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From nothing, from an “idea”: Barbara Baert’s iconology of immersions and transitions

Review of: Barbara Baert, *Pneuma and the Visual Medium in the Middle Ages and Early Modernity. Essays on Wind, Ruach, Incarnation, Odour, Stains, Movement, Kairos, Web and Silence*, Leuven-Paris-Bristol (CT), Peeters, ('Art & religion', 5), 2016

The following article discusses the iconological research of prof. dr. Barbara Baert (Francquis Chair 2016) on the Pneuma, a motif that includes breath, wind, ruach, odour, stains, movement and silence. It is based on her latest publication Pneuma and the Visual Medium in the Middle Ages and Early Modernity. Essays on Wind, Ruach, Incarnation, Odour, Stains, Movement, Kairos, Web and Silence (Peeters, 2016), a book that is related to her broader iconological research. The author argues that the value of prof. Baert’s approach consists in inventing an iconological method where meaning emerges from its relation to the latent sensitive potential of artworks. Baert’s method subtly integrates iconology into a phenomenology of all the senses, from smell to touch and hearing.

In the second edition of *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art* (1996), Leo Steinberg evokes Frederick Hartt’s interpretation of Giovanni Bellini’s *Ecstasy of St. Francis* (c. 1480). Hartt points out that nothing moves in the image except a tree in the upper left corner. The wind shakes its branches and blows into the direction of the saint. Consequently, his gaze determines the diagonal composition of the image. Bellini’s leaves, Fra Angelico’s wings of the dove from his *Annunciation* (1433-34), Botticelli’s garments and hair locks from the *Birth of Venus* (c. 1486), da Vinci’s drawings of the flood (c. 1517): they all integrate an invisible force, the wind, an agency that introduces a manifestation of movement in their composition. This general dynamism of the image makes Steinberg write in a footnote: «The theme of symbolic wind in Western Art awaits its historian»¹. Thirteen years later, this footnote becomes a research project when Alessandro Nova and Tanja Michalsky edit a volume of essays on wind and the weather². Fifteen later, Alessandro Nova publishes the first reference work on the iconology of this invisible force, the wind³. The book is a diachronic overview of this motif from antiquity to contemporary arts; it combines a classical iconographic approach with a study of its allegorical implication, namely the wind as a symbol of changing moods.

These preexisting studies frame the *status quaestionis* of Barbara Baert’s work

on the iconology of the *pneuma*, a notion that denotes a variety of motifs including wind and breath. It concerns a broader class of figures that represent a flux, transition and a swift passage that inserts a sense of dynamism in images. Regardless of their medium and regardless of how they have been edited, images have always manipulated time. Any image, including moving pictures, presupposes a fragmentation of a larger composition. Visual representation depends, after all, on cropping and arranging perspectives on the world. This arrangement structures the image plane and imposes a certain experience of movement. Further, movement unfolds in time so that some images repress it (the crystal-like shapes of Egyptian reliefs) and other cultivate it (the swift Baroque movements). Hence, “duration” - the qualitative experience of time as a slower or a faster flux - has always been a fundamental problem of the construction and the experience of images. Wind is precisely an index of movement but it is not the only index that modulates the image plane: breathing, odors and stains exert similar functions.

In this context, Barbara Baert’s latest work addresses a broader range of motifs that are relatable to the wind in visual arts. The complete title is *Pneuma and the Visual Medium in the Middle Ages and Early Modernity. Essays on Wind, Ruach, Incarnation, Odour, Stains, Movement, Kairos, Web and Silence* (2016)⁴. This long list of motifs leads us to a first question: what connects all these elements? Barbara Baert describes the focus of her study in terms of an «art historical hermeneutics», a notion that deserves a longer theoretical clarification than «in other words, what can wind tell about the visual medium as such» (Baert 2016: 5)⁵.

Our hypothesis is that Baert’s research of the *pneuma* relates wind and breath to an unexpected event, the spontaneous outburst and capricious movement. This research relies on the sensual experience of images, an experience that affects their iconological sense. In other words, the *iconology* that Baert has developed is implicitly embedded in a *phenomenology* of the image: the meaning of an image depends on the way in which the layers of sensations that it carries affect the viewer⁶. Reading images for Barbara Baert means relating the symbolic layer of image to their *latent* aesthetic potential. An image is not just optical but implicitly tactile, olfactory and fluid. The question is how this latent aesthetic potential relates to the iconological sense.

The motifs listed in the title of the book address one fundamental gesture of image-making, namely the experience of *transition* and *immersion*, *passage* and *fluidity*. Because it involves the entire sensing body, the wind, just like breathing, is a sensitive experience. But what does the wind do with images when it is included in their composition? When represented in visual arts, the wind becomes a figure of *duration*, a notion that is only implicit in Baert’s otherwise incredibly

well-documented study. However, the entire study of the *pneuma* (including breathing and wind), presupposes a qualitative temporal experience that oscillates between a slow and a fast flux. After all, the leaves that St. Francis watches in Bellini's painting signal a force that *swiftly* disturbs an otherwise quite landscape. The contrast that the wind introduces into the image plane is that between the stillness of nature and the velocity of a force (the gust of wind) that signals the divine presence.

The question that Barbara Baert raises is whether an iconology of the capricious movement of the wind is possible. Methodologically, the study consistently correlates the anthropology of the wind to its visual representation, especially in Christianity. Her study consists of an innovative interpretation of the Annunciation in the Quattrocento. The originality of her approach concerns the intuition that this well-known motif includes and appeals to the sense of seeing, hearing and smelling. The analysed images are relevant: the depicted Annunciations go back to the work of Robert Campin, Sandro Botticelli, Fra Angelico and Gentile da Fabriano. Yet the most fascinating examples concern ancient and medieval artworks and book illuminations: the well-known Genesis embroidery from the 11th century (in Girona's Cathedral Museum), a 12th century manuscript from Bavaria, a 5th century BC relief representing Zephyr and Iris from Trieste's Museo Archeologico, the Codex Egberti (c. 980), or the Apocalypse of Beatus of Liébana, where the four angels/ winds of the Earth appear.

In the interpretation of Barbara Baert, the Annunciation confronts the viewer with the broader aesthetic plethora of the body; it depicts the becoming human of God as the transition of Gabriel through an interior, a transition that is not just seen but also heard (as a voice) and that carries scents (like perfumes do). God is thus associated with a saturating force that passes through along «the most ephemeral of the senses», the odour that is related to wind and *ruach*, the vital principle that fills both God and humans (Baert 2016: 33). Breathing is significant both on an aesthetic and on a hermeneutic level. In fact, as Barbara Baert shows, in Hebrew the pronunciation of the words actualises their meaning: «A Hebrew text is not a mirror or doubling of the world of knowledge; it is an actually dynamic secret that the reader has to impregnate with breath, with speech» (Baert 2016: 23). Hence, breathing and the wind are not just motifs, but active forces that affect the interaction of the viewer with visual or textual representations. Throughout the study, breathing and wind are correlated to various passages from the Old and the New Testament in order to establish them as principles of vital forces. *Ruach*, in the Judaic tradition, denotes a spirit that is intimately related to breathing as a dynamic principle of life.

Other than the typical art historical concern with the exhaustive description of primary sources, the value of Barbara Baert's work consists in her ability to relate the classic iconological approach to a phenomenology of the image. Reading images - that is to say, explaining them in terms of visual symptoms that are detectable in texts - appears here as a first step, an introductory episode meant to account for other sensorial dimensions of the image. As Baert shows, the representation of the *pneuma* testifies to other latent senses, like touching, smelling, hearing and feeling the fast, sudden or slow passage of time (*Nepesch* is another notion that the book addresses as denoting a vital principle that is experienced as breathing in and out, cf. Baert 2016, 25-26).

The originality of the approach consists in the subtle combination of iconology with phenomenology. The iconological aspect is not new, as it includes the canonical homologation of images to texts that announce their structure, motifs and interpretation. Since Warburg and Panofsky, this approach has been the hobbyhorse of any trained art historian. Yet, while Nova's work is mainly concerned with one representation of the *pneuma*, namely the wind, Baert addresses other variations on this theme and reads in them a much more complex phenomenology of exteriorisation and interiorisation. The wind is a motive that mediates between the inside and the outside of the room (in the Annunciation). *Ruach* and breathing too, mediate between the interior and the exterior of the body conceiving life as a constant circulation of air. It is this permutation between iconology and phenomenology that makes Baert's approach stimulating, relevant and captivating. *Pneuma* is a figure that transforms the image from a stable entity that is meant to be seen, into a *transitional flux* that engages the entire aesthetic body in its interpretation. The visual world is full of distinct substances (air, water, light), but the *pneuma* is that which mediates between them, adding consistency and differentiating them.

Like the Creation, the Annunciation is the originating act of all imagery because it represents the moment when the invisible becomes visible, when the Word becomes Flesh. Iconologists trace back this intricate relationship between texts and image; they describe precisely the dialectical relationship between these two elements. In her work, Barbara Baert points out that this relationship is the outcome of an «iconic "space between": the interspace» (Baert 2016: 54). Significant is the implicit Platonism that remains a symptom of iconology. Its formulation in this volume is interesting: «The visual medium is a sensual medium that will provide the mystery of the Incarnation with its own artistic aura that mirrors just this taking on of form and matter (from nothing, from an "idea")» (Baert 2016: 63, emphasis added). Iconology is the method that describes a miracle, an act of

faith which is based on doubling, in a material medium, an immaterial element. Thus, the image realises the Incarnation; both are equivalent, but while the image repeats, mirrors or doubles the “mystery” of Incarnation, the Word is breathed out and it becomes flesh. Yet the justification of iconology is an “act of faith” (not a logical conclusion) as she miraculously – *from nothing, from an idea* – word and image. This explanation has determined iconological thinking: the Idea as realisation of an eternal prototype (Erwin Panofsky), the “figured thought” according to which the production of images involve a “disfigurement”, a visible discontinuity between God and its various representations (Georges Didi-Huberman), or the unconscious figure-matrix as phantasmatic origin of figure-forms that emanate from it (Jean-François Lyotard).

What does Baert add to this discussion? She shows how this iconological debate should be related to a phenomenological analysis of the aforementioned interspace between word, gaze and touch: «*With Baert, iconology becomes a logic of intervals and transitions, between texts and sensations*»⁷. Interpreting does not just mean “reading”; it also means experiencing latent sensitive dimensions of the image, especially of indexes of movement. In many of her articles, Barbara Baert has developed what one could call an *iconology of transitions*⁸. That is why she emphasises the Annunciation’s spatial and olfactory layers: the mystery of the Incarnation emerges in the transitive “threshold” between Gabriel and Mary, a discontinuity that she describes as a spatial movement, as a tension between the exterior and the interior and as the protrusion of the angel into the room, of the viewer into the image (Baert 2016: 59). Iconology is not just a question of homologating text to image and vice-versa but of designating how images affect our belief, how they point out tensions that are transferred into the world.

“Transitions and transferences” would be an alternative title to Baert’s book because her work is more than an “pneumatology”, a discourse on the *pneuma*. It is an iconological phenomenology (or phenomenological iconology) of transmutations, conversions and passages that reaches its peak in the analysis of odour and moistures, a variation on the power of the image to open up, to fuse with and appropriate the aesthetic body of the viewer (Baert 2016, 76). Formless stains recognisable in matter are other testimonies of the dynamic softening of linear representations, as Wölfflin would put it. The image of *Kairos* in the Renaissance consistently intensifies its major theme as it represents a force of transition that turns the image into an energetic field, demanding more interaction than merely detecting the meaning of the depicted motifs (Baert 2016, 149-165). Another instantiation of transition is the web, addressed in a chapter on the intrigues between Athena and Arachne.

One final note on style. We distinguish here two rhetorical devices that consistently return in the style of Barbara Baert's writing. On the one hand, there is the *parataxis*: wind is that, wind means that, wind does that. At key moments throughout the book, the movement of the wind is presented as the scattering of staccato, un subordinated sentences (Baert 2016: 1-2, 10, 81, 179). On the other hand, the author breaks through the occasional boring academic style by means of a *syncopated "dramatism"*; a succession of sentences describes a theme while building up a scenography filled with suspense: «Mary is sitting reading. In silence. She is startled. She hears words. Then she herself speaks. She asks: "How shall this happen?"» (Baert 2016: 66)

How to summarise Barbara Baert's reconfiguration of iconology? As a resistance to the reduction of iconology to hermeneutics, i.e. to the interaction with images as flat entities to be read, as visual representations that can be coded and decoded, understood as "illustrations" of texts. Barbara Baert proves that images confront the viewer more like a sensing organism than as text. While a text depends on a code, the contact between organisms is never perfectly coded. It presupposes continuities and transitions, movements and tensions. The image is not just a visual text but an organism that appeals to the broader aesthetic and intellectual disposition of the viewer. An image that evokes odours and touch, movement and breath demands infinite attention as it claims to include more than a readable message. It cannot just be seen, archived, explained and left behind because it solicits the experience of time as duration. Subsequently, the experience of time as duration is a sign of life and it is in this sense that we may speak of a "life" of images. The viewer is not just demanded to decode their sense but also the specific type of indexes of movements: breathing, sensing, smelling, etc. In the eyes of Barbara Baert, images are both a question of meaning and of figuring bodily gestures, of sense and sensibility.

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- 1 Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, Second Edition, Revised and Expanded, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 263.
- 2 Alessandro Nova, Tanja Michalsky (eds.), *Wind und Wetter. Die Ikonologie der Atmosphäre*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2007. The edited volume is a systematic study of scattered themes from Descartes' *Meteorology* (1637) to da Vinci's flood and storm.
- 3 Alessandro Nova, *The Book of Winds. The Representation of the Invisible*, Ithaca (NY), McGill-Queens University Press, 2011.
- 4 The book was published in 2016, part of Peeters' *Art & Religion* series. The series was founded in 2011 by the Iconology Research Group, a research unity affiliated to Faculty of Art History (KU Leuven).

- 5 The notion of art historical hermeneutics is discussed at large by Oskar Bätschmann in *A Guide to Interpretation: Art Historical Hermeneutics*, in Claire Farago, Robert Zwijnenberg (eds.), *Compelling Visuality. The Work of Art in and Out of History*, Minneapolis, University of Minneapolis Press, 2003, pp. 179-210.
- 6 Besides the book on the wind, Barbara Baert has also worked on the iconology of weaving and the navel, all motifs that involve a strong aesthetic (tactile) experience and question the opticality of the image. See the chapters on weaving, veiling and dressing, mantle, fur and *pallium* from Barbara Baert, Rudy M. Kathryn, *Weaving, veiling, and dressing: textiles and their metaphors in the late Middle Ages*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2007. See also Barbara Baert, *Kleine Iconologie van de navel*, Leuven, s.n., 2009.
- 7 For a philosophy of intervals applied to angelology see, Andrei Plesu, *Despre Ingeri*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2003.
- 8 Amongst others, see especially, *Nymph. Motif, Phantom, Affect. 2: Aby Warburg's (1866-1929) Butterflies as Art Historical Paradigms*, in *Studies in iconology*, 4, Leuven, Peeters, 2016; *Wind und Sublimierung in der christlichen Kunst des Mittelalters: Essay über Pathos und Affekt*, in «Archaeus. Studii de Istorie a Religiilor / Etudes d'Histoire des Religions», 16, 2012, pp. 231-268; *Nymphe (Wind): der Raum zwischen Motiv und Affekt in der frühen Neuzeit*, in «Ars. Časopis Ústavu Dejín Umenia Slovenskej Akadémie Vied», 46 (1), 2013, pp. 16-42.