Secret Societies, Animal Mimicry, and the Cultural History of Early French Postmodernism

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Secret societies, animal mimicry, and the broader, related trope of hiding in plain sight figured prominently in the writings of Georges Bataille and other interwar French intellectuals who are now regarded as precursors of French postmodernism. Most accounts of the history of postmodern thought emphasize links between intellectuals: for example, Jürgen Habermas describes a line extending from Nietzsche, through Bataille, to Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, while Julian Pefanis argues that postmodern aesthetics owed much to Bataille’s “reconceptualization of the Hegelian framework.” Similarly, Michèle Richman and Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi write in different ways about how French social and political thought shaped the work of the Collège de Sociologie, a short-lived group Bataille created in 1937 with the young social theorist Roger Caillois and the surrealist-turned-ethnographer Michel Leiris.1

In an attempt to move beyond this ideational approach, this essay asks what it might mean to account in local, culturally specific terms for the wide interest in hiding in plain sight among interwar avant-garde intellectuals in France. In broad terms, this means asking how the focus on that trope helped thinkers such as Bataille and Caillois respond to the social, cultural, and political changes that marked the late Third Republic—from the growing power of mass audio-visual media to the rise of surrealism and the spread of fascism at home and abroad. Although new technologies such as radio and film inspired much excitement and admiration, many critics feared that they also presaged a dangerous age of mass homogeneity, conformity, and irrationality, with the spectacle of fascist masses in Italy and Germany representing most vividly the nightmarish world that emerged when social difference and critical thinking disappeared. A broadly

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based, flexible, and mobile discourse on this alleged world bereft of difference took shape, offering commentators a vocabulary with which to articulate their often divergent assessments of what was happening and what to do about it. It was their tacit engagement with this larger discourse that drew Bataille, Caillois, and others to the trope of hiding in plain sight. How that trope intersected with that discourse and undergirded what we might now call their postmodernity is the subject of what follows.

This more contextual approach has the advantage of carrying the genealogy of French postmodernism beyond the circles of great thinkers and bringing into focus the historically- and culturally- contingent character of the postmodern challenge to traditional understandings of identity, difference, and community. Though postmodernism is a complex phenomenon, it is commonly associated with the effort to “think” identity together with difference. This effort has often involved demonstrating how any given identity (national, political, racial, sexual, etc.) depends for its meaning and force upon the construction of an “other” against which it stands in contrast, usually hierarchically. Difference, in other words, is constitutive of identity (including the identity of the “other”), haunting it through and through and disrupting any sense of its “essence,” purity, or stability. Since communities, including liberal pluralist ones, have typically been based on some notion of identity that supersedes difference—that is, on some kind of collective “we,” such as the Nation or even Humanity, that privileges singularity over plurality—postmodern theory has posed the problem of how communities might be formed and sustained in ways that refuse the identitarian logic that so often denies, marginalizes, or co-opts difference. Though this critique of identity has become commonplace in literary and cultural studies due to the conceptual foundations given to it by the poststructuralist thinkers of the 1960s and 1970s, its emergence during the 1930s has remained obscure, cloaked as it was in tropes such as hiding in plain sight, and embedded as it was in marginal, even mystical, cultural practices. In revealing that the interwar years had already created a cultural and discursive context for a similar kind of critique, this study outlines a new genealogy of French postmodernism while also contributing to a growing historiography that emphasizes continuities between the interwar and postwar periods of twentieth-century French history.

Hiding in Plain Sight: Variations on a Theme

Georges Bataille was a radical and idiosyncratic writer who wrote about secret societies and even founded one of his own—“Acéphale” (meaning “headless”)—in 1936. In a journal he created bearing the same name, he called for a “sacred conspiracy” that would transcend contemporary forms of politics and religion to

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produce what Nietzsche had called an “existence that exceeds man.” His fascination with secret societies formed an integral part of his larger efforts to rethink the meaning of the “sacred” not only after death of God, but also after the death of Man. Depicted as a headless man with a skull in the place of his genitals, the figure of Acéphale was the mark of this double beheading, and the projects that emerged under his sign secured for Bataille a place among those twentieth-century French thinkers who, beginning in the interwar years, formulated “an atheism that is not humanist,” which is to say an atheism that refuses to elevate “man,” or “humanity,” or the “human sciences” to the position of sovereignty left vacant after God’s death.5

Secret societies, secret languages, and elective communities were also privileged objects of analysis of the Collège de Sociologie, which, far from being a formal institution, was a loosely structured study group whose members met privately, sometimes with invited guests, in the back of a bookstore to present their work to one another and discuss it.7 At the meeting of 8 January 1938, Leiris, who was writing a thesis on an African secret language at the time, gave an exposé entitled “The Sacred in Everyday Life” in which he described his childhood relationship to one of his brothers as an “embryonic secret society.” Similarly, Jean Paulhan, editor of the Nouvelle Revue Française from 1925 until the war, gave a presentation at the College, “Sacred Language,” in which he analyzed Malagasy proverb tellers as “something like a secret society.” Caillois, for his part, explored his interest in secret societies and other types of elective communities in his March 1938 presentation at the College, “Brotherhoods, Orders, Secret Societies, Churches,” as well as an essay he would publish that summer, “The Winter Wind.”8 Though the College aimed with such presentations to probe the role played by “the sacred” in creating and sustaining social cohesion, anti-fascism informed its project, too, where it was yoked to an implicit quest for virility, with the group publicly condemning the Munich Accords of 1938 as a sign of the Western democracies “devirilization.”9

The theme of blending into modern mass society while also remaining distinct from it recalls the work of another College participant, Walter Benjamin, who attended regularly but later broke with the group over what he took to be its overly ambiguous strategy for opposing fascism. Apparently, Benjamin was to have read his “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” at the College of Sociology, but

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6 Geroulanos, An Atheism that is Not Humanist, 1-11.
7 Denis Hollier calls it a “chorus that was not in unison.” See his foreword to The College of Sociology (1937-39), ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), viii. Membership fees were nominal: 8 francs per month or 30 francs per year; for comparison, Hollier notes that a subscription to Acéphale cost 10 francs and to the Nouvelle Revue Française 85 francs. Bataille considered developing bylaws and an independent bulletin or review, but these never materialized.
8 All of these texts appear in English translation in Hollier, ed. The College of Sociology, hereafter COS. For the original French versions, see Denis Hollier, ed. Le Collège de Sociologie, 1937-1939, 2nd ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), hereafter CDS. Leiris’s thesis was later published as La Langue secrète des Dogon de Sanga (Soudan français) (Paris: Institut d’ethnologie, 1948).
9 “Declaration of the College of Sociology on the International Crisis,” COS, 45; CDS, 362. The declaration first appeared in the Nouvelle Revue Française, no. 302 (1 November 1938).
never did, for reasons that remain unclear.10 In that essay, the exiled German philosopher examined the relationship between the modern self and urban mass society as it was embodied in Baudelaire’s flâneur (“stroller” or “wanderer”). Like a secret society that embeds itself in the public, the flâneur, who was implicitly male, slips undetected into the modern crowd in a search for artistic inspiration, yet never becomes fully one with it: he is the “accomplice” of the masses, “even as he dissociates himself from them.”11

Finally, though both Bataille and Caillois were interested in the social behavior of insects and other animals,12 it was Caillois who engaged the paradox of being simultaneously visible and invisible in that context. Blending his knowledge of biology and psychoanalysis, he wrote a fascinating text on animal mimicry—that curious process whereby an animal takes on the color or even the texture of its environment in order to blend into it undetected. By means of a “heteromorphic” identification with its surroundings, the organism loses itself in space—indeed, is devoured by it. For Caillois, this phenomenon helped explain how some forms of human psycho-social experience could erode rather than fortify the boundaries of the self.13 Intriguingly, the unorthodox psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan cited Caillois’s work on mimicry as contributing to his famous theory of the “mirror stage,” further testifying to the role this trope played in structuralist and poststructuralist theory.14 The concept would also be picked up and applied to postcolonialism in the work of poststructuralist critic Homi Bhabha.15

10 Hollier, ed., COS, xxi. On Benjamin’s relationship to the College, see Falasca-Zamponi, Rethinking the Political, 3-5.
12 See the material on animal societies in Hollier, ed., COS, 94-97; CDS, 83-93.
14 See Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I function,” in Écrits, trans. Bruce Fink, et al. (New York: Norton, 2006), 77. In the mirror stage, the child identifies with his image in the mirror in a “jubilant assumption [assumption]” of it; that image presents itself as an “exteriorized gestalt” and forms the imago of his body. In contrast to the heteromorphic identification (and attendant de-individuation) that occurs in animal mimicry, the process of homeomorphic identification at work in the mirror stage, which occurs between the ages of 6-18 months, has a formative effect on subjectivity. This was not the only place Lacan evoked the trope of hiding in plain sight: in a noted seminar, he would elucidate his conception of the unconscious through reference to Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” in which a letter notoriously remains hidden by virtue of its being placed in plain view. See Écrits, 6-50.
15 Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” in The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994), 121-131. Oddly, Bhabha’s essay does not acknowledge the intellectual history of the concept of mimicry, or any debt to Caillois, yet its place in this lineage seems clear. The essay originally appeared in October, a journal of art criticism and theory that regularly publishes texts by or about Bataille, Caillois, and Leiris. It later appeared, along with translation of Caillois’s “Mimicry and
Contexts and Connections

Caillois's work on animal mimicry can be productively framed as an implicit engagement with the problem of the human organism's shifting relationship to space in modern mass media culture. Interwar commentators were utterly obsessed with the potential of the audio-visual media not only to penetrate and colonize psychic space, but also to move quite literally into physical space: think of radio or cinema's ability to collapse "there" with "here" and thereby abolish distance (and implicitly difference), at least in a virtual sense. The media's purported ability to fritter away physical and psychic boundaries, and in so doing generate an increasingly homogenized (yet atomized) social world, elicited both excitement and fear among interwar elites, and formed the basis of a broader discourse on modern mass phenomena in which Caillois was implicated.

Interestingly, the theme of collapsing boundaries was central to Caillois's discussion of animal mimicry and the "instinct of abandon" that drives it. The same instinct, he argues, is present in what he asserted was a human inclination to imitate, seek resemblance, and even desire depersonalization through assimilation with space. Freud called this the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a text that haunts Caillois's own text. When this inclination is pushed too far, however, it results in "legendary psychasthenia," which Caillois defined as a disorder in the relationship between personality and space that depletes the personality and produces a diminished sense of vitality. The originality of Caillois's essay lies in the way it connects the death drive to the "lure of space," which is not the temptation to make space in our own image (as a colonizer might), but rather a temptation to abandon our image to the surrounding space, becoming part of the scenery, if you will, by allowing space to penetrate us to the point where we disappear into what he called "represented space." This is why he described animal mimicry as a kind of three-dimensional photography or "teleplasty," in which the animal resembles a photograph of its surroundings because it literally embodies them.

Caillois made a distinction between perceived space, in which the organism is located at the origin of the coordinate system, and represented space, in which the organism is but one point among many. In represented space, he says, the organism "no longer knows what to do with itself." Caillois says that modern science had produced "increasing numbers of...represented spaces," citing Riemann-Christoffel's hyperspace (a principle of the differential geometry of surfaces) along with other examples. He further tells us that these new spaces undermine one's sense of personality, defined as an "awareness of the distinction between organism and environment and of the connection between the mind and a specific point in space."

We need both perceived and represented space to get on in the world, but when represented space occludes perceived space, we risk losing ourselves to it if, 

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16 Meyers, "Your Brain is No Longer Your Own," 144-5.
like the mimicking animal, we come to embody it. Represented space would, in other words, remake us in its image. This was precisely the fear that some commentators indirectly expressed with regard to new media: that the new forms of represented space generated by the media might refashion the world in their image, thereby blurring the boundary between reality and representation, and ultimately leading us, as passive recipients of those representations, to lose ourselves. There is a powerful analogy between, on the one hand, Caillois’s discussion of spaces that devour and depersonalize, and, on the other hand, the wider discussions of new media as penetrating and homogenizing the psychic and physical space of the so-called malleable “masses.” That analogy is evidence of broadly shared cultural and discursive pattern.

The depleting depersonalization Caillois linked to animal mimicry was not for him a desirable thing when it occurred in human beings. In fact, it might be read as one of the more oblique ways he relayed his feeling that he was living in an increasingly monotonous, atomized world, one that was devoid of collective “exuberance and jubilation,” as he put it in one of his presentations at the College. He and the other College founders often spoke in gendered terms about this state of affairs, with Leiris complaining about the “feeling of a diminished, castrated life” and Bataille lamenting a “world where the need to be a man is missing,” where indeed there was “room only for the unattractive face of the useful man.” This was the devirilized world that had led to Munich, and they blamed it on an endemic “bourgeois individualism” that had atomized people, slackened their social ties, and turned them into “some sort of conscious sheep resigned to the slaughterhouse” when faced with the possibility of death in battle. Modern individualism, they thought, had (ironically enough) generated conformity and cowardice.

Although they mustered many of the tropes that other critics were using to describe the links between modernity, mass phenomena, and social homogeneity—and thus found themselves implicated in the dominant discourse about these things—the College’s founders, in valorizing the secret society, ultimately embraced hiding in plain sight, and the self-loss it entailed, as a solution to the cultural malaise they associated with modern mass society. Bataille had once described the College as “somehow the external activity” of the secret society Acéphale. Moreover, in one of the few public statements it issued, the College claimed not only that it was seeking an answer to the question of

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9 Roger Caillois, “Festival,” in Hollier, ed., CDS, 302, see also 281; “La fête,” in Hollier, ed., CDS, 691; see also 646.
whether “spiritual direction” had disappeared under the weight of modern rationalism, but also that it was striving “to be to the extent that it is able, this answer.” The College thus positioned the secret society as at once an object of study and as something worthy of imitation. Either way it offered the image of a strategic depersonalization that was not depletory, but active, energizing, and implicitly virile.

In contrast to the instrumental and servile form of self-erasure demanded by fascism, in which the self sacrifices itself to the collectivity for the sake of the Nation and the Race, the secret society allowed the College to conceive a form of self-loss that would rescue the vitality of the self—and the community—without inventing a new political religion or assigning sacred status to homogenizing, identitarian, “monocephalic” categories such as the Nation. Thus, at one point in the mid-1930s, Bataille tellingly asked, “Who is not to say that we shall never see, assembled upon this earth, crowds, caught up together in a trance, rising to end the idiocy of patriotism?” At the same time, the “sacred” would not be banished, only reconfigured in new terms. “We are ferociously religious,” Bataille would claim in the pages of Acéphale. Although it was not clear how this religiosity would be expressed concretely or practically, in the abstract, at least, Bataille pointed to the possibility of a religion that would refuse the fantasy of an identity unadulterated by difference, whether that fantasy took the form of God, the Nation, the Race, or some other category imagined to be purged (really or ideally) of otherness. Such a refusal required a notion of difference as radially unassimilable and infinitely irretrievable—in other words, in a perpetual state of hiding. For the risk of publicly proclaiming one’s difference in, say, movements or manifestos or political parties, was that this difference might itself become the basis of a new form of identity without difference—or, in other words, the starting point of exactly the kind of religion Bataille and the College wanted to avoid. If they aimed for plenitude, it was plenitude that, as Leiris put it in another context, would be “the bearer of its own distortion and ridicule.”

Secret societies and animal mimicry thus symbolized in very different ways the possibility of holding identity and difference together, and—more crucially—the possibility of protecting “difference” from absorption. For what does hiding in plain sight signify if not the possibility of being, simultaneously, indistinguishable from one’s surroundings (by virtue of being identified with them) and distinct from those surroundings because one has nonetheless managed to preserve the boundaries of one’s form, or, in other words, one’s difference? It should perhaps come as no surprise that Leiris was fascinated by the geometrical concept of tangency, which as he put it, marks the “crossroads of a union and a split.” How better to describe the structural undecideability—the holding together of identification and differentiation—that was written into the

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23 Hollier, ed., COS, 65, emphasis in original.
28 Ibid., 22: 11.
various figures of hiding in plain sight, from the flâneur to the secret society to the mimicking animal?

Critical Implications

The project of protecting difference from absorption by conceiving it as permanently irretrievable, as impossible to pin down, performed a tremendous amount of cultural work. On the most basic level, it founded an antifascist position that was neither liberal-republican nor Marxist in that it called neither for a revival of the autonomous individual nor proletarian revolution, but rather for self-erasure. The logic of this position was homeopathic, with the remedy resembling the ailment: that is, by embracing the very depersonalization encouraged by modern mass society, the College thought they might be able reconstruct selves and communities as structurally divided, constitutively incapable of conceiving themselves as pure, self-same, or devoid of internal difference. It bears mentioning that this was more of an ethical position than a strictly political one (at least in the usual sense of that term).

Hiding in plain sight also offered a seductive metaphor (whether literalized or not) for thinking about the possibilities for resistance in a world the College’s founders perceived to be increasingly deft at neutralizing more visible attempts to subvert dominant norms. The bourgeois appropriation of surrealist art illustrated this process beautifully for Bataille, Caillois, and Leiris, all of whom had engaged with surrealism on some level but ultimately rejected it. In other words, the College learned from surrealism that a culturally subversive agenda could not risk publicity—in the fullest sense of the term—lest its subversive effects be co-opted by the very culture it intended to criticize. Naming itself as a movement in a public maniesto had doomed surrealism to cultural assimilation and, in short, ensured that surrealist anti-art would find its way into museums and art markets. The movement had also started acting like a traditional religion, Bataille thought, with its leader André Breton “excommunicating” those who fell out of line. The College’s founders thus moved away from subversive art and literature in their search for disruption to imagine culturally subversive practices that would, in Caillois’s words, “confront society on its own territory and attack it with its own arms.” In this context, too, the secret society appears as a kind of homeopathic cure.

The project of holding identity and difference together also allowed thinkers such as Bataille and Leiris to reconceive the meaning of masculinity. In their formulation, virility was no longer tied to individual autonomy and rationality as it had been in mainstream republican discourse, but rather to self-loss, depersonalization, and indeed castration. In other words, their critique of identity-without-difference—that is, their rejection of the kind of plenitude that fails to bear within itself its own distortion and ridicule—had an important gender dimension. What they did not do, however, was question why virility, even

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29 Dean, The Self and its Pleasures, 221-2.
30 Hollier, ed., COS, 35-6; CDS, 335.
in reconstituted form, should remain the ultimate objective of social and political life.\textsuperscript{32}

Finally, to put these issues in a slightly different and larger context, we might consider whether the College of Sociology’s focus on invisibility, hiding, and secrecy as the basis for subversive action marked an implicit attempt to reverse what Michel Foucault would later theorize in *Discipline and Punish* as modern panopticism.\textsuperscript{33} When the modern disciplinary and surveillance apparatus furthers its power by suggesting, as Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon did, that it sees (or can see) everything without itself being seen, should it be surprising when hiding in plain sight becomes a privileged method of resisting such power and the docility—that depleted life—it engenders? How otherwise to thwart panopticism if not by reversing the seeing/being seen dyad so that she who wishes to resist power becomes the one who sees without being seen? This point must arguably form part of any historical explanation of why the College’s founders found the trope of hiding in plain sight so appealing, whether that trope served, as it did for Caillois in his essay on animal mimicry, as a way of describing a debilitating form of self loss that he would describe in other texts as a feature of modern mass society, or whether the trope helped articulate new forms of resistance, as it did in the various texts on secret societies.

In providing this brief effort to historicize and contextualize these various interwar fantasies of hiding in plain sight, this essay has sought to sketch out the contours of the discursive context in which early expressions of what we now call postmodernism emerged. This research might also broaden our understanding of why similar fantasies—along with the actions they might motivate—continue to resonate in contemporary culture. Whether we are considering an anonymous network of terrorist cells whose members blend in to the societies in which they operate, or the prevalence of conspiracy theories in the present day, we would do well to remember that the subversive potential attributed to what we could call “panoptic reversal” has itself a discursive history—one linked to the problem of homogenization in modern mass society and the way it has been constructed and understood.
