

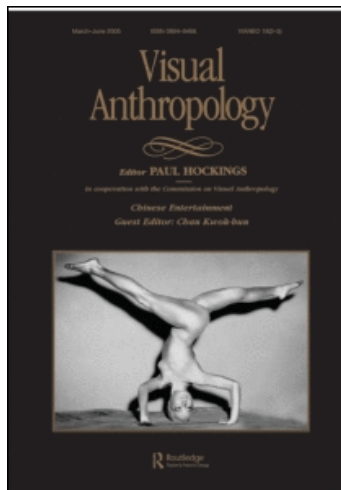
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The Visual Traces of an Ethnographic Investigation; or, How Do People Present Themselves in a Concrete Situation?

Albert Piette

This article describes the methodological work of retrieving the remnants of an ethnographic investigation of a festive ritual. Eliminated at first, the author shows how, thanks to the representations of outlines in photos, details have been retrieved so as to describe and analyze the styles of human presence seen in the slightest displacements in space. Rather than “ethnography,” the author is proposing the term “phenomenography” here to designate this study of the presence of people.

WHAT TO DO WITH THE LITTLE DETAILS?

Some years ago, when my objective was the observation and comparison of rituals and personal behavior in various festivals of French-speaking Belgium, (carnivals, popular festivals, political fêtes), the comparative perspective—even if supported by photographic recording—led me necessarily to look at the things that seemed naturally important and essential, and I was directed in this by information the actors themselves gave. I thus went through the usual phases in a field study: observation, taking and organizing notes, theorizing and writing up. And many of the details ended up in the waste-basket!

But what *is* a detail? Is it what we find after we have described thoroughly, that is to say, some little bit extracted from the whole, within which it plays some role and can be studied minutely? Or is it an insignificant, inessential element, of no importance in this whole? There would thus be some details that are good to think about and good to work with in a scientific operation for which they have satisfied its pretension for exhaustion; and there would be others which it would be necessary at the start to throw out, so that the scientific conclusion would appear coherent and sensible. From the evidence, no element is in itself a minor detail, and all elements can be integrated into such and such a logic for

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understanding, such and such a schema of intelligibility. On the one hand, no scientific study can suppress the smallest fragments of an entity; but on the other hand, the process of investigation involves preserving and eliminating. There are features that, almost naturally in the practice of observation, are not even seen, let alone noted, by an observer in the field; while there are others that, if they are noticed, will not be worth putting into a field diary. And if by chance they do get written down, they very likely will not make it into the formal organization of the notes.

Other more resistant details come up against the theoretical and conceptual framework which, following a process of abstraction, consists in accentuating trends or tendencies so as to foreground some diffuse elements and eliminate others. And at any rate, the other stage, that of writing up, is equally constrained to reduce and summarize, to get away from whatever has seemed to qualify one's objective of maximum readability—in a word, make it disappear! It's a fact that many of the losses concern details on the mode of concrete presence of individuals. Thus, once our comparative research is over, it seems evident to us that, prompted by a sort of dissatisfaction, we need to empty out the waste-baskets (virtual ones, nowadays), that is to say, to recuperate a collection of details discarded during the stages of scientific analysis. Luckily in my case, the rejects thrown into the waste-basket were parts of my photographs!

THE DISCOVERY OF PHOTOGRAPHIC REMNANTS

In the sphere of festive rituals, my most revealing encounter with this viewpoint was without doubt with the *Gilles* of Binche, a Belgian town in the Province of Hainaut. These folkloric personages are embedded there in a symbolic order which involves a strong affective mobilization of the Binche populace. In fact, these symbolic orientations can be looked at in terms of the three following diads, one of each pair having a positive or negative weighting: past +/future –; inside +/outside –; constraint +/liberty –. Along the first axis, the festival at Binche is viewed as a “traditional festival” and the Gille character is comparable to numerous dancers in other very ancient European festivals.

“The carnival must remain as a tradition,” say the Gilles. Certain practices associated with the Gille costume suggest a desire to cement certain of the elements according to the most ancient possible historical model. On the second diadic axis, the festival is valued for its purely local authenticity and its opposition to all commercial distortions of a “folkloric” sort by Gilles outside the town. Such a local valuation of the Gille character implies a certain “osmosis” between the Binche populace and its Gilles, one which excludes the “outside” spectators. On the third diadic axis, the Gille is shown to be a very serious character whose gravity and solemnity resemble those of “a great priest.” It is thus logical that such a personage will be subject to various rules during the performance of his ritual, ordaining the most dignified behavior possible: avoiding the abuse of drink, not having hair hanging down over the neck, not dancing with a woman in a café, avoiding hands in the pockets, not leaving one's group without one tambourin player, etc.

Thus at the onset of my study [Piette 1988] the power of local discourse, my own observations, re-reading my fieldnotes, and analysis of the photos made me see a convergence of attitudes about the Gilles as though they were identical, and that their respectful posture in particular was. For example, I noted there without more precision, "once the public began to crowd onto the pavement [sidewalk], the Gilles grouped together in their association descend from the Railway Square to the Central Square, all the time dancing to the rhythm of tambourins but not without refreshment in two or three cafés." Let us call this Description I.

After looking into the details which had been consigned to the waste-basket, here comes a new description (we will call it Description II) of the same sequence of actions which I outlined in a book, *Le mode mineur de la réalité*:

Here then these Gilles start off to carry out their mission in the early light of dawn. They are a pair, three, five, eight and so on, as their numbers grow. Accompanied by relatives and friends, they dance their traditional steps without a whisper of emotion, the atmosphere most often a serious one. However, it is not forbidden to exchange a few words, to tell someone a joke, during this choreographed advance. Dawn breaks. Already spectators are turning up; no doubt they are Binche people who are looking on, since they do not perform as Gilles. The groups, all bunched together, leave a few gaps: children in the foreground, feeling a bit lost or coming behind, and chatting amongst themselves. Relatives and friends in front of the group of Gilles press forward as if to protect the dancers. [Piette 1992: 67, trans.]

This Description II was not only accompanied by photos but in addition I juxtaposed at the end of the text a collection of terms suggesting the appropriate behaviors of a supplementary network, a sort of diffuse duplication of the narrative schema of the festival: "Multiple Gilles—repetitive dancing—various salutations—exchange of words—joking—presence of spectators—overlooking the children's behavior—cash reward for success."

As for the pathological risk that confronts one in ethnography (to throw out nothing and describe everything), I want to suggest a practical solution. Isn't the height of obsessiveness to create waste-baskets? My methodological choice leading to the opposite train of thought from the sociological procedure is a better one [Piette 1996]. It requires, as I have just said, to return, once the text is written, to the event itself, passing through the several stages of the research and digging out of the waste-paper baskets what had been discarded. Let us go back to the description of the Gilles.

What has happened between Description I and Description II? Some photographic images of this sequence have been the deciding ones in the process of recovering the facts. Looked at in multiple shots, they make us see from one image to another in the series details of no importance which are nonetheless present in each shot. Let me explain first of all in this research the procedure for reading the photographic images, and secondly the kind of details that they allow us to recover.

Thanks to the principles of focus and depth of field, photography allows one to see a more or less stratified and modulated presentation of the scene that was photographed [Piette 1993]. The image however forms a flat and uniform



Figure 1 Photography-concept.

support, transposing three-dimensional objects located at some distance onto a two-dimensional paper surface. A third level of cumulation and melding of readings of the images is needed to compensate for this uniformizing tendency of photography *vis-à-vis* the data that it provides, by calling into evidence in the design the pertinent and non-pertinent elements.

So far as the sequence of actions described above is concerned, a first reading [Figure 1] was based on a principle of schematization: that is, making hierarchies, discerning features, eliminating the incidental in favor of what is essential. It was necessary in fact to put tracing paper over a photo and make a tracing, that is to say, follow the traits recognized as the principle ones and the outlines of what I would wish to demonstrate [Leeds-Hurwitz and Winkin 1991].

By analogy with the textual paradigm, we are here at the level of the photography-concept, characterized by accentuation of one or more aspects of the photographed data (costume, gesture, etc.) and/or of a string of phenomena that are sometimes isolated, diffuse or discrete. This string is thus a system of codes: its privileged rules of composition presuppose a given universe of specific meaning and an articulator of the various distinguishable signs. It is indeed this operation which consists in making disappear those actors who are not of one mind in their attitudes [Figure 2], which results in Description I.

Then the application of a particular grid for reading [Figure 3], and the occurrence of "somatotactic" and/or "proxemic" codes [Spiegel and Machotka 1974], causes different modalities of presence to appear in the interpersonal positions (face to face, one behind the other, one beside another, back to back, and at variable angles); in interpersonal movements (approaching, contacting, intersection by occupying the same space, inclusion of the body of another, manipulation through movement in the personal space, removing oneself through a process of disengagement, separation with absence of contact, etc.); variable intensities of engagement (avoidance, absence of contact, brushing against someone,

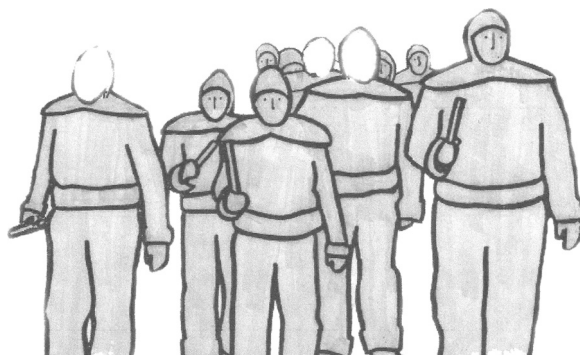


Figure 2 Details are disappeared.

touching them, intense engagement); different bodily positions (standing, leaning, sitting down, bent, curved); with gestural movements (of the head, the arms, the legs, the feet, or of the whole body); kinds of looking (avoidance, sideways, general, straight in the eyes); zones of extension of the body to carry out some predetermined movement (forward, forward-sideways-left, etc.).

Finally, the analytic frame of photography [Figure 4] attempts to re-use the data from the first two levels of reading. Thus, far from espousing a fragmentation of ideas about what is real, the photography-concept and the code of reading adopted may, through too much structuration, risk wringing the data dry or at any rate reducing and excluding some of it. It is for this reason that the photography-frame has as its aim not just a “framing” of the focused-upon event in the scene being examined but at the same time the outline taken from the tracing; and then the naked eye, well informed by this initial view, can appreciate this behavioral movement.

By revealing what is there to be seen and what is gestured, while leaving the reality to exist in its uniqueness, this type of photographic reading allows one to frame a scene starting from the focal event; but by doing this it indicates that the modalizations of this framework are subject to a permanent vulnerability: according to Goffman’s analysis [1991], doing this, finding oneself outside the frame, breaking the frame, causing a pause...

In this inverse study which leads to Figure 4, we need to recover a collection of bits of residual data contained in the photographic images. Today this would mean falsifying rather than associating supplementary information to one or

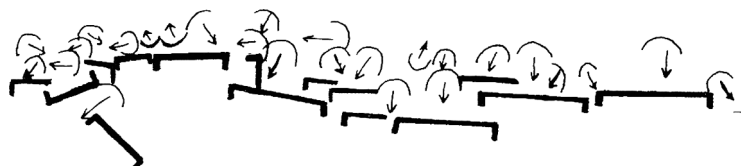


Figure 3 Grid for reading attitudes.



Figure 4 Photography-frame.

another waste-basket in particular: for writing, for concepts, for the organization of notes, and finally in a direct look at the field. But that the slackening of some children while dancing (on the left of the Figure) was resisted until the final step, and that the side movements of the Gilles had not even been written down at the time of the observation is a certainty. It is quite possible they hadn't even been noticed!

This is how we can reconstitute the progressive operation of recovering the residual things—let us call them the data—according to an inverse operation to the classic one of field enquiry:

- The displacement of the children captured on the left of the image (with the oblique lines in Figure 5) by an external element which initiates a pronounced sideways displacement certainly risks an action that could imply a call to order, an immediate “correction” (like “Watch out! Where are you going?...”). Here we are up against a limiting distraction. There is also a collection of

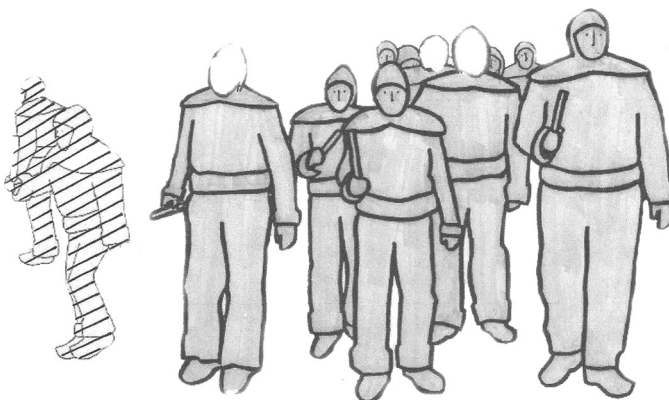


Figure 5 Recovery of the children's displacements.

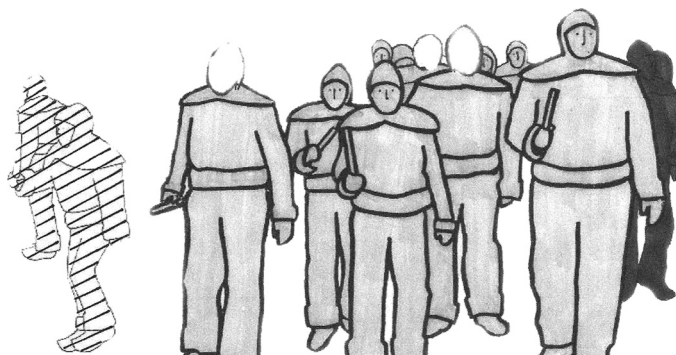


Figure 6 Recovery of the Gilles' greetings.

actions the accomplishment of which, far from being explicitly prohibited, would suppose an arrest in the interaction until it gets renegotiated, sometimes very rapidly, in order that it can resume. Another possible case would be one of an incident which is clearly compartmentalized, like for example putting a badly adjusted costume back in order.

- The greeting of the Gilles (in black on the right) towards some persons recognized on the sidewalk [Figure 6]. The Gilles are thus also, in the dominant mode of the compromise, Mister X and Y who, at the moment when they do the ritual action in question, also occupy other roles (family or professional ones, etc.). This is a redoubling that allows the actor to actualize traces of other roles in a more or less material way. While a process of lurching forward involves a succession of actions, one must here make apparent to his people a sequence of actions in different registers. This is the cropping-up of an external factor towards which one or another person directs a more precise nod of the head or a look of recognition. It's also a pointed conversation which is kept going with a friend or with members of the same dancing group (shown with large dots in Figure 7). These

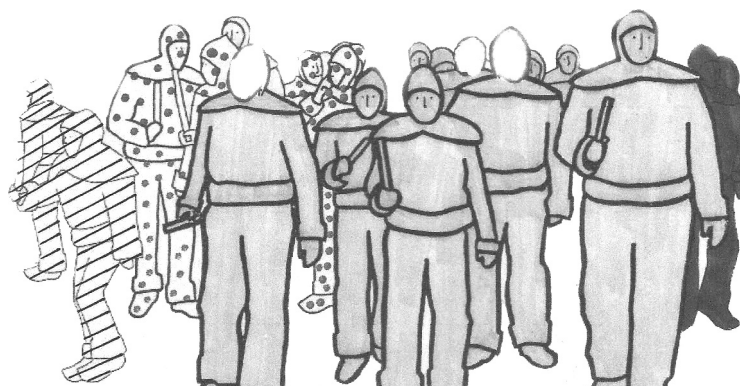


Figure 7 Recovery of the conversations between Gilles.

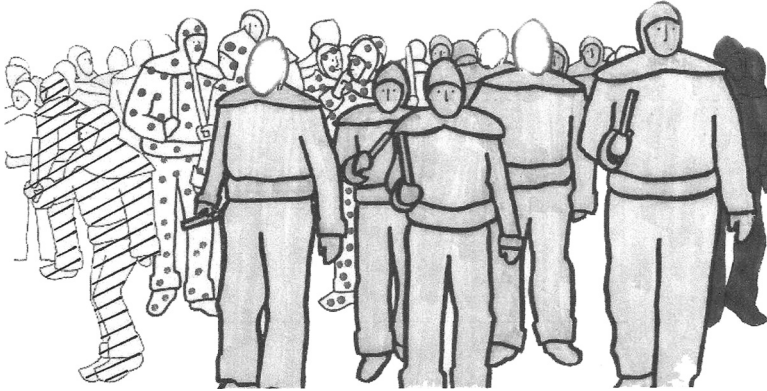


Figure 8 Recovery of the Gilles' small movements.

behaviors can be related to the introduction of a different "nature" than that demanded of the participants. The conversation between Gilles goes back to the same category as the preceding point, except that they are already written into the possible ritual sequences.

- The small movements of the Gilles (in white in the middle of Figure 8): according to the codes of reading that were used, they effectively allow one to see movements of the head, eyes or body towards right or left, and a variable gap created between the positions of everyone. Such variations do not seem intentional: purely individual, these gestural traits differ and are not shared among members of the group. There is noise, it might be added. But this, which is unnoticed, is without consequence and is absorbed as soon as it arises.
- The distraction of the Gilles (with faces cross-hatched in Figure 9) by a harmless external factor, which does not seem to correspond to a precise greeting to anyone.

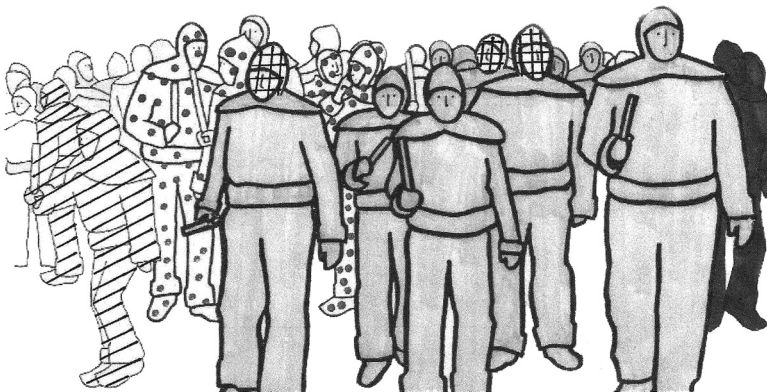


Figure 9 Recovery of the Gilles' distraction.



Figure 10 *The backdrop.*

- The backdrop [Figure 10], in particular that of trees, houses, streets and sidewalks.

PERCEPTION MODES AND INTERVALS IN PRESENCE

What can we get out of all this? First of all, in contrast with many sociologies of perception, especially those oriented toward forms of tension and vigilance, the minute observation of details causes one to see a diversified collection of points of attention, of focusing or of distraction, from which the presence of humans cannot be separated.

Indices

These are the visible expressions of social support, which are themselves external to the situation and which are made up of a collection of rules, norms or conventions on which individuals depend to show an expected attitude and to show the proper signals. In the situation presented it is up to the Gille to show a neat dance-step and a good disguise. The indices are most often noticed or utilized in an automatic and routinized way.

Reference Points

These can be people, objects, spaces, times that allow everyone with a minimum of reflexive effort to adapt himself to the situation and to coordinate his actions with those of others. In the analyzed image, the sidewalks, streets, timetables, the members of their particular group are constant reference points against which the sequences of action of the Gilles are accomplished.

The Fragments

These are the object of particular attention, often of brief duration, as perhaps during the ritual sequence, the brief motion of a Gille in the process of adjusting his costume, but which it would be difficult not to recall. A person who is recognized and greeted on the sidewalk would also be a fragment of this dynamic of perception, inasmuch as she or he was a brief object of attention.

The Backdrop

This is made up of the totality of people and objects present in the space, though not considered explicitly or implicitly as pertinent factors at stake in the situation and in its collective understanding. There could be a red stoplight in front of the procession, which is certainly an indication of a capital support, or a streetlamp, which, in other circumstances, would act as a marker or reference point for a pedestrian, or a tree which may have been a bit of a concern for a municipal worker, or houses, windows, people a man is familiar with, towards which he would glance without actually noticing them. The background in a situation also includes many things that are not seen; and certainly not the same ones for every person.

The Unimportant Detail

This is something that emerges from the background every so often, distracting the individual, such as the sun's rays, the open window of a house (but this would not be the window where once a Gille had played as a child in that house), the red hat of a lady on the sidewalk—all being moments in time without any consequence, hardly noticed by anyone else, perhaps too things that are rapidly forgotten as are an aside between two Gilles or the slight lateral nods of the head or body. As they have entered into the background with no direct importance to the current situation, these fragments or indices can appear as isolated and like details of no importance, such as a lamp-post or a stoplight.

ATTENTION SPACE

Next, these comments allow one to stipulate to five forms of time-lag or interval infiltrating the modes of human presence.

Docility

This concerns the interval created by the “wandering” of one’s attention during an immediate and automatic performance, the effect of habit of action and of the implicit applying of rules, bearings and sundry indices.

Interstitiality

This designates the margin introduced during the ongoing act of presence by an imitative posture in the form of a hesitation, of a disengagement, a mental "absence," and also small gestural or postural omissions.

Laterality

This designates, in the space-time unity, elements that were *already present* and peripheral to the pertinent stakes; they might be persons, animals, objects or landscapes. These constitute a backdrop against which the observed thing may have minimal visibility, and furthermore be distracting for someone or other among those elements considered unimportant details.

Externality

This concerns the *arousal*, in the ongoing act of presence or in relation to it, of elements external to the spatial-temporal unity in question, in the form of wandering thoughts, and in particular memories of past situations or anticipations of future ones.

Fluidity

This topic expresses the immediate and continuing flux between situations, instances and sequences of action (even opposite or contradictory ones), whether punctuated or not by vacant passages or weak moments, marked by fluid variations in intensity, or in the balance of attention, but also by the human capacity not to close off an action or a conversation, nor to postpone them, to forget them or place them in parentheses.

FROM ETHNOGRAPHY TO PHENOMENOGRAPHY: ANOTHER ANTHROPOLOGY

We can go further from the viewpoint of methodology and theory. In terms of this back-and-forth between the event and the text, sociocultural ethnography shifts forward from its habits of observation to analyze the presence of the individual. Rather than comparing, pulling together attitudes, gestures, postures in synthetic descriptions, so as to understand the groups, cultures, or societies, we attempt to capture the human presence according to varied expressions of engagement in a situation where an individual is in agreement with others about the collective stakes, and at the same time allows for a grouping of gestures or unexpected behaviors to appear.

To consider a society's culture as all that the individual does by way of behavior that is in a manner acceptable to others, one is risking too direct a

focusing—and one not easily turned away from—on the convergent semantic traits. While bad use of this margin of maneuver risks threatening the course of the interaction, its complete non-use entails such an interactional danger that the participants in the interaction could call into question the normality of a human being.

Would not a scene of the self-absorption arouse a sense of fright or a sign of extravagance? For competence in interaction supposes furthermore a capacity for identification with the situation and a masterly control of the borders of a maneuver, a capacity for tolerance allowing one to undervalue the totality of the gestures of partners in this situation and in this space for action.

The same judgment of extravagance would elsewhere apply to someone who, halted by particular details in the conduct of others, would not be able to practice implicitly (we can only deduce what is going on in an interaction) this cognitive operation of underestimation for a collection of gestures the recognition of the irrelevance of which implies tolerance precisely.

It thus appears that we are working on data the characteristics of which differentiate them from the data that the social sciences generally seek to discover and analyze, the things that are typical and shared among the members of some collectivity. Effectively, everyone who I allowed to see my “waste material” confirmed the nature of the detail: “That isn’t important.” It is what comes under this heading which interests me and which focuses my attention on the gestures or attitudes that do not have any real signification for the individual himself. Many of these often go unnoted and unobserved by the participants in the interaction themselves, or at any rate are not considered because they are thought lacking in importance. These details do not connote a new system of signs that are directly pertinent and interpretable by people. Indeed, on the contrary, it is because they form a simple index of humanity that they are not included in the realm of significant pertinence of an interaction or in the typicality of a cultural model. From this perspective the detail is basic because it *is not* pertinent.

What theoretical place should be accorded to such details which are, by definition, of no importance in the social sciences? They lie at the heart of the notion of being a human. Had the history of sociology and ethnology been different, without allowing the work of Tarde and Simmel, for example, to remain in the shadow of Durkheim’s and Weber’s work, this matter would no doubt have been looked into and worked on in various ways. We read in Tarde, for example:

The attributes that each element owes to its incorporation in a regimen do not entirely make up its nature; it has other tendencies, other instincts which come to it from different contexts; others again, [...] which come to it from its own origins, from its own basic substance, can be drawn upon to struggle against the collective force, which is much more vast though less profound; a force it participates in, but which is just an artificial entity made up of aspects and appearances of human beings. [Tarde 1999: 80, trans.]

In involvement, the choices of action and of gestures that are actualized and the choices that are rejected but not abandoned are seen as possible: as such, they can show themselves in the form of unimportant details in human social involvement. “The person is richer, more lasting, larger than the individual,”

wrote Simondon [2007: 220], evoking a reserve of the person that is “available, in waiting” [*ibid.*: 193].

The person is not only what he shows himself to be, because this manifestation is not the *entelechy* [the vital principle that guides the development and functioning of an organism—*Ed.*], but only one phase; while this phase is actualizing itself, other latent but real phases, actual even to the extent of being energetically present potentials, do exist, and the person consists in these as much as in the phase by which he is attaining his *entelechy*. [*ibid.*: 216]

An extra-social reserve, a negative reserve, more or less: our human being seems to be equipped to continue to live, to survive. In human situations, there is thus something more, a remainder. Certainly though, a situation without any emergent meaning would be chaotic. It would lack order, lack reference points. But a situation without any residues is unlivable. Minor details too allow people to live together: they add a layer to those details that contribute to the construction of an action, the specifically human layer which relaxes, or defuses, which frees human presence from the imperatives of meaning and of rationality, that allows people not to see another in the guise of an exhibitionist or a planner of his meanings.

These details attest that humans are not tied to the imperatives of communication, of place and of social strategies, as animals would be. This is the minor mode of life. Is it not precisely this principle of an animal life without leftovers that illustrates the description reported by Darwin, even if at second hand, on the attitude of dogs which “when they feel affection, lower their ears so as not to hear any sound and concentrate all their attention on the stroking by their master” [Darwin 2001(1872): 165]?

More than culture, structure or interaction, it is the human being himself who is present in a situation, in relationships with other people, and who therefore is of interest to us. To designate this sort of study, we use the term “phenomenography.” And phenomenography has as its objective to observe and describe human beings in the most precise way possible while avoiding a sociocultural perspective (hence my avoidance of the term “ethnography”). This term keeps the cap on important information so as to understand the stakes in a situation, but it also directs our attention towards things that are not stakes in it. For all the theories get around the *presence* of a human being in a situation. It is precisely the objective of phenomenography to describe his presence and that is what we want to devote phenomenography to: looking, noting, writing what appears to be there; the person who is present and acting somehow, when he is with others.

For what discipline is there that is charged with describing the human in his situation? Psychology privileges experimentation in a laboratory, philosophy most often involves theoretical questioning, and the social sciences, when they do choose to observe, try to understand a grouping, a society, an interaction, or a social activity. If we have to define phenomenography, we would say that it consists of an observation-description of human beings in situations, following their swing, according to the rhythm of the hours and days, placing in parentheses sociocultural variations while centering one’s attention, through varying

focal lengths, on the modes of presence, that is to say, the actions, gestures, and the states of mind that constitute the act of existing. Phenomenographic study is analyzing the act of existing, insofar as it goes beyond the social dimension of the person but so constitutes an essential dimension of communal life.

Phenomenography thus seeks to observe human beings in their modes of presence; but also other beings, such as animals, so as better to understand what is specifically human. Think back to Darwin's dog. It's a safe bet that animals phylogenetically close to humans, like chimpanzees and gorillas, show in their situational presence many unimportant details, many of those little discrepancies or compartmentalized intervals. But this is to embark on another study for which the photographic image would also be something one could not ignore. It's a new perspective for anthropology as an empirical and general science of both human and non-human beings [Piette 2009].

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