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Burning togetherness.

Par André Ourednik. Le 16 juillet 2007

"…but he takes various shapes, just as fire, when it is mingled with different incenses, is named according to the savour of each."[1]

How can we consider ourselves as being together? How do we meet? We, moving and becoming individuals.

If our existential structure – as far as Heidegger is concerned – is that of the *Dasein*, our being-together-in-the-world is both *In-der-Welt-sein* and *Mitsein*, phenomena closely embedded in *spatiality* — the *Umhafte der Umwelt* [1927, 101].

Let us start here. Let us conserve space and some distance but let us divide being-together-in-the-world into being-together-in-space and being-together-as-space:

in-space: where space is nothing less (but nothing more, yet) then the only category in which A and not-A coexist in ontological peace.

as-space: where I am, as *ex-isting* to otherness, as being out there, necessarily outside of myself, the other of my other, always something else, always one step behind each present situation of being *thrown into* a world of immediate response demand to existential choices.

Now the question: is "as-space" its own category' As-near, as-distant, the spatial here and there includes only those at-hand (*zuhanden*) and it appears, thus, that it is I, to myself, that am the magnetic centre of any togetherness. However complex the actual structure of the "real ontological subject"[2], being-together-as-space is nothing but an aspect of my self, the all-encompassing *Dasein*. Or is it'

Well, though it is impossible to "be human without being *a* human" [Husserl 1936], and though "the world is always already the one that I share with others"[3], being oneself might not, in fact, be enough for togetherness to emerge. Besides others and me, there is a world of words and places we

are thrown into. And it is not I or we, but these words and these places that allow us to say “we” and “I”, here, now, before we carry them along in our unstoppable becoming (*Werden*). “Man is a semiotic animal, a species whose individuals are kept together and apart by their use of signs” [Olsson 1994].

Being-together-as-space is thus being-together-in-*place*: the one in which we meet, the one we can name, whose contours we might dispute but whose existence is agreed on ? common place. We are together in our neighbourhoods, in our cities, in our space too, as far as we possess an image thereof, i.e., as far as we have made it to a place. The *topos* of the mapped space is the deictic “where” we meet[4]. Çatal Hüyük becomes a city the day a fresco of itself is engraved in stone [*cf.* Farinelli 2003, 152]. The *topos* of the discourse is the topic we have agreed to discuss. In both cases, we know of our being-together.

But places are not rocks in the flow of time. They come into being, by *topomorphosis*[5], as Angelo Turco names the “process through which a cluster of social values not only condensates in a place but, by taking the aspect of that place, becomes that place.”[6] At the same time, “much bitter dying must there be in your life, ye creators”[7] of social values. *Topolysis*[8] is an expectable side-effect of the creation of any new place.

Thus, having places for its containers, our togetherness never resides on solid ground and one might as well call it liquid [*cf.* Baumann 2000]. The rest could be considered as a mere question of viscosity. Jericho has lasted ever since the Mesolithic (9’000BC), Nabatieh camp destroyed within two decades. Swiss Expo’02 biodegraded after just one year.

Yet it would be hard to attest to any acceleration of the topomorphosis-topolysis cycle along the History of mankind, for we do not have any actual hold on places: they are often renamed, rebuild, sometimes even displaced[9].

Two distinct aspects of *our* life might be claimed, nevertheless.

Firstly, there is the unquestionable acceleration of our transportation means. Potentially ? and often very effectively ? our contemporary spatial practice consists of an incredible flow of human bodies through our most important places. As we have been able to show, more than 30% of time spent in city-centres is so by others than those we call their “residents”. Like the Great Red Spot on Jupiter, our places can more than ever be conceived of as pure self-identical forms, as conceptual centres of a never-halting movement of individual particles of human matter. More than ever, the self-identity of our places does not rely on any material substrate but on the narrative conceptualization *we* provide *them* with.

Secondly, there is our technological capacity to build large-scale temporary places: theme-parks, national expositions, open-air-concerts. This month’s site is one of these.

The site’s name is “Burning Man”. Its place is Black Rock City, a “temporary city” in Black rock Desert, Nevada, that ? at least in its physicality ? emerges and decays at every end of September since 1986. Its 2006 edition counts 39’000 inhabitants. It takes its name from the ritual of burning a large wooden sculpture of a human on its sixth and last day.

As described by its cofounder, Larry Harvey, Burning Man is “a project dedicated to discovering those optimal forms of community which will produce human culture in the conditions of our post-modern mass society” [Harvey 1997]. “It is, like cyberspace, a frontier in which individuals can exercise remarkable freedoms. Our desert world and the blank expanse of its playa form a decontextualized arena of action [where] it is possible to reinvent oneself and one’s world aided only by a few modest props and an active imagination.” The direct link with cyber-reality is achieved, among others, by burningman.com, the site of the place, that allows anyone to be there without being there, to share or to discuss its claimed values, i.e., to participate to the constitution of togetherness having the place and concept of “Burning Man” for its centre. The web-site, the place, as much as the sculpture of “Burning Man himself” constitute a “centre of gravity, a powerful axis in time and space [that] human beings require […] in order to found a cultural sphere” [Harvey 1997].

A simple cyber-contemplation of this axis will not do of course ? at least in Harvey’s sense ? as “real community can only be attained through the experience of certain primal unities in the physical world.” Burning Man attendees, after payment of 195USD to 280USD (depending on the ticket acquisition date), are “encouraged to find a way to help make the theme come alive, whether it is through a large-scale art installation, a theme camp, gifts brought to be given to other individuals, costumes, or any other medium that one comes up with” [“What is Burning Man”].

Both the distraction character of the event (supported by the fact that it is paid for), as well as its outside-of-everyday-life character (supported by the fact that Black Rock City does not physically last) contribute to intensify the togetherness provided by the place. “Creative social intercourse” [Durkheim 1983], the paradigmatic attribute of urbaneness, is thus achieved in a temporary city, not despite, but because of its temporality.

The example whereof Burning Man is, is certainly more exemplary than the place itself. Judged more severely, especially in consideration of most photos posted by event-goers on the internet, the story of Black Rock City tells nothing more than amusing anecdotes in the self-aestheticising lives of nudist IT-consultants and DINK-revolutionaries. There are aspects of Burning Man that could certainly match Houellebecq’s cruel description of the “*Lieu du Changement*”[10].

One should not disdain the imaginative power of Burning Man, nevertheless, and by this I mean especially the very sign and symbol that this place/event has chosen for itself: the burning self.

Fire, in effect, is the paradigmatic figure of self-identity in radical change, as well as the clearest expression of will aimed at nothing but the total discharge of its own self in the temporality of its action. This is not Thales’ liquid cosmos and certainly not Baumann’s liquid society either. Liquidity happens despite itself. The liquid does not discern objects and paths: there is something sub-discerning, something hypo-critical about the “meeting of strangers” in Baumann’s places of “unproblematic togetherness”, where being-together is “given well before any effort to make it be has started” [2000, 100]. Much more, there is something hyper-critical in the confluence of desire incorporated by a temporary city, like in the one-night stand of two people that have secretly wanted each other for years. In the burning event of togetherness, others seek others, to consume them in some way, perhaps, but certainly to interact with them[11]. The meeting of strangers, in the case of a place/event like Burning Man is nothing like an event without a past [Baumann 2000, 95]

as it is always preceded by a past of drives and urges. The social role of a temporally society, like that of Black Rock, is the self-annihilating confluence of these urges. Its kind of togetherness is a little death, a ? sometimes all too easy ? social orgasm. But Houellebecq is both right and wrong with respect to that fact: events like the one described here are very much perspired by sexuality, indeed, but there is more to sex itself than anatomical obscenity. Be it in a metaphorical or in a concrete physical sense, the sexual form should rather be understood as one of the major figures of human togetherness on diverse social scales.

A more important point, though, has to be made about the convergence of place and event, here. While postmodern liquidity critique, facing event-like togetherness, *asks* for place, togetherness as phenomena like Burning Man *finds* its place in the event. It turns the event to a place, annihilating their distinction. Now, which posture is of greater contribution to our being-together?

In a society of mobile and constantly evolving individuals, advocates of the permanence of places are not the ones who will provide us with a conceptual foundation of togetherness. There is something profoundly dissociative and xenophobic about the nostalgic claim for perpetuity, for the unchanging once-and-for all identities of continents, nations, communes… It is for the sake of our society, that we have to overcome this all too pusillanimous desire for ontological cosiness. The world of words and places that we are thrown into is a world of transitional objects: always necessary, but only useful in their impermanence. The signs and places of our togetherness need to be constantly re-evaluated, redrawn, remapped, over and over. We must be careful not to lose our story[12] in the game, but to embrace the transitoriness of our places might be a more efficient way of conserving togetherness in our plural and evolving society. Thus, if we look away from its tendentious hipness, there is an appealing project in Burning Man's claim to reverse the disintegration process of our society by the very tools of communication and unceasing movement that our technology has developed. [*cf.* Harvey 1997].

Photo: André Ourednik, *Lausanne*, 2007.

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rue, 90-91, 3-4/1997, Paris, L'Harmattan, pp. 231-249.

Note

1 [You need a Unicode enabled browser in order to see the original Greek text thereafter:] « ? ???? ????? ???????, ?????? ?????, ??????? ??????, ????? ????? (???????? ??????? ????? ? ????), ?????????? ?? ??????? (???), ?????? ??????? ???????? ????????? ???? ?????? ??????? » : « God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and hunger; but he takes various shapes, just as fire, when it is mingled with different incenses, is named according to the savour of each." fragment attributed to Heraclitus of Ephesus from Hippolyte, *Refutation of all heresies*, IX, 10, 7,. See also : « ????? ?? ????????? ?? ????? ??? ??? ??????? ??????? ??????? ??????? ??? ???????? ?????. » "All things are exchanged for Fire, and Fire for all things as wares are exchanged for gold, and gold for wares." Fragment attributed to Heraclitus of Ephesus from Plutarch, *On the E at Delphi*, 388 DE.

2 „das ontologisch wohlverstandene ‚Subjekt'" [Heidegger 1927, 111]

3 „[…] die Anderen sind vielmehr die, von denen man sich zumeist nicht unterscheidet, unter denen man auch ist. Dieses Auch-da-sein mit ihnen hat nicht den ontologischen Charakter eines ‚Mit'-Vorhandenseins innerhalb einer Welt. Das ‚Mit' ist ein Daseinsmäßiges, das ‚Auch' meint die Gleichheit des Seins als umsichtig-besorgendes In-der-Welt-sein. ‚Mit' und ‚Auch' sind *existenzial* und nicht kategorial zu verstehen. Auf dem Grunde dieses *mithaften* In-der-Welt-seins ist die Welt je schon immer die, die ich mit den anderen teile." [Heidegger 1927, 118].

4 More or less directly, Heidegger has denounced this mapping: "Das umsichtsfreie, nur noch hinsehende Entdecken des Raumes neutralisiert die umweltlichen Gegenden zu den reinen Dimensionen. Die Plätze und die umsichtig orientierte Platzganzheit des zuhandenen Zeugs sinken zu einer Stellenmanigfaltigkeit für beliebige Dinge zusammen […] Die Welt geht des spezifisch Umhaften verlustig, die Umwelt wird zur Naturwelt" [1927, 112]. But why would this agreement on a *Stellenmanigfaltigkeit* be a "sinking"? Though it would be suicidal – or at least regressive – to reduce being-in-the-world to this multiplicity of formally determined locations, it provides us with an indisputably effective mode of being-together-in-the-world. At the scale of the planet, in its cosmic physicity, we can conceive ourselves as being together with persons that we only know of. Ethics of togetherness rely also on geostatistics.

5 The coming into form of place, as named by Turco [1994].

6 « processus selon lequel une grappe de valeurs sociales non seulement se condense en un lieu, mais en prenant l'aspect du lieu, *devient* ce lieu. » [Turco 1997].

7 « Aber dass der Schaffende sei, dazu selber thut Leid noth und viel Verwandelung. Ja, viel bitteres Sterben muss in eurem Leben sein, ihr Schaffenden! Also seid ihr Fürsprecher und Rechtfertiger aller Vergänglichkeit. » [Nietzsche 1885, „Auf den glückseligen Inseln"].

8 The dissolution of place, as named by me.

9 Such as the Pergamon Altar, moved from Anatolia to Berlin at the beginning of the 20th century.

10 "Their plan, inspired by the liberal values of the early seventies, was to create an authentic utopia – a place where the principles of self-government, respect for individual freedom and true democracy [*démocratie directe*] could be practiced in the 'here and now'. The *Lieu* was not a commune, but had the more modest aim of providing a place where like-minded people could spend the summer months living according to the principles they espoused. It was intended that this haven of humanist and democratic [*républicain*] feeling would create synergies, facilitate the meeting of minds and, in particular, as one of the founding members put it, provide an opportunity to 'get your rocks off' ['*de baiser un bon coup*']." [Houellebecq, Wynne 2001, 73]

11 *cf.* Baumann 2000, 97: "consumers often share physical spaces of consumption such as concert or exhibition halls, tourist resorts, sport activity sites, shopping malls and cafeterias, without having any actual social interaction. […] Such places encourage action, not inter-action [as interaction would keep the actors] away from the actions in which they are individually engaged".

12 I.e., our "narrative identity", to borrow the words of Paul Ricoeur.

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