

# Revisiting Presentism: The Experience of the Present in Late Medieval and Early Modern North-Western Europe

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### Abstract

This essay explores the pertinence of the present as a temporal category in the late medieval and early modern period. After a historiographical overview of scholarship on presentism and reflections on the complex notion of 'present', we present three case studies to explore how the experience of the present could be discerned and studied in literature, visual arts, and news media. The first case study focuses on the increasing emphasis on the present in the *Gruuthuse* manuscript and *rederijker* plays. Secondly, an examination of depictions of the breach of the Sint Anthonisdijk in 1651 shows different ways in which Dutch landscape painters engaged with the present. The final case study discusses how the spread of the northern invention of printed newsletters stimulated a wider interest in the present 'elsewhere' in apparent peripheric locations like Geneva. Drawing on these cases, we reflect on the relation between crises and presentism and suggest that the manner in which time, and the present in particular, was experienced in north-western Europe seems to be distinctly different from the relation to time of people in Renaissance Italy.

*Keywords:* presentism, temporality, crisis, poetry, landscape painting, news

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In 1434, Jan van Eyck added the inscription ‘Johannes de eyck fuit hic 1434’ (‘Jan Van Eyck was here [in] 1434’) to his so-called *Arnolfini Portrait*, above the mirror on the wall behind the couple. With these words, the painter did not merely sign his work – he could have written ‘Johannes van Eyck pinxit’ (‘painted’) or ‘pingebat’ (‘was painting’), in accordance with the conventions of his time. He also simultaneously presented himself as the witness of the couple’s betrothal, an interpretation reinforced by the presence of two additional men visible in the convex mirror.<sup>1</sup> This dual ‘presence’ of the painter, both concrete and in the past (the meeting of Van Eyck and the couple), and also symbolic and in the present (the meeting of the viewer and the painting), is further expressed by the ‘hic’ in the signature, indicating a deliberately ambivalent spatiality. The same ambivalence prevails from the standpoint of temporality, since Van Eyck does not write ‘erat hic’, an expression carrying a nuance of continuity or repetition in the past that would have suggested he had been in this place for a certain period or on multiple occasions. Instead, he writes ‘fuit hic’, implying a presence that indeed took place but is now concluded. In doing so, he marks a break between the past of his testimony and the present of his execution. Moreover, this also signifies an autonomization of this present, conveying to the viewer the idea that, to fully comprehend his work, it is crucial to detach it from an abstract eternity and situate it within a meaningful and relevant ‘hic et nunc’. The present, manifested in the subjective experience of human beings who

<sup>1</sup> Countless studies have been dedicated to this artwork since Panofsky’s ‘Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini Portrait’. See Belting, *Jan van Eyck*; Moxey, ‘Transgressive Temporalities’; Blanc, *L’art des anciens Pays-Bas*, 118, for a focus on narrative issues. The authors wish to express their gratitude to the editorial board of *EMLC* and the editors of this special issue in particular for offering us the opportunity to share our initial reflections on this topic. A month before publication of this article, the Swiss Science Foundation awarded our project ‘Capturing the Present in North-Western Europe (1348-1648). A Cultural History of Present Before the Age of Presentism’ a SNSF Sinergia grant (no. crsii-222709). This four-year project will start in the autumn of 2024 under the direction of Jan Blanc, Thalia Brero, Estelle Doudet (University of Lausanne), and Élodie Lecuppre-Desjardin; Marije Osnabrugge will take on the role of senior scientific collaborator.

live and think in their own time, is worth our attention. According to Reinhart Koselleck and François Hartog, respectively, this interest would only arrive at the time of the industrialisation, or even more recently.<sup>2</sup> The example of Van Eyck's signature, amongst many others, invites us to reconsider the notion that late medieval and early modern societies were primarily dominated by the past and promises of the future, without contemplation of their own present.

In this exploratory essay we put forth the working hypothesis that the notion of 'presentism' – defined here as an individual and collective mindset in which either only the present exists or, at the very least, truly matters – is not solely a characteristic of contemporary societies. Rather, we propose it is a historical category with much older roots. Specifically, we argue that a distinct manner of engaging with time emerged in pre- and early modern north-western Europe, particularly in regions such as northern France, the Netherlands, England, and the Holy Roman Empire, alongside the more recognized 'Renaissance' in southern Europe. We believe numerous phenomena that are either unique to this region, or that developed with exceptional vigour therein, can attest to this, even if further studies are needed to corroborate this hypothesis. Examples could include the importance of current events and contemporary matters in historical, theatrical, and poetic literature, the acceleration of time driven by new and improved means of transportation and communication, the invention of new techniques such as the printing press, watchmaking, and oil painting, and the advent of the Protestant Reformation and of experimental scientific reasoning. In our view, these phenomena had direct consequences on the ways in which time was conceived and experienced at both individual and collective levels in north-western Europe. It became possible to inhabit a shared present, which gained legitimacy and value in its own right.<sup>3</sup>

While this is neither the time nor the place to provide a comprehensive overview of the manners in which the present was conceived and experienced in the Low Countries over the course of the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, we would like to contribute to this special issue with a programmatic article of sorts, hoping to offer an impetus and basis for further exploration of these complex matters. We will do so on the one hand with an overview of the current state of ideas about the notion of presentism, particularly in France and Germany, and, on the other hand, by offering three short yet illustrative case studies on the representation of the present in literature, the visual arts, and news media, in order to give a taste of the variety and richness of the material on which our research

<sup>2</sup> Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*; Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité*.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas, *The Perception of the Past in Early Modern England*; Schiffman, *On the Threshold of Modernity*; Woolf, *The Social Circulation of the Past*; Reith, 'Uncertain Times'; Bauer, 'Jetztherschend, jetztregierend, jetztlebend'; Glennie and Thrift, *Shaping the Day*; Langman, 'The Future Now'; Lecuppre-Desjardin, 'Des portes qui parlent'; Schiffman, *The Birth of the Past*; Blondé and Verhoeven, 'Against the Clock'; Pettegree, *The Invention of News*; Champion, *The Fullness of Time*; Dyck, 'Tijdsmeting en tijdserving in de middeleeuwen'; Krumenacker, 'Temps protestant et temps de la modernité'; Kiening and Stercken (eds.), *Temporality and Mediality*; Turel, *Living Pictures*; Blanc, *L'Art des anciens Pays-Bas*; Lecuppre-Desjardin, 'Une simple agitation de surface?'; Epstein and Prak (eds.), *Guilds, Innovation, and the European Economy*. For important studies of the perception of time in Renaissance Italy in particular, see: Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past*; Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*.

will be based. While these case studies can by no means be representative for all aspects of presentism, they have been selected to evoke the kind of questions and obstacles that such a perspective and scope raise, amongst others in terms of transdisciplinarity, heterogeneity of the period and region (such as language, government, and religion), and the historical and geographical reach of the phenomenon.

### *Past Presentisms: State of the Field*

Defying what might seem obvious at first, we could say that the notion of presentism is nothing new. In English, the word is attested as early as 1916. In 1924, the French philosopher Frédéric Paulhan appears to have been the first to have introduced and discussed presentism. He primarily considered it in psychological terms, however, without connecting it to a precise historical period: 'I call presentism the excessive predominance of the present situation in the mind, whether it is the emotion of the moment, the current feelings, a freshly hatched idea.'<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Mounier joined him two decades later, describing a mindset that 'instead of orienting oneself fully towards the future with all one's life force, folds in onto itself and closes down'.<sup>5</sup>

It would nevertheless take until the 2003 publication of François Hartog's *Régimes d'historicité* for the notion of presentism to make its sensational appearance in the vocabulary of historians. Taking a lead from the work of Reinhart Koselleck, Hartog defends the existence of 'orders of time' based on a location and era: a specific manner of thinking and living one's relation to time.<sup>6</sup> By means of identifying different 'regimes of historicity' (*régimes d'historicité*) that reflect the ways in which the temporalities of past, present, and future are articulated, Hartog distinguishes one that he perceives as being typical for the contemporary mindset, calling it presentism.<sup>7</sup> In this essay, we set out to talk about presentism to characterize the experience of time in the late medieval and early modern period. Firstly, by way of contrast with the futurism that dominated the European horizon as a thought category and object of scientific research for a long time – before its disappearance at a moment of disorientation and rising uncertainty and doubt. Secondly, to better compare our current present with the 'presents' of the past, or at least with some of the more notable 'presents' that left the deepest mark on European culture: the Homeric present, the ancient present of the philosophers, the reborn one of the

4 For the concept of 'presentism' in English, see Walsham, 'Introduction', who has edited a useful dossier in *Past & Present* devoted to presentism. For 'presentism' in France, see Paulhan, 'Le présentisme', 190. On the philosophical understanding of presentism, which remains quite prevalent today, see especially Ingram and Tallant, 'Presentism'.

5 Mounier, *Traité du caractère*, 326.

6 Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité*. Also see Koselleck, *L'Expérience de l'histoire*; Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*. For more recent insights on the cultural history of time, see also: Bieri, *Zeit und Zeiterfahrung*; Assmann (ed.), *Erinnerungsräume*; Lorenz and Bevernage (eds.), *Breaking Up Time*; Champion, 'The History of Temporalities'; Champion, 'A Fuller History of Temporalities'.

7 Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité*, 39.

humanists, the eschatological or messianic present, or the modern present produced by the current regime of historicity.<sup>8</sup>

Later, Hartog proposed to refine his definition of postmodern regimes of historicity by distinguishing two kinds of presentism. The first would have been born between the end of the eighteenth century and the middle of the nineteenth century, in the context of what he calls the ‘coronation of history’ (*sacre de l’histoire*).<sup>9</sup> This first kind of presentism coincides with ‘the modern concept of history, which portrays time as an actor and agent and the widening gap between the field of experience (memories) and the horizon of expectation (hope), where the new historical time is produced’.<sup>10</sup> The second kind, the ‘new presentism’, is born out of the ashes of the two world wars and the end of providential or futurist illusions.<sup>11</sup>

Originating in the vocabulary of the philosophy and psychology of the early twentieth century and later reinvented in the context of historical discourse, the notion of presentism now occupies a central place in the humanities and social sciences, as well as in the media. Historians have appropriated it to study the methodological consequences for the discipline or to apply it to their own research subjects, and several philosophers and sociologists have used it to describe (and often denounce) postmodern history and society, marked by the cult of speed, change, and immediacy.<sup>12</sup> But as it is starting to be recognized outside strictly academic circles, the notion of presentism has started to encounter its first criticisms. Initially, these were attempts at nuancing the concept: where should the true starting point of presentism be located? And should Hartog’s two-level interpretation of presentism be preserved – the first following the French Revolution and the second after World War II – or should other explanatory models be proposed?<sup>13</sup> Our aim here is not to revisit the debates, arguing for or critiquing an exclusively contemporary presentism. Instead, we recall the words of Lynn Hunt to characterize people’s difficulty to fully understand their own place in history: ‘We constantly need to remind students that the Greek and Romans did not consider themselves ‘ancient’ and that the people of the twelfth century did not believe they were living in a transitional period.’<sup>14</sup>

8 Hartog, *Régimes d’historicité*, 260. It is interesting and significant to note here that Hartog seems to be unaware of the fact that the notion of presentism existed before his theory of history and was already part of the vocabulary of philosophers of psychology and cybernetics in the first half of the twentieth century. On the issue of providentialism and futurism, to which numerous historical works have been devoted, see, for example: Hölscher, *Die Entdeckung der Zukunft*; Pollmann, ‘Archiving the Present’; Oschema and Schneidmüller (eds.), *Zukunft im Mittelalter*.

9 Hartog, *Chronos*, 230.

10 Hartog, *Croire en l’histoire*, 14.

11 Hartog, *Chronos*, 274–276.

12 See, for example: Lenclud, ‘Traversées dans le temps’; Zawadzki, ‘Les équivoques du présentisme’; Wannich and Zaoui, ‘Présentisme et émancipation’; Gumbrecht, *After 1945*; Tassel, ‘Les usages publics du passé en temps de présentisme’; Baubérot, ‘L’histoire, une projection dans l’avenir?’; Gauchet, *Le Nouveau monde*; Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration*, following in the footsteps of Virilio, *Vitesse et politique*.

13 For alternatives to Hartog’s chronological or geographical demarcation, see, amongst others: Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*; Doering-Manteuffel and Lutz (eds.), *Nach dem Boom*; Tomlinson, *The Culture of Speed*; Assmann, *Le Temps est-il sorti de ses gonds?*; Olivier and Tamm (eds.), *Rethinking Historical Time*.

14 Hunt, ‘Against Presentism’.

These nuances do not only evoke historiographical questions, they also lead to methodological issues. Firstly, if we talk of ‘presentism’, is it completely clear which present we are thinking about? In a pioneering study, Preston King has complicated the idea that we might spontaneously have of the present, particularly from a historical perspective. He distinguished four types of present, defined on two temporal scales, namely chronological (time as an abstract sequence) and substantial (time as a sequence of concrete events).<sup>15</sup> On the chronological axis, the present can either be ‘instantaneous’, capturing the elusive yet real limit between what has not yet happened and what has, or it can be ‘extended’, covering a portion of time longer than a simple moment, to which a community can consider itself partial (a day, a year, or a century). On the substantial axis, it is possible to distinguish an ‘unfolding’ and a ‘neoteric’ present. The first characterizes the state of an event or of a historical evolution that is present because it is being done: it will no longer be – that it to say, it will be ‘in the past’ once it has completed its development. The second refers to the sensation that, at any given time, time appears to be detached from another, traditional, conventional, or old concept of time: this present constitutes a rupture and is characterised as new, innovative, or modern.<sup>16</sup>

All these distinctions contribute to a more nuanced understanding of presentism, intentionally adding layers of complexity to its seemingly straightforward nature. When considered in a chronological manner, it may seem contradictory. How is it possible to affirm the primacy of a temporal community marked by a refusal to rest, an obsession with innovation and an attachment to the immediate present only, all the while underlining that this community inscribes itself in a ‘conquering phase of presentism’, that is to say: to an epoch and therefore detached from the vicissitudes of the moment? From that perspective, the very idea of a ‘presentist period’ appears to be oxymoronic. Indeed, presentism has its limits as a substantial view point. While it is true that postmodern societies evolve at an ever-quicker pace – one of the reasons why Hartog defends the very notion of presentism – is it true that societies evolve *always*, *all*, and *all-over*? If this is not the case, which seems likely, this means that the values of presentism are not unanimously adhered to, nor are they shared in a durable and totalizing manner. As such, it is necessary to study the frictions and conflicts that are at the origin of this discrepancy. To borrow from Georges Gurvitch, Jacques Le Goff, Reinhart Koselleck, Hans-Georg Brose, Helge Jordheim, and Giorgio Agamben, who all reflected on ‘non-simultaneity’ of social time, temporalities, and contemporaneity: living at the same present time does not mean living the same present.<sup>17</sup> If the notion of presentism can indeed be moved around from one period to another, from the second half of the eighteenth century to our own day, does this imply that it is typical for modernity or postmodernity or, by contrast, that it is a more general structural

15 King, *Thinking Past a Problem*.

16 On this kind of present characterized by rupture, see especially: Febvre, ‘Pour l’histoire d’un sentiment’; Landwehr, *Frühe Neue Zeiten*; Deseure and Pollmann, ‘The Experience of Rupture’; Jensen, ‘De opmars van Disaster Studies’.

17 Gurvitch, *La multiplicité des temps sociaux*; Le Goff, ‘Au Moyen Âge’; Brose, ‘An Introduction Towards a Culture of Non-Simultaneity’; Jordheim, ‘Against Periodization’; Agamben, *Che cos’è il contemporaneo?*

category? This second possibility is upheld by several historians who, contrary to Hartog, consider a form of presentism that is less directly linked to the specificities and uncertainty of contemporary history.

In what follows, we will present three case studies related to the late medieval and early modern Low Countries to reinforce our hypothesis that societies and individuals in that time and space turned the present into an essential dimension of their perception of time. Moving beyond historiographical and theoretical considerations, these three case studies illustrate in more tangible terms how we intend to study presentism in the late medieval and early modern Low Countries by focusing on people's lives, practices, and imagination.

### Tijd van Nu: *The Literary Imaginaire of the Present*

To which degree is an individual conscious of the construction of their own reality and how can the present become a subject on itself? Furthermore, is this present to be considered as a moment of existence between the before and after, or as a long sequence enveloping enough shared elements for people – on the level of a family, a neighbourhood, a city, or a country – in the feeling of belonging to an epoch? Literature is undoubtedly one of the most sensitive mediums for expressing emotions. Poems and plays allow access to a particular awareness of the present moment, experienced in the urgency of crisis, whether it inspires regret or prompts action to overcome it.

The Low Countries were home to a dynamic nature of performative literary communities, such as *rederijkers*, *puys* (confraternities devoted to religious poetry in northern France), and theatrical companies. It is not surprising that Netherlandish urban theatre plays offer an extraordinary source with which one might illustrate a specific attention to the present, and the way it was identified, characterized, and personalized by means of allegory. The intense literary activity of the *rederijkers* and poets in the international trade city of Bruges has been widely studied.<sup>18</sup> Jan Dumolyn's recent interpretation of the famous *Gruuthuse* manuscript from the library of Louis de Gruuthuse (1422-1492), a rich and veritable literary monument of Flemish glory, has shown how some of the included poems testify to the factional battles that lacerated the urban unity at the turn of the fourteenth century.<sup>19</sup> The street fights and power plays did not only foster political instability but also cultivated a deleterious atmosphere of poisonous discord, suspicion, and denunciations, motivating the chronicler Olivier Van Dixmude to describe the envy that spread through the town in the year 1407: 'From then on envy started to go around and everyone did their best to molest others. And in Bruges a great envy had invaded the city, because Jan Canfin and Jan Honin had been deposed, and Lubrecht de Scutelare

<sup>18</sup> Ramakers, *Spelen en figuren*; Van Bruaene, *Om beters wille*; Van Dixhoorn and Speakman Sutch (eds.), *The Reach of the Republic of letters*.

<sup>19</sup> Dumolyn, 'Une idéologie urbaine "bricolée"'. On literary activity in Bruges in general, see: Oosterman, *Stad van koopmanschap en vrede*.

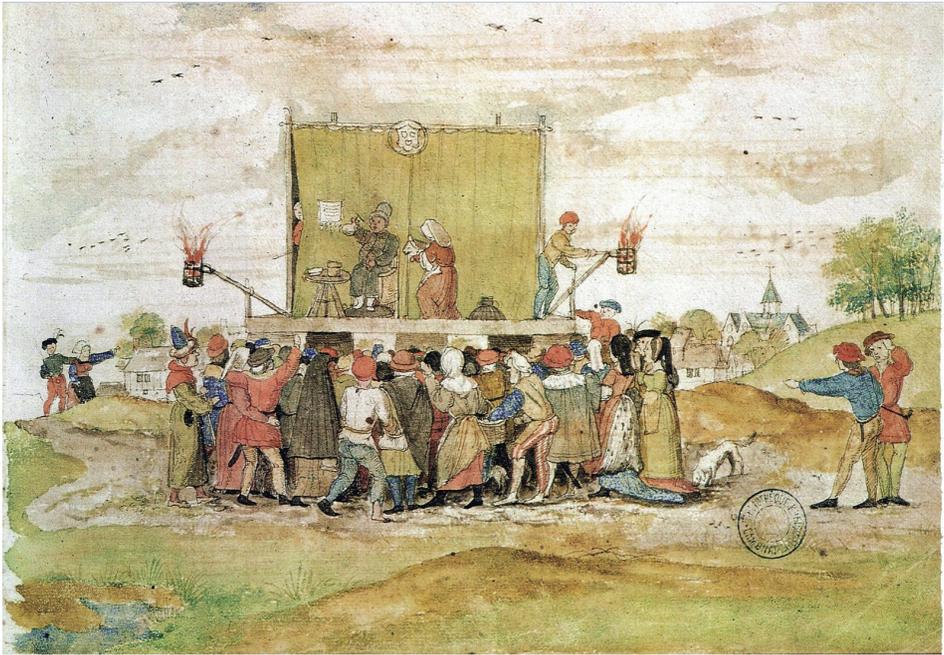


Fig. 1 Anonymous, Popular theatre scene, c. 1542, drawing in the songbook of Zeghere van Male, Cambrai, Bibliothèque municipale, Ms 126, fol. 53r.

and his followers had taken power.<sup>20</sup> The references to envy (*nyt*), hate, and the lament of the end of brotherly bonds testify to the socio-political engagement of the singers, poets, and *rederijkers*, and to the existence of an engaged discourse reflective of its time (figs. 1-2).<sup>21</sup> The brotherly love (*broederlijke minne*), the northern counterpart of the Siense *concordia* and a key element of the corporatist harmony of the city, has disappeared. Jan Moritoen, one of the more noticeable authors of the volume together with Jan Van Hulst, complains about this loss in a poem that Dumolyn has titled ‘The seven gates of Bruges’, read out at the occasion of a vigil of the kings organized by the brotherhood of the White Bear (*Witte Beer*). Moritoen concludes his poem with some wishful thinking: ‘And we want to prove to you that we are friends by looking each other in the eyes, rather than behind the back.’<sup>22</sup>

If reflections on the poets’ own time are at the heart of this poem, we have to wait until the first decades of the sixteenth century and the pen of Cornelis Everaert to see the

20 Van Dixmude, *Merkwaerdige gebeurtenissen*, 35: ‘Nu voort an zo begon de nyt allomme ende elc die best mochten pynden andere te derne, ende te Brugghe in de steide was groote nyt, want Jan Canfin ende Jan Ovin [sic] waren ofghestelt ende Lubrecht de Scuetelare ende de zyne waren verheiven.’

21 Dumolyn, ‘Une idéologie “bricolée”’, 1062-1063, drawing on the analyses of Franck Willaert.

22 Cited in Dumolyn, ‘Une idéologie “bricolée”’, 1056: ‘Ende ooc da twi hu willen toghen/ Dat wi sijn vrienden voor den oghen/ Ende alzo wel vriendenbachten rucghe.’



Fig. 2 Anonymous, The Entry of the Flemish Chamber of Leiden (detail showing the allegorical figures of bad reputation and bad conscience), 1607, engraving, in: *Const-thoonende juweel, by de loflijke stadt Haerlem* (Zwolle: Zacharias Heyns, 1607).

emergence of a personification of the agitated times that continued to shake the city of Bruges. Everaert, a cloth dyer, fuller, and member of the city's two rhetorical chambers, *De Heilige Geest* (The Holy Spirit) and *De drie Santinnen* (The Three Saints), wrote several plays at the occasion of festivities organized by the chambers, as well as to celebrate important events in the reign of Charles V, such as victories, agreements, and peace treaties.<sup>23</sup> Reflecting the same mindset that formed the basis of some of the later texts in the Gruuthuse manuscript (III.17), prayers for a peace that would preserve trade and the common good dominate the choice of subject. The infernal succession is well known, as are the means to stop it, and yet it repeats itself forever: 'Envy leads to battle/ Battle leads to war/ War leads to poverty/ Poverty leads to peace.'<sup>24</sup>

It is in this context that the *zinnespelen*, used to transmit a concept or moral idea (*zin*) to the public, invoke a number of allegorical figures. In the sophisticated writing of the *rederijkers* these allegories, including *Meest al de Wereld* (Almost All of the World), *Broederlijke Liefde* (Brotherly Love), *Eyghen Liefde* (Self-Love), and *sHeeren Wille* (God's Will), make it possible to incarnate and articulate debate and opposition.<sup>25</sup> Facing a weakened economy, which was worsened by Charles V's endless wars, *Den Beroerlicken Tyt* (Troubled Times) appears on the scene. In the piece *Ghewillich Labuer ende Volc van Neerynghe* (Willing Work and Business People), created at the time of the Peace of Madrid

23 Mareel, 'Entre Ciel et Terre'; Mareel, "You serve me well". We are grateful for the discussions that Élodie Lecuppre-Desjardin had with Samuel Mareel on this subject.

24 Cited in Dumolyn, 'Une idéologie "bricolée"', 1062: 'Van nijt compt strijt/ Van Strijt compt oorloghe/ Van Oorloghe compt armoede/ Van armoede compt pais.' On this ideology of the common good, see also: Lecuppre-Desjardin and Dumolyn, 'Le Bien Commun en Flandre médiévale'.

25 For a general discussion of this culture, see Coigneau, 'Rederijkersliteratuur'.

in 1526, *Ghewillich Labuer* is represented by the mechanism of a clock and *Den Beroerlycken Tyt* is accused of causing all the suffering of the hard-working people of Bruges.<sup>26</sup> The accusation is sufficiently vague to appeal to the authorities and escape censorship. By contrast, a piece like *dOnghelycke Munt* (Inequal Money), which explicitly calls the emperor's fiscal and financial politics into question, was censured by the authorities in 1530. It was hastily replaced by the more inoffensive *Groot Labuer en Sober Wasdom* (Great Labour and Small Profit), in which *Tyt van Nu* (The Time of Now) again functions as the incarnation of trouble.

Eventually, that same present time becomes the central subject of a play presented in Antwerp in 1585, called *De tegenwoordighe Tijd* (The Present Time).<sup>27</sup> It arguably represents a refined version of the word on the street which laid the blame for the endless disasters that continuously shake and weaken the poor people on 'the times'. Opinion and rumours enter the theatre plays of Cornelis Everaert and promulgate an argument that perfectly illustrates the popular debates about issues, like the incorrect pricing of goods, injustice, and wars that are considered unfair. Simultaneously, personifications on the French-speaking stage like *Bon temps* (The Good Times), representing a golden age that is deeply missed, and *Temps qui court* (Time Running Out), who appears completely agitated and disoriented, clearly place the present with its overwhelming problems front and centre.<sup>28</sup> Besides its political and economic implications, the personification of the present can also reveal the moral and religious obligation to put one's life on the road to virtue. In *Tspel dat ghespeilt was voor de Aragoenoyen* (The Play Performed for the Aragonese), the audience is reminded that 'we will be compensated in the manner in which we act, and we will die as we have lived'.<sup>29</sup> As Samuel Mareel has noted, the announcement is clear and makes the present into a fundamental sequence within the religious culture marked by the debates of the Protestant Reformation.

### *Visualizing the Present: Painting the Breach of the Sint Anthonisdijk on 5 March 1651*

The preoccupation with the present was not only reserved for literature, but dominated many parts of society in the Low Countries of the late medieval and early modern period, including the visual arts. Initially, the inclusion of isolated contemporary motifs (fashion, city views) and references to the current moment (such as signatures) served to visualize the present.<sup>30</sup> Gradually, manners of visualizing the present became more intricate and

<sup>26</sup> Mareel, 'Entre Ciel et Terre', 96, underlines the play on words with 'een onruste ofte oorloge', which can refer either to an unrest (part of a clock) and a watch, or to trouble and war.

<sup>27</sup> Hummelen, *Repertorium van het Rederijersdrama*, 247. The other references to allegories of the present time in this corpus will be discussed in a separate future study.

<sup>28</sup> Doudet, 'Théâtre de masques'.

<sup>29</sup> Cited in Mareel, 'Entre Ciel et Terre', 96: 'So een doet, zo wort hy betaelt/ Ende zo een leeft, zo sal hy sterven.'

<sup>30</sup> See the well-known early example of Van Eyck's signature developed in the introduction and Anne-Rieke van Schaik's discussion of story maps in this special issue.

comprehensive.<sup>31</sup> In the wake of the Reformation, Protestant ideas about art, such as those that eventually led to iconoclasm, provided a definite stimulus to the development of new subject matter. Notably, many of these subjects are in some way related to the depiction of the present day.<sup>32</sup> Scenes of everyday life, although always composed and often moralizing, are perhaps the most obvious example.<sup>33</sup> Hybrid representations of religious histories and daily life, such as Pieter Aertsen's and Joachim Bueckelaer's market scenes with biblical episodes in the background, illustrate how artists appealed to the audience's awareness of their own life and time to deliver a religious message. As demonstrated by the example of Jan van Eyck's words discussed at the beginning of this article, portraiture also included increasingly personalized and realistic features in an attempt to suggest the actual presence of the sitter. In fact, portraitists met the challenge of suggesting movement and momentum in portraits head on.<sup>34</sup> In addition to these examples of larger subject categories, we can mention 'niche' subjects like the *kortegaerdjes* that depict soldiers at rest, playfully recalling the state of war in which the Dutch Republic found itself for most of its existence.<sup>35</sup>

Several ways in which artists interacted or reacted to the present seem to converge in landscape painting, which developed into an independent pictorial subject in the Low Countries over the course of the sixteenth century, on its way to becoming one of the most popular genres in the seventeenth century.<sup>36</sup> The remainder of this section on the visualization of the present time in the visual arts will focus on images of the breaching of the Sint-Anthonisdijk (also called Diemerdijk). This natural disaster took place near the hamlet Houtewael, just outside of Amsterdam, in the night of 5 March 1651. Jan Asselijn made at least six paintings showing different stages of the breach and the flooding of the polder, as well as one depicting the reconstruction works (figs. 3-4).<sup>37</sup> Willem Schellinks created one painting (fig. 5) and an elaborate drawing which served as the basis for a newsprint.<sup>38</sup> We can distinguish three levels on which these depictions of a natural disaster engage with the present: subject matter, visual tools, and artistic practice.

On the first level – the subject of these artworks – the connection of the artists to the present is straightforward: they depict a specific current event. Inundations were a frequent phenomenon in the Low Countries, an area with most of its land laying below sea-level.<sup>39</sup>

31 In this short essay, we focus on the conception of artworks. However, much is to be said about the relation to the present in the context of the consumption and reception of art: Brusati, 'Perspectives in Flux'; Massey, 'Response', and the other contributions to the special issue 'The Erotics of Looking. Early Modern Netherlandish Art'.

32 It could be argued, however, that this societal crisis was perfectly in line with changes that had already been occurring gradually 'on the inside' of art and artistic practices.

33 Silver, *Peasant scenes and landscapes*; Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting*.

34 Adams, 'Temporality'. Genre painting and portraiture are here simply selected as an example; more can be said about the representation of the present in all larger subject categories.

35 Rosen, *Soldiers at Leisure*; Pouy, 'La scène de corps de garde'.

36 Stechow, *Dutch Landscape Painting*.

37 Steland-Stief, *Jan Asselijn*, 161-163, 179 (cat. nos. 225-231 and 333-334).

38 For the drawing, see Willem Schellinks, *The bursting of the water through the Sint Anthonisdijk near Amsterdam on 5 March 1651*, 1651, pen on paper, 37 × 51,5 cm, London, British Museum, cat. Oo,10.202: [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P\\_Oo-10-202](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_Oo-10-202). For a brief discussion of the print, see below.

39 Jensen, *Wij en het water*.



Fig. 3 Jan Asselijn, *The Breaching of the Sint Anthonisdijk near Amsterdam*, 1651, oil on canvas, 85,5 × 108,2 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 4 Jan Asselijn, *The Reconstruction of the Muiderdijk*, 1651 or 1652, oil on canvas, 64,9 × 96,9 cm, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie.



Fig. 5 Willem Schellinks, *The Breaching of the Sint Anthonisdijk at Houtewael in 1651*, oil on canvas, 65,2 × 86 cm, Amsterdam, Amsterdam Museum.

Asselijn's painting depicting the reconstruction of the dyke and land hints at a certain heroic narrative of the resilience of the Hollanders facing the terrible force of nature. Perhaps newsworthiness and sensation were sufficient motivation for this choice of subject. In fact, at least three illustrated newsprints concerning the breach were published in 1651, all visually very similar to these paintings. One, comprising three views, was invented by Roelant Roghman and published by Lodewijk Spillebout (fig. 6); two further prints after the inventions of Willem Schellinks and by Jacob Esselens and I. Colin were published by Pieter Nolpe.<sup>40</sup> The prints, each of which depicts the disaster from a different angle, explicate the illustration with letters and an accompanying legend. In addition, some editions of the prints by Roghman include a poem, and those after Schellinks a descriptive text. Both texts mention the meteorological conditions that caused the breach and the resulting damage on site (drowned cattle, flooded land, and the destruction of a farmhouse that left an entire family homeless) and further away in Amsterdam (flooded basements, barges in the streets), as well as the efforts to rebuild the dyke. The emphasis on the water damage within the city of Amsterdam and on the council's supervision of the reconstruction were likely intended to appeal to the urban audience of the print – in a way bringing the disaster closer to home – and hints at a similar intention for the painted depictions.

<sup>40</sup> Dozy, 'Pieter Nolpe', esp. nos. 152-154. From Dozy's overview of prints made (*fecit*) by Nolpe, a very large part illustrates current events and can be considered newsprints.



The artists' second level of engagement with the present is through the use of a visual tool typical of seventeenth-century art across Europe, one which takes on a specific meaning in the context of these artworks: the inclusion of spectators who are witnessing the disaster up close. It is extremely rare to encounter an early modern Netherlandish landscape painting without figures. Most of the time, people – often very small and in the distance – go about their business: travelling or working the fields, as well as the occasional artist drawing after nature. In his *Schilder-boeck* (1604), Carel van Mander advised artists to populate their landscapes: 'Yes, make your land, city, and water elaborate, your houses inhabited, and your roads walked upon.'<sup>41</sup> The presence of humans in a landscape painting allowed the viewer to connect this view of nature to their own reality. As a result, the landscape was no longer timeless and anonymous, but represented a palpable present. In the case of the depictions of the breach of the Sint Anthonisdijk, the figures served an additional role. The man with the eye-catching red cloak flapping in the strong winds, the one on the other side of the gap holding his hat (Asselijjn), or the men hastily climbing to higher ground (Schellinks) stimulate the further emotional engagement (excitement or fear) of the spectator with the scene. In order to evoke empathy with the unhappy fate of these Hollanders, artists employed this visual tool in a manner not unlike painters depicting a scene from (religious) history or mythology.

Lastly, these paintings relate to the present because of the process underlying their conception. A key element of the practice of Dutch painters was to draw 'after life' (*naar het leven*), in addition to using their imagination and memory, which they had trained by copying the work of other masters. For landscape painters, this meant leaving the familiar urban environment behind and venturing into nature to study the flora and fauna, weather conditions, and different kinds of landscape (such as woodland, sea and lakes, mountains, and dunes), by means of extensive observation which they committed to portable sketch-books as well as to memory. This practice greatly contributed to the level of realism visible in Dutch seventeenth-century painting, which in turn reinforced the viewer's connection to the landscape. The artists depicting the breach of the dyke on 5 March 1651 went a step further: they hurried to the scene of the disaster and sketched this specific event, rather than collecting general motifs for future use. Nevertheless, as would be the case for a 'regular' landscape painting, they carefully composed the paintings back in their studio, and the paintings should not be considered a direct rendering of the event.<sup>42</sup>

Amongst the painters witnessing the flooding first hand was Jan van Goyen. He made several drawings in his typical rough yet efficient manner, some of which he later worked out in greater detail (fig. 7). He had to travel from The Hague rather than neighbouring Amsterdam, as is apparent from the fact that he recorded a later stage of the event: the calm after the storm. In this particular drawing, men in small barges and others on the dyke are taking stock of the damage. Jan Asselijjn and Willem Schellinks, both based in Amsterdam, arrived earlier in Houtewael than Van Goyen. Asselijjn recorded two stages

<sup>41</sup> Van Mander, *Schilder-boeck*, fol. 37v: 'Iae maect u Landt, Stadt, en Water behandelt, Huysen bewoont, u weggen bewandelt.'

<sup>42</sup> See Osnabrugge, 'Painting Foreign Lands', for an elaborate description of the artistic practice of landscape painters.



Fig. 7 Jan van Goyen, *The Breaching in the Sint Anthonisdijk near Amsterdam, 1651*, drawing (black chalk with gray wash), 11,4 × 18,4 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

of the flooding: three paintings (currently at Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Hermitage St. Petersburg, and Gemäldegalerie Berlin) show the water rushing down to the lower polder in a small cascade, whereas in two other paintings (Schwerin and Amsterdam Museum) the water has levelled and the dark storm clouds have subsided. It suggests the painter hurried to the scene in the middle of the storm and carefully studied how the inundation advanced over the course of the early morning of 5 March 1651. Schellinks, like Asselijn mostly known for his depiction of foreign landscapes, rendered the disaster in a very different way. Apparently placing himself – and therefore the viewer – very close to the water gushing through the breached dyke, Schellinks focused on the emotions involved in experiencing a natural disaster. The resulting painting is more dramatic, but not necessarily less accurate. The two artists, who had known each other for a long time and had travelled together across Europe, likely stood side by side in Houtewael, yet they perceived and experienced the same event very differently. As such, these paintings also serve as a reminder of the necessity to attempt to reconstruct the perception of the present from the perspective of different individuals.

The examples of the literary and visual representation of the present discussed in the first two case studies offer a first glimpse of possible ways in which the perception of the present firmly anchored itself in the *imaginaire* of pre-modern people in the Low Countries. However, their ‘northern’ way of perceiving and conceiving the present did not dissipate at the foot of the Alps. The last case study will show how it spread much further.

*Meanwhile in Geneva: What's New(s)?*

When the St. Felix Flood on 5 November 1530 wiped several dozen villages in Flanders and Zeeland off the map, causing a great number of casualties and ruining essential wheat fields, the news spread fast. The *Journal d'un bourgeois de Paris* indicates that Parisians, informed by some *lettres imprimées*, talked about it the following week.<sup>43</sup> The catastrophe was of such a scale that it concerned more than the immediate environs of the flood. News of the disaster not only reached Paris, but also the city of Geneva, where a description of the deluge was published too.<sup>44</sup> The drama of the St. Felix flood stirred the minds of the inhabitants of this episcopal city of about ten thousand despite the fact that they had their own preoccupations. At the end of the 1520s, the population was torn between two competing factions, those who wanted to remain Catholic under the rule of the Dukes of Savoy, and those who wanted to rally with the Swiss cantons and join the Protestant Reformation.<sup>45</sup>

In fact, it could be argued that this tense situation made them particularly aware of news from elsewhere. After all, events taking place in neighbouring countries at the same time could potentially be radical game changers for local politics. Still, their hunger for news – whether diffused in printed form, handwritten, or orally – was not limited merely to the immediate interests of the Genevans.<sup>46</sup> Several publications printed by Wygand Köln circulated throughout the city, informing the citizenry of events elsewhere in the world.<sup>47</sup> Originally from Franconia, this printer-bookseller complemented his earnings by producing publications like almanacks, astrological predictions, and *abécédaires*. All of these types of publication shared the characteristics of being short, cheap, and meant for everyday use by a large audience. In addition, he sometimes printed texts for the local urban authorities and religious institutions. However, his main contribution was the introduction of a novelty to Geneva and the Savoy territory: printed news reports – a medium already widespread in France, the Low Countries, and the Holy Roman Empire.

The invention and success of the printing press stimulated a general interest in what we now call 'news', as well as an acceleration of the spread of information (fig. 8). From the 1480s onwards, cheap booklets recounting recent events started to appear across Europe: French *occasionnels*, Spanish *relaciones de sucesos*, and German *Neue Zeitungen*.<sup>48</sup> These short texts, consisting of four to eight sheets of low-quality paper, were produced quickly and cheaply.<sup>49</sup> Before their appearance, recent news circulated by handwritten letters that

43 *Journal d'un bourgeois de Paris*, 421-422.

44 Wilstet, *Sensuyt la teneur des lettres*.

45 On Geneva during this time period, see Caesar, *Histoire de Genève*.

46 It should be noted that during this period, news principally travelled by means of handwritten correspondence and in-person conversations. Printed news media formed but a small part of the exchange of information.

47 Wygand Köln was active in Geneva between 1516 and 1545. He is known to have produced fifty-eight editions, including twelve placards. His productions were characterized by their brevity: twenty-two consisted of only one leaf (thus a quarto of four leaves or an octavo of eight leaves). See Gilmont, 'Wigand Koeln', 131-132.

48 Ettinghausen, *How the Press Began*.

49 In a day, a quarto of four or eight pages could be printed on a small printing press. An edition of five or six hundred copies could be distributed in the streets a day or two after the printer obtained the text: Pettegree, *The Invention of News*, 73.



Fig. 8 Philips Galle (workshop), after Johannes Stradanus, *The Printing Press*, c. 1589-1593, engraving, 26,4 × 19,5 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

were copied to reach more people. Printed news reports descended directly from that means of communication: they appropriated the tone, length, and habit of discussing a single event without any comment.<sup>50</sup> In fact, it was only with the arrival of periodicals in the seventeenth century that publications started to unite descriptions of different events and take a more analytical approach to the information provided.<sup>51</sup>

Wygand Köln was the first to publish these news sources in Geneva. Some reported on military events, like the siege of Pavia (1525), while in a series of booklets published between 1526 and 1532, Genevan readers were informed about the movements of ‘the dog with an insatiable taste for Christian blood, who calls himself the Emperor of Turkey’, Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent (fig. 9).<sup>52</sup> They described the westward advance of the Ottomans following the sultan’s victories at the Battle of Mohács (26 August 1526) and the Siege of Vienna (1529).<sup>53</sup> Köln also informed his readers about imperial events in the

50 Pouspin, *Publier la nouvelle*, 54, 65; Seguin, ‘L’information à la fin du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle en France’, 310.

51 Petitjean, ‘Comment l’Europe de la Renaissance inventa l’actualité’. On the diffusion of news in Europe, see: Layher and Scholz Williams (eds.), *Consuming News*, 200; Davies and Fletcher (eds.), *News in Early Modern Europe*; Brandtzæg, Goring, and Watson (eds.), *Travelling Chronicles*.

52 Taegio, *Le siege de Pavia*; *Sensuyvent les faitz du chien insaciable*.

53 *Le double de l’original*; *Le siege et champ*; *D’une escharmouche*.

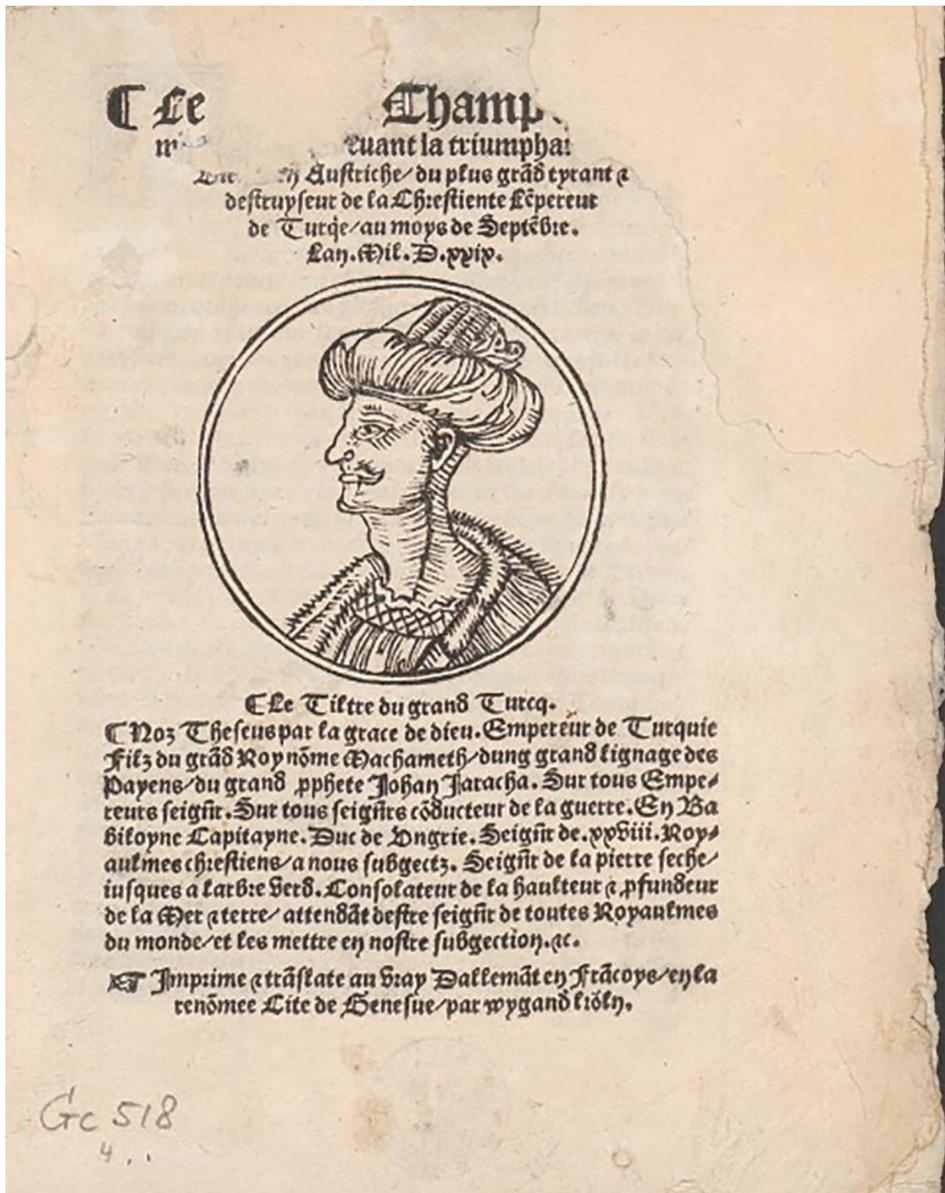


Fig. 9 Le siege et champ mys nagueres devant la triumpante ville de Vienne en Autriche, du plus grand tyran et destruyeur de la chrestiente l'empereur de Turquie, au mois de septembre L'an mil. D. XXIX (Geneva: Wygand Koln, 1529).

Holy Empire, with leaflets narrating the coronation of Ferdinand of Habsburg as King of Bohemia in Prague (1527), the joyous entry of Charles V into Bologna (1529, fig. 10), and his coronation as emperor by the pope (1530).<sup>54</sup> One publication, already mentioned, focused on a natural catastrophe: the St. Felix flood (1530).<sup>55</sup>

Only a fragment of Wygand Köln's production has come down to us; he must have published many similar booklets that are now lost. In fact, this type of printed work has a low survival rate, as it was not meant to be conserved and was discarded or reused in a similar way to newspapers today.<sup>56</sup> However, the aforementioned sample is probably quite representative and the remaining publications have two points in common. Firstly, all reported events are in some way related to the Holy Roman Empire: its army and wars against France (in Pavia) or the Ottoman Empire, the coronations of its Habsburg rulers, or natural disasters touching its territory (the St. Felix flood in the Southern Netherlands). Secondly, with the exception of the news about the flood (written directly in French), all leaflets are translated. The one concerning the battle of Pavia is translated from Latin to French by a certain Morillon, likely a local intellectual. All the other news reports were translated from German to French by the publisher himself, as indicated by references like 'printed and newly translated from German to French in Geneva by Wygand Köln, German'. In most cases, moreover, it is possible to identify the original German news reports.

Köln obtained German news reports and translated them for the Genevan market, resulting in an unbalanced availability of information. For example, none of the extant texts provides news about France – even if this absence does not mean, of course, that he never sold French news reports. It is not surprising that Genevans were aware of what was happening in northern Europe, as this area was particularly dynamic with regard to the general print production. Indeed, the invention of the printing press took place in this region and the Protestant Reformation caused the production of German prints to soar from the 1520s onwards.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, Germany and the Netherlands were fast becoming the main centres of information exchange and diffusion of news on a large scale, while England also published many of these leaflets, often translated from German or French.<sup>58</sup>

In fact, it was a military conflict ravaging southern Europe, the Italian wars (1494-1559), that instigated the need and desire for news in the north. In France, the first printed news bulletins served people's need to know about the fate of their armies and kings fighting

54 *Le coronnement du tresillustre roy de Behemen; Lentrée de la Imperiale Magesté à Boloigne; Sensuyvent les deux couronnementz.*

55 *Wilstet, Sensuyt la teneur des lettres.*

56 Seguin, 'L'information à la fin du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle en France', 47-48. Marion Pouspin has identified 2,200 editions of cheap pamphlets published in France between 1480 and 1580. Two-thirds of these are only known to us through a single surviving copy, and three hundred are 'virtual pieces' (i.e., booklets for which there is no physical copy, but that are known through old catalogues or inventories). See Pouspin, *Publier la nouvelle*, 30-35.

57 Edwards, *Printing, Propaganda and Martin Luther*.

58 On Germany, see: Roth, *Die Neuen Zeitungen in Deutschland*; Molino, 'Connected News'. On the Netherlands, see Pettegree and Walsby (eds.), *Netherlandish Books*; Arblaster, *From Ghent to Aix*; Harline, *Pamphlets, Printing and Political Culture*; Weduwen, *Dutch and Flemish Newspapers of the Seventeenth Century*; Koopmans, *Early Modern Media and the News in Europe*. On England, see: Raymond, *The Oxford History of Popular Print Culture*, I; Shaaber, *Some Forerunners of the Newspaper in England*.

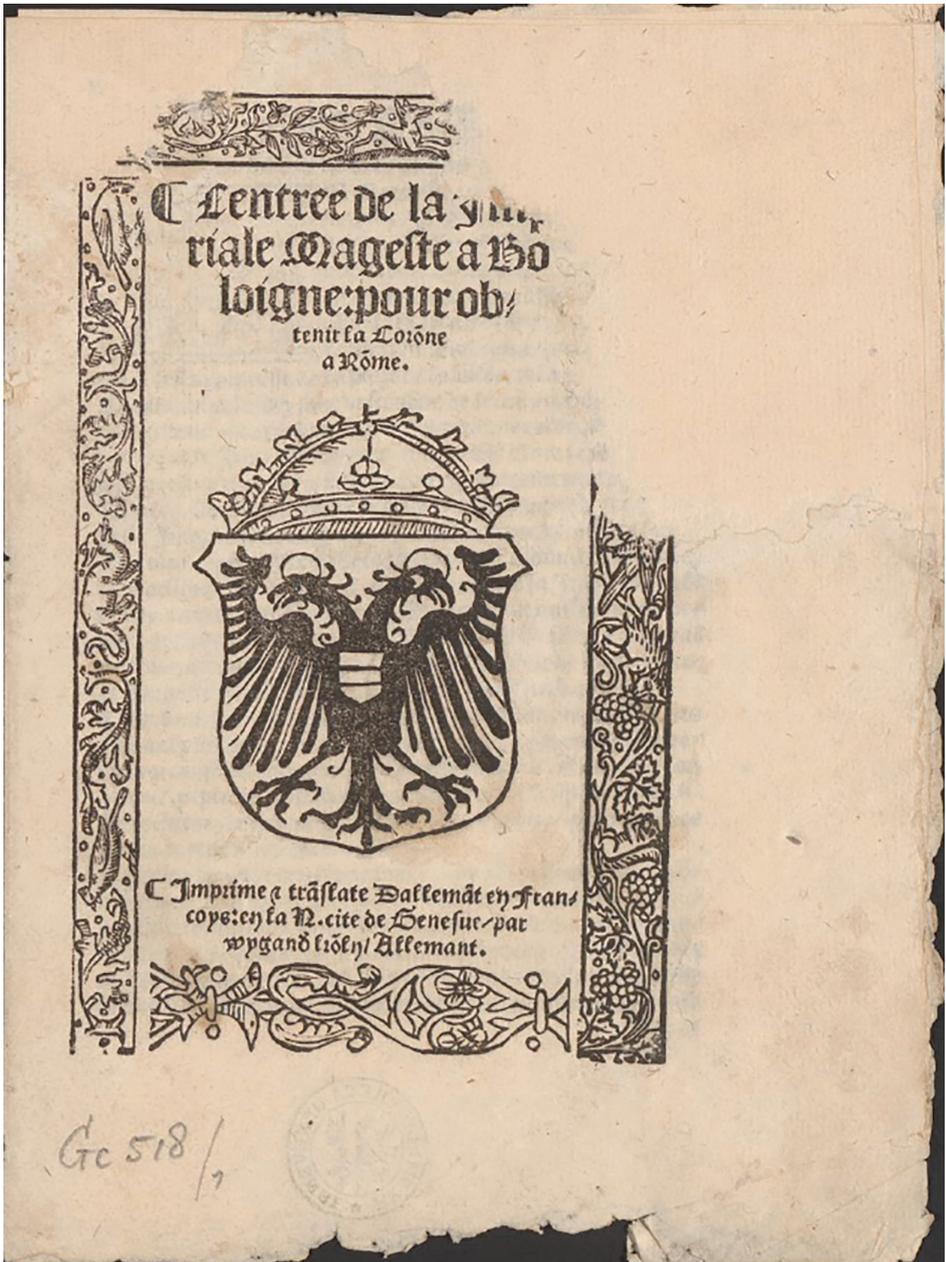


Fig. 10 L'entree de la Imperiale Magesté à Boloigne, pour obtenir la coronne à Romme (Geneva: Wygand Köln, 1529).

on the other side of the Alps, in the Kingdom of Naples and the Duchy of Milan.<sup>59</sup> The news was certainly not transmitted in an impartial way, since those prints only reported favourable stories about the progresses of the French army.<sup>60</sup> As such, the war was not only fought on the battlefields, but also on paper.<sup>61</sup> An avalanche of news reports favouring the Empire also appeared, especially from the Netherlands, where Antwerp was quickly becoming the publishing capital.<sup>62</sup> Certain episodes of the conflict even initiated a veritable media war, such as Francis I challenging Charles V to a duel, with declarations of the monarchs appearing in both France and the Low Countries.<sup>63</sup> Italy, which formed the main stage for the conflicts, saw its own information system severely affected by the wars. Employing the printing press in a more traditional manner and privileging other forms of writing about news like the satirical *pasquinades*, it adopted the format of printed news reports much later than its northern neighbours.<sup>64</sup>

This modest example of a Genevan printer's contribution to the dissemination of news concerning events predominantly taking place north of the Alps illustrates how the manner of producing and consuming news as developed in north-western Europe during the first decades of the sixteenth century was gradually spreading towards other territories. Geneva was not particularly impacted by the advancing Ottomans, the ceremonies of the Habsburg family, or indeed natural disasters taking place in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, the Genevan citizens were unmistakably interested in these events. The bookseller-printer Wygand Köln had the insight to turn this hunger for news into financial profit. A new era had arrived, in which knowledge of what was happening at the same time on the other side of Europe had become a coveted commodity. This acceleration in the dissemination of information not only whetted curiosity, but also brought present events in distant places closer together, stimulating interest in current affairs and, indeed, in the present.

### *Conclusion: The Present in Crisis and Beyond*

Is it merely a coincidence that the conception and perception of the present in the three cases studied in this essay is related to crisis situations (economic downfall, natural disaster, and war)? To a certain extent, yes and no. While there are numerous examples to choose from pertaining to the rhythms of everyday life and the temporal experience of celebratory events, times of crisis undeniably reinforce the acute perception of the present.

Crises have indeed often been perceived as revelatory moments during which an increased awareness provided an impetus for recovery and reform or, to quote Lampe-dusa's famous paradox, for 'changing all so everything stays the same'. But they were also

59 Charles VIII, Louis XII, and Francis I all campaigned in Italy, some for several months, others for years.

60 Pouspin, "Des nouvelles de par desca"; Pouspin, 'Les "pièces d'actualité" politique françaises'. Also see Seguin, *L'information en France avant le périodique*; Seguin, *L'information en France de Louis XII à Henri II*; Seguin, 'La découverte de l'Italie par les soldats de Charles VIII'.

61 Astier, *Un affrontement de papier*.

62 Pettegree, *The Invention of News*, 81-82.

63 Gunn, Grummitt, and Cools, *War, State, and Society*; Pouspin, *Publier la nouvelle*, 169-170, 447.

64 Infelise, *Prima dei giornali*, 200; Petitjean, *L'Intelligence des choses*; Pettegree, *The Invention of News*, 80-81.

the backdrop for a profound nostalgia made up of regrets, disillusion, and doubt. As such, the unprecedented cataclysm of the Black Death can arguably be seen as constituting a temporal marker. This interpretation was proposed by Etienne Anheim, a Petrarch scholar who, drawing on the poet's correspondence, framed 1349 as a kind of year zero, a 'fold in the order of time'.<sup>65</sup> However, although the whole continent was struck by a disastrous mortality rate, the pre-humanist world of Petrarch was distinctly different from that of chroniclers and poets active in the cities and courts of northern France and the Netherlands like Guillaume Machaut or, a couple of decades later, Gilles li Muisit, Eustache Deschamps, and Jan Moritoen. While Boccaccio's response to the plague is considered to be one of the first manifestations of the Renaissance, in northern France Machaut was thinking about mourning, regret, and melancholy, and advocating a language of truth, void of artifice.<sup>66</sup> To see and tell (*voir dire*), according to Machaut, is to renounce skilful speech and rhetorical perfection and instead bluntly express one's feelings, sometimes in a crude and ungainly manner.<sup>67</sup> In his *Prison amoureuse*, Froissart confessed that he needed to write in a manner reflecting the time as he perceived it.<sup>68</sup> Other sources from north-western Europe testify of this emerging necessity to record the immediate present and to anchor literary production and writing in general. It is arguably this capturing of the present that distinguishes poets and writings in the north from Italian humanist culture. Since its arrival at the turn of the fifteenth century, the humanist movement presented itself as the creator and thereby commander of its history, turning the present into a moment of crystallization embedded in a historical continuum and advocating a fundamental ideology that mirrored ancient history.<sup>69</sup> These specific examples from the framework of literary studies open up stimulating paths to understanding what distinguishes one cultural habitus from another. The present, arguably a universal temporality, is nonetheless shaped by expectations and a variable attachment to particular historical past and location. A more systematic study of the perception of the present in the late medieval and early modern Low Countries will enable us to reassess the specificity of the countries of the north. 'For if each of us lives in time, it is charged with memories and hopes that permeate each of us', a self-evident observation by Jean-Marie Le Gall, but one that allows us to hypothesize that the present is experienced differently at the individual and community levels.<sup>70</sup>

The reflections presented in this essay, encompassing both historiographical and methodological aspects, focus on a period and geographical area that have not been previously

65 In as far as Petrarch's words and unique vision should not be considered the reflection of personal amazement. See, notably, Belich, *The World the Plague Made*; Boucheron, 'D'après la peste'.

66 As Estelle Doudet explains, while Boccaccio presents the countryside as a place of pleasure to escape calamity and enjoy life, or what remains of it, Machaut, locked in his room before joining the court, nurtures his melancholy and turns black into an inspiring colour for the generations of Northern poets who follow him. See Doudet, 'Après la pandémie'.

67 See Cerquiglini-Toulet, *Guillaume de Machaut*.

68 Froissart, in *La Prison amoureuse*, also admits to this immediate writing style that may later be revised, yet it remains an expression of *sentement* (sentiment or emotional response) in its immediacy. See Cerquiglini-Toulet, *La couleur de la mélancolie*, 45.

69 Revest, 'The Birth of the Humanist Movement'.

70 Le Gall, *Défense et illustration de la Renaissance*, 21.

studied in the manner we propose. We contend that they should serve as an impetus for a renewed examination of how the question of the present is approached and explored within the field of humanities and social sciences, particularly within the realm of historical research. It is especially crucial, we argue, to relinquish the notion that ‘presentism’ and the associated implications only emerged in recent years, and to demonstrate that the profound interrogation of what we might term a ‘time in crisis’ has long been a prominent concern.

This brief survey has attempted to illuminate the distinct character of the Low Countries’ perspective on the present, setting it apart from other regions in Europe, while connecting it with the other north-western European countries with which they share borders, languages, and a common history. It is our proposition that this region constitutes a genuine *koine* – that is, a shared constellation of individual and collective values and references. North of the Alps, void of the Roman spirit, the perception of the present does not appear as a historical construct. Instead, it emerges as an imperative necessity to act, a command, a desire of men and women eager for news and wanting to understand the meaning of their life in light of an urgent present rather than through an exemplary past. By delving into this unique awareness of the present, our aim is to make a meaningful contribution to a more profound understanding of historical consciousness and the dynamic interplay between individuals and societies and the temporalities they inhabit. Undoubtedly, future research endeavours should further investigate the intricacies of this perception, in order to shed light on the complexities of the Low Countries’ experiences and their broader implications for historical understanding. This hypothesis stands at the forefront of our research agenda for the near future.

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