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Dosso's Ambiguity

In recent years ambiguity has become a matter of great interest among scholars of early modern visual art. While the declared goal of humanistically-oriented iconology was to determine a painting's "one and real" meaning from a historical point of view, the idea has come to be accepted today that many works of Renaissance art do not correspond to this unequivocalness, but are rather open, many-sided and semantically highly ambiguous. This ambiguity may be diverse and may apply equally to the illusioned content, the relationship between the painting and the viewer or the technical dimension that yields the picture as such. Taking a work of art out of its original context as well as historical distance may considerably intensify latent qualities of ambiguity. It seems to me to be essential, however, to distinguish two basic forms of ambiguity: on the one hand, the general openness of the meaning of an image, as, for example, described by so diverse authors like Umberto Eco, Theodore W. Adorno or Hans Blumenberg as being a valid quality and a normative category of *every* work of art. And on the other hand, the ambiguity that is deliberately produced by artists, created by the omission of significant attributes, the use of equivocal symbols or the addition of extraneous motives. As stressed by Valeska von Rosen in her recent publication on Caravaggio, this "intended (structural or strategic) ambiguity" is a phenomenon discussed since antiquity under the terms of "amphibolia" or "obscuritas". Early modern Italian art theory, however, which sought first and foremost to define norms for the effective visual conversion of a more or less clearly defined content, did not deal explicitly and dominantly with visual ambiguity.

This is particularly true for religious paintings, which in spite of their being increasingly included in private picture galleries had in no way freed themselves of their functional purpose. As far as religious paintings are concerned, one kind of ambiguity is in the center of attention: the undecidability between sacred meaning and profane appearance. In the following I would like to examine a painting, in which precisely this quality – the ambiguous vacillation between the sacred and the profane – is particularly pronounced and intriguing: Dosso Dossi's so-called panel of "Saint Sebastian", today in the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan (fig. 1).

Ambiguity may not be surprising with respect to the panel's author, the court painter from Ferrara, Dosso Dossi (1486-1541/42), nor with respect to the iconography of Saint Sebastian. Dosso is an artist who, like Giorgione, is well known for complicating access to the content of his paintings. And also the iconography of Saint Sebastian has for some time already been discussed as an ambiguous form of representation: Since the figure of the patron saint of plagues was transformed from an aging bearded captain of the guard under the Roman emperor Diocletian (as described in the legend) to an ideally beautiful, youthful figure presenting itself with relish to the gaze of its viewers in all its erotic nudity, this depiction has always brought up the question of the transgression of religious content. Whereas according to early modern sources it is women who ought to be protected from the morally-corrupting image of male beauty (this is stressed by Vasari, where he praises Fra Bartolommeo's art for the lively mimesis of flesh), in the 20th century the passively effeminate, bound figure of the youthful Sebastian has become a "gay icon". The iconography of Saint Sebastian possesses an ambiguity that was recognized then as now.

Yet Dosso Dossi's painting is a *particular* example of intentionally staged ambiguity. When I in the following examine the profane qualities of this panel, my aim is not to focus merely on the sensual erotic charge of the ideal male nude figure and not merely on the representation of the body pierced by arrows – the embodied indicators of the perspectival gaze – “as the pole in which desire converges”. Instead, as I want to show, by leaving out all distinct allusion to the religious *istoria*, by the use of symbols that have sacred as well as profane significance, as well as by ingenious intensification of certain details, Dosso Dossi allows in this work, more than in any other painting of Saint Sebastian known to me, a different, profane, and thoroughly independent iconography to come to the fore: that is the iconography of the “martyrdom of love” (as I would like to call it), caused by the arrows of the ideal counterpart's gaze; a martyrdom that binds the lover in fetters which are as lamented as they are desired.

Regardless of various investigations of recent years, the “martyrdom of love” is an iconography whose independent existence and fully profane significance is not generally accepted as such to this day. Because they are located beyond a certain narrative subject, images of this iconography are usually – on account of the dominant arrow motif – interpreted as ambiguous and intentionally unclear representations of Saint Sebastian. This fact would make it necessary to extend the area of research beyond Dosso's specific panel and to trace the profane iconography of the martyrdom of love in different examples of late quattrocento and early cinquecento Italian art. Within this context this cannot be done in full detail.¹ Let me just state at this point, that I consider the iconography of the martyrdom of love also to be highly ambiguous. This ambiguity does not, however, question the profane nature of these paintings, but has to do with the specific concept of Renaissance love, the formal aesthetic execution and the relationship

between painting and viewer. Dosso Dossi's panel, however, shows a different kind of ambiguity. It is an image, which, as I would like to demonstrate, oscillates highly ambiguously between the sacred and the profane.

So the subject-matter of my paper is twofold: First, my aim will be to analyze the visual strategies with which Dosso Dossi creates ambiguity. I will do this in comparison with (less well-known) examples of the "martyrdom of love", examples, which – I hope – can substantiate my claim of the independent existence of this profane iconography and give further insight into its different variations. Secondly, however, I will examine what effect Dosso might have sought in attempting to let a profane iconography shine through in an – at least as far as the earliest known place of presentation would lead us to believe – religious panel painting? What are the implications in opening up the sacred subject to the profane subject of love to such an extent that finally only the concrete context of presentation can decide whether the panel's significance is sacred or profane?

Because of the intended publication this paper stops with the introduction here.

ⁱ See my article „Amore dolce amaro. Giorgione und das ideale Knabenbildnis der venezianischen Renaissancemalerei“, in: *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 33 (2006), pp. 113-174.