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Press on My Eyeballs in the Dark
Martínez Bellido

17 May – 6 September 2024

THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE

The reliability of the senses has been a challenge to the greatest luminaries of mankind. The problem, in a nutshell, can be summarised as follows: without the sensorium, we would ignore the world, but how can we eliminate mirages? Grudgingly, Descartes writes: “From time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once.” ¹

A few centuries before the philosopher’s warnings (haste makes waste, etc.), Thomas Didymus (The Twin) went out to run some errands and missed the miracle. As a substitute, he was given a synopsis. “We have seen the Lord”. He, the predecessor of the hypothetico–deductive method, looked at them suspiciously. Was it a joke? Had they gone mad with fear and sadness? A sensible mistrust earned him notoriety: if I don’t see, if I don’t touch, I won’t believe. The episode is not lacking in substance. The apostle is not satisfied with a story (the transformation of what is *seen* into what is *heard*): he calls for the evidence of sight and the confirmation of touch.

Let us take a less solemn example. Hergé was amused by the combo of gaffe and bump. Wandering through the imaginary deserts of the Khemed, Thomson and Thompson saw an oasis on the horizon, which, a few panels ahead, vanishes between meandering lines. “—Goodness gracious! A mirage! —A mirage? Really? I thought they’d been abolished”. The misunderstanding is repeated a couple of times until, confidently, they drive into a palm tree that ends up embedded in their bumper.²

But even if we were persuaded of the infallibility of touch, the touchable part of reality is very scarce: thus, taking advantage of the fact that smell, taste and hearing are only half–civilised, vision has imposed its tyranny. We live besieged by images and they all claim to be *true*.

For centuries, mankind has fantasised about the possibility of self–made images. The ancients revered some artefacts in the making of which no one had been involved. Herodian mentions the engraved stone of Emesa and the famous statue of Athena, protector of the Trojans ³

¹ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 12.

² See, Hergé, *Tintin, Land of Black Gold*, London: Methuen, 1972. The album was originally published in 1950 and the comic sequence is repeated on several occasions. Hergé introduced a similar gag in *The Crab with the Golden Claws* (published in 1943), in which Captain Haddock starts to hallucinate with a giant bottle of champagne in the middle of the Sahara. “land of thirst”. When he pounces on it, he falls flat on the sand.

³ See: Herodian, *History of the Empire from the Death of Marcus*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015.

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Stoichita has found a beautiful precursor to photography in the cloth of Veronica: the face miraculously transferred to the canvas, without adulteration or artifice. Omar Calabrese notes that, like so much else in Christianity, the story mixes a passage from the *Gospel of Nicodemus* (an apocrypha) with a myth (that of Paneas): “the hero, mortally wounded, indelibly imprints his face on a cloth, to bequeath this imperishable memory to his beloved.”⁴ Christians venerate at least six acheiropoietia (literally, *not manufactured*) icons of the messiah. A pious and multiplying tradition claims that the portrait of Veronica travelled folded in four folds, which caused it to be traced on the overlapping layers; another, that the unique radiations of the resurrection turn the linen into a photosensitive material.

Against this background (and with such ontological flexibility), one can understand the enthusiasm that photography caused in the most imaginative minds. After all, if the cautious Christian populace had unquestioningly believed that this mug, clearly drawn by the rokiest iconographer of his class, was *sine manu facta*, who could doubt the immaculate images which, on top of that, came out of the cold entrails of a machine?

The Moderns were nuts about gizmos. Telescopes, automatons, clocks, fountains: all gears were good. In 1600, lenses were a sensation. Even Descartes himself, the patron saint of the suspicious, began his treatise on optics by stating that “sight is the most comprehensive and the noblest of [the senses], there is no doubt that the inventions which serve to augment its power are amongst the most useful there can be [...]. So that, carrying our sight much farther than the imagination of our fathers was used to going, [lenses] seem to have opened the way for us to attain a knowledge of nature much greater and more perfect than our fathers had.”⁵ Wow. The obsession with concave and convex glass disrupted families and endangered empires. ⁶Leeuwenhoek, the inventor of the microscope, grew fond of magnifying lenses thanks to the mesh counters in the family business (his father, like Zurbarán’s, traded in textiles). For his invention he used tiny beads, which were made by heating a glass thread with a candle flame until it formed a drop, which was left to precipitate on a flat surface and then polished. The method was so fallible that these “spherules” were sold in bulk so that unusable ones could be discarded.⁷

⁴ Omar Calabrese, *Las verónicas de Zurbarán: un ritual figurativo en La verónica de Zurbarán*, Madrid: Casimiro, 2015, p. 20.

⁵ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology*, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1965, p. 65.

⁶ “The fascination with lenses pervaded society. Many inhabitants of the Dutch Republic and elsewhere wished to produce their own; some became ‘almost fanatical in their devotion’ to this undertaking, as a biographer of Descartes described his subject’s good friend Claude Mydorge. Mydorge, a mathematician, spent so much time studying optics and making lenses as well as mirrors that he completely neglected his family. [...] In England, enough people were grinding and using lenses that, even by 1658, the political thinker James Harrington could assert that Oxford scholars were ‘good at two things, at diminishing a Commonwealth and multiplying a louse.” Laura J. Snyder, *Eye of the Beholder*, London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

⁷ Ibid.

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To improve his device, Leeuwenhoek set himself the unpleasant task of dissecting eyes. His interest was not original: reputable colleagues had been busy with those of bees or ticks. Observing the compound eye of flies, Father Odierna concluded that their system could receive and perceive numerous images at once, and that insects see inside the eyes and outside the brain.⁸

The idea would have fascinated early photographers, particularly those fond of invisible realities. According to Gombrich, photography freed painting from the yoke of figuration, to which I would add that it tried to evade this task as soon as it could. In 1896, Jakob von Narkiewicz-Jodko held an electric coil in one hand while posing the other on a photographic plate, trying to capture his vital effluvia. A couple of years later, Adrien Majewski and his wife did the same, but without the electric shock. Meanwhile, Louis Darget and Hippolyte Baraduc tried to *photograph* thoughts by placing a photosensitive headband on their volunteers' foreheads.

Unfortunately, these astonishing discoveries were soon refuted. In 1897, the head of the Salpêtrière's photographic service thanked Adrien Guèbhard for his latest set of objections: he was happy to possess "the most beautiful possible collection of operating accidents caused by the incompetence of photographers".⁹

Beyond a few eccentric occurrences, practitioners of this heterodox and speculative photography clung to the honesty the photographic plate seemed to promise. Many of their experiments used simplified cameras, when not the naked film directly confronting the world. They wanted, as St Paul promises, to see face to face and not in a mirror dimly.¹⁰ The playwright August Strindberg tried to capture the heavens "sans appareil ni lentille". He himself submitted some of these prints, obtained with plates dipped in developer trays under starlight. "I have worked like a devil and have captured the movements of the moon and the real appearance of the firmament on a glass plate, independent from our misleading eye," he says in one of his letters to the astronomer Camille Flammarion.¹¹

These *celestographs*, while useless for scientific purposes, are undeniably beautiful. The same can be said of *effluviographs* and Darget's and Baraduc's *thought images*. They hoped to capture, *in fraganti*, the transcendental essence of the universe without realizing, poor fools, that they were only portraying the ghost inside their machines.

⁷ Ibid.6

⁹ Clément Chéroux, *Breve historia del error fotográfico*, Mexico City: Ediciones Ve, 2009, p. 165.

¹⁰ 1 Cor 13, 12.

¹¹ Strindberg's celestographs and notes he made on envelopes can be consulted on the National Library of Sweden website.

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Borrowing from the aberrations and distortions produced by light in lenses and prisms, Martínez Bellido (Cádiz, 1992) has made a set of photographs without a camera, now on exhibit at Galería Luis Adelantado. The title, *Aprieto los ojos en la oscuridad* (Press on My Eyeballs in the Dark), is taken from August Strindberg's essay *A Glance into Space*, where he asks: "Is the sun round because it looks round to us? And what is light? [...] When it is dark and I press on my eyeballs, I first see a chaos of light, stars or sparks, which are gradually condensed and gathered up into a brilliant disk [...]. Is it the inside of the eye that the astronomer reproduces in word and image, and is it the lenses of the telescope that he photographs on the photosensitive plate?"

Joaquín Jesús Sánchez, May 2024

On the artist

During the last few years Martínez Bellido (Cádiz 1993) has carried out several projects on the nature of photographic image, searching for structures and meanings hidden to the naked eye and pursuing a particular poetics of perceptive estrangement that directs towards the material substrates and the technical rudiments of the images and the devices that produce them. Currently, he develops a line of work around the photographic trace and optical instruments, closely related to the first scientific photography, where the pretension of accessing and registering the invisible, experimentation with photosensitive materials and photographic abstraction often appear together.

He has had solo exhibitions such as "Fulgores" at Espacio Derivado or "El rigor oscuro de la luz" at SCAN Projects London. He has participated in group exhibitions such as "Embustes y maravillas: representaciones inverosímiles de lo otro" at Casa de Iberoamérica, "Entre las formas que van hacia la sierpe y las formas que buscan el cristal" at CAAC, "Error de cálculo" at Fundación de Artes Plásticas Rafael Botí or "Thinking about photography" at the International Photography Festival SCAN Tarragona. He has been awarded with the European Contest of Plastic Arts of the University of Seville prize or the production grant of the Iniciarte Program. His work can be found in institutions such as the Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Seville University or the Valentín de Madariaga Foundation.

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