





Old St John's Hospital, Musea Brugge, Bruges, 2020 (photo Dominique Prevost)

## THE INFLAMMABLE IMAGE - THOUGHTS ON WILDFIRE

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Note to reader : Parts of this text might read like an organic concentrate. It is up to the reader to dilute, process, and then serve.

There are two introductions to *Wildfire (meditation on fire)*. One introduction starts with Till-Holger Borchert enquiring whether I would be interested in making a piece for the exhibition 'Memling Now' in Bruges. In the conversation with Till-Holger and Michel Dewilde we talked about cleansing fire and paintings as spiritual journeys: 'If only we could project ourselves elsewhere, transcending and leaving our bodies behind'. We also discussed prayer – 'Please hear me!' – and how prayer implies the expectation of a long-lost inner voice



that will listen and provide us with answers. Prayer, according to Julian Jaynes, originates in the loss of auditory hallucinations common in early civilizations, calling to mind symptoms of schizophrenia. I will return later in this essay to the *Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1976) and Ian McGilchrist's *Master and his Emissary* (2009). Both authors provide an unsurpassed perspective on culture since the Bronze Age and early modernity respectively. Both are researchers in the history of psychology.

For the sake of simplicity, I could say that for Jaynes the left and right hemispheres of the human brain became interconnected after an early state – prior to our own – that was naturally schizoid. For McGilchrist, the two hemispheres became 'intraconnected', specializing as two neuronal alternatives that attend to the world in different ways. As modernity emerges, the emissary (left hemisphere) takes over from the master (right hemisphere) or, one could say, the executive powers of the mind take over from the metaphoric powers.

The second introduction starts with an enquiry I made into the computer power needed to simulate a synthetic, very detailed 'still life' of fire, whereupon people at my studio explained that it was likely literally to set our computer system (including a render farm) on fire before running out of rendering power. That definitely caught my attention.

Biological programming, which still exists in today's living creatures, dictates a reflex to stay away from fire that cannot be contained (i.e. wildfire). Therefore a 'meditation on fire' may sound like an impossibility. Previous works I have made, such as *Sunrise* (2009) and *Reflecting Sunset* (2003), included images filmed directly into the sun, looking straight at a raw 93000 lux. These works are all about the wonder of images. How can so little do so much? A video projection of the sun emits a feeble few thousand lumen but will still generate a human reflex – briefly – as we seek protection from too much sunlight. Besides the motif of the sun, early works are animated – not by frames per second it would seem – but by the wind in trees, softly caressing the picture plane, far away from any kind of story and favouring phenomena that even the blind can see, at least if we take innate memory into account. If a blind person can see the picture, it has to be because it can be seen with the nervous system. It is outdated to teach the five senses as our gateway to the outside world, as if we were talking about a computer with enough USB ports.

What I remember about Hans Memling is the coexistence of hot and cool areas in hell and heaven respectively. This was the first thing that held my attention. The second was an interest in how spending time with a single image crystallizes the matter that we perceive in it, and how persistent looking can transform people of flesh and blood into sculptures carved from stone, for example in photography. To think of how an impression of fire – almost a definition of fleetingness – might transform into a solid building of flames, including holes that will be read as windows, fire extending upwards like flaming columns, a flaming roof etc. It is hard not to sympathize with the structure that underlies this building of flames, which explains its beauty.

As a young adult I lived close to the Ghent Altarpiece by Van Eyck, but it was not until 2010, while preparing *Travel* (1996-2013) and *Olympia...* (2016-2016) that Early Netherlandish panel painting re-entered my thoughts. The 3D painting and compositing work I did working on those two pieces started to affect my views on photography, film and the history of painting. I became convinced that the camera, a child of modernity that was now 200 years old, would be short-lived, followed by a gradual disintegration into the digital.

I coined the term 'dark optics', suggesting that the mutual authentication between author, device and subject was a necessary illusion in a world of pervasive rationalization. Dark optics, then, would welcome visual hallucinations (that which is not there) back into our intimate circle, after their banishment since the Enlightenment. The optical truth provided by a camera was dependent on a light source (hence 'enlightenment'), but the better part of its industrial development occurred during the 19th century, which may help explain the liberal ideology that accompanies the usage of a camera, namely that anyone should be able to operate it, and that the sensitive plate should capture anything that happens to be in front of the lens. In short : a readiness for action and exposure. The sole condition for this intromission of light into the dark chamber was that there should be light. How different from current and future imaging techniques that can register in the dark by emitting signals!

In parallel to this, I developed an interest in evolutionary and neurobiological research and writings on how we build images and why it is that we live in an image culture rather than, say, a touch or haptic culture. Evolutionary biology suggests that we look as much through the cells in our skin as we look through our eyes, and that our sight runs along the same neuro-pathway as memory. What I see at this very moment actually runs along memory lane.

I was not entirely surprised to find the principles of 3D computer imaging in neuroscientific findings on how we process sight from the retina to the visual cortex. Among some of the familiar encounters were, in no particular order: colour compression, the separation of shape, line, point and texture, image mapping, the importance of shadows etc. It seems that the new technology of 3D painting is a few hundred thousand years old.

I also detected a Cartesian coordinate system in 3D painting (polycounts, addresses and IP addresses; a lot of deadening fixations) far removed from the liberal, sensitive surface of celluloid.

The future of the image would thus bear the hallmarks of a Cartesian view cutting up mind and body, processor and hardware: a schizoid existence that any artist will intuitively resist and try to overcome. If it isn't overcome, the eye of the beholder remains disconnected from the overall sensory system and thus the perception becomes disembodied, floating above bodies, turning the window onto the world into a window onto a window. A view from a mirror into a mirror is indeed infinite but it is also quite a dead experience. It brings to mind the term 'hyperconsciousness' by Louis Sass (*Madness and Modernism*, 1992). When I see, excessively clearly, all of my possible actions from the top down, I see myself in an endless hall of mirrors, but I can no longer do anything because I don't know where it is I am looking from and I don't know where to find my body. When I am very, very much aware of my innate movements (ipseity) I become paralyzed. Here we find that the power of thought, Rene Descartes, schizophrenic symptoms, excessive computing power and optical hyper-awareness have more than a little in common, as I explained when talking about 'dark optics'.

The audacity to search for optical truth as it is found in the West, outspoken in the work of Memling and Van Eyck, is by the 15th century no longer driven by the same motivation as a primitive organism that depended on internal image mapping for survival and orientation in hostile surroundings, but by a confidence in clear and universal sight. A constant evolution and ameliorations in the optical field would ultimately lead to the dominance of the visual confidence system, the system we know as 'image culture'. The

dominance of sight has been lamented by the anti-ocularcentric movement (Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 1993). Although iconoclastic fury has gained in strength from the Reformation onwards until today's public execution of statues and monuments as a decolonizing act, one cannot ignore the fear and awe we experience for images-as-power, as if they themselves were living creatures against whom the protest is directed.

During the 170 years of development of industrially produced cameras, the trusted format is not that dissimilar from what it was at its origins: a device that needs focusing, user interaction, and a button to be pressed. Still, I claim that our relation to this device is becoming – in small increments – a psychotic one. The distrust in the visual confidence system can be felt in the social-political realm.

Similarly, the evening news, as a ritual, is not that dissimilar from what it was seventy years ago. In the 1950s, even if you missed the news, you could rest assured that everyone else had seen it. 'That' was the importance of the news: if you had not seen it, you knew that others had. Today perhaps only the advertisements are targeted directly at your browsing history and IP address, but the news still feels familiar or collective because it has been built up over generations. The confidence that you are receiving truthful information collapses when you become hyper-aware that a 'core value', the content of the news, is served up according to your preferences.

Too much time lies between ourselves and Memling and his contemporaries to fully grasp the impact of painting as it emerged around 1450, but it may have been in the order of something still valid today: 'magnificence in evidence'. This is similar to the experience of those who witnessed early film projections, brilliantly surpassing the ancient power of the word: a slow, linear art, that made the progress of time appear to be like a very long wire, and does the same with the understanding of history (Vilem Flusser).

The evolution of technology, from lighting a fire to mashing cooked food (consciousness is the product of an abundance of proteins, calories and fat), to spending time by the campfire after a day's labour, all the way up to the digital, suggest a steady evolution away from the stress of ancient survival instincts. However, the principle of divided attention – looking for food while not turning into food, so necessary for the survival of mammals – has remained, and it returns in Western art only to be given up much later in abstract art. Abstract art is the product of a stress-free, relaxed subject who has subcontracted depth of vision (survival instinct) to the lens (technology) and enjoys a worry-free relationship with that which can be grasped (at arm's length) in the picture plane: looking for food while no longer running the risk of becoming it.

Unsurprisingly, keeping in mind divided attention, we find the principle of 'two' returning in images, the way we find it in most organic life on earth. The idea of the YES and the NO (so important in autism) or the 1 and 0 in the binary system is this extraordinary binding force between line (writing) and image. The binary, along with chronometry, is the star actor of our time. Think about free time, and then look around and count the devices around you that depend on frequency – a product of chronometry – in order to function: a lightbulb, the clock speed of a PC, a screen, electronically produced images. The ordering of time through chronometry is of such pervasiveness that it seems wiser not to think about it, in order to safeguard some illusion of free time – if you are someone who believes that time can be counted and accumulated, that is. I do not.

And then finally, let us end with one significant example of two constants in an image that need to remain divided for there to be