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On the INEXPLICABLE PERSISTENCE of STRANGERS

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Since the dawn of humanity, our societies had always made a place for the stranger—the one from afar who traded in prized goods and valued experience. But the stock of that ‘stranger’ has fallen of late. From the beginning, societies were set toward hospitality, toward welcoming the stranger who could exchange commodities and intelligence or ‘experience[s]... passed on from mouth to mouth’.¹ In ‘the old, courtly civilizations’, Frantz Fanon tells us, ‘the foreigner was called *vazaha*, which means *honorable stranger*’.² But the privileged place once reserved for the stranger has become uncannily marked as ‘slated for expulsion’.

In Western literature since the Renaissance the stranger has played a valued role as a critical outsider, able to pierce the dazzling cultural hegemonies imposed by our ruling classes and see through them to a different truth. Such figures are invented or embroidered in works from Montaigne’s Brazilian ‘savages’ of the sixteenth century (*Des Cannibales*)³ to Montesquieu’s Usbek in his 1721 *Les Lettres persanes*, Samuel Johnson’s Abyssinian Prince in *Rasselas* (1735), or Mark Twain’s insightful *naïf* in *Huckleberry Finn* (1884). An effort at self-estrangement even appears in the seventeenth century’s René Descartes, who believed he could cleanse his mind of irrationality (and prepare for the critical position he hoped to occupy) by distancing himself from unscientific received ideas and absurd outdated customs.

From that same Renaissance onward, and even while these critical reflections were being prized, a reverse process was nonetheless underway. Europeans were arriving as strangers to

lands everywhere around the world, more often than not zealously imposing their ‘superior’ culture over those less culturally ‘advanced’. The colonial workforce (teachers, engineers and doctors, et al.) was often drawn to the colonial adventure by its ‘exoticism’: Marguerite Duras, in *The Sea Wall*, recalls her mother’s desire to go teach in Indochina as motivated by ‘colonial propaganda posters “*To all you young people, go to the colonies, where a fortune awaits you*”’.⁴ The orientalist ‘maunderings’ of Pierre Loti’s novels did the same for her father.

With the advent of the colonial attitude, however, the pattern of welcoming strangers and their ‘news’ is profoundly disturbed, and the cultural *identity* of the host culture is consequently altered. More than anything that the authors who portrayed the critical ‘outsider’ as bearers of valuable and potentially revolutionary cultural insight ever dreamed, the colonial stranger wrought profound changes in the host culture that dismantled the longstanding relation between host and guest.⁵ The hierarchy of one culture over the other instituted by colonialism has played itself out in many variations ever since: colonists imposed their values over indigenous peoples; native cultures tried to recapture their cultural purity; colonists resisted or capitulated. But the resulting societies have yet to exhibit anything like the older kind of reception for ‘the stranger’.⁶

In 1903, social thinker Georg Simmel (perhaps motivated by a premonition of the convulsion that was to destined overwhelm his native Germany) argued that ‘the stranger’ was both a formal ‘element of the group itself’ and vitally necessary to every society.⁷ While the stranger does not, by definition, participate in the group’s identifications, s/he shares general or abstract universal traits with them. According to Simmel, both the stranger and his or her host society participate in a *common humanity*.

Simmel opposed the ‘stranger’ to the ‘wanderer’ by dint of the spatial location of *the stranger*, who is, by definition, already *in* and *of* our society, whereas *the wanderer* is free of any

ties to a specific locale. The stranger thus occupies, as it were, for Simmel, a middle distance between the fully far and the near: not our *intimate* and yet *not unfamiliar* to us. Simmel further argues, on this basis, that their critical distance affords those stranger to us greater objectivity than we can have about ourselves.⁸ The stranger is free of the constraints on completely objective thought that any culture necessarily imposes on its subjects. Yet, the freedom and objectivity with which Simmel credits strangers have by now become, in the eyes of conservative politicians everywhere, their very drawback.

Simmel's effort to secure a formal and structural role for the stranger can even be read as a sign of the demise of 'the old courtly civilizations' that took the value of strangers for granted. In the decades following Simmel there was, I believe, a tectonic shift in the very grounding of social relations and it has resulted in a more or less permanent hostility to the stranger. In one example, the stranger is deemed completely irrelevant to a group's collective *identity*. T.S. Eliot made the following remark in a 1932 lecture (which was suppressed until 2003): 'a population should be homogeneous; where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely either to be fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate'.⁹ Indeed, in the post-colonial condition the peoples once ruled at a distance have come home to their 'mother country' and their appearance there is seen as more and more of a threat. Thus, although the early twentieth-century dream of purifying cultures was defeated on the battlefield of World War II, our societies, now formed largely around imaginary identifications have intensified hostility to those stranger to these identifications.

Indeed it is after the Second World War, a war fought in part over the attempted destruction of those deemed 'strangers' to European culture, that we find an unexpectedly sharp rise in fictional and filmic depictions of strangers as inspiring intense fear. The lethal potential of 'the stranger' can be seen as motivating Hitchcock's 1951 *Strangers on a Train* or Ida Lupino's 1953 *The Hitch Hiker*, and not only these (e.g.,

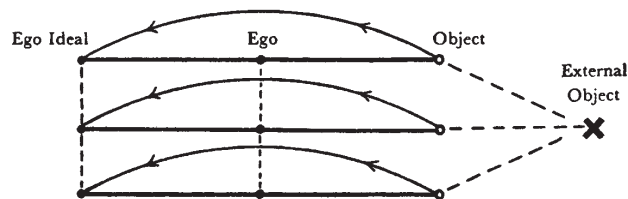
Dead Calm 1989, not to mention fear of child abductors). Again and again, the public is warned of the dangers of trafficking with strangers. In recent films centred on psychotic killers, such strangers have become the site of the most detailed and intimate knowledge of you—he or she can read your emails, they know your children's birthdates, even your childhood traumas (e.g., Hannibal Lecter to Clarice Starling in *Silence of the Lambs*, 1991). We have lost all capacity to believe in, like Tennessee Williams' Blanche du Bois, 'the kindness of strangers'.

Culturally, then, 'the stranger' has become the sum of all fears, including, of course, the homebred terrorist of foreign descent—the ultimate enemy within—and the very definition of the paranoid state.

The group ego and the 'intimacy imperative'

Remarks like Eliot's and the fear of immigrants/strangers index the rise of what Freud had in mind when, in 1921, he studied a new social formation: the 'artificial' group based on imaginary identifications.¹⁰ Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* details this 'group' as created solely by mirroring a singular ego as a multiple: a community of like egos, modeled on a single image, projected by a leader who in turn also reflects them.

In Freud's initial view of the origins of collective life (totemic, Oedipal), an unconscious symbol (the [phallic] signifier of the 'dead father') grounds and binds the traditional group, which is thereby composed entirely of those who (men and woman alike) take this 'father' as their *unconscious* ego-ideal. What supports Freud's new 'group', by contrast, is its structuring entirely around the *ego*, the site of mastery and control, and in which the *unconscious paternal ego-ideal* is replaced by the *visible object with which all are equally libidinally tied* and which all identify 'themselves with one another in their ego'.¹¹



This later becomes the *image* of a leader with whom all group members identify. Potentially disparate egos are thus tied together not by the *word*-(or *signifier*)-based social bond but by a shared perception, an object held in common, an *image*.¹² If the group is to cohere and to act in concert, Freud writes that each ego comprising the group must see itself reflected precisely in one's fellows: 'Everyone must be the same and have the same',¹³ in dress, hairstyle, skin color, even gender (artificial groups do not brook sexual difference). Any loss of libidinal interest in this object that has replaced or displaced the 'father', risks throwing the ego into paranoia.¹⁴

As in Freud's '*Uncanny*' then, we might begin to hypothesise why the stranger is now regarded as such a threat. In him or her we unconsciously recognise the return of a truth and a denied reality we have repressed in ourselves: all the differences that necessarily make us up—from our infantine arrival as a 'little stranger' to the chance encounters with others from whom we learn.¹⁵ What we have socially repressed (as formally and structurally commanded by group psychology) is the knowledge of our dependence on others for our existence, for shaping our lives and permitting us to live on.

It is therefore all the more ironic that this repression and denial of our interdependence takes the form under globalisation of an *imperative to intimacy* that is not only linked to this transformation of the basic social bond (formed by the signifier) to one formed around the *ego*, but which also is bound to eradicate any role for the stranger. Everyone must know everything about everyone. The resulting 'group' thus

refuses the stranger a *place*, and is therefore the reverse of the 'old courtly civilizations' Césaire described.

Yet, by attempting to eliminate the stranger, does it not open itself to the unbridled paranoia noted above that we are now experiencing culturally and which in fact attends every attempted reduction of the *subject* to the *ego*.¹⁶

Let us consider. Contemporary globalised culture now commands *intimacy* (or more precisely a fantasised intimacy) as the final form of all social ties. 'Instant intimacy' arrived first with television's bringing others' living room conversations into your living room (talk shows) and now podcast pornography brings the bedrooms of others into your bedroom: 'everyone must be the same and have the same or 'share and share alike''.¹⁷ The promotion of 'celebrity' in this model proves the point. The machinery of celebrity does not elevate someone to the level of the unapproachable 'star' of long-ago, but instead brings him or her (much too) close. Every detail of a celebrity's life *must* become familiar to everyone everywhere. We may individually try forgetting how Brittany Spears belches after drinking her soda (12 August 2006), or flashes her bare nether parts when exiting an automobile. But these images are now indelible and unforgotten (her belch is still floating around in cyberspace on sites as varied as Belch.com, youtube.com, dailymail.co and even nzherald.co).¹⁸

Art itself has not been untouched by this demand for hyper-intimacy and total familiarity. Recently, a young artist suggested that the once unbridgeable gap between *distance* and *intimacy* is now overcome *via* universalised cyberspace as long as a performing self is at its centre. Her project is to podcast her sexual relations with her husband. May Ling Su (with her husband, Jay E. Moores) writes:

All over the world, adults have at their fingertips the technology to share erotic fantasies and adventures through a mass medium that is global and intimate at the same time. I am an amateur pornographer,

publishing my personal explorations on line from the comfort and privacy of home. My husband and I are a self-contained package, both with art degrees and with an insatiable appetite for kink.¹⁹

Is the world really one-sided and flat, with our egos at its centre everywhere? Or is this perhaps the biggest lie we can tell ourselves today? May Ling Su seems completely certain that she is securely enclosed in a private sphere—alive and well in Sade’s bedroom—and at the same time completely ‘in touch’ with the universe, without anyone beyond her husband—a stranger, say—ever really touching her. After all, May Ling Su is not actually inviting strangers into her actual bedroom, and her thesis requires *distance* (Internet mediation) for there to be the intimacy she espouses. For if it is really ‘global and intimate at the same time’ that intimacy is open to everyone *except* one’s actual fellows.

Contrast this with artist Sophie Calle’s work *The Sleepers* (1980), in which she invites the real people she encounters in the street—strangers—to come and sleep in her bed, while she watches over them and takes their photograph. Or her *Suite vénitienne* (1979) where she tries to re-learn Parisian-ness by following a stranger in the street. Or her *Erw of Jerusalem* (1996) in which she interviews Israeli and Palestinian occupants of the city as to what places they recall as their most meaningful. The secretly shared intimacy of these strangers (virtually all the city’s spaces noted are shared by the two different ethnicities) could never be accessed without words, words that transmit a commonality, a common humanity, that the simple image of, say, a park bench would never be able to without them.

The difference between these two projects is not simply vast; it is absolute. It highlights that we have arrived at a real impasse in our comprehension of social life. The very fact that we need to feign intimacy-at-a-distance to constitute our ‘communities’ is telling. It is the result of eliminating the stranger as a potential social asset. All the stranger’s potential—

—the chance encounter, the opportunity for new horizons s/he opens (*à la* Calle) may be dangerous but not psychotic. It plays a part in an entirely differently constituted human universe from the one inhabited by May Ling Su—and the one we also perform inhabit as well.

I would go so far as to say that *the* ideological fantasy of our time is our belief that we can manufacture an *intimacy with strangers* without implicating ourselves in them and their lives. Or that we can permanently deny our actual social interdependence, forever avoiding the spaces and places of actual encounters with strange others, in favour of imaginarily inviting others ‘in’: keeping them at a ‘safe’ remove and keeping ourselves untouched by them.

The destructive results of this fantasy are by now coming clear: the loss of all potential to learn from the stranger, and the universal paranoia that the encapsulated, insular ego always brings in its wake.

1. The wisdom or the news from elsewhere that Walter Benjamin notes in ‘The Storyteller’ (1936), *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken, 1969, p. 84.
2. In ‘what Césaire calls ‘the old, courtly civilizations’, characterised by ‘humanity’, ‘good will’, and ‘courtesy’, Fanon writes, ‘the foreigner was called *vazaha*, which means *honorable stranger* [...] shipwrecked Europeans were welcomed with open arms [...] The European, the foreigner, was never thought of as the enemy.’ Frantz Fanon (1952), *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann, London: Pluto Press, 1986, p. 99.
3. ‘Three of these men, ignorant of the price they will pay some day, in loss of repose and happiness, for gaining knowledge of the corruptions of this side of the ocean; ignorant also of the fact that of this intercourse will come their ruin ... three of these men were at Rouen at the time that the late King Charles IX was there... [T]hey were shown our ways, our splendor, the aspect of a fine city. After that, someone asked their opinion, and wanted to know what they found most amazing? They mentioned three things, of which I have forgotten the third, and am very sorry for it; but I still remember two of them. In the first place they thought it very strange that so many grown men, bearded, strong, and armed, who were around the king... should submit to obey a child, and that one of them had not chosen to command instead. Second (they have a way in their language of speaking of men as halves of one another), that they noticed that there were among us men full and gorged with all sorts

- of good things, and that their other halves were beggars at their doors, emaciated with hunger and poverty; and they thought it strange that such needy halves could endure such an injustice, and did not take the others by the throat or set fire to their houses.’ Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, I: 31, trans. by Donald Frame, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957, pp. 158–9.
4. Marguerite Duras (1950), *The Sea Wall*, trans. by Herma Briffault, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1952, p. 17.
 5. Frantz Fanon, *op. cit.*, p. 98, claims that after their encounter with Europeans who laid claim to superiority, the Malagasy ceased to be Malagasy—or even human: ‘white alone means human’. (p. 98). The inexplicable *de-humanisation* of the Malagasy is the result of the lopsided encounter that also demolished the traditional relation of host group to strangers. Walter Benjamin ascribes the devaluation of the stranger-as-storyteller to WWI, which destroyed our belief in experience: ‘never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. The epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out.’ ‘The Storyteller’, *Illuminations*, p. 84.
 6. See the amazing portrait of Saloth Sâr (Pol Pot), using his own speeches drawn by Hélène Cixous, *The Terrible But Unfinished Story of Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia*, Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1994, trans. by Juliet Flower MacCannell, Lollie Groth and Judith Pike. Pol Pot desires to purge his country (Cambodia) of all Western influence, and refund its purity as Kampuchea.
 7. Georg Simmel (1908), ‘The Stranger’ in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. & trans. by Kurt H. Wolff, London: Free Press of Glencoe & Collier-Macmillan, 1950, pp. 402–8.
 8. Simmel: ‘the objective individual is bound by no commitments which could prejudice his perception, understanding, and evaluation of the given [...] he is not tied down in his action by habit, piety and precedent’, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, p. 405.
 9. American-born poet T. S. Eliot delivered the lecture ‘Personality and Demonic Possession’ to the University of Virginia, in which he excoriates the very traits Simmel considered the prime virtue of the stranger, free thinking and objectivity. Eliot said: ‘a population should be homogeneous; where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely either to be fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate. What is still more important is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable.’ Thomas Stearns Eliot, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, <<http://www.vqronline.org/vault/2004/03/16/eliot-suppressed-lecture/>> [accessed 14 January 2010]
 10. Sigmund Freud (1921), *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, *Standard Edition*, vol. XVIII, trans. by James Strachey, London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955, pp. 65–143. Freud restricts his analysis to the group-ego of ‘artificial groups’ such as the army, the church and the bureaucracy—all hostile to outsiders. Nowadays military styles, religious enthusiasms, and bureaucratic forms dominate and shape our cultural life, giving this group near-universal power to displace the traditional group.
 11. Freud, *Group Psychology*, p. 116.
 12. In Lacan’s later idiom, the tie that binds this kind of group goes through the *mirror*, the *Imaginary*, and not the *Symbolic*.
 13. Freud, *Group Psychology*, p. 120.
 14. Jacques Lacan (1955–6), *The Seminar. Book III, The Psychoses. 1955–56*, trans. by Russell Grigg, London: Routledge, 1993, pp. 89–90.
 15. Freud, *Group Psychology*, p. 1: ‘In the individual’s mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent; and so from the very first individual psychology, in this extended but entirely justifiable sense of the words, is at the same time social psychology as well.’ Later, he says every intimate relation sediments feelings of aversion and hostility (pp. 100–1).
 16. Lacan says the paranoid schizophrenic’s ‘voice’ grows out of the superego modality of the ego if the father is ‘foreclosed’. Lacan, *The Seminar. Book III*.
 17. Recall that Freud’s analysis finds the group ego’s ‘egalitarianism’ rooted in primal envy of others (*Group Psychology*, p. 120), transfigured in the artificial group into universal brotherly ‘love’.
 18. Web accessed 15 January 2010. We are not allowed *not* to know about his mistresses’ description of Tiger Woods’ sexual prowess; we are not allowed *not* to know about Clinton’s cigar foreplay with Monica Lewinsky or Pastor Ted Haggard’s methamphetamine and male prostitute addiction, or the sexual fantasies Eliot Spitzer played out with his call girl in a private club.
 19. She continues, claiming a productive alienation from herself: ‘I began my Web documentation from a point of innocence. Many of the sexual escapades we explored online were first-time experiences for us both. When the cameras are rolling, Jay and I click into performance mode and do the nastiest things together. Later on, we watch the footage and get aroused all over again, shocked at the images of our decadence.’ Timothy Greenfield Sanders, *XXX. 30 Porn Star Portraits*, New York and Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2004, p. 138.