

Animal Print Suicide

Vets have a tendency towards suicide. Or so H  l  ne Cixous proposes recounting seven vets who took their own lives over just a three-year period in her local area.¹ In notebooks, not originally intended for distribution, she tells the story of how the dark hair of a 35-year-old vet turned to white overnight following the violent suicide of his colleague. To become a vet is to acquire a fatal illness, he told her. It begins with vocation, but nobody would become a vet if they truly knew what it entails. He then explains the multiple areas of expertise required of a single practitioner. The vet must be,

*... a doctor who has to be a surgeon, haematologist, pneumatologist, oncologist, general practitioner, psychiatrist, self-psychoanalyst, it's inhuman.*²

For him the stresses of this particular profession groom the death drive. The animal is stressed, this stress is transferred to the human who absorbs it and in so doing the vet becomes the animal. Suicide becomes desirable as flight from the scenario, release from becoming animal and becoming double. Affirming the susceptibility of the vet to adopt the position of the animal he treats, the bereaved vet adds,

*Vets need to have a very close watch kept over them by loving masters.*³

In the long tradition of the folding in of the animal into man, the vet houses the animal, and the animal houses the vet. They are connected by pain, and, through a mutual wish for release from it, can fatally assimilate.

Cixous' notes are part of a trajectory of thought on how we have evolved as inhabited beings, a set of ideas much visited in Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power*, an extensive study of the human as multiple. Canetti stresses the importance of the Ancient Egyptian incorporation of animals within men and writes of the "...unchanging double figure of the totem," an early prototype for the metamorphosis from man into animal and from animal into man.⁴ Canetti considers not only the many routes of animal into human and vice versa, but also the way in which we inhabit each other, human within human. He describes the unique mobility of the human face, inherited from monkeys, reflecting our readiness to transform as social beings. We copy and imitate to communicate, to resemble temporarily those we address. Our companions are encouraged to recognize their own facial expressions in ours and to be at ease with a fluid mirroring. As with Cixous' vets, Canetti also recognises the extent to which this process of exchange is subject to pathologies. We can mirror to the extent that we fear, and risk losing, our own image. We can become locked behind the arranged faces, or masks, we present to others. We can start to believe in the faces we make and fail to shore up territory we previously recognised as our own.

The word "Printmare" similarly evokes a darker side to ideas of multiplicity. A recent entry into language, it means,

*A terrifying or very unpleasant experience that is read about and haunts the reader long after they have stopped reading.*⁵

As for the animal within the vet, print has lodged itself within the reader. As a result two separate, but simultaneous, places are occupied. The reader looks from their place in the physical world through the place that has invaded them via the medium of print. Walter Benjamin observed that the copy, the cast, the imitation, the replica were developed to reach a wider audience than could ever be possible for the original, in a single location.⁶ Print as text and print as image multiply the possibilities, not only of the work of art itself, but also the places in which it can be encountered. Unlike a viewer of a painting, the viewer of a print would have been aware, from the early inception of the copy, that others elsewhere could be viewing this exact same image at the exact same time. The essential multiplicity of the print meets not only with the composite nature of its viewer who has evolved, which Canetti describes, as a doubled being, but also with a sharing crowd within multiple dimensions.

A forerunner of the idea of looking at a print while imagining others elsewhere viewing the same representation at the same time, was the idea of human copies appearing in more places than one during a single instant. Known as bilocation, Our Lady of the Pillar in 40 AD is believed the earliest proponent, with the more recent and better-known figure of Padre Pio, allegedly appearing simultaneously at several bedsides of the sick and dying until his death in 1968. Initially a practice intended to maximize the capacity of

Christian saints or monks to attend as many in their flock as needed, more recently, during the presidential elections of 2008, Senator Hillary Clinton was also believed by some to co-exist in multiple locations giving speeches to crowds simultaneously in neighbouring states.

Whether or not we choose to trust in the idea of bilocation, the fact of its existence as a phenomenon stretching back historically, indicates an early concern with the limitations of an individual bound to a single location at any one time. A cure for grounded existence exists in the act of copying. To print is also to free.

In *The Wretched of the Screen*, Hito Steyerl writes of a world consumed by multiplicity to the extent where we are not only inhabited, or capable of virtual bilocation through technologies such as Skype or FaceTime, but our ability to multiply, and be multiplied, is calling ever more into question the possibilities of our own viewing position. Steyerl suggests that a prevalent use of gaming and surveillance image use may be contributing to this anxiety. Having always navigated with a horizon to move towards, indicating which way is up or down, we now survey populations from the skies and through drone eyes from a range of coordinates and vantage points at once. In gaming too, we no longer have use for a horizon, viewing characters and combatants from a choice of many perspectives at any one time. Citing Walter Benjamin's views on Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* (1920), Steyerl writes,

*Grappling with crumbling futures that propel us backward onto an agonizing present, we may realise that the place we are falling towards is no longer grounded, nor is it stable. It promises no community but a shifting formation.*⁷

In Steyerl's analysis of Benjamin's writing on Klee, the subject falls backwards and doesn't know what is coming, other than the inevitability that the future lies at the back of the faller. It is we, all of us, who are falling. Yet soft flight, in the experience of most of us, ends in meeting a resistant surface in the end. Ultimately, soil, earth, ground are bound to arrest us. We expect an end to falling and in anticipating it spend less time and scope on the experience of falling itself.

Saint Anthony (c. 251-356), a figure much visited by artists, is celebrated for his visions, doubts and meetings with the devil.⁸ He went to live in the desert to question his orientation in the spiritual world. Horizons in the desert can be misleading. Without their instruction on place and the location of the viewer within them, other possibilities for inquiry can take on more prominence. After seeing Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting *The Temptation of St Anthony*, (1557) Gustave Flaubert laboured for thirty years on a prose adaptation of the same name, constructing a paradigm shift in the concept of horizons similar to that observed by Steyerl. In an introductory essay to Flaubert's text Bisland writes,

Flaubert's Lucifer has no relation to the jejeune Devil of man's early conception of material evil, nor does he resemble Goethe's Mephistopheles; embodiment of the Eighteenth Century's spirit of sneering disbeliefs and negation. He is rather our own tempter – Science. He is the spirit of Knowledge: Nature itself calling us to look into the immensities and readjust our dogmas by this new and terrible widening of our mental and moral horizons.⁹

While Steyerl's concerns stem from an interest in the impact of new optical technologies and cultures on perception, Flaubert's emanate from the impact of science on faith. St Anthony attempts blindness to the temptations of the physical world to increase sight or knowledge within. For both, the losing of the horizon line acts as catalyst for addressing where we stand both physically and metaphorically in a world of multiples. As Cixous shows with her suicidal vets and Canetti with his human and animal mirrors, each of us is already plural as we gaze on the copy.

The next form of inhabitation is predicted to arise from developments in print's link to technological innovation. Soon all of us will at some stage have the option of incorporating printed elements into our physical bodies. We already have the possibility of replacing defective blood vessels with 3D printed equivalents, grown in layers from the inside out. Printed titanium knee joints can be implanted to replace bone. It may be that the printmare ahead that we fall backwards towards, blasted by gales of progress, will require us to re-

orientate again and question who or what is looking, acknowledging our printed selves.¹⁰

-Nicky Coutts

¹ Cixous, H. (2004) *The Writing Notebooks*, ed. Sellers, S., London: Continuum pp. 44-7

² *ibid.*, p.47

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Canetti, E. (1984) *Crowds and Power*, New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, p.374

⁵ <http://www.urbandictionary.com>

⁶ Benjamin, W. (1936) *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Penguin

⁷ Steyerl, H. (2012) *The Wretched of the Screen*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, p.28

⁸ Saint Anthony was also known as Anthony of Egypt, Anthony the Abbot, Anthony of the Desert, Anthony the Anchorite and Anthony of Thebes. His temptations have been represented by a range of artists, including Martin Schongauer, Hieronymous Bosch, Dorothea Tanning, Max Ernst, Leonora Carrington and Salvador Dalí.

⁹ Flaubert, G. (1874) *The Temptations of St Anthony*, Bisland, E., trans Hearn, L. (2001) Digireads, p.8

¹⁰ El-Showk, S., (21st October, 2013) *Science Focus – Science & Technology*, "How to rebuild your body with 3D–printed parts"
<http://www.sciencefocus.com/feature/tech/how-rebuild-your-body-3d-printed-parts>