

Allegorising Gerard ter Borch

Research, Appropriation and the Baroque Impulse in the Work of Karin Hanssen

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Abstract

This article takes the context of practice-based research as a starting point to discuss the meta-critical potential of allegorical work. It is suggested that the baroque impulse in allegory today can be understood in terms of what Gregory Ulmer terms 'heuretics', an alternative hermeneutics that prompts the connotation of heresy in the field of interpretation and that, due to its logic of invention and creativity, seems to meet the requirements of art as research. The inherent theoretical sensitivity of allegory is more specifically exemplified by a detailed account of a recent installation by Belgian painter and researcher Karin Hanssen. Her *The Borrowed Gaze/Variations GTB* presents a series of appropriations of the famous *Paternal Admonition* by genre painter Gerard ter Borch, (1617–1681). This contribution proposes to understand the ten paintings, each one presenting a variation on the same *Rückenfigur*, along the lines of Walter Benjamin's theory of baroque allegory and to regard them as a step by step emancipation of the female figure. Through tracing the dialogue between the Benjaminian mode of allegory and Hanssen's successive appropriations I hope to show that *The Borrowed Gaze/Variations GTB* alters and ultimately enriches the original connotations of the Golden age.

Résumé

Cet article prend comme point de départ le contexte de la recherche artistique pour ouvrir une discussion sur le potentiel méta-critique de l'allégorie. L'impulsion baroque qu'on retrouve aujourd'hui dans l'allégorie peut-être interprétée comme ce que Gregory Ulmer qualifie de 'heuretics', une sorte d'herméneutique alternative qui incorpore la connotation d'hérésie et qui semble en même temps bien correspondre à l'idée de recherche artistique avec sa logique d'invention et de créativité. De manière plus spécifique, la sensibilité théorique inhérente à l'allégorie sera exemplifiée par l'analyse détaillée d'une installation récente conçue par Karin Hanssen, peintre et chercheuse belge. Son ouvrage *The Borrowed Gaze/Variations GTB* présente une série d'appropriations de la fameuse peinture *Admonition paternelle* de Gerard ter Borch (1617-1681). De ces dix peintures dont chacune présente une variation sur le même *Rückenfigur*, cet article présente une interprétation qui suit la théorie benjaminienne de l'allégorie, tout en proposant

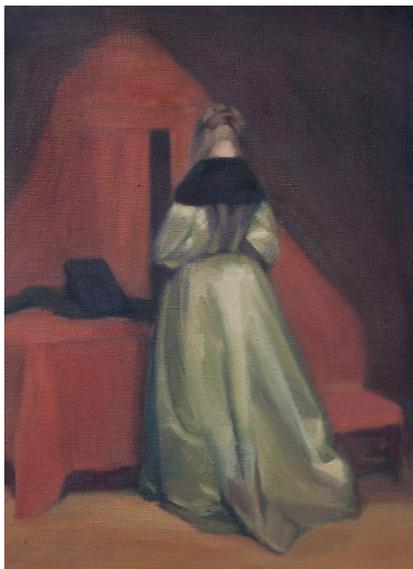
qu'il convient d'abord de les considérer comme la figuration de l'émancipation graduelle d'une figure féminine. En retraçant le dialogue entre l'allégorie benjaminienne d'une part et les appropriations successives par Hanssen d'autre part, j'espère pouvoir démontrer que *The Borrowed Gaze/Variations GTB* modifie et, en fin de compte, enrichit les connotations originelles de l'oeuvre qu'on associe d'avantage avec le Siècle d'Or aux Pays-Bas.

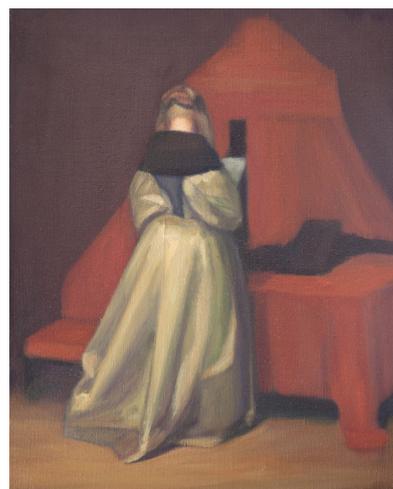
Keywords

baroque, aura, allegory, appropriation, artistic research



*Gerard ter Borch, De Galante
Conversatie (Paternal
Admonition, around 1655).*









Logic of invention

What is the relationship between the concept of (neo)baroque and artistic practice today? What is it about the term that first and foremost seems to make it so interesting or attractive to theoreticians of art and culture, as it seems to enable a better understanding of how art functions today? There are growing amounts of work that take the Baroque as their guiding methodology for cultural analysis. And clearly, the term has proven its relevance and consistency as a heuristic category to analyse contemporary artistic developments. In order to continue to cultivate this emerging field of research, however, I would argue that we need to ask the artist himself or herself what it is that he or she wants from the Baroque, its philosophy and its principles of form and design. That is to say, if

the baroque artistic regime seems to provide us with resources to theoretically grasp and rethink the meaning of art, it does not seem illogical to turn the tables and to explore how artists self-consciously and explicitly re-enact principles of the Baroque. To ask the artist is, however, not to discredit the role of theory. On the contrary, far from wanting to reproduce the theory-practice dichotomy, I would like to merge perspectives into the proposition that pondering the Neo-Baroque is at its richest and most impartial if we are willing to encounter art as *thinking*, as that which in its own right poses theoretical terms and, moreover, produces reflection on theory itself. My contribution wants to develop the stakes of this claim by addressing a series of paintings by the Belgium-based artist and teacher Karin Hanssen. This installation, *The Borrowed Gaze/Variations GTB*, deliberately stages itself as an appropriation of baroque imagery and, in doing so, sets up an intriguing dialogue with art history. Likewise, to consider Hanssen's art as what Mieke Bal termed 'theoretical objects' (Bal 2002) involves a shift of emphasis which might extend what theory counts as thinking – a debate that ultimately, as we will see in the concluding thoughts, might even lead us to the provocative suggestion that art on its own behalf *thinks*. Can we approach the work of art as an autonomous agent? Probably the most fertile yet complex setting for an encounter of that unusual kind is the debate about what is commonly described as "artistic research".

By way of introduction, then, it is perhaps worth relating that this impetus - the move into the context of arts-based research – originates in my personal commitment to the ongoing discussion on what constitutes artistic research, what it should be and what its contribution could be. *The Borrowed Gaze/Variations GTB* was realized between June 2010 and September 2011 as a preliminary investigation in the doctoral project Karin Hanssen is working on at the moment within the framework of a collaboration between the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and the University of Antwerp. When Hanssen suggested me to help her in developing her thoughts about the doctorate the debate on research in the arts was (and still is) in full swing. The consensus seems to be that an artistic doctorate constitutes an innovative artistic work linked to a thorough reflection on that work and its cultural conditions. It is, however, less clear where that critical reflection should be situated and how it has to externalize itself. Can an artist be expected to write up his or her experiences as theoretical considerations? Should the visual artist willy-nilly master academic skills? Or, conversely, is the sovereignty of the work of art to be respected, because it is eminently capable to speak for itself? This choice then in turn would raise the question what makes a doctorate in the arts distinctive against the background of a century in which art, almost of its own accord, is meta-art, as the avant-garde discounts the statute of art in our society as a problem in the work of art. Admittedly, I will not be able to answer any of these questions within the scope of this article.

Moreover, it could be argued that fixing principles, terms and conditions of art as research goes against the spirit of artistic dynamics and innovation. And yet a sense of the urge to evaluate a specific case and to derive some indications, albeit in a partial, incomplete and, no doubt, personal way, demands that these questions be asked and answers attempted. However tentative, my attempt will point to a 'baroque reason', a paradigm of thought and expression that characterizes the paintings of Hanssen and that seems to correlate to its inherently theoretical sensitivity.¹

From the outset it should be made clear that this 'reasoning' of the Baroque has more in common with a bewildering excess of apparent referential or symbolic meaning than with an orderly classification according to a systematic and pre-given logic. As such, it is suggestive of what Gregory Ulmer has called 'heuretics', prompting the connotation of heresy within the field of interpretation. Heuretics originate in theology, but indicate its flip-side, the dark or repressed margin of conventional strategies of art and its interpretation. One could, according to Ulmer, interpret texts and images, or one could employ the unstable dialectics between words and pictures as a means of invention and thus use it heuretically. Hermeneutics ask what can be made *of* a work. Heuretics ask what can be made *from* a work: 'The relevant question for heuretic reading is not the one guiding criticism (according to the theories of Freud, Marx, Wittgenstein, Derrida, and others: What might be the *meaning* of an existing work?) but the one guiding a generative experiment: Based on a given theory, how might *another* text be composed?' (Ulmer 1994: 4-5). Ulmer for example mentions Breton, who's re-reading and re-visualizing of Freud and Marx presented a surrealist critique of bourgeois ideology by at once proposing and performing alternative attitudes and thus fusing artistic and theoretical concerns in one move. It is also possible to hear in Ulmer's project an echo of Susan Sontag's earlier plea *Against Interpretation*, which stated that '(i)nstead of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art' (Sontag 1966: 14). At any rate, this shift of emphasis takes the attention away from a uniform model of theory to the advantage of a logic of invention and creativity. In the light of such connotations, it does not come as a surprise that the Baroque is often referenced with respect to the appropriation of images in modern art and their superimposition by the contemporary artist with new meaning.²

1. The term is taken from the highly inspirational book by Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *La raison baroque: de Baudelaire à Benjamin*, Paris 1984. In her analysis of Walter Benjamin and the Baroque, Buci-Glucksmann maintains that allegorical writing is at once figural writing and the destruction of the figurative; the feminine as the marked image of modernity thus gives expression to the rupture between figural and signification, conception and perception. Although the focus is on modernity, and the author mainly discusses the work of Baudelaire, I found *La raison baroque* to be very suggestive for a better understanding of the potentials of research in the arts today.
2. A lot has been written about the resurgence of allegory in postmodernism. Notably in the American visual arts context of the 1980s, Benjamin's theory of dialectical allegory was rediscovered as a postmodern trope. In 1982, Benjamin Buchloh wrote 'Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art' (in *Artforum*, September 1982, vol. 21), the first in a series of reflections he developed on allegory and neo-avant-garde practices.

More specifically, I will try to show in what respect Hanssen's remake of the Baroque of Gerard ter Borch, with vigorous yet graceful lines, creates an installation that, as Walter Benjamin would put it, enhances 'die Geburt der Kritik aus der Geiste der Kunst' ('the birth of criticism from the spirit of art') (Benjamin 1991: 952). Benjamin saw this birth happen, more specifically, in the baroque and allegorical work of art, that 'gewissermassen schon in sich (...) die kritische Zersetzung [trägt]' ('already and to a certain extent carries the critical laying-apart in itself') (*ibidem*). The quotation from Benjamin's study of German tragic drama during the baroque period is telling because of its highly accurate, one might say, heuristical way of aligning art with criticism. Hence the aim of conjoining allegory as an inherently metacritical device with an exemplary work of art and of somehow making this link resonate with the demands of art and research in general. Before I describe how Hanssen elaborates Walter Benjamin's view on allegory, yet at the same time making work *from* Benjamin rather than *of* the German literary and cultural critic, I want to begin by addressing the allegorical image language that was so dear to Benjamin in his writings about the German tragedy and, later, the poetics of modernity.

Allegorical doubling

Benjamin's theory of the allegorical image, which proceeds from the observation that allegory is an approach as well as a performance, a perception as well as a technique, defies summary. As the central issue to be addressed here is art as research, I will not attempt an exegesis of the work of Benjamin, but merely investigate the 'heuristical' qualities of allegory. With this in mind, I will briefly consider the context and motivation of Benjamin's writing on baroque allegory and, thereafter, zoom in on the appropriative nature of allegory through an interpretation of Hanssen's imagery as what Benjamin termed "Denkbilder" (thought-images, thought-pictures). *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* was initially meant as a reaction against Nietzsche's artistic creed in terms of myth and universalia. Benjamin instead wanted to present the theatrical Baroque as expressing an ontological break between the prehistoric pantheon of gods and heroes and the emergence of a new political community. Whereas Nietzsche situated the tragic in the mythical, timeless essence of tragedy, the baroque *Trauerspiel* according to Benjamin lacked this transcendence in the first place. From this point of view, the mindset of Baroque theatre was less driven by myth, the close and iconic connection between the earthly and the supernatural (through, for an example, the reconcillation between a protagonist who is always already guilty and the cosmic order), than by

See also Craig Owens, '[The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism](#)', in *October* (vol. 12, Spring 1980).

history as actually experienced by people in their own time. More specifically, Benjamin's secular reading understood baroque allegory as the expression of a sensibility which experienced the world as a degenerated and disintegrated place. Indeed, politically speaking, the tensions between the upper class and the rest could at the time no longer be resolved other than with violence. Furthermore, natural catastrophes and wars had extended the gap between disconsolate earthly existence and eternal life, so that the promise of salvation had become relative. In other words, the pressure of historical experience intensified an emerging secularisation of the traditional worldview, as it already announced a universe in which the self-evidence of a communal transcendental horizon faded. As a result, it lay bare a rather desolate landscape which man had to assign meaning to from its own individual initiative. Accordingly, in Benjamin's opinion, baroque theatre distinguished itself as 'the new drama throughout Europe' through its 'rejection of the eschatology of religious drama', as a theatre where, conversely, the modern individual comes face to face with his own image (Benjamin 1998: 81).

The baroque allegorist is no longer empowered to read an immanent meaning from the book of life and he has no other choice than to project new, subjective meaning onto a world that has lost objectivity. In a gesture of randomness, the allegorist will whisper sense into a dumbfounded reality that will listen to his individual logic. The image of the world consequently multiplies into a plurality of viewpoints, which initiates the essentially baroque stream of images. This ontological uncertainty of the Baroque gives way to a very specific poetics and a distinctive set of aesthetic techniques. Drained of an originary, fundamental and unifying meaning the allegorical object lies as a pure facticity under the manipulative hands of the artist. 'With every idea the moment of expression coincides with a veritable explosion of images, which give rise to a chaotic mass of metaphors, Benjamin concordantly wrote in his theory of German drama (Benjamin 1998: 173). The allegorical could then be minimally formulated as one work re-enacted through another, however fragmentary or discontinuous their relationship may be. As a rule, then, its structure corresponds to the logic of the doubling, because the artist generates an image through the ruthless appropriation of other images. Benjamin more particularly studied this process as it took place *within* the structure of the work of art.

Benjamin discerned in the allegorical temperament a genuine resistance against hermeneutics and the act of interpretation altogether, because it signals an unbridgeable distance to the original instead of seeking out, disclosing and preserving seminal meaning. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* thus gave impetus to an aesthetic theory of modernity that deliberately rooted its origins

firmly in the Baroque of the 17th century. Consequently, what we have here are all the seeds of what will become, for the later Benjamin, the decline of 'aura' in the age of commodity production as displayed in his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Indeed the allegorical stance towards objects will there equal the devaluation of objects in capitalist society, whose social relations are stripped of an aura, their essence serialized and reduced to fetishes circulating in the commodity market. Indeed the term 'commodity' constitutes the link between baroque allegory and the secularized world of the market.

Karin Hanssen's at first sight rather surprising appropriation of the Dutch Golden Age through the work of one of its most renowned artists has to be understood along these lines. More specifically, ter Borch's paintings make particular sense in one of the first great bourgeois nations, where, for almost the first time, art entered the world of commodities and a person's rank was determined by the art works they collected instead of by their ancestry. However, for all of the characteristics of Holland's new *burgher*, the establishment of the first open market and the love for wealth, the country was also puritanical and full of restraints. This holds especially through for ter Borch's astonishing skills to paint the finest lace, an embroidery that allegorically speaks of opulence yet at the same time constrains the woman that wears it. In the remainder of my text I will analyse in detail how Hanssen's appropriation of a most famous baroque painting by ter Borch enters into dialogue with the logic of allegory.

Allegories of satin

Karin Hanssen has enjoyed international recognition and acclaim with paintings that thematize the flash-back through the appropriation of photographic and cinematographic imagery from the 1950s to the 1970s. The situations and figures depicted in her work bring to mind the decades that discovered leisure and experienced the advent of consumerism. On a more personal note, Hanssen thus poses as the interpreter of her own formative years, her entry as a child into adolescence, and, ultimately, her evolving into an artist. When we look at these emblematic appropriations, however, the first thing that draws our attention is the peculiar way in which the paintings do not acknowledge but transcend the historical conditions of the original image, giving the specific a more general implication through a dream-like abstraction of the setting, the strange aloofness of its inhabitants and, generally spoken, the diversion of the pure gaze. This approach is comparable to the painted images of - to name the most important artists - Gerhard Richter, Neo Rauch or Luc Tuymans, yet it displays specific characteristics and shows a personal signature in manipulating the archive of images that make up our collective imagination. Hanssen's paintings clearly elaborate on

the themes of social determinism, yet they somewhat ambiguously also retain a resilient quality, allowing for a strong emotional and poetic appeal through a paradoxical mix of empathy and criticism.

Hanssen's unique style is most apparent in the current installation. As stated, *Variations GTB* takes its cue from the Dutch Golden Age, an era in which art as commerce, morality and social value are all entwined. More concretely, the series of works take as their subject a historically famous scene, the so-called *Paternal Admonition* by genre painter Gerard ter Borch, (1617–1681). The title denotes a father reprimanding his daughter, but today it is believed that ter Borch rather wanted to depict a customer propositioning a prostitute in a brothel. The portrait of the woman, a *Rückenfigur* (back figur) in a fine dress, seems to have been immediately popular at the time. Gerard ter Borch himself made several copies of the woman, and there are approximately thirty versions known that were made by other artists. Interestingly, these duplicates all detach the female figure from the original setting and reinsert her in ever-new situations. Time and again, she appears with her back turned towards the beholder, a hollowed-out figure and an empty signifier, mediating her readiness to be appropriated at the intersection of the economic (the duplicates: serializing images for commercial success), the aesthetic (the depicted gesture) and the narrative (prostitution). A confiscated image on several levels, then, the woman in the fine dress has previously entered the consuming process of appropriation. An image there to be used once more in a different context, she has already been subject to sexual and commercial commodification, a body necessarily mediated by the gaze of the artist and - when sold - of the beholder. Hanssen somehow continues this layered procedure, meanwhile probing the status of the woman permeated by the perception and memory of the Golden Age. Inherent to this approach is an oscillation between commodification and reanimation, as if aiming at reviving the fossilized shell of the female body. This dialectics constitutes the very source of the theoretical significance of the installation. More specifically, in allegorizing Gerard ter Borch's iconic figure, Hanssen, in her typical style, both recaptures the commercialized woman as object in its own right, and at the same time somehow restores the identity of the commodified body, saving it from oblivion.

Variations GTB consists of ten paintings, each one presenting a variation on the same *Rückenfigur* such as it first shows in *Paternal Admonition* by ter Borch, but also in *Lady in White Atlas*, presumably by Caspar Netscher, ter Borch's son-in-law and an apprentice in his studio, and in the *The Messenger*, purportedly also painted by ter Borch. Whereas the woman remained unchanged in all her varying appearances at the time of ter Borch as she was inserted as an ideal

image in new situations time and again, every painting by Hanssen articulates the mysterious figure in a different way. Not only the settings vary, also the woman herself changes and acquires singular features. Hanssen approached each work individually; they were not painted as a series, so that each execution ultimately keeps its own power of expression. At the same time the individual work in the setting of ten paintings interacts with the other images, reinforcing its own character by contrast and increasing the appeal of the woman in the total image. In other words, the serial character of this presentation enriches the identity of the woman represented. This inversion of the logic with ter Borch, who put the identical woman in different settings, is the core of this installation. It presupposes that, in this case, the reproduction does not lead to a further disembodiment of the woman as a figure, but, on the contrary, under Hanssen's hand grows into a singular, figurative Gestalt. That way the multiple personage in the installation gradually discards the principles, methodologies and ethical conducts that she embodied in the age of ter Borch. This step by step emancipation of the woman as individual figuration can best be understood by discussing the painting along the lines of the three main groups the ten paintings are divided.

The first group (variation 1, 2, 5 and 6) originated from Caspar Netscher's image in which the female figure is put before a canopy bed with next to her a non-reflecting mirror on a small red table and a stool covered with the same red cloth. There is also one *pasticchio* (var. 5), the version with the letter, which is composed of *The Messenger* and Netscher's image. The woman in the picture turns away from the public even more emphatically, as if she wants to shield the words in her hand from the beholder. Her pose increases her attraction and stimulates the spectator's curiosity. This fact will later be fully exploited in the third group, which closes the series with a comparable image. Also in her present-day version the woman does not face the beholder and this sets the tension between the works from the Golden Age and those by Hanssen. There is no way that the woman will show herself. But, whereas this pose was formerly an object of a courtly morality, it will really withstand this objectification in Hanssen's work. Allison Kettering has suggested that ter Borch's painting embodied common Petrarchan poetics of the woman as the distant, indifferent, beautiful mistress, forever turning away from her suitor, and in this case also from the viewer (Kettering 1997). In ter Borch's days, the artist's sister, Gesina, the model for this painting and its many copies, as so many other burghers, collected courtly poems depicting the supreme female and the devoted man. More specifically, in the bourgeois era of ter Borch the exciting combination of chastity and sensuality proved to be possibly even more erotizing than in late medieval and Renaissance poems. And here the incomparably realistically painted dress plays the central role.

The satin dress constructs an ideal of female beauty, that, above all, dresses the woman in the image of her submission to the male morality of the era, in the unequalled elaboration of the cloth, its texture and play of light. She *is* her dress. And the reason why the painting was so immensely popular in its many versions is probably to be found in the fetichizing of the female body just as much as in the mastery of ter Borch's craft: together they constituted the commercial value of the work. In the seventeenth century shiny satin more particularly stood for becoming reservation, but in the painting it just as well possessed the same sensual sheen that can be seen in the beautiful female neck.

It is clear that the function of the dress is toned down by Hanssen, so that the woman can free herself from her silver straitjacket. Hanssen in fact omits the satin texture. At the same time the emphasis remains on the neck, which in ter Borch's work is marked as the area of femininity *par excellence*, between dress and hairdo. By deleting the shiny effect of the satin – an intervention that is underlined by including the darkened mirror next to the woman – she is so to speak liberated. It is furthermore characterizing for Karin Hanssen's personality that she does not do this while abandoning the woman's sensuality, which indeed formed the core of her ambivalent position with ter Borch. Hanssen retraces the figure of the woman through isolating her figure, but at the same time keeps her sensuality. She even goes so far as to accentuate the main pleats in the dress, which straightly directs the erotic gaze. Hanssen thus allows the female figure to be enriched in significance through negotiating and ultimately altering its original connotations.

In doing this, she moves beyond the allegorist appropriation in the spirit of the Baroque, where the image was incapable of generating any meaning or significance of its own. Thus, according to Benjamin's description of the Baroque *Trauerspiel*, allegorical appropriation is consistently attracted to the fragmentary and the incomplete, to transience and decay, depicting history as an irreversible process of mortification (Richter en Tuymans involuntarily spring to mind), as Benjamin in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* states that:

... in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, had been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face - or rather in a death's head. (Benjamin 1998: 166)

In contrast, in *Variations GTB* the woman does not renounce her identity in order to degenerate into an image of melancholy. Whereas she appears in the shape of a prostitute in ter Borch's painterly imagination, with Hanssen her sensuality does not contradict her dignity as a woman. The figure is

endowed with the power to become other than she was before and this shift is due to the modern context in which she reappears. Benjamin's analysis of modern reproduction technologies in the *Artwork* essay has been referred to before. It is well-known that in this essay the author proposes the thesis that the painted image, and by extension all art, loses its essential core when it is reproduced by new technologies such as photography or cinema. Benjamin called this lost core the aura of the image. However, whereas the allegory in the baroque *Trauerspiel* could not erase the trace of a profound melancholy, Benjamin was more ambivalent about the loss of aura seen in art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Indeed the *Artwork* essay is torn between the extremes of elegiac mourning and revolutionary avant-gardism, the latter being the somewhat fatalistic hope that freeing the art work from its link to tradition would make it available for political use. As Susan Buck-Morss noted in her groundbreaking essay, Benjamin was 'demanding of art (...) to *undo* the alienation of the corporeal sensorium, to *restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity's self-preservation*, and to do this, not by avoiding new technologies, but by *passing through* them' (Buck-Morss 1992: 5). In the same vein, it could be argued, the figure regains her identity as a woman in the paintings of Hanssen; she is released from certain principles that constituted the original context.³

Possibly because of similar reasons Hanssen also removes the cord with which ter Borch attached the canopy to the ceiling. The removal of the anecdotal elements of the space is consequently continued in the second group of images (var. 3, 4 and 10), in which the setting is further emptied to make room for the woman. The first painting of this group (var. 3) is a reduced image based on a fragment of *Paternal Admonition*, the second one (var. 4) a reprise of the fragment with a background that is even more reduced – also the furniture has gone now – but with the inclusion of the floor from the painting *Helena van der Schalcke*. Paradoxically enough this abstraction enhances the mystery of the turned-away figure up to the point that it acquires an almost religious aura. One can imagine that Hanssen reaches another boundary here, which reflects the fetishizing objectification by conversely giving the image an almost transcendental aura. If carried through and if dialectically reversed this once more could have an objectification of the woman as a consequence. It could, to use the same imagery as a little while ago, result in a cultic image of the woman as the Madonna. The third group (var. 7, 8 and 9), all of them pasticcio's derived from

3. It might be noted that, although the 17th century also utilized new technologies such as the camera obscura in the production of copies, by no means did it attach the same value to the original; the tension between copy and original was not there yet. Maybe this can explain Hanssen's recurrence to the Golden Age: as if the artist wanted to shake off the melancholy burden so characteristic for later ages.

Helena van der Schalcke, which shows the woman in a grandiose and monumental way in a vague spaciousness, seems to strengthen this impression at first sight. She nearly becomes an icon of femininity. Still, this is ultimately not the case and Hanssen manages to keep the aura of her personage in a dialectical tension, so that she does not fully grow into an emblem or yet another ideal either, thus in the end losing her private character. For this reason this group is dearest to me: because the three paintings, the culmination of the whole installation, display the singular beauty of the woman in a timeless and undefined space, celebrating her emancipation at the same time as her serialization. In this sense the letter in the final image (var. 9) punctuates the aura. It refers to the singular situation of the woman, which extends beyond the frame, and at the same time again formulates an appeal to the beholder, whose voyeurism is fuelled, so that we become aware that this dimension has never disappeared from the work since ter Borch.

Hanssen reproduces the conditions for the male gaze inherent in the painting of ter Borch. She does for instance not alter the perspective of the *Rückenfigur*, nor does she lend the female figure a face. Simultaneously, however, she is caught in a series of conflicting imperatives (empty signifier versus female identity) that seem actively to express the struggling of the woman to retain her sensual identity. In the same logic the aura could be considered as a female principle, which struggles under the groping gaze of the man. As a consequence of this resistance even Benjamin's own poetical metaphors suddenly resound all the louder, for instance when he compares the allegorist to 'a stern sultan in the harem of objects', whose invasion of the original is characteristic of 'the sadist ... [who] humiliates his object and then - or thereby - satisfies it' (Benjamin 1998: 184-185). By contrast, as I have shown, in Karin Hanssen's variation on ter Borch – who himself is in turn objectivized to 'GTB' in the name of the installation – the woman is a subject who does not renounce her aura. It is a matter of agency.

Afterlife

At the end the portrait of the woman becomes the site for a debate that poses crucial questions for our times when considering the aesthetic, commercial and moral values involved in the serialized copying of the figure of a prostitute. The field of tension between original and copy is one of these crucial questions. But just as well – to paraphrase a book of W.J.T. Mitchell – the loves and lives of an image (Mitchell 2005). Because in Hanssen's attempts to wrest this woman from the codes and duties of her time, by continuing the series, she raises questions about art as research, questions about the capacity of the image to exist on itself despite the template that fixes her time and again, in years past but also now, in the triangle between artist, canvas and beholder.

The question of what the image *itself* wants is probably the most far-reaching. If we consider the image to be an organism, how does it meet us? It is the most improper reversal, because it defers hermeneutics, which traditionally probes for meanings and firm ground, and requires an almost archaic, magic change of place. This inversion unsettles the contemporary approach of the image. Averse to all explanatory schemes from art history and theory, apart from artistic training programmes and endless notions of spectatorship, even against the economy which invariably impregnates the work of art beforehand with a commercial value – the question is: what does the picture *really* want?

What pictures want from us, what we have failed to give them, is an idea of visibility adequate to their ontology. (...) Pictures want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language. They want neither to be levelled into a "history of images" nor elevated into a "history of art" but to be seen as complex individuals occupying multiple subject positions and identities.' (Mitchell 2005: 47)

This suggestion boldly shifts the question from restriction to desire, from the dominant model of the gaze to be opposed to the invitation to the subaltern and the objectified to raise its voice. Thus, the question of the agency of the image flirts with a superstitious attitude toward images, one that returns us to animism and idolatry. Surely, it contains a heuristical impulse. It turns our attention to a possible life of the image of the woman in the satin dress, an (after)life that has acquired increasingly clearer contours as the paint of the portraits dried.

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