

Enemy  
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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. So, if we could conceive of an enemy that is absolutely powerful and impossible to defeat, we would be most successful in endowing ourselves with 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 big bang, in the use of 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, which no one has yet seen, or maybe will ever see.

Enemy emerges everywhere, from natural disasters, to man-made catastrophes, from bacteria and viruses to warfare. From the geographical, political, religious and cultural to

the psychological sphere, anything foreign can slip into the place of 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 a 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 a 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 term. Maybe, we want to look for the apocalyptic 'turn' in the strained striving among his crumpled figures, and further to read his recurrent motif of wrecked cars and machineries 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 enemy in the relation between humanity and technologies: 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 imbedded in this dangerous game called enemy.

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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

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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.