

When Law became Mobile:

The Birth of the Haptic Gaze between Van Eyck's *Man in a Red Turban* (1433) and da Messina's male *Portrait* series (1474-1478).

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Abstract

Starting from a reflection on Erving Goffman's notion of *strategic interaction*, this contribution discusses a number of paintings, all completed between 1433 and 1478, to argue that the haptic gaze in painting probably emerged between those dates. The emergence of the haptic gaze, i.e. the gaze that touches and senses, inquires, inspects and surmises, announces the gradual crystallization of a burgher form of life in which responsiveness and an uneasy emotive mix of entrepreneurship and caution all come to subtly structure modes of social behaviour and interaction. This, to use other words, represents the birth of what one could call tactile modernity. In this emerging form of life law suddenly becomes mobile: it forms in and through responsive, tactile and tactical movements which, in turn, are constantly trying to sense law's contours.

Key Words

Strategic Interaction – Haptic Gaze – Burgher Form of Life – Prophetic Painting – Johannes Van Eyck – Antonello da Messina – Tactical Modernity – Renaissance Painting

1. Strategic Interaction and Prophetic Renaissance Painting (by way of Introduction)

In his book on *Strategic Interaction* (1969) Erving Goffman, inspired by Mead's earlier work, focused, in quite some minute detail, on the intricate interactions which human actors tend to generate in and during encounters. Human actors will interact strategically. They reflect upon what they believe are, at

least potentially, others' strategic reflections upon their very own strategic and often hidden reflections. They will constantly adjust –strategically, says Goffman- the form and shape of their actions in the light of minute clues gleaned from what they perceive to be other actors' perceptions, intentions, and motives which, in turn -they will be inclined to surmise- will have been fed and will continue to be fed, by the adjusting actor's own moves. Strategic interaction, then, is as much about hiding as it is about showing, and is as much about second-guessing others' reflections and motives as it is about one's own gaming and intentional deception. It is as much about the visible as it is about the invisible. Strategic interaction is, to large extent, generated in and through, and fuelled by, actors' *inner speech* (i.e. inner conversations that are sustained by the self that is in constant dialogue with itself; for an overview of the literature on this theme, see Wiley, 2016). In inner speech probing and explorative reflections upon actors' probable or likely moves underpin interaction.

Goffman's elaborated insight has now become a truism in micro-sociology. Although Goffman himself, in his book, focused on strategic interactions and *gaming* in the political sphere or in the sphere of diplomacy, his thesis far outstretches the bounds of those fields of application. There always is, so to speak, a lot of strategic interaction going on at the till in the local corner shop down the street. That does however not necessarily mean that strategic interaction is inevitable. For there to be strategic reflection and strategic inner speech in human interaction, actors must share a cultural context that generates, in actors, strategic awareness. In the West, for example, this has

not always been the case beyond the political and diplomatic spheres mentioned by Goffman. Only with the emergence, during the late 14th and early 15th centuries, of a well developed and sophisticated burgher form of life, did strategic awareness come to infuse social interaction. That is, only when individual burghers came to realise, awakening to themselves as it were, that individual life trajectories had become largely a matter of choice and chance, of opportunity and risk, of immanent potential and actual change, did the need arise for burghers to second-guess other actors' often hidden strategic projects, and to present oneself in the public sphere strategically, if necessary half-hidden and half-seen (on this see Lippens, 2009).

At the end of the 15th century this newly emerged cultural awareness and sensitivity –the *birth of existential man*, in a way- had crystallised fully. It is possible, as is usually done in Renaissance studies literature, to point to a number of key texts which all somehow mark the completion of this process (on this, see Jacob Burckhardt's seminal (1860) classic; partim, but throughout). One of those texts is Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *De Hominis Dignitate* (1486) which placed humanity and its laws –i.e. not eternal divine Law- at the centre of ... humanity. Another is Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* (written during 1512-17) in which the author makes a plea for rulers and governors alike to wake up to energetic popular desires and aspirations 'out there', in order to harness and make good strategic use of them in what we now call Machiavellian moves.

This contribution attempts to shed some additional light on the above process whereby strategic interaction gradually came to culturally pervade everyday life throughout much of the western hemisphere. Whether the term 'strategic' is used in this context, or 'tactical', is a matter of debate. Our focus will be on the very moment of what we have above called the awakening of the burgher to himself (him or herself, of course, henceforth *him*), and to the cultural exigencies that were generated in the newly crystallised form of life that surrounded and engulfed him. At the very point of awakening the burgher realises only a few things, i.e. that he is suddenly finding himself positioned in a field of moving positions, and that this requires him to take account of all that happens, or might be happening, in all those other positions amongst which he is floating in a restless, and unrelenting maelstrom. Very often, in such moments, there is little time to contemplate strategies –which always are more or less long term in nature- although very quick, and hurried, thoughts and reflections about shorter term moves – tactical moves- will tend to abound.

There is another reason why one might prefer the word 'tactical' here. The term is closely related to the word 'tactile'. The newly emerged burgher, floating in a permanently moving world of aspiration and tactical moves, and contemplating, from his localised and individualised *perspective* whatever it is that he is finding himself floating in, is eager (or desperate) to tactilely explore, and if possible *grasp* the *nature* of the world around him, and of all that drives it, and fuels it. And that includes others' tactical reflections, contemplations, and their resulting moves, whether muffled, or half-hidden,

or not. Fifteenth century artists and aestheticians of the stature of a Leon Battista Alberti were probably aware of this, and indeed, in his seminal treatise *On Painting* (1435), Alberti regularly used words such as 'perspective' and 'nature', or 'natural', to describe what the pictorial arts, in his view, really ought to evoke. We will revisit this theme further in this essay.

Inspired by vitalist philosophy –Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution* (1907) in particular- and the phenomenology of embodiment –Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work (1964) should be mentioned here- we accept that new forms of life, emerging as they do from the material depths of immanence, manifest themselves first and foremost in and through the body, that is, through embodied interaction. Only later will the emerging form of life, and its cultural codes, become manifest conceptually, in language, in the spoken word, or, for that matter, in philosophical works. To evoke, once again, a few Renaissance authors already mentioned above: the burgher form of life will have been experienced before it was reflected upon and before traces of its cultural sensitivity will have emerged on pages in works by the likes of a Pico della Mirandola or a Machiavelli. It therefore pays to study works of art to explore when, and how, a tactically aware cultural sensitivity ultimately found its way into the burghers' bodily posture and expression, and, thence, via artists' own distinctive cultural sensitivity (on this see e.g. Haskell, 1993), onto painted panels and canvases. This is the aim of the contribution at hand. The focus will be on the emergence, sometime near the latter half of the 15th century, of a tactile or *haptic gaze*, tentative and explorative, surmising,

second-guessing, half-wavering and half-confident, in a burgher culture that was only just awakening to itself.

With this contribution we aim to add to the understanding of the importance of visual art not just as a vehicle of expression of particular forms of life –all of which carrying within them, as said, their cultural sensitivities, preferences, anxieties and taboos- but also, and more importantly, as embodied *harbingers* of what is yet to fully emerge, reflected upon, and conceptualised, in language. As such we hope to be able to add to the analysis and scholarship of what, elsewhere, we have termed *prophetic painting* (see e.g. Lippens, 2010 and 2014).

2. The Gaze in Netherlandish Renaissance Painting

Let us have a look at Johannes van Eyck's painting *Man in a Red Turban* (see Figure 1). Most art historians agree that this is Van Eyck's self-portrait. The man's gaze is quite striking. Although the man in the painting (van Eyck himself) does not look us straight in the eye (the man seems to be zooming in on something immediately to the right of us viewers) his gaze really is a gaze, i.e. a sustained, focused training of the eye on a particular object. With this we know that in the first half of the 15th century painters were, technically, speaking, capable of painting a nearly perfect gaze. We readily admit that at that time Johannes van Eyck was at the top not just of his own, but, also, of the European game of portraiture, and of painting more broadly (e.g. he is credited for introducing the technique of oil painting in European painting). But, that said, the gaze of the *Man in a Red Turban* does strike us as quite

modern. Very few painters were, in 1433, capable of van Eyck's feat. But it was not impossible. The then foremost art theorist, Leon Battista Alberti, whom we've already mentioned above, is, well known for having argued, in his *On Painting* (which was published shortly after van Eyck had completed his self-portrait i.e. in 1435), for the use of perspective on the one hand, and for the need for painters to acquire an eye for "natural" (i.e. coherent, non-contradictory, common sense) situations and scenes in painting. He would probably have nodded favourably upon beholding van Eyck's panel.



Figure 1.
Johannes van Eyck
Man in a Red Turban (self portrait) [1433]
Courtesy of The National Gallery, London

The question however becomes whether the painted gaze, so strikingly accomplished by van Eyck in 1433, would, from that point in time onwards,

proliferate throughout Netherlandish painting, or Renaissance painting more broadly. It didn't. In the remainder of this essay we shall make an attempt to illustrate this remarkable development (or non-development, if you wish).

Van Eyck's picture is a self-portrait. One would of course, for obvious reasons, expect something akin to a gaze in self-portraits. The fact that van Eyck did paint his self-portrait at all is worth noting. At the time this was quite uncommon among painters. But he did and one could say that van Eyck, in his day, may have been one of the few who had 'awakened' to themselves. But although he was technically capable he did not paint another gaze in any of his subsequent works.

In fact, in none of those paintings do gazes ever cross. In his *The Annunciation*, painted only a year after his self-portrait, for example, we do not find Gabriel and Mary, as one would expect, engaged in a "natural" (dixit Alberti) process of communication whereby they would look each other in the eye. After all, an 'annunciation' is a form of direct communication. However, quite the opposite is the case. Both the archangel and the virgin seem to be locked into a contemplative posture. Their gazes –if any are to be noticed at all- do not cross, and we, the viewers, are left completely unable to look either of the protagonists in the eye. The same applies to van Eyck's panels commissioned by local notables (high ranking clerics, governors, and so on) who, as was the custom, had their picture represented amidst saints or saintly figures. In one of those, the magnificently coloured *The Madonna and Canon van der Paele*, also painted in 1434, we find the canon commended to Saint Donatian by Saint George (Van der Paele's name saint) in the

presence of Mary and the Holy Child. Again there is no eye contact whatsoever between any of the five figures in this painting, and none of them are looking at the viewer. There is precious little of what Alberti, a year later, might have recognised as *naturalness* in the somewhat contrived scene depicted in this painting. All figures are, without exception, locked into their own inner contemplative self. The same can be seen in van Eyck's *The Madonna and Chancellor Rolin* (1435), where the Child Jesus is making a gesture with his right hand, seeming to be engaging in a communicative process. However, there is no meeting, nor crossing, of the gazes there. And in one of van Eyck's best known paintings, *Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife*, completed in 1434, there is, once again, no eye contact between husband and wife, or between them and the viewer.

The near total absence of eye contact or "natural" communication between what appears to be frozen figures imprisoned in solitary meditation is not something that was peculiar to Johannes van Eyck's work. Nearly all other Flemish masters, throughout the 15th century, painted in the same style. Rogier van der Weyden's *The Madonna and Saint Luke*, for example, is a good example. In the painting, completed in 1435, van der Weyden pictured the saint, Luke, in the process of drawing the likeness of the Madonna and her Child. One would expect a draughtsman to study, in all minute "naturalness", his objects. In a "natural" scene Saint Luke would have his gaze firmly fixed on the Madonna and Child. But in van der Weyden's painting there is nothing of the sort: Madonna, Child, and Saint all adopt the by now familiar pose and in the background two townspeople have their backs turned towards us. Rogier

van der Weyden was also well known for his portraits of burghers and members of the lower nobility. But there again, we notice the absence of eye contact. Facing his *Portrait of a Young Woman* (1435) or his *Portrait of Philippe de Croy* (also 1435) viewers find themselves unable to catch the sitters' eye. It would be possible to argue that all the paintings mentioned above date back to 1434 or 1435, and that it simply may have been too early in that century for painters to have picked up on a new trend. In a way such a statement, or assessment, would make sense. But even as late as 1460, in one of his later paintings, i.e. *Portrait of a Woman*, van der Weyden's sitter, contemplating or meditating, still has her eyes cast slightly downwards. The point that is being made here is that throughout the best part of the 15th century, eye contact and "naturally" probing forms of communication, almost never found their way onto panels.

Diederick Bouts' painting *Ecce Agnus Dei*, completed in 1464, is a case in point. Here we have scene, supposedly taking place near the river Jordan, where John the Baptist, standing behind the man, or donor, who commissioned the painting, points in the direction of Christ who is walking on the other side of the river. Hence the title of the painting which, in translation, means "Behold the Lamb of God". There is, once again, nothing "natural" about the scene. Where one would expect both the Baptist and the donor to be fixing their gaze firmly upon the Christ, we find the figures in the painting, all three of them, locked into solitary contemplation. No gazes cross. In fact, none of the three figures in the painting is actually looking at anything or anyone in particular. A similar scene, painted some fifteen years later by

Hugo van der Goes, i.e. his *Donor with Saint John the Baptist*, has the saint pointing, over the donor's shoulder, in a particular direction whilst, almost in a dream-like state, casting his contemplative eyes downwards. The donor's eyes do not follow the line projected by the saint's pointing finger.

Later still, near the end of the century, we find other Netherlandish painters such as Hans Memlinc continuing this style of painting. In his *Deposition*, completed in 1490, three men are working together quite intensively to take down the Christ's body from the Holy Cross. Under "natural" circumstances such activity would require significant focus and coordination and those taking part in it would have to make a serious effort checking each other's intentions and actions in order to be able to successfully complete the joint mission. But on Memlinc's painting there is little of the sort going on. There are no checks. No gazes ever cross. The three men are locked in solitary contemplation. In another of Memlinc's paintings, completed also in 1490, i.e. *Virgin and Child between Saint James and Saint Dominic*, the Virgin and Child take centre stage. To her right we have Saint James commending a group of male donors (eight to be precise), and to her left Saint Dominic commending thirteen female donors. In all there are, then, twenty-five figures in this picture. And not only is it the case that not a single eye is fixed on what takes place centre stage (the Virgin and Child sitting in splendour), nor is there any eye contact between any of the figures (the Virgin and the Holy Child themselves are not looking at any of the people present in the room; in fact the Virgin is reading what can only be presumed to be the Bible). This is,

purely mathematically and geometrically speaking, a remarkable painterly feat.

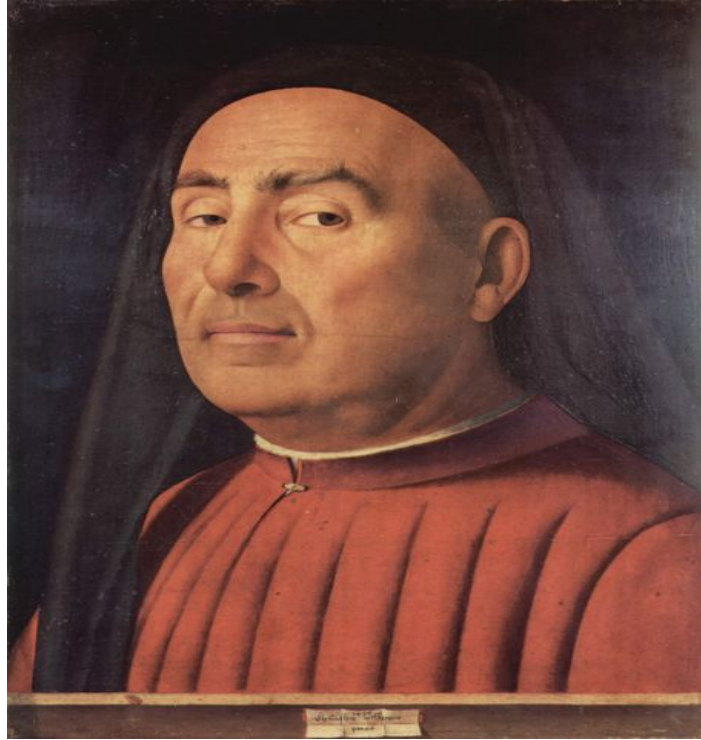


Figure 2.
Antonello da Messina
Portrait of a Man [1476]
Courtesy of Turin City Museum of Ancient Art

This then is why Antonello da Messina's male portrait series (which he painted between 1474 and 1478) are so important. It should be noted that, unlike other Italian painters, da Messina was heavily influenced by Flemish and Netherlandish painting (on this, see Berenson, 1952: 143). Quite suddenly though, around the year 1474, he accepted a number of portrait commissions of which about seven have survived to this day. What is remarkable about those portraits is that all of them, without exception, depict

the commissioning burgher with his eyes firmly fixed on the viewer. There is, most definitely, eye contact here (see Figure 2).

There is more than just eye contact, or a gaze for that matter, in this picture (or in any of the other portraits in da Messina's series). The look in these burghers' eyes betrays something of a newfound confidence, certainly. But there is something inquisitive about their gaze as well, something probing perhaps. It is as if the sitter, in the painting, is wondering about us. He could be wondering about who we are or, more precisely perhaps, about what we are about. Or indeed, these burghers are looking at us as if they are asking themselves what it is that we, those that are gazed upon, are actually thinking whilst we, in turn, are gazing upon them, wondering what might be on *their* mind. What does their gaze mean? What are they hiding? Can we trust what we see on their faces, or in their eyes? These are questions that some of us might be asking ourselves when looking at those faces who, themselves, are probably asking themselves the very same questions when they are looking us so inquisitively in the eye.

This was a new style of painting. We know that painters were technically capable of this style. At least since van Eyck they were. But one had to wait until da Messina's portrait series, all those many decades later, for this style to appear on panels, fully-fledged. Whenever that happens, i.e. whenever a new style of painting suddenly appears, this is something to take good notice of. It usually means that the artist, culturally sufficiently sensitive, and, to some extent at least, painting from sensory experience straight onto panel or canvas, was able to pick up on a trend which, at the time of painting, may

not have had the time to emerge into language yet, whether in speech or into the written word. The trend which da Messina picked up on, we shall argue in the remainder of this essay, was the birth, from within the burgher form of life, of a tactical and tactile modernity.

3. Tactical Modernity and Mobile Law (by way of Conclusion)

At the heart of the burgher's form of life one finds, if not necessarily perhaps long term oriented strategy, then at least tactics. The burgher has come to realise that his life, his individual life, depends not just on the resources and the constraints that surround him during his life's trajectory (the fact that his life follows a trajectory at all is something that the burgher has also come to realise) but also, and more importantly perhaps, on his knowledge of those resources and constraints, and his skill in negotiating them. His life, in short, depends to a significant extent on the decisions that he is able to forge out of the chaos of his world, and on the courses of action that he ultimately chooses to take. In the burgher form of life existential man is truly born.

The burgher has learnt to distance himself from himself, and to look at himself from a number of potential positions, or to use a word used throughout 15th century with relish, *perspectives*. This almost came "naturally" to him as his world had indeed, very gradually, almost waveringly at first, become one of moving positions and perspectives. In a world of moving positions and perspectives though, targets (whether resources or constraints, whether opportunities or risks) are also very much on the move. What today is an

opportunity may tomorrow represent a risk, or a liability. Who today is a friend, or an ally, can tomorrow just as easily turn into a foe or a competitor.

The burgher experiences this. He knows this. And he knows that others also know this. In fact, in his world of moving targets, others are the burgher's most significant resources and constraints. That which is on others' mind –their hopes and fears, their projects, their intentions, their ambitions, and so on- is what the burgher has become extremely interested in. The burgher however knows that the others in turn are also interested in what could, both potentially and actually, be on his own mind. And he consequently feels compelled to take all that potential, and all that potential actuality, into account in his day-to-day tactical deliberations or *inner speech*. He has thus gained a keen interest in, and indeed, in some cases even a probing curiosity about others' motives (which in French, interestingly enough, translates as *mobiles*, i.e. as that which moves).

As if all this is not complicated enough, the burgher has also awakened to the fact that, in a world of moving positions and moving perspectives, or targets, the *real* nature of resources and constraints, and the *real* mobility of others' *mobiles*, cannot always be inferred from what is visible on the surface. Human beings, the burgher has come to realise, come in layers. They have depth. That which can be seen on, or read from the surface of others' faces and eyes, or heard in their words, is largely the result of the tactical games that they are playing in a world of unrelenting movement. What people say, do and show, of course holds important information. But only in so far as it holds clues as to what remains hidden behind the others' surfaces, i.e. their

half-hidden real intentions, motives, ambitions, or projects, and their real thoughts about him (i.e. the surmising reader) and his own intentions, motives, ambitions or projects. As to the latter: what the burgher really is interested in is what others really believe that he himself is keeping hidden behind his own surface. He has, in other words, become desperately interested in others' hidden complex inner lives. There may not be too much of a coincidence in the fact that Antonello da Messina, who may have picked up on this new cultural sensitivity, also painted, at about the same time, i.e. in 1474, his *Saint Jerome in his Study*. This painting is, on the surface, about a religious theme so typical for the age: Saint Jerome is depicted in his study, translating the Bible. He is doing intellectual work, and is –to evoke burgher language– preparing to persuade and convert others to his cause, to his project. What is worth noting though is that da Messina shows us Jerome sitting in his cloister but after having taken away, so the speak, the walls of the study, as well as the outer walls of the building in which the study is located. We see the saint sitting at the very heart of a massive building, but we see him through a series of transparent walls, or through absent walls that were taken away, as it were, for the purpose of the painting. Once more da Messina seems to be suggesting that we need to work our way behind surfaces in order to grasp what really goes on behind them.

In the burgher form of life a new cultural sensitivity gradually emerges whereby submission to a fixed and immobile law no longer makes sense. In the burgher's view Law, of necessity, has to become more flexible, mobile indeed. Divine law, emanating from God's fixed and fixating eye, able to

generate only stupefied, dazed contemplation in those caught under its spell, is slowly crumbling apart in the burgher's moving world of tactical moves. Gradually and hesitating at first, but steadily, the burgher deploys and hones his tactical knowledge and his "gaming" skills (to evoke Goffman's phraseology once more). His gaze begins to wander and explore, and where it focuses, it tries to pierce inquisitively, and probingly, through all surfaces that, he presumes, hide more than they reveal. Making attempts to get to grips with others' motives in a world that is marked by the relentless churning up of complex inner selves, the burgher's gaze becomes more 'haptic'. It becomes more tactile. The birth, from within the burgher form of life, of tactical Modernity, was at the same time, as da Messina's work seem to be showing, also a tactile Modernity. Deploying a haptic gaze, da Messina's burgher surmises the contours and parameters of the tactics that might be, or must be, at work behind surfaces. But projecting tactile and tactical indeterminacy (in other words: keeping his options cautiously open) the burgher also opens up potential space for negotiation and, hence, for the further elaboration of the moving field which his world is made of.

Note

Paintings mentioned in this contribution but not reproduced above can all easily be located in a variety of internet sites.

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