



I am not a statistic!

Description

“Don’t become a statistic!” That was the warning teachers and parents would direct at young drivers some years ago, when news broadcasts used to feature weekly road casualty figures.

The psychologist Carl Jung amplified the despair of associating the human with a number: “If, I, despise myself as merely a **statistical cipher**, my life has no meaning and is not worth living” (236). This is in his final book, *Man and His Symbols*, published posthumously in 1964 (and co-written with others).

He posed the conundrum: “how can a human being stand the tension of feeling himself at one with the whole universe, while at the same time he is only a miserable earthly human creature?” (236)

By *statistical cipher* Jung meant the human being reduced to a number. That’s a common trope characterising the victims of statistical aggregation, bureaucracy, militarism, consumerism, confinement, etc.

“I am not a number. I am a free man!” protested the captured British intelligence agent named *Number Six* in the opening to the vintage Spy-Fi series *The Prisoner* (1967-68).

For *number* also read *cipher*. The idea of the cipher is important in the world of espionage. “Cipher” has at least two uses. I read this in an article in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature*:

“The first is the meaning of ‘nothing’ or zero (from the Arabic *sifr*) The second meaning of cipher relevant to my essay and to Behn’s many literary allusions to her biographical experience as a spy is that of a type of code or secret writing that invites (but may also resist) full deciphering by readers and spectators with varying amounts of information about the authorial subject(s)” (2).

The context of the passage concerns the novelist Aphra Behn (1640-1689), who had also worked as a spy for Charles II. The essay considers the historical deprecation of women as writers, and how those who wrote resorted to pseudonyms. Think number, cipher, secret message, spy, pseudonym, and a

nobody.

The OED also defines a cipher as 'A secret or disguised manner of writing. It's a code, a stand-in for something else, a disguise, a substitute. A cipher in literature and playwriting is also a character with a minor functional role, and devoid of obvious character traits. It can also be a character waiting to absorb the personality of the actor. Sometimes it describes the author of the story.'

What is a number?

A cipher is the number zero. The term *cipher* also stands for all integers, i.e. all Arabic numerals, i.e. the symbols: 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. These symbols are also figures (*chiffre* in French). The figures are symbols, which then become metonyms for the the product of a calculation.

So we say: 'the figures don't lie,' 'she has a six figure salary,' 'figure it out,' 'facts and figures'. A *figure* is different to a *number*. The symbols on the door of your hotel room might read as the figure 6 followed by the figure 7. So you occupy room *number* 67, but not room *figure* 67.

The modern French *chiffre* is even closer to the Arabic word *cifre* for zero. The etymology of *cipher* in the OED is informative.

Etymology: < Old French *cyfre*, *cyffre* (modern French *chiffre*) = Spanish *cifra*, Portuguese *cifra*, Italian *cifra*, medieval Latin *cifra*, *cifera*, *ciphra*, < Arabic *ʿalīf* the arithmetical symbol 'zero' or 'nought' (written in Indian and Arabic numeration ٠), a substantive use of the adjective *ʿalīf* 'empty, void', < *ʿalāfara* to be empty. The Arabic was simply a translation of the Sanskrit name *Ānya*, literally 'empty'.

Nothing

The OED orders its definitions. The first definition for *cipher* pertains to the symbol '0', zero. The second definition is 'A person who fills a place, but is of no importance or worth, a nonentity, a mere nothing'. That fits the idea of the person who's been denied their identity, the anonymous non-person; the person reduced to a number or 'a statistic'.

Jung also references the city in his characterisation of the statistical cipher. The city is a site of multiplication, of many individuals, which produces this pessimistic reflection.

'Today the enormous growth of population, especially obvious in large cities, inevitably has a depressing effect on us. We think, "Oh, well, I am only so-and-so living at such-and-such an address, like thousands of other people. If a few of them get killed, what difference can it make? There are far too many people in any case"' (236).

A non-entity

Jung famously developed the idea of the archetypes: mother, father, wise person, young virgin, trickster, etc. These provide a simple classification system for roles that recur in stories, legends, narratives, dreams, and in everyday human relationships. As far as I can tell Jung never referred to an

archetype that identifies as a *cipher*, a non-entity.

Perhaps a person reduced to that condition is outside the fold of the archetypes, though I would be prepared to incorporate that characteristic into the place of his trickster archetype.

After all, the trickster occupies and/or crosses the threshold between categories. The trickster is a boundary crosser. If a cipher is a personality, or a non-personality, then its home might well be the non-place of the boundary. I would be prepared to accept that rites of passage, moving from one life condition to another, involve baptism into â??non-personhood,â?• and then out again, renewed.

Here are some other related terms, to be pursued at a later time: lacuna, non-place, non-entity, everyman.



Bibliography

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Note

- The image is of people standing and moving along the edge of George Square in Edinburgh during the Edinburgh Festival last year. Itâ??s a LiDAR scan processed by Asad Khan. See post <https://richardcoyne.com/2018/08/18/fade-to-black/>.
- Hereâ??s the figure of a languid UK politician turned into a graph. from the *Metro* free newspaper 4 September 2019.



Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. cipher
2. narrative
3. nobody

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