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## Vision of God - a mystagogic installation

### Nicholas of Cusa, Thomas a Kempis and Jan Van Eyck

In his book *Soliloquium*, finished around 1438, Thomas a Kempis discusses the role of images for the practice of meditation: our way on earth is full of sadness, lacking the divine fulfilment of our deepest desire – the desire for God.<sup>1</sup> In the view of Thomas a Kempis personal meditation is a crucial way to find *consolation* in this earthly condition. Quoting 1. Corinthians 13, Thomas affirms that we cannot avoid the use of images to find a perspective beyond the dark sadness we are in during our earthly existence. This need for images can be seen as a limitation and an obstacle to find ultimate happiness already in this life. In spite however of the somewhat dark colours with which Thomas paints this aspect of our human condition, he seems to believe firmly in the fact that the possibility of *consolation* belongs to our earthly life as well.<sup>2</sup> Although we are never able to see God directly, there are images enabling to remember that our life at the end is orientated towards a lightening fulfilment. These images mirrors our earthly life and presents it in another light, the mirror shows the light which cannot be seen directly. In chapter 21 of this marvellous and somewhat forgotten collection of meditations, Thomas describes the final goal of our earthly pilgrimage – in order to give hope to go on, to find orientation within the darkness and to maintain the desire instead of giving up and give space to bitterness. This goal is the heavenly Jerusalem, as it is described in *Apocalyps 21 -22*, which is at a distance and absent, but inasmuch

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<sup>1</sup> See Thomas a Kempis, *The Soliloquy of the Soul*, Charleston SC: NaBu Press, 2012 (Reprint of 1923), p. 6; 48. See also Kees Waaijman in his introduction of the Dutch translation of this work: *De alleenspraak der ziel*. Translated by Rijklof Hofman, Amsterdam: Ten Have, 2004, pp. 3-4; 34.

<sup>2</sup> See Ronald K. Rittgers, "Grief and Consolation in Early Lutheran Devotion," in: *Church History* 81/3 (2012), 601–630.

as it enables consolation also present here and now at the same time . The heavenly Jerusalem, which we are able to see in a spiritual way, is a perfect place for everything and everyone which is good and lightening. The chapter is amazing, for the description of the people coming together around the lamb, remembers almost one to one to what we can see in the famous *Ghent Altar Piece* from the famous Flemish painter and contemporary of Thomas a Kempis, Jan Van Eyck. Of course, both, Thomas' meditation and Jan Van Eyck's altarpiece refer to the same chapters of the Apocalypse, so it is not without reason that there are some similarities. Nevertheless, here is something more at stake than a common reference to the text of the Bible. Thomas a Kempis describes in his *Soliloquium* the different groups, coming together to praise the lamb in a quite detailed way: there is the group of the Prophets and Patriarchs, there are the apostles, there are the regular clergymen, there are the martyrs, there are the confessors. They all come together from different directions to praise the lamb, beholden by the Lord, by Mary and by the Lord's friend, John the Baptist. Despite some differences, e.g. the more political inspired presence of bishops and popes in Van Eyck's painting, it is amazing how one reads in the meditative text of Thomas a Kempis the imaginary of the inner panels of the *Ghent Altar Piece*.

There is, as far as I could find out, no historical evidence for a particular link between Thomas a Kempis' text and Jan van Eyck's pictorial treatise.<sup>3</sup> We have no detailed knowledge about the historical and intellectual background of Thomas' text except that it must have been written before 1438 – in other words in the same time as Van Eyck worked at its polyptych. Therefore one should be careful to speculate about the relation between Jan Van Eyck and

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<sup>3</sup> Marc de Mey, 'Performative Painting. Jan Van Eyck and the Devotio Moderna', in: Tilman Borsche/Inigo Bocken (eds.), *Kann das Denken malen? Philosophie und Malerei in der Renaissance*, München (Fink Verlag) 2010, 46-62

Thomas a Kempis. However, the sketched analogy is surprising. By referring to the amazing similarities between the imaginary of the Ghent Altar Piece and Thomas a Kempis' meditations on images exceeding the power of the senses, I want to focus on the specific interpretation of mystical experience in everyday life as it can be found in the religious reform movement of the *Devotio Moderna*.<sup>4</sup> I want to show that one can find in the *Devotio Moderna* a way of thinking or a *logic*, about how to deal with images – a way of thinking which is also present in the innovative art of painting of Jan Van Eyck. *Consolatio* in Thomas a Kempis (in his soliloquium but of course also in his *Imitatio Christi*) has to do with man's ability to deal with real and concrete images – so is the thesis I want to explore – and this dealing with images is related directly to the idea of practice, as it can be found in the *Devotio Moderna*, which is expressed by the idea of *imitatio*, the practice of man's becoming an image herself.

Connecting the *Devotio Moderna* with the painting of 15<sup>th</sup> century is not self-evident. Already since Johan Huizinga's *Autumn of the Middle Ages* the *Devotio Moderna* has the reputation of representing a narrow minded and moralistic way of life, contrary of the great cultural innovations in the art of 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Huizinga's contempt of the *Devotio Moderna* had much of an influence, and even recently there has been scholarly enterprises, like that of Sabine Augath on Jan Van Eyck's *Ars mystica*. In fact she repeats there the idea that the personal piety in the daily life as it can be found in the *Devotio Moderna* is,

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<sup>4</sup> There has been done some research already on the relation between Jan Van Eyck and the *devotio moderna*: Marc de Mey, 'Performative Painting. Jan Van Eyck and the *Devotio Moderna*', in: Tilman Borsche/Inigo Bocken (eds.), *Kann das Denken malen? Philosophie und Malerei in der Renaissance*, München (Fink Verlag) 2010, 46-62; Hans Belting, *Florenz und Bagdad. Eine westöstliche Geschichte des Blicks*, München (Beck), 2007; Inigo Bocken, 'Performative Vision. Jan Van Eyck, Nicholas of Cusa and the *Devotio Moderna*', in: Gerhard Jaritz (Ed.), *Ritual, Images and Daily Life. The Medieval Perspective*, Berlin 2012, blz.95-106.

contrary to the splendid mysticism of Van Eyck, only the expression of a limited and moralistic even simplistic piety.<sup>5</sup>

In this contribution, I want to show how *Devotio Moderna's* turn towards concrete practice does not only contain a simple ascetic rejection of sophisticated theological reasoning, or of the richness of sensual perception, – as it is often has been seen,<sup>6</sup> but initiates far more a new paradigm of the interpretation of practice, in which visual experience and performance play a crucial role. I hope to make clear that there is a relationship between the religious practices of the *devotio moderna* and the contemporary innovative practice of painting as it can be found in the work of Jan van Eyck. As was already mentioned before, this relation is not self-evident. For not an insignificant number of art historians point to the severe contrast between the critical attitude towards sensual images of this reform movement and the fascination for human vision, as it finds its expression in the naturalistic images of precious stones and robes in the paintings of the Flemish artist. These seem to refer far more to the extreme luxury of the Court of Burgundy, of which Jan van Eyck was the envoy, as to the duty of a sober life of the pious brethren and sisters of common life. Nevertheless, I see a fundamental relation between the form of thinking of the *imitatio Christi* and the Eyckian conception of painting, mainly in his 'play of realism' (as the art historian Craig Harbison characterised the work of Van Eyck).<sup>7</sup> It is my thesis, that the concordance consists in the *performative* character of vision, which can be found both in the religious practice and in the painting. Therefore, I think that one can interpret the major

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<sup>5</sup> See Sabine Augath, *Jan Van Eyck's „ars mystica“*, Paderborn: Fink Verlag, 2007, passim.

<sup>6</sup> See Kees Veelenturf, *Geen povere schoonheid. Laat-middeleeuwse kunst in verband met de Moderne Devotie*, Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> See Craig Harbison, *Jan Van Eyck: The Play of Realism*, Chicago: Redaktion press, 1997, 24 and passim.

work of Van Eyck, the famous Ghent Altar Piece as an expression of the performative logic of the *Devotio Moderna*. We have to do something, before we are able to contemplate the divine light, already present in reality, nevertheless hidden by the shadows of our life. The 'play of realism' opens the space for those who are searching for the vision of God in their concrete visual experiences, in the midst of daily practice. I will understand, in other words, the Ghent Altar Piece, as a kind of mystagogic installation, which invites the viewer to enter and to discover the divine by participating the concrete process of vision and perception.

I will show this logic by way of referring to the thought of Nicholas of Cusa, who lived and worked in the same time and in the same region, and whose work can be seen as a kind of theoretical reinterpretation of the challenges of the lay movement of the modern devotion. Mainly his work *De visione Dei* (The Vision of God) may be helpful to understand the Ghent Altar Piece as this mystagogic installation.

We do not know whether Nicholas of Cusa ever have met Jan van Eyck, or even ever have seen his paintings. There is no historical indication that these two personalities of 15<sup>th</sup> century Northern Europe had personal relations. But there can be no doubt that they were very close to each other and that they operated in the same circles. Nicholas of Cusa was active as papal diplomat in the same region as Jan van Eyck was the envoy of the duke of Burgundy.<sup>8</sup> Finally – and perhaps the most important to notice – they were both in close contact with the spiritual movement of the brethren and sisters of common

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<sup>8</sup> Wolfgang Schneider compared the travelling of Van Eyck with that of Cusa and concluded that it must have been difficult for them to avoid each other. See: Wolfgang Christian Schneider, "Betrachtung, Aufstieg und Ordnung in Jan Van Eyck.", in: Harald Schwaetzer/Marc De Mey (Eds.), *Videre et videri coincidunt. Theorien des Sehens in der ersten Hälfte des 15. Jahrhunderts*, Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2011, 209-236.

life, the *devotio moderna*. It is in this triangle that I will develop this idea of the Ghent Altar Pieces as a mystagogic installation.

### **1. Imitation and consolation in the devotio moderna**

One of the main reasons for the success of the *devotio moderna* was certainly the strong development of the cities in the Netherlands and Flanders in 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>9</sup> The movement can be seen as a kind of monastic life for the citizen.<sup>10</sup> The urban character of this reform movement, initiated by Geert Groote, had its implications for its attitude towards the decreasing hierarchical interpretation of reality. And urban life always supposes social flexibility: the son of a vine grower from Kues was able to become cardinal of the Roman Church, a craftsman professor or mystician.<sup>11</sup>

In the view of the main spiritual authors, like Thomas a Kempis, the divine hierarchy never can be exhausted by human attempts to create order. It is in the practice of daily life that the inner reform has to take place. The brethren and sisters of common life had to find their own being image of God – *imitatio Christi* – by living their humble active life and to perform their reform towards Christ in daily duties and work. It is not only within the important authors that one can find this idea, as e.g. in the sister books, like that of Emmerich, in which the author says that ‘the daily work at the spinning wheel is my prayer, my practice is my contemplation.

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<sup>9</sup> See John van Engen, *The Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: A History of the Devotio Moderna*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008, 20.

<sup>10</sup> See Berndt Hamm, *The Reformation of Faith in the Context of Late Medieval Piety*, Leiden: Brill, 2004, 45.

<sup>11</sup> See Berndt Hamm, *Lazarus Spengler (1479-1534): Der Nürnberger Ratsschreiber im Spannungsfeld von Reformation und Humanismus*, Tübingen: Mohr und Siebeck, 2004, 123 and passim.

Geert Groote and Thomas a Kempis were very well aware of the fact that human being never can leave the domain of human action, which is the field in which God's action becomes apparent.<sup>12</sup> Inspired by nominalist theology, the faithful had in this view the task to discover the active power of God within the human order of action.<sup>13</sup>

In his *imitation of Christ*, Thomas a Kempis stresses the fact that it is far more important to practice e.g. compunction as to know its definition<sup>14</sup> – it is not so important to be able to give sophisticated theological or philosophical explanations. Therefore it is the concrete practical realisation of the Gospel in concrete individual life. Concrete life is so to say the stage for the Gospel in order to become visible. The famous specialist in the field of the *devotio moderna* Rudolf van Dijk used to argue that *imitatio* also means *to become an image yourself*.<sup>15</sup> Action is the highest form of theory, of seeing God – we are able to see God in daily practices, in the way we deal with these. We are always tempted to hide ourselves behind our knowledge, our judgements. As such we avoid to become the image of God ourselves. Not these judgments count, but only the one, hidden judgment of God.<sup>16</sup> This may be unknown in itself, but can become manifest through the concrete individual life by discernment. Already in the beginning of the book *De Imitatione Christi* there can be found an interesting remark on this, when Thomas a Kempis asks himself whether all

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<sup>12</sup> See Heiko Oberman, *The Two Reformations. The Journey from the Last Days to the New World*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, 36-42; see also Wolfgang Göbel, *Die Subjektgeltung des Menschen im Praktischen nach der Entfaltungslogik der Geschichte*, Freiburg i.B./Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, 1996, 62-64.

<sup>13</sup> See Louis Dupré *A Passage to Modernity. An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Culture*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, 120.

<sup>14</sup> See Thomas a Kempis, *De imitatione Christi*, ed. Rudolf van Dijk, Kampen: Ten Have, 2008, I, 1, 3.

<sup>15</sup> See Rudolf van Dijk, introduction of the translation, in: Thomas a Kempis, *De imitatione Christi* Kampen: Ten Have 2008, ii.

<sup>16</sup> *De imitatione Christi*, I, 3, 1.



these theologians with their judgments about the Trinity, would ever have asked what Trinity judges about themselves.<sup>17</sup> Before Thomas, nominalist thinkers made already clear that it is not possible to grasp God's judgment by way of philosophical or theological reasoning. In this remark of Thomas a Kempis we learn that we have to find God's judgement in our own practical life, in our *doing*. There we are able to learn to discern between the shadows and the light, already present in our life. To see God means in fact to become a lightning image ourselves – *imitatio Christi* – and images expressing the lightning stories of the Gospel can help us. They can become a paradigm for our own itinerary from the darkness into the light, as Thomas a Kempis says in the first sentences of his *imitatio Christi*, quoting the letter of John.<sup>18</sup>

This way of practical dealing with mysticism has often been the reason why scholars did not take serious too much the theological and philosophical content of the *Devotio Moderna*.<sup>19</sup> Looking to the *Devotio Moderna* through the glasses of Nicholas of Cusa however, the theological value of this new mode of practical mysticism can be acknowledged.<sup>20</sup> Even if Nicholas of Cusa did not belong to the inner circle of the *Devotio Moderna*, recent studies showed intensive relations between the cardinal and the religious reform movement. Cusanus founded by heritage the *bursa cusana* in Deventer, enabling 20 young people to study at the Latin school of the Brethren of the

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<sup>17</sup> *De imitatione Christi* I,1,3.

<sup>18</sup> *De imitatione Christi* praefatio.

<sup>19</sup> See Alfons Auer, *Die vollkommene Frömmigkeit des Christen. Nach dem Enchiridion militis christiani des Erasmus von Rotterdam*, Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1954, 65.

<sup>20</sup> See Inigo Bocken, „Visions of Reform. Lay Piety as a Form of Thinking in Nicholas of Cusa”, in: Christopher M. Bellito/David Zacharias Flanagan (Eds.), *Reassessing Reform. A Historical Investigation into Church Renewal*, Washington: Catholic University Press, 2012, 214-232.

common life and as papal legate in the Netherlands,<sup>21</sup> he was responsible for the foundation of several houses in the Windesheim tradition. He even attempted to establish the Windesheim rule also in other monasteries. Still more, we find major traces in his philosophical and theological works – one even could say that Nicholas of Cusa was a *critical friend* of the *Devotio moderna*: understanding its spiritual and theological potential, and avoiding its anti-intellectual impetus at the same time.

There is a clear relationship between this paradigm of theory and action and the figure of the *idiotus* in Cusanus, in his three books on the layman. It is often said that the *devotio moderna* was a *lay* movement, a movement of people without theological formation, without knowledge of Latin, people of the practice: citizens of the towns in the Netherlands, craftsmen, trademen, politicians, ... *idiotus* (from the Greek *idios*, the one who does it on his own way), or *illiteratus* are the Latin words, used for this state of being.<sup>22</sup>

In Cusa's *idiotus de mente*, the layman is a craftsman, a spoonmaker, who hardly can read or write, but who understands very well mystical theology and knows the secrets of divine creativity. In making his spoons, he discovers the divine creativity in his own way of doing – therefore human being is an image of the divine creativity. Nicholas never ceases to stress that human being has the ability to think himself even in his active and practical life. The *idiotus* is the one who is able to liberate himself from every form of outer knowledge of tradition and to understand that wisdom proclaims itself openly in the streets (*sapientia enim clamat in plateis*, as he says in his *Idiotus de sapientia* and his *De apice*

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<sup>21</sup> See Maarten J.F.M. Hoenen, "Ut pia testatoris voluntas observetur. Die Stiftung der *bursa cusana* in Deventer." In: Inigo Bocken (Ed.), *Conflict and Reconciliation. Perspectives on Nicholas of Cusa*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2004, 53-76.

<sup>22</sup> See Inigo Bocken 2012 o.c. 220.

*theoriae*). The whole process of truth and reality starts all over again with every individual in his concrete existence. As is stressed in the main writings of the *devotio moderna*, e.g. in the *De imitation Christi*, every human being has to follow the path of Christ over and over again. And *imitation of Christ* does not only mean to the pious 'following' Christ, but also expressing Him with his own life, only by fulfilling daily tasks – not by developing sophisticated theological systems, but by doing.

This way of thinking practical mysticism is still intensified in Cusa's marvellous book of 1453, *De visione Dei* – the vision of God. The book contains nothing less than a mystagogic installation, helping the reader to see God with earthly eyes, already in this life, in his concrete doing.<sup>23</sup>

## **2. Mystagogy in Nicholas of Cusa's *De visione Dei***

The scenery of the *De visione Dei* may be well known. The book is written on behalf of the Benedictine monks of the Abbey of Tegernsee, who asked the cardinal for help in their spiritual search. They receive a painting, an omnivoyant portrait, whose gaze follows the viewer of the painting. It is interesting that Cusanus refers here in the text to a self-portrait of the Flemish painter Rogier van der Weyden, which was in the town hall of Brussels in the time of Cusanus.<sup>24</sup> This reference not only attests to the awareness of Cusanus

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<sup>23</sup> See Inigo Bocken, *Performative Vision: Jan Van Eyck, Nicholas of Cusa and the devotio moderna*, in: Gerhard Jaritz (Ed.), *Ritual, Images and the Daily Life. The Medieval Perspective*, Münster: Litt Verlag, 2012, 95-112.

<sup>24</sup> "Pandam nunc quae vobis dilectissimis fratribus ante promiseram circa facultatem mysticae theologiae. Arbitror enim vos, quos scio zelo dei duci, dignos, quibus hic thesaurus aperiatur utique pretiosus valde et maxime fecundus, orans imprimis mihi dari verbum supernum et sermonem omnipotentem, qui solum se ipsam pandere potest, ut pro captu vestro enarrare queam mirabilia, quae supra omnem sensibilem rationalem et intelletualem visum revelantur. Conabor autem simplicissimo atque communissimo modo vos experimentaliter in sacratissimam obscuritatem manuducere, ubi dum eritis inaccessibleem lucem adesse sentientes quisque ex se temptabit modo, quo sibi a deo concedetur, continue propius acedere et hic praegustare quodam suavissimo libamine cenam illam aeternae felicitates, ad quam vocati sumus in verbo vitae per evangelium Christi semper

of the newest developments in the visual arts of his time, but also shows how he is of the opinion that the vision of God – or *theoria* – can be found within actual cultural and human practices.<sup>25</sup> In classical tradition since Plato, the ideal of *theoria* was reserved only for those who were free from earthly duties and cares.<sup>26</sup> Human action was in a way an obstacle for the action of God, leading the soul to its original state. The reference to a work of art made by human hands – not an *acheiropoieton* – as the context in which the vision of God can be realized, is significant for a tendency present in the whole of Cusanus' work. Cusanus expresses this tendency himself in *Idiota de sapientia* and *De apice theoriae*, where he describes how in an earlier time he was searching for the divine truth and wisdom in dark and remote rooms. But “now” he realizes that, with the psalmists words, “wisdom is proclaiming everywhere in the streets.” (*clamat in plateis*).<sup>27</sup> Cusanus seems to be convinced that the monks of Tegernsee are able to reach *theoria*, the vision of God, within the time of this earthly life, this means within the universe of their daily experience.<sup>28</sup>

Cusanus develops a scene of theatre, to which the monks are invited to participate. It is a kind of experiment, which only makes sense if the reader, as the viewer, really becomes part of it in an active way. The experiment is a practice (*praxis*), in which – in the words of the French historian and

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benedicti. (...) Harum etsi multae reperiantur optime pictae,—uti illa sagittarii in foro Nurembergensi, et Bruxellis Rogeri maximi pictoris in pretiosissima tabula, quae in praetorio habetur, et Confluentiae in capella mea Veronicae, et Brixinae in Castro angeli arma ecclesiae tenentis, et multae aliae undique—, ne tamen deficiatis in praxi, quae sensibilem talem exigit figuram, quam habere potui, caritati vestrae mitto tabellam, figuram cuncta videntis tenentem, quam eiconam Dei appello.”  
 Nicholas of Cusa, *De visione Dei* I, h VI, 1-2.

<sup>25</sup> See Elena Filippi/Harald Schwaetzer (Eds.), *Spiegel der Seele. Reflexionen über Mystik und Malerei*, Münster: Aschendorff, 2012, 1-5.

<sup>26</sup> See Hannelore Rausch, *Theoria. Von ihrer sakralen zur philosophischen Bedeutung*, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1982, 23.

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *Idiota de sapientia* I, h V, n.3; *De apicte theoriae* h XIII, n. 5

<sup>28</sup> See Inigo Bocken, *Performative vision. O.c.* 99.

philosopher Michel de Certeau – the act enables the words.<sup>29</sup> The vision of God cannot be achieved through theoretical efforts, but only inasmuch as the reader/viewer of the painting himself follows the path which is shown by Cusanus. Whoever enters this scenic space understands how he will be able to see the invisible divine light. The monk has to move from the right to the left and vice versa around the portrait, getting the impression that it has been made only for him and that he is in the centre of the attention of the gaze. The more the viewer explores this way of seeing, the more he feels he is confirmed in his impression that he is at the centre. The amazement of the viewer circling around the portrait is intensified further when his brother in faith, performing the same experiment, reports the same experience. The fact that the second monk, coming from the opposite direction, has the same experience, is incomprehensible for the first one. He cannot understand this, unless he believes what his colleague on the circle around the portrait is telling him – that he is in the centre of the attention as well. “And so, through the disclosure of the respondent he will come to know that that face does not desert anyone who is moving – not even those who are moving in opposite directions.”<sup>30</sup> He discovers that what he sees is only his way of seeing, from a concrete, determined point of view. He is not at the centre at all; his way of seeing is only one of many ways of seeing. The point of the experiment, however, is that Cusanus does not see any reason to deny the truth of this concrete way of seeing – this perspective. Both perspectives are true. It is only within his concrete way of seeing that the viewer understands that it is impossible to see perfectly and fully what he sees.<sup>31</sup> In other words: we see the invisible, because

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<sup>29</sup> See Michel de Certeau, *La fable mystique. XVIème-XVIIème siècle*, Paris: Gallimard 2013, 32.

<sup>30</sup> See *De visione Dei* I.

<sup>31</sup> See *De visione Dei*, II.

we take into account that there are other viewers, and therefore always other perspectives - and in the view of Cusanus, this paradox is one of the main characteristics of all visual perception. Contrary to the main spiritual tradition since Plato and Neoplatonism, for Cusanus even spiritual vision is not a special kind of mental vision (*theoria*), it belongs to the possibilities of physical perception itself. The vision of God consists in the awareness of the paradoxes within our physical perception.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, the viewer understands why he is not able to see the portrait as it is in itself. For it is impossible to take a point of view other than his own. In *De docta ignorantia* Cusanus stresses that even if we would try another thousand years to imitate the position of the other, we never will achieve it.<sup>33</sup> We may be tied to our own perspective, but we are not its prisoners. The fact of being bound to our own concrete way of seeing and experiencing is, in the view of Cusanus, not the expression of a tragic situation at all. For it is only from within this perspective that we are able to understand that there are other ways of seeing and understanding. There always will be perspectives that we do not immediately grasp. However, this knowledge opens the possibility of seeing other perspectives. A human being is able to move in several directions in order to collect more points of view, though he only is able to integrate these within his own way of seeing. Therefore, Cusanus is able to quote in the sixth chapter of *De visione Dei* the critical argument of the Greek philosopher Xenophanes. There he says that God is for the lion a lion, for the ox an ox, for

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<sup>32</sup> See Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn. Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014, 120.

<sup>33</sup> "Etiam si mille annis unus aliam imitari studeret in quocumque, numquam tamen praecisionem attingeret, licet differentia sensibilis aliquando non percipiatur." *De docta ignorantia* II, 1., h I, n. 95.

the young man he appears as a young man, for the old man like an older man.<sup>34</sup> It is important that Cusanus quotes here Xenophanes – a citation that, as far as I know, is not found in any other medieval text.<sup>35</sup> For Cusanus, the argument gets a new meaning: it does not demonstrate the anthropomorphic way of religious thinking, as was the case in Xenophanes. Rather, it stresses the unavoidable character of human practices, in this case the practice of making images (which is one of the themes of the book, as the reference to van der Weyden may have shown already). In the view of Cusanus, the unavoidable character of images gives reason to take serious concrete human practices. Even the most abstract metaphysical insights and ideas are bound to the practical human imagination.

Therefore, the vision of God necessarily takes place within the context of human acting and practice. The divine truth remains invisible, but it is an invisibility working within the visible. It would become visible if human beings could see all perspectives at once, which is impossible. Nevertheless this impossibility belongs to the possibilities of human vision. And besides, this impossibility teaches something fundamental about the nature of the divine, being the infinite whole of perspectives. The impossibility to grasp all these perspectives at once, does not exclude the perspective of the human viewer from the whole of perspectives, being thought by Cusanus as a circle with an infinite number of angles. The perspective of the human viewer is actually taking part of the infinity of perspectives of the divine vision, although this divine vision never can be ‘seen’ except through one concrete perspective.

The experiment shows that the viewer is not outside the circle around the painting, s/he is part of it – and is confronted with the challenge to become an

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<sup>34</sup> See *De visione Dei* c. 6; h VI, n. 19.

<sup>35</sup> Pauline Moffit Watts, *Nicolau Cusanus. A Fifteenth Century Vision of Man* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 115.

image himself – a living image (*viva imago*).<sup>36</sup> The point of this argument is that this “invisible” truth is not separated from the process of visual seeing, but belongs to the more comprehensive spiritual task to become aware of being this living image.

Again and again, Cusanus gives examples of these kinds of vanishing points within every visual perception. What is interesting here is the phenomenological way Cusanus is arguing when he shows that our direct way of seeing – our perspective – has been interrupted in the words of Michel de Certeau “suddenly”.<sup>37</sup> The act of perceiving itself confronts us with the limits of our perception. The confrontation with these limits is interpreted by Cusanus as an appeal to see in a new way, and as such to become an image himself. In *De visione Dei*, the viewer sees “suddenly” that he is the one who is viewed himself, being living image. In his perspective there appears a vanishing point, which shows him the gaze of the other.

In the last part I want to return to Jan Van Eyck and show some fragments of the Ghent Altar piece in order to show how the Eyckian functions as a theatre of contemplation, a mystagogic circle in which the viewer is guided towards the vision of God already in this daily life. By referring to *De visione Dei* of Nicholas of Cusa I want to show how the logic of *consolatio* and *imitatio* as they are central in the *devotio moderna*, are constitutive for this theatrical installation.

### 3. *The Ghent Altar Piece as mystagogy*

It is difficult not to get fascinated by the very detailed and concrete naturalistic representation of reality in this major work of van Eyck in the Saint-Bavo-

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<sup>36</sup> See *Idiota de mente* h V, n. 106.

<sup>37</sup> See Michel de Certeau, o.c. 46.



Cathedral in Ghent. Often, this naturalism is interpreted as expression of a secularisation of the divine.<sup>38</sup> However, one may believe that it is far more a mystagogic play with the viewer which is played here by the painter. The painting invites the viewer to enter its space, in order to follow the traces of light. These lightening traces direct the viewer through the whole of the painting. It is by way of the everywhere presence of light that the objects and the persons in the painting are painted. In other words: Van Eyck is not painting the light as an objective reality – far more it is the road of the light which forms the framework of visible nature. The extreme realism as it is found in the painting, is not only an extraordinary technical achievement which opens exterior nature as it is in its own. Far more it has a mystagogic meaning. One of the fundamental procedures which form the dynamic structure of the representation, is without any doubt the reflection and refraction of the light, which can be found everywhere in the picture, precisely as is described in the optics of Alhazen. This refraction leads the eye of the viewer towards different points, collecting his attention and organising at the same time nature in its proper dynamical movement. The painting invites the viewer to play the play of light, a play one is able to see in various reflecting effects. Everywhere on the painting, there are mirrors to be found, which reflect the light, light invisible in itself, but becoming visible in the mirrors, which are the painted objects themselves – as e.g. Michel de Certeau described this). The light is nowhere, it is invisible, one is only able to see nature, buildings, bishops or pilgrims, precious stones or armatures. Likewise all these things are points of reflection. In the work of Van Eyck, the structure of things is formed within this process of reflection (as one can see in these stones, IMAGE 2]. However, it is a paradoxical structure: using the effects of reflection and refraction of light, and

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<sup>38</sup> See Norbert Schneider, „Aequalitas. Zu Jan Van Eycks Porträts.“ In: Inigo Bocken (Ed.), *Kann das Denken malen? Philosophie und Malerei in der Renaissance*, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2010, 155-165.

inasmuch the painted things are in fact points of reflection, one does not see what one sees.

This paradoxical structure becomes likewise manifest in the *mise en scene* of the painting. As for example here in the armature of the soldiers, the *milites of Christ*. It is easy to observe that even the armatures are working like mirrors. Here one is able to see an ambiguity by regarding the reality which is mirrored in the metal of the uniform. One is able to see the outline of green pastures, fractured in the reflected metal. It is nothing else as the landscape, which is the background of all the lowest panels. This means however, that the mirrored landscape should be situated before the painting, which is impossible, for it forms its background. Here we find an ambiguity, an interruption of natural vision.<sup>39</sup>

The play with the mirrors obtains still more depth, looking to the fountain in the midst of the lower panel. In the metal of the fountain as in the spurts of water one is able to see a reflected image. It is the window of the Vijd Chapel one can see here – this means: the concrete and original location of the painting [image].

This is what one should expect in the armature of the *milites Christi*. The viewer, who is invited to make some efforts in order to see the play of mirror and reflection, realises that he entered the space where the divine happening is becoming developed. The ambiguous reflection forms so to say a circle around the painting, a circle in which the viewer is able to take part of the vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem. Here he is confronted with a task to be fulfilled – namely

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<sup>39</sup> James H. Marrow, "Illusionism and Paradox in the Art of Jan Van Eyck", in: Caroline Zöhl/Mara Hoffmann (Eds.), *Ars nova. Studies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Northern Painting and Illumination*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2007, 156-175.

to realise the synthesis of these different perspectives within the painting. The window of the Vijd Chapel appearing everywhere in the painting, shows the viewer that it is not only the chapel which is present within the painting, but also the viewer, present in the chapel. By looking to the painting, he is present already in the vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem. The Heavenly Jerusalem is not here, we lack its fullness in our earthly existence, but the image is offering consolation – makes present what is absent, makes visible which is invisible – and for this, the viewer has to *do* something, to enter into the circle around the painting.

Here we can find an explanation for the ambiguity of perspectives: taking part in the event, the viewer finds the traces of light, through surprising reflections everywhere in the painting. The viewer does not have the all-seeing eye of the central perspective in the Italian art, which is a perspective *from the outside*. The viewer in Eyckian painting finds him/herself within the circle around the lamb, this means Christ and being within this circle, he has to look actively for a position allowing him/her to take part in the light. In the Eyckian perspective, it is not the viewer who is outside of the painting, but it is the light, which is likewise everywhere and nowhere. As a consequence, the viewer is present within the painting, he is invited to become part of it.<sup>40</sup>

Again and again in the works of Jan Van Eyck, there can be found small and almost invisible figures, looking at the painted scenery. Although these figures are generally not the main actors on the scene, they do take part in the event – sometimes in a somewhat irritating way. It is mostly not very clear what these

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<sup>40</sup> See Inigo Bocken, "The Viewers in the Ghent Altar Piece", in: *Marc de Mey/Cyriel Stroo (Eds.), Vision and Material. Interaction between Art and Science in Jan Van Eyck's Time*, Brussels: Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten, 2012, 118-131.

viewers are doing, and who they are. The most famous ones are, without any doubt, the small figures in the mirror of the Arnolfini-portray [IMAGE ].

It has been discussed already thousand times whether they are witnesses of a wedding, or do we see the painter and his assistant at work, who are looking to us from far beyond the surface of the image, through the mirror in the centre of the scenery? [IMAGE 2] Perhaps it is exaggerated when the art historian Yvonne Yiu tells us that it is the eye of the infinite God, which we see through the mirror<sup>41</sup> – nevertheless, what we see is quite mysterious, and at least we can say that Van Eyck succeeded in challenging generations of scholars and viewers to look deep into the centre of his painting, and to start reflecting about the question what it means to be the viewer of a painting, what it means to make paintings and to look at them.<sup>42</sup>

There have been already a lot of discussions on the meaning of the Arnolfini Wedding. However, the viewers in the Arnolfini portrait are by far not the only of their kind in the work of Van Eyck. Less central, although unavoidably present, we see appearing in the Van der Paele on the shield of Saint Georges a figure in such a subtle way, that it was only discovered some decades ago: it is the silhouette of a viewer – or perhaps that of the painter, who is in the end a viewer too. He is present in an almost invisible way, although he is there, and once we have seen him, we are not able anymore not to see him – once we have seen this figure we cannot avoid the question on the relation between what has been seen and the one who sees.

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<sup>41</sup> Yvonne Yiu, *Jan van Eyck. Das Arnolfini Doppelbildnis. Reflexionen über die Malerei*, Frankfurt (Stroemfeld), 2001, 15.

<sup>42</sup> Erwin Panofsky, 'Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait', in: *Burlington Magazine* 64 (1934), p.117-127

In the painting of Chancellor Rolin, they are there in a prominent way, our viewers [Image ]. They are present again in the centre of the painting. They – or at least one of them – are looking into the immense – almost an infinite developing landscape, and they have the same direction of seeing as us, the viewers of the painting. There is a path on the floor, leading to those two small figures, a path inviting the viewer of the painting to participate in a direct and immediate way in the sacred events, painted here.

By way of the central position of the viewer, the border between the world of the image and the world of the actual viewers becomes transparent. The imaginary world is at the same time *our* world. The reality of the image seems to become perfect only by the presence of the viewers.

In this contribution I want to show that the presence of viewers in Van Eyck's painting is not accidental at all – they tell us something about the way Van Eyck is reflecting in his paintings on the human abilities to see, they show us how Van Eyck is exploring the possibilities and limits of human vision, searching the limits of seeing, the *invisible*. 'Als ich can', as much as I can, showing the border between what can be seen and what is invisible. For it is the explicit presence of a viewer, which reminds us that our seeing always is mediated – it is us we are seeing, and there are always other ways of seeing. The painter however is able to show that what we see, is always that what is seen by human eyes. I want to elaborate this idea, by referring to the main – or at least the biggest – work of Jan Van Eyck, the Ghent Altar Piece.

For also here we find them back, our viewers, although it is (as in the Van der Paele) very difficult to see them, they are almost invisible for the superficial viewer, nevertheless – they are there. And from the moment on, we discover

them; we cannot avoid the question anymore why they are there. For as we now, in the work of Van Eyck, no detail is painted 'by accident', just like that, without having thought about it. Jan Van Eyck is the master of the detail, and if we discover a disquieting scene, we almost can be sure, that we are confronted with one of his famous riddles, as Marc de Mey mentioned in an earlier article.<sup>43</sup>

We find the almost invisible viewers at the outside panel of the Ghent Altar Piece, which can be seen in its closed position [IMAGE]. Here, we are witnesses of an annunciation scenery, the starting point of the sacred history, the moment in which Mary becomes aware of her unique historical role as bearer of future salvation of mankind.

The event of which we are the witnesses, is nothing less than the turning point in the history of mankind, however, the world seems to be not aware of it: the panel is characterized by a fundamental contrast between the inside event of annunciation and the outside world, the town with all its rumor, people walking around and talking about the things of the world. From within this inner, divine event of annunciation Van Eyck offers us a perspective on the outside world, which can be seen through the window, and which is not at all in the centre of the attention of the actors within the room.

Exactly at the vanishing point in the shadow of a tower at the end of the street, we are able to see three figures, which are staying there, somewhat in a distance from the other people in the town. They belong to the earthly town,

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<sup>43</sup> Marc De Mey, 'The Ghent Altar Piece and Performative Painting', in: Inigo Bocken/Tilman Borsche (Eds.), *Kann das Denken malen? Philosophie und Malerei in der Renaissance*, München 2010, p. 54-69.

but at the same time, they are not totally absorbed by the multitude, they seem to have other attentions than most of the people in the street. The street life is full of the light of the sun, but our viewers seem to be the only ones who are focused on the source of the light, which is not visible in the painting. They are seeing something which escapes the attention of the other people, and which we, viewers of the painting, are not able to see. They see, in other words, the invisible, the source of the light, which is dispersed everywhere in the scenery – and as we see later on – everywhere in the painting.

The act of seeing the invisible, which Van Eyck presents to us here, therefore, seems to connect two different worlds: the seeing actors are part of the outside world, which can be seen through the window – the outside world with all its everyday life events. However, Van Eyck shows clearly that these figures are looking to something above these everyday life events. It is as if they have a subtle awareness of something not belonging to the world of the painted scenery, something which does not belong to the image we are confronted with. When these figures are actually viewers, they literally see the invisible, that which is outside the framework of the image. Are they perhaps aware of the unique divine event, the annunciation of future salvation, which is taking place very near, in the humble and somewhat narrow room at the front of the painting? At least they seem to represent an interruption of the everyday life events, we are able to see and as such they may refer to the contrast between the inner world of the room and the outside world of the street.

## Conclusion

Both in the work of Van Eyck, as in Nicholas of Cusa, one is able to find a far developed attention for the active and decisive role of the viewer, the participant of the event – this means, the individual human being, who has to realise its relation with the divine, in order to find the vision of God and to become living image of God himself. It is here the same logic as can be found in the Thomas a Kempis, in his *Imitatio Christi* but also in his later work, the *Soliloquium*. The relation with the divine has to be gained over and over again, it finds its starting point with every individual. The viewer has to *do* something, in order to be able to imitate Christ, becoming image of God himself. This is the *consolatio*, that we have the ability to make the invisible divine reality visible with our own life, to make present which is absent.

In the logic of the *devotio moderna*, with whom Jan Van Eyck was familiar, the vision of God can be realised only in a very concrete manner, in the way we are looking to the world. In his *Soliloquium*, Thomas a Kempis describes how the pious searcher of God, distressed by the darkness of the world, can find consolation by making images of the heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>44</sup> These images are presenting some of the light of God already in this world, and as Thomas stresses, in an immediate way. The work must have been written around 1430, and contains almost one to one the description of the way Van Eyck is interpreting the book of Apocalypse in the open panel. It is the role of these images of consolation, to show that the vision of God is, although only partial,

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas a Kempis, *Soliloquium animae*, 1473; edited and translated by Rijcklof Hofman, Amsterdam (Ten Have), 2004.



is a real, concrete vision, a way to deal with the material conditions of this world.

The technical achievements of Van Eyck should not be reduced to this pious ideal; nevertheless, they cannot be isolated from it. Van Eyck, Cusanus and Thomas are challenging us to look as carefully as possible to what we, viewers, in fact are seeing. Perhaps they can learn us, that we, viewers of the painting are present within the reality of the painted scenery itself.