

Dossier | Fear of the Social

 esse.ca/en/fear-of-the-social

Fear of the Social

By Fabien Loszach

For something to say in the meantime I casually observe that these days everybody is bound, at one moment or another in his life, to have the feeling of being a failure. We are agreed on that.

– Michel Houellebecq, *Whatever* (1)

Much has been written about fear of the Other and the foreigner. The latter, an exemplary figure for Georg Simmel, embodies the constant and paradoxical tension between the near and the far, here and elsewhere. This position of the Other is often idealized in the figure of the monster or the barbarian, a liminary character who always occupies the border between two worlds: the known and the beyond, the world ordered by the signifier and chaos. The monster is a “typical” figure, because it personifies the cosmic and spiritual forces which have not yet been subjected to the rational order of logos. Its appearance thus coincides with the irruption of the subversive into the social. The “Other,” the monster, is the antithesis of common sense, disturbing our registers of meaning and threatening social order.

Another kind of fear exists, one more specific to our contemporary world, which shares this anthropological fear of the Other: the fear of being ignored and unrecognized by otherness. The history of contemporary social struggles demonstrates, in this respect, a passion for recognition which is manifested in repeated declarations of pride and in the profusion of battles for respect and identity (pride marches, the recognition of specific identities, etc.). Individuals today would like to be identified and seen for what they are intrinsically while at the same time feeling that they have worth in the social fabric. These demands have not arisen out of nothing; they appeared alongside a new normalcy of behaviour which emerged, in the West, in the mid-twentieth century and which emphasized individuality, authenticity and independence.

This individualism of behaviour is manifested in the increase in demands for autonomy and freedom from former hierarchical and communal structures. Zygmunt Bauman uses the term “fluidification” (2) to describe our society, which is characterized by emancipation from the identity imposed by tradition and by the idealization of the cult of the aesthetic construction of the self (to create your own life freely, like a work of art). The maxim “become what you are” might be seen as the rallying cry of this contemporary “individualism,” a term that is often compromised but which must be understood, in a broad sense, as the capacity for self-definition. Individualism, too often understood as

exaggerated selfishness and detachment from any social bond, is above all a constantly ongoing personal project: claiming the right to master one's singularity by means of the demand to control one's life and of resistance to an identity that has been imposed and assigned from without. For Charles Taylor, for example, individualism is also, and above all, expressed through moral conviction and the goal of achieving the Good Society, in which a relationship with transcendence is interiorized. (3) Individual thus intend to make their own ethical choices while at the same time forming social bonds which are freely entered into.

This new model, however, even as it increases an individual's freedom at the expense of the community, creates new problems. Modern individuals are certainly free, but naked; subjected to themselves, to the constant search for bearings in a world that has become a horizon of meanings. More simply, what had previously been supplied by the original community (identity, marriage and hierarchical status, culture, organization of time, rituals, etc.) has become today something very much constructed by oneself out of reservoirs of knowledge and skills unevenly distributed throughout society: individuals become individual trajectories in search of their personal identity.

Nevertheless, this identity is never "shaped" in complete isolation. It is constantly engaged in a specular relationship with the Other and the world. It comes to terms with the "given" as well as with ready-made elements; it adopts attitudes and ways of living and doing that it borrows from the mediations it enters into. For François de Singly, "The individual becomes singular only through a process of composition." (4) In other words, we do not "sculpt" ourselves in a narcissistic relationship with ourselves; rather, we are a kind of patchwork that borrows from others and needs their recognition. This is the paradox of the process through which our behaviour becomes autonomous: the more individualization advances, the greater the need for security and social bonds becomes apparent. The difference between individualistic and non-individualistic societies is thus not characterized, in de Singly's view, by a decrease in social bonds but in "the importance granted to more personal and elective bonds." Autonomous contemporary individuals do not refuse the social; on the contrary, they over-value every form of attachment as long as it is a part of the process of constructing their identity.

What remains of our singularity if the Other is no longer there to provide us with a positive image? Nothing, other than emptiness and fear. The absence of any relation or connection to bonds which would provide us with a negative image makes an ontological definition of the self impossible. Put simply, individuals who do not feel recognized are led to believe that their subjectivity has little value. The fear of being "undefined" and the humiliation of feeling underestimated are thus the most widespread forms of modern anxiety, insinuating themselves into all the empty spaces and sites of uncertainty within modern identity.

The Elementary Particles

Michel Houellebecq's novels are often highly provocative because they construct their dramatic effects around this fear while at the same time creating a constant critique of the

individualization of conditions which do not free us but rather democratize doubt and uncertainty and heighten our sense of frustration. Houellebecq's anti-heroes are, like everyone else, subjected to the enormous task of becoming the subject of their own existence, but they lack the resources to turn themselves into an ideal self. This inability to construct a presentable subjectivity, taken in a reflexive social logic, prevents the hero from advancing towards otherness (unless in the form of dehumanized and hypersexual relations) and, as a result, makes it impossible to be taken into consideration by the Other. These heroes are constantly frustrated at not being acknowledged, especially in their sexual and romantic relations.

Houellebecq's second novel, *The Elementary Particles*, describes modern individuals, hyper-individualized beings who are reduced to the state of monads closed in upon themselves. The combined blows of selfish individualism and capitalism have destroyed "intermediary communities" (the couple, the family, the community)—the last "islands of primitive communism [which] separate the individual from the marketplace." Modern individuals are left to themselves, abandoned in a new state of chaotic nature which operates in an almost brute system of domination. Contemporary individualism is thus the cause and effect of capitalist logic: autonomy and neo-liberalism go hand-in-hand and, although these "emancipatory" values are supposedly granted to all, in fact they are the privilege only of the well-off. Individualism is genetically competitive: under its influence, people become atoms, unattached particles living in a disillusioned and neo-barbarous world unlike the comforting model of the traditional community.

Nevertheless, Houellebecq sees two zones of consolation: "In the midst of the great natural barbarity, human beings have (sometimes) been able to create small places warmed up by love—small, closed, discreet spaces where intersubjectivity and love reign." (5)

Love, he explains between the lines, remains today the most personal and thus most highly valued form of acknowledgement, because the logic of love is the one in which we are most radically construed in the eyes of the Other, the logic in which we give up all our privacy, without our mask. Love is the ideal form of social bond and fear's worst enemy because it provides social recognition which takes root in the truth about oneself. When we feel loved, we feel intimately acknowledged. Nevertheless, capitalism's undermining, which gradually contaminates every sphere of social life, will soon also have destroyed these final pockets of acknowledgement and security by transformng love and sexuality into a capitalist meat market.

"It's a fact, I mused to myself, that in societies like ours sex truly represents a second system of differentiation, completely independent of money; and as a system of differentiation it functions just as mercilessly. The effects of these two systems are, furthermore, strictly equivalent. Just like unrestrained economic liberalism, and for similar reasons, sexual

liberalism produces phenomena of absolute pauperization. Some men make love every day, others five or six times in their life, or never. Some make love with dozens of women; others with none. It's what's known as the "law of the market." (6)

Acknowledging Each Other between The Walls

In *Cœurs* (Private Fears in Public Places, 2006), his most recent film, Alain Resnais, even though he examines contemporary ideas about love with care, also depicts the emotional fatigue that the obligation to be oneself involves. The question underlying the film is perhaps the same as that in the work of Houellebecq: how can we enter into social relations when we are not confident of our abilities and are, to use Alain Ehrenberg's expression, "tired of being ourselves" (7)? But how can we do anything other than form social bonds if we do not want to sink into the fear of non-acknowledgement? The film examines this eternal re-beginning, this impossible adventure on which we are constantly starting out again, which consists in finding the strength to create an identity by meeting the other half-way.

The script of *Cœurs* deals with the personal lives of two people in restricted social spaces. Resnais analyses this state of affairs by constructing his film on the model of "bridges and doors": opening towards the Other and falling back on an attitude of "as for myself." This allows him to examine closely the characters' private lives and to focus the images on the walls which divide up our living spaces but which are also metaphors for the way modern spaces define our identity.

One by one, the film's world-weary characters, tempted by the search for an encounter with the Other, hesitate to take the first step. As I remarked above, escaping towards otherness is not to be taken for granted, it requires emotional capital, a "reservoir of energy" which enables us to confront slightly unpleasant situations (8) and take the stage: this is known as self-esteem. Nevertheless, it is impossible to have self-esteem if you don't throw yourself into the action, because it is in the social realm, in our encounters with the Other, that modern individuals find ethical and cognitive resources, or the energy needed for their actions and thus self-esteem. This game of bridge and door, of opening one's identity to the Other and of turning in on oneself, is subtly handled by Resnais and is expressed even in the film's images. The physical walls (the ones separating the tiny rooms of our apartments) he focuses on are thus similar to those erected between people who try, one way or another, to acknowledge each other between the porous walls of their subjectivity.

If, for Virginia Woolf, having "a room of one's own" was, in both a physical and a poetic sense, the first step towards the emancipation of individuality, today this desire appears, as it does in Resnais' film, a source of new problems. Walls express metaphorically the process of individualization, they mark out singularity and the increase in personal space, but they problematize the definition of boundaries between the Self and the Other. Where is the happy median between opening up to the Other and drawing in upon oneself? Once again, people tired of holding up their Self, those who no longer have the psychological means to

create social bonds are often torn between two antithetical positions: to withdraw like Nicole (Laura Morante) into a sort of melancholic introspection or to accumulate like Gaëlle (Isabelle Caré) a growing number of one-night stands. The beauty of Resnais' film rests on the metaphoric and visual transposition of these physical and symbolic territories.

Choosing One's Self

Choice is the nodal point in the construction of identity. Underlying the process of individualization are the demands of individuals to choose for themselves and make decisions about their lives. It is in this daily obligation to choose, however, that fear creeps in: fear of being unable to make the right choices about one's identity, a synonym for the distress and insecurity we have around the self-image we project to others. To fight against this fear, we all must try as best we can to patch together techniques and adapt ways of continuing to engage in social relations. The weakest and most despairing among us, those who no longer have the energy to create a positive image of themselves, give themselves over to inaction and sometimes make a despairing attempt to return to the womb through indecision and a refusal to take responsibility for their lives and most often end up in a state of depression. Being oneself is the fruit of a permanent struggle in which one must confront the social, the sole antidote for fear.

[Translated from the French by Timothy Barnard]

NOTES

1. Michel Houellebecq, *Whatever*, trans. Paul Hammond (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998 [1994]), 30.
2. Zygmunt Bauman, *La vie liquide* (Rodez/Paris: Rouergue/J. Chambon, 2006).
3. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).
4. François de Singly, *L'individualisme est un humanisme* (La Tour d'Aigues: L'Aube, 2005), 17.
5. Michel Houellebeck, *Les particules élémentaires* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), 88.
6. Michel Houellebecq, *Whatever*, op. cit., 99.
7. Alain Ehrenberg, *La fatigue d'être soi* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1998).
8. Pierre Clastres and Edmund Burke, quoted in Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *L'invention de soi. Une théorie de l'identité* (Paris: Hachette, 2004).