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► **To cite this version:**

Sandra Lorenzi. Fragile entities at work in ambiances. Understanding ambiances from the cultures and practices of the invisible. Proceedings of the 4th International Congress on Ambiances, Alloaesthesia: Senses, Inventions, Worlds, Réseau International Ambiances, Dec 2020, e-conference, France. pp. 296-300, 10.48537/hal-03220313 . hal-03220313

HAL Id: hal-03220313

<https://hal.science/hal-03220313>

Submitted on 14 May 2021

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Fragile entities at work in ambiances

Understanding ambiances from the cultures and practices of the invisible

Sandra LORENZI¹

Abstract. Through her investigation of fragile entities, philosopher of science Vinciane Despret sheds new light on our relationship to the deceased. Through a relation of obligations, the dead put the living to work. The living take care of their deceased by choosing to respond to the call. Practices of memory modify, densify and colour our understanding of our living environment and create specific ambiances. Focused on the singular link of a Georgian family with their deceased, Nino Kirtadze's film, *Tell my friends that I'm dead*, enlightens the full scope of these fragile entities at work on the existing. Through this documentary, we identify the invisible chains that generate ambiances above ground and outside time. Furthermore, transgenerational psychoanalyst Christine Ulivucci conducted critical analysis showing that ambiance memories, sensitive impressions are rooted in our personal history. The encounter with familiar places or objects activates reminiscence and produces what we call: fragile ambiances.

Keywords. *Fragile Entities, Memory, Dead, House, Cult of the Dead, Transgenerational Psychoanalysis, Fragile Ambiances*

In Nino Kirtadze's film *Tell my friends that I'm dead*, (2004), a Georgian family is busy preparing the funeral of Tsotné, the clan father. In this particular region of Georgia, the living does not separate from the dead. They continue to take part in daily life: they are consulted for advice as the living dialogue with them. It is just as well known that after someone dies, the living will continue to take care of the dead. Before receiving his homage, Tsotné has to leave his hospital room to return home. His soul must find its way home too. The manoeuvre is perilous, she could get lost along the way. To guide her through the city, the family ties a thread to the hospital bed, and carefully unwinds the reel: "Come Tsotné. Sit with us in the car, don't be afraid." The car starts off, really slowly, so that the wire doesn't break. His wife and daughters are waiting for him at home. "There, you're home now."

Long relegated to the rank of folklore and superstition, the practices and cultures of the invisible return in force in the customs we know today as freed from the influences of the philosophical and progressive categories of right and wrong. To the question "does it really exist?" and to the dual perspective of "either it exists or it doesn't," philosopher Vinciane Despret favours the average path taken by the Greeks allowing correlation. According to her investigation of *fragile entities*², Despret highlight the fact that the dead continue to make the living do things. They put them to work. By answering their call, the living continues to make things through them. They hold themselves together by the milieu and by the circles in which they live. From one end to the other, the thread is held together as is the assurance that the life of the deceased will live on. An ecological relationship between the dead and the living is at work.

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2. Vinciane Despret, about "Entités fragiles", public intervention at Beaux-Arts de Marseille, 15/01/2020.

From our relationships to *fragile entities* and the resulting practices and cultures of the invisible, we are witnessing a lasting transformation in our understanding of reality. These uses modify, densify and colour our living environments in an unprecedented way. In the midst of environments, ambiances are re-generated through obligations, developed outside of our “reasonable reasons.” The dead man summons me, I answer his invitation. A subtle conversation is woven between the visible and the invisible, the known and the unknown. The point here is to question in what way these practices participate in the ambiances that are being created. How can we distinguish and understand an ambiance shaped by our relationship to the invisible?

Sometimes muffled, emphatic or silent, these ambiances are held together by a thread, stretched not only between specific places, but between beings in search of the existing. We experience them long after the moments dedicated to the cults of the dead and even outside the physical or psychic spaces in which we thought they were contained. Their presence is diffused through the most protean vector of nature and human culture: memory.

If there is a culture where the memory of the dead is conjugated in the present tense, we will find it among the people of the journey, especially in the Manouche community. In his book *Nous, on en parle pas. Les vivants et les morts chez les Manouches*, ethnologist Patrick Williams studies the relationship between the Manouches and their deceased: “In the months (but it can be years - the closer you are to the deceased, the longer it lasts) following the death, the “relatives” stop mentioning the name of the deceased and do not evoke his memory, “we don’t talk about our deceased” [...] Addressing a dead person as we do a living person would be like using a mullo object without precaution. All these prescriptions are always presented and explained in terms of respect.”³

In contrast to the Georgian family, which exhorts in chorus the name of the deceased, here silence is required and silence is transmitted as a mark of respect. From then on, a different practice is at work that will take the same form as that of travelers on byroads: commemoration by subtraction.

“Whether they remain in use or are taken out of circulation, all objects that have belonged to a dead person and that have been preserved become ‘mulle’, ‘mullo’ (dead objects, objects of a dead person, dead is dead). [...] However, outside this final destination, nothing in the course of daily life distinguishes mulle objects from ordinary objects. They are, without any distinctive sign, mixed with others. [...] The silence surrounding mulle objects is only one aspect of the silence surrounding the dead.”⁴

3. Williams Patrick, *Nous, on en parle pas. Les vivants et les morts chez les Manouches*, in *Ethnologie de la France*, n°13, Éd. de la maison des sciences de l’homme, 1993, pp. 8-9: “Dans les mois (mais ça peut-être des années - plus on est “proche”, plus ça dure longtemps) qui suivent le décès, “les proches” cessent de prononcer le nom du défunt et n’évoquent pas son souvenir, “nos défunts, on n’en parle pas”[...] S’adresser à un mort comme on s’adresse à un vivant, ce serait se servir sans précaution d’un objet mullo. Toutes ces prescriptions sont toujours présentées et expliquées en termes de respect.” (translation SL)

4. *ibid.* pages 6 and 7: “Qu’ils restent en usage ou qu’ils soient retirés de la circulation, tous les objets ayant appartenu à un mort et conservés deviennent “mulle”, “mullo”(des objets morts, objets d’un mort, des morts, c’est mort).[...] Cependant, hors de cette destination finale, rien ne vient distinguer, dans le cours de la vie quotidienne, les objets mulle des objets ordinaires. Ils sont, sans signe distinctif, mêlés aux autres. [...] Ce silence qui entoure les objets mulle n’est qu’un aspect du silence qui entoure les morts.” (translation SL)

To remove a deceased person's possessions, from his name to his objects and places of life is to ensure that no one can disrespect him and take the risk of disturbing him in death. Presence through absence, silent remembrance over permanent prayer, are favoured : "There is indeed a Gypsy memory, but it is a memory that does not make speeches, a memory that does not aim at exploring the past and accumulating knowledge."⁵

Mullo incarnation takes place in the daily life environment. The couch in the living room on which no one sits - because the deceased cousin had a similar couch⁶ - the dog who sleeps under the caravan mixed in with the other dogs...The *mullo* dog, the *mullo* couch stand off-camera to cast a different light on reality. They no longer belong to the conventional time that punctuates the unfolding of a day. In this particular space-time, subordinate to the attention of those who know and remember, their use and presence is cancelled. There is a correlation between living beings, objects, places and things. We understand them as other types of *fragile entities*, fragile because they are dependent on a lively and careful memory that, while avoiding names, grants an inextinguishable respect to its dead. Sown in houses, caravans, gravel yards, they connect to our capacities of reminiscence which become, both through conscious (in the case of the *mullo*) and unconscious work, a trigger of ambiances. In this sense, could we speak of *fragile ambiances*, or of memories of ambiances? How do these ambiances found our relationship to reality?

Like the needle of a compass oscillating with the movement of our body, our feelings and imagination are directed by the emergence of reminiscences at the discovery or rediscovery of familiar context. A subjective and singular path is also in motion, oscillating between the reality of the impression and the vagueness of its attachment.

"Sometimes it is not real place that reappears, it is rather a memory of atmosphere and spatial configuration that is transmitted. We find ourselves in the same style of house, village, country as a distant ancestor."⁷

The analysis of the transgenerational psychoanalyst Christine Ulivucci on the psychogenealogy of living places enlightens us on this point : we must not neglect "*les transmissions inconscientes d'ambiance et de configuration sur plusieurs générations*."⁸ [...] *Certains lieux dégagent une mémoire de vécu qui nous rend familiers et nous relie à un épisode de l'histoire de nos ancêtres*."⁹ Les lieux nous font signe, tout comme les meubles et les objets. "The unconscious transmission of ambiance and configuration over several generations. [...] Certain places give off a memory of life that makes them familiar to us and connects us to an episode in the history of our ancestors." Places beckon to us, just like furniture and objects. "Like threads running through the generations, furniture and objects act as witnesses and passers. [...]"

5. *ibid.* page 14: "Il existe bien une mémoire manouche mais c'est une mémoire qui ne fait pas de discours, une mémoire qui ne vise pas à l'exploration du passé et à l'accumulation de connaissances." (translation SL)

6. Here a "mullo" transfer takes place from one object to another. I notice that this story concerns another community of travellers.

7. Ulivucci Christine, "Psychogénéalogie des lieux de vie, ces lieux qui nous habitent", éditions Payot & Rivages, Paris 2008, page 22

"Parfois ce n'est pas le lieu réel qui réapparaît, c'est plutôt une mémoire d'ambiance et de configuration spatiale qui se transmet. On se retrouve ainsi dans les mêmes styles de maison, de village, le même pays qu'un ancêtre éloigné." (translation SL)

8. *ibid.* page 22.

9. *ibid.* page 23.

Objects live, pass from hand to hand, disappear, reappear, remain in our memories and remind us of people and places. [...] Sometimes an object, or even the memory of an object, is enough to remind us of a person, a house.”¹⁰

These memories of ambiances are spread through our living places and our habits and customs. They become sensitive ambiances expressing themselves through the strata of our present. We sometimes experience them as a vague impression when the memory is not yet conscious. We also welcome them with joy when they arouse the memory of a happy moment. Whether they are linked to the cult of the dead, or to a lighter episode in the life of an ancestor, they put us to work on memory. And it is because we are beings of memory that they exist for us. Just as correlation underpins the relationship between *fragile entities* and the living, so correlation underpins the relationship between *fragile ambiances* and memory.

In the light of these studies, we can name *fragile ambiances*, ambiances that put us to work on the existing through the vector of memory. The recognition of this fragility is not a weakness. It is up to us to feel it as a living and active force within ourselves. It is up to us to fan it in consciousness like an ancestral and comforting fire: the hearth of our home, where these ghosts and *mullo* are also the multiple expressions of our being.



Figure 1. Nino Kirtadze, “Tell my friends that I’m dead,” 2004

10. *ibid.* page 222: “Comme des fils conducteurs à travers les générations, les meubles et les objets font office de témoins et de passeurs. [...] Les objets vivent, passent de main en main, disparaissent, réapparaissent, restent dans les mémoires et nous rappellent des personnes et des lieux de vie. [...] Parfois il suffit d’un objet, voire du souvenir d’un objet, pour se remémorer une personne, une maison.” (translation SL)



Figure 2. Elodie Fradet, “Repérage pour La ptit’ fradette”, 2020

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