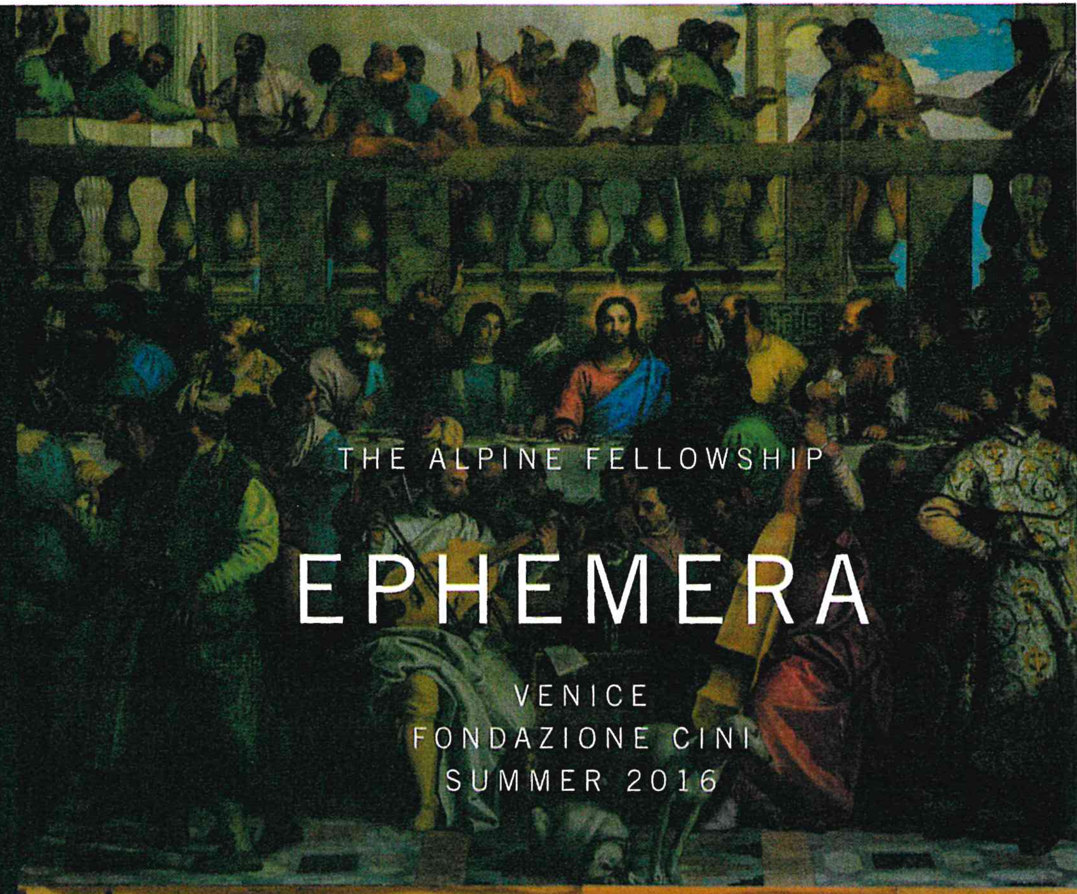
The Alpine
Fellowship

ON THE SEARCH FOR PERMANENCE IN A TRANSITORY WORLD

AF 2016/2 – EPHEMERA

Roger Scruton



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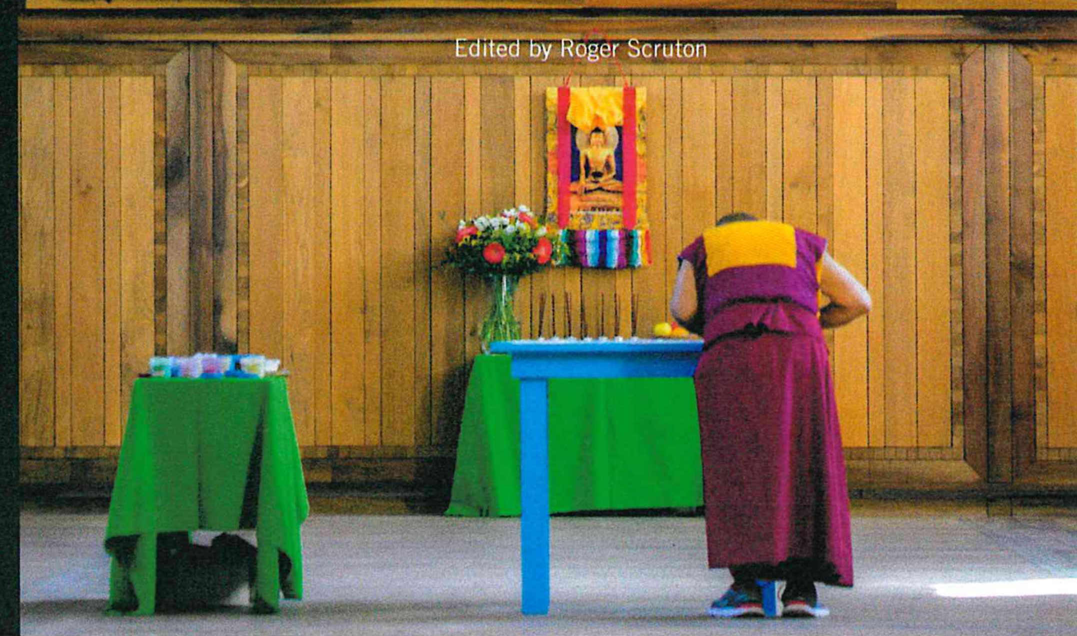
SUMMER 2016



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People Die, Things Last.
Surviving through Artifacts

Pasquale Gagliardi

Animula vagula blandula
Hospes comesque corporis,
Quae nunc abibis in loca
Pallidula, rigida, nudula,
Nec, ut soles, dabis iocos ...

P. Aelius Hadrianus, Imp.

Little sweet stray soul, mate and guest of the body, now you are ready to descend into colourless, arduous, bare places, where you won't have anymore your usual amusements ...

The Emperor Hadrian wrote that short, inspired graceful lyric just before he died. I felt that the melancholic serenity with which the most powerful man of his age accepts the inevitable natural conclusion to his earthly story might create the right emotional atmosphere for the ideas I would like to put forward here today.

How do we cope with the awareness that our lifetimes are wholly ephemeral, and how do we try to transcend our finite boundaries in time? In this paper I will develop some ideas related to this theme, basically referring to three streams of research: Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition,*[1] George Kubler's *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things,*[2] and my own work on artifacts and the aesthetic dimension of social life.[3]

Is 'the longing for permanence' a universal human aspiration felt by everyone and in all periods in the history of humanity? This is a first preliminary question raised by Arendt. She believes that the longing for permanence is a consequence of the process of secularization and of the 'modern loss of faith' inevitably arising from Cartesian doubt, which deprived individual life of its immortality, or at least of the certainty of immortality. Individual life again became mortal, as mortal as it had been in antiquity, and the world was even less stable, less permanent, and hence less to be relied upon than it had been during the Christian era. Modern man, when he lost the certainty of a world to come, was thrown back upon himself and not upon this world; far from believing that the world might be potentially immortal, he was not even sure that it was real... At any rate, [he] did not gain this world when he lost the other world ...' (Arendt 1958: 320-321).

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[1] Arendt, H. (1958) The Human Condition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[2] Kubler, G. (1962) The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

[3] Gagliardi, P. (1990) Symbols & Artifacts. Views of the Corporate Lansdscape. Berlin and New York: de Gruyter; Gagliardi, P. (2006) 'Exploring the Aesthetic Side of Organizational Life,' in The Sage Handbook of Organizations Studies. Stewart R. Clegg, Cynthia Hardy, Thomas B. Lawrence, and Walter R. Nord (eds). London: Sage.

Arendt then raises a second key point: is this longing for permanence an aspiration to immortality or to eternity? As we know, a central step in Arendt's argument is the distinction between 'the life of thought and the life of action,' vita contemplativa and vita activa, the first being concerned with eternity, the second with immortality. 'Immortality means endurance in time, deathless life on this earth and in this world as it was given, according to Greek understanding, to nature and the Olympian gods. The Greeks' concern with immortality grew out of their experience of an immortal nature and immortal gods which together surrounded the individual lives of mortal men. Imbedded in a cosmos where everything was immortal, mortality became the hallmark of human existence ...' (Arendt 1958: 18). 'The task and potential greatness of mortals lie in their ability to produce things—works and deeds and words— which would deserve to be and, at least to a degree, are at home in everlastingness, so that through them mortals could find their place in a cosmos where everything is immortal except themselves. By their capacity for the immortal deed, by their ability to leave non- perishable traces behind, men, their individual mortality notwithstanding, attain an immortality of their own and prove themselves to be of a 'divine' nature...' (Arendt 1958: 19). 'Yet it is decisive that the experience of the eternal, in contradistinction to that of the immortal, has no correspondence with and cannot be transformed into any activity whatsoever ... Theoria, or 'contemplation,' is the word given to the experience of the eternal, as distinguished from all other attitudes, which at most may pertain to immortality' (Arendt 1958: 20).

A third crucial concept in Arendt's thinking is that of the 'durability of the human artifice.' 'The work of our hands ...fabricates the sheer unending variety of things whose sum total constitutes the human artifice ...Their proper use does not cause them to disappear and they give the human artifice the stability and solidity without which it could not be relied upon to house the unstable and mortal creature which is man ... It is this durability which gives the things of the world their relative independence from the men who produce and use them, their 'objectivity' which makes them withstand, 'stand against' and endure, at least for a time, the voracious needs and wants of their living makers and users. From this viewpoint, the things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life, and their objectivity lies in the fact that—in contradiction to the Heraclitean saying that the same man can never enter the same stream—men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table. In other words, against the subjectivity of men stands the objectivity of the man-made world rather than the sublime indifference of an untouched nature...' (Arendt 1958: 136-137).

Lastly, I found interesting in Arendt's book the concept of reification and the distinction between repetition and multiplication. 'Fabrication, the work of homo faber, consists in reification. Solidity, inherent in all, even the most fragile, things, comes from the material worked upon, but this material itself is not simply given and there, like the fruits of field and trees which we may gather or leave alone without changing the household of nature. Material is already a product of human hands which have removed it from its natural location ... and the image or model whose shape guides the fabrication process not only precedes it, but does not disappear with the finished product ...it survives intact, present, as it were, to lend itself to an infinite continuation of fabrication. This potential

multiplication, inherent in work, is different in principle from the repetition... Multiplication multiplies something that already possesses a relatively stable, relatively permanent existence in the world' (Arendt 1958: 141-142).

Kubler, in his book *The Shape of Time*, refers to the same concepts—creation, repetition, and multiplication—when narrating the story of 'things, a term which encompasses all kinds of visual forms: ideas and objects, artifacts and works of art, replicas and unique examples, tools and expressions ... in short all materials worked by human hands under the guidance of connected ideas developed in temporal sequence.' Just as new things are being incessantly created, others are multiplying and spreading, while still others are discarded. They reveal patterns of invention, repetition, and selection, cycles of stability and change, chaos and order. 'From all these things a shape in time emerges. A visible portrait of the collective identity, whether tribe, class, or nation, comes to being. This self-image reflected in things is a guide and a point of reference to the group for the future, and it eventually becomes the portrait given to posterity' (Kubler: 1962).

As we have just seen, Arendt illustrates the relationship between things and the individual self, claiming that human beings 'can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table.' To my mind Kubler takes a further step forward by stressing the role that things play in the construction of collective identities.

Collective identity is what makes one specific social group recognizable and distinguishable from other social groups in the same species, be it a tribe, a company, a local community or a form of social aggregation held together by a common interest in reaching specific goals or by shared beliefs and values. Even in opportunistic and utilitarian aggregations, the constituent differences of identity concern the basic beliefs, worldview, role in the world, and the values and basic assumptions consciously or unwittingly shared: in a word, they concern the 'culture'—in the anthropological sense—of the group in question.

The study of cultures both in traditional societies and contemporary organizations has long been influenced by the 'cognitive bias,' by the relevance given to beliefs and value assumptions, and in general to all sort of analytical knowledge. At the same time, the artifacts, i.e. the constituent elements in the so-called 'material culture,' have been considered and treated as subsidiary or secondary manifestations of a culture, even though they are its most obvious tangible manifestation. The interest of social researchers in the study of artifacts and space sprang from the growing awareness that the study of artifacts and of physical reality enables one to approach a basic human experience: the aesthetic, used here in the general sense, to refer to all types of sense experience and not simply the experience of what is socially described as 'beautiful' or defined as 'art.'

The analysis of artifacts in most cases implies the analysis of a fundamental category of experience: space. Every object possesses a physical edge, which circumscribes it and sets it off from other objects, a perceptible boundary which marks where it begins and ends; space defines the features of an artifact, its relations with other artifacts in the same setting and its meaning. On

the other hand, the perception of space is inextricably linked to the perception of 'things' which frame it and define its contours. The physical setting is not a naked container for social action, but a context that selectively solicits—and hence, so to speak, 'cultivates'—all our senses. This context refines some of our perceptive capacities (perhaps at the expense of others), enabling us to grasp minimal gradations in the intensity of a stimulus, and accustoms us to certain sensations until we become 'fond' of them, even if those same sensations may well be unpleasant in other contexts and for other people.

The wealth of associative and reactive capacities that people accumulate through living in a specific physical-cultural setting forms a set of patterns of classification, interpretation and reaction to perceptual stimuli that I proposed to call 'sensory maps', distinguishing them from 'cognitive maps' (Weick 1979). Cognitive maps can be conscious or unconscious but are 'knowable'; sensory maps are learned instinctively through intuitive and imitative processes over which the mind exercises no control, and integrated automatically into life daily.

There is a widely held opinion, even among anthropologists and historians of art, that artifacts are the illustration of a pre-existing worldview. But it is difficult to say whether it is ideas, which produce forms, or forms which generate ideas. I have to confess my leaning towards considering aesthetic experience basic, if for no other reason than that it takes place before (and often without) the intellect's conferring of unity on the data of sensory experience through concepts. Artifacts convey their own messages, often untranslatable into ideas, at least to the same extent as they demonstrate existing conceptions. In this sense, the relation between systems of meanings and systems of sensations is probably circular in nature.

Many authors (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton) have carefully analyzed the importance of the relationship between things and the development of the individual self. The things, we create, which we use and with which we surround ourselves, not only 'reflect' our personality, but often they are part of or an extension of the self, not in a metaphorical or mystical sense but in a factual and concrete sense. Things incorporate our intentions of control, and the self develops out of feedback to acts of control. In things reside the traces and memories of our past, the witness to our present experiences, our desires and our dreams for the future. Things tell us constantly who we are, what it is that differentiates us from others and what it is that we have in common with others.

Material reality is equally decisive, perhaps more so, for the collective identities. In fact, the existence of a social self which is not publicly objectified in forms which survive the coming and going of individual people and generations, and which embody a sharable vision of reality, is conceptually unthinkable. In an organization, ends are pursued, energies invested and ideas are made concrete in machines, products and places. In order to think and act, especially when they must reciprocally co-ordinate, social actors need an intelligible world. Things are the visible counterparts of this intelligibility, they indicate rational categories and hierarchies of values, and in this sense they collectively constitute an important system of communication, alternative and much more powerful than the language of words. Things pin down meanings, and contain

their fluctuations. They inevitably, incessantly convey the messages that they embody with the silent constant force of inertia. Actions, like thoughts and speeches, are contingent signs, destined to vanish if they are not reified. A brilliant idea left out of the minutes of a meeting can be irretrievably lost. Only things last. And it is probable that the bolder the convictions of a social group, the more it will be concerned to reify them, to immortalize them in lasting things, passing them on to succeeding generations through the language of the senses. From this point of view, the physical setting of every collective—the factory of a firm, the landscape of a village, the house of a family—with its formal qualities, i.e. with its sensorially perceptible qualities, is thus the most faithful portrayal of its cultural identity, and its enduring 'monument'.

The worldview that the physical setting offers daily and uninterruptedly to the unconscious perception of members constitutes at the same time indelible testimony about the past and a guide for the future. Thus, it contains an implicit promise of immortality for the collective self, a public declaration that 'something' will survive as a super-individual and impersonal reality. The concern of French presidents to link the construction of grandiose monuments to their time in office unequivocally expresses their desire to contribute and define the form over time of 'Frenchness'. On a smaller scale, the president of an industrial association—whose mandate was only three years—told me that all his predecessors (and he himself was following their example) had been concerned to leave behind some indelible trace of their brief occupation of the post by physically changing the shape of the presidential floor: thus waiting rooms, meeting rooms and offices changed form and aspect, shrinking and growing alternately, every time offering subtly different conceptions of a microcosm of roles and relations. In conclusion: Geniuses keep their own name alive through their works' undying fame. Many people believe their individual selves deserve to survive through artifacts, which actually disappear with their makers, leaving no trace. But most people strive to satisfy the longing for permanence through the persistence of a collective identity—and of the enduring artifacts shaping it—, which they have contributed to construct and idealize during their lifetimes.

I would like to end these thoughts on the way human beings seek consolation for the fact that they must inevitably die by briefly recounting a personal story. My mother died a few years ago, at the age of almost 100 and right to the end she lived alone and was still more or less completely self-sufficient. During one of my last visits I asked her how she felt.

'How do you think I feel? I only think about death,' she replied.

I tried to console her: 'No, mother! You should think about eternal life instead.'

She shrugged: 'You know son, I don't think I'm immortal...'

'Mother, I wasn't referring to the continuation of your earthly life, but the new life waiting for you in another world!'

'My dear son, I must admit I'm beginning to have some doubts about that prospect...'