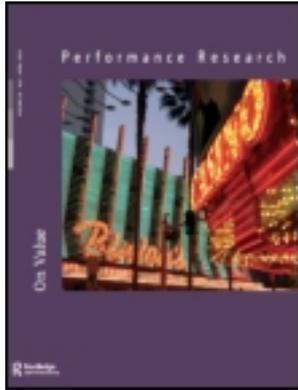


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That Which Burns

A meditation on fire, allegory and competitive telekinesis

T E D H I E B E R T

INTRODUCTION

In a dimly lit room, three teammates prepare. For the last several weeks they have been imagining the nuances and intricacies of fire, wondering about the power and beauty of a flame, speculating on ways in which fire can be manipulated and controlled. Their goal has been to find a viable strategy for what at first seems an impossible task – an attempt to influence the flame of a candle with the power of their minds alone.

In another room, many miles away, another group of friends has been doing the same. The strategy they came up with was entirely different, but they wait with equal anticipation. They know their ideas and efforts will soon be put to the test.

Both teams have been informed of the schedule. At an agreed upon time, in a third location, unrelated to the other two, a candle is lit. It doesn't seem like much, but this fire is as imaginary as it is literal. A game of competitive telekinesis has just begun.¹

This essay is a meditation on fire, both a meditation on the topic of fire and an enflamed meditation – an attempt to extend a series of thoughts about fire in ways that may amplify the stakes and possibilities of fire as a catalyst for thinking and performance. Fire can be dangerous and if the same is not true for the act of thinking about fire, then the thoughts risk doing an injustice to the question under exploration. To think about fire is to potentially light oneself on fire in the process – to be seduced by the flames and perhaps to even be burned in the process.

What follows is a collection of reflections

– episodes in which various perspectives on the question of fire are taken up for their speculative and performative potential. For, what is most interesting about fire is how quickly it becomes allegorical – how meditations on fire quickly ignite the imaginative mind. In some ways, this is nothing less than an attempt to make thought literal – a visualization experiment designed to do more than simply experiment with thought. Instead, this visualization is contemplation on the ways in which the imagination can influence the material world – a game of telekinesis in which minds move matter and thoughts are mightier than either pens or swords. What is required is a catalyst, a moment of enlightenment – of lighting up the brain, igniting by consequence the possibilities for manifest cognition.

The catalyst for this essay is the World Telekinesis Competition, an art project that is also an invitation to others to spend an hour of their time, in a team context, attempting to influence the behaviour of fire. In so doing, teams also compete against one another in order to determine a yearly telekinesis champion. As the candle burns, so too do teams find themselves with the opportunity to meditate on the fire in front of them – a performance and a competition enabled by the candle as the catalyst that burns.

1. A MEDITATION ON FIRE

In a game of competitive telekinesis there is only one real rule – no professionals allowed. It is an important rule designed to preserve the experimental edge of the game. Telekinesis is an amateur activity: less a sport than a thought

¹ This meditation on competitive telekinesis comes out of my involvement in the World Telekinesis Competition, a project hosted since 2008 by Noxious Sector Arts Collective. For full details on the competition see Noxious Sector Arts Collective (2012).



■ Game image: World Telekinesis Competition. Noxious Sector Arts Collective. Color photograph, 2010.

experiment; less a claim of ability and more a gamble with possibility. There are other rules, too, but they are more recommendations than prohibitions.

To play, players must organize themselves into teams of three. Teams are required to create a logo – an identity that anchors their collaborative efforts – and a mission statement. Biographies of team members are required, although there is no requirement that the biographies be real. Indeed, some teams actively avoid the real, including ghosts, avatars, alter-egos and even family pets within their group.

At a time determined in advance by the referees, in an agreed upon location, a candle is lit on a competition game board. This signals the beginning of the game, which lasts for one hour or until the candle wax spills onto the game board, whichever comes second. There are four quadrants on the game board – two brown and two blue – aligned according to cardinal points so that teams know how to orient their psychic efforts. A colour is randomly assigned to each team in advance of the competition. The object of the game is to make the wax from the candle drip onto the opponent's side of the board, the winning team being that which has best realized the objective. This objective is to be accomplished by remote mental influence; in whatever way teams determine this guideline for themselves.

In some ways, the game of telekinesis is a meditation on fire – a meditation that takes as its object the idea of influencing the flame it

observes. In other ways this meditation is also itself on fire, illuminated as only a meditation can be. It is an attempt to illuminate the brain, to activate and fire-up – to expand the inner workings of a normative or functional mind. A game of telekinesis is also an opportunity to reinvent oneself – an identity redesign designed to render plausible what seems otherwise unapproachable. It is an opportunity to literally play with fire while also using fire as an opportunity to focus and challenge the mind.

THE CIRCULAR RUINS

This isn't the first time a story of this sort has been told. There is also the account of the dreamer, a character from Jorge Luis Borges' (1964) story 'The Circular Ruins', who made a pact with fire that allowed his dreams to turn into material reality. In this story, the dream was of a child – one so realistic that only the dreamer (and fire) could ever tell him from a real child of flesh and blood. Fire, recognizing that the child was made of dreams, would never burn him. The child grows up and eventually moves away. Now an old man, the dreamer moves to the woods where he lives out his days in peace. Except one day, the forest around him catches on fire, burning the world around him to ashes. Strangely, the man himself is left untouched by fire and on this day the dreamer realizes that he too has been dreamed – and perhaps burned all the more poignantly as a result.

There are a number of lessons, or

speculations, which might be drawn from this story. The first is to always be cautious when making promises with fire, especially when attempting to manipulate fire in the service of one's own imagination. The chances are good that the relationship will never be as simple as one imagines. Fire bites the hand that feeds it – and it is in its nature to do so.

At the same time, fire enables the manifestation of the imaginary – in real ways. It's not by accident that meditative practices often coach learners to focus on a flame. The hypnotic effect – calming, warming, comforting – is easy to provoke, perhaps too easy. Fire seduces the imagination at the same time as it enables the focusing of creative energy. In some ways fire captures the imaginary, allowing it a space to manifest, yet typically in ways that are bound to remain private, a fantasy shared only by the one imagining and the fire that acts as catalyst. In Borges' story this fantasy is that of the dreamer who cannot be burned, but perhaps if the dreamer knew this secret he might have dreamed differently. It's possible that fire has a secret.

What would be the secret to this riddle? It might be to propose a dream that wouldn't be burnt even if it weren't imaginary – like a fireproof vest or a devil. It might also be the opposite, a dream destined to burn such as to accentuate in advance the irony of the situation. Imagine, for instance, a candle that couldn't be lit – an imaginary candle brought into existence through a pact with fire – destined never to mistake itself as real in the first instance.

There's also the inverse possibility – that in Borges' story fire made a mistake and the dreamer was never meant to be burned – burned by not being burned – left un-touched as the forest burnt around him. It is a burning of a different sort, the traumatic touch of unrequited preferential treatment. A strange possibility – that fire misunderstood its own allegorical potential. For the way in which an allegory collapses is important. The collapse of reality is not an argument against the allegorical. Instead, it is a strange reversal. Allegory burned into reflexive existence.

THE PROMETHEUS COMPLEX

There are other versions of the story; for instance, there is the story of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods and brought it back to the human world. Interestingly, what is sometimes less told is that Prometheus was also responsible for fire being withheld from humankind in the first place – a punishment for tricks he had played on Zeus.² This story was made into a psychological allegory by Gaston Bachelard (1964:14) who coined the 'Prometheus complex' as a state of mind never content to passively accept the dictates of authority – a state of mind that purposefully plays with fire and that acknowledges that we learn nothing without sometimes being burned in the process. For Bachelard, knowledge is about performance, even transgression – it is never enough to simply see someone else manipulate fire. Instead, the observation catalyses a desire to learn, to perform one's own manipulations and to step beyond the boundaries imposed by those from whom we learn. In this way, the manipulation of fire is always comparative – defined in opposition to those who claim to know better than we. In Bachelard's words: 'We propose to place together under the name of the Prometheus complex all those tendencies which impel us to know as much as our fathers, more than our fathers, as much as our teachers, more than our teachers' (Bachelard 1964: 14).

The Prometheus complex is, for Bachelard, an 'art of clever disobedience', that which grows from seeing others play with fire – as a child might see his or her father manipulating the family fireplace, or as a teenager might witness a college bonfire party (13). The observation causes a desire to mimic and exceed – to experience for oneself the perceived power of manipulating fire. Being burned along the way is less the unfortunate exception and more part of the point of the process itself. To experience fire for oneself is also to know the risks and dangers with which one plays.

This is fire – and for Bachelard, by extension, knowledge – as representative of an adrenalin rush of sorts, in part the risk of coming

² For a full account of the Prometheus myth, see Graves (1955).

up against insurmountable odds, in part a strange desire for authenticity of the sort that only happens when encountering the incommensurable, the imminent or the sublime. What starts perhaps as play quickly promises to become more. Part-extreme sport, part-disaster-tourism, fire is designed by those who participate, not by those who witness – even if the witness is sometimes the one changed most by the experience.

This is merely to make a relatively obvious insistence. Fire burns, but in burning fire implicates multiple contexts and locations and personalities and stories. Fire is never simply fire. What is perhaps most interesting about fire is how quickly it becomes allegorical – how fire become more than fire, illuminating and destroying and irreparably changing its context in the process of simply being what it is.

2. A MEDITATION ON ALLEGORY

A game of competitive telekinesis is as much an occasion for speculative engagement as it is a competitive challenge. If one has never sat quietly with a group of friends, working together in the attempt to influence a candle flame, then one may not have had first-hand experience of the performative context. The question arises of whether one can judge or dismiss such a challenge if one has never tried. Whether or not one is a believer is a secondary question.

The other question is what to do for the duration of the competition, which activities to perform, or how one might go about nuancing one's own approach in order to gain a competitive advantage over others.

The methods chosen by teams vary. Some conduct research on telekinesis training exercises and do their best to implement them. Some invoke spirits, witchcraft spells, astral projection or remote viewing strategies. Others simply sit and stare, focusing their minds in unison, sometimes on the game, sometimes on the other players or referees. There are also teams who are more sceptical, signing up but invoking random chance rather than psychic strategy.

In a telekinesis competition, all strategies are allowed. What each team method has in common is that it is, in some way, made public by their collaborative participation. Each team process is an experimental performance, building imagined and imaginary communities through participation – a game of competitive telekinesis is an excuse to imagine together, with direction and focus and agreement.

Likewise, to light a candle is to delineate this event as an opportunity for engagement. The challenge is to influence the story of this moment of fire – to re-cast a dreamer's story as one where the imaginary makes fire real and not the other way around. To play the game is to suspend disbelief, to implicate oneself in the act of imagining – to allegorize one's participation. It is to not only tell the story of a team who signs up, but that of a team who sits down and imagines, however that imagination takes form.

In some ways, the game of telekinesis is a meditation on allegory – one that is itself caught being allegorical. A game of telekinesis is an allegory on fire.

THAT WHICH BURNS

It's not by accident that a conversation about duration comes up in this context, less the phenomenon of fire and more the instance of encounter. If, in encountering fire, one ends up changed then fire – whether seen as a catalyst for knowledge or experience – has a transitive presence. The question is not (or not only) about the mastery of fire but also about how to interact with it, how to sustain the flame, keeping alive the participatory dream.

This may be seen as an attempt to keep alive the transitivity of process, avoiding a moment of realization or change by emphasizing the allegorical – more a cultivation of phenomenological continuity than an empirical assessment of results. For this, a strategy is needed.

One such strategy can be found in the eccentricities of Alfred Jarry. Best known for his formulation of 'pataphysics – at once a 'science of imaginary solutions' (1996: 22) and

a study of 'the laws governing exceptions' (21) – there are stories about Jarry that are equally important. And while it is sometimes considered unfashionable to invoke the biographical details of an actual life performed, there is perhaps no better exception to the rule than the thinker who insisted that rules be built around exceptions and not the other way around.

According to the accounts by Nigey Lennon (1984) and Jill Fell (2010) Alfred Jarry lived in half an apartment – divided vertically, which worked for him because he was particularly short. He kept pet owls. When the owls died he had them stuffed. He carried a pistol and occasionally used it. He drank a lot – mostly absinthe (a highly alcoholic liqueur), undiluted since he thought watering it down would be an insult to the drink. He rode his bicycle a lot too, sometimes around his apartment, sometimes in public, often while wearing yellow high heels. A young Pablo Picasso looked up to him – and perhaps inherited one of his pistols, kept as a special treasure of a soon-to-become Cubist way of looking at the world.

Jarry also avoided calling things by their names – preferring instead to name them by what they did. A bicycle became 'that which rolls', the wind became 'that which blows', and a bird became 'that which chirps' (Lennon 1984: 62). This was more than simply a strange habit of speech, however; it was part of the performative method through which Jarry integrated his dramatic flair into everyday life. One might even think of this as a phenomenological integration of the performative and the imaginary, a character to be sure, but one whose effect was to supplant and embellish – and even enflame – the patterns according to which objects remain objects rather than participatory encounters.

One may even extend this method to other contexts, using 'pataphysical strategy to embellish and extend the concept of fire – insisting on the experience of fire as an encounter with 'that which burns'. To do so would be to propose a theory of performative method – the mind of a playwright scripting the activities of the characters that would

accompany him in the process of engaging the world, not as objects but as activated agents in the unfolding drama.

THE ORANGE RABBIT

There are other accounts of imaginary friends, designed – as they were for Jarry – with the intention of raising the stakes of engaged participation with the world. One important version of this story comes from Nicolas Bourriaud, the French curator who coined the phrase 'relational aesthetics'. According to Bourriaud, artistic practice, and perhaps all transformative relationships, are built on allegory – perhaps even hallucination, if and when hallucination is required (Bourriaud 1998:49).

For Bourriaud, contemporary art is a state of encounter – dependent on dialogue and engagement, but independent from truth or verification for as long as the participating parties can sustain the interaction. Less the 'suspension of disbelief' of nineteenth-century aesthetic thinking (Coleridge 1907: xiv) and more the 'consensual hallucination' of already virtualized minds (Gibson 1986: 69). In some ways, contemporary art is a game of telekinesis – sustaining the life of a work of art by purposefully imagining it. Whether it is actually present or not – even whether it is real or not – is ultimately beside the point. Bourriaud describes the situation like this:

Reality is ... a product of negotiation. Escaping from reality is mad. Somebody sees an orange rabbit on my shoulder, but I can't see it. So discussion weakens and shrinks. To find a negotiating space, I must pretend to see this orange rabbit on my shoulder. Imagination seems like a prosthesis affixed to the real so as to ... destroy any a priori agreement about what is perceived.... Feeling nothing means not making enough effort.
(Bourriaud 1998: 49)

Quixotic, yet purposefully so, this game is one of imagining – not object-dependent but activity-dependent – performative to the point that the imaginary lights the real on fire,

a spark of life that erupts from nowhere but with consensual power. This is Borges' story in reverse, not fire that allows the imagination to become real, but fire as that which facilitates an alternative to the hegemony of the real. The guarantee of the imaginary is that it can't be burned away. The possibility of the imaginary is that it makes real what may not have been there otherwise.

Seen in this way, the stakes of the allegorical are clear – not merely the symbolic representation of the imagination but an imaginary catalyst. Fire, seen allegorically, is about challenging the constraints of the consensual real. To do so collaboratively is what guarantees reflexivity to the process. To not engage in this way is to dismiss outright the dialogic possibilities of the imagination, which have never required reality in order to manifest in transformative and participatory ways.

3. A MEDITATION ON COMPETITIVE TELEKINESIS

When a candle melts, wax drips. 'That which burns' becomes 'that which melts and spills'. That which spills is also that which is measured, that which is assessed, that which speaks its own story about which team moved it most. It is that which determines a winner.

In a game of competitive telekinesis, it is not always clear how the winning team imagined their way to victory – yet there is always a victory involved, just as there is always a defeat. A melted candle yields definitive results. That which happens, happens anyways, ostensibly even if a team forgets their appointment or forfeits engagement. At stake is the possibility of minds making a tangible difference – lighting a fire in the world around them.

Fire implies duration. That which burns, burns out. Without an endless supply of energy, the idea of a permanent fire is difficult to imagine. The sun may be what comes closest: less a source of light than a distant fire that slowly burns the universe around it. Yet, scientists estimate that in five billion years even the sun

will burn itself out. The destiny of fire is to burn itself to oblivion.

The same is true in a telekinesis competition, except that it is the imagination that sustains both the process and the allegory. The end of the match is the moment of burning out – the moment where the allegory is made real – accountable to the referee's decision and the distribution of wax on the game board. There is some question as to the decidability of the situation, how one processes or understands 'that which happened'. Are team methods responsible for the results? Are the variables properly controlled? Does one side of the board have an unfair advantage over the other? Suspended disbelief falls back to the ground to encounter the world it knows, but the uncertainty doesn't really leave.

A game of competitive telekinesis is undecidability on fire – lived moments whose methods cannot ever be entirely verified, but which nevertheless yield measured results: less science and more imagination, less data and more questions, less proof and more speculation.

In the game of competitive telekinesis, the winner earns a trophy. In other versions of the story the trophy is different.

HUNTING ORANGE RABBITS

Asked to define surrealism, André Breton said the following:

The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd. Anyone who, at least once in his life, has not dreamed of thus putting an end to the petty system of debasement and cretinization in effect has a well-defined place in that crowd, with his belly at barrel level. The justification of such an act is, to my mind, in no way incompatible with the belief in that gleam of light that Surrealism seeks to detect deep within us. (Breton 1972: 125–6)

The strange thing about Breton's manifesto is not its social extremity – what's more interesting is the idea of shooting into a crowd

as an imaginary solution to the question of uncertainty. One may estimate that the members of the crowd are less the targets of the action than the reality in which they live. If in doubt, fire at random, hoping to hit upon either the invisible or the absolute in the process. A new theory of fire is born – a theory that acts to impose an imagined context on others rather than one that understands itself as a reactive mechanism of learning. This is more about collaboration than it is about revolution, however. That which burns may not always burn the same way twice. And that which invokes a random methodology never knows who will be burned in the process. One may fire the first shot or be equally the target. The imaginations of those in the crowd would certainly be on fire if confronted with such an encounter – or even asked simply to contemplate the possibility.

There is a somewhat problematic saying that ‘guns don’t kill people; people kill people’ – a poorly theorized statement, but one that has an interesting imaginary extension in this surrealist context. The mistake is to assume that technology is neutral, when at its most basic the role of technology is to facilitate activities, which it does by streamlining patterns of use, prescribing habits in the process. If fire can be seen as ‘that which burns’ a gun may be thought of as ‘that which fires’ – the destiny of a theory of fire is to become technological.

At the same time, the factor of randomness in Breton’s formulation is also important. One fires blindly, catching others unaware in the crossfire. Yet this is not really quite unintentional – it is instead a form of intentional unintentionality, an intentional eschewing of intention, a firing at random in order to ensure that one’s gesture implicates someone whose response – or indeed whose survival – cannot be predicted. If Bourriaud’s orange rabbit was to be the placebo catalyst for an allegorical conversation, in the hands of Breton this theory becomes a hunt for invisible orange rabbits. Because one can’t see them, one is forced to fire blindly – but the blindness is not quite blind; it is instead strategically disavowed, hunting trophies for a Surrealist game of non-visual self-encounter.

THE TELEKINETIC IMAGINATION

According to Jean Baudrillard, ‘the real is born of a lack of imagination’ (2003: 33). If this is true then the inverse should hold and a healthy amount of imagination will hold at bay the dominance of a literal world. It’s a recipe for altering reality with the power of one’s mind alone. In a sense, this is to think of the imagination telekinetically – a form of mindful engagement that makes a tangible difference to the world that surrounds it, moving realities in the process.

For Baudrillard the manifesto for the imaginary comes as a response to a technological and virtualized world, the hyper-reality of information excess (1994: 12–13). But the secret to the imagination is that it has never been in competition with the real. It is instead a form of virtuality that, until now, didn’t know how to render itself as information, how to transform itself into a communal encounter instead of remaining a solitary private moment. A meditation on fire and allegory, however, reveals the reversibility of the formulation.

That which burns implicates others, provides community and insists that only by sharing imaginary solutions with others can the creative possibilities of engagement be expanded. No more enlightenment. Instead, the imagination is a manifesto for lighting things on fire – beginning with the imagination itself. Pyromaniac theory – that which burns is enlightenment thinking re-activated for a hallucinatory age.

Seen from this perspective, the simplest act of ‘that which burns’ would be to run out into the street with a loaded imagination and to start re-imagining the world as fast as possible, implicating anyone and everyone around you in the activity itself. That which burns, burns others in the process – or provides them with the dialogic option to join in the game – and in doing so sustains its own longevity. This is suspension of disbelief – or even consensual hallucination – lit on fire, a suspension of the real itself in aggressively quixotic ways.

And perhaps it's a game that both starts and ends with Borges, yet this time with a slightly different story – the story of a map so detailed that it exactly covers the territory it describes (Borges 1998: 325). Baudrillard references this story in *Simulacra and Simulation*, his seminal text on simulation and virtuality, suggesting that with this exchangeability of the map for the territory, the value of the real begins to disappear behind the accessibility of the representation. Baudrillard goes even further, suggesting that the real – not the map, as in Borges' story – begins to fade, deteriorating beneath a map that increasingly contains far more information than the real could ever hope to present (1994: 1). The virtual map includes geo-tags, Google Maps, scientific data of all sorts, Facebook check-ins and blog accounts – some authentic, some fabricated – so much information that only the imaginary could ever hope to legitimately interact with a context so complex. A map so in-tune with the imaginary that it too could never be burned – although the reality it once represented may well fade into oblivion. Facilitated by technology, the power of the mind takes on telekinetic strength, imagining the world differently and impacting the very materiality of the world in the process.

THAT WHICH BURNS

At the end of a telekinesis competition, a trophy is awarded to the championship team – the team to have emerged victorious and undefeated from the game. Their unseen competitors have been in virtual attendance, correspondence conducted independently by the referees. The competitors never see one another but assume one another to have existed, brought into relational proximity by their mutual attempts to influence the candle that enables their interaction.

Some capacity for self-delusion is required. Luckily, self-delusion is the name of the telekinetic game. A meditation on fire is already a game of competitive telekinesis – an attempt to make information manifest differently, using the power of the mind alone. To engage with

that which burns is to participate in a rewriting of the codes of possibility – understanding from a different perspective, which also means shifting the position of things so that they can be understood from where we already stand. We didn't move, but something changed. If nothing else we had an experience that both existed and didn't – a moment where orange rabbits mingle with imaginary crowds of teammates and competitors. A game of competitive telekinesis is a meditation on the question of fire. And this fire is dedicated to the performative challenge of moving information by the power of the mind alone.

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