

Enemy

When we detect a threat from someone or something, either actual or potential, we declare it as an enemy. In order to recognise some opponent entity as a dangerous enemy, this entity has to be equal to or more powerful than you, otherwise you do not perceive it as a significant adversary. Thus, the psychological trick behind our conception of the enemy is this: we grant ourselves empowerment by assuming a mighty enemy. The stronger your enemy is, the stronger you are. An enemy has to be powerful and worthy enough to fight. We mirror ourselves in a configuration of the powerful and dangerous 'other', personifying a threat by resemblance and projecting an image of the 'strong us'. In this way, we measure and expand the range of our own capacity. The notion of enemy is a place where our endless game of empowering flowers, where our desire to expand the limit of our capacity, thrives. If we could conceive of an enemy that is absolutely powerful and impossible to defeat, we would be most successful in endowing ourselves with the ultimate power. The impossible enemy is a reflection of our desire for omnipotence. We cannot stop expecting the coming of the absolute enemy through which we are able to transcend the limit of who we are. In our expectation towards the coming of the absolute, decisive moment, the notion of enemy appears to be very similar to our conception of the apocalypse.

The idea of the end of time, or more precisely, the idea of the absolute point of accumulation (and annihilation and subsequent redemption), has a long-lasting place in thought. From ancient myths, religions and philosophy to contemporary science, our desire for the supreme point to come has been an underlying narrative in how we think about our world. In the figures of God and deities, in a search for truth, in the hierarchy of evolution, in the theory of the big bang, and in the use of the atomic bomb, I see various representations of one decisive point that transforms things fatally. Or, put it in another way, we love drama. We cannot turn our back on our passion for storytelling. We are busy reading literature, watching films, psychoanalysing our lives, to give narrative representations to a various range of emotions that we experience in our lives. 'Introduction', 'development', 'turn' and 'conclusion' – this fundamental structure of storytelling, one of our most primordial inventions to give an account to our perception of time and space, is persistently capturing our minds and thoughts. Our thinking enjoys a narrative pivot that introduces the temporal division between 'before and after'. The idea of apocalypse emerges out of our compelling excitement to 'turn', and behind the notion of enemy lurks our longing for an endless ascension/descension towards the coming of the 'turn'. We keep searching for an ever more powerful enemy, until we reach the absolute point of 'turn', which no one has yet seen, or maybe will ever see.

For the mind that expects 'turn', an enemy emerges everywhere, from natural disasters to man-made catastrophes, from bacteria and viruses to warfare, from physical threats to symbolic threats. People from another town, city, country, religion or culture. Or, diseases, earthquakes, criminals, governments, terrorists, anxiety for the future, trauma from the past, unconscious desire, depression, capitalism, communism, fascism, nuclear power, computer, iPhone, Facebook, Google, as-yet-unknown species and phenomenon on earth and in the space. Too numerous to mention. From the geographical, political, religious and cultural to the psychological sphere, anything foreign can slip into the place of an enemy under the name of a threat (referring to whatever you think is important for you), either actual or potential. More recently, as we go through an unprecedented rapid growth of information technologies, our perception of time and space, and thus the nature of our mind and body, have been accelerated, expanded and transformed. As our capacity expands digitally, advancing technologies increasingly appear more consuming, more monstrous, than ever. While hoping for a bright, technologically advanced, future, we are anxious about leaving conventional modes of life behind. Utopian and dystopian narratives are attributed to numerous speculations on the outcome of what we are transforming into after this technological outburst. Civilisation is in a rapid rush uphill/downhill towards another level of life that no one has ever seen before. Here again, in the recent discourse around technologies, I detect our long-lasting call for the coming of 'turn', the coming of something enormous beyond our capacities and expectations. An enemy is a precursor to our urge for transcendence.

Behind the looming world of Phil Hale's paintings, there is a strong sense of accumulation and condensation that is devouring layers of images underneath the surface, as if gravitating toward the coming of an enemy. Hale's skill of crafting images is in the meticulous layering of pigments rather than the manipulation of spontaneous brushstrokes. Indifferent in the artworld-friendly self-referential performance between the materiality of painting and what is represented, his paintings work as an art of thinking. Thinking of what? His images, prone to disasters and accidents, bend on top of each other, oozing out a dramatic tension. Convulsive bodies crumpling together with wrecked cars, wrinkles and crimps, muscles, debris, an oppressing gradation of grey and black. Unknown but irresistible forces are distorting figures and landscapes trapped in the gravity of the scene. In his latest works, this sense of condensation gets loose, the crumpling bodies turning into a wrinkled blob-like mass, like an inflatable bag. But no image is clear to us about what is actually going on, leaving us with nothing but an obscure impression of something deadly that we have seen somewhere in reality or in media. In these distorted images, we are surely tempted to see an implication of some sort of social commentary on the violent nature of contemporary society. However, what I see here is not a play between the socio-critical quality of

concepts and the craft quality of object/image making, which has been a criterion for giving credibility to contemporary works of art since the rise of conceptual art. Hale's works are not about 'painting as window' (symbolic or realistic re-presentation of conscious/unconscious reality), painting as a 'recording machine' of pure, retinal sensations or of emotions, or painting as social criticism. In his images, I see thinking revolving around invisible, inevitable, forces that bring about a series of events and unsettle the human's occupancy in the world. This force might be called 'violence' in our anthropocentric terms. Maybe, we want to look for the apocalyptic 'turn' in the strained striving among his crumpled figures, and further read his recurrent motif of wrecked cars and machinery as a symbol of a downfall in relation to technologies. Rather than looking at Hale's works through a dystopian fantasy, I locate the dialectics of the enemy in the relationship between humanity and technology: the bigger your enemy is, the better you are. We are scapegoats on the altar of technologies, and at the same time their manipulators, endlessly empowering each other with life at stake. Hale's condensed images demonstrate how deeply we have been embedded in this dangerous game called enemy.

Going back to a time when our ancestors inhabited caves, we can imagine how the entire world must have been heard like an alarm. To their primordial minds, their surroundings full of unknown creatures and phenomena might have equated with a sense of threat felt in awe and fear. In the world where physical survival was a primary condition, I imagine, there was no clear boundary between the actual physical danger and potential threat. Anything could be a sign of a life-threatening danger: a howling of the wind, raindrops, birds flying over the sky, passing insects, even a glimpse of their own shadow or the sound of their hushed breath, might have sometimes appeared as dreadful as an actual assault by a hungry beast. The division between the actual and the potential, I and others, here and there, might have been far more blurred in a perpetual state of alarm. There would be no consistent notion of enemy since the world did not carry divisions between safe 'I/we' as against dangerous 'foreign-ness'. The world would appear as a limitless source of dread. With no substantial technology to defend lives, everyday lives would be experienced in a perpetual state of fear. Governed by the primitive survival instinct, instead of singling out a certain figure of enemy, our minds would totalise fear and anxiety towards the entire world. Eventually, the humankind stepped out of the darkness of the cave, invented tools and devices, expanded our world as we discovered technologies, reduced the primal survival anxiety while increasing our metaphysical concerns. As we mastered the dangerous wild nature to secure our lives, the notion of enemy started to anchor in our thinking as a narcissistic mirroring of the self, as a way to expand our interior consciousness to the

outside world. An enemy is a touchstone of the development of the human's subjectivity (and subsequently warfare among people). Yet, while we look up at the sky being fascinated by the vastness of the universe, we never tire of being scared of its unfathomable depth that sweeps away the notion of enemy. In this conflicting feeling between fascination and fear, curiosity and self-defensive silence, we remember that we are still living in a cave, the one called the earth. Beyond the bright blue sky, looking into the dreadful abyss of the space about which we know relatively little, we are returned to the primordial anxiety of the unknown, de-humanising the notion of enemy once again beyond imagination.

In Jim Threapleton's paintings, the most prominent narrative is the feeling of the sublime – a representation of an anxious but curious excitement towards the dark spectacle of the overwhelming forces of nature, or of something unknown. His works appear to me as if a diagram of the sublime feeling made out of the ominous stormy landscapes reminiscent of the Romantic paintings, or, maybe, out of piles of crooked bodies like those in Gericault's images. Strangely enough, there is the sense of classic in his abstract forms in a way that invoke images and narratives familiar to the Western history of art. At the same time, this excitement seems to stem from Threapleton's anxious enchantment with the illusionary effect of the medium of paint itself. Appealing to the ambiguity of image formation through variously manipulated brushstrokes, his images play on the ephemeral effect of vision between the self-awareness of the materiality of the medium and plausible images. In this dizziness of visual/material play, I see a trembling shadow in face of the limitless depth of the surface of the canvas that vacuums systems of representation one after another. This optical existentialism in Threapleton's paintings, contrary to Hale's sober posthumanist temper, invites a nostalgic return to the primordial anxiety that reminds us of the cave that we inhabit.

Life to Life

Suppose that there is an entity called 'life', which does not care about who you are, what you think, what you say, what you do, how you feel, how you love, or how you live. Life that does not care about your life. Such an entity, or phenomenon, has been a source of inspiration and curiosity for humanity's activities throughout history, variously formulated as mythology, religion, humanities, sciences, art, technology and so forth. This is a conception of life that goes beyond the individual; life that does not coincide with who you are and what you do; life that cannot be acknowledged as such.

Understanding the human in a chain of relations between different systems in a wider environmental context is an idea which has in recent years been challenging various fields of sciences and humanities that have historically revolved around anthropocentrism, i.e. the idea of the human as the superior mind positioned above the world (typically seen in the Enlightenment and its related fields of study such as taxonomy). In the latter half of the twentieth century, so-called 'posthumanism' – the idea of radically going against anthropocentrism – emerged from the fields of philosophy and social science later incorporating scientific discourses in biology, physics, mathematics, cybernetics, neuroscience and so forth, bringing about a major shift in approaches to the question of the human. Now, the debate concerns how we can unfold the figure of the human being as a consistent, seamless entity and dissolve it into a chain of reactions and relations to other creatures, environments or phenomena participating in the dynamism of molecular activities. The question is, how can we think of life in a way that does not distinguish human beings from all other phenomena in the world?

Nonetheless here one might see humanity's age-old desire for something that is disinterested in the individual life saturated with earthly concerns and sufferings; it is another call for fabulous yonder, for a transcendental entity/state that can ease our everyday concerns as well as the horror of mortality, the idea of the end. Behind the posthumanist passion, there is an incessant endeavor to decompose the contours of the limit of human life into the endless motions of a microscopic world that appears more and more complicated along with newly developed technologies. Here, it becomes all the more obvious that the two streams of thought, beyond/below, visible/invisible, here/there, are persistently lurking in the form of an aseptic curiosity towards molecular phenomena, and towards invisible, minute life/non-life, from bacteria and viruses to genetic agents. The desire for delving into the invisible world of viruses replaces the ascensional desire for divine entities conventionally seen in a religious belief system. Ascending to the metaphysical world, descending to the minute world of matters and creatures, these two modes of thinking

eventually bite each other's tails.

The urge for transcendence is the characteristic of humanity's intelligence and curiosity that inevitably conceives life as detached from itself. It is the desire for pursuing something that does not coincide with oneself, that goes beyond/below the individual being, the desire for illuminating the complicated networks of the unknown system of forces that interweave with human life. This urge can not stop looking at the world from the perspective of the transcendental eye, either of god or of virus, or even of community or society, if I may define transcendence as a phenomenon oriented to surpass a singular mode of existence.

There is 'life' that does not concern us, but also there is life that does concern us, thriving on the singularity of the individual interior world – emotion.

In the face of 'life' driven by transcendence, twisted into the complicated relations of matters and forces, what we call violence does not exist. Or at least, violence is not an incidence to single out among all other phenomena in the world. Violence can be identified as such only when moral judgment is brought in, which is a system of thinking unique to human. To put it another way, the judgmental criteria such as good/bad, rational/irrational, constructive/destructive, harmless/harmful, is nothing but an archive of stories that constantly looks for the consistency of what holds together the figure of the human; whether you call certain phenomenon violence, love, affection or hatred is as fictional as literature, and nature has different archives of its own stories, we too narrate our lives and the world in our own grammar.

But this does not mean that nothing is taking place in this place of fiction. In an attempt to name a certain phenomenon, create a narrative around it, and experience it as a distinct state, something is certainly taking place. Violence as such does not exist in light of the wider systems of nature where the figure of the human is constantly to be decomposed into relations and forces. For nature, violence is just a distortion oozing out of a system that informs us of possible movement and transformation. However, violence comes to exist in an experience of narrating it, of isolating it from another phenomenon, because it provokes an emotional reaction from a certain creature, including human beings. Whatever the definition of violence is, it is, for nature, one type of force; for the human, it takes shape as an emotion.

The question of violence inevitably relates to the issue of emotion and feeling, and the issue of empathy – the transmission of one thing/state/motion to another. Emotion is one of the most powerful carriers of a certain state from one place to another, whether in the form of

anger, pleasure, love or boredom, in the kaleidoscope of the human's psychic world. For nature, emotion is a tool for the transmission of forces which appears to us as an unbearably painful phenomenon. Emotion, which apparently seems to be interested and engaged in the personal life, is the very driving force that realises transcendence through the promise of something being transmitted somewhere else. The world is nothing but a part of this contagious process between different entities and modes of being, constantly looking for the carrier of forces. Through emotion, the individual human being comes to be incorporated into this contagious cycle of life.

Philip Hale's works deal with 'life' that engulfs violence in the form of emotion, transforming it into the force of transmission. His paintings consist of layers and layers of fragmented images taken from the reservoir of his visual experiences in contemporary society. In his sombre collages of grey images, one might see any violent circumstances of natural/man-made disasters, attributing them to some specific events in warfare, social and political conflicts or accidents. Violence, as a sign of distortion in systems that formulate our society and world, is a guide for his visual layering. In crashed cars, a blob of deformed male bodies and animals, decomposed buildings, which seems to signify the breakdown of the masculinity of our persistently anthropocentric mind, Hale accumulates distortions, compresses them into a stratum, then cracks open again, layers another images and shapes, until the significance, or the narrative of each layer, disappears into another. Rather than coming to a collage that expects a 'new' meaning to emerge out of the juxtaposition of different visual orientations, his painting looks for the disappearance of one image into another, one narrative into another, one system of seeing into another, being haunted by the desire to move away from what it is. As a result, Hale's images throw us into an accumulation of ambiguity and plausibility. In the endless reflections of resemblances, they evoke in us an obscure feeling of anxiety that makes us long for meanings and stories behind the shapes.

As a study of image, in the last few decades, art history has employed psychoanalytical narrative for excavating complicated images, lush with moss of stories. It is an effective methodology to demonstrate in an image the intricate stratum of simulacra of stories, formulated in relation to various things and events in personal, social and historical sphere. On the other hand, psychoanalysis is nothing but a form of literature in a strict sense because it can hardly pin down an object of study that is physically measurable. The psychoanalytical urge is an urge for stories, and it is the desire for going beyond what appears, leaping to the bigger narratives that can encompass broader events in the physical and psychological world. After the layers of stories are peeled away from an image, what remains there is neither truth nor origin, it is merely a fantastic energy of the human life

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that has been yielding countless numbers of stories throughout history, disinterested in their truthfulness or goodness. Here life reveals itself as a force of narration that never stops wanting to connect/transmit one thing to another.

Hale's ominous images, prone to violence, invokes in us of this unquenchable energy of life that continues to render us emotional and disfigured; departing from what is told, what is seen, what is, for the sake of an ever-receding transmission and transcendence.