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My Discomfort is My Culture

Such ambivalence of course extends beyond the home. All civilization everywhere displays a similar tendency, and with respect to everything. The negative side of this ambivalence (known as inconvenience, embarrassment, distress, fear or discomfort) consistently strikes us, whereas the positive side (known as comfort, well-being, agreement, euphoria or a certain kind of happiness) sometimes appears merely to be the inverse of the former, dependent on its retreat. A couple of true or misleading spoken words can be all that is necessary for this withdrawal; a new (and deceptive) assurance can spring from the occasionally formidable confusion they slip into ideas or acts. In an essay devoted to intellectual comfort, Marcel Aymé uses the term *revolution*, whose ambiguity has appealed just as strongly to those on the Left as to those on the Right. The Right rejoiced in 1940 when Marshal Pétain promoted a 'National Revolution' that allowed them to maintain their ideals and relieve their discomfort at being called 'reactionaries', since it meant they could also be considered 'revolutionaries'. Judges condemned Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* for the use of language that no longer shocks us. We have learned that poetry must generate a certain kind of distress or it will fail in its mission

to feign the destruction of language, its signifying function and its consensual values. Ambivalence persists here and there, but a new use of words can cloak interior discomfort.

Perhaps something similar will happen in cyberspace, whose incomplete and illusory satisfactions I have already mentioned. Those who navigate the Internet abandon themselves to the vertigo of a sprawl lacking positions and distances, where everything is simultaneously close and far away, and where mobility extends to sitting in front of a computer. This is another, still poorly defined, way of thinking and travelling across a world, and one that serves the anonymous convenience of absolutely anybody. Who is to say that, were it structured differently, a new assurance could not surge from this uncertain space, where anything goes and everyone turns into a 'man without qualities' (which author Robert Musil understood as someone not frozen in their own character but open to all experiences)? But will we succeed in creating this new well-being without questioning time-honoured ways of thinking and acting, much like art and poetry do, by allowing the rich ambiguity of our essential values to shine through?

Comfort, discomfort and anti-comfort are the safest mooring for these values, which anchor every society across the earth and throughout history. In their own way, they lead to regret or to dreams, desires and projects based on the same principles (of the true, the beautiful, the efficient, the dream), defined by presence, change or absence. Well-being and ill-being are their signposts, which we see in the rituals that every private and public space imposes on its occupants and whose accomplishment simultaneously causes embarrassment

and pleasure. But these 'places' only awaken these feelings through our private acceptance of the values that they embody, through our observation of the *code* that defines us, and only us, as the person for whom the message is destined.

Bruno Taut did not understand the codes of his Japanese house. Forgetting or rejecting them leads to a specific type of discomfort, yet opens the mind to a different kind of pleasure. The Scandinavian under his duvet or the Vietnamese on his bunk would see an exchange of their beds as an aberration. However, instead of just feeling physical discomfort they would take this as an affront to their national and everyday rituals. We only learn to judge comfort and discomfort as such, in relation to each other, and *together*, through culture.

But both comfort and discomfort are felt and delineated as images, and it is time to return to those levers that every civilization imposes on our thoughts and acts. Beyond the fact that images have become the ultimate merchandise, they smoothly guide our existence like a social catechism. More powerful than perception itself, they project people and things as a series of flashes instead of showing them in all their changeable reality, while their recurrence causes them repeatedly to act in the same way, which we can recall at will.

In my previous book *Habiter: rêve, image, projet* (Inhabiting: Dream, Image, Project) I showed the steady manner in which images condition our impressions of well-being, designing how we conceive, project, realize and improve it to our liking. But they have an equal effect on how we perceive discomfort, even when it does not simply reside in the imagination. Obviously, cold and heat, hunger and thirst, a

poorly designed chair or uncomfortable interiors irritate our nerve endings before images take over. A physical malaise initially stems from messages sent from the senses to the brain, since it alone provides us with the consciousness (which we call sensation) of these initial emotional retorts. But our education, which has taught us to interpret our body according to our senses, takes over by awakening memories that are also presented as images.

When thinking of our future home, images guide our thoughts and they do so in a more imperious fashion the closer we get to its accomplishment: the project that will follow construction or purchase. Images reveal the possible states of discomfort in three ways: they function as *icons* of the uncomfortable object – through a relationship of simple resemblance they affirm its existence; they also suggest its *attributes* and *symbols* – a vulgar piece of furniture, the disgust that its possession would impose; a hard bed, the impending insomnia; a doubtful conviction, the aura of bitterness and approbation that will surround it. But beyond these assertions, images also determine the norms on which our judgements are based: their ever-similar return and their omnipresence remind us that what is anathema to us is not so for everybody. Images that emanate from a common culture carry some truth, and sometimes also legal obligations that it would be unreasonable to refuse. As such, they turn us into the accomplices of the precipitous staircase or the hard bed. They make the potentially avoidable discomfort seem tolerable, economical and practical and they turn something unsuitable, authorized by practices, norms and our means, into something inevitable and often desirable.

Thus lavishing appearance, components and rules on discomfort (and so stirring us to submission while justifying it), images accentuate it by eliminating our initial capacity to decide in the name of the codes by which we interpret them. When a magazine asserts that Louis XVI, the rustic, the romantic, the Japanese or Scandinavian style is the one that best suits me, the formidable authority of my entire culture weighs on my judgement and choice. The most venerable monuments, the most eminent professors or the least sophisticated weekly magazines that promote deliberate reversals of discomfort also limit the realm in which I can even conceive of it, as well as any personal effort on my part to reduce it. My pleasure will result less from a private need finally satisfied than from my subjection to norms predetermined by my education and culture. Discomfort is, first and foremost, heretical.

Because codes imbue images with an authority that submerges our judgement and taste, and that confirms their schematic character and steadiness, they command our decisions. Here again, the false well-being of conformity and consensus mask an inherent moral servitude. It is on their level that the recovery of discomfort operates. Each object of well-being has a meaning established by its uses, which becomes the orthodox way of perceiving it. Forgetting or negation only engenders the discomfort that has been defined for us, or at the very least an unorthodox use: a rug can cover furniture, decorate a wall, serve as a curtain or bedcover – only someone who knows the code walks on it and finds the sensation pleasing. Someone else might consider the chair I relax in to be an instrument of torture, or perhaps a mirror holder or a drying

rack. Similarly, the curtain with which I conceal a corner of my room could be a tablecloth, rug or wall hanging.

Codes – of beauty and ugliness, misery and luxury, good and evil – are formed and subsist by and for social categories that maintain and control authority, via money and taste, rather than universal consent. In every society, this perversion of the real is expressed in the most profound and secret variety of discomfort, which is also the one we most tolerate, having been with us since our first day (along with the rest of our culture). At home, at school, in conversations and reading, we learned to see a *legitimate certainty* in it because it was founded on silence, custom and the law. Not the intimate and profound truth of the instinct and the body – which Nietzsche repeatedly called our ‘great reason’ – but still another, which all societies need for their self-definition, and to enable each individual to exist.

This also applies to me, in the world and in the home where these thoughts arose and where they now reach their conclusion. Doesn’t this shelter act as the microcosm and metaphor for the human space that surrounds me, the network of ideas in which my thinking is activated from the sum of acts my energy is devoted to? Sitting beneath the roof of this home, I began to establish myself on the earth. Every room and every stage of my life dictates a distinct series of gestures, each one a way of being: labour, love, pleasure, travel, care for the body and soul. But the comfort and discomfort specified by my culture always accompany this common separation of my home and my existence; only the ‘truth’ of their codes defines my pleasures and privations.

Here I am still, on this cold, damp staircase that I did not design or build, but that initially stirred in me the idea of discomfort. My ancestors have charged the anonymity of the built thing with ‘meaning’ that makes it truly my own. Its handrail feels soft to my touch and its angles knowingly await my footsteps, but its inconvenience – which accompanies these joys and causes superficial hostility in me – has outlived generations, to the extent that it reveals the dual visage of my past. Its awkward but harmonious curve, still maintained by artisans from this province, reveals the thousands of compromises in which art and science endeavour to keep me; that is, my present. And I can no longer climb up or descend these stairs without recalling the (still unfulfilled) desire and the (never realized) project to make them more manageable, thus directing me towards the future.

So, the ordinary act of *inhabiting* the home with my body, and the world of the spirit beyond its walls, indicates that well-being and its absence are inseparable and timeless; they are irreducibly and ambivalently frozen in the ‘form’ of my civilization. But my taste for living and my quest for happiness stem from this familiar ambivalence. A faithful life companion, it exhibits only two sides – joy and pain, pleasure and subjection – and partakes in their common origin throughout society. My discomfort is my culture.

