

AT LEAST NOT BY ME

Willem de Ridder



Willem de Ridder at his recent "Praktijk" in Amsterdam with Nurse Cora.; Foto: Fransje Bannenburg

Not much is known about the eyes, by me. Perhaps other people feel more comfortable with the way they see things, but I always had the feeling that I did not see enough. I have studied seeing for a long time now, but I understand less and less about it. When I was a boy I became aware that there was something funny with my eyes. I started to experiment to find out more about them. I remember clearly the first one of a long series. I sat down in front of a big tree and tried to see it. I watched it intently for over an hour because I figured that if you looked long enough you would finally be able to see it completely. But the longer I looked the more the image started shifting. The tree seemed to change all the time. After a while I realized that my thoughts were interfering. They seemed to distract the eyes and prohibited me from actually seeing the real tree out there.

Later I sat in front of a mirror and watched my face for long stretches of time, but I saw even less. The image was changing all the time and sometimes my image started to scare me. I tried to stop thinking, but that made it even worse. Thoughts now came at double the speed. I knew now that something in me prohibited me from seeing nature as it is. Perhaps there was something wrong with my eyes or perhaps I had to train them. For more than one year I had to travel every day for twenty minutes to another town and back. Every morning I took the train and sat by the window, looking intently at the same landscape passing by. Everyday I saw something different. It drove me crazy.

I took up painting. Before the sun came out I travelled to my favorite landscape and painted it. I made countless paintings of exactly the same landscape but they were all different. I never could really see what was there. The image kept changing on me. Then I heard about a chemical substance that did funny things with perception. A good friend told me that when she took LSD she could see the world as it really was. I had never told her about my research, so her remarks caused an enormous interest in me. I went to the landscape I had painted so much, sat down and took LSD. I knew every detail of the scene in front of me of course. As soon as the chemical started to affect me the image started to shift more than usual. I desperately tried to focus on it, but the more I tried to hold on to what I was supposed to see, the more it started to change. Then, to my great alarm, it changed completely!

All the trees were gone. I saw a wide open plane and mountains in the distance. A fat snake was crawling at my feet, it scared the hell out of me. With all my power I tried to focus again, but I now was in a lush jungle, full of wild animals. I felt how the ground under my feet became soft, I was sinking. I was in the swamps and the mud reached my lips. I was drowning, stiff with fear, into a bombardment of brightly colored spheres. I floated in between them and they all missed me, I felt safe and at peace. I must have been there for hours and hours seeing everything but the landscape in front of me.

This experience changed the nature of my research. It was hard to believe, but it slowly dawned on me that there might be nothing to see out there. Perhaps I was surrounded by a 360

degree screen on which I was just projecting my own favorite movie. My eyes were probably just lenses and in my head was the projector. Even if I closed my eyes the projection went on and on. My dreams always seemed very real to me (as long as I was asleep). As soon as I woke up I knew of course that I had been dreaming, But who said I was awake at all? Perhaps I was dreaming day and night! When do I wake up from this to realize I have been dreaming? When I die?

I started reading about the scientific research in this field. Especially since they want computers to see, there is a lot of researching being done around perception, the eyes, the brains etc. etc. I soon realized that most of us have no idea what seeing involves. We take it for granted (I never could talk about my research, because people started to look at me) but it is one of the great scientific riddles. We know that every second about 300 million impulses bombard the eyeballs, and only 1 million are allowed to enter. Who or what makes the selection for me? Only a fraction of that million chosen ones reach the brain. Only a few thousand pass the censor to reach the final destination to be used to create our picture of reality "out there". Who is the censor? What would there be to be seen if all those 300 million impulses would be invited in? I decided to give up painting altogether. I took the paper from the easel and crumpled it into a ball. I started to exhibit the crumpled balls of white paper which I called Paper Constellations. The viewer could project his or her own movie into this amorphous form. Like staring at the wallpaper. I became a successful publisher and started playing with the perception of my readers. I soon realized that so called reality was merely a bunch of agreements we made. Stories we believed. Seeing had to be learned. As a kid we do not see much. It seems that we see color spots or fields. Slowly we start recognizing things. Then all those forms are labeled. Our parents give us the corresponding words. We enter the agreement. The more words we learn the clearer we start to see. As soon as we believe something 100 % we start to "see" it. My newspaper was a great vehicle to make the readers believe in events I made up. The effects were wonderful. The newspaper became a movement. A way of seeing things.

I started experimenting with films, television and other visual media to manipulate popular perception. I learned that two thirds of our brain is geared towards visual input. It is a dominating function. Two thirds of our sensors there produce pictures. We have learned to label them all. The label is an agreement with others in our culture. Otherwise we cannot communicate, and we will be separated from the others, which will create total panic. We do everything to fit into the culture. It is a jail that we have built ourselves. The key we have thrown out of the window. I felt trapped in a psychic grid. I wanted another movie to project on the screen around me. Another dream than the one I was trained to dream.

I moved to Hollywood, the city where most dreams of the Western World are produced and affirmed. I lived there in the mansion of the first movie star that ever opened his mouth on the silver screen and could be heard. Al Jolson, a white man who painted his face to look like a black one, The first talking movie was the end of the silent era, in which cinemas had to hire storytellers to explain to the audiences what they were seeing. I had given up all visual work. I figured it was ridiculous to bombard the brain with visuals like TV and film were doing. The brain was perfectly able to do it better than any movie.

Film and television in Hollywood had developed a simple but lethal trick to keep their audiences glued to the screen. They measured the average attention span and kept within that time limit. All shots had to be cut short to stay within that frame otherwise the viewer would get bored and turn off the set. Just like puppy dogs we kept staring at the avalanche of images. Not that they were particularly interesting. No, it was just a physical process that kept our attention in action. After watching years and years of boring movies at a fast pace the audience gets used to it of course. A whole nation learns how to look faster. The attention span shrinks and Hollywood's answer is to cut their movies short some more.

Nowadays most movies are so fast that we can barely see them anymore. Videoclips and commercials are of course in the forefront of fast editing. Much faster is not possible anymore, it would create a blur. All those instant images have to be recognized instantly of course. So we have to go by first impressions. We get more and more used to very tight agreements. The culture is closing in. The jail is getting smaller and smaller. Everybody with a TV set has seen it all before. It is very much like watching a merry go round. The same wooden horse is passing by again and again. Just like my experiments with the tree and the mirror.

If two thirds of the brain are geared towards the creation of visuals, it is of course ridiculous to work extra visuals.

The brain will get lazy that way and forget how to create the good stuff itself. Everybody knows that background music in films cannot be heard. It is loud enough all right, but the visual stimuli totally overpower the sound so that we do not "hear" it any more. Since television, radio has become a second rate medium. Storytellers have disappeared. The attention span is getting smaller and smaller, everybody in media knows how difficult it is nowadays to really get people to watch anything. Movies have become so expensive because bigger and better effects are necessary to attract enough attention.

So I concentrated on story telling and radio. The reasoning behind that decision was very simple. If a 100% belief creates reality, then story telling is like telling lies! Everybody knows that we want the other to believe our lies. We do everything to avoid being exposed as a liar. So we tell it as if we believe it ourselves. You have to be really good at it and most people do know how to properly fake it. So we all know everything about changing reality for ourselves and others. It is a form of story telling. The old radioplays did not need any lighting, stage sets, costumes and other visual tricks. The visuals were created in the imagination department of the listener's brain. Better images than any director can dream up for you. After reading the Godfather each reader has a different Don Corleone in his head. After the movie it has become fatso Marlon Brando for everybody. Back in jail!

In Al Jolson's mansion I started to produce radio shows for Dutch National Radio. I was only speaking to one listener: YOU. I tried to get as close as possible to you. And I soon realized that I could only manipulate you, by manipulating myself. If I really felt something, then automatically all the listeners did. I could not fool myself there. It had to feel real for me in order to affect the readers in a real way. The effects were quite stunning. On a certain moment I made a program in which I asked the listener to undress with me. I started to make love with my listener. I got very excited and at the same time shaky. I had to talk myself into it. I asked you to undress with me, lie down in the pillows and masturbate with me, trying to both come at the same time. The program was so popular that it was transmitted twice. Many listeners had a deeply felt experience, even if they just passively listened. They had never experienced anything like it, and they all had very strong visual flashes.

The next step was obvious of course. Until now the listeners had been very passive. Most media demand that total passivity. Film even demands total darkness and TV has created entire nations staring at a flickering tube in the corner of their living rooms. It sounds like science fiction. I created a program that started at 1 o'clock in the night. I told the listeners that for the first time they had a real choice. They could be passive as usual, but they could also listen actively. If you listen actively, you will have an adventure you will never forget in your life. You will be the main protagonist in a real life movie that will excite you no end. Please get up from your chair and collect a big plant. A green one. Find a nice pillow, take your camera, oh yes, you need a fork and a piece of white paper. Write the word GOD on it and go to your car. Turn on the radio there, make yourself comfortable and wait for the instructions. If you do not have a car, go to the nearby freeway, wear the piece of paper on your coat

somewhere and start hitchhiking. As soon as you see a car with the word GOD on the window they have to stop for you.

30.000 listeners followed the instructions. From that moment the radio show became a soundtrack for the real life movie they were projecting. By changing the story, they started to project something different. A new reality was created, In the show, all kinds of incidents and accidents happened to add drama to the projections of the listeners, The next day, most papers reported them as real. In Hollywood I started to experiment with another form of reality projection. Human guinea pigs received a portable cassette recorder and a pair of headphones. They had to sit down on a chair and wait until I left the room. Then they had to turn on the players. They heard my voice, welcoming them into a different reality. Simple instructions were given how to get up, leave the room, go downstairs, outside, first street to the left, etc.

The walker was listening to a voice that was "seeing" everything that he saw. As long as he followed the instructions the voice was entirely correct about the reality around the walker. But the voice started to tell stories. It started to alter reality. Telling different stories. The amazing effect was that the walker (after ten minutes already) started to identify with the voice, as if it was his own voice. As soon as the information went outside the cultural agreement we all adhere to, the perception started to change.

As soon as the Walkman was invented (many years later) those walks were introduced on a big scale. Some cassette guided journeys lasted three days, including two nights in a hotel. The people in the hotel knew that the walkers with the headphones lived in a different world with different laws, and they were instructed to play the game. Along the route several restaurants, banks, private parties, shops and gas stations were included. The owners were instructed to play a certain role that would extend and affirm the dream that was created. Many people were very much aware that a different film was put in their reality projectors, but they too could not help but to experience well known reality very differently. Many people admitted that their vision was affected. There has been great efforts made to create an artificial reality, From the grand dioramas from the last century that came forth out of the illusion theater from the Italian Baroque, to cinemascope, 3-D movies, theme parks to now flight simulation and virtual reality. A tremendous amount of harch and software is necessary to create paintings that move, breathe, feel and talk. All these creations coming from the past, from what we know already, and more important, what we can recognize, and we can recognize only what we have learned and agreed upon. If those agreements do not work anymore, utter chaos and panic will be the result.

In a scientific test 10 test persons had to look at two cards. On one card was a line of two centimeters. On the other three different lines. One of three centimeters, one of two and one of one centimeter ... The question was, which line was exactly the same as the line on the first card. A very boring test. So the first person points out one of the three lines, the second one, the third one ... they all very confidently point out the same line. Except the 10th person. He is a nervous wreck, sweats, is clearly in panic and points out another line. This test proves how important it is for us that we agree about reality. Because only the tenth test person is actually a test person. All the others are in the scientific conspiracy. They all point very securely at the longest line. When the first one is wrong the tenth still feels secure. When the second one points out the same wrong line, he starts already doubting himself. When the third one points out the same line he is doubting already 36.6% about himself. By the time it is his turn, he is a nervous wreck.

When I heard about the experiments with an electronic virtual reality, I introduced my brand of Virtual Reality. People were invited to visit a dangerous exhibition. At the entrance they got a walkman and headphones. The voice told them to open the door and be careful. Entering a small hallway the light started to fade away, once the door was closed. Soon it was totally

dark and the voice told them to open the next door. Entering the dark exhibition the voice warned of the dangers in this space (deep holes and sharp objects) and the importance of following the simple instructions very carefully. Two thirds of the brain start projecting immediately and the adventure is so overwhelming that everybody tells a different story afterwards. The pictures will be remembered for a long time.

And that is the ancient secret of storytelling. It stimulates the memory as no other approach. Stories are remembered exactly. The youngest children are able to point out the deviations when a story is told to them the second time. They want to hear the story exactly as they remember it. Time and space disappear completely. Only when the storyteller forgets herself, then the listener can forget himself. I tell stories, that last 6 hours and sold out houses forget everything. They all see very clearly and remember the pictures first, the words automatically follow. No other medium has ever equalled the power, the impact and the stimulation of the oral tradition. Children believe all stories 100 % and it creates their reality. Even now, our reality is the direct result of what we want, what we totally believe. Consequently, if we believe something else (only 100 % works) our reality changes. So there are no victims in this universe, only volunteers.