
THE PATHOLOGICAL NOTION OF INFORMATION: BORDERX

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ABSTRACT

In 2001 artist Heath Bunting began a project called “Border Xing’s” where he set out to cross all of the national boundaries within the Eurozone. Not deterred by the eager optimism of a newly formed European Commission, nor criticisms levied against his project proposal claiming that the notion of the ‘border’ within the Eurozone has become obsolete. Bunting proceeded in order to prove this criticism and socially fore-grounded notion of open borders wrong seeking to provide a double negative. But does this double negative transpire with the conditions he established for the project? Can this double negative even be produced by a body that fits all of the requirements of the able, Western—albeit a bit scruffy looking—globalized traveler?

KEYWORDS

Border, Pathology, Fugue, Information, Global flows

The artist is Heath Bunting. The project is “BorderXing’s” (BorderX).

In 2001 Bunting set out to cross all of the national borders within the European Union. Funded by the British Council, Tate London and Mundam Contemporary Art Luxembourg, Bunting shook off both the touting and hubris of a newly formed European Commission and early criticisms of his project proposal that asserted national borders no longer impeded travel. In other words, the national borders within the Eurozone were obsolete for EU citizens, and therefore crossing them undetected or not, was a benign political Act. Bunting proceeded with the project, deflecting this criticism daring to produce a double-negative: that he as a white northern European fellow, dressed in a variety of hiking gear, could be arrested for deliberately crossing these borders on foot, entering countries along unobvious or

unrecognized routes. Already we have a contradiction. Does not, Bunting’s plan to cross borders undetected negate the possibility of apprehension, and therefore a positive proof? Does traveling undetected across borders that are not patrolled negate the potential of this project to shed light on security formations and control structures that are complex in function and difficult to ascertain if the ultimate goal is arrest?

“BorderX” also had a web component called “BorderXing’s Guide,” complete with text and images describing preparation and travel; and had a ‘route planner’ or piece of software that rated the difficulty of each journey. Bunting provided restricted access to this site, granting viewing permissions only to those he approved or felt it was in their best interest to see. But this website component too, presents a contraction in regards to the Act. “BorderXing Guide” does not achieve what it pretends to do: to provide other border crossers with explicit and precise information for crossing or to enable the establishment of an underground network to aid fellow border crossers, refugees, asylum seekers etc. The images and text on the site are more a mix of travel photos and on-the-road Zen like poetry. Explicit tactical information is not provided. Network creation is not realized.

Perhaps then, the wrong question of this project has been asked. Instead of focusing specifically on the potential of the political Act, which Heath flirts with, why not concentrate on the process rather than the result? What then makes crossing borders undetected quite engaging, perhaps seen as even dangerous? What does walking 60km in one day between London and Stevenidge, or between France and Spain via the Pyrenees ‘act’ out? I would argue that Heath not only in “BorderX,” but in his general practice which has and consists of pirate radio, tunnel digging, street graffiti, hackerish net.art projects etc. expresses a conceptual schema, a pathology of disappearance: developing utilizing a set of tactics and networks that enables his body within an informational culture which has at its core, a desire to monitor, track and process the ‘record’ of the global citizen. In order to prove this pathology we need a case or example of something perhaps similar. In a recent work by philosopher of science Ian Hacking, called “Mad Travelers: Reflections on the Reality of Transitory Mental Illnesses,” Hacking provides an outline and analysis of the social “vectors” contributing to the production of a medicalized condition

called the “fugue” or compulsive desire to travel. Hacking’s argument uses the metaphor of the ecological niche to understand why fugue was only diagnosed in Europe, primarily France and Germany between 1887 and 1910 and why it affected invariably men of the “working poor”. The tripartite of: the metaphor of the ecological niche; the medicalized conditions of the fugue; and characteristics of the fugueur can in a rather uncanny manner, work together as an inverse mirror for a reading of an informational pathology or that of Heath and “BorderX.”

In “Mad Travelers” Hacking asks what are the conditions that make the diagnosis of the “transient mental illness” or “travelers-fugue” as malady possible? For this Hacking uses the *ecological niche*: an environmental location where the sum of various competing forces, produces a specific ecology ripe for the production of species. Hacking identifies four forces or “vectors” that contribute to the niche of the fugue: (1) medical taxonomy; (2) cultural polarity; (3) observability and (4) release (Hacking, 81-82). Hacking also provides a negative niche, or ecology where fugue was never diagnosed; this negative is America.

According to Hacking, traveler’s fugue was first diagnosed in Bordeaux France by a young psychiatrist named Phillip Tisse. The first patient was Albert Dadas. The year was 1887. Tisse’s words:

“one morning last July when we noticed a young man of twenty-six crying in his bed in Dr. Pitres’s ward. He had just come from a long journey on foot and was exhausted, but that was not the cause of his tears. He wept because he could not prevent himself from departing on a trip when the need took him; he deserted family, work, and daily life to walk as fast as he could, straight ahead, sometimes 70 kilometers a day on foot, until in the end he would be arrested for vagrancy and thrown in prison.” (Tisse, Hacking, 7)

Travelers fugue, in 1895 summarized by a Parisian psychiatrist Fulgence Raymond consisted of three primary symptoms: (1) An unmotivated “compulsion” walk to destination ‘X’ with no explicit purpose; (2) When fugues traveled they behaved in an intelligent manner; fugueurs were not ones to steal and would travel “almost regularly without violence”; (3) Fugueurs retained no memory of their travel and thus

were perceived to have a form of amnesia, but induced by what? (Hacking, 47) Once medicalized the debate surrounding fugue was dominated by diagnosis and specific cause. Tisse and the prominent Parisian psychiatrist Jean-Martin Charcot pursued a blended hypothesis of hysteria and epilepsy which both the fugueurs’ amnesia and irrational behavior to ‘walk’ seemed congruent. If patients responded to hypnosis and suggestion they fell more on the side of the hysteric, if the patients responded to the taking of various “chemicals” then they were more of an epileptic; therefore a condition was diagnosed that fit within known medical discourse.

Hacking presents Albert Dadas the first fugueur with these characteristics: he was a member of the “working poor” neither homeless nor a part of the emerging 19th century leisure or middle class; he was employed at a gas company in Bordeaux and then Paris with duties as a clerk and minor repairman; he was clean in dress; not apt to drink; shy around women and a prodigious masturbator (Hacking, 26). Albert’s fugue would begin upon hearing of a far off place sometime in the midst of his daily routine. Compulsively, with as little or as much money as he could muster, Albert would take off on foot towards ‘X’ destination. Upon arrival, there, or wherever, usually out of money, hungry yet not particularly destitute, Albert would begin to gather funds either extending his journey or delivering him back home. On the road however, Albert would consistently lose all of his identifying papers, shedding his marriage certificate, service record from the military, and even a “get out of jail free” document provided Tisse that was acceptable for police in the explanation of his condition. Tisse diagnosed Dadas with “pathological tourism,” Hacking diagnoses Dadas with a profound desire to escape a powerless situation (Hacking, 25, 72).

Hacking on the last diagnosed fugueur in France Henri C.:

“From there he walked over the smuggler’s trails between France and Spain, a network of glorious rocky walls in the Albes, the foothills of the Pyrenees, smothered, at the time of year he traveled, with tiny flowers... That is great fugue country. There on a flowery slope or on a windblown outcrop you may still encounter a nervous man who was hoping not to be seen (Hacking,

79)”

This sounds very much like “BorderX,” in fact Heath did tell me that the best place to go if there ever were the apocalypse would be the Pyrenees (Kabatoff). Now Let’s apply the four “vectors,” taking up Hacking’s analysis of Albert’s fugue, transplanted onto Heath’s “informational pathology.”

Albert (Hacking’s Argument):

(1) Medical Taxonomy – Fugue fitted into a taxonomy, either as hysteria, or as epilepsy, or both. It did not dislodge existing systems of classification. But it invited controversy: into which established taxonomy should fugue be fitted? That made fugue theoretically interesting to physicians and alienists of the day (Hacking, 81).

Heath (Kabatoff’s argument):

“BorderX” also fits into a taxonomy, either as activism, conceptual art, performance or net.art. It did not dislodge existing systems of classification. In fact it enhanced them by bringing aberrant actions of the body into an art world environment that is only beginning to think about informational infrastructures, thus making it interesting and relevant to what we are now encountering—although this taxonomy viewed in retrospect could possibly appear similar to the medical conditions that produce Hacking’s fugue?

Albert (Hacking’s argument):

(2) Cultural polarity—Fugue perfectly fitted between two social phenomena that loomed very large in contemporary consciousness: romantic tourism and criminal vagrancy, one virtuous, one vicious. Both were deeply important to the middle classes because one stood for leisure, pleasure, and fantasy escape, while the other stood for fear of the underworld. So fugue, as a phenomenon, was not interesting to ordinary people who did not go on meaningless and compulsive trips, people who could control their fantasies or indulge in them (Hacking, 81).

Heath (Kabatoff’s argument):

“BorderX” as well as the other projects of Heath also rest in the vacuum between two polarities; the globalized business traveler and the illegal migrant, asylum seeker or terrorist, and again to follow Hacking, in the contemporary setting we have an example of both virtue and vice. To the

informational class an expression of success and participation in this new logic of flows, while the other is seen as the force that corrupts a social welfare systems or has the potential to bring a nation to the brink of war. “BorderX” is less interesting to those who can access either of these two routes of passage, as each is motivated bearing an end goal and does not present a situation where Heath would be represented as a either an exalted or vexed figure.

Albert (Hacking’s argument):

(3) Observability—A substantial system of surveillance and detection was in place. French fugueurs had to have papers, if they went far. They were systematically subject to scrutiny as deserters or draft dodgers. You could not simply wander about the continent of Europe without being noticed by authorities. In order for a form of behavior to be deemed a mental disorder, it must be strange, disturbing and noticed (Hacking, 82).

Heath (Kabatoff’s argument):

Heath is wandering around Europe unnoticed. That is the point. What is displayed on his website irrational.org/heath/borderx/index.htm is the record. Heath travels with a passport just in case, but he has never been stopped. He looks like a hiker, sort of. The fact that he has not alerted the authorities makes strong the case that the pathology of the informational is to move with flows, unnoticed, undetected, without a trace.

Albert (Hacking’s argument):

(4) Release—Fugue was an inviting escape for a particular class, men who had steady work and a certain amount of independence. Their circumstances of income and family kept them this side of leisured travel. Their deep-set conformity to established mores kept them this side of crime. Fugue was a space in which dysfunctional men, on the edge of freedom yet trapped, could escape (Hacking, 82).

Heath (Kabatoff’s argument):

Heath escapes into a world—either virtual or actual—that does its best to monitor, track and silently influence the individual. The “release” for Heath, that which calms the nerves, is the maintenance of mental and bodily facilities which enable him to exist much like Serres “Parasite” in relation to the relation, feeding off the surplus produced by two polarities (Serres, 14).

Heath moves from his semi-stable living environment to one that he is perhaps more familiar with, life on the street, life on the trail. Perhaps this is even a “coming home” for Heath.

Epilogue: Albert (Hacking’s argument)

(Negative) UK/USA—To postulate a niche for an illness is to make two kinds of claim, one positive, one negative. In the presence of the relevant vectors, the illness flourishes; in their absence it does not. We have controls in the past to check this. America and Britain, lacking both the cultural polarity and observability vectors, had no fugue epidemic. Cultural polarity: vagrancy was not a central social problem, and tourism within America had not yet become an industry. Observability: Travelers were not systematically inspected for papers; indeed one need have no identifying document on one’s person (Hacking, 82).

Epilogue: Heath (Kabatoff’s argument)

An anecdote, and another rather strange similarity between Dadas and Bunting: When Dadas traveled to Russia he was arrested while admiring a statue of Peter the Great in Moscow and accused of nihilism where he was subsequently deported via an escort of Cossaks to Turkey; When Heath went to visit, then girl friend Rachel Baker, who was teaching a new media workshop at CalArts in Valencia California, he was denied entry not once, but twice at the border between Canada and the United States. What was the reason? They didn’t like the way he looked. In the mid-90’s when it was still in fashion, Heath used to only travel in his active hikerish outfit and have around his neck a CD-ROM. No bags, nothing. The US border guards didn’t like this image, that he wasn’t a proper tourist. They thought he was a nihilist, but instead of reeling against Russian Orthodoxy he was reeling against liberal capital structures? Let’s be more modest, Heath is a mischievous guy.

CITED SOURCES

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