

Editorial: Group and Grouping

Notions of 'group' and 'grouping' and their manifold cognates appear to be limitless in variety, application and relevance. To open this rich thematic field I propose an imaginative exploration of a number of metaphorical images as emblematic devices in order to attract, gather and articulate some group-related nuances of meaning.

Take as first instance a simple visual image from target shooting – the familiar disc with its spatial design of concentric circles and a bull's-eye at the centre that is used to register random and inclusive 'hits'. As soon as the distribution or positioning of hits begins to display an iterated regularity, symmetry, mechanical consistency or non-human accuracy – immediately suspect in target-shooting – one would tend to speak of a pattern and its components rather than a grouping of elements.

Set theory has an operational concept of groups of elements (where elements may of course be anything – whether these be numbers, objects, processes, events, organisms, people, institutions ...). It is in this sense that an exclusive and close grouping of hits on a target may count towards a high score in proximity of the bull's-eye, alternatively as an index or measure with which to adjust the rifle's sights. Instrumentality is the key feature here as picked up, for instance, in focus group methodologies.

The target image facilitates the conceptual formation of group categories by divulging a certain spatial play beyond the mere sequence of hits. This play includes such relations as being on and off target, inside and outside, proximity and distance and centre and periphery. Of cardinal importance, however, is the crucial distinction between the factual contingency of random numbers and clusters of elements or hits and the centre's all-powerful pull or attraction. The power of the centre has diverse senses beyond the vital desire for grouping at or around a centre, including a normative sense of unity in group formation and the imperative of being centred or focused, of being aware, balanced and in control of oneself, of being self-possessed – particularly resonant senses of grouping current in psychology, sociology, political science and ethics.

These examples of grouping also serve to recall an old archery image connected with the medieval and scholastic concept of intention. This is the image of an archer and his bodily effort of drawing and steadying the bow, with the eye aiming along the shaft of the arrow – the release of the arrow being directed by the desire to hit a bull's eye or a lethal spot. Sporting and martial mastery of this exercise in bodily proficiency offered a striking metaphor of mental intentionality – a visual metaphor of the desire for knowledge, of the concentrated energy of a focused intelligence, of a perfect subject-object alignment driven by the mind's spiritual directionality. It was notions like these that provided a historical basis for ideas concerning intentionality and intentional objects which saw a prominent resurgence in twentieth-century phenomenology and hermeneutics.

This remarkable historical dynamic of archaic images which recur again in the present, often with a new urgency and an enhanced content, epitomises another metaphor to be associated with 'group', namely 'constellation'. In antiquity, mythical zodiac figures were familiar in many cultures as entirely imaginary configurations of fixed stars, thought to be permanently connected visual features of the eternal sidereal macro-cosmos – think of star maps and the lines connecting certain prominent dots. In astrological thought and practice, the shifting positions of planets, the so-called 'moving stars', against the imaginary figures of these fixed domains or 'houses' in the background were believed at micro-cosmic level to determine fateful events or influence individual human fortunes.

For critical theorists like Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, however, the constellation notion signifies something apparently worlds apart from zodiac figures, namely such shifting, disparate, contingent and clashing forces as may be associated with notions like 'dialectics at a standstill'. They emphasise the critically positioned points and difficult angles of view from which such revelatory constellations can be glimpsed, often with great difficulty. Historical phenomena apparently resist conceptual identification, categorical grouping and discursive ordering, their hidden ideological affinities only emerging like fleeting firework bouquets illuminating nocturnal darkness.

Despite the new horizons that opened due to the loss of representational bonding between figurative shapes and permanent ontic order, critical theorists' discursive constellations still manifest themselves by means of imagery, now however in hauntingly apparitional formations. Moreover, they are also still imbued with a sense of human destiny, now weighed and censured in ideology-critical terms. Nonetheless, constellation has been established as a valid and productive procedure of heuristic and conceptual relating and correlating.

Clearly 'group' has acquired an emergent quality, 'grouping' in the sense of wholes rising from contiguous elements as described in Gestalt theory's figure-ground relations. Such pregnant shapes or emergent wholes dominate their constituent components – the whole being more than a sum of its components – maintaining and asserting their sensory identities despite their fluctuating transformation or fluid 'morphing'. Musical motifs which remain recognisable and persistent throughout diverse modulations, variations, orchestrations and performances would be a good example.

The prominence of emergent Gestalt identities clearly differ from the idea of a hidden identity becoming manifest or an occult portent being revealed, as exemplified by the icon of a particular species (the death's head moth for instance) which only reveals itself in the final stage of the process of metamorphosis. Hence: the contested Gestalt-switch idea to account for emergent relations between separate wholes.

A further, projective and constructive, sense of grouping may be represented by the critical notion of 'composition'. In the visual arts this term is primarily associated with formal design properties, in particular with Renaissance perspective, and in music with composing processes and complete musical works. Originally a grammatical term for syntactical ordering from language it was translated into the arts together with its prominent decorum values of *Hellenismos* and *Latinitas*. Like correct Greek or school Latin, classical composition was valued as unmistakable demonstration of civilization and achievement, of deliverance from or progress beyond the 'other' (whether identified as barbaric, pagan, primitive or Oriental).

It should be clear by now that the notional nuances of 'group' and 'grouping' drawn from the preceding examples all have particular social applications and consequences, some of which are investigated by authors whose texts are included in this volume. A critical and tolerant awareness of the power as well as the relativity of the historical bonds which bind us together into diverse groupings or spiritual neighbourhoods by far outweighs the identity of any of the social groups to which we may belong or which we may happen to be studying.

Professor van den Berg's own work centres on art theory, art historical hermeneutics and typiconic research of the rhetoric of image power. Recent examples of his publications are "Painting History: 'Terra Incognita' as Anti-Leviathan Emblem", *Acta Academica*, 2005, 37(1): 56-98 and "Not I: Troubled Self-Representations", *Acta Academica*, 2007, 39(1): 47-78. He was awarded the Stals Award for Art History (2000) in South Africa.