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The return of the nimbus

Sybrandt van Keulen

In painting, the halo has increasingly been applied during the first centuries of the Christian era. This symbol has been given various names by the iconographer: nimbus, aureole, and gloryⁱ. The Romans employed the expression *nimbus* in all sorts of combinations: *nimbus florum* to indicate a shower of blossoms, or *nimbus sagittarum* for a shower of arrows, and *nimbus numismatum* for a shower of money. Linked to this usage, 'nimbus' often means a 'luminescent cloud'. Sometimes depicted nontransparent, other times transparent, in a microscopic thin line, but also sometimes in different colours, and even in gold leaf. They certainly have not just the geometric shape of a circle, triangle or quadrangle, but are even very often shaped as multiform flames or a powerful jet or a fountain of sparks. The nimbus could also be depicted in the shape of a luminescent shadow, as a kind of garment of someone.

It has not known a fixed shape, neither was the nimbus exclusively used in the Christian or Western world. In the East as well as in the West, the aureole is 'symbol of power' and the 'ornament' (in the terms of the iconographer) of divinity, typical of both good and evil powers which influence the individual and the society. There is a picture of the Hindu goddess Maya with her head, shoulders, and underarms surrounded by a nimbus of sparks and rays, partly enclosed by a zigzag aureole, while she stands barefooted on a rolling sea of milk that comes from her own breasts, which she holds with her hands and which spout like fountains through her fingers.

It is impossible to determine with certainty when the aureole was used for the first time; it seems as old as ancient religions. The nimbus was adopted by the Christians as a symbol of divine power, as a means to mark the hierarchy between earthly and heavenly powers. This iconic symbol was in use until the Renaissance. But even from that time on technical depiction of light and the divine in the arts have often occupied the same space. A turning point in the reproduction of the light may be best marked by the panel *Madonna di Senigallia* (circa 1470) by Piero della Francesca. All figures in the picture – the child, the mother, the angels – lack the characteristic sign of a halo. However, the sunlight that enters from the window on the background adding a sparkle to all figures from left to right is at least very remarkable. Especially the left angel's hair is almost fluorescent. It seems as if the natural light takes the place of the omnipresence of the aureole; that doesn't mean that this light loses religious impact. Here, the art of painting rather acts as a transforming force field: the iconic sign is miraculously erased and changed into a pictorial special effect. After the painters mastered the techniques regarding natural light and having called forth its glorious function to its ultimate refinement, the light of day, moon, and stars differentiated into many worldly, so-called secular, lighting effects. These are at least as magic as the well-known effects in the paintings of the girls of Vermeer and the clair-obscure of Rembrandt. The auratic –also briefly called 'aura' – has been emancipated, together with the central light source and the central perspective from the specific religious practical value. *The starry night over the Rhone* (1888) by Van Gogh shows a manipulated sky, probably to paint the relation between natural light and artificial light (the gas lighting from the banks) in one battlefield in which neither prevails. In other words, this is not a glorious scene; it is as if almost the reverse is true: in this spectacle of the night sky the hierarchy between celestial light and artificial light is unsettling in such a way, that the difference is about to disappear.

On 13 June 1794 Friedrich Schiller finishes a letter to Immanuel Kant with the following words: 'Finally, *verehrtester Herr Professor*, I wish to ensure you of my deepest gratitude for the beneficent light which you have kindled in my mind'ⁱⁱ. From the poet's view his Enlightenment comes from another source, i.e. the one of pure reason, but the opposite could also be claimed, viz that modern Enlightenment has assimilated, and therefore also erased it, all light effects in the art of painting, from nimbus to clair-obscure, from divine to earthly and technical light. Hent de Vries says: 'Perhaps

this self-effacement did always belong to the structure of the miraculous – and hence, the magical and the religious – as such”ⁱⁱⁱ. Instead of ‘self-effacement’ one could also speak from Jacques Rancière’s neo-Enlightenment philosophy of a ‘history of confusion’ between ‘two concepts of avant-garde’ or ‘two concepts of political subjectivity’^{iv}.

To express this specific political subjectivity, the avant-garde could do without the concept of light. Just like the effacing of the nimbus after the Renaissance, after the commencement of non-figurative and abstract art not just the perspective illusions disappeared, but the lighting effects also became things of the past. Starting from Walter Benjamin’s well-known dichotomy – cultic value versus exhibition value – the idea to understand the return of the nimbus as retrospective of the cultic value is tempting, which may more than ever force the art of painting to ‘backwardness’ (Benjamin’s word). But another, more glorious comeback is also possible. If it is true that art, technology, and science are increasingly intertwining – and that is beyond my doubt – then the emancipation of the cultic, as the other side of the nostalgia for representation, can give a new meaning to the diversification of the technical light. If no event in film, sports or pop music is imaginable without spotlights, and only a fool will deny the dominance of glorification in these scenes, then there are also many other possibilities of technical uses of light, different from aureoles around idols. Not just as a mere counterpart of show lighting. Subtle and intimate applications of artificial light turn the space into a patchwork, not directed by a central light source.

In *Mille Plateau*^v by Deleuze and Guattari, so much attention is given to the contrast between smooth (*lisse*) and striated (*strié*) space, but so absent in their work is the nimbus, the aureole or any other form of glorification that is rich in contrast. Maybe their aversion of the philosophy of consciousness is one of the causes that they are blind to the transcendental power of light: the main condition for space to become visible, in short, for corporality with and without organic orientation. A first translation of the language of contrasting spaces into a lexicon of light has the following result. The smooth space is associated with ‘desert, steppe, sea, or ice’ (idem, p. 484); here the absence of coordination and orientation is a constructive power. The nimbus which comes in a new stage of self-effacement through the transformations in the art of painting, could be called a stream of light, in the terms of the above-mentioned panel of Piero della Francesca, which radiates through eyes and hair, and skims along skin, nails, and garment, and consequently invites touching rather than seeing. The caressing look is not focused on figures but on the smooth mutual vibrations – you could call them infrared fields, effects by which a body without organs can be turned on and off. The returning nimbus does not need to restrict itself to skimming light; it can also create an auratic landscape, i.e. shine light through apparently accepted bounds, make the space liquid or fathomless like an ice field – a shower of sparkles without centre or source which enables a ‘relative deterritorialization’ (idem, p. 293, italics mine). Lighting in the form of LEDs or other micro applications can make the unattainable in everyday life lighter. Artificial light could become nomadic; light of cat eyes and glowworms giving the most ordinary thing a sphere of eternity. It may be a shaft of rays like a set of jackstraws or a divergent radiation which adds luster to eyes. However, an essential aspect of this ‘even’ light is that it does not concentrate on one thing, nor focuses on a phallus or G-spot, more likely ‘a strange chromaticism’ (idem, p. 491), a territory of uninterrupted variation of affections and informal activities. The moment of the ‘stand by’ nimbus has come.

Literature

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ⁱⁱ Kant, I. (1902). *Gesammelte Schriften*. Herausgegeben von der Königl. Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin 1902, band XI, zweite Abteilung: Briefwechsel.

ⁱⁱⁱ Vries, Hent de (2001). 'In Media Res: Global Religion, Public Spheres and the Task of Contemporary Comparative Religious Studies' in: Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, ed. (2001). *Religion and Media*. Stanford University Press, p. 27.

^{iv} Rancière, Jacques (2006). *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Translated with an introduction by Gabriël Rockhill. London/New York: Continuum, pp. 29-30.

^v Deleuze, Gilles & Félix Guattari (2003). *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (orig. 1987). Translations and foreword by Brian Massumi. London/New York: Continuum.