

In Defiance of Impossibility

Reflections on the 2008 World Telekinesis Competition

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Facing a world that is unintelligible and problematic, our task is clear: we must make that world even more unintelligible, even more problematic.

– Jean Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion*.¹

Where does one draw the lines of impossibility, the lines that do not appear but which we nevertheless see, as demonstrated by the ways in which they govern self-conception – as though seeing the invisible were not impossible enough, somehow we are also supposed to abide by this imagined rule. Much better are the rules of the imaginary, through which we draw our own invisible lines, testing the powers of the impossible, and making sure we were not lied to when told that it was, on principal, beyond our reach.

Are things as they must be or as we choose to agree? Do we do ourselves a service by believing in the impossible, or if there really is an impossibility, how close to it can we possibly come? Moths to a flame or players to game? Is there a limit horizon to the question of impossibility, and if there is, does this not itself deny the premise of the question? If impossibility is possible – which is to say if such a thing as the impossible can be insisted upon – then everything will always remain backwards. It can be nothing other than a redundant limit to conception that pre-empts the question of possibility with an answer that deems the imagination futile.

A question then: Does a flame burn on purpose, or with purpose, or can purpose be changed, given and exchanged – repurposed – a competition for enflamed attentions – for randomness in pattern – and to spite the despite of otherwise worldly – or even otherworldly – logic? Not lines drawn in the sand – but cast in wax – a wax museum of impossibility.

Welcome to the 2008 World Telekinesis Competition.

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Telekinesis

It is said that minds do not necessarily move matter, yet we also know this to be locally untrue in the sense that arms and legs and mouths are set into motion through a complex series of neural patternings. We also know that mind refusal has a paralyzing effect upon the body proper – if one mentally refuses to move, there are few factors that can outbid one’s mental powers, whether these be powers of will or of simple stubbornness is, perhaps, of only secondary importance. The question at stake, consequently, has nothing at all to do with that of mind and body, but more with the boundaries of self and world. Are we in the world or separated, and if separated is the distance material, cognitive or both? Inject the equation, hyper the logic, and in the temper tantrum of speculation, consider that the rules we have learned need not be the only rules in play.

Telekinesis is the ability to remotely influence the movement of objects through the powers of the psyche alone. A formidable challenge. Yet, it is not the remote-ness that is necessarily challenging, for we can blow on a candle, and we have no trouble at all imagining how that might have an effect. So, what is the difference between thinking and blowing? Can we really take the stance that blowing is a more powerful physical force than thinking? Perhaps, but here we are forced to contextualize and defend such an assertion in ways that ultimately prove uncomfortable.

The difference, it would seem, is materially-mediated, and in such a phrasing lies the trick to our own self-deception. How, in other words, do ideas take shape, enter the world, inspire, perspire, aspire and even retire to the vestiges of acceptable logic? Material mediation... bodies in space that take up the conceptual imperatives of thought. But why only bodies? Why not objects too? If Jean Baudrillard could insist that “it is the object that wants to be photographed,”² might one here not equally insist that the world demands to be moved, influenced in some way by the ideas we keep privately to ourselves – unwilling to believe that the world cares enough to engage? Are we then, unwilling also to attempt the impossible, even if it is with no good reason – or more accurately, a no-good reason – a faulty logic by which we cut ourselves off from the possibilities of impossibility? Or, perhaps, is the impossible compelling enough that it inspires an effort of its own, even if we don’t necessarily know what an effort of this sort might look like?

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A Simple Proposition

Consequently, a proposition:

If one has never spent a full hour sitting quietly, staring at a candle, trying to cognitively influence the ways it flickers or doesn't, the way it dances to the tune of the room, or indeed the way it melts and drips onto the surfaces below, then the question is whether one is really in a position to judge whether some potential for a relationship might not be herein cultivated. There are also, of course, many activities that one does not complete successfully with only one try, and consequently perhaps several attempts may be necessary to discover whether such potential exists. And even then a decisive declaration may not be possible. Uncertainty is allowed, of course (and even, perhaps, the sign of contemporary times), but sometimes uncertainty is not enough to compel action when none might be otherwise required.

Most certainly, however, opinions are always allowed, but it may be important to acknowledge that much of what informs the basis from which our declarations of possibility and impossibility manifest have nothing whatsoever to do with the question of what is possible, but rather more simply that which we have been led to believe. Now, we may with some reason trust those authorities that pretend to know better than we who have never tried, but there is a passivity to such a gaze, a passivity whose consequence is a strange form of indifference, a laziness even – a hesitance to engage the possibilities of failure and irrelevant activity – which consequently inhibits such engagements on principle.

And yet, there is an easier way, for it is absurd to think all action must belong to the realm of the serious or sensical. Consider, for instance, a somewhat more playful option – entertainment – that which allows us to allow ourselves to be washed over, bathed in the massage of suspended stories. And, insofar as entertainment is deemed an acceptable form of engagement, speculative and creative possibilities can always be considered within the safety of, at least, this already existent cognitive framework.

The proposition – consequently – is simple:

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Dedicate one hour to entertainment, albeit of a sort perhaps not typically engaged, but nevertheless of a sort certainly possible. And consider that this hour need not by necessity be any less entertaining, nor less relaxing, less interesting or seductive and compelling than any other hour of life entertainment. But, instead of entertainment in its common form, simply light a candle and commit oneself to an hour of staring, imagining, thinking about the possibilities the candle offers, thinking whether one might be able to influence its motion, thinking about how the candle melts and the wax drips and the world keeps going on anyways.

Think of it as a thought-experiment – an action that changes nothing – the possibility of mentally influencing a candle holds no threat to established world views, no threat to structures of meaning or establishment, which is why, ultimately, it can be called entertainment. Here, is there not a rupturing of reality in the safe ground of fiction (as opposed to the volatile ground of daily living), providing fictions that enrich our minds without enriching our lives, cultivating the imaginary while failing to provide strategies for the integration of these new possibilities into our lived existence itself? Certainly—and that is partly the point. Possibility exists most poignantly in the benign – a premise upon which this particular call to absurdity rests. A simple proposition, one that changes nothing, but has the latent potential to refashion at least some of the assumptions about the ways in which the world can be made to manifest.

World Telekinesis Competition

The World Telekinesis Competition is an event in which teams from around the world have committed to spend an hour – attempting to remotely influence the behavior of a candle, using the powers of their minds alone. The candle is somewhere; the teams are somewhere else, some of them together, others not; some comprised of people, some of people no longer alive, some of fictional entities or animals or technologies. But mind power is itself a subject with possibilities of its own – and controversy too.

The game is simple:

- There is a game board, divided into quadrants and aligned according to the cardinal points.

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- There is a candle – standard tea light variety, with the foil casing removed.
 - There is a clock and an agreed upon start time.
 - And there are two teams.
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- The object is to have the melting wax from the candle drip onto the opposing team's side of the game board.

The way the game is played, however, is much more complex. How many ways might one imagine to influence the outcome of a match? The attempt to telekinetically engage the candle is, of course, the stated method – but it is a method open to personalization, strategization, interpretation... and this is where the imaginations of those participating teams have intensified the question on impossible grounds that are their own personal initiatives. From the psychic channelling of poets and mystics and visionaries, to wiccan invocation, voodoo, astral projection, ouija, and force of will – the methodologies continue. From intoxicated inspiration to technological mind-amplification, remote viewing, extraterrestrial influence and unconscious powers of intuition, the possibilities abound. And even the antipossibility factions are represented, with teams inciting methods such as personal distraction, disavowings of order, leisure engagement and random chance as their strategies of choice. And, as critics might note, the wax will drip anyways... leaving the always uncertain status of unverifiable outcome. Such is the nature of candles, of course, and of melted wax – and while this may be devastating to science, it is nothing if not fundamental to a mentally-funded – which is to say conceptual – imperative to imagine the impossibilities. It is an imperative of the sort called ‘pataphysical by the French thinker Alfred Jarry, a call for “imaginary solutions” to the question of the hour.³ But this hour is special, for it questions the dominance of reason – even if only for a moment.

Thomas Nagel, a forefather of the field of study now commonly referred to as consciousness research, once lamented the existence of an imagination such as this, calling it the aspect of consciousness that prevents us from fully understanding the workings of the mind.⁴ The stance taken here is exactly the opposite. Of what use is a mind without the imagination? A purely rational and rule-bound mind that cannot conceive of possibilities not

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already present or latent in the formulations of reason alone? If we light a candle, there are probability charts that can be drawn to determine the likely ways in which it will burn, and the likely ways in which the wax itself will melt and distribute on the surface below. There are also an indeterminate number of variables, from air circulation to barometric pressure, from the number of breathing entities present to their relative oxygen consumption, from the orientation of the candle to the angle of the wick when lit. All possibilities – including even the possibility of a ghost in the room, drawn to the flame – must be taken into account in such a calculation. But what if there is still – as one would expect – some random element? Might one not in fact consider that minds or attitudes or powers of concentration focussed on a specific activity would – even if only in theory – have an effect?

If we light a candle, does the fact that we lit it cast a shadow on the way it will burn? Does intention matter, in the most material of senses? Again, does one's thinking matter? Does intention manifest, is there a manifesto or a manifestation that can be traced to the manner in which events are initiated? One might wonder what happens when one spends an hour focusing on a candle flame. A simple meditation exercise, often used to induce peacefulness and calm, but in this instance also asked to mobilize itself in a remote direction at the same time. Remote relaxation or an expanded meditation in favour of mediated projection into worlds of a geographic otherwise – a geographic other-wisdom of possibility? Technology extends the body outside of itself, said Marshall McLuhan⁵, but if it's that obvious should it not also be that simple? Out of body, why could one not influence the remote melting of wax... simply by thinking about it? Well, if we can't, then it means that the sword is definitely mightier than the pen and the entire history of knowledge is premised upon a faulty initial proposition: that ideas can change the tangible manifestation of the world. And so, even if we are wrong to think so, it makes sense to at least try – to at least give credence to the possibility that thinking makes a difference in one way or another.

And yet, neither is it unscientific. It is, instead, quantum – perspectival non-locality – the paradoxical condition of influence at a speed greater than light, material influence at the speed of the imagination. It works with photons,⁶ so why not with ideas too, with intention and focused thought and meditation and transference, and imagination and indeed why not with candles? The enflamed imaginary knows no restraint, bound by neither

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wave nor particle, yet real none-the-less, or at least really imaginary, whatever that determination might actually mean. And what it means is that uncertainty, paradoxically, is the deciding factor – the inability to account for all the variables is what will make, of any worldly activity, an imaginary project. Not an assertion of miraculous potentiality, but exactly the opposite: a defiance of it being anything but mundane. It is a defiance of impossibility – whether rhetorical or strategic or sincere is only of speculative interest. For ultimately, it is not what is said, and more what is enacted, what is performed – some of which we will not ever know – that forms the relative merit of individual engagement.

Speculative action is what is required – in this instance and always – and it cannot be otherwise. For ultimately all actions prove at least partly speculative, and whether one moves with one's mind or not, the mindful knots of understanding always lie in the shadows of performative being. If one can never measure for both position and velocity at any given time, then by necessity neither can one measure for momentum or force⁷ – and the consequent forcefulness of one measured mind over another makes clear the position taken at the expense of the understood whole. Even impossibility, then, is subject to uncertainty – not demonstrably impossible, and therefore fair game for the defiant gaze of imaginative game play.

Strangely enough, the game concludes not with uncertainty but with its inverse – an emergent certainty principle that suggests all attempts to render declarative impossibility will themselves be subject to the uncertain. It is a loop-hole in the cosmic game of intelligible activity, and one that the imagination exploits. And in these imaginary exploits lie the possibilities made possible by uncertainty, the delirious possibilities of speculative worldly engagement not only as themselves delusional, but more importantly equal to all other acts in their debt and defiance of the impossible. Calling out the lies of impossibility, here telekinetic attempt uncovers a principle of certainty to the disorder of things, a nonlocal movement of the matters of fact which is forced to move by the very facts of the matter in play. Not simply an entertaining excursion into the possibilities of the impossible – this is a forum for setting in motion the speculative trajectories of defiance, sheltered by uncertainty from the very possibility of impossibility itself.

This vector is noxious: a formalized forum for informal inquiry.

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Notes

1. Jean Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion*, Julia Witwer, ed., New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, p. 83.
2. Jean Baudrillard, "Objects, Images, and the Possibilities of Aesthetic Illusion," In *Art and Artifact*. Nicholas Zurbrugg, ed., London: Sage, 1997, p. 14.
3. Alfred Jarry, *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien*, Paris: Galimard, 1980, p. 32.
4. Thomas Nagel, "What is it like to be a bat?" *The Philosophical Review* LXXXIII: 4 (October, 1974): p. 2.
5. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964, p. 19.
6. One of the conundrums of quantum physics is the question of nonlocal influence, where twin photons separated continue to influence one another despite the fact that such influence defies the basic tenets of quantum physics. In order for this quantified effect to be made acceptable, one of two theories must be prioritized: either these photons communicate at speeds greater than the speed of light, or they have a nonlocal connection to one another. See Paul Davies, *Superforce*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984, p. 48. As cited in Michael Talbot, *The Holographic Universe*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1992, pp. 52-3.
7. One of the basic tenets of quantum physics is Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle that states one can never accurately measure both position and velocity of a particle at any given time. The logic extends: since measurements for both momentum and force are also a function of velocity, they too are implicated in the same determinations of uncertainty. See Wikipedia, "Uncertainty Principle." Available online at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncertainty_principle.