peace by an outward kiss; as a sign of love, as is permitted between husband and wife or as is given and received between friends after a long absence; or as a sign of catholic unity, as is done when a guest is received.

25. But just as many misuse natural goods such as water, fire, iron, food, and air as instruments of cruelty or of pleasures, so perverts and the depraved somehow attempt to sweeten their crimes with a kiss, though natural law established it as a sign of the blessings mentioned. They defile the kiss itself with such wantonness that their kiss is nothing but adultery. Any honest person knows how much such a kiss should be loathed, abominated, shunned, and rejected.

26. Now the spiritual kiss belongs to friends who are bound by the one law of friendship. This takes place *not through a touch of the mouth but through the attachment of the mind*, not by joining lips but by blending spirits, while the Spirit of God purifies all things and, by sharing himself, pours in heavenly flavor. This kiss I would aptly name the kiss of Christ, which he offers, however, through the lips of another, not his own. He inspires in friends that most holy affection, so that to them it seems that there exists but one soul in different bodies, and so they may say with the prophet, *See how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to live in unity.*⁴

Here, from the word considered as the emission of breath, from the *carnal word* (a word of intimacy and desire),

4 of Rievaulx, Aelred, *ibidem*, pp. 75-77.

we could speak of *carnal dialogue*, meaning by this expression a *conspiratio of the everyday life* that takes place through the viscerally felt carnal word; a communion between the *I* and the *Thou* mediated by the breath of the living word.

Heart (I-Thou, We)

Imagine the *inner face* as a vibrating string plucked by God's hand to emit a special, unique vibration of its own. In the encounter of one *visage* with another, one of these "strings" can also resonate with the other and compose a harmonic chord, an encounter.

To continue thinking about encounters in this key, I dwell on the intellectual contribution of Hartmut Rosa, who has developed a sociological reflection around the concept of *resonance*.⁵ Rosa provides us with this musical metaphor and allows us to think about the theme of encounter with a language capable of evoking the invisible dynamics that take place in the encounter. Here I will try to bring the metaphor of resonance back to the existential dimension.

Let us start with the eyes: finding ourselves in a semantic field that concerns music and therefore listening, the eye is not the place from which the ocular ray of the gaze capable of reaching the face of the other spreads, but is seen in this framework as a *window of resonance*. Now it is the voice that touches my *visage*, reconfiguring itself as an inner vibrating string. When one feels touched by the other's voice, the face vibrates like a tuning fork and the eyes shine and become windows of resonance, witnessing in their shining the future of the joy of encounter, of the agreement of faces.

For my voice to reach the *inner chord* of the other, it is necessary that a resonant chord, or rather a channel onto which the creative tension of the encounter can travel. When the cord is

5 Rosa, Hartmut, *Resonance: A sociology of our relationship to the world*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2019.

stretched, the eyes shine, and there is reciprocity and interaction.

If God plucks my inner chord, my face speaks; the voice and the word can travel on the resonant chord and reach the inner chord of the other; but it may happen that we are carried down by the force of gravity, and now the *visage* shows itself as mute, the resonant chord is broken, and we stand in front of each other as strangers, as aliens who mean nothing to each other. Still, at other times we must struggle for the word to reach the other, the channel of communion seems congested, and the world between us shows itself as a set of obstacles to overcome.

Byung-Chul Han takes up the metaphor of resonance in his discussion of the disappearance of the ritual way of life.⁶ The Korean philosopher sees community as a *space of resonance*, a field of resonance. In the space of community, we can meet each other; a creative tension is ignited between us through the sharing of a *collective feeling* that transcends the small personal ego; it is the feeling that puts us in a sentimental connection with the world. The world that is waning is a world of community without communication; one is together through the sharing of collective feelings and a living in common ritual life. In its place, the author sees the rise of a world of communication without community, that of atomized individuals reduced to the swarming of neoliberal and digital society. Byung-Chul Han takes an apocalyptic stance and points to only the ability to *play* as the answer, in a strong sense; play opens up the creation of a new *form of life* irreducible to any definition.

The critical reflection on our present is interesting and resonates, in my memory, with a juxtaposition proposed by Raimon Panikkar in the introduction to his text *Worship*.⁷

6 Han, Byung Chul, *The disappearance of rituals: A topology of the present*, Cambridge: Polity, 2020.

7 Panikkar, Raimon, *Worship and the secular man*, New York: Orbis, 1973. Here I'm referring to the introduction to the text that Panikkar wrote in Barcelona at Christmas 1977.

Panikkar proposes the power of ritual as an antidote capable of balancing the excessive preponderance of the scientific principle in the constitution-making process of our industrial societies. The *capacity for resonance* in the light of these reflections appears as the force capable of awakening us from the alienation of industrial society founded on the principles of scientific knowledge, technique, and productivity alone. Resonance is an attitude that has much affinity with the ritual attitude that, in Panikkar's vision, creates *dialogue* and makes relationships *personal*. The essence of ritual is to make reality no longer an impersonal Being in which the (anti)relational I-It logic typical of modern scientific knowledge dominates, but rather an *intimate* and *personal* space of relationship in which the *I-Thou* relationship prevails. Here, in the light of the above, *resonance* reveals itself as a fundamental relationship with reality, a *personal* and *dialogical* relationship, capable of response and open to transformation in encounter. The *visage*, as a vibrating string, resonates with the *visages* it encounters, and the experience of life becomes more intense and alive. The world, in the presence of God who gives voice to our face, is revealed as a *space of resonance*.

Encounter is a possible new way of life and *ritual practice of resistance* to the subtle totalitarianism of impersonal industrial society. Encounter is the force capable of opening a breach in the wall of impersonality in which the productivity principle encircles reality, rendering it incapable of speech. The mute and alienating irreality typical of neoliberal isolation is transformed into the force of personal communion, dialogue, the ability to resonate, and love that restores the word to the other and to the world.

Viscere (I-Thou)

To meet another person means first of all to look at him or her. Usually, insisting that typical of man is speech, much emphasis is placed on the act of addressing the other person. So, you first address the gaze and then the word and these two primary acts open up the encounter with the other. Now, together with Ivan Illich,⁸ I would like to emphasize another decisive dimension of the encounter with the other that starts from our nostrils. For if we have emphasized the importance of the *eyes* and *mouth* involved in the first two acts of addressing (gaze and speech), it is also true that for the future of an authentic encounter, it is necessary that something be unlocked in that subtle and invisible channel that connects our *nostrils* to our *bowels*. To truly encounter the other, we must open ourselves to receive the atmosphere emanating from the *presence of the other* in our bowels, and this can only happen through our nostrils, breathing in and smelling the other.

In times of the spread of the *performance attitude* and an increasingly pervasive invasion of all spheres of life of the *principle of productivity*, it is necessary for us to rediscover the attitude of stopping, pausing, lingering, and staying in a given condition long enough for our perception to be refined, to grasp even such a subtle element as an atmosphere and the tone of an environment, a situation. In addition, our daily modes of encounter tend more and more to be mediated by screens and speakers that can disable, if not nullify, the *carnal substance* of our looks and words, reducing our *visages* to the superficiality of virtual faces and our *words* to plastic and manipulable elements of communication. In this walled world, an emblematic example of the alienation of industrial society, the tension of *natural attraction* typical of all beings partici-

8 Illich, Ivan, The Cultivation of Conspiracy, in *The Challenges of Ivan Illich*, (eds) Carl Mitcham and Lee Hoinacki, SUNY Press, 2002.

pating in the dynamics of *physis*, including women and men, is obstructed. Ivan Illich touches on this theme in the text *The Wisdom of Leopold Kohr*.⁹ Here Illich states:

Not only were seeing and hearing transformed, not only the senses themselves, but also the character of desire—with the good disappearing, to be replaced by value. In ethics, value widely displaced the good. It's true that "value" is an old word; it stood near "dignity" in meaning, pointed out what was precious, indeed magnificent, and early on indicated the selling price of an object. Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, "value" has had these uses and has denoted what was always desirable, useful, and even what was due; it then entered discourse in place of the good. By the time of my youth, it simply stood on the positive side of zero. Today, however, one needs a qualifier—values can be either positive or negative. To resolve this convertibility, to make it determinate, there is no stable criterion. With values, anything can be transposed into anything else, just as in music, with equally tempered tones, any melody can be transposed from one key into another. Proportionality being lost, neither harmony nor disharmony retains any roots in an ethos. The good, in the sense of Kohr's certain appropriateness, becomes trite, if not a historical relict. It then becomes possible to speak about the triviality of evil.

In ethics, values are as opposed to an immanent, concrete proportion as are the sounds of Helmholtz. Like them, values run counter to *tonos*, the specific tension of a mutuality or reciprocity. As timbre separated from tone, so that one could play a violin's part on the piano, so an ethics of value—with its misplaced concreteness—allowed

9 Illich, Ivan, *The Wisdom of Leopold Kohr (Annual E. F. Schumacher Lectures Book 14)*, Great Barrington: Schumacher Centre for a New Economics, 1994.

one to speak of human problems. If people had problems, it no longer made sense to speak of human choice. People could demand solutions. To find them, values could be shifted and prioritized, manipulated, and maximized. Not only the language but the very modes of thinking found in mathematics could norm the realm of human relationships. Algorithms “purified” value by filtering out appropriateness, thereby taking the good out of ethics.

When one attempts to utilize or exploit the good, natural inclination is extinguished. Such a propensity, the desire of everything for its own good, was accepted as inherent to all existence and was termed natural love. Even for several generations after Newton, rain was not drawn downward but sought its natural place. Flowers reached up toward the sun. Among people, this attraction was understood as a step toward friendship and friendship as the fruit of civil life. All were called to the other, to friendship.

Illich concludes by saying that Leopold Kohr knew that a certain sensitivity to what is *appropriate* is necessary to access friendship. Illich celebrates with Kohr the reality of *desire*, telling us that there is a visceral, vital, and erotic attraction to the other that is the foundation on which the edifice of love and conviviality can be built. From feeling my own good, I am attracted to the other who evokes my desire, and between us, a *resonant chord* is generated, and the *creative tension* of encounter can be shared.

In this journey, from the *nostrils* to the *guts*, and in these considerations internal to the metaphor of music, the *heart*, the place of resonance, becomes the space of openness in which one feels the other. Illich, in this journey between our carnal organs grasping an aspect of the other’s *spiritual presence*, gives the heart and affection its central place, just halfway between the tip of our *nose* and the depths of the *bowels*. I feel an attraction to the other in my bowels; my heart

resonates with the other's heart, and from this inwardness of the *visage*, the manifestations of the face's gaze and speech emerge. The person is then the *chiasm* of this invisible carnal dimension of *viscera* and *heart* (*visage*) and the increasingly perceptible dimension of the personal gaze and word (face).

The heart is also the place where the *common sense* for what is good is rooted. Starting from this felt sense for what is good, I'm able to relate to a specific group of people with whom I am sharing the breath, the aura, the atmosphere of the encounter.

With each arrival and departure of a person, the aura of the group changes and transforms; the breath of the group, the atmosphere changes with arrivals and departures. The specific group I am in is the *chiasm* of the faces, looks, breaths, and words of individuals who participate with their uniqueness and, by participating, generate the common atmosphere; an event, the happening of *Conspiratio*. Now we know what is in danger in the society of communication:

Ivan, with his friends, wants to make thinkable and criticizable the idea that the central danger to be overcome in the use of communications is not their content, the access to produce them, or to use them as industrial products. [Instead], Ivan and his friends want to make it credible that the intensity of dependence on communication extinguishes the sovereignty that is rooted in the corporeal senses. The senses are critically verified by the common sense for what is good, in opposition to what is of value. For this reason, and for me at least and for my friends, communication destroys the possibility to believe that peace today is my responsibility, that I can make peace flower in a group with whom I meet face-to-face, that peace is based on conspiracy—on the creation of a hospitable atmosphere.¹⁰

10 Illich, Ivan, *The personal decision in a world dominated by communication, Conspiratio*, Spring 2023, p.109-110.

Conclusion

When we recompose the visceral element in our *phenomenology of encounter*, the word and the gaze recover their somatic rootedness and *carnal substance* (the bread and the wine that we can share) that can become a source of nourishment of a common and friendly atmosphere that breaks the closed totality of impersonal alienation. The bowels feel the presence of others, and the heart responds by emanating a vibration of resonance with the friend. The face, with its gaze and word, nourishes the *visage* of the other in viscera and heart, with the substance of its own face that seems to come, upon careful and deep consideration, from the *rivers north of the future*. In that amicable atmosphere, in *Conspiratio*, we mutually nourish each other with gazes, words, beats of the heart, and viscerally felt attractions in the grace of a *Third* who safe keeps us.

As Aelred tells us about the third kind of kiss, the intellectual kiss:

27. Having grown accustomed to this kiss and confident that all this sweetness derives from Christ and, as it were, thinking aloud, “O! If he would only come in person!” the soul sighs for that intellectual kiss and cries with the deepest yearning, “Let *him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth*.” So at last, with all earthly attachments calmed and all worldly thoughts and desires lulled, it may delight in the kiss of Christ alone and rest in his embrace, exulting and exclaiming, “*his left hand is beneath my head, and his right hand will embrace me*.”¹¹

11 of Rievaulx, Aelred, *ibidem*, p. 77.