

***The Timanthes-effect. Another note on the historical explanation of pictures***<sup>1</sup>

Koenraad Jonckheere

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In his *Historia Naturalis*, Pliny the Elder described a contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius. Zeuxis was a painter working in Athens in the fifth century BC. Parrhasius of Ephesus was his main artistic rival. The two painters were believed to be the best living artists and in order to settle the discussion a contest was organized. Both were to make a painting and it was to be decided which one was the most lifelike. Zeuxis revealed his panel first. He had painted grapes, which looked so convincing and inviting that birds immediately fell from the sky to peck them. Proudly Zeuxis now asked Parrhasius to slip the curtain of his painting, only to find out that it was a *trompe-l'oeil* instead of an actual drape. Zeuxis immediately admitted he had lost the contest and gratefully congratulated Parrhasius on his triumph.<sup>2</sup>

Pliny's story is a wonderful metaphor on human visual cognition. While Zeuxis had indeed deceived the birds, Parrhasius deceived Zeuxis, the most famous artist, by tricking him into trusting his patterns of expectation only to

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank **XXX**

<sup>2</sup> Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, 35.145; On this story see recently: Sarah Blake McHam, *Pliny and the Artistic Culture of the Italian Renaissance: The Legacy of the Natural History* (London - New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 47. Stijn Bussels, *The Animated Image. Roman Theory on Naturalism, Vividness and Divine Power* (Leiden - Berlin: Leiden University Press - Akademie Verlag, 2012), passim.

find out that his own medium, i.e. visual arts, had betrayed him. Indeed, Zeuxis was looking for something that lay beyond the curtain, unconsciously searching for the *un-depicted*. The painter who was renowned for seeing every minor flaw in his own work had been misled by the illusion of a simple curtain, because he blindly trusted his patterns of expectation.<sup>3</sup>

Stories on visual perception and deceit are a commonplace in Art History since the days of Pliny.<sup>4</sup> They were re-counted, paraphrased and interpreted by many as an illustration of the mimetic power of art. De Van Limburg brothers tricked the Duke de Berry into believing that a woodblock painted in trompe-l'oeil was an actual manuscript<sup>5</sup> and Hans Vredeman de Vries – the Parrhasius of the Low Countries according to Van Mander – deceived the Prince of Orange with his ‘perspectives’ in Gillis Hooftman’s courtyard.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in the age of iconoclasm, many believed images to be living miracle workers.<sup>7</sup> Yet, Pliny’s account is more than a naive tale on illusion in the visual arts. It is also the story of a spontaneous response based on a pattern of unconscious expectations. It is a story on the anticipated perception of illusionistic art, a problem that 25 centuries after Apelles, was still central in art and art theory,

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<sup>3</sup> Pliny also recounts the story (*Naturalis Historia*, 35.66) of Zeuxis criticising one of his own paintings, namely a boy holding grapes. Again the birds came to peck them. Pliny considered it a failure because the boy apparently was not painted lifelike enough to scare the birds.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Blake McHam, *Pliny and the Artistic Culture of the Italian Renaissance: The Legacy of the Natural History* (London - New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 255-287. For Pliny’s impact on Netherlandish art theory, see especially: Walter S. Melion, *Shaping the Netherlandish Canon. Karel Van Mander's Schilder-Boeck* (Chicago – London: University of Chicago Press, 1991) passim.

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<sup>6</sup> Karel Van Mander, *Het Schilder-Boeck* (Haarlem, 1604), 266r.

<sup>7</sup> Koenraad Jonckheere, *Antwerp Art after Iconoclasm. Experiments in Decorum 1566-1585* (Brussels - New Haven - London: Mercatorfonds - Yale University Press, 2012), passim.

think for instance of René Magritte.<sup>8</sup> Patterns of expectation provoke what Jas Elsner, in his discussion on Pygmalion, called the “supreme myth of realist viewing”.<sup>9</sup> “For in realism, all viewers are invited to become creators.”<sup>10</sup> Unconsciously, they build a non-existent reality upon an illusionistic experience. Zeuxis, deceived by his own patterns of expectation, tried to look beyond the realm of the illusion, and in doing so forgot about it. It is this phenomenon that I would like to discuss in this paper.

### **Patterns of expectation and art historical methodology**

In Art History, Ernst Gombrich following the lead of Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky was one of the first to intensely study the psychology of pictorial representation.<sup>11</sup> In a few dozen essays, bundled in *Art and Illusion* and in the *Image and the Eye*, he explored the possibilities of psychology for Art History, brilliantly demonstrating that our visual cognition is biased by a vast number of psychological and sociological preconditions.<sup>12</sup> In one of his latest essays,

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<sup>8</sup> E.g. the discussion of his work in Mitchell and Foucault. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory : Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago - London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 64-76; Michel Foucault, *Ceci N'est Pas Une Pipe. Deux Lettres et Quatre Dessins de René Magritte* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana), 1973.

<sup>9</sup> Jas Elsner, 'Visual Mimesis and the Myth of the Real. Ovid's Pygmalion as Viewer', *Ramus. Critical studies in Greek and Roman Literature* 20 (1991), 154-68, p. 154. (Also commented upon by Stijn Bussels, *The Animated Image. Roman Theory on Naturalism, Vividness and Divine Power* (Leiden - Berlin: Leiden University Press - Akademie Verlag, 2012), pp. 32-36). The *pygmalion-effect* in psychology is the term used to describe self-fulfilling prophecies, a classical example of the impact of unconscious biased patterns of expectation on perceptions. see **XXX CHECK XXX**

<sup>10</sup> In fact, Elsner talks about another typical example of the artist deceived by art, namely Pygmalion. Jas Elsner, 'Visual Mimesis and the Myth of the Real. Ovid's Pygmalion as Viewer', *Ramus. Critical studies in Greek and Roman Literature* 20 (1991), 154-68 (p. 161).

<sup>11</sup> A good and recent summary of the history of art historical methodology is: Michael Hatt, and Charlotte Klonk, *Art History : A Critical Introduction to Its Methods* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006). On Warburg, Panofsky and Gombrich see pp. 65-119.

<sup>12</sup> Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation. The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts 1956* (London - New York: Phaidon Press - Pantheon Books, 1960); Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye. Further Studies in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1982).

*Image and codes*, Gombrich reviews his own oeuvre while refuting some of his critics.<sup>13</sup> In the essay, Gombrich refers to the Zeuxis contest, and touches upon the problem of patterns of expectation briefly, affirming that our visual cognition is biased. Since Gombrich, many art historians have developed his arguments further. Michael Baxandall in particular developed some interesting concepts to historically reconstruct the beholder's condition. In *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth century Italy*, Baxandall introduced the concept of "period eye", meticulously showing that people in, for instance 15th century Italy, had different patterns of expectations than the twentieth century viewer, which caused a different cognitive and emotional response.<sup>14</sup> In other words, in order to reconstruct the historical meaning of art, it is crucial to reconstruct the "period eye", according to Baxandall. With this concept, he addressed one of the most fundamental problems in Art History, the so-called *hermeneutic problem*: How can we understand or reconstruct the mindset of people in the past in order to understand how they perceived art?<sup>15</sup> What were their patterns of expectation?

In philosophy, it was Maurice Merleau-Ponty who drew attention to the *Phenomenology of perception*.<sup>16</sup> Particularly in his unfinished opus magnum, *Le visible et l'invisible* - in which he discussed the impact of the

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<sup>13</sup> Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye. Further Studies in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1982), pp. 278-297. Nelson Goodman for instance opens his *Languages of Art* with a comment on Gombrich; see: Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), p. 7

<sup>14</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in 15th Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 29-108.

<sup>15</sup> Neatly explained in Michael Hatt, and Charlotte Klonk, *Art History : A Critical Introduction to Its Methods* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 23-25 (on Warburg, Panofsky and Gombrich).

<sup>16</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Fenomenologie Van De Waarneming*, ed. by Douwe Tiemersma and Rens Vlasblom (Amsterdam: Boom, 2009). On Merleau-Ponty and art history see: Dana Arnold and Margaret Iversen (eds.), *Art and Thought*, online publication: (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/>) 2008, esp. chapter 4: Meaning, Identity, Embodiment: The Uses of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology in Art History

'impercepted' on perception and cognition – made a few points that are particularly interesting for what I am about to argue. Whilst Merleau-Ponty showed how significant and meaningful silence can be in a conversation, I will discuss how important *omission* (visual silence) can be in art. Or to return to Zeuxis: how strong is the attraction of the un-depicted?

However, long before Gombrich and Baxandall, Panofsky developed a methodology to tackle the hermeneutic problem.<sup>17</sup> Panofsky, like most of his contemporaries was preoccupied with contemporary research on perception in experimental psychology. In the famous description of an every day scene, which Panofsky used to introduce his methodology (and which started the 20<sup>th</sup> century discussions on meaning in art), he used the basic findings of this research. Imagine, Panofsky writes, an acquaintance walking in the streets. He lifts his hat as you approach him. The factual observation of a man holding his hat is the pre-iconographical description, he argues. It is the mere recognition of a formal object consisting of line and colour. However, we will recognise the man as a friend, Panofsky continues. Panofsky here speaks of a factual meaning. It is an unconscious response provoked by immanent patterns of expectation. Moreover, the act will be read as a greeting. Here, Panofsky argues, the expressional meaning comes in. 'It differs from the factual one in that is apprehended, not by simple identification but by empathy'.<sup>18</sup> It requires sensitivity. Moreover, we will read the gesture as a greeting only if we form

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Hatt, and Charlotte Klonk, *Art History : A Critical Introduction to Its Methods* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 96-119.

<sup>18</sup> Experimental psychology at that time had shown that the brain actively tries to make sense of the 'visual input'. (e.g. experiments with multistable images, etc. ...). Cf. *Infra*.

part of a culture and society in which we are trained or 'conditioned' to read the lifting of the hat as a polite gesture, a remainder of mediaeval chivalry. An Australian bushman will not read it as such, Panofsky argues.<sup>19</sup>

The problem that I am to discuss in this paper is already immanent in the anecdote: Panofsky correctly supposes a basic level of 'empathy' and a common familiarity with specific cultural conventions in every human being, but he refrains from taking the full consequences of this observation. While - in the tradition of Wölfflin and Riegl<sup>20</sup> - he starts with the formal observation to subsequently argue that (and here he opposes his predecessors) there is more to art than formality, he eventually sticks to the interaction of the beholder's mind and the formal properties of the 'object' to construct his iconographical and iconological layers of interpretation. His scheme, in other words, is built on the observable, while if one agrees with the fact that people in a certain socio-historical context are preconditioned to read the gesture of the man as a greeting, one also has to accept that the man could have walked by without greeting and that it would have been regarded as impolite and discourteous. The non-appearance of the gesture is the 'formal' (or *anti-formal*?) foundation to build on in this case. Indeed, it is the breaching of the patterns of expectation that generates the 'factual meaning' here. I will come back to this.

Panofsky's ideas provoked many a discussion<sup>21</sup> In his well-known, scrupulous analysis of this famous anecdote and methodology, Mitchell for instance argues that 'Panofsky's iconology is one in which the "icon" is

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<sup>19</sup> Panofsky explained his methodology several times. I used the introduction in Erwin Panofsky. *Studies in Iconology: Humanist Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, (Oxford: Westview Press, 1939; re-edition 1972), pp. 3-31.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Hatt, and Charlotte Klonk, *Art History : A Critical Introduction to Its Methods* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 65-95.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Keith Moxey, *Visual Studies and the Iconic Turn* **XXX CHECK XXX**

thoroughly absorbed by the “logos,” and understood as a rhetorical, literary, or even (less convincingly) a scientific discourse.’<sup>22</sup> Mitchell built on Panofsky to argue that an unalloyed picture theory ought to be developed, i.e. a theory that is not based on the paradigms of verbal interaction but on the particularities of visual communication. His work marked the beginning of the ‘pictorial turn’, and was supplemented by Boehm who proagated an ‘iconic turn’ (*Ikonische Wende*). Boehm argued for a greater awareness of the ‘pictorialness’ in the construction of epistème.<sup>23</sup>

All these theories challenged the ‘*semiotic turn*’, started by Bal and Bryson amongst others, in which the ‘context’ became central and Panofsky’s, Gombrich’s and Baxandall’s imperative paradigm of perception was largely dismissed.<sup>24</sup> The art historian, they argue is always ‘present in the construction he or she produces’, and therefore the aim is to ‘see how we art different from (the historical) them and to use context not as a legislative idea but as a means to locate ourselves (...)’.<sup>25</sup> In semiology art is looked at in terms of *signifiant* and *signifié*, which are themselves part of historical changes.<sup>26</sup> The hermeneutical problem and the reconstruction of the perception of the historical beholder, ought to be the focus of art history no longer, according to

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<sup>22</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory : Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago - London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 28.

<sup>23</sup> Gottfried Boehm, *Was Ist Ein Bild?* (München: Fink, 1995); See also Hans Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie : Entwürfe Für Eine Bildwissenschaft* (München: Fink, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> Norman Bryson, ‘Semiology and Visual Interpretation’, in *Visual Theory : Painting and Interpretation*, ed. by Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith P. F. Moxey (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), pp. 61-73.

<sup>25</sup> Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, ‘Semiotics and Art History: a dicussion of Context and Senders’ as reprinted in: *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 242-262, esp. p. 252.

<sup>26</sup> Moreover, one also has Alfred Gell’s now famous agency theories (Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford - New York: Clarendon Press, 1998); Keith Moxey’s and Michael Ann Holly’s image theories (E.g. Mark Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith P. F. Moxey, *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). and recently Nagel and Wood introduced the challenging *Anachronic* concept (Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).

the semiologists. Art History ought to focus on the functioning of the sign on 'multiple historical horizons'.<sup>27</sup>

All of these theories tilt to either an absolute or a relative (cognitive) reading of art in that they assume that the meaning of the artwork is either inherent to the object itself (and thus that the visual object and narrative have their own 'logos') or that meaning is foremost dependent upon the beholder's mindset and/or the cultural context in which the work of art is viewed.<sup>28</sup> These seemingly opposing views, in which Panofsky actually took the middle course, led to an on-going methodological debate.<sup>29</sup> However, they all seem to have missed one crucial point, for the common ground of all of these methodologies, theories and schemes of interpretation is that they are based on the pre-assumption that 'meaning' in art actually originates in the observable, either in an absolute or relative sense. Even Jonathan Crary's thought-provoking *Techniques of the observer* and Rudolf Arnheim's *Art and Visual perception*, fail to touch ground in this respect.<sup>30</sup> In sum, all of these, often complex models of interpretation are built on the paradigm that meaning, now or in the past, is or was triggered by the represented facts, objects, gestures or whatever. Indeed, Zeuxis responded to what he saw, but the crux of the matter is that he did so because he expected it to cover something else, something beyond the observable.

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<sup>27</sup> Norman Bryson, 'Semiology and Visual Interpretation', in *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation*, ed. by Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith P. F. Moxey (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), pp. 61-73, esp. 72.

<sup>28</sup> These discussions seem to run parallel to research in psychology and neuro-psychologie in which top down and bottom up models and approaches to visual cognition are being forwarded. See **XXX CHECK XXX**

<sup>29</sup> The debate is not likely to stop, since it is a debate on what the ambition of art historical research should be.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass. - London: MIT Press, 1990); Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974; expanded and revised edition).



According to me, the opportunities of ‘patterns of expectation’ so eloquently discussed by Panofsky, Gombrich, Baxandall and some of their heralds and critics, have not fully been explored. While I do not have the intention to discuss the validity of the named theories and insights here, I want to demonstrate that Art History of the sixteenth century Low Countries and by extension Art History in general has, since Panofsky, missed important iconographical and iconological occasions, precisely by focussing on the represented solely, and thus refraining from exploiting the possibilities of patterns of expectation completely by looking at the *un-depicted* instead. For if one recognises the fact that strong patterns of expectation do exist at all times, in all cultures (and recent research in various disciplines makes it pretty hard to ignore), and that these patterns are vital step stones in the genesis of meaning, one also has to accept that one can breach these patterns by deliberately omitting the expected.<sup>31</sup> In other words, if a strong pattern of expectation as to the depiction of a certain topic exists, it is possible to successfully tell a new story by actually *not* depicting key-elements; i.e. elements which are cognitively or emotionally to be expected. To illustrate my point I will use the same ‘methodology’ as Gombrich and Mitchell and refer to a cartoon, first published in the New Yorker (fig. \$).<sup>32</sup> It was made by Edward Frascino and depicts a man entering heaven. Great is his surprise, when he sees God and notices that He looks nothing like his pictures. The omission of a

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<sup>31</sup> E.g. A fashionably theory in Neuro-psychologie today is predictive coding. This theory states that the brain responds more intensely to whatever differs from the expected. E.g. Rajesh P. N. Rao and Dana H. Ballard: ‘Predictive coding in the visual cortex: a functional interpretation of some extra-classical receptive-field effects’, *Nature Neuroscience*, 2 (1999) 79 - 87. ‘(...) visual system using an efficient hierarchical strategy for encoding natural images’. See also [Karl Friston etc. XXX CHECK XXX](#)

<sup>32</sup> Also published in *De Standaard Weekblad*, 8 June, 2013.

beard, creates a strong element of surprise here, because it breaches the unconscious pattern of expectation created by seeing an old, white-bearded God time and again in painting since the Middle Ages.<sup>33</sup>

But first: what are these patterns of expectation? As psychologists, neurologists, linguists and others have aptly shown in recent decades, all human communication, is stuffed with them – these disciplines I must say, have all developed individual terminologies to describe specific aspects (such as *conditioning*, *priming*, *predictive coding*, etcetera), but in this paper, I will stick to the generic term.<sup>34</sup>

Signs, symbols, gestures or indeed the lifting of a hat bare meaning because we are primed and conditioned to read them as such. “Expectation is a constant part of mental life, (...) a biological adaptation with specialized psychological structures and a long evolutionary pedigree” as one scholar put it.<sup>35</sup> Such patterns are so deeply embedded into our brain that they constantly steer our behaviour and reactions without us recognising it. Strong patterns of

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<sup>33</sup> Gombrich, discussed this phenomenon, to the best of my knowledge, first but never elaborated on it. In an essay on the beholder's share in *Conditions of illusion* he argued, whilst referring to Leonardo's *Sfumato* and Danièle Barbaro's comments on - again - Parrhasius, the possibilities of the deliberately blurred image that 'leads us to understand what one does not see.' Surprisingly – or not – Gombrich stuck to the formal aspects of style and as far as I know never explored the possibilities of omission and blur in iconography. Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation. The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts 1956* (London - New York: Phaidon Press - Pantheon Books, 1960) pp. 170-203, esp. p. 185. Gombrich's ideas were formed by Da Vinci's own observations (Leonardo da Vinci and Jean Paul Richter (ed.), *The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci [in English and Italian text, introductory material and notes in English.]* (New York - London: Dover - Constable, 1989), vol. 1, p. 127) and contemporary findings in the *Gestalt psychology* of the Berlin School in which blurred images were used for experiments. (on Gestalt see David Hothersall, *History of Psychology*, New York 2004, pp. 207-248)

<sup>34</sup> David Hothersall, *History of Psychology*, New York 2004.

<sup>35</sup> David Brian Huron, *Sweet Anticipation : Music and the Psychology of Expectation* (Cambridge, Mass. - London: MIT Press, 2006), p. 3. This book provides a good overview of research of patterns of expectation in various disciplines.

expectation therefore are easily disturbed. A textbook example is a traffic light. We are all conditioned to wait at a red light for a certain amount of time. However, we do expect the light to turn green within a certain timeframe. If the red light remains red for half a minute longer than usual, most people, will get nervous. Their pattern of expectation - which one is generally unaware of - is breached; it causes unrest and makes them aware of the fact that they actually are waiting for a red light.<sup>36</sup>

In the so-called performing arts, such as music, theatre and film, patterns of expectations have been studied more intensely in recent years.<sup>37</sup> The reason is simple: these arts allow for the creation of expectations within the timeframe of the 'performance'. In film for instance, patterns of expectation are constantly being built in order to raise the tension and introduce elements of surprise - surprise is caused by breaching the (unconscious) expectations. Here, a close analysis and the study of the different steps in building expectations is possible, because it can be 're-viewed' time and again.

In the fine arts on the other hand, patterns of expectation are only created over time (sometimes centuries), subsequently lost in time and therefore hard to pinpoint. The fine arts, as a rule, evolved slowly. It is therefore extremely hard to reconstruct stylistic or iconographic stereotypes, let alone specific changes or ruptures in longstanding traditions. Multiple efforts in the twentieth century have merely shown how complex the matter

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<sup>36</sup> David Brian Huron, *Sweet Anticipation : Music and the Psychology of Expectation* (Cambridge, Mass. - London: MIT Press, 2006), p. XXX

<sup>37</sup> E.g. in music: David Brian Huron, *Sweet Anticipation : Music and the Psychology of Expectation* (Cambridge, Mass. - London: MIT Press, 2006); in film theory e. g. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film; the Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York - Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960). XXX CHECK XXX

is. Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne*<sup>38</sup> and Henri de Wael's iconographic classification system *Iconclass* for instance, never succeeded in fully capturing the cultural and historical diversity of imagery.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, it is almost impossible to reconstruct the patterns of expectations of the beholder as to a certain topic. What styles and iconographies did a historical person see? How often and how long did he or she see them? How did he or she perceive them then?

Even in the fine arts though, it is possible to recognise and reconstruct some specific aspects of patterns of expectation, for in art they are typically breached by the addition of certain in-decorous elements. There are some famous instances in which the work of art provoked arousal, turning the work of art into an icon at once, precisely by breaching patterns of expectation. Probably the most famous is Manet's *Olympia*, which is, not coincidentally, one of the best-documented examples.<sup>40</sup> In his *Olympia*, Manet shocked the Parisian bourgeoisie by a few minor shifts in style and iconography to the old *topos* of the reclining Venus (fig. \$). By individualising the face and adding some accessories worn by prostitutes, Manet forced the audience of the Salon to read his Venus (fig. \$) in a different and apparently upsetting manner. The pattern of expectation of the Parisian bourgeois was disturbed, causing a sudden awareness of the presence of *Olympia*. By infringing decorum, the public became attentive of their implicit expectations as to art and nudity and they returned home with an image in their mind they

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<sup>38</sup> Christopher D. Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor, and Aby Warburg's Atlas of Images* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> Henri van de Waal and L. D. Couprie, *Iconclass. An Iconographic Classification System. Completed and Edited by L. D. Couprie [and Others]* (Amsterdam - London: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1973-...)

<sup>40</sup> XXX CHECK XXX

could not erase. Their mental concept (*aesthesis*, if you will) of a reclining Venus was disrupted. The image had become an icon at once.<sup>41</sup>

The addition of indecorous elements however is, not the only way to disrupt the unconscious patterns of expectation. Take for instance an image of the skyline of Antwerp (fig. \$) by Jan Wildens. Some, living in Antwerp, will recognise it only to find out that the tower Our Lady's Church has disappeared. Those who do not live in Antwerp probably did not notice and took it for granted that it is in fact the city (fig. \$). The interesting thing for art history and especially iconology is that this minor disruption of a (unconscious) visual pattern of expectations forces the primed beholder not to contemplate the picture as a whole, but to focus on the omitted tower. In other words: the absent automatically becomes the focal point of the image, at least for those who recognise the omission. The example of Antwerp is rather harmless, but showing a photograph of the New York skyline without the Twin Towers to a New Yorker the day after 9/11 can hardly be dismissed as meaningless. Showing the same picture to a New Yorker in say 50 years will probably not trigger such a strong emotional or cognitive response.

As mentioned, in (Neuro-)psychology, Musicology, Art History and various other disciplines, many expectation-response theories have been developed.<sup>42</sup> Surprisingly, these studies tend to ignore that Art History, has a specific word to describe some specific aspects of the phenomenon of unconscious patterns of expectation and particularly the possibility to breach

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Note \$\$ on predictive coding.

<sup>42</sup> e.g. Eric R. Kandel, *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain From Vienna 1900 to the Present* (New York: Random House, 2012); David Brian Huron, *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Expectation* (Cambridge, Mass. - London: MIT Press, 2006); David Freedberg, *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) + RECENT DAVID FREEDBERG XXX CHECK XXX

them, namely *decorum*. While *decorum* is a term, a word considered to be one of the *100 Kunsthistorisches Grundbegriffe*,<sup>43</sup> according to a recent textbook, the literature on the issue of *decorum* is scarce, and in general it limits itself to the explanation of the origins of the word, or at the best to recount, once more, the well-known *decorum* issues, such as Caravaggio's *First Saint Matthew*, Tintoretto's *Last Supper*, or indeed Manet's *Olympia*.<sup>44</sup> Decent, in depth studies on the concept of *decorum* and its implications for art history are lacking, not withstanding the fact that it is one of the most commonly used terms. Most still refer to or paraphrase Rensselaer Lee's discussion of the concept in his classic *Ut pictura poesis* or Blunt's writings.<sup>45</sup>

The invention of the idea of 'decorum' is given to Aristotle, who in his *Poetics* discussed the importance of using the appropriate style for the context in literature and theatre.<sup>46</sup> Horace, Cicero, Virgil and others dwelled on this concept and with their writings deeply influenced the Mediaeval and early Renaissance thinking on the appropriateness of style and genre; in literature that is. I will not dwell on it extensively, since Jeroen Jansen and Jan Dietrich Müller most recently published good studies of the concept in literature and it is not this specific meaning of *decorum* that I would like to discuss in this paper.<sup>47</sup> In Art History, *decorum* was used in a more generic sense already in

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<sup>43</sup> Thijs Weststeijn, 'Decorum', in: *Lexikon Kunstwissenschaft. Hundert Grundbegriffe*, ed. by Jürgen Müller, and Stephan Jordan (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2012), pp. 88-91.

<sup>44</sup> Ibidem

<sup>45</sup> Rensselaer W. Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977); Anthony Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy, 1450-1600* (Oxford - New York: Oxford University Press, 1994; reprint edition).

<sup>46</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, IV

<sup>47</sup> Jeroen Jansen, *Decorum. Observaties over De Literaire Gepastheid in De Renaissancistische Poëtica* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2001); Jan Dietrich Müller, *Decorum. Konzepte Von Angemessenheit in Der Theorie Der Rhetorik Von Der Sphisten Bis Zur Renaissance*, Rhetorik-Forschungen. 19, ed. by Joachim Dyck, Walter Jens and Gert Ueding (Berlin - Boston: De Gruyter, 2011). Here it is argued that *Decorum* (*Angemessenheit*) the key to successful rhetoric.

Antiquity, for instance when Vitruvius used the word to describe the grotesque decorations in Nero's palace, the *Domus Aurea*, which he considered to be *in-decorous*.<sup>48</sup> When art theoreticians in the Quattro- and Cinquecento picked it up, it remained a rather nonspecific word to describe the 'appropriateness' of a work of art or human behaviour.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the problem with the word decorum is that, while it is commonly used, the concept remains undefined. Still, it is a concept that humanists and artists were well aware of and it was definitely not limited to issues of style. Sixteenth century iconoclasm, I recall, was a pretty extreme reaction to imagery and behaviour considered to be *in-decorous*, often not for stylistic reasons but iconographical or iconological ones.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, in the dozens of pamphlets and tracts on art written in the wake of iconoclasm the concept of decorum plays a key role.<sup>51</sup> Artists, authors and large groups within society thus were aware of the fact that patterns of expectation of the public as to art no longer matched the art itself.

## **Omission**

Now, in the age of Iconoclasm in the Low Countries several artists 'systematically' started to use omission as a means to breach the strong patterns of expectation and in doing so, *decorum*. Instead of adding or changing details, as Manet famously did, they simply omitted key elements in

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<sup>48</sup> Vitruvius, *De architecturi libri decem*, VII.5 (Vitruvius, *Handboek Bouwkunde*, translated by Ton Peeters (Amsterdam: Pollak & Van Gennep, 2008), pp. 204-207.

<sup>49</sup> E.g. Francis Ames-Lewis, and Anka Bednarek (eds.), *Decorum in Renaissance Narrative Art. Papers Delivered at the Annual Conference of the Association of Art Historians* (London: Birkbeck College, 1992).

<sup>50</sup> David Freedberg, *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>51</sup> David Freedberg, *Iconoclasts and Their Motives. Gerson Lecture. 2* (Maarssen: Gary Schwartz Sdu Uitgevers, 1985).

the iconography. A nice example of an iconographic topos, which is particularly well fit to illustrate the point I am trying to make, is the *Adoration of the Magi*. From Savonarola's Florence in the late fifteenth century to the Netherlands in the age of Iconoclasm, this subject was one in which the most talented painters systematically experimented with patterns of expectation and decorum.<sup>52</sup> Especially the 'omission' of key elements in the topos proved to be an important feature. It may come as no surprise. The story of the Magi itself is based on one vague verse in the Gospel of Matthew (2:11). Almost the whole iconography, is apocryphal, while, somewhat paradoxically, the depiction of the scene had become unusually popular, stereotypical and detailed in the Renaissance. Not unexpectedly, many a humanist and reformer, started to question the iconography of the subject. Both Catholics and Protestants (Molanus, Bloccius and others, ...) agreed on its apocryphal nature.<sup>53</sup>

First in Italy, the subject was used for important iconographical experiments. In *The controversy of Renaissance Art*, Alexander Nagel discussed Giorgione's *Three Philosophers* (fig. \$).<sup>54</sup> It is one of the most enigmatic paintings in Art History, and is (by many) believed to be a reworking of the Adoration of Magi-topos.<sup>55</sup> Nagel argued that the omission of the iconography-determining elements (in this case a reference to the Nativity of Christ) is crucial for the cognitive appreciation of this painting and was a deliberate choice by the artist. The omission, Nagel believes, created the

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<sup>52</sup> Koenraad Jonckheere, *Antwerp Art after Iconoclasm. Experiments in Decorum 1566-1585* (Brussels - New Haven - London: Mercatorfonds - Yale University Press, 2012), passim.

<sup>53</sup> Idem

<sup>54</sup> Alexander Nagel, *The Controversy of Renaissance Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 60

<sup>55</sup> An overview of the different interpretations is to be found in: Karin Zeleny, 'Giorgiones drei Philosophen: Eine philologische Identifizierung', in *Giorgione Entmythisiert*, ed. by Sylvia Ferino-Pagden (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), pp. 191-98.



possibility for 'not pushing into obscure reaches of Christian iconography, but - in the spirit of Antonello and Leonardo - shifting the ground of the painting's relation to subject matter, and thereby working into the foundations of Christian art.'<sup>56</sup> While he does not dwell upon it, Nagel too recognises the necessity of patterns of expectation for Giorgione's experiment, arguing that the iconography of the *Adoration* was indeed a strong topos in Early Modern art.

As I argued extensively elsewhere, several painters in Antwerp systematically discussed the same topic, some of them by using similar motifs (in fact *anti-motifs*): i.e. the omission of key-elements in the standardized iconography of the subject. Adriaen Thomasz. Key for instance commented upon the the apocryph nature of the African, by simply omitting him (fig. \$).<sup>57</sup> In his version of the adoration, painted at a particularly young age, he copied the version by his renowned master Willem Key (fig. \$), but instead of copying the whole panel, he dismissed the African Magus. As mentioned, in the second half of the sixteenth century in the Netherlands, Catholic and protestant image theologians such as Johannes Molanus and Petrus Bloccius discussed the subject and actually agreed on the fact that the whole, traditional iconography was apocryph.<sup>58</sup> The black magus in particular was problematic, because no such man was mentioned in the Bible. Moreover, the exact number of magi was a mystery too. By omitting this specific figure in an otherwise

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<sup>56</sup> Alexander Nagel, *The Controversy of Renaissance Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 66; Nagel discussed the same painting also in: Alexander Nagel, 'Structural Indeterminacy in Early-Sixteenth-Century Italian Painting', in *Subject as Aporia in Early Modern Art*, ed. by Alexander Nagel and Lorenzo Pericolo (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 17-42.

<sup>57</sup> Koenraad Jonckheere, 'Repetition and the Genesis of Meaning. An Introductory Note', in *Art after Iconoclasm. Painting in the Netherlands between 1566 and 1585*, ed. by Koenraad Jonckheere and Ruben Suykerbuyk (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2012), pp. 7-19.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. note \$.

pretty strict copy of an ambitious painting by his master, Adriaen Thomasz. Key commented on a socio-religious discourse. In doing so he made use of a very strong pattern of expectation for in the iconography of the subject since the late middle ages, the black magus was almost always present. The copy-omission formula proved to be successful, for he re-used on several other occasions.<sup>59</sup>

More subtle, yet based on the same principle and referring to the same discussions, is Pieter Aertsen's interpretation of the theme (fig. \$). On the central panel of an altarpiece that he probably painted in the late 1550s, he discussed the riches of the church by actually omitting them. Whilst referring to the traditional iconography in which a golden chalice filled with gold coins was nearly always central (fig. \$), the focal point of Aertsen's interpretation is the empty hand.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, in the plethora of Adoration paintings produced in Antwerp in the first half of the sixteenth century, the oldest magus is nearly always kneeling, whilst 'offering' gold to the Christ child. It was an extremely strong topos - nearly one out of three Antwerp paintings in the early sixteenth century was an adoration.<sup>61</sup> The omission of this iconography determining element in an age of omnipresent discussions on the riches of the Church was, no doubt, meaningful.

Another example of omission-iconography, or at least an iconography in which the patterns of expectation are stretched and breached by omissions,

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<sup>59</sup> Koenraad Jonckheere, *Adriaen Thomasz. Key (Ca. 1545 - Ca. 1589). Portrait of a Calvinist Painter*. Pictura Nova. Studies in 16th- and 17th- Century Flemish Painting and Drawing. 14, ed. by Hans Vlieghe and Katlijne Van der Stighelen (Turnhout: Brepols publishers, 2007), pp. XXX CHECK XXX.

<sup>60</sup> Koenraad Jonckheere, *Antwerp Art after Iconoclasm. Experiments in Decorum 1566-1585* (Brussels - New Haven - London: Mercatorfonds - Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 192-196.

<sup>61</sup> Dan Ewing, 'Magi and Merchants: The Force Behind the Antwerp Mannerists' Adoration Pictures', *Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen* (2004-2005), 275-299.

are empty niches. After the iconoclasm, empty niches in painting became a means to comment on the nature of art, in particular sculpture. Two examples: Michiel Coxcie (fig. \$), for one thing, commented on pagan idolatry by combining empty niches with the second commandment in the decalogue. He did so in 1567, one year after the Iconoclasm, when empty niches were open wounds of social unrest.<sup>62</sup> On a central panel of a Holy Sacrament triptych, Coxcie depicted two empty niches under which, in Hebrew, he wrote the famous verses of the decalogue (Exodus 20:1-17: 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me' and 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image').<sup>63</sup> Through the omission of pagan images, he showed the beholder that his painting was not a idolatrous object.

Maarten de Vos, in turn, used the same idea in his Saint-Luke painting the Virgin (fig. \$). He emptied the niches, while referring to his own invention for the Joyous entry in Antwerp of Ernst of Austria in 1594 (fig. \$).<sup>64</sup> St. Luke is depicting a rightful image. The pagan idols are gone.<sup>65</sup>

These examples (I have discussed them briefly here since I studied them all extensively on other occasions) are the tip of an iceberg. If one looks at the iconographies of late sixteenth century painting with the concepts of patterns of expectation and decorum in mind, one will find that standardized iconographies, such as the *Adoration*, are often breached by the omission of key-elements. The crux of this methodological issue is, of course, the reconstruction of these patterns. Baxandall, in his work, called it the

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<sup>62</sup> Jonckheere, NKJ (forthcoming)

<sup>63</sup> I thank Larry Silver and his son for helping me out here.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Ann Diels, 'Van opdracht tot veiling. Kunstaanbestedingen naar aanleiding van de Blijde Intrede van aartshertog Ernest van Oostenrijk te Antwerpen in 1594,' *De zeventiende eeuw* 19, 1 (2003), 25-54.

<sup>65</sup> Jonckheere, NKJ (forthcoming)

difference between the participant's and the observer's understanding, resulting in different kinds of decorum and different possible interpretations (i.e. the essence of the *hermeneutic problem*).<sup>66</sup> However, the participant's understanding can, to some degree, be reconstructed, and it is this reconstruction that allows for a more nuanced observer's interpretation: one that makes the implicit tangible and cognitive. I believe that this reconstruction of the participant's understanding has focussed too much (or solely) on the represented, and in doing so has missed the opportunity to explore the possibilities of omission as a 'symbolic form', to paraphrase Panofsky once more.<sup>67</sup>

### ***A Quaestio disputata?***

Having established the fact that a key to understanding Early Modern art sometimes lays in the expected absent,<sup>68</sup> it is now worthwhile to look at the consequences of this observation. I'll use the example of Bruegel to further dwell upon the opportunities.

In the introductory chapter of his important study *Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter* (2006), Walter Gibson rephrased some of the arguments that let many an art historian to forward wild iconological analyses of

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<sup>66</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in 15th Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 29 etc. This claim can hardly be challenged, and paved the way for Bal's and Bryson's *linguistic turn* in which the ambition to painstakingly reconstruct the participant's understanding was largely dismissed.

<sup>67</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as a Symbolic Form*, translated and edited by Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books 1997). Just like perspective in the argumentation of Panofsky, omission can be a symbolic form.

<sup>68</sup> This was also observed by Michael Camille for Mediaeval Art. See: Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), passim.

Bruegel's iconographies.<sup>69</sup> Gibson, on the occasion, referred to the misreading of Abraham Ortelius' famous epitaph in which he (Ortelius) stated that his friend (Bruegel) 'painted many things that cannot be painted'. This sentence, a paraphrase of Timanthes's story in Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, opened the quest for 'hidden meaning' in Bruegel's oeuvre; a quest, which was based on an old misunderstanding of Timanthes, according to Gibson.<sup>70</sup> In Pliny's story of Timanthes, the 'meaning' was not hidden. It was known to everyone, since the visual narrative was based on a familiar story. Timanthes just did not paint it as expected. Indeed, when commissioned to paint the sacrifice of Iphigenia Timanthes marvellously depicted the grief of all bystanders, according to Pliny, but unable to show the immense sorrow of the father, covered the man's face with a veil.<sup>71</sup> In doing so, Timanthes revealed Agamemnon's overwhelming emotions by actually concealing them. He cleverly made use of the effect of omission to attract the beholder's compassion. Timanthes invited his audience to reflect upon the unanswerable question and to imagine the grief of Agamemnon themselves, as Pliny states. Just like Parrhasius, he played with the patterns of expectation of the beholder.

As argued above and elsewhere, many a painter in the second half of the sixteenth century made use of the possibilities of *omission*.<sup>72</sup> While they did not use it to extract emotional empathy, like Timanthes did, they too used the

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<sup>69</sup> Walter S. Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter* (Berkeley - London: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 1-13.

<sup>70</sup> Jan Muylle, 'Pieter Bruegel en Abraham Ortelius: bijdrage tot de literaire receptie van Pieter Bruegels werk', in *Archivum Artis Lovaniense: Bijdragen Tot De Geschiedenis Van De Kunst Der Nederlanden Opgedragen Aan Prof. Em. J.K. Steppe*, ed. by Maurits Smeyers (Leuven: Peeters, 1981) pp. 319-37..

<sup>71</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 35.73. On the story see: Sarah Blake McHam, *Pliny and the Artistic Culture of the Italian Renaissance: The Legacy of the Natural History* (London - New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 43-44. Timanthes' trick is always linked to the depiction of emotions but has wider implications.

<sup>72</sup> Koenraad Jonckheere, *Antwerp Art after Iconoclasm. Experiments in Decorum 1566-1585* (Brussels - New Haven - London: Mercatorfonds - Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 263-269.

patterns of expectation of the conditioned and primed beholder to subtly focus the emotional and cognitive attention.<sup>73</sup> Through the omission of key elements in standardized iconographic formats, they appealed to the viewer's unconscious expectations and trapped their immediate and enduring attention. To fully explain the consequences of this phenomenon, it is interesting to return to Panofsky's anecdote, quoted above. If the stroller in Panofsky's story had not lifted his hat, the absence of the greeting would have been considered to be impolite at first, as I argued. Indeed, the conventions of appropriate behaviour (decorum) would have been broken not by an actual gesture but by the lack of any gesticulation. If decorum had been breached by another gesture the meaning would have been clear, since it would have had a semantic connotation.<sup>74</sup> The mere absence of a greeting however, would trigger a whole other set of responses, primarily questions: Why did he not greet me? Did he not see me? Is he angry with me?

Possibly, the visual implications of this observation can be explained somewhat better with a textbook example on the psychology of vision: the duck-rabbit (fig. 5). Because of its educative nature, it was used as an example in many (art) theories related to perception psychology, including, Wittgenstein, Gombrich and Mitchell.<sup>75</sup> This image is an example of the so-

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<sup>73</sup> 'Priming' is a term used in psychology to describe an implicit memory effect caused by a stimulus and as a response to a second stimulus. See [xxx check xxx](#)

<sup>74</sup> On the semantics of gesture see for instance: André Chastel, 'Gesture in Painting. Problems in Semiology', *Renaissance and Reformation* 10, 1 (1986) 1-22; David F. Armstrong, William C. Stokoe, and Sherman E. Wilcox, *Gesture and the Nature of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Jan Bremmer, and Herman Roodenburg (eds.), *A Cultural History of Gesture*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

<sup>75</sup> Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation. The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts 1956* (London - New York: Phaidon Press - Pantheon Books, 1960), pp. 4-5 (Introduction: Psychology and the Riddle of Style); W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago - London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 45-57 (Dialectical

called multi-stable images: images which do not allow for a clear identification. Upon seeing it, the mind constantly switches between the recognition of a duck and a rabbit. The duality of the image was considered illusive for the characteristics of some works of art. However, what both Gombrich and Mitchell - I'll stick to the art historians - fail to mention is the fact that the omission of an iconography determining element is key to this multi- or instability. A mere clear contour line of the body of either a duck or a rabbit, for instance, would fully resolve the problem (fig. \$).<sup>76</sup> Some crucial elements of the aisthesis (mental image) of a duck or rabbit are simply absent. The omission is (at least) one important cause of the instability.

More important though, as Mitchell argues, is the fact that the multi-stability of such images mentally constructs a constant dialogue (question-answer) between the observer and the picture.<sup>77</sup> What do I see? A duck? A rabbit? Mitchell therefore calls them dialectic pictures. Comparably, I would argue, the omission of the black magus or the gold in the Adoration scenes by Key and Aertsen or the omission of the sculptures in the niches in Coxcie's and De Vos's altarpieces, provoke questions: what, why, ...? By breaching the pattern of expectation through the omission of cognitively and emotionally expectable elements, these images invite the beholder to fill in the missing links and reflect upon them.

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Images); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, Blackwell: 1953), p. 6 etc.

<sup>76</sup> Although there are some examples of this multi-stable image with bodies as well. Here again, some key iconography-determining elements are blurred/omitted. Creativity has been linked to the ability to handle such ambiguous figures and images. See for instance: Richard Wiseman, Caroline Watt, Kenneth Gilhooly and George Georgiu, 'Creativity and ease of ambiguous figural reversal,' *British Journal of Psychology* 102 (2011), 615-622.

<sup>77</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago - London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 45-57 (Dialectical Images)

Bruegel, who was equated with Timanthes by Ortelius, seems to have been posing similar 'questions' to his audience. In his grisailles of the *Adulteress woman* (fig. 5) for instance, he played with patterns of expectation and omission.<sup>78</sup> As thoroughly explained elsewhere, Bruegel appealed to a contemporary and all-pervasive discourse on the materiality of art (mere stone) and the adulteress nature of iconolatry whilst referring to the grisaille trompe-l'oeils of sculptures on the outer wings of altarpieces.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, idolatry and adultery were considered two of a kind. However, one of the most interesting aspects of this little panel is Bruegel's play with the 'omission' of clues. Jesus writes his famous words at the feet of the Adulteress woman, but at the word 'Werpen' (dutch for 'throwing'), he refrains. Only the 'W' is visible. '(af)Werpen', was the word used for iconoclasm in the Low Countries. Thus, working for an audience *primed* by discussions on the materiality of art, iconolatry and adultery, Bruegel triggered responses by the absence of a 'burdened' word.<sup>80</sup> As such, Bruegel posed a (visual) question in his *Adulteress Woman*, comparable to the effect created by Timanthes in his depiction of Iphiginea. His iconography is an invitation to the beholder to fill in a gap and to reflect upon the desirability of iconoclasm.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Koenraad Jonckheere, *Antwerp Art after Iconoclasm. Experiments in Decorum 1566-1585* (Brussels - New Haven - London: Mercatorfonds - Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 199-209. See also E. Matt Kavalier, *Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 13-20

<sup>79</sup> Adultery and Idolatry were systematically linked since the Middle Ages. Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), passim.

<sup>80</sup> Abraham Ortelius, whilst referring to Apelles en Timanthes lauded Bruegel for his restrictiveness in his style/iconography. For a translation of Ortelius' verses see: Mark A. Meadow, 'Bruegel's Procession to Calvary. Aemulatio and the Space of Vernacular Style', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 47 (1996): 181-205, esp. pp.192-196.

<sup>81</sup> As Sullivan argues, proverbs (as studied by Erasmus amongst others and depicted by Bruegel) were considered to have a 'hidden' meaning' too. Margret Sullivan, 'Bruegel's Proverbs. Art and Audience in the Northern Renaissance', *The Art Bulletin* 73, 3 (1991), 431-66, esp. p. 438.



Another, more complex example of Bruegel's construction of such a visual question-syntax, is his *Peasant Kermis* in the kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (fig. 5). In recent years, many have scrutinized this painting. Matt Kavalier and Todd Richardson especially have contributed significantly to our understanding of its style and iconography.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, they have aptly demonstrated how paintings such as this one might have functioned as conversation pieces in a sixteenth century civic context; i.e. not purely as an *exemplum contrarium*,<sup>83</sup> but as an open narrative stuffed with possible associations, ranging from humanist understandings of Roman Bacchanalia and the vernacular to religious debates and civic morality. As such, they reconstructed aspects of a complex societal debate affiliated with the imagery, i.e. the primed nature of the beholders or in Baxandall's terms, the *period eye*. However, as Kavalier put it: 'Bruegel's *Peasant Kermis* is disturbingly ambiguous, resisting clear allegiance to any tradition. It does not disappear, so to speak, behind a confirmation of expectations but rather challenges the viewer to find a meaningful way of addressing the picture.'<sup>84</sup> In addition to Kavalier's sharp observation and expounding on the idea of omission and the creation of a question-syntax, I would argue that Bruegel played with patterns of expectation and blurred the iconography through omission. For that reason, it is important to understand how the Vienna panel differs from Bruegel's own, earlier depictions. Indeed, Pieter Bruegel the Elder

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<sup>82</sup> E. Matt Kavalier, *Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 184-211; Todd M. Richardson, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Art Discourse in the Sixteenth-Century Netherlands* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 123-148.

<sup>83</sup> Korine Hazelzet, *Verkeerde Werelden: Exempla Contraria in De Nederlandse Beeldende Kunst* (Leiden: Primavera, 2007), pp. 103-112.

<sup>84</sup> E. Matt Kavalier, *Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 184-211; Todd M. Richardson, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Art Discourse in the Sixteenth-Century Netherlands* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 196.

represented Kermises on several occasions, either in drawing, in print or on panel. In two prints, *St George Kermis* (c. 1559) and *Kermis at Hoboken* (1559), he depicted the *folklore* he is renowned for.<sup>85</sup> One sees laughing, singing, drinking and dancing peasants enjoying themselves on the holiday. In both of these prints however, the procession, the main constituent of such feast days, is shown. Albeit not imperatively present, the procession is depicted as an essential part of the festivities. As such the composition and the iconography of the prints are similar to for instance Pieter Aertsen's *St Antony's procession* (fig. \$), in which the carrying of the devotional sculpture is shown nearly at the centre of the composition. As argued on another occasion, right around the time when Bruegel painted his panel, an important socio-religious debate on Saint's days and Kermises was climaxing in the Low Countries. Exceptionally, the Catholics and Protestants agreed on the fact that these religious holidays had become problematic. Two quotations – the first taken from the decrees of the Council of Trent (1565) and the second by the reformed theologian Petrus Bloccius (1567) – make that abundantly clear.<sup>86</sup>

‘That also the people celebrate the saints, or go on pilgrimage and visit the holy relics, and not abuse them with excess and drunkenness, as if the holy days should be spent in excess and drunkenness in honour of the saint. Finally, the bishops will diligently and sharply supervise an orderly, correct and acceptable course, without ungodlyness or treachery’.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Johannes and Lucas van Doetecum after Pieter Bruegel, *Saint-George's Kermis*, 1559, etching and engraving, 332 x 523 mm, four states known; Frans Hogenberg after Pieter Bruegel, *Kermis at Hoboken*, c. 1559, etching and engraving, 298 x 408 mm, four states known.

<sup>86</sup> See also Jonckheere, Koenraad. *Antwerp Art after Iconoclasm. Experiments in Decorum 1566-1585*. Brussels - New Haven - London: Mercatorfonds - Yale University Press, 2012, p. 66.

<sup>87</sup> *Ordonnancien ende decreten, vanden heylighen Concilie generael ghehouden tot Trenten* (Antwerp: Willem Silvius, 1565), pp. 244-245 'Dat oock de menschen het vieren vanden heylighen, oft pelgrimage gaen, ende besoecken de heylighe Reliquien, niet en misbruycken tot overdaet en[de] dronckenschap, al oft

The Lxxxiiii herecy is that the heretics dictate celebrating many holy-days for Blasius, Machuyt, Waltrudis, Quirinus, Willebrordus, Leopold and other such unfamiliar idols, with costly cloaths, lavish meals and indecent idolatry, so that on these holy-days they are found at their inns (which are then packed with drunks), where they show off and lay wasted, listening to grubby stories and gossip about other people's shortcomings. Christ and his apostles had no holy-days'.<sup>88</sup>

Comments on Kermises such as these were common in the 1560's, when Bruegel made his painting. People often heard sermons on these issues and discussed them among one another.<sup>89</sup> Psychologically speaking, they were primed with the idea that such 'excesses' on a 'holy-day,' were highly undesirable.

In the Vienna *Peasant Kermis* Bruegel (by means of omission of the iconography determining element, namely the procession) the iconography was dismissed of its strongest religious marker, allowing the beholder to read the visual narrative according to his or her own attentiveness. If a procession or another clear indicator had been introduced, the multiple questions and

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die H. daghen souden moeten overbrocht werde[n] met met overdaet en[de] broot dronckenschap ter eere[n] va[n]den Heylighe. Ten lesten zo zullen in dese sake[n] de Bisschoppen zo nerstelijc en[de] scherpelijck toesien datter niet onghereghelt, verkeert oft beroerlijck en gheschiede, noch niet ongoddelijcx oft oneerlijcx ghesien en werde [...].'

<sup>88</sup> Petrus Bloccius, *Meer Dan Tvvee Hondert Ketteryen, Blasphemien En ?Nieuwe Leeringen, Vvelck Vvt De Misse Zyn Ghecomen / Eerst Van Petro Bloccio School-Meester Te Leyden in Latyn Ghemaect, Daer Nae in Duytsch Voor Slechte Menschen Ouerghesett ...* (Wesel: Augustijn van Hasselt, 1567), pp. 72-73: 'De lxxxiiii ketterye is, dat de ketters veel feest-dagen Blasij, Machuyt, Waldruyt, Quirini, Willebrordt, Leopoldi ende diergelycke onbekende afgoden ghebieden te houden, met costelicke cleederen ghullighe maeltijden, ende onbehoorlicke afgoderye, alsoo datmen heur feest-daghen niet beters mach vernemen, dan aen heur herberghen, welcke dan vol dronckaers zyn: ende datse dan proncken ende sitten leech voor de doore verhaelen achter-clap ende ander lieden ghebreken. Christus ende de Apostels hebben gheen feest-daghen [...].'

<sup>89</sup> Historians have recently studied the divulgion of ideas in the first decades of the revolt extensively. Particularly interesting in this context are: Anne-Laure Van Bruaene, *Om Beters Wille. Rederijerskamers En De Stedelijke Cultuur in De Zuidelijke Nederlanden (1400-1650)* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008); Peter J. Arnade, *Beggars, Iconoclasts, and Civic Patriots: The Political Culture of the Dutch Revolt* (Ithaca - London: Cornell University Press, 2008).

possible answers would have been reduced to a more narrow set of interpretations. This was not the case. Whilst referring to a longstanding iconographical tradition including his own prints,<sup>90</sup> Bruegel did not restrict his iconography to a clear-cut stance. He opened it up and phrased a *quaestio disputata*. Paintings such as the *Adulteress woman* and the *Peasant Kermis* were scenes stuffed with strong suggestive power and due to the omission of an iconography-determining element, became an invitation to reflect upon them. In line with Ortelius' epitaph, one could call it a *Timanthes-effect*. It is the effect created by a painter who made sure that '(...) altijd eenighe heymelijcke verstanden oft bediedtselen in verborghen laghen, boven het ghene dat het punct was, dat hy in zijn Historie hadde uytghebeeldet'.<sup>91</sup> Or freely translated: 'there were always *stealthily* insights and explanations to be found next to the point he had made in the actual narrative'.

### **A culture of question?**

While the idea of reading the named panels as a *quaestio*, might seem farfetched, it can also be argued that it is the obvious consequence of Bruegel's and other painter's humanist backgrounds and their interests in rhetorics. Moreover, it would fit perfectly well into the early modern intellectual *habitus*. In educational systems, in literature, in humanism, in religion and indeed in rhetorics, the 'question' played a seminal role. Since the late Middle Ages

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<sup>90</sup> Allison G. Stewart, *Before Bruegel: Sebald Beham and the Origins of Peasant Festival Imagery* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008).

<sup>91</sup> Karel Van Mander, *Het Schilder-Boeck* (Haarlem, 1604), 70r: 'Verborghen' in Van Mander's phrase is not simply to be translated with 'hidden'. In this case, it probably means 'not immediately discernable'. (<http://gtb.inl.nl>)

students in Scholastics, for instance, would learn to formulate questions.<sup>92</sup> These *quaestiones disputatae* were considered the substruction of the argumentation. These fundamental questions were subdivided in separate *articula* to which dialectically arguments and counter-arguments were formulated. The *Questio de Quodlibet* too, a more liberal and public disputation, was based on this scheme. In other words, intellectuals in Medieval and Early Modern Europe were trained to think on the premises of questions. Or as St. Augustine wrote in his treatise on education (*De catechizandis rudibus*) real scholars are the ones who pose important questions.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, 'silence' too was a well-known principle in Christian rhetorics since the days of St. Augustine, who valued it greatly as an important rhetorical device leading to greater religious clarity.<sup>94</sup>

Moreover, this line of reasoning was translated into more popular texts in the sixteenth century and finds its echoes even in the writings of the most fervent adversaries of scholasticism: protestant theologians. Their most successful publications – and thus with the biggest social impact – such as Luther's *Small Catechism*, the *Genevan Catechism* and the *Heidelberg*

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<sup>92</sup> On *quaestiones disputatae* see for instance: Martin Grabmann, *Die Geschichte der scholastischen Methode*, vol. 2: Die scholastische Methode im 12. und beginnenden 13. Jahrhundert (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957), pp. 221 etc.; Brian Lawn, *The Rise and Decline of the Scholastic 'Quaestio Disputata': With Special Emphasis on Its Use in the Teaching of Medicine and Science*. (Leiden: Brill, 1993)

<sup>93</sup> Aurelius Augustinus, *Goed Onderwijs. Christendom voor Beginners (De Catechizandis Rudibus)*, translated and edited by Vincent Hunink and Hans Van Reisen (Budel: Damon, 2009), p. 85: '(13) Sunt item quidam de scholis usitatissimis grammaticorum oratorumque uenietes, quos neque inter idiotas numerare audeas neque inter illos doctissimos, quorum mens magnarum rerum est exercitata quaestionibus.'

<sup>94</sup> Joseph Anthony Mazzeo, 'St. Augustine's Rhetoric of Silence', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 23, 2 (1962), 175-96. These ideas are of course, partly inspired by such Classical authors as Cicero, who in a discussion on humor and rhetoric in his *De oratore libri tres*, explains the importance of suggestion and omission as a means to surprise the crowds, to make them laugh and consequently convince them of a point of view (Merleau-Ponty was not the first to stress the meaning of silence, *sic*). Cicero argued that to make a cunning joke, it can be more suggestive and thus effective to leave all options open, i.e. not mentioning what people expect you to say. XXX CHECK XXX

*Catechismus*, were all phrased in a strict question-answer scheme.<sup>95</sup> It may come as no surprise, since in humanist discourse too (the discourse that challenged scholasticism<sup>96</sup>), the question played a seminal role.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, inspired by the so-called Socratic or elenctic method, as described in Plato's *Dialogues*, and influential in neo-platonic and scholastic traditions, the question itself and the dialectics of question and answer were essential. Socrates would famously keep on interrogating people until their arguments would fall apart and eventually fell into *Aporeia* (ἀπορεία).<sup>98</sup> Aporeia, in ancient Greek philosophy was a state of cognitive loss. Socrates and Plato found it crucial to first be intellectual despair before taking a fresh rational, philosophical start.<sup>99</sup> Recently, aporeia was linked to the arts by Nagel and Pericolo, who convincingly argue that some early modern works of art intentionally block the path of cognition in order to create aporeia.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Willem J. Can Asselt, (*Inleiding in de Gereformeerde Scholastiek [Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism]* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011).

Note: The Roman Catechism, published after the Council of Trent, dismissed the questions and phrased the dogmae in a purely affirmative manner.

<sup>96</sup> e.g. Charles G. Nauert, 'Humanism as Method: Roots of Conflict with the Scholastics', *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 29, 2 (1998), 427-38.

<sup>97</sup> Anthony Grafton, and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Europe* (London: Duckworth, 1986), **XXX CHECK XXX**; Peter Mack, 'Humanist Rhetoric and Dialectic', in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, edited by Jill Krayer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 82-99. esp. 83-84.

<sup>98</sup> Gary Alan Scott, *Does Socrates Have a Method?: Rethinking the Elenchus in Plato's Dialogues* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2004), **XXX CHECK XXX**

<sup>99</sup> In the Renaissance, Plato (and his stories on Socrates) were 're-discovered' and translated. They had a great impact on humanist discourse. Many of the most famous renaissance books were dialogues, similar to Plato's, in which questions were a crucial part of the imaginary conversations. Erasmus's *Colloquies* are arguably the most famous example. (See for instance recently Catalin Partenie (ed.), *Plato's Myths* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). In the Netherlands, the most influential later humanists, such as Coornhert, would use the literary model too, phrasing complex theories, philosophies and theologies in a dialogue format. Dirck Volkertzoon Coornhert was a Haarlem based author-engraver and a friend of many painters in the sixteenth century Low Countries. On Coornhert see: H. Bongers, *Leven en werk van Dirck Volkertzoon Coornhert* (Amsterdam, 1987; reprint). The number of questions in such dialogues are innumerable. E.g. Dirck Volckertzoon Coornhert, *Synode over Gewetensvrijheid: Een Nauwgezete Onderzoek in De Vergadering Gehouden in Het Jaar 1582 Te Vrijburgh*. Bibliotheca Dissidentium Neerlandicorum, translated and edited by J. Gruppelaar, J.C. Bedaux and G. Verwey (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008).

<sup>100</sup> Alexander Nagel and Lorenzo Pericolo, *Subject as Aporia in Early Modern Art* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

Rhetoricians too had a 'culture of question'. The chambers of rhetoric in the Low Countries were places of societal discourse, and functioned as catalysts of ideas.<sup>101</sup> In order to facilitate these transfers, question formulas were used systematically, as Marijke Spies argued.<sup>102</sup> For instance, the rhetorician's games in Brabant - called *Het Landjuweel* - were writing contests, in which a question was the central guiding principle. The *zinnespelen*, the most popular writings of the rhetoricians were based on a similar format, for these plays were completely structured around a 'questye'.<sup>103</sup> Just like in scholasticism and humanism, Rhetoricians were thus trained to argue on the premises of a *quaestio disputata*.<sup>104</sup> What's more: apart from the awareness on 'questions', Rhetoricians were aware of the possibilities of omission too. For instance in their plays, they regularly introduced characters that never appeared on scene.<sup>105</sup> The public would constantly be expecting them during the play, but never actually see them appear.

Surprisingly, in the many studies on, for instance the work of Bruegel, Aertsen, etcetra and the different cultures of discourse in the sixteenth century (that systematically link his work to rhetoricians and humanists) by Richardson, Sullivan and Meadow amongst others, the idea that a work of art

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<sup>101</sup> Anne-Laure Van Bruaene, *Om Beters Wille. Rederijkerskamers En De Stedelijke Cultuur in De Zuidelijke Nederlanden (1400-1650)* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008).

<sup>102</sup> Marijke Spies, "'Op de questye...": Over de structuur van 16e-eeuwse zinnespelen,' *De nieuwe taalgids* 83 (1990), 139-150; Marijke Spies, *Rhetoric, Rethoricians and Poets. Studies in Renaissance Poetry and Poetics* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999), pp. 15-17.

<sup>103</sup> Marijke Spies, "'Op de questye...": Over de structuur van 16e-eeuwse zinnespelen,' *De nieuwe taalgids* 83 (1990), 139-150

<sup>104</sup> Marijke Spies, *Rhetoric, Rethoricians and Poets. Studies in Renaissance Poetry and Poetics* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999), pp.15-17.

<sup>105</sup> XXX CHECK XXX



might have been conceived as a *quaestio* was not forwarded.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, the possibility of a question-syntax of the visual narrative in Early Modern art has, to the best of my knowledge, been neglected.<sup>107</sup> Whilst meaning in art has since Panofsky been one of the most thoroughly discussed topics in Art History and many theoretical-methodological models have been forwarded to interpret the visual narrative and its relation to the beholder's perception now and in the past, its most fundamental paradigm, namely 'La tyrannie du visible' - a phrase used by Didi-Huberman to frame the Renaissance, has not thoroughly been addressed.<sup>108</sup> Art history has focused too much (if not solely) on the observable. The un-depicted and the omitted play a key role in the genesis of meaning as well, for absence can breach patterns of cognitive and emotional expectations and, as such, decorum. By playing with patterns of expectations and the perception of the imperceptible; by deliberately blurring the iconography through omission, artists paved the way for works of art as *quaestiones disputatae*. In an age of omnipresent discussions on art, one could expect no more.

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<sup>106</sup> E.g. Margaret A. Sullivan, *Bruegel's Peasants: Art and Audience in the Northern Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Mark A. Meadow, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder's Netherlandish Proverbs and the Practice of Rhetoric*. Studies in Netherlandish Art and Cultural History. 4 (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 2002); Todd M. Richardson, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Art Discourse in the Sixteenth-Century Netherlands* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

<sup>107</sup> The closest to this idea comes Alexander Nagel, cf. note \$\$\$.

<sup>108</sup> Didi-Huberman XXX CHECK XXX



