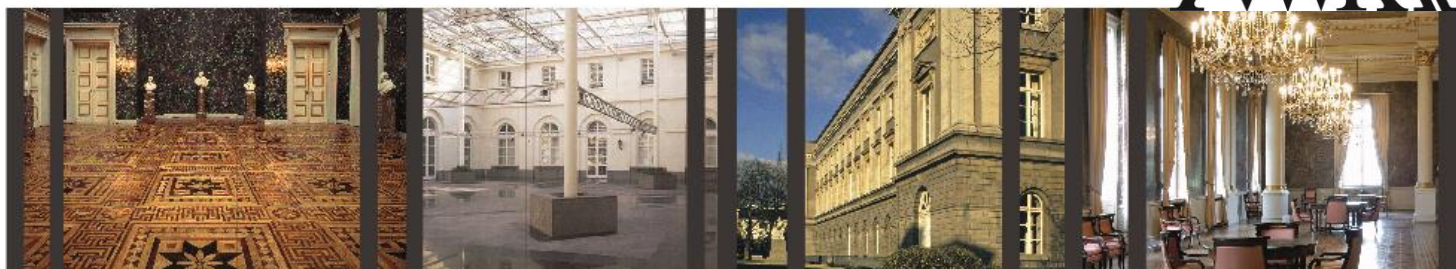


Eindrapportering Denkersprogramma

IMAGE SCIENCE

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IMAGE SCIENCE

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1 Activiteitenverslag

1.1 Situering

Deze Denkerscyclus rond Image Science werd geïnitieerd vanuit de Klasse Kunsten. Op voorstel van Hilde Van Gelder (KU Leuven) en Bart Verschaffel (UGent) werd W.J.T. Mitchell uitgenodigd als Denker. Mitchell is professor Engelse literatuur en kunstgeschiedenis aan de Universiteit van Chicago en is editor van de *Critical Inquiry*, een tijdschrift gewijd aan de kritische theorie in de kunst en de menswetenschappen.

Doel was een discursief en reflexief project vorm te geven rond de tentoonstelling 'Metapictures' waarvan de Denker curator was in Beijing (2018), gevolgd door rondetafelgesprekken en een slotsymposium rond het thema 'Image Science' (boek Mitchell).

Hilde Van Gelder (KU Leuven) en Bart Verschaffel (UGent) namen de coördinatie en wetenschappelijke leiding van het programma op zich en rapporteerden maandelijks in de vergaderingen van de Klasse Kunsten.

1.2 Denker

W. J. T. Mitchell is Gaylord Donnelley Distinguished Service Professor in kunst, literatuur en film aan de Universiteit van Chicago. Hij is vooral bekend als grondlegger van het vakgebied "visuele cultuur en iconologie", de studie van beelden in de media. Hij publiceert over geschiedenis en theorie van de media, beeldende kunst, literatuur en iconologie, met monografische publicaties zoals *Picture Theory* (Chicago, 1994) en *What Do Pictures Want? Essays on the Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago, 2005).

Hij is tevens auteur van *Image Science* en *The War of Images, 9-11 to the Present*. Zijn memoires van de twintigjarige artistieke strijd van zijn zoon met schizofrenie, *Mental Traveller*, verscheen in het voorjaar van 2020, gevolgd door *Present Tense: An Iconology of Times* en *Seeing through Madness: Insanity, Media, and Visual Culture* dat verschijnt in 2021. Hij is sinds 1978 hoofdredacteur van het kwartaalblad *Critical Inquiry*.



1.3 Activiteiten

1.3.1 Initieel programma

Alle activiteiten in deze Denkerscyclus waren initieel gepland voor het voorjaar van 2020. Mitchell zou twee keer afreizen naar Brussel voor een substantiële periode in maart 2020 en in mei 2020. Het intensieve programma dat was voorbereid kon echter, omwille van de wereldwijde Coronacrisis, niet doorgaan. Het ging telkens om activiteiten die de fysieke aanwezigheid van de Denker vereisten en die te midden van de eerste quarantaine vielen waardoor het publieke leven letterlijk stilviel. Het omvatte o.m.:

23-30 maart 2020 – Metapictures, Vandenbroucke, Gent

- Installatie tentoonstelling 'Metapictures'
- 26 maart: inaugurale lezing W.J.T. Mitchell en publiek event met Anthony Gormley

1-30 mei 2020 – Image Science, Paleis der Academiën, Brussel

- Tentoonstelling 'Metapictures' on view
- 12 mei: workshop met Norman McLeod
- 18 mei: publiek debat W.J.T. Mitchell en Jacques Rancière in BOZAR
- 19 mei: slotsymposium in de Academie met W.J.T. Mitchell (Denker), Horst Bredekamp (HU, Berlin), Xavier Wrona (Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Saint-Etienne), Mieke Bal (Amsterdam), Marie-José Mondzain (Paris). Afsluitend muzikaal optreden door Janice Misurell-Mitchell.

1.3.2 Present Tense 2020: An Iconology of Time

De maatregelen rond COVID-19 maakten internationaal reizen tot na de zomer onmogelijk en er diende naar een alternatieve invulling van het programma gezocht te worden die digitaal haalbaar was én die op korte termijn georganiseerd kon worden. Samen met de Denker werd beslist om twee online lezingen te voorzien, telkens rond een zeer actuele thematiek en gevolgd door een debat met het brede publiek.

De eerste lezing over 'Present Tense 2020: An Iconology of Time' vond plaats op 21 oktober 2020 en telde meer dan 350 deelnemers wereldwijd. De Denker gaf er een reflectie op de eeuwige filosofische kwestie van tijdelijkheid, gesitueerd in het huidige moment van gelijktijdige wereldwijde crises zoals klimaatverandering, politieke cycli, het verloop van een pandemie, ... In deze lezing belichtte Mitchell hoe we tijd voorstellen in metaforen, patronen, vormen en iconische gebeurtenissen en wat we kunnen leren van een anachronistische koppeling van hedendaagse beelden en mediaspektakels met oude figuren uit de tijd zoals Kronos, Kairos en Aion.

1.3.3 Mental Traveler: A Father, a Son, and a Journey through Schizophrenia

Op 17 februari 2021 vond het tweede online event plaats en ging Mitchell in gesprek met Omar Kholeif over zijn recentste boek 'Mental Traveler: A Father, a Son, and a Journey through Schizophrenia'. Omar Kholeif is auteur, curator en cultuurhistoricus en Director of

Collections and Senior Curator at Sharjah Art Foundation. Hij sprak met Mitchell over 'Madness, Cinema and the Panopticon'. Terwijl intieme onthullingen zich gedurende het hele uur ontvouwd, onderzocht het duo waanzin en rouw, evenals het ondubbelzinnige huwelijk tussen de hedendaagse beeldcultuur en het menselijk onderbewustzijn. Meer dan 250 deelnemers registreerden zich voor dit event.

2 Resultaten en impact

2.1 Bevindingen van de Denker

De transcripties van beide lezingen en van de debatten die erop volgden zijn integraal terug te vinden in de bijlagen.

2.2 Activering maatschappelijk debat

In het voorjaar van 2021 werkte Hilde Van Gelder rond de tentoonstelling 'Metapictures' met 60 studenten Kunstwetenschappen van de KU Leuven, in het kader van haar vak *Capita Selecta: Hedendaagse Kunst*. Het hele vak was opgebouwd rond de komst van W.J.T. Mitchell naar België en de samenwerking met hem. Daarnaast liep er ook een samenwerking met de vakgroep Intermedia van de LUCA School of Arts in Brussel (coördinatie dr. Nicola Setari en dr. Richard Venlet). De Leuvense en Brusselse studenten werkten aan een parallel tentoonstellingsproject, dat zou getoond worden in de Terrarium tentoonstellingsruimte aan de Paleizenstraat, maar dit project werd geannuleerd.

Aan de UCLouvain werkte prof. Alexander Streitberger met zijn masterstudenten Kunstwetenschappen rond de expo *Metapictures*. Zij maakten een virtuele tentoonstelling. Ook in 2020-21 namen zijn studenten deel aan beide online evenementen.

De opname van de lezing 'Present Tense: An Iconology of Time' van W.J.T. Mitchell werd als lesmateriaal gebruikt door Prof. Dr. Arne Dewinde voor het vak Semiotiek aan de PXL-MAD School of Arts, UHasselt. De 70 studenten hebben in grote getale de sessie bijgewoond en/of achteraf de recording bekeken. In de les werd een nabespreking gehouden en ging men in detail met het videomateriaal aan de slag.

Het boek 'Mental Traveler' van W.J.T. Mitchell vertelt een aangrijpend en moedig verhaal, sterk passend bij onze tijd en de huidige Corona-impasse. Prof. Dr. Hilde Van Gelder heeft het boek in het onderwijspakket opgenomen voor haar studenten Kunstcritiek aan de KU Leuven en werkt het hele semester met haar studenten aan een lees- en discussietraject rond dit boek. De thematiek is ontzettend actueel nu veel studenten het mentaal moeilijk hebben met wat er hen overkomt. Bovendien vinden de 70 studenten zelf dat dit momenteel onvoldoende gethematiseerd is in de colleges die ze krijgen. Prof. Van Gelder en haar studenten discussiëren op wekelijkse basis over dit thema, via Blackboard Collaborate: het eerste uur via Breakoutgroepen, het tweede uur in een plenair debat. De colleges zijn een groot succes.

2.3 Communicatie en media

De activiteiten van het Denkersprogramma werden aangekondigd op de website van de KVAB, de LinkedIn-pagina en de Facebook-pagina van de KVAB, in de Academieberichten en op de websites van partnerorganisaties.

De aankondigingen en uitnodigingen voor beide lezingen werden elektronisch verstuurd naar meer dan 3000 geadresseerden. De sprekers en coördinatoren hebben deze mede verspreid binnen hun netwerk wat zorgde voor een breed internationaal publiek.

Een gedetailleerd programma van elke activiteit is terug te vinden op de website van de KVAB. De digitale opnames zijn beschikbaar op de KVAB-pagina van de Denkerscyclus Image Science: <https://www.kvab.be/nl/denkersprogramma/image-science> .

3 Bijlagen

3.1 Present Tense 2020: An Iconology of Time – W.J.T. Mitchell

Transcription of the digital lecture and debate on 21/10/2020, moderated by Bart Verschaffel.

My newest book is a memoir about the life of my son Gabriel Mitchell who suffered from schizophrenia for 20 years. Gabriel's life project merged with my own. He wanted to take madness – all forms of it at all times and places – into a framework for understanding the human condition rather than something that exiles, excludes or puts the mad at some distance from us. To bring it into our midst as a framework for critique and comprehension. *Mental Traveler* tells his story but it is also the basic argument of the book that we are all mental travelers on this planet and we all have our issues. None of us have perfectly rational minds. All of us are part of this journey. That's why I've been guided throughout this whole inquiry into time by Nietzsche's remark: "Insanity in individuals is somewhat rare but in groups parties nations and epochs it is the rule."

Since my topic today is time – and we clearly live in crazy times – it seems like a good moment to inquire into the nature of an epoch and into the nature of craziness as a temporal phenomenon. This is – to put my cards on the table – to ask all the old questions about the nature of time such as 'What is time?' but accompanied by an acknowledgement that we're going to have to settle for an iconology of time. Images of time which include not only faces and figures and forms but figures in the sense of verbal metaphor, figures in the sense of numbers. Time is always about numbers and about mapping numbers in space. It's always about shapes as George Kubler said long ago: "The shape of time is uneven, filled with waves undulations and breaks.". So, the iconology of time tries to take into account all of the things we can mean by shapes, forms, figures and faces.

I'm not going to be reading a paper because in a sense that would put my words in the past. Words that I wrote yesterday or two months ago. I will try to make this up as I go along. You can read the paper soon in *Critical Inquiry*. It'll be published there soon but this is not that paper. It's, speaking of today, the time we're in right now. Clearly, it's a historic moment of political uncertainty and anxiety often compared to other moments of crisis for instance one century ago: the 1918 Spanish flu, the denouement of World War I, the crises especially in the United States around race relations in the early 1920s. It's as if we have come around on a cycle of return to things that were present one century ago.

In 1919, Aby Warburg, the great art historian who is largely the inspiration for much of my work, tried to compile an atlas during World War I. An atlas of the Great War to try to comprehend it, to produce what Walter Benjamin would call 'a constellation of images that would help you understand that present'. The project however – either he was already going crazy or it drove him crazy – remains in boxes in the Warburg Institute in London. It never came to pass. His *Bilderatlas* of human emotions did get created so you may think of

this as my own crazy project. An attempt to create a *Bilderatlas* of the present of 2020.

The first thing we would have to acknowledge in an iconology of the present, in the most literal sense, would be the peculiar nature of our presence here to each other. Present, not in reality or not bodily nor literally, but present as images to each other. It's a new world in which the regime of images has penetrated life. It's been doing that for a long time but it's now penetrated to a much deeper level. One question this paper asks is: what does it mean that we are now convening in this kind of way? I imagine many of you are teaching this way on zoom, teaching by remote control, by virtual presence. Are we more or less present to each other here and now in this virtual lecture hall than we would have been if I were in Brussels right now? Of course, something has been lost. There's no doubt about it that I will miss going to dinner with all my dear friends in Brussels this evening but let's not focus on that. What are we gaining by this mode in the present. I'm not here to convince you that this is a crazy time – you know that already – my aim is rather to specify and analyze the particular and singular character of this moment in history. I want to find out whether it helps us to think about the question of time and the question of madness and something beyond.

I want to begin with some of what you might call the Bartlett's Familiar Quotations about time that almost anyone who writes about time has to take these on. Saint Augustine, usually the canonical beginning, remarked that the present is real in a way in which the past and the future are not. But even more famously Augustine's acknowledgment that the ontology of time is an unanswerable question as he says: "If nobody asks me, I know; but if I were desirous to explain it to one that should ask me, plainly I do not know.". Then there's that mythical Chinese curse: "May you live in interesting times.". Certainly we do. Apparently the Chinese have nothing to do with this curse. For some reason it's been attributed to them. Finally, I think if there is a keynote to the whole talk it is Nietzsche's remark in *Beyond Good and Evil*: "Insanity in individuals is somewhat rare but in groups, parties, nations and epochs it is the rule.".

Now, for the moment, I want to take out the groups, parties and nations and focus on the idea of the epoch. What is an **epoch**? Epoch is usually connected to moments in time or periods. The epoch is like an era. It might be signaled by an event, such as 9/11 defined a new epoch in the United States or the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. This is where we usually cite a date as the beginning of an epoch or the end of an era. Clearly we are in an epoch now. In the US they're often defined by something as simple as presidential regimes and the rule of parties. We are now in the epoch of Donald Trump and more broadly – as a planetary issue – we are in the epoch of endangered democracies and the rise, in many countries around the world, of authoritarian neo-fascist regimes. Corrupt and hollowed out democracies in which the elections still take place but they're in fact meaningless. Epochs can extend to larger periods of geological time in an instance so all of these are part of what defines the epoch.

There is a very closely connected concept 'the **epoche**' which is a slightly different notion of time. It's much more associated with phenomenology, with direct experience, and in ancient philosophy with skepticism and the act of refraining from any conclusion for or against anything as the decisive step. In that sense epoch and epoche are direct opposites. If the 'epoch' is defined by a decision say an election, the onset of a war, a catastrophe ... 'epoche' is the suspension of decision. So where are we today in that

respect? I would suggest we are in an epoche, at least in the US, waiting for the epical decision which will occur exactly 13 days from today. That is our present. The present is always a kind of accordion concept that expands and contracts. Is the present today? Is the present this hour, the time of this lecture? Is the present this week? Is the present the pandemic which the entire world is experiencing simultaneously? All those scales of time correspond to whatever we might want to call the present.

I very much like William James's definition of the present as: "... the short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly sensible. The specious present has a vaguely vanishing backward and forward fringe, a saddleback from which we look in two directions into time.". Where are we sitting today? All over the world, we are sitting and looking into the past and future from this present moment in different directions. And I want to compare this position with Walter Benjamin's famous *Angel of History*, his reading of the painting of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920). "This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past ... A storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress."

Benjamin's *Angel of History* is of course conjured up by him in 1940 as World War II is breaking out, as fascism has firmly taken over in Germany, as a world war is descending on the planet. It is an incredibly pessimistic view and in a few months Benjamin will commit suicide. There is no future or there is no future you can see. It's a deep and abiding image of the perspective of the historian. In the words of Henry Ford: "The only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history."

I want to propose for my own Angel of History a rather different figure, much more humble and not exactly an angel. The reason I chose him was because of William James's account of the specious present as a saddleback from which we look in two directions into time. This is an Italian peasant, painted by Giuseppe Crespi in the early 18th century, based on an Italian folk tale about Casenno. Casenno, as his name suggests, shits on the face of the sovereign. He is the insolent fool or clown. That form of craziness that verges on satire, burlesque, parody, caricature ... and that I think is one of the important images of time. Not just the angelus novus of the sublime catastrophe of history but a kind of awkward peasant sitting backward on his horse looking both into the future and contemplating the past at the same time. So, when you think of my own standpoint with regard to time, think of me as Casenno the fool.

The first thing I think Casenno notices, since he can swivel around in his saddle, he can see in all directions. It's not easy to see the future as Yogi Berra once said famously: It's very hard to make predictions especially about the future. But one thing we can observe is that the present is not simply defined by the most obvious global force that we have to contend with namely the pandemic. I want to suggest that there are several other viruses at play. You can say they are metaphoric viruses and the pandemic is literally a biological virus. All of them are 'demics'. They have to do with the people, with all the people of the planet and the people of nations, countries and so forth. I think of them as structural viruses that are operating at different levels: the biological 'pandemic', the cultural 'endemic', the psychological communication of messages 'infodemic', and the planetary 'ecodemic'.

Let me elaborate these a little bit.

All of us have expressed the sentiment that the world before February-March 2020 was a completely different place and that suddenly the world changed. For me it changed on March 12, 2020 when I spoke to my last class in person, a class on William Blake. I wished them all a wonderful spring term, fully expecting that we would be returning to classrooms soon. And here we are. The '**pandemic**' clearly produced an epoch, a break in time, but in the meanwhile it also produced an epoche, a time of suspension. A time when habitual actions, travel, gatherings with friends, going to a movie, going to a restaurant, ... all of these things are suspended while we wait. We have no idea how long we'll be waiting or when will the decisive moment come. A decisive moment in a different dimension, the US presidential election, will occur in two weeks. We know that that decision is uncertain. We have predictions, we have lots of opinion polls, but we cannot know for certain. We also know that the world will not suddenly change back to normal. It will take a long time to release us from this state of suspension. The temporal effect of the pandemic is double: on the one hand the break in history; on the other hand a suspension of history of not knowing how to go forward.

The second, something that has coincided with the pandemic, is the upsurge of racial violence and of racist expressions and actions, especially in the US but also registered globally. And of course I'm going to come back to the figure of George Floyd and the massive global uprising against racism that occurred about three months into the epoch of the pandemic. I call it '**endemic**' because I don't think racism is an episode like the pandemic. Pandemics come and go. The 1918 flu came and then finally went away after millions of people died. The endemic is a pathological condition that endures over long periods. It evolves and changes. It is like those resident bacteria and viruses that live in every living thing. It's part of who we are and therefore part of what we have to deal with all the time and not in just episodes.

There is another endemic condition what I would call the '**infodemic**'. The world of communication we live in now – which statisticians refer to as structural viralities – is rumor, gaslighting, conspiracy theories, paranoia. Again, this is an endemic condition accelerated by social media. Its epoch might be thought of as from the beginning of the invention of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram in the early part of this century to this year.

And then finally, the framework within which all of these have to be understood is the '**ecodemic**', the planetary. The great acceleration of climate change which shows no signs of abating and no signs of being dealt with in any kind of holistic and systematic way. We are in a Darwinian competition with the microbes on our planet that have lasted millions of years and we have only been around for about three hundred thousand years. We are watching as 300 species per day go extinct so our framework for thinking about the present is not merely journalism but a kind of paleontology as if we were looking at the passing of the dinosaurs in real time.

I want to illustrate how these **four structural viruses** are made visible in a variety of strategies, starting with graphs.

Every day these graphs run before us and sometimes I pause to try to figure them all out. Some of them show how much faster the virus is gaining on us in the US than in other

countries. They show not only the passage of time but the acceleration of processes in time. Timelines are never merely lines nor rarely straight lines. They may be framed by straight lines but they're always undulating curving and serpentine waves and undulations. The most prominent at this moment, as of October 13th just a few days ago, is the recognition that we are now heading into a third wave. The prediction, which seems quite plausible, is that this third wave is going to be bigger than the first and second. You may remember that the consciousness of the present back in March was that the first wave would be over during the summer. In fact, the second wave peaked in July, then began to go down as summer waned and now, as the cool weather approaches, a third peak is on its way.

If you thought of that trough between the first and second wave as a moment or period when the virus might wane, that was the period when the global burst of anti-racist demonstrations began across the world centered in the US. Almost every major American city had enormous demonstrations and some of the biggest mass movements in history. People having been told to isolate themselves from the virus suddenly rushed together, against all health restrictions, to express their solidarity against racial murder.

A timeline having to do with police shootings of black people is also part of the timeline: as of July 14, 2020 a kind of a five-year summary of the percentage of black people killed by police in the US. Race relations in this country also subject to times, epochs, moments: the 1920s were a terrible time when many of the confederate monuments were erected, when a massacre in Tulsa Oklahoma wiped out banks, hotels and one of the most prosperous black neighborhoods in the US, when the Ku Klux Klan with the connivance of the president of the US was marching proudly with thousands of members through the streets of New York.

With respect to the infodemic, I highly recommend a wonderful MIT-study that appeared in *Science* (March 9, 2018). The study showed that human beings have a built-in virus, a structural virality that is in favor of false news, disinformation, lies, rumors, propaganda and slander. Why is this the case? The answer turns out to be that falsehood spreads faster as a function of novelty and emotional impact, that lies have more impact, that surprise, fear, disgust and a sense of scandal outweigh anticipation, sadness, joy and trust. Among journalists there's a slogan: if it bleeds it leads. Bad news is what we are hungry for and that hunger leaves us vulnerable to lies about bad news. This has been known at least since the 18th century when Jonathan Swift put it very well: "Falsehood flies and the truth comes limping after it.". The big megaphone is for lies, fake news; the tiny megaphone is for truth which tends to get drowned out. This is an endemic virus in the way human sociality is constructed and it's one reason why the general cure for this has always been the notion that democracy was a way that somehow the truth went out, that people would be able to communicate and join together in language games, institutions, social movements that would be beneficial to the vast majority and it would produce a kind of equality.

The other endemic condition which is now been accelerated by the pandemic is of course mental illness. I'm happy to say that the silent generation, which is my generation born in 1942 around World War II or just before, are only 35 percent more prone now to mental illness. The Baby Boomers, the Generation X, the Millennials and Generation Z above all, are the most prone to falling into mental illness in this time.

That's all part of the infodemic. The way in which gaslighting and the disruption of daily life has produced a sense of 'time is out of joint' and 'the future is so uncertain no one can see

the end of it'. I think the conquest of the infodemic is going to be one of the great challenges. That's why the candidacy of Joe Biden is mainly about: do you want somebody who tells the truth or do you want a compulsive liar? That's in some ways the fundamental choice of this election.

Finally, there is the planet and the question of extinction. The threats to biological diversity, as Dipesh Chakrabarty recently argued in an article in *Critical Inquiry*, is part of what's producing the increased likelihood of pandemics. There are no wild areas left. We have conquered the earth so completely that now bats, carrying viruses that are hundreds of thousands of years old, are part of some people's diet and coming into our own ecosphere. So, the ecodeemic and the pandemic are deeply structurally linked. It's not that they are independent variables.

If you were looking at contemplating curves and graphs over the last months, there's one graph that only shows a small deviation around March 2020 when the word finally leaked out. After Trump had informed his stockbroker friends that there was a really bad thing coming – while not telling the American people anything about it – telling them to be complacent everything would be fine and it would go away like a miracle, the stock market briefly crashed but then bounced right back to a kind of steady curve of restoration of normality. At this point I have to quote Fredric Jameson that it's easier now to imagine the extinction of the human species than the end of capitalism. These graphs make it clear why that very pungent and pessimistic saying seems so accurate. The stock market goes on as if immune to all of the others, the pandemic, the endemic, the infodemic. Inside information helps to make them immune.

Those were the numbers and figures, the kind of spaces of our time that I wanted to illustrate for you as part of everyday life. I now want to turn to the question of the human face and the face of our time because I think a lot has been focused on the face as well as the expression of human emotions. What Emmanuel Levinas called 'the site of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity'.

So let me begin by showing you faces of the current occupant of the White House. They tell us a lot about what the face of this moment looks like since he is the face of the Trump epoch. I want to share this story with you. In 2016, before the election, I was in the Palestinian territories teaching at Birzeit University. One evening at dinner with the arts faculty we had a conversation and I asked them what they thought about Donald Trump. Here in Palestine, they burst out laughing. I asked them what's so funny. "We love trump", they said. Of course I said: "You cannot be serious!". They said: "We love trump because he shows the true face of America.". And there is a truth to what they said that Trump is not just this singular aberration. We have had a lot of bad presidents. We've even had some crazy presidents. We certainly had racist presidents. We've also had some great ones. But Trump sums up something in the American character, the old stereotype of the Yankee Con Man. It goes back to the 19th century. H. L. Mencken foresaw perfectly one century to go, July 26 to 1920, that someday for some reason someone like Donald Trump would be elected. "As democracy is perfected, the office of the president represents more and more closely the inner soul of the people. On some great and glorious day, the plain folks of the land will reach their hearts desire at last and the White House will be occupied by a downright fool and complete narcissistic moron." I think it's notable that narcissism which now has a

technical meaning, Menken already saw it coming.

The face of the virus was also perfectly captured by *The New Yorker* in this picture of Trump simultaneously broadcasting lies – the infodemic of misinformation and disinformation – and blinding himself with the mask that would filter or prevent him from speaking out and spreading the virus lies. Now that has become literal. He and his followers refused to wear masks in these rallies and in the White House rose garden which led to the White house itself becoming a hot spot of viral contamination.

Alongside that is the event of the murder of George Floyd. I'm showing this deliberately to convey the global impact. His face became suddenly the most recognizable face of our moment. The one on the upper left was painted in Belgium, the second one in Berlin, then there is a very familiar one from Minneapolis with his name and face and Houston's Third Ward where his family comes from. This is also our angel of history because George Floyd was transformed from a police victim into the global symbol almost overnight. And there is no sign that he's going away. At the same time his face begins to be elevated, circulated around the planet and monuments to the confederacy were going down all over the country. Why did George Floyd's face go viral? Why did this image of truth become so powerful? I could go and recite numerous names of many cases of this sort here in Chicago, even in my own neighborhood. So why did George Floyd go viral? One answer is because it was mediated in a very specific way. It was not merely a still image but an image of an unbearably long moment of precisely eight minutes and 46 seconds of watching a man murdered under the knee of a police officer who kneels with the most complacent attitude, his hands in his pocket. It immediately led to what Deleuze in his *Cinema* book called a 'time image'. An image in which nothing is happening, a life is simply being extinguished slowly and being silenced.

The dialectical image for this moment is I think, as Benjamin would have put it, an image that constellates the virus with this moment of the endemic virus of racism converging in a very simple symbol namely the mask. The mask is there not only to prevent my breath from infecting you or your breath from infecting me, to keep us in some kind of togetherness while also preserving us from mutual contagion, but at this 'I can't breath' which are George Floyd's last words. That moment is encaptured and synthesized with the virus. There are many other statements of this kind but I think of this as the one that was most iconic. The one which converges the two pandemics most clearly. Partly because it also builds upon a whole tradition of masking. It goes back to the aids crisis, to the era when Muhammad Ali was criticized for talking out of turn, to the Chicago 7 Trial when Bobby Seale was shackled and gagged. All this put together made George Floyd into a monumental figure and monumental in a very specific way.

This wonderful cover in *The New Yorker* by Kadir Nelson is called 'Say their names'. I would argue that this image captures a moment of sovereignty from below, sovereignty of the under commons, certainly sovereignty of the civil rights movement, the movement against the endemic condition of racism, cast inequality and white supremacy. I would contrast it with the sovereign figure of Western polities, namely Hobbes's Leviathan, what you might call the figure of white patriarchy in which the masses are gathered inside the body of the sovereign. The masses of black martyrs are here gathered inside the body of George Floyd as if somehow that eight minutes and 46 seconds brought back from the dead all of these

previous victims. Two sovereigns, two monumental figures. There's an important little detail that I think is very telling about the contrast of these two images. In Hobbes's Leviathan all of the people are facing away from us and toward the sovereign. The sovereign is the narcissistic focus, the center of adulation. George Floyd's faces and names are all looking out toward us. They are human individuals. Again, the face of resistance to the virus of racism, of inequality is captured in the wonderful contrast between these two.

Meanwhile in the last few weeks, since our beloved leader has recovered from the virus, he has been basking in the adulation of crowds. It's clearly at this point he knows that the chances of him winning are very little. This is only for his own pleasure. He spends most of his speeches complaining about what a persecuted figure he is, persecuted by this terrible virus that just won't go away no matter how much he wishes it would, or the fake news.

Well, those are the figures and faces that I wanted to focus on. Now I want to go to forms and step back from our moment to think about the recurrent shapes what George Kubler calls the '**shapes of time**'. They have a very simple geometry. In a way I don't know if there's anything excluded by this diagram: time is a line, time is a circle or cycle and time is a point. We are at a point but we are also on a line of a certain duration and the sun will rise tomorrow. All these shapes of time are the fundamental geometry of time. If you put these shapes together, you come up with a synthetic image of the spiral or vortex. This is also an incredibly ancient figure for the way time moves. It doesn't simply move in line, circle or point but it brings them all together in our experience as something like a spiral tightening toward moments, an instance of decision. The Romans adopted the Mithraic deity of eternal time of Aion. They put it on their coins as a symbol of the aeternitatis, the endless rule of the Roman Empire over the world. This is an angel of history who is the symbol of power and of sovereignty holding the instruments of power in his hand and striding on the globe but wrapped inside the spiral.

I want to take that figure of the spiral and suggest an elaboration of it in terms of our sense of the present time. The present time as a vortex, as both an epoch and an epoche, converging on a period, a moment, a still point including what we can call 'the split second decision'. I want to suggest four vectors that produce the maelstrom of time. One is of course our own individual time: each of us listening to this lecture is at a certain point in their lifetime, young, old, middle-aged. I speak from the standpoint of old age and as such I want to apologize to the young generation, to all the students from Leuven and around the world who might be listening to this, for the incredible mess that my generation has made of the world. Then there is the collective time of regimes, dynasties, revolutions. There is the vector of non-human mechanical time: our own inventions, our own way of figuring, measuring, mapping and graphing time which we've already looked at. Finally there is the vector of natural time: the planetary time that we cannot control. That's why I think this is a propitious moment for reflecting on the general question of time because all of these things are converging so obviously in this moment. You might think of this along with my earlier four dimensions of the pandemic, endemic, ecodeemic and infodemic as built in to this.

I think the spiral itself is worth pausing on as a figure of temporality. My poetic mentor William Blake saw the serpentine spiral not as the guarantee of the imperial destiny, the Roman Empire's eternal rule over the world but as a figure of revolution itself and so here in *America*, a prophecy of 1793, he shows the revolutionaries, the scales tipping and the tyrants being

cast into the abyss about to be bitten by the serpent of time. He elaborates us even further in *The Book of Urizen* where he suggests that the very idea of Christian sovereignty may be subject to revolution. This is like Christ between the two thieves, all of them wrapped in serpents, all of them plunging into the abyss. This from the author of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* who argued in the 1790s that Christianity and the whole fundamental basis of what we call Western civilization was undergoing a radical upturning.

At the center of the vortex is a moment, often a figure, and I wanted to point out to something that is very much a part of our sense of time in the United States. It is the supreme court decision from 1989 *Graham v. Connor*. "The reasonableness of a particular use of force must be judged from the perspective of a reasonable officer on the scene, rather than with the 20/20 vision of hindsight ... The calculus of reasonableness must embody allowance for the fact that police officers are often forced to make split-second judgments – in circumstances that are tense, uncertain, and rapidly evolving – about the amount of force that is necessary in a particular situation."

You can see how the 8 minutes and 46 seconds of George Floyd's murder by a police officer instantly breaks open the doctrine of the split-second judgment of the moment of decision which has been the whole basis for immunity. For instance Breonna Taylor's murder in Louisville has been justified fundamentally on the basis of *Graham v. Connor* that the police were in a tense uncertain and rapidly evolving situation. No doubt about it. They thought there were drug dealers in the house and so they fired over 30 shots into an apartment and killed a woman who was sleeping in her bed. But no worries, the doctrine of the split-second exonerates them, makes them immune to the consequences of their actions.

Now I want to make a completely anachronistic move which seems to me, in the spirit of Walter Benjamin, absolutely necessary and go back to the most classical and traditional Western figures of time including old **Kronos** himself, also called Saturn, with his scythe or harvesting instrument. A figure both who cuts the timeline and who is the figure of death (not only Father Time, also Father Death), but also a positive figure of the harvest of the transformation. A portrait by Romanelli (painting in Warschau) depicts the titan Kronos wielding the scythe of harvest but what he's harvesting is his own children. It's as if the QAnon conspiracy is informed by this old myth of Kronos as the devourer of children or the most terrifying version of this Goya's Saturn Devouring His Son. As the theory went, Kronos represented the destructive ravages of time which consumed all things.

The second member of our trio is **Aion** with the cycle of Zodiac along with Mother Earth and the four children and the four seasons. The figure of the cycle of time: line, circle and point. Kronos cuts the line, Aion guarantees the (eternal) return of time.

Finally, the one most relevant to our moment is time as occasion, as opportunity, as event. A strange figure carrying a razor blade in his hand on which scales are balanced to indicate that this is the moment of decision, the split-second, the election, the time of suspension in the scales, the epoche that will lead to an epical decision. **Kairos** is often associated with Fortuna and with other figures of 'seizing the moment'. Certainly, Kairos was provided by the president of the United States to his wealthy investor friends when he gave them inside information about the onset of the pandemic while concealing it from the American people. So Trump himself is a kairotic figure and I think that's best reflected in Kairos's hairdo. If you look at Kairos, you'll notice he has a very strange comb over. He has a long forelock

and a bald head hidden behind it. There's an old saying about Kairos that as the opportunity approaches you must grab it by the forelock because if it slips by you will have nothing to grab hold of. It'll be gone. Kairos only lasts for a minute and if you let that fatal moment get by ... no chance to catch it. So all of those things are condensed in this figure. It is the personification of the present. And this is my one visual joke for the lecture: Trump raising his forelock rather than his hand to take the oath of office. If only Judge Roberts at that point had grabbed him by the forelock and thrown him down in an act of real judgment.

I'm coming to the end of my talk with what you might call the survival of these ancient figures of time, these personifications in the present. The first is this wonderful composition by the Swiss artist Bastian Oldhouse, who is riffing on Goya and so many other artists like Rubens. He shows Saturn Kronos, the god of linear time, not eating his children but eating the planet and surfing on a tsunami on a clock face. To me this is an image of what you might call the destiny of white patriarchy. The white Father Time, Father Death, the king or sovereign of the world who is – if unchecked – leading us at considerable speed toward the destruction of the planet with rising sea levels and destruction of the environment. We are literally eating the planet as we speak and I think everyone knows that has to be reversed. We can't keep doing that because that's the only place we have. Now, I don't want to end with that. I want to end with something I think more measured, more complex. If you notice there are white doves flying in through a cleavage in the sky. Some kind of symbol of hope I suppose as if this is not all there is to the story.

Let me turn to one final image. If I could improve on Oldhouse's image it would be to replace the white doves with blackbirds singing in the dead of night. The fateful year of 2020 has seen the coincidence of the global pandemic with these revelations of the endemic racism of white supremacy as the American monuments to white patriarchy come down. What should rise in their place? My candidate is this distinctly, anti-monumental assemblage. A miniature memory palace created by black feminist artist Betye Saar who lives in Los Angeles. It is a doll's suitcase and we approach it from the backside. Like Benjamin's angel its wings are open but it has eyes in the back of its body, in the back of the trunk, looking toward the future. When you go around to the front of the trunk, the wings of this angel of history show us a pair of small well-traveled dolls with two heads standing on the top of the trunk. A globe and a clock. They look back at us into a future we can't see. The trunk may have its back to the future but it's not going there blindly. Saars trunk gathers the bodies of the ancestors, which I can't resist calling Father Time and Mother Earth. The bodies are scarred, mutilated and assembled from part objects but they are still standing. Father Time, a leather doll whose chest has been etched with the diagram of the human cargo of a slave ship. Black Kronos has not been devouring the planet or his children like the white patriarch of the Oldhouse allegory. Instead he has been cut off at the knees and maybe decapitated. It also looks as if his feet have been hobbled or replaced by something like bird's talons as if he is becoming the broken winged blackbird himself. An impression that's reinforced when you look more closely and see the large feathers that accompany him in the background. Mother Earth by contrast is an assemblage of vases and bottles stacked to suggest a faceless but not headless body. Her emblematic attributes are not feathers but antlers. The one on the left is like a crutch, on the right more like a weapon. Her feet are firmly on the ground looking up with Mojo eyes. If Father Time bears the scars of slavery on his body, Mother Earth looks more like a warrior.

Her tools close at hand. Saars work exemplifies in my view both the portable and the prophetic character of the black contribution to our time. Her angel of history carries the past in its body rendering history and the earth, time and the planet as something that have to be carried, brought along with us, not left behind. Even if we think of the trunk as a kind of pregnant object to be carried to term. It's an allegory of labor, slavery and escape from slavery incorporated in the body of a doll's trunk that is looking clear-eyed toward the future with eyes on the back of its head and on the feet of Mother Earth. Searching for a vision of truth. Thank you very much.

BV

Thank you very much for the wonderful, very inspiring and rich lecture that touched upon so many different issues. I would like to open with a question, a bit methodological almost, but it may help as a beginning of the debate.

You talked about the present and images that symbolise the present or that catch the present on the one hand, and then referred to basic images that are used throughout history to picture time. The thing is that we do not really know what is going on, so that we cannot oversee the present and look for images to help us understand the present, to catch what is going on in that sense. And then there is trying to understand, trying to know what is time as such. That is also very difficult because we do not know what time is and we can only see time as movement or in its effect. How do images function in grasping and understanding what is going on versus an iconography of time as such?

WJTM

I think, if you study the whole history of attempts to grapple with the question of time, what you find is contempt with imagery but then almost inevitably I need to fall back on it. There is no way to speak of time directly except through figures, faces, forms, shapes. So in one sense, all that I'm doing is trying to eliminate the notion that there would be another way, as if we could go directly to time. Maybe deep inside computers where the clocks are humming away as we speak, there is some invisible engine or force if we could only get out, that could explain what time is. I think that's the false direction. What we need to do is go back to our experience, go back to history and the historical record and think about the perception of time, the experience of it in our moment.

In a way, this is a point of view I suppose that Walter Benjamin expressed when he wrote the thesis on *The Philosophy of History*. He talked about himself as being like a monk, because he was in a state of suspension himself. Rousseau also said – similar – when he was quarantined with a virus in an Italian coastal city that suddenly he couldn't do anything. All he could do was think, and what he thought of was itself, the question of time. Another way you could put this is: I'm trying to make the best of a bad situation. Asking: Is this a could time to be thinking about time? Shouldn't we be like: No, don't think, let's do something wright away? Unfortunately, that option is not open. So I think in some way this is the most propitious moment for thinking about the scales of time that go to make up our experience all the way from the planetary to the instant of police decision making. In other words, human time in all of its range of possibilities. I cannot do anything about it, I can think about it, I can try to bring together images from all times and places in a kind of crazy atlas, a crazy quilt of our moment.

BV

You would say in the present moment, like the experience of time that we have in this moment of history, that that notion of time is best captured by the notion of danger almost of Kairos as a kind of sharp moment where things are at stake.

WJTM

Yes, it is that, but it is also a moment one feels that immediate action is pretty much ruled out. I mean – my own action the last few days – is been sitting at the kitchen table with my wife handwriting postcards to voters in Georgia. There is a theory that the handwritten postcard is much more effective in getting people to vote, getting them to participate in this decision than a standard printed out postcard. My handwriting is terrible but it's in some sense the only thing I can do, other than voting myself, to have some effect on history.

The other thing I can do is my job, which is as a scholar to be here in my study surrounded by my books, thinking about: What is the total experience of this time? That's why I began with Aby Warburg. Warburg tried to assemble the entire archive of evidence about: What was the great war and the pandemic that accompanied it and that succeeded it rapidly. The minute the war was over, the pandemic was launched. In some ways a much worse time than ours. But Warburg thought: I must make an atlas, I must bring it all together, try to understand it. That's our job as scholars. Some say being a hermit, being isolated in this way, maybe it is for scholars a kind of ironic blessing.

BV

You gave examples of images that capture the present and which will stay as images to picture 2020 but do you think there are images of the future also? Like the Angel of History is looking back because you cannot see the future off course. What you see is the past heaped up as a ruin and then trying to do something with it. The picture drawn by Crespino was like half looking forward, twisting on his horse.

WJTM

Yes, he is twisting on his saddle. I like the image of us ambling on horseback. This is William James' picture of the specious present. We're like on a saddleback: we can see a lot of the past, especially the immediate past, it's partly memory and then it's history, but what about trying to turn in the saddle and glimpse what's coming. It's clear that this is a turning point in the road that we are all 'mental travellers' on. That the world is not going to be the same after this is over. The virus will end but we know it won't be forever. My mother was also a philosopher of time. When I was a boy and I was complaining: when is this going to stop? She would say, this too will pass. Which always made me angry. But it's true, the virus will pass, it's an episode. But it's a decisive episode. And it's coupled with these other, with the pandemic, the endemic, which is a new crisis in our time.

We know the future will be different. It's safe to predict that what we are doing right now, talking globally to an audience that comes from all over the planet, that this is going to become much more normal. Why? I would much rather be in Brussels right now, having coffee with you and my colleagues and celebrating together, and I think there will be a time when that can happen again, but we also know that this is in a sense a new normal that it won't be necessary to travel the world. Pleasurables that will be: we'll be sitting in our own houses learning from each other. A new kind of intellectual academic culture is emerging right in the moment we are in at this time.

BV

I go back to the lecture and pick some of the questions that were raised. How do images fit into your vortex of time? Are they specific to a certain time, a part of the graph? Does the process of iconisation – as with the case of George Floyd – make them timeless or do these icons become sides of a conversion of time?

WJTM

Wonderful question. My answer usually to either 'are they this or are they that' is 'yes, they are this and or that'. Images in one sense are always timeless. George Floyd's image will last for a very long time just as Hobbes' Leviathan did or the coin with the Roman emperor wrapped in a serpent. But at the same time, they are timely images. They appeared at a time, they have dates on them. This is why in Anne-Mie's introduction, she mentioned: "I think images are like living things.". I think it's a strong metaphor. They are actually more like viruses than full life forms. If you're going to compare images to living things, they need a human host in order to spread like viruses. Viruses cannot reproduce by themselves, they are parasites, they live in us. You could call them pseudo-evolutionary entities. They keep developing, they are evolving as we speak. This is one thing that makes COVID-19 so deadly. It's not just that it's one thing but it's changing and adapting to the new conditions it finds as it invades human bodies all over the planet.

For me, images are the key to understanding past and present and imagination itself is all about predicting the future and imagining a future that we could create. One in which some of these endemic conditions would be moderated, certainly the virus of racism – one we've been living with in our bodies on this continent since 1619. This is the new date now when we say: When was America founded? Was it 1776? That's what I was thought in school. Now we're learning a new date, 1619, the day when the first slaves arrived in North America.

BV

I have another question from Norman McLeod. You said earlier that time is not constant and showed a few charts to illustrate your point. Physically time is not constant, off course, but this becomes an issue only a very high speed, speed of light or at a very small quantum scale. Over the scales you're referring to time itself is constant, the variation in the charts you show occurs on a non-time axis. I think what you mean is that our perception of time is variable. It varies with our emotional states. Do you agree?

WJTM

Yes I do, absolutely. Since Bergson, everyone understands that subjective time is not in the sense of 'my time' or one individual time sense. Off course we have different time senses. There are people here who are at a different point in the timeline of their life. But we also have collective time. Maybe my lecture here is just a symptom of conversations that we're all having about the strange, crazy times (plural!) in which we live. That distinction between time as a singular absolute and times as a plural phenomenon is very crucial. We are in both at the same time. The clock may be ticking inexorably uniformly at microseconds, or split seconds, or intervals of 8 minutes and 46 seconds, or weeks, months, years, ... what we are experiencing is both individual – how do I feel today, how do you feel – but then how do we feel. What is the affect of temporality of the epoch/period in what Raymond William called 'the feeling of the time'. He wanted to have a history of periods that was not simply about events but about experience and affect. The affect of temporality that underlies

group experience.

BV

Would you say that the vortex image is the integration of what Ricoeur calls cosmological time? How would you relate 'time as history' and 'time as nature'? Because it looks like in the pandemic it is time from nature that intervenes in history and takes over. Our notions of presence is both as a time, but also as 'being present' (something that you can see and relate to). We cannot relate to the virus. The virus is present but not present for us because we do not know where it is. So, it is as if the time of experience that we try to capture in images and stories clashes with another kind of time that intervenes in a way that we cannot see.

WJTM

I think the vortex is a good way of imagining and depicting time not simply as an event or a continuum, not simply a period or a moment, but as a convergence of different scales and vectors. One thing we see is that natural time/the virus/nature is completely indifferent. It's one of these strange moments when the big agent in history has no face. It is strictly invisible and yet incredibly powerful. Like the old Saturn Father Time is the Grim Reaper. That's what I think Father Time was always about. Trying to make visible: what is this force that is impersonal that does not care about us but which we have to care about it. We have to come to terms with it.

The other is the planetary time. We are living in a period that maybe harkens back to the time of the dinosaurs. A great extinction where thousands of species were simultaneously disappearing. This is a kind of Father Time and Death which is not about individuals. It's not that one of us dies but the entire herd is wiped out. It's no accident that people are talking about 'herd immunity' as this is the secret plan that Donald Trump has: "Let it go. We're tired of hearing about it. Let it kill everybody and besides it won't affect me because I'm immune.". That's his characteristic attitude.

So yes, natural time is bearing down on us simultaneously from two directions. One is the immediate pandemic, the other is the longer term question of species extinction, the realm of climate change. 25 years ago, climate change was in the future. This year, in the midst of the pandemic and in the midst of the uprising of the endemic of consciousness of racism, we've had the most terrible weather, fires burning unprecedented amounts of forest on the West Coast, floods and hurricanes on the South. Chicago sometimes feels to me like the kind of refuge, the still point at the center of the tornado or the hurricane. So my sense of the presence is: it's a still center. That's what I meant by the epoch, the suspension. It's a still center in which we are observing around us and it's lucky scholars as us who get to observe it in this way. After all, social isolation is our way of life. We do get together for drinks but most of our days are spent like mine, communing with the dead in all of those books.

BV

A last question. If we speak about white supremacy and racism by using Kronos, Aion, Kairos and the examples from Western art history only, doesn't this show the supremacy of knowledge systems? We talk globally but we only use Western knowledge so it seems. Isn't this exactly what is wrong with the world today?

WJTM

Certainly, this question is one of the reasons I turned to a completely alternate set of figures

of Father Time and Mother Earth to conclude. Bastian Oldhouse's image is a kind of condensation of why we cannot go on this way with white supremacy, predatory capitalism, unlimited growth, the idea that the global economy along with the population can just keep growing endlessly. The planet cannot sustain it. The old Father Time is now updated as Kronos not just eating his children, but eating the planet itself.

BV

Do you think that the Western iconography of time determines our understanding of history and our understanding of what's going on today?

WJTM

No, it's only partial. That's again why Betye Saar's *Searching for Vision of Truth* was my concluding example of a completely different conception of Father Time and Mother Earth. Father Time is someone who is not killing the world but who has survived; who is an image of survival that we have to carry forward with us. That's the ultimate question for our species: how are we going to survive what we have done? Darwinism tells us the implacable lesson that there is nothing that guarantees that the human species will outlive these viruses. The viruses have been around for millions of years. We are relatively new and now we have rendered ourselves a precarious species. One reason why I think of this in terms of madness is basically in terms of the simple legal definition of insanity in this country which is: Is someone a danger to themselves or to others? That's our legal criterium. There nothing psychoanalytic or psychiatric about it. Just a behavioural definition. Under that criterium, the human species is clearly a danger to others ... we are wiping out 300 a day and we are a danger to ourselves. So, this is the time to take cognisance of that to make decisions which recognise that as a possibility that nothing guarantees the continuation of the future we were imagining, say two years ago. We are in a new period now with a new future that has to de-center that old Father Time of white supremacy of rapacious capitalism. The black Father Time and Mother Earth are like totemic figures we could carry with us into that future.

BV

Even before there were viruses, I think Kronos castrated his father and so separated Mother Earth and the sky and created the space where we live.

WJTM

Yes, all these legends come back to us now. Nietzsche was right, we come in a circle, we come back to them but they are different and that's why it's a spiral and not just a closed circle.

3.2 Mental Traveler: W.J.T. Mitchell speaks to Omar Kholeif about Madness, Cinema and the Panopticon

Transcription of the digital talk and debate on 17/02/2021, moderated by Hilde Van Gelder.

Tom Mitchell has invited Omar Kholeif for a conversation on his latest book *Mental Traveler: A Father, a Son and a Journey through Schizophrenia*. A book basically about the mystery of human consciousness and the human mind.

Omar:

Today's conversation is entitled 'Madness, Cinema and the Panopticon'.

I used to believe that I was little but now I'm big.

I used to believe that 10 times 25 was 60 but now I know that it's 15 000. Wait no I just remembered it's really 250.

I used to think the biggest number was 1000 and now I know that the biggest number that any human being has known is Googleplex. You can never imagine how long it would take to write it down. It would take so so so so soooooo long if you wanted to write Googleplex. It's like a quadrillion quadrillion. So if you have to say quadrillion a quadrillion times but you only have to write it down just once.

That is an excerpt from the poem *What I used to think* (May 27, 2020) by Elon Gabriel Cher, from a personal project of his entitled *A Pandemic of Poetry*. This surrealist slice of reality is offered by WJT Mitchell's nine-year-old grandson – or at least I believe him to be nine years old – a collaborative effort between the two offered during the course of lockdown transcribed by Baba from Zoom conversations that took place between California and Chicago.

Now I turn my attention to our Thinker-in-Residence William John Thomas Mitchell. It is an honor to be in your presence and I thank you all at the Royal Flemish Academy for inviting me not only to speak with professor Mitchell but also to honor the impact that his thinking and writing has had on all of us. As we prepared for this event, I jokingly professed that I would be doing my best Oprah Winfrey today because I felt it would be appropriate to invoke a healing iconoclastic figure for this conversation. An individual who is also like professor Mitchell synonymous with the city of Chicago. But in reality William John Thomas Mitchell has always played the Oprah in this relationship.

I came to know of Tom's work – and that is how I shall refer to him mostly for the rest of this evening – while studying at the University of Glasgow, thanks to some early training in semiotics. But it was not until I began writing the first chapters of my doctoral thesis in late 2012 that the late Gene Fisher, my closest mentor, came to inform me of the publication of a new book that Tom had offered called *Seeing through Race* based on a series of iconic lectures that he had given. The word 'iconic' shall resurface often during this conversation. After all I am sitting with the Godfather of icons. In this treatise on race Mitchell argued against the covert politics of color blindness stressing that color in thé difference is not only what gives us the clarity to understand our social reality but that being aware of these differences enables us with both the fluency and the tactics to address and tackle racism.

I was particularly moved by the correlations drawn Tom's cross-section of examples which looked at color from both an ideological, religious and ethnic perspective.

Seeing through Race is an appet segway to Tom's most recent book his memoir *Mental Traveler: a Father, a Son and a Journey through Schizophrenia*. As the title suggests, the book tells the story of Mitchell's relationship with his son Gabriel, a filmmaker who struggled with what was diagnosed as schizophrenia. In the first pages of the book Mitchell notes: "I have tried to see through Gabe's madness.". In a sense one can argue just as Mitchell had looked through the lens of critical race and ethnic theory. Here, he is also looking through or indeed looking past the language of 'mental illness' in order to offer the reader an interior perspective. Initially conceived as an atlas of madness inspired by the likes of Aby Warburg, the results came out very differently. Tom Mitchell professes at the beginning that this is not a book that I wanted to write. It was a book that I had to write. I have implored Tom or begged him or professed that he should never write a book again unless he feels that indeed he has to write it. What tom has produced is no self-pitching diatribe against mental illness, schizophrenia or the medical industrial complex. It is an animate biography of its subjects creative obsessions with cinema.

From the opening pages we find ourselves immersed in the lush texture of Gabriel Mitchell's visual affinities. It is like sitting in front of a large technicolor screen at a drive-through watching Goya and Blake come alive next to Jack Nicholson in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* or sitting in the back seat behind Tom Cruise and Cameron Diaz in Cameron Crowe's *Vanilla Sky* as they are about to freewheel off of this earth. Goddard and Kubrick also occupy this transversal space. One that is imbued with anecdotes of the freewheeling 60s and 70s while Janice was creating wild vocal settings to Wall Stevens's *Emperor of Ice Cream*. Janice, Mitchell Gabriel's mother and Tom's partner, an icon in her own right is also represented in the book with a selection of tender poems that capture the prickly peaks and troughs of grieving. For die-hard academics do not be disappointed, there is much to learn and glean from the perspectives offered here. But Tom's book also offers a gateway for anyone who has experienced depression grief or loss. It is my belief that this book sits up there with some of the most moving accounts of depression. On my shelf it sits next to Roland Barthes's *Mourning Diary* from 1978, Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* from 2005, William Styron's *Darkness Visible* from 1990, Susanna Kayson's *Girl Interrupted* from 1993 and Kay Redfield Jamison's *An Unquiet Mind* from 1995.

When I moved back to the United States as an adult settling in Chicago for the three years I would end up living there, the first person that I reached out to was Tom. I had not known of Gabriel's suicide at that point and it was not mentioned at our initial lunch at the University of Chicago's Hyde Park Campus. Living alone on the fortieth floor of someone else's apartment in a skyscraper overlooking Lake Michigan felt like thé thing to do as a recent transplant to the home of the skyscraper. I was here to experience the panopticon but quickly the walls began to cave in on me. The bitter chill of subzero temperatures inched up and through my body. The quiver from the biting cold literally turned me to ice. One morning on that initial winter something unusual happened. I recall being transfixed by the floating rings of frozen ice on the water of the lake when I literally felt like my mind had jolted out of place. I remember crying attempting to pick up the metaphorical pieces of me off of the floor. Soon began a slow descent into an abyss. Foucault and Freud could not help me here. In one of my darkest hours my friend the artist Zachary Cahill, a former student of

Toms, informed me of what had happened to Tom and Janice's son Gabe. I fought to reach out. Maybe there could be healing by proxy. I took Tom out to lunch one weekend. It was a Mexican restaurant. If I recall I remember that we sat side by side on a very large family table. Our positioning caused me great unease and irritation. I tried to broach the topic of Gabe's death. I wanted Tom to tell me that suicide was bad. But at the time Tom did not deflect to his own experience. He asked me why I seemed so troubled. I listed out various diagnostic criteria offered to me by three different psychiatrists from the DSM, all of which I did not agree with. I cannot remember the specifics after that. The landscape inside of my head had turned into a cacophonous sonic vortex of screeching electronic noises. I was unable to focus. I spoke quickly. This meeting, this encounter, this was a failure. It wasn't until Tom put his hand over mine to perhaps offer comfort or calm me down that I took a breath. From that day onwards Tom informally became my Baba, what we call our fathers in Arabic or our grandparents and many other languages and cultures. He might not want to be my Bubba but he'll occupy that space nonetheless. I have since descended and moved around the contoured shapes of madness from the inside. Reading Tom's book was a suturing, a healing act for me for too many reasons to list here.

Gabriel Mitchell may not be with us anymore but I believe that his father has done him proud. Reflecting on Gabriel's life now I personally do not believe that he had intended to take his own life. I choose to believe that like Tom Cruise in *Vanilla Sky* he thought that his descent would give him the power of new life, to start again, to open his eyes. With this book William John Thomas Mitchell has opened a new page for his son Gabriel but also for so many of us who have suffered and who at this moment in the midst of the global pandemic may be suffering more acutely than before. His book situates him as a caregiver of the highest order. Thank you.

Tom:

I only have one correction to everything you just said and that is that my grandson is watching us now and he's in Los Angeles. He is seven years old and here is his book, his first publication *A Pandemic of Poetry*. It was assembled by his daddy, my son-in-law. We spent the first three months of the pandemic, from basically March into June, two or three times a week composing poetry together. I was just the secretary. I took down what he dictated. The first page is his dedication page and it shows the two of us as worms inside of a book. We discovered that we are both bookworms and we're very happy in our environment.

Omar:

I sincerely apologize to you Alon. You're obviously much more of a genius than I had assumed – being seven years old – and able to produce such incredible lyrical poetry. The gift of story time seems to be one that runs through your bloodline Tom. I thought that maybe we could begin by discussing some semantics. Obviously, you're a master of words. Can you take us through what you believe to be the appropriate definition of madness as it relates to everyday life? And by that I mean madness as a construct of a lived experience as opposed to a construct of scientific study or for example critical or cinematic imaginary.

Tom:

In fact, the sequel to *Mental Traveler* is going to be a book called *Seeing through Madness* which will try to do this. I think the best way to do this is just to visualize a very simple venn diagram with a small circle inside of a much larger circle whose boundaries are uncertain.

The small circle is what I would call 'the sphere of mental illness': it's mainly focused on individuals, behavior, symptoms, sometimes the stigma that goes with it. The authoritative book on this is the DSM (the psychiatric manual of mental disorders), a huge vocabulary to try to differentiate the names of the disorders. I think it's in its sixth edition. It's now as big as the Manhattan telephone book because the number of syndromes is expanding rapidly. One of the things about the history of the DMS is that the first edition, shortly after World War II, was quite slim and it included obsolete syndromes such as homosexuality and hysteria. Those are no longer in the edition.

The kind of thing I'm interested in is what you might call all of the obsolete things that precede the DSM, the history of madness. One of our interlocutors here is Mieke Bal. She has made a film about madness called *A Long History of Madness* and is here with us today. I'm sure she could help us understand why that big circle of madness is so large. That's where you have lunacy, hysteria, craziness and all of the vernacular terms of madness which go on forever and which have a long history in every language on the planet. That's what I would call the cultural and symbolic manual, the panopticon of madness, which is much larger than the DSM and much less open to technical understanding or mastery. In fact, Gabriel's inspiration to me was: "Dad, I want to turn schizophrenia from this exception into a kind of framework for seeing human nature itself.". Instead of calling our species *Homo Sapiens* perhaps we should think of our species commonality as centered on things like emotionality, irrationality, depression, mania, the ability to see what is not there and sometimes the inability to see what is there. Because so much has overwhelmed us in our mental life. In other words, the priest Roux in the great play *Marat/Sade* who says: "Man is a mad animal.", I think is the new kind of fundamental posture that I'm going to have to explore. That madness is built into human nature and not some kind of deviation from it.

Omar:

I'd like to return to Gabe's comment a little bit later as well because I think it's very appreciant to this conversation. Seeing that you brought up this project *Seeing through Madness*, I'm curious as you have articulated it's a much more expansive field of discourse with many accented and linguistic subjectivities to it. It's as much about perception and visuality and representation than the DSM – which I only have DSM-5, I didn't know that there was a DSM-6. But as the DSM is already this big, how then will you create your selective criteria to create this 'atlas of madness'?

Tom:

The criteria are informal. This is not a scientific investigation. It starts basically from my own experience as a caregiver to a very bright and lovable young man who suffered from schizophrenia for 20 years. So I work out from that center. Gabriel remains the kind of pivot point that launched the book. One of the chapters is about the question of gifted schizophrenia which is a kind of rare condition. Most people who suffer from schizophrenia don't report back. They often disappear into catatonia because their interior mental life is so overwhelmingly complex, sometimes horrifying, sometimes ecstatic so they can't articulate it. Judge Schreber for instance – who I have been reading compulsively – had such an incredible interior life. For most people all he did was sit in the garden and refuse to recognize anybody who arrived because he had to keep the universe stable and pay attention to the butterflies which were the spirits circulating around him. We are very lucky Schreber emerged from this and revealed his secret. He said: "I was chosen to be the virgin

Mary of a new human species." He had fantasies of transsexuality in which he would be impregnated and deliver the new Adam or Eve for a new start for the species. He was a brilliant man. His fantasies were endless. But he was just one case of something I think that has afflicted a number of people such as where I started: William Blake. From childhood he saw angels in trees and heard voices. Or the great inspiration for us art historians: Aby Warburg. His *Bilderatlas* was a kind of therapy and perhaps a kind of symptom of his need to understand all of the passions of the human species in a new way.

So it's not a systematic exploration. I would call it more cinematic, exploring scenes, individuals, cases and – crucial to it – it isn't just about individuals. One of Gabriel's insights in his pilot film for the big encyclopedic film on hand as he planned was going to be about collective forms of madness, how groups go crazy together, how they reinforce each other's lunacy and their delusions. And since we are living in this time where the United States just emerged from a four-year period of really dangerous mass insanity reinforced by media, gaslighting, ... As we know one thing about madness, people are very vulnerable to it. Anybody, you or me or anybody who's listening here could be driven out of their mind. You could do it within a day, make them stand in the corner, don't move, don't speak, ...

Omar:

Can we talk about this idea of 'seeing madness'? In the book you quote Gabriel when he is discussing how he wants to turn mental illness, or schizophrenia specifically, into a learning tool that can help others. And then he goes and creates the pilot for *Crazy Talk* which was inspired by his sister Carmen and which was meant to lead to a nine-hour visualization of madness. An atlas of madness of his own, inspired by Godard's *Histoires du Cinéma*. In the book it's very much about the interior and exterior world of his own madness, and actually, this is the first time I've heard you talk about this kind of collective madness so explicitly. Which leads me to a question that I had asked you a couple of days ago. What do you think Gabriel would have made of for example movements such as Occupy, which is the subject of one of your books that you co-authored, or the movements that have surrounded the likes of the Trump campaign, organizations such as QAnon, ... What would he have made of these things? Would he have been able to decipher and be critical of these things as this is in terms of judgment? How do you think he would have responded to these contexts which you've discussed in your writing?

Tom:

Well, I don't even have to speculate on this one. I know, because he was still alive when the Occupy movement took place and participated in it along with me. In *Crazy Talk*, his pilot film, he focused on – what I think of as the kind of rehearsal for the era of Trump – namely the rise of the Tea Party. This kind of atavistic attempt to reenact the American Revolution in the present, to restore a fantasy of an all-white America. Gabriel latched on to a set of cartoons that recycled the image of the Tea Party through Lewis Carroll and the Mad Hatter's Tea Party. So when you see *Crazy Talk* it only lasts for maybe 10 seconds but there's a montage of collective madness of the things that were already happening in 2011, the year before his death, that he was registering and pulling together as the forms of collective madness at that moment. And then you have the arrival of QAnon or a psychopathic narcissist as president of the United States, a really dangerous person whose own mental illness mirrors that of a very large body of followers. It's becoming clear now that we have just escaped from the grip of a cult. Republicans who voted against or voted for Trump's impeachment are now being shunned by their own families in this country. The headline

this morning about one of our Illinois Congressmen was that his whole family has turned against him. There's something much deeper than ordinary electoral politics going on here when people can't accept defeat and democracy itself.

Omar:

One thing that is very much part of the public consciousness today is a kind of recalibration of the language that we use to discuss individuals with certain conditions or individuals from certain identity categories or groups. Whether it's around gender and sexuality, whether it's a pronoun for example, whether it's in the case here in Britain where I am presently ... there is a big debate around the term BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) which is used to talk about individuals together under an umbrella of otherness. And likewise I think we're slowly inching towards certain kinds of recalibration around definitions in and around mental health. For example, there is an increased sense of awareness that individuals can have cohabiting conditions, that individuals can represent certain characteristics of specific conditions for a period in their life that may go away, or that it may be recurrent. But more than that there's also been the sense that one can potentially see it as a seductive space to be associated with. For example, if you think of the young Greta Thunberg who's autistic and the way that she refers to her autism as a superpower. Or if we even look back at the mythology and the great artists like Blake and others who suffered or struggled with madness.

So my question relates to a concern for many of us who have fought and campaigned for mental illness to be acknowledged by certain employers as a form of disability that allows you to take leave, that allows you to be paid for that leave, or to be entitled to certain kinds of benefits. However, my question for you is: Do you think that we should let go of the term 'mental illness', the notion of 'illness', being something that is very much an othering device or do you think that if we let go of that – bearing in mind that we live in a neoliberal economic setup – that we would potentially be subject to losing some of the things that those who have been mentally ill and those that have surrounded them have fought for. What do you think about that?

Tom:

I definitely don't want to let go of terms like 'mental illness' or 'mental disorder'. The medicalization of madness has been a double-edged gift. On the one hand I think it produced an illusion of mastery that somehow this was going to be just like medicine. It's not just like medicine. It's within medicine, it's psychopharmacology, it involves also the environment in which people live. So mental illness is a real thing. We are all mental travelers. We are all at some moment in our lives. We all go crazy. In fact, we would not be normal if we did not. Think about adolescence or think about childhood. It's part of a complicated and extended process turning us into self-managing creatures. It takes a long time for a human animal to be capable of managing their own affairs. So in that sense we are all mental travelers. Some of us have a much harder road and of course you're subjected to conditions as homelessness, poverty, discrimination, various forms of othering and exile, that make life intolerable and that make craziness inevitable. I hear what you're saying about mental illness and no way ... if I have a polemic here ... it's not against psychiatry. I am not part of the anti-psychiatry movement although Gabriel and I read through the literature of anti-psychiatry particularly people like Goffman and R.D. Laing but not so much Thomas Szasz. Thomas Szasz was the one who said that since we cannot see the lesions in the brain then mental illness is just bad behavior. Thomas Szasz is my bad anti-psychiatry figure.

Omar:

It is interesting though what you bring up in the latter part. You mentioned homelessness which was something that in the first chapter Gabe says: "I need to become homeless" and he's calling you from NYU in his first year as an undergraduate. "To be with these people, to support that, I must be with them, I must be like them." Ultimately that is a reality for many people when sheer cognizance just disappears at times. It may reappear but with the stigma that surrounds mental illness it can often be impossible to seek help. And the stigma of mental illness I guess is one that I'm most concerned with being from the cultural, religious and ethnical background I'm from where even saying the word 'suicide' in many countries that is illegal to put in print for example. Bearing that in mind: what do you think could be strategies to end certain kinds of stigma? Of course the book is one, but are there other things that we need to do to see through madness?

Tom:

I think there are numerous things we need to do. The first thing we need to understand is that our vocation as human beings is one of care and caregiving. Needless to say that ruthless predatory capitalism is bad for your mental health. It produces enormous pockets of poverty. It's now also defiling the planet. At this moment four million Texans have not had power or fresh water or heat for three days. This is partly because Texas thinks that it is the capital of the fossil fuel industry across the planet. Only problem is all of their turbines shut down all at once. This is much bigger than the mental health community. It's a notion of care for others, it is the foundation of socialist thought, I confess right now yes I'm a socialist. I think at some point the American experiment is going to have to recognize that being one's brother and sister's keeper was part of the constitution, part of the democratic program, and not being in a dog-eat-dog race with your brother and sister to see who can be trampled on. So, mental health I think is a social issue both at the level of delivery to people who have a mental illness but also in this larger framework. One of the things I've been interested in reading about the history of mental illness and the history of political constitutions is that the constitution of the United States was designed quite consciously as a mental health document. It was about the separation of powers. About the idea that we're not one thing but we are several things that are working together. Schizophrenia is when they don't work together very well, they start to fall apart. The idea of division of powers between the reasoning, the will, the judgment, that was the foundation of the whole structure of that capital. We saw Under Siege on January 6th. It's a striking moment and the very idea of democracy was under siege in this country that thinks of itself as the great beacon of democracy.

Omar:

I want to come back to that in a second because it relates to a very specific book that I want to ask you about that you authored. Now one thing that comes to mind is – again – stigma exists in so many other fashions and it's not just about mental illness. Like you say, being a socialist in the United States because it is so associated with the evil that was communism and the Cold War Era. Thy need to be good to thy neighbor, thy brother, ... I mean, which is seen as something almost demonic. It's quite terrifying actually to be in a space with someone who literally can has the power to call a secret service agent on you when you say the word socialism which is very common in the American museum landscape actually, believe it or not. The one thing that I thought about you is that you've

always looked to the other side of the coin as it were and you were a very good friend with Edward Said, the father of post-colonial theory. You published an edited text of his in *Critical Inquiry*, the journal that you were the editor of for many years, and I'm curious about – obviously Said popularized in the late 70s the use of the term 'other' to relate to postcolonial subjects – how you perhaps see the mentally ill patient fitting into a colonial paradigm because I see that it's quite a natural fit.

Tom:

I think it's extraordinarily useful to think about mental illness in relation to this long discussion we've had in culture and politics about the issue of 'alterity' of 'otherness'. Who is the other, what does that make the self, ... I think mental illness and madness is in a sense our final frontier of the question of otherness. When someone is mentally ill they immediately are subject not only to care, solicitude, support but also to a stigma. The sociologist Erving Goffman is wonderful on this when he talks about the moral career of the mental patient and how the mental patient becomes othered. First by their own family because their behavior usually is immediately experienced by the family: they can't get along with us, they're angry all the time, what's wrong with them ... As Goffman points out, the moment when you go to the mental health system, the mental patient experiences themselves as being othered: now I'm no longer normal, I've been expelled from my family, perhaps hospitalized against my will. And the question of when – for someone's own good – should they be confined so they don't hurt themselves or hurt somebody else, that's where the law enters into this. The point is, other forms of otherness – say in terms of sexuality or race – they are part of what we call identity politics. Madness is also an identity politics but one connected very directly to caregiving and to a kind of very labile form of othering or exile. This is why I think it's very important to remember anyone can be driven mad, no one is immune. That goes for individuals and collectives so we have to figure out what is our relation to this otherness and I think the answer is in us. It's definitive of us.

So thinking of the mentally ill as other and connecting that as you suggest to Said's post-colonial project and the critique of practices of other, exile, exclusion and stigma is critical to it.

Omar:

I think what you say about care is all fundamental. It's also about the willingness for the patient to receive the care, to acknowledge the need that they are part of a care system and within that space to be able to reciprocate when necessary. And at this juncture in history it's very clear and very evident that care is what we all need actually to survive this moment in history.

But I want to ask you a question that has to do with your literary kind of prowess as a memoirist. Could you tell us a little bit about the way you structured and then created the tapestry of the book? Unlike any book of critical theory, you really are in full force storytelling mode with this book. How did you create the pacing, the stylization, the choice of the narrative flow ... because it's not always linear as well.

Tom:

It was very hard. I've been trained as an academic all my life, like many of you listening, just try writing without footnotes. Try writing without depending on citations to authorities all the time like 'this is what Foucault and Derrida think so therefore that must be right'. I had to cut myself loose from all that. The key was at first: just tell stories. I didn't know what the

story was, I just knew that there were lots of them and they had to be told. I couldn't get them out of my head. The first one was when Gabe was a student. His phone call saying: "Dad, I've discovered the meaning of life. I have to become homeless.". I said: "Oh good, well then maybe you should be a social worker because NYU has a very good program.". "No, no, no, ... you don't get it. The homeless are the only people who are in touch with the reality of the human condition. Don't you get it. You and mom are bourgeois. You're comfortable. The homeless know what the world really is and so I need to do that." This was as a freshman so I talked him out of it with bribes and things like that. That kind of story is what launched me. And then there were many others. When he was an eleven-year-old boy, we went on a field trip into New York and visited *Mad Magazine* for a day because I was a charter subscriber to *Mad*. I always felt it was the best early education any boy could have. That was only the first phase, it was just a chaotic assembly of stories.

I had very wonderful readers. My friend Bill Ayers read it and said that the stories are great but they need more detail. He also said to think about it like a novelist and if you can't remember what happened make something up. Needless to say my wife Janice said don't you dare do that, this is supposed to be true. So we had a struggle over that. I'm sure there are things I elaborated because as Bill often said that memory is a strange thing, you can't trust it. Just tell the story and make the story feel real. Finally, Bill's daughter-in-law Rachel DeWoskin, a terrific novelist, read the fourth or fifth draft and she said: "Everything is here, Tom, it's just all in the wrong order. I'll tell you what to do.". I got the greatest gift an author has ever had. It was like moving pieces on a chessboard. Rachel just rearranged the whole thing. At first I was in despair. I thought all my beautiful little transitions are now crap. But she was right. So, with a lot of help from friends I was able to write it. That was really the process.

Omar:

It sounds like you had some incredible support there but as you know, you can't teach someone to write, so I think it's an incredible feat of yourself and result of your gifts as an author. I'm hoping that you're going to do the Agatha Christie spy novel or something else and to continue without footnotes and endnotes, which is so incredibly challenging.

Before we open up the debate to our moderator Hilde, I want to ask you one last question which really is more about you as a kind of figure, situating you and your work more holy. The other day you told me that *Iconology* was your most popular book which I was disappointed by because I thought that *What Do Pictures Want* – which was dedicated to your children – should have been number one on the list and that that *Cloning Terror* should come in second. That book is very specifically about what it means to decode images as text and text as images and lays the foundation for a kind of lifelong commitment to deconstructing the agency of images. I know that you have been keenly following all forms of media from RSS feeds and social media Web 2.0 to the mass media and so forth looking at how Black Lives Matter as a movement has been represented in these spaces and particularly also the storming of the Capital on the 6th of January 2021, the use of body cams, the use of Instagram, ... Can you talk about how that has inspired or evolved your thinking around the agency of images today and maybe is there a link to madness in that as well that we could think about?

Tom:

I think both images and words are conveyed by media and media are technologies that are subject to drastic innovations, enhancements, enlargements of their power and range and instantaneous communication. Let me think about what we're doing right now: this is

words and images, we're talking and we're seeing people from all over the world. They're seeing us in a format that was unthinkable a year ago this time. Nobody would have even tried this. So the media have adapted to this moment thanks to the Zoom technology and this is a kind of chronic feature of our time. Since I've been thinking about democracy and communication and mental health together, and since we are still in the grip of something called a pandemic, I kept thinking about: why we call it a pandemic? What is that root word demic, demos mean? I think demos – as you know – is the root of democracy. It is the idea of gathered citizens, not just a population, not just the bare life of the human animal, but the qualified life. I think we are in the middle of simultaneously four pandemics: one is the biological that is most imminent but there's also one called the infodemic which is the reign of gaslighting, the reign of lies. We've always had lies, propaganda, mass disinformation but it has now reached a pandemic proportion. In the United States, for instance, we used to have what we call mainstream media and that was the place where you felt like a common truth could be arrived at. No longer the case. The US media sphere is radically divided. About 30 to 40 percent of the population never reads respectable newspapers, never watches mainstream media. In fact, it's all been denounced as fake news. So they are in a reinforcement loop of disinformation and lying which I think is capable of producing a collective psychosis. This is what I'm calling the infodemic. There's also of course the ecodeemic which is impinging on us from every side which is climate change. And then there are others. I think technological advances in this case have not simply produced more and better but also at the same time new things that are quite toxic and we have not figured out how to navigate.

Omar:

I was going to show a clip of *Crazy Talk* now but then I thought maybe we hand over to Hilde and we could show it at the end of the questions.

Hilde:

The majority of the questions have to do with the relationship between madness as an individual disease/illness and the collective phenomenon. Many members of the audience are fascinated about this. On the one hand we are living in a so-called culture of rationality where we are supposed to be very intelligent people and on the other hand you see that we also live in an era of collective delusion or stupidity and how these both are shifting. How did you experience this discrepancy in your writing and thinking about madness?

Tom:

This is a very central question, politically for our time. I've been reading recently a wonderful book called *Dangerous Charisma*, one of the thousand books on Trump, written by the psychiatrist Jerrold Post. His book advances what he calls a 'mirror psychosis hypothesis'. He spent a lot of his career working with the CIA analysing authoritarian leaders to give the president of the United States some kind of clue: How do you deal with somebody like Saddam Houssein? He wrote a psycho-biography and created profiles that were extraordinary useful. He wasn't there to try to cure these people; he was there to assess chronic cases of narcissistic personality disorder in charismatic authoritarian leaders. His hypothesis is there is a mirroring that goes on between collectives and charismatic leaders and that this can lead to cult adoration so people will sacrifice themselves for the sake of the great leader. You might think of this as the kind of capstone of group psychoses in our time, illustrated in this mirroring between the leader and the follower and their relationship.

Clearly, this is something that goes all the way down into groups of any size. Families, clubs, parties, movements, ...

My whole project has been inspired by one remark of Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil* where he says: "Insanity in individuals is something rare but in groups, parties, nations and epochs it is the rule." I used to think this was Nietzsche being kind of ironic clever but not totally serious. The older I get, the more I think he really captured a certain truth. It's clear that one party in my country has really lost its mind. A very dangerous situation. It threatens the whole system of democracy around a notion of balancing two parties. What if one party becomes so imbalanced that it doesn't believe in democracy itself anymore? The rare is the individual who is declared mentally ill but the norm/rule is the group. That's where the real danger arises.

Hilde:

It was interesting how Omar connected that to the colonial paradigm and the history of imperialism. Could you elaborate briefly on potential connection in relation to group delirium in contemporary society?

Tom:

I think this raises the question of rationality itself. The idea that madness is irrationality is a very dangerous assumption, for instance, when we think about empires and the way empires treat others. The British Empire regarded itself as an extension of the conquering empire of light and reason. Europe bringing civilization to the rest of the world with pretty catastrophic consequences for the recipients of all of this rationality. Not that I'm saying the world was just fine before empires started to conquer usually with highly rationalized military force and bureaucracy. We have seen the example of the third rush where the trains ran on time, German engineering and technical inventiveness was at its peak, science made great leaps forward. But in the service of mad projects we also see extermination, genocide, conquests. So madness and rationality are not opposites. Rationality can be an instrument of a much higher pervasive madness.

Hilde:

A slightly more personal question. How does society distinguish between bad behavior on the one hand and mental illness on the other hand. How did you experience this as a caregiver.

Tom:

That's such a hard question. In the debate about Donald Trump, one of the people I know said: "Stop talking about Donald Trump as being mad. He's bad. That's all there is to it.". Of course, I thought this person was right. You cannot call Trump mad or saying he's mentally ill. I don't think he is a good subject for caregiving. I don't think he is curable. He is merely manageable. Maybe the idea of cure itself needs to be questioned. This is something Aby Warburg discovered and I think Gabriel was on to it as well. When you find you have a mental disorder and your mind is not quite working the way other people expect it to, the notion of a cure – now I am okay, now I am normal – can become a kind of phantasm. I think this is the key to the panopticon of emotions.

Aby Warburg listened to Binswanger, his favorite therapist and a follower of Freud, saying: "I can't cure you but you can manage your life. You can not be crazy all the time.". In fact, when Warburg was in the asylum, they said he was completely out of his mind in the

mornings but by tea time he would calm down and have conversations for a couple of hours. Crucial is that we realize that when people are crazy they are not crazy all the time. This is one thing I learned with Gabriel that it was cyclical. There were good days and bad days. It also depended on the context. Sometimes he could be with a group of strangers and work the room like a skilled politician because he was convinced everyone out there is a mental traveler like me. Everyone has an infinite soul and a path thereon. So he didn't have any patience for small talk. He would immediately come to people and say: "Who are you? What is your dream? What are you about?". A lot of people told us – after his passing – I only met your son once but he had this incredible impact on me because he immediately wanted me to open myself up to him the way he was opening himself up. This is very characteristic for schizophrenia. That's why – and the DSM fully acknowledges that – these labels are very imprecise. The question of time, of cycles, of good days or bad days is absolutely crucial.

Hilde:

How can we interpret the title of the book in relation to Blake's poem?

Tom:

I think this is, in some ways, Blake's greatest poem. It's not like his big mythological poems full of allegorical figures and invented characters:

*I travelled through a land of men,
A land of men and women too,
And heard and saw such dreadful things
As cold earth wanderers never knew.
For there the babe is born in joy
That was begotten in dire woe,
Just as we reap in joy the fruit
Which we in bitter tears did sow;*

...

The cycle of the seasons and the cycle of reproduction of human life, beginning, birthing, planting the seed, harvesting, ... all of that is backwards upside down in this mirror world of *The Mental Traveler*. It's as if Blake wanted to hold up a mirror to the human psyche, but in a mirror everything is reversed. It's both the same and the opposite. Gabriel knew this poem very early. I used to play it to a heavy metal setting on guitar and so it was one of our favorites. And when I was casting about for a title I thought that was it. The question of mental health, mental illness, mental disorders, ... let's think about it as 'mental travel' and start with the assumption that we are all mental travelers. This was one. I was very close to him and I learned an immense amount about the world of schizophrenia from him, about his experience of it and his efforts to make those experiences public to bring them out. It is the way Schreiber said: "Here's what it's like. It's not your world but it's a human world. You may find something of use if you follow me down that path."

In a way, the title came very late. I didn't know what to call it for a long time. It seemed to pull the strings together.

Hilde:

If you situate the book within your larger body of work, do you see it as something very

particular or does it somehow fits and makes sense within the rest of your oeuvre. How do you feel about this when you look back at this wonderful book.

Tom:

As Omar said before, it was a book I didn't expect or want to write. I wanted my son, I didn't want to write a book about my son. I wanted him to make his nine hour film.

It fits in one sense. Before Gabe took his life in 2012 he had commissioned me as his research assistant for his film *Histoire de la folie*. It was to be the nine-hour Goddard-style epic showing the entire range of individual collective madness, the whole planet as a ship of fools. That was the basic metaphor. Since we now know that we live on spaceship earth – we've discovered that at least since the 1960s – the old 'ship of fools' metaphor has come back in a rather new way. So I was already his research assistant and the first seminar, which I taught with psychiatrist Bernard Rubin and my dear friend Françoise Meltzer, just called 'Seeing Madness' which was mostly film but also a lot of visual art and medical documentation about the spectacle of madness. We often say that mental illness is invisible, you can't find the lesions in the body, it's just its behavior. But there's also this fascination with madness as an object of performance display when you think of the genres of theater and performance: comedy, tragedy, satire, romance, Greek drama, Shakespeare, ... You wouldn't have these plays without the madness. That's what drives them.

Hilde:

There were quite a few questions also in relation to your research on images. The example that was given was the iconic picture of the Tiananmen Square and how they make us see the unthinkable. How we perceive that then as images of madness? Perhaps you could briefly expand on that and maybe even in relation to the *Metapictures* project.

Tom:

One of the books that actually Gabriel volunteered to be my research assistant on was my book *Cloning Terror*, written in the decade after 9/11. He went searching into the archive of the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, particularly for the figure of the hooded man and some other figures. Of course, a prison of that sort not only produced death but mental damage of all kinds. The hooded man later came forward and revealed that he'd been hospitalized. He had a complete breakdown as a result of the treatment that he received. It wasn't even so much physical abuse as just deprivation of food and water, occasional threats to his life and constant abuse. When you think about terror, it is the modern form of psychological warfare. It's not military conquest or doesn't involve invading armies, it involves an emotional attack and you reduce the enemy to helplessness by terrorizing them. Gabriel was very much part of the research for that.

Hilde:

There have been numerous comments in the chat. We will now open up and have a few people speak out.

Janice Misurell-Mitchell:

You know what we've been witnessing in the past month or so through the mobs. Tom and I have been talking a lot about the religious element in some of the things that are said by people who are still convinced that they must support Trump no matter what. I'm not an

expert in any of this but I thought a lot about people within crowds, within mobs, and kind of giving in to the mob sensibility, and if it's kind of a long-term thing. I think it does have elements that are similar to embracing ecstatic religion. The relation to schizophrenia would be the breaking down of the individual barriers and kind of agreeing to go with a group feeling which then becomes stronger and stronger because the barriers aren't there. My initial understanding of this was watching the crowds when Hitler was speaking. You have this huge body of people who have been primed by music and soldiers and rhythms and then the rhythms of the bodies against each other. If you're breaking down barriers and you have this kind of collective energy that can also result in the kinds of things that we have seen in terms of mobs.

Mieke Bal:

I just want to say that I think it is completely wonderful and brilliant to change the terminology of all these DSM terms. I remember we showed the film on madness in England to an audience of 200 people from the association of schizophrenics Hearing Voices. It was an incredible experience. We were very fearful but in the end they were very positive and it was very engaging. To call it 'mental traveler' I think it's genius. It gets rid of the otherness, of the uttering, it gets rid of that sort of the frontier establishing around people and yet it says something, it has content. So Tom I really want to compliment you on that term and as you explained it was actually Gabe's idea to talk about it in those terms. I think it is fantastic. Tomorrow, I'm going to see the psychoanalyst with whom I made the film. I'm going to tell her that this is the term that we need because it is dignifying, it has nothing of the derogatory connotations, yet it is specific. It is also something that we all engage in sometimes.

Tom:

Another inspiration taking that title and that name for madness 'mental travel' was R. D. Laings *The Politics of Experience* in which he talked about schizophrenia in two ways. He said: "I'm not talking about this in the mode of psychiatry. I think schizophrenia fundamentally is something like a broken heart.". That was certainly true of Gabriel. It may not be something you would generalize but it often is part of the idea that you feel like yourself has been broken by something. Laing's other comment was: "We should think of schizophrenia as a kind of exploration of a frontier, like the seafarers of the early 17th century most of whom never returned to tell their stories.". This was for me the entry into the chapter on gifted schizophrenia. The idea that some people who go through this come back to tell the story and we should listen.

Hilde:

Now is an excellent moment to show the clip of *Crazy Talk*. Omar, could you briefly introduce it to the audience so everyone has an idea of what you will show?

Omar:

Basically I was saying to Tom we have to show a clip that Gabe would like. We started off by saying we should show the end scene from *Vanilla Sky* because it's just so magnificent, dramatic, evocative and captured also so well in the book. Instead, we decided to show you a few minutes of Gabriel's *Crazy Talk* which is, as Tom mentioned already, was the pilot film for this larger nine-hour project exploring a panoptical history of madness. The fact that it is on this balcony and situated within the city of Chicago in this specific panoptical way, we felt was an appropriate way to tie things together and also bring Gabe into the room

as well. For those who don't know, of course Gabe has been in the room the whole time, also as my background namely the cover of Tom's book.

Tom:

I'll just add one thing. Listen to the soundtrack carefully. This is a choral piece in a setting by Janice Misurell-Mitchell, my composer spouse, of Blake's early lyric written when he was a teenager called *Mad Song*. It's a chorus of I think 12 voices.

<https://philmworx.com/crazy-talk-what-is-mental-illness/>

Omar:

First of all, I want to say that you can watch the entirety of the work of this piece as well as other of Gabe's works on his website <https://philmworx.com/>.

What's so incredible to me about watching this clip is the technique that Gabe has used. It is one of appropriation of sampling that has become so rife in the age of the RSS feed, in the age of Instagram, of taking someone else's image screen, grabbing it, editing it, contorting it, and putting it up against another kind of material to create a new form of meaning. In a sense, the metaphor of appropriation and assimilation of these kind of fragmentary narratives that we now see so often permeating the thickened digital sphere is really an appropriate metaphor for schizophrenia and for madness as we have discussed it, but also for this idea that has come out today of the collective madness. Basically, everybody is infinitely scrolling through their phones and RSS feeds, appropriating, borrowing and taking stories and making and culling and creating their own stories in this kind of insular mad experience. I think in a way Gabe foreshadowed a cultural moment that very much has been accelerated by the isolation. The pandemic has shown us with everyone being glued to their phones and their screens as we are now. There is that moment where I did feel very like high five when I see Major Hasan, the Islamic convert, being called the rag head on the news juxtaposed against Jack Nicholson in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, who's one of my favorite anti-hero figures. I'm sad that I never got to meet Gabe personally but I do feel that I would have liked to have experienced his incredible sense of humor that he must have had. I wanted end my part here by asking Tom to reflect on Gabe as a filmmaker, what Gabe's ambitions really were with cinema. You outlined some of that in the book but in terms of where he would have wanted to be today and maybe even post the nine-hour film.

Tom:

I loved the idea of the film *Histoire de la folie*. I don't know how many of you have seen Godard's magnificent *Histoire du Cinéma* which is nine hours. The reason he took that as a model was because he had an incredible tutorial in montage and techniques of assembling. We had a kind of film group – a little club including Tom Gunning, Yuri Tsivian, Miriam Hansen and other friends – and we watched that nine-hour film over nine weeks, watching one hour each week every Tuesday night followed by pizza. And then we would watch the same hour again, only we would stop to analyze. So there was a huge amount of material. Of course, as you could see from *Crazy Talk*, he was stealing film footage from everywhere. When we pointed out to him – I hate myself for remembering this – you know there's copyright restrictions on this. He would look at me and say: "Godard gets away with it. He steals from everybody. Why shouldn't I?". I should have said: "You're right, go ahead, steal all you want, let them try to sue you when they find out that you are working as a grocery clerk and making a hundred dollars a week. They'll have a tough time getting

anything out of you.". Anyway, I thought it was actually quite a brilliant idea and I encouraged it even though it was utopian. I still love *Crazy Talk's* way of condensing the issues of individual and collective madness together. In a way it's a nine-minute glimpse into the encyclopedia he wanted to show. Particularly when he breaks away from Tom Cruise falling and approaching the edge of his building, to reflections on colonialism, and then moves to torture and brainwashing in the scenes from *A Clockwork Orange* which is about operant conditioning. So it's a little gem of a film that gives us a great insight into how he wanted to proceed with this subject.

If anybody wants to see the whole thing, just go to Gabe's website, it's called <https://philmworx.com/>. All of his films are available there and a lot of other things as well such as his sculptural and drawing projects and cartoons and also a documentary about our dear friend Bill Ayers. He had bill read from *Fugitive Days* – his memoir of going crazy in the late 60s in the anti-war movement as part of Students for Democratic Society and the Weather Underground – and bill said: "Yes, of course we were crazy with revolution.". Gabe asked bill to read the first chapter of his memoir and then he went out and created a montage of images from newsreels and other records of the 60s. It's a kind of tribute to Bill Ayers and another moment of political madness which us old folks live through.

Bart:

Tom and Omar, let me conclude officially this marvelous event. I want to thank everybody joining us for this event, I want to thank Hilde for chairing and of course both of you for this wonderful dialogue.