

Michel Houellebecq, 2013

A Remedy for the Exhaustion of Being

Foreword to *Musée national*, Editions de la Martinière, 2014

Subsequent publications

Interventions 2020, Michel Houellebecq, Flammarion (French)

Michel Houellebecq, Dumont, Cologne, 2019 (German)

Cahier, La nave di Teseo, Milan, 2019 (Italian)

Cahier de L'Herne, *Houellebecq*, 2017 (French)

Corriere della Sera, Milan, 10.10.2020 (Italian)

Le Point, 1.10.2020 (French)

It happens occasionally - rarely, but all the same it happens - that contemporary sociologists come up with some relevant thoughts on contemporary society. Among the absolutely novel phenomena to have developed in the 20th century, the one for which no real equivalent can be found in previous centuries, one of the most ambiguous and least studied, is, without a shadow of doubt, *tourism*.

I was lucky enough to know Rachid Amirou, a sociologist of tourism who died prematurely a few years ago, and thus benefit from some of the thoughts and observations which he did not have the time to give book form. I had been particularly struck by this anecdote, which took place in an inland Provence village, where retired people were paid a few euros by the municipality *to lead exactly their normal way of life*, as it had been popularised by the films of Pagnol, among others: games of pétanque, drinking pastis on terrace of a café shaded by plane-trees; their only, and hardly demanding, obligation was to adapt their timetables to the passage of foreign tour coaches, and to agree to be photographed by these tourists.

Our first reaction, it has to be said, is one of deep unease; we have the impression that these Provençal oldies are being treated like the giraffe women of Northern Thailand, or the Navajos of New Mexico obliged to perform rain dances for imbeciles in Greyhound coaches, we have the impression of a sort of *attack on human dignity*.

Marc Lathuillière's photographs translate this unease in a particularly violent way, to such a degree that their lighting itself seems worrying (even when, in reality, this lighting varies greatly). When present in a photograph, the human face is so essential to it, so central, that the very fact of covering it with a mask (and not even a frightening or grotesque mask; here it is a light, realistic mask, whose only function is to obstruct facial expressions) contaminates all of the other elements in the photograph, sowing doubt as to their authenticity. It must be noted, the unease is all the stronger when the subjects' profession is related to livestock farming or to the catering trade (are we this crazed by *what we have on our plates?*). Thus, despite the feathers on its undeniably muddy belly, the unfortunate 'free range goose' will only be suspected of being a toy-geese, the sausages in the 'full choucroute' of being display sausages, plastic sausages, and the 'crustaceans' of being straight out of a soap opera.

But the discomfort caused by Marc Lathuillière's photographs seems to me even more insidious and haunting when their subject is not professional life, but touches upon the private. 'Holy Communion' disturbs me deeply (and I do wonder if the priest was right to accept being photographed). Family life is also not one of those realities which can be transformed into *role play* without danger. That said, a distinction has to be made. 'At Home with the Lafayettes' is hardly disturbing, especially given the fact

that, since about the time of Louis XIV, the sole social function of aristocrats has been to play at being aristocrats. But 'Bedtime' is truly painful: this family (that one imagines belonging to the centre-left Catholic upper middle class, readers of *Ouest-France* active in humanitarian aid for Haiti) cannot, without unease, be reduced to *playing the role of a family*.

Thus we have, at first sight, an oeuvre dedicated to a radical denunciation: France has given up evolving, she has decided to stand still, to cease taking part in the evolution of the world: we are all not only tourists in our own country, but actors of tourism; the French people in their entirety have agreed to *play their role of being French* to the delight of international tourism.

This may be so, but is it such a catastrophe? In conversation with Marc Lathuillière, I learned that most of the models had agreed easily, and even with pleasure, to take part in the exercise, to play their own professional (or even family) role after putting on a mask — while most people hate being photographed; as we know, for them, posing for a photograph is an ordeal. Personally, I hate being photographed: I am the worst possible model, I do not understand what the photographer wants and I do not want to understand, after five minutes I already have the impression that the session has lasted hours. At the same time, I realise that I would have agreed quite easily to put on a mask and play my own role. I suppose that, in Marc Lathuillière's project, I would have been the *Greatwriter*, sitting in front of a coffee, smoking Gitanes, at the Café de Flore. Ah, I would have done this, even with a certain pleasure (well, in fact, it is a bit anachronistic, you can no longer smoke Gitanes at the Flore, or anywhere, I am not even sure that Gitanes are on sale freely, the photo would have had to be taken before).

The difference is that the ordinary photographer asks you to *be*, and it is exhausting to be (with this aggravating factor that the photographer aims to capture your being, as if that was imaginable, with a lens); while Marc Lathuillière asks you to play your role; which is sometimes amusing, sometimes exhausting, it all depends. Obviously you have to pay attention before choosing a role (because it does not take long before you become what you play); but it is a choice that has to be made, in one way or another, in life; while photography constantly tends, indiscreetly, to bring you back down to this wearisome obligation to be, to make an unbearable injunction to profundity. And all that just to produce, all the same, generally nothing more than some crappy little snapshot.

I have never really understood how one can 'imagine Sisyphus happy'; Sisyphus seems obviously unhappy to me, since he performs vain, repetitive *and unpleasant* gestures; but the being who performs vain, repetitive *and pleasant* gestures seems obviously happy to me. It is enough to compare Sisyphus pushing his rock to a bichon playing with a ball on a staircase to understand what I mean. Undoubtedly Camus had in his head some obscure and nonsensical notions concerning human dignity.

No, it is not the 'literature of the absurd' that first comes to mind when I think of Marc Lathuillière's photographs; but rather those strange science-fiction short stories where the characters, captured in a time warp, are forced to repeat indefinitely the same gestures (I do not have any precise references; my memory of these short stories is so vivid that I have no doubt just invented them). These short stories anyhow take place in beautiful weather, beneath a spotless and permanently blue sky. Storms and clouds make instantly for drama; but tragedy, like absolute happiness, requires an constant azure.