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SOCIÉTÉ IMAGINAIRE



President of Uruguay Julio M. Sanguinetti, Batuz, and the Prime Minister of Saxony, Kurt Biedenkopf at the exhibit of constructivism in Montevideo, Uruguay. By Peter Granser.



Julio M. Sanguinetti and artist Michael Morgner. By Peter Granser.

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Signs and wonders: a cow stall in an eastern German cloister is transformed into a state-of-the-art museum showing the work of Austrian-born photographer Inge Morath; in a villa on Italy's Lago di Como, scholars, artists, writers, intellectuals, and politicians from Europe and North and South America gather for a week to discuss cultural, political, and economic issues; Julio Maria Sanguinetti, Uruguay's president, and Kurt Biedenkopf, Minister-President of Germany's Saxony state, attend an exhibition of Argentinean and German constructivist art in Montevideo, Uruguay, and then sit down together to explore ways of bridging the yawning cultural gap between nations of the European Union and the six Mercosur countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay.

These were not random occurrences, but events organized by the Société Imaginaire, functioning as the town meetings of its international, universalist polis. In its tenth year of existence, the Société has continued to re-invent itself at regular intervals, as witness the gatherings mentioned above, and has evolved into what Batuz, its painter-founder refers to as a state of "permanent imagining." On a more concrete level, the Société has established a base at its "Working Center" at Kloster Altzella, in Nossen, Germany, where the "International Fotomuseum Inge Morath," was opened on September 15, 1996. The museum houses a permanent exhibition of photographs taken by Morath, the co-founder of the famed Magnum photo agency, and will also show rotating exhibitions of work by photographers from the region. The museum's inaugural also featured a two-week exhibition of Constructivist art in which works by Raul Lozza, the 85-year-old Argentinian master of the genre, were displayed with those of Hermann Gloeckner, a Dresden artist who died in 1987. Although the two men never met and lived on different continents, there were striking similarities in their art, reinforcing the Société's belief that creative endeavor can transcend national or cultural boundaries.

The Société's evolution into an intermediary between cultures and intellectual disciplines was also demonstrated over the past year at "dialogue forums" at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. and in Cadenabbia, Italy, where the discussion theme was "Politics and Culture."

That theme is also relevant to the Société Imaginaire's future. After a decade of existence in which its driving notion of fighting against cultural ignorance and isolation by creating new contexts for bringing together creative, like-minded but heterodox individuals, the organization, which has flourished without an institutional structure finds itself facing an existential question: where to go from here?

The short answer, from those involved, is onward. What that means is open to debate. While the Société's goals remain unchanged, the global political framework in which even a society of the mind ultimately exists has

changed dramatically over the past decade. Communism has collapsed in Europe. Democracy has been reestablished through Central and South America. The United States is unchallenged as the world's pre-eminent economic and military power.

Those changes have everything and nothing to do with the Société Imaginaire, which was founded in 1984, primarily as a response to the dismal cultural climate that prevailed in a world divided between two ideologically opposed superpowers. On the one hand, the political changes mean that creative people everywhere are now free to pursue their muse as they choose. On the other, however, national cultures and individual creative endeavors have become more vulnerable to the sometimes brutal dictates of the marketplace and to the omnipresence of American popular culture which is disseminated at light speed by electronic media and backed by unimaginable wealth and technical resources. In the post-Cold War world, economics have become a dominant factor in many aspects of life, including foreign policy. Cultural understanding, rarely a broadly compelling issue in government policy in the best of times, is in danger of being marginalized as the nations of the world align themselves into monolithic trading blocks and focus on the business of business.

Through its activities over the past decade, the Société Imaginaire has shown that it can provide effective antidotes to these developments by creating new, less-formalized contexts for dialogue between individuals interested in culture regardless of where they reside. It has also created new contexts for creativity, such as bringing together artists and writers from different countries and asking them to illustrate each others work. To date, five Graphics Portfolios have been produced. Other examples include the ongoing collaboration with the *Harvard Review*, which has served as a forum for Société members, and the Correspondence Project, which brought together writers from different countries and then compiled, catalogued, and archived the correspondence that later developed between them. Universities from twenty nations were involved with that project. More recently, the workshops and facilities at Altzella have become a learning center for students and academics from Saxony, Europe, and the world.

In Montevideo, President Sanguinetti suggested that the Société could actually serve as a model for furthering future cultural understanding not just between individual nations on a bi-lateral basis, but between the Mercosur countries and the European Union. This challenging notion will be a central discussion topic at the Société's gatherings this year in Washington D.C., Cadenabbia, and Prague.

Batuz believes that in order for the Société to act as a cultural intermediary between the Mercosur and European Union it would need a broader base, including scientists, economists and social scientists, as well as a more formal structure and working centers similar to Altzella in several cities around the world. This would, of course, require money and an

administrative organization. Without a structure, he argues, the Société risks losing opportunities to serve as an intermediary between cultures and to have a voice in decision-making that effects culture.

"We take as our task to think about and discuss these things. Now that the Iron Curtain is gone, how does culture develop in a world where ideology and religion are no longer dominant and capitalism must be prevented from reverting to its most brutal forms," Batuz said. "The transformation of the world into integrated economic blocks must be accompanied simultaneously by cultural integration. Never before has it been possible for like-minded intellectuals to be instantly in touch. New contexts for this contact have to be developed so that people in these thousands of cultures can live together and continue to develop but with full awareness of what is going on elsewhere. Culture will continue to develop on its own, that is true. But we can try to plan and to influence its development and keep it from boiling down into a monoculture that is completely subservient to economic factors. I think the Société Imaginaire can do this because it exists nowhere and everywhere and is closely connected to various political and economic decision-makers, but is heterodox, not subject to rules or conditions, not subordinate to any institutions."

Ferdinand Protzman

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Batuz and Inge Morath, in the museum of photography at Altzella which bears her name.
By Peter Granser.

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Before: Construction of the Museum of Constructivism at Altzella, six weeks before the opening. By Peter Granser.



After: Inaugural exhibit of works by constructivist artist Raul Lozza. By Peter Granser.

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About Michel Butor

Michel Butor was barely thirty in 1957 when he published his third novel, *La modification*. Reviewed appreciatively by Michel Leiris, awarded the Prix Renaudot, it was quickly and rightly accorded the status of a modern classic. It remains the best of all his books. But there is a lot more to read by the writer who was hailed by Sartre as the most promising in post-war France: there are three other novels, an autobiographical memoir, quite a few poems, at least five books of essays, an opera libretto, extended reflections on travel and place, and a number of works best described as collage of invented or found text by Michel Butor.

Experimentalism has been of the essence of his work. Like a laboratory scientist—though he would prefer a metaphor drawn from mathematics or music—Butor chooses for each work a method which can be applied systematically, yet can produce surprise. Obsessive yet playful, his activity results in densely structured, but essentially open form.

Take for example his second, and second best, novel, *L'Emploi du temps* (*The Timetable*, translated by Richard Howard under the more relaxed title *Passing Time*). Published in 1956, early in the collective experiment in elaborate structuring of narrative time which has been going on ever since, this novel exploits with great virtuosity the *decalage*—the disjunction and variable distance—between narrating and narrated time. It is written in the form of a journal. A Frenchman named Jacques Revel must spend a year in England, in the somber industrial city of Bleston. Beginning his journal in May with an account of his arrival in Bleston in October of the year before, Revel lives his life in present time even as he struggles to bring his record of the past up to date. His story thus unfolds in time as a fugue, with parts which sound separately, overlap, or pile up in stretto paragraphs; themes are recapitulated, inverted (one long segment is narrated backward, using connectives such as “it was just before this that I . . .”), or restated, with new emotional resonance, in a new key.

The fictional city of Bleston, rendered in an atmosphere saturated with gloom, is a labyrinth with a crime at its center. Cain, murderer and founder of cities, is the figure celebrated in stained glass in the city's cathedral, and it is in the lurid light cast by that figure that the murder is committed in the mystery novel Revel is reading. Revel eventually meets the author of this novel, who is to be himself the victim of a murder attempt. A great deal is done, in short, to layer the texture of this book and give it body. The result, as

Michel Butor is a prominent member of the Société Imaginaire

the writer Revel is drawn even deeper into his material, is a transformation. The story of a year so told is not, in the end, the sum of its disappointing and inconclusive events, its thwarted relationships and unsolved mysteries. It becomes, instead, a hymn to the experience itself, as lived and relived in time. The city of Bleston, its name a corruption of *belli civitas*, halfway between "blasted" and "blessed," at first so impenetrable and inhospitable to the stranger, becomes for him a beloved, addressed as "tu," accepting and accepted as "nous."

Passage de milan, (*Hawk's Way*, untranslated), Butor's first novel, represents another enclosed area in time and space with a death at the center. The time is the hours from 7:00 PM to 7:00 AM of the following day; the space is the seven floors of an apartment building in Paris. The compositional grid is firm, but this early work suffers from insufficient authority of narrative voice. There are more than fifty characters, and Butor's decision to give a large number of them a turn at being *focalisateur* might have worked but doesn't. The tone is incoherent, the result is unconvincing. The opportunity to create a choral presence, as John Dos Passos did on a grand scale in *USA*, or Camilo José Cela did in *La Colmena* (*The Hive*, about the myriad characters encountered in a single cafe in Madrid), has been missed.

Butor's fourth book and last novel, *Degrés*, set in a French high school, is a spectacular failure. Its protagonist, a history teacher, has had the demented idea of describing exhaustively one hour in one day of the eleventh grade, and of structuring his description through the kinship relations which happen to exist among the participants. In the end he dies, having isolated himself from everyone by his obsessive focus on his task, and having grown terminally disoriented in a hopeless effort to achieve encyclopedic mastery of the disparate parts of the French curriculum. Despite its documentary period interest and the power of its satiric intent, I can't recommend reading *Degrés* even once. And sadly, I must say the same of most, with the exception of his thoughtful essays, that Butor has written since, as his experimental-compositional and documentary agenda has taken him far from the core territory of the novel.

The best of Butor, the book most in balance and most satisfying as a story, remains *La modification* (titled *Second Thoughts* in the British edition, and *A Change of Heart* in the American edition of the translation by Jean Stewart). In it the classical unities are strictly observed: the story begins as its protagonist boards a train going from Paris to Rome, and ends when he gets off. We are kept at just the right distance by the narrative voice, a disembodied one addressing the protagonist as "vous" and with full access to his rather obtuse, rather hypocritical mind. What happens in the story is simply that its protagonist, Léon Delmont, a Parisian businessman with a mid-life crisis, changes his mind. At the beginning of his journey he plans to leave his wife and begin a new life with his mistress, but by the end of the trip he has given up the idea and decides to write a book instead.

Perhaps *La modification* is Butor's most successful experiment just because it is not very radical. His work has been associated with the *nouveau roman* of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Claude Simon, and Nathalie Sarraute. Given his liking for mathematical analogies, he could also claim an affinity with the group Oulipo, which in the 1960s included such wonderful writers as Raymond Queneau, Georges Perec, and Italo Calvino. But what seems more important is that he is possibly the best writer to have stood on the shoulders of Proust.

As an unblinkingly objective portrait of a mediocre and ineffectual character given to fantasy, *La modification* echoes the achievement of Flaubert in *L'Education sentimentale*. But Proust is there too: in the long sentences with their rhythmic periodicity, the paragraphs which come so gently yet firmly to rest; in the use of dependent clauses to redirect flow, the essayistic elaboration of discrete movement, the doubling-back narrative in which events are glazed with meaning just one more time; in the use of fictional works of art within the story to cast light on its own artistic aims; in the magic reevocation, the recapture of experience long grown stale, at a crucial turning point, when Delmont recalls his wedding trip of twenty years before.

A good book can be read with pleasure more than once, and I enjoyed reading *La modification* twice. I don't expect to read it a third time, though; for Butor's masterpiece lacks some measure of the humor, the tenderness and wonderment to be found in *A la recherche du temps perdu*. But then, what book doesn't?

Sarah Kafatou

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"Books can only reveal us to ourselves, and as often as they do us this service we lay them aside."

— *Simplify, Simplify and Other Quotations from Henry David Thoreau*. Edited by K.P. Van Anglen. Columbia University Press, 1996 (\$23.00). See book review on page 222.