

OF THE MANY SECRET SOCIETIES THAT PASS THROUGH US

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Four images

In the first image we see an American prison, according to the caption, whose walls have been breached. A prisoner sits alone on the edge of what is no longer a jail. In front of him we can see a countryside landscape. But the prisoner does not seem to want to leave.

In the second image we see an ape, perhaps an orangutan, its massive dark body squeezed into a ballerina's dress with thin white braces and a finely pleated tutu.

In the third image we see a group of men covered in white sheets, sort of ritual cloaks culminating in a pointed hood. They look like scarecrows. The ghostly air that surrounds them is confirmed as soon as we take a closer look. Each hood vaguely resembles a skull. Two large black holes pierce the white cloth covering their faces.

The fourth and last image shows a big fish about to swallow a smaller one.

The four figures accompany a short article by Georges Bataille, 'Espace', published in 1930 in a journal named *Documents*,¹ which Bataille founded and directed for a couple of years.

Face and skull

The first and last images photograph a kind of suspension point in the relationship between inside and outside. In one case, the inside is about to come out, as the prison wall has collapsed. In the other case, the outside is about to be swallowed in the bowels of the bigger fish. In both cases we feel all the precariousness of the distinction. We feel the imminence of its overthrow, or at least its impending possibility. But even in this case the catastrophe has not yet happened.

¹ Bataille, G. (1930). Espace *Documents* 1: 41-44, reprint Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1991.

The second and third images, on the other hand, show a fully realised subversion of inside and outside. The monkey's body, its fur, its large and vaguely suffering limbs are forced into a tiny and absurd dance costume. In the other case, the skull, which is normally veiled by the face, the surface of the skin, the thickness of the muscles, the play of their expressiveness, is now exploded, brought violently to the surface. The framework of life has re-emerged, towering over life with its dazzling hardness. It is not only the relationship between inside and outside that is subverted. But also the relationship between bone and flesh, between the dead and the living, between what will survive to life, and life that is still in progress, and yet is already shown as a residue, as a skeleton, perhaps as a spectre.

Suspension points

So we think back to the fourth picture, the two fishes. The big fish is about to eat the little one. Here again we feel that the relationship between inside and outside is irreducible to a pure spatial relationship. It is not a simple geometric pattern. It is first and foremost a relationship of forces. It is a tension between life forms or aspects of life. The active and the passive. Who eats and who is eaten. Who is destined to live and who is destined to die. Who is destined to become matter for the life of others, and who is a form about to swallow, metabolise, subjugate the life of others, imposing his own imprint on it.

Even the ape, constrained in his absurd tutu, declines the theme of the inside and the outside well beyond geometry. We see that the game of the inside and the outside is always a surface, the ripple of an underlying movement. It hides or reveals an unexpected thickness, and that thickness is made up of gestures, tensions between heterogeneous materials, struggles between things and lives that press on each other, and sometimes enter each other. Things and lives that break down and recompose, leaving a new order on the ground, a new spatial ripple, a new disposition of the inside and the outside.

The ape, for example, seems to have been photographed in a circus. It has that disconsolate air we see in the eyes of every animal forced to put on a show for our supposed amusement. It almost seems to surrender to the idea that a sort of battle between heterogeneous elements has been won by the absurd and very fragile tutu, and its body is the loser of that battle. Is it the inanimate that, once again, has won over the animate? But even in this case the scene remains suspended. The ending is unknown. Those thin white braces are subjected to a palpable tension. What they force inside could at any moment tear them off, and return to the outside.

Space is ‘*voyou*’

Rather than actual reversals of inside and outside, these images show approximations, gradual approaches to a breaking point, balances that are at a critical threshold. Perhaps they show, more generally, that every articulation of inside and outside is a game, an unstable equilibrium, a stasis condition subject to revisions. By the way, in Greek *stasis* does not mean stasis, one of its meanings is internal war, civil war.

That ‘space is *voyou*’, (lvi, 41) as Bataille rather cryptically observes at one point in his article, which, it must be said, never directly interacts with the images we have just recalled, perhaps means this, space is not a neat thing, space is not that ordered thing, or that thing capable of putting order, that transcendental thing on which the order of every empirical thing depends, which philosophers say it is. Kant seems to be the secret target, never even mentioned, of these two incandescent pages. Bataille has the air of saying that space is certainly not a form a priori. If anything, it is a rogue, a canaille, as we could say in French, a pack of barking dogs. They run disorderly, they step on each other, they fight with each other. Sometimes they tear each other to pieces. And kill each other.

We call space the somewhat Apollonian and somewhat superficial picture of this subterranean fight. Just below the surface, space has the features of Dionysus, god of laceration, drunkenness and sex. God of bodies quivering in the dance and god of the dance that borders at every instant on sex and fight. Space has something animal about it, and something sexual. What we call the inside and the outside are the unaware and precarious children of this animal and sexual prehistory.

The Groupist

There is a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, written in collaboration with Adolfo Bioy Casares, entitled ‘*El Gremialista*’, ‘The Groupist’, or, in the English translation, ‘The Brotherhood Movement’ (Borges and Casares 1982).

The protagonist of the story is called the Groupist because he is a sort of philosopher who is obsessed with the apparently banal yet enigmatic problem of how groups, clusterings of people, associations of individuals, and in general human societies take shape. Around what elements is created that more or less lasting coalescence, which unites a certain number of

people into a certain more or less stable whole? That's the question which obsesses the Groupist.

The hypothesis of the Groupist - who, of course, as happens in Borges's stories, was not directly encountered by the narrator, his esoteric doctrine arrived along the most indirect and tortuous ways to the ears of those who report it - is a radically Bataillean hypothesis. It is a radically Bataillean hypothesis, in the sense that it continues Bataille's gesture, but with a radicality of which Bataille, the Hegelian Bataille, does not seem to have had any inkling. I say the Hegelian Bataille, because he is clearly a Hegelian in the pages we have just read as in so many others. He does not doubt for a moment that space is '*voyou*' because it is a dialectics between an inside and an outside. And he does not doubt for a moment that in order to subvert the old, academic philosophy of space, it is enough to show that the inside always looms over the outside, or that 'the' outside is always on the verge of entering the inside.

Lighting a match

Borges and Bioy Casares, we might simply say, don't stage anything like a dialectic of inside and outside. They are too baroque to be Hegelian. Mankind, the Groupist explains, is made up of an infinite number of groups, societies, associations. They are mostly secret societies, he says.

He doesn't add anything to this, but it is quite clear that these societies are secret not for the others, for those who don't know of their existence, for those who have not been admitted. They are not secret for the outside, in one word. They are secret for their own inside, for their members. Their members do not know they are members. They ignore the moment they find themselves affiliated to them. They ignore the moment they are expelled.

Borges and Bioy Casares' bizarre hypothesis takes shape along the way. It even becomes quite clear when we understand what kind of groups and associations the Groupist is talking about. Some groups are more durable, he says. For example, the one made up of individuals who bear a Catalan name, or a name that begins with a certain letter. For example, G. Others are more transitory. For example, the group that brings together all those who at this moment, in Brazil or Africa, smell the flower of a jasmine.

These groups partially overlap with other groups, or they branch out, then merge, then split again. Among those who are affected by coughing, some are also wearing slippers. The two

groups merge, at least briefly. They merge as long as the cough lasts or until the slippers give way to shoes. Among those who are stricken by the cough, others flee away on bicycles for who knows what mischief. The smallest gesture, the group leader concludes, such as lighting or extinguishing a match, tears us away from one group and instantly transports us to another.

Tactical nature of spatial forms

The universe of the groupist brings Bataille's intuition to vertigo. Every articulation of inside and outside is a momentary game. Every articulation of space according to a certain rib that divides an inside and an outside is a momentary effect, it has a purely tactical value. Instead of one space made up of two regions, perhaps on the verge of overturning one into the other, we see a dissemination of passages, a space made up of tunnels, sudden bridges, momentary doors, sudden voids or impenetrable walls.

But that's not all. We are always inside many spaces simultaneously, and we are simultaneously inscribed in as many outside spaces. The scheme within which we could map this changing and in fact unexplorable groupism is a scheme of proliferation, that is, it is not a scheme, or it is not *one* scheme. It does not envisage a pair of opposites, the inside and the outside, nor a reversal of the inside into the outside or of the outside into the inside. It envisages an infinity of effects of constellation. Each constellation coincides with a certain series of interiors with respect to a certain series of exteriors. And each of those interiors may well be, at the same time, the exterior of one or many or infinite other interiors.

What can be constructed, then, is not a theory of space, not even in the Bataillean form of a critical theory, a theory that denounces an Apollonian idea of space and replaces it with an idea of space that we might call Dionysian, or deconstructive. What we can construct is rather a practice of montage, an entirely tactic *savoir faire* that allows to grip with certain effects of interiority and exteriority, a radically situationist manipulation of this multiple entrances into certain spaces and multiple defections from certain other spaces. Short durations of each montage, short combinations of incoming and outgoing movements, sometimes sudden sedimentations. Art of the creation of certain groups of inside-outside effects. Art of couplings among certain series of constellations. Art of eroding or erasing other series. All this, we might say, does not really speak against Kant. It merely multiplies the Kantian device, it stratifies it, it makes it proliferate. That all space is a spatialisation effect, that all space is ultimately a tactical effect of an illocalizable movement, this is after all a quite literal way of exposing his notion of space as a priori form. The Groupist vision is Kant's theory, in practice.

The trait, the event, the door

There is a kind of secret plot underlying the Groupist bizarre list of examples. The first example is based on names. It is the example of the most stable group. Catalan names, names starting with a certain letter. Membership in that group lasts a lifetime, we could say. But it would be easy to erode this apparent stability, as Borges has done so many times in so many of his stories on similar subjects. Names that begin with a certain letter, but have a certain letter in the second position. Names that begin with a certain letter, but whose bearer is now wearing slippers. Unexpected migrations begin. People come in, people go out. At each complication of the criterion, a rather contradictory flock of people coming and going.

At the other extreme, that of maximum instability, we have the example of the match. It is an example based on a gesture. But even this could be broken down into smaller and smaller atoms. How do I light the match? By rubbing it from right to left, or from left to right? At the lower limit of the series, we could identify, with what in mathematics would be called a passage to the limit, the minimum atom of the construction of a certain spatial montage, the simplest unit through which a more or less stable belonging is constructed, the irreducible element that sustains the briefest identification. Borges and Bioy Casares use a very precise word to indicate this minimal atom, which in truth we should not think of as an object around which people gather, or with respect to which one finds oneself excluded. They call it a trait.

We could think of this trait as an event, as something that happens but which has no objective consistency, no concreteness of thing. Or as a threshold, a door through which we pass, without being, before passing under its arch, the same as we will be after having passed it. On the other hand, let us not forget that while we cross one door, we simultaneously cross many others, and that each one has the same metamorphic effect. It makes us become what we will have been, once we set foot in the space beyond that threshold, that is to say, in the internal space of that identification.

In this sense, it is never I who chooses a certain trait or who encounters a certain event or who crosses a certain threshold. It is always the trait that pierces me. It is always the event that awaits me. It is always the threshold that crosses me, and so many others with me. In other words, it is the groups that pass through me. To be precise, those groups are never groups of individuals, but groups of traits or events or gestures or affects. More precisely, it is always single traits, single gestures, single affects, that pass through me and others like me. If they

seem to form groups, for example the group of all the gestures of lighting a match, for example all the hasty escapes on a bicycle, it is only because we are counting the individuals within which those traits or gestures or events or affects take place. But the trait, the event, the gesture, the affect, is each time unique and impersonal, absolutely singular and completely faceless.

Empty but crowded associations

A theory and practice of traits requires an extension that Borges and Bioy Casares do not enunciate. Perhaps they do not enunciate it for simple reasons of brevity. Their short story is marked by a dazzling intensity. All the material of the discourse burns in less than five pages.

One consequence is that every event, even the most empty and colourless, is a trait and functions as a trait. That is to say, it functions as the small door through which shaky identifications are produced, shy belongings are drawn. Or perhaps identifications which are thought to be less labile, or belongings which are indelible. But the fact is that these identifications are all labile and are all indelible, if we consider them in their measure, in their more or less brief duration, in their more or less conspicuous colouring. They are all indestructible, because while they last they are absolute, and because every duration is an absolute.

Even to say that their duration is more or less brief is an imprecise way of understanding our question. While a certain constellation is in existence, it has no exterior in relation to which it could be judged short or weak, durable or powerful. It has no exterior, because the exterior it certainly has is the effect of a momentary coupling with a certain interior and the exact reverse of that interior. It is an internal exterior. A further space, from which to judge its breadth, is missing. Another time against which to judge its curation is simply unavailable. Etymologically, absolute means free from all relationships. The trait is absolute, but this does not mean strong, it means closed on its tacticism. It does not mean all-encompassing, but so singular as to be incomprehensible by any outside, by any otherness.

The other consequence is that these unstable but absolute and fibrillar identifications are absolutely indifferent to any other identification we could assume as an external point of view. There is no external point of view, as we have said. So, if every trait is an absolute, in its humble measure and in its solitary consistency, breathing makes me join the group of all those who are breathing. Human beings, but also animals. Other mammals, but not only. Depending on

how I define the act of breathing, perhaps even fishes, reptiles, bacteria. A whole system of momentary kinship, a whole web of elective affinities is drawn at each event, in the direction of not only humans, not only animals, not only living beings. These secret societies, being secret, are most inclusive, and always absolutely crowded and absolutely empty.

On the criterion of heterogeneity

Absolute is the threshold through which the subjects, the things of the world, the materials of the universe, pass, receiving a sort of imprint that tactically belongs to them, as long as they do not pass through other traits, which is always on the verge of happening, or is always already happening.

So it does not matter the consistency of each grouping, it does not matter the solidity of this or that identification, it does not matter the internal breadth of this or that space within which we find ourselves. They are all absolutes, they are all incomparable. They are all very big and therefore very small. Or if you prefer, very small and therefore very big. What matters, if anything, is the quantity of connections that a certain trait produces with other traits, designing its momentary constellation, its momentary distribution of internal and external domains, its inside and its internal outside.

This internal heterogeneity alone, is the criterion, not of the truth or legitimacy or consistency of that distribution, but of the pleasure or power that is not ours but that can nevertheless resonate in us, of the quantity of life that is not ours but that we can feel in ourselves, and as ourselves.

References

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