

Extase

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*Extase,
la bouche ouverte et
on y voit la lumière*
Photo : Idra Labrie

Life and other ecstatic practices

Life has no instruction manual. The human mind, however, is constantly searching for the meaning of life. Philosophies, religions, aphorisms, books on behavioural psychology, sages and other poets all do their best to explain it, and suggest or impose a range of very different paths that all hold out the promise of meaning. But the meaning of life remains elusive. Manifold theories yield conflicting, even contradictory answers. The further we investigate, the harder it becomes to settle on a single dominant model. The monotheistic religions and other absolute systems of thought are obsolete. It is impossible to distinguish truth from fiction, the beautiful from the ugly; neither Plato nor Kant, the Bible nor the Koran can help us. Rationality intersects with Kabbalah, fantasy, mysticism. Science, with its mysterious attractors, black holes and dark matter, also becomes part of this poetry. Chaos theory, for all its mathematical equations, is helpless to explain political or societal chaos. The permanent scars left on the earth by engineering and industry show us the irreparable rift in our relationship with nature and harmony.

Our unstable condition, as seen through this disturbing mirror, immerses us in absolute doubt. Some radical environmentalists are even calling for the abolition of the human race. Yet despite postmodernist pundits' claims that the search for meaning is obsolete, it continues to haunt us—so powerfully that the permanent search for meaning may well be our primary pathology, disrupting our behaviour and rational mind. And this pathology programs us to search for ecstasy; as if even reason and common sense capitulate in the face of human absurdity, stupidity and our drive to cannibalize our planet.

Many people take refuge in religion and mysticism, faith-based systems that, as such, require no objective proof. In any religion or philosophy of life, the body becomes the first subject of derogation. The body is the pathway to ecstasy in such diverse practices as mysticism, the hardships and joys of the Buddha, hermeticism, the Okipa¹ ceremony

¹ A ceremony practised in the nineteenth century where an individual was suspended by two hooks through their chest. At the moment of suspension, the pain was reported to overwhelm the consciousness creating a state of ecstasy.

of the Mandan, intense physical challenges, the practices of the Cynics and other stoics, the extraordinary ritualized behaviour in religions, stigmata, the pagan rituals of suffering and deprivation, and collective practices that transcend individual experience such as liturgies, where voice and body unite to elevate us to a higher state.

Ecstasy can be induced in a host of ways, from performance art to madness to religion. Performances where the body is used to communicate ideas, sounds and possibilities are very similar to the practices of self-harm and deprivation used in many world religions: scarification, tattooing, fasting, and the sound poetry of litanies and other mantras. All these practices, which often defy reason, can become pathologies when the yearning for truth grows excessive.

Through our theme, *Life and other ecstatic practices*, Folie/Culture examines how we reach ecstasy, defined as an “emotional or religious frenzy or trance-like state, originally one involving an experience of mystic self-transcendence,” or “an overwhelming feeling of great happiness or joyful excitement.”²

If we take life as an ecstatic practice, it behooves us to examine others as well. In the search for meaning, answers may come from both pure reason and our departures from it—poetry, mysticism, yelling, rage, symbolism, and practices of excess which take pain as a necessary component. Another view is that the search for meaning can be realized only by a small number of individuals after a lengthy process that begins with initiation and then requires systematic study and discipline, at the end of which meaning may be glimpsed. The apparent coherence of the world eludes us because we have no proof of the world’s existence other than our own sustained perception of it. The world remains inscrutable, insensitive to our cries and indifferent to our quest.

http://books.google.ca/books?id=NBIDYE38ODYC&pg=PA579&lpg=PA579&dq=pratiques+extatiques&source=bl&ots=nd e8rL6CMx&sig=tynPCxgl6U1vld5ZhqrA55MIskM&hl=fr&ei=_EurTP70BoGglAfaztXTCA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2&ved=0CBoQ6AEWAQ#v=onepage&q=pratiques%20extatiques&f=false

² Oxford Dictionary

What paths to ecstasy are available to us today? How can we name and describe the religious reawakening behind the spontaneous generation of new churches, sects and practices that exalt the body, reject reason and embrace creationism, alongside the exponential power of social networks? It is as if everyone wants to find a way out of the spiritual void that marked the beginning of postmodernism.³

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³ Gilles Lipovetsky, *L'Ère du vide* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983).