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The Right Moment. A Symposium on Kairotic Energies

Herman Parret, response to Victor Stoichita, *Giotto, the Eye and the Gaze*

Having the Scrovegni Chapel back under the eyes, and the moving storytelling of this happy phase in the life of Ann and Joachim, high to the right side of the Chapel, I am touched by the profound humanity of the scenery – the colorful aesthetics (the predominant blue, background and source of the figuration, the grey of the stones and their transformation into the geometry of walls and temples, and then the lightness, in their variety, of the draped cloaks, the large sleeves, all the variants of red and rose, with some black spots – Envy, for instance – suggesting a dysphoric semantics), but not only the aesthetics of the signifier but even more the preciseness, adequacy and transparency of the narratological logic, the *mise-en-scène* of interactions between deeply rooted feelings, the unfolding and display of affects, an iconography of a universe of self-restrained *pathos*. It is for sure the balance between the beauty of the plastic qualities and the authenticity of the tale that moves me the most and that motivates me to run back to the Scrovegni Chapel as soon as possible, as a pilgrimage to this exceptional treasure.

And Victor Stoichita leads us far into deeper understanding by his never gratuitous erudition, by a method broadening philosophically, philologically the classical scope of art history, and with a sharp heuristics, a reading whose originality is embedded in an existential intuition of what the *senses* are, the eye and the gaze in the first place, and touching, and the body and love and joy. That Vasari was wrong about the eyes in Giotto is evident after Stoichita's phenomenology of the attitudes of the protagonists and of the specific quality of the eye contact so amply argued about in this paper. It is true – and Stoichita shows it convincingly - that Giotto is so very much better than Gaddi in representing the “circulation of energies”, as he says – think of this symposium's “kairotic energies” - and closer than anyone to Dante whose reflection on the fascinating gaze and the arch of love identifies smoothly with the giottesque imagination. Besides the philological information from the apocryphs, the *Légende dorée* and various other sources, there is in Stoichita's analysis also something truly systematic, there for instance where the semiotic opposition of

inclusion and *exclusion* effects in the description of the figuration of the *Refusal of the Offering* – the body language and gazes of the opponents there, the priests and Joachim, marked by the interior/exterior limitation – the authoritarian power of the functionaries of the Temple pushes Joachim away, and in a way one could say that the *structural* reading of this polemic the priest and their victim crowns the textual and philological input of Stoichita’s analysis. However, I should not focus on the method but rather on the content and the signifier of these so powerful art works. Phenomenologically – or call it anthropologically – Giotto’s figuration of the entire tale of Ann and Joachim, and Stoichita’s treatment of it, culminates in the delight of the *kiss*, more specifically *osculum*, the kiss on the mouth. This is the fifth of a series of six panels narrating the story of Joachim’s wandering and finally the encounter with his beloved. The rhythm of the narration is accelerating and the kiss is the acme of the energetic and pathetic investment in the protagonists. This dramatic discharge is shown there in its polysensoriality – the *gaze* where the eyes search each other on the one hand to the more extensive *haptic* feeling of the simultaneous *kiss* and *caress* on the other. How does Giotto presentify the *synesthesia* of gazing and touching, and secondly how to interpret Giotto’s figuration of *temporality*, mainly of *kairos* – can we conclude that “something happened ‘at the right moment’” in Giotto’s story of Ann and Joachim? These are the two *problemata* I wanted to formulate with regard to Stoichita’s paper.

Screening carefully the direction of the eyes of Joachim and Ann, it looks as if these eyes do not *touch* each other in the sense of “les yeux se touchent”. There is a slight deflection, or is it a lack of expressivity, a seemingly resignation, or is it the sweet feeling of a fundamental certainty of a reciprocal alliance... And then, the lips join each other, not really passionately, conquering each other. The proximity of the souls, remarks Stoichita, is *self-restrained*, without any violent impulse. Just like the eyes, the lips are not really contiguous. The same self-restraining and sublimated being-together is in the caress of the hands – in fact, even more than the eyes, the touching of the hands shows so suggestively the affects of the soul, not so much the right hand of Joachim – the hand of a shepherd - but both hands of Ann, the elegant left hand and especially the fingers of the right hand gratifying Joachim’s hair by a delicate and warm caress. The sensorial signifiers of the affects separately are tamed, contained, and governed by formal but also cultural and societal constraints. This is Giotto’s language. One can say, like Stoichita does, that the gaze of the protagonists

“doubles” the kiss, and that kiss and caress reinforce the underlying affect. And the point I want to make explores this idea further: that the euphoric intensity and the dramatic quality of Giotto’s art in the Scrovegni Chapel is not due to the representation of *separate* and *isolated* sensorial functioning – looking at, touching of the lips by fusion, touching of the bodies by caressing – but by the genial figuration of a *synesthesia* where the global sensoriality of the signifier is rooted within a *proprioceptive* feeling of the body, feeling of an expected happy event, feeling of a tender easiness with each other, quietness and serenity with regard to the mystery that will realize within and from this kiss on, by this exemplary union of the affects, a crystallization of energies, the birth of a child.

Stoichita explains fairly well how *osculum*, in the medieval tradition (as well as in Ambrosius, in the *Song of Songs*), reconciles flesh and spirit. The “light kiss”, like the one we discover in Giotto, furthers the “pneumatic circulation”, sublimation of the union of the flesh, but still there is junction, infusion, resolved tension, and this is exactly what happens when the rhythm of the tale brings us to its culmination, the synesthetic *kiss*. This is the “right moment”, *kairos*, where the child is conceived and all kairotic energies embodied in the conception of a child. I know that the texts are contradictory with regard to the moment of the conception of Mary. However, it is evident to me that the spatio-temporal organization of the tale is such that *kairos* can fasten itself on this culminating episode. This would mean that Giotto, in all his estrangement, promotes a haptological aesthetics where *kairotic temporality* is rooted in the touching virtualities of the affective body.

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