

## ‘What Manner of Salutation This Should Be’: The Disquieted Gaze in Fra Angelico’s *San Marco Annunciation*

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Fig. 1. Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation*, ca. 1450. Fresco, 230 x 321 cm, Convento di San Marco, Florence.

On a wooden stool, under a vaulted loggia, a woman is suddenly interrupted from her repose beside a garden. She raises her eyes warily towards an intruder who bows and exalts her in grand terms. Confused by the visitor’s lofty greeting, she feels troubled. Looking up, she sees an angel with impossibly multihued wings staring back at her. Captured in paint, the figures are suspended in an interminable moment of tension. Who is this unexpected visitor, and what is meant by the nature of his greeting? These questions are manifest in the gaze that passes between the two figures. As the woman draws her arms protectively close a question lingers: who will speak next?

To viewers of Fra Angelico’s fresco, described above and situated in the north corridor of the Dominican monastery at San Marco in Florence, there is no mystery as to the *dénouement* of the encounter (fig. 1). The Annunciation of the birth of

Christ to the Virgin Mary by the angel Gabriel is a seminal image in Christian art, beloved for its poignancy and intimacy. Throughout the many treatments of the story run familiar Christian lessons: humility, acceptance of God's will, and submission to a divine plan. Why, then, before one of the most canonical Annunciations of the Renaissance, do we hold our breath?

Despite the brevity of the Gospel account in Luke, the Annunciation narrative abounds in complexities. At its heart lies a series of narrative tensions where the translation of the divine realm into human form is realized only through the fusion of opposites: motherhood and chastity, knowledge and innocence, Word and matter, spirit and flesh.

This is not, of course, the common understanding of the Annunciation. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the focus remained firmly on the celebratory aspects: the good news spoken by the angel and the Virgin's humble submission to her role. Indeed, the twin events of announcement and acquiescence are frequently conflated in Renaissance Annunciations, effacing the tension that builds throughout the account.

I wish to return, however, to the moment that falls between the angel's greeting and the Virgin's most famous, and most frequently depicted, utterance: "behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it unto me according to thy word."<sup>1</sup> In Luke we learn that after the angel greets Mary by saying, "Hail, thou art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women" *she does not speak*, but "she was troubled at his saying, and cast about in her

mind what manner of salutation this should be."<sup>2</sup> I return to this line not so much to reconsider its significance but to question why so often this moment is elided; why we so frequently skip to the end of the story and its joyful conclusion. The significance of Mary 'casting about in her mind' is clear. At this moment she is deeply human, for she pauses, feeling afraid.

It is this moment that is captured in Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*. With her eyes trained on the intruder, she is not yet "the handmaid of the Lord" but puzzles about what sort of message is being delivered to her. What may seem like an insignificant detail—Mary raising her eyes while a blush of, perhaps, trepidation spreads across her cheeks—is, in fact, almost without precedent in Renaissance treatments of the genre. Nowhere else do we see the Virgin so clearly participating in the exchange that precedes the Incarnation. Elsewhere she is ever the virginal vessel with eyes downcast and a soft, yielding body. In the margin of one of his notebooks, Leonardo da Vinci muses that "women should be represented with demure actions, their legs tightly closed together, their arms held together, their heads lowered and inclined to one side."<sup>3</sup> He is not alone in this prescription. Few things were held to be more threatening than the female gaze, and the eyes were thought to be the source of women's erotic power.<sup>4</sup> It was as essential for an artist to depict a woman with her head down to control any excessive female sexuality as it was to preserve her virtue.

In Annunciation images the Virgin's lowered head further

signaled her humility and deference to God, and we can find her head 'lowered and inclined to one side' in numerous Tuscan examples. In images by Fra Filippo Lippi and Sandro Botticelli in particular, the lowered head becomes a natural extension of

the Virgin's deeply curving torso, which emphasizes the receptive nature of her womb and echoes her yielding body and spirit (figs. 2, 3).

In Fra Angelico, then, the implications of the Virgin's two raised eyes and the look that she directs towards her intruder are immense. They suggest a level of awareness unavailable to those other Virgins who keep their eyes downcast and their selfhood concealed. Yet once raised, the eyes and the gaze, as



Fig. 2. Fra Filippo Lippi, *The Annunciation*, 1448-50. Egg tempera on wood, 68 x 152 cm, National Gallery, London.

we understand today through the contributions of psychoanalysis and as they were understood in Renaissance terms, cannot help but become identified with the centre of the self and the locus of individuality.<sup>5</sup>

When contemplating Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* fresco, questions about *how* we look at paintings and at each other are inevitable, for the problem is laid out in front of us. Do we look only with the mind, meditating on themes and morals that might instruct us? Or are we inevitably drawn, when standing before the likeness of a body, to respond in kind, in and through our own bodies and minds? I would argue that in Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* the viewer is drawn to engage with the figures on a fully embodied and affective level; that is, the viewer feels the impact of the painting through both the body as well as the intellect. I do not mean that the body responds at a sensory level. Rather, since our consciousness is imbedded in our physical selves, the two are ineluctably intertwined and jointly inform our



Fig. 3. Sandro Botticelli, *Annunciation* (Cestello Annunciation), 1489-90. Tempera on panel, 150 x 156 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

understanding of the painting.

The phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty denies that an image can be received on a purely intellectual level without the mediation of the body and asks “what is this presupposition on the visible, this art of interrogating it according to its own wishes?”<sup>6</sup> Instead, he argues that the body shares “a participation in and a kinship with the visible.”<sup>7</sup> It is this grounding of the image in ‘kinship’ with the body that I believe lies at the core of this fresco.

The kinship of the body and the visible first occurs between the two figures on the wall. Here the term kinship is especially useful. The gaze that passes between the Virgin and the angel Gabriel is so direct that it implies not only an affinity between the two figures at a *narrative* level—the angel tells Mary to “fear not” before she has spoken—but suggests a relationship, a kinship, between the two bodies at a *physical* level.<sup>8</sup> This is possible despite the presumed physiological difference between the otherworldly angelic messenger and the pure yet mortal virgin. They are located on the same level and their bodies incline towards one another as though drawn by magnetic force. The gaze that passes between them is as taut as an invisible thread and is visually reinforced by the horizontal metal bar just above their heads in the loggia. All of these factors render both figures physical, present, and embodied.

An additional level of kinship between the body and the visual occurs when the viewer, particularly a fifteenth-century Dominican friar, steps before the painting. Once located before the image, the

embodied, non-verbal exchange passing between the angel and the Virgin extends to include the viewer in its dynamic. The viewer no longer looks passively, but is drawn into a relationship where his or her own subjectivity is imperative to the conclusion of the scene, as we shall explore later. Rather than being kept apart by different temporalities of time and space, the viewer is invited into the garden alongside the Virgin to empathize with her predicament. Unlike many fifteenth-century Annunciations that focus on the moment of the Virgin’s acquiescence, or *Humiliatio* as Michael Baxandall has described, here the focus is on her moment of disquiet, or *Conturbatio*, one of the five Laudable Conditions of the Virgin, according to the fifteenth-century Florentine preacher, Fra Roberto.<sup>9</sup>

Yet what is it about this eye contact that makes it so *effective* and equally so *affective*? Jacques Lacan argues that our subjectivity is formed when we feel the gaze of the outside world, or the Other, acting upon us. We become aware of ourselves as *selves* through “the presence of others as such”, and through the gaze of the Other, we become embodied, experiential beings.<sup>10</sup> In the words of Lacan, “what determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside.”<sup>11</sup> At San Marco, the formation of the Virgin’s subjectivity is instigated by the gaze of the Other. This gaze comes from two sources: the angel Gabriel, who looks at her from inside the loggia, and the viewer, who stands in the dormitory corridor.

It is possible to suggest that the Virgin could still feel the presence of

Lacan's gaze with her head lowered. But in this pose she would also be indistinguishable from da Vinci's model of unconscious femininity. It is her response to the gaze, centered in her raised eyes, that most affirms her selfhood. By raising her eyes and deploying her own gaze, she regains a measure of agency over her identity and, by extension, her own destiny.

The model of the masculine, active look of the angel directed towards the passive, submissive Virgin of downcast eyes—the predominant paradigm of Annunciation images—is thus disrupted. Michel Foucault reminds us that within all social regimes lie the tools of their own confrontation.<sup>12</sup> So it is with the scopic regime of the gaze. By raising her eyes, *two* subjectivities suddenly become active within the painting, and the unique histories, questions, and destinies of each collide where the gazes meet, subverting the passive/active dichotomy, and presaging a dramatic resolution of events.

As the dynamic of the passive/active gaze ruptures, the painting is free to make its own meaning, to stage its own reenactment of the meeting in the garden. As Merleau-Ponty reminds us, a painting can only be fully experienced if it breaks through “the ‘skin of things’ to show how the things become things, how the world becomes world.”<sup>13</sup> In this way, Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* reenacts the *original* Annunciation with every viewing. George Didi-Huberman discusses the annunciatory structure of the painting in similar terms. He notes that there is a suspension of time in the painting where the viewer feels him or herself

on a threshold between the past and the future.<sup>14</sup> This is undoubtedly true. Fra Angelico's painting does not foreshadow its own ending but rather breaks through the skin of things (time, space, narrative) to suspend the viewer in the tension of the moment, where the figures themselves, and the Virgin in particular, do not yet know how the scene will be resolved. In almost too perfect symmetry with Merleau-Ponty's words, we see, quite literally, how the “world becomes world” time after time.

Here we might begin to consider the viewer who stands outside the frame and who, for most of the image's history, would have been a Dominican friar. As we shall see, a Dominican audience was particularly well-suited to contemplate the image on an affective and embodied level. The Dominicans' guiding principle was to teach by “*verbo et exemplo*,” by word and example, and the visual vocabulary of the cycle of cell frescoes in the dormitory helped reinforce the practice of inward and outward discipline.<sup>15</sup> Many cells depict one of the early exemplars of the Order, St. Dominic, St. Augustine and Peter Martyr, whom the friars would strive to emulate in their private study and contemplation. This emulation had a distinctly physical dimension as the friar was instructed not only to seek spiritual likeness with his predecessor, but to copy his gestures in preparation for preaching. Following a “didactic pictorial language”, they would sit or kneel for hours in their cells with their arms outstretched or prostrate on the floor in emulation of the pose of the figure on the wall—often Saint Dominic himself—observing or

participating in biblical scenes.<sup>16</sup> The gestures were sourced from an illustrated prayer manual for novices called *De modo orandi* and were not accompanied by a textual gloss.<sup>17</sup> It was assumed that the physical posture itself would be enough to elevate the mind, for the two were inextricable. Such a manual, and its centrality to the fresco's cycle, illustrates the Dominicans' distinctly embodied approach to spirituality and spiritual development.

As the north corridor *Annunciation* is located outside the cells at the head of the staircase, William Hood argues that it encouraged a distinct, ritual approach. He proposes that on their way to the cells the friars would pause in the corridor before the *Annunciation* and give a ritual salutation to the Virgin, as reminded by the painting's inscription: "when you come before an image of the Ever-Virgin take care that you do not neglect to say 'Ave'."<sup>18</sup> From here they would proceed to private devotion in the cells. He further argues that the friars would see themselves embodied in the role of the angel: "the friars' entire action – the action of his body and the silent action of his mind as he prayed – exactly imitated the angel's action in the painting."<sup>19</sup> However, I would like to push this further and suggest that, given the Dominicans' particularly enthusiastic Marian devotion and the highly embodied nature of their religious practices, rather than identifying with the angel, here the friars would instead feel a kinship with, and see themselves in the role of, the Virgin herself.

The possibility of suggesting an affinity between male, cloistered

Dominican friars and a Virgin mother is not as implausible as it might seem. While today we read history as governed by inviolable gender distinctions, during the Middle Ages and Renaissance gender-defined behavior was remarkably fluid between the sexes. In religious communities, it became popular for religious men to adopt distinctly feminine metaphors when describing their relationship to Christ, including childbirth, nursing, and marriage, where the human soul, male or female, was 'bride' to Christ, the bridegroom.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, religious men on the whole experienced more visions of the Virgin Mary and venerated more female saints than religious women.<sup>21</sup> This suggests that for Dominicans, including those at San Marco, it would not have been anomalous to identify with a female figure in an image, even one as exalted for her femininity as the Virgin Mary.

Moreover, the importance of Mary to Dominican theology, history, and tradition established her as a more than suitable exemplar for male friars. Fra Antonino, in his role as reformer of the Observant branch of the Dominicans in the fifteenth century, felt that it was the Virgin herself who primarily absolved mankind from sin, albeit through the birth her Son.<sup>22</sup> The written history of the Order, the *Vitae fratrum*, likewise recounts the Order as emerging from the Virgin's plea to Saint Dominic to create an Order of Preachers to spread the gospel, and it is she who gives the Dominicans their black and white robes.<sup>23</sup>

This attitude of extreme veneration to the Virgin is visible throughout the

building complex at San Marco. Although the church was not built by the Dominicans but obtained from the Sylvestrines in 1436, they did everything possible to conform all remaining Marian imagery to their particular imperatives.<sup>24</sup> For instance, the inherited lower church contained an Annunciation altar that was a close copy of an earlier image from the nearby church of Santissima Annunziata. Such replicas were popular in Florence as it was hoped that a worthy copy might appropriate some of that painting's miracle-working properties. It is suggested that the north corridor *Annunciation* was intended as a response to this "derivative" Annunciation in the lower church.<sup>25</sup> For this reason, in addition to his own stylistic imperatives, Fra Angelico's composition in the dormitory differed entirely from the precedent established by the Santissima Annunziata *Annunciation* and differed also from his several earlier treatments of the same scene.

It is important to note that the corridor fresco is not the only Annunciation in the dormitory. In cell three there is another, painted high on the wall and notable for its elegance and austerity. Here the Virgin kneels below a gently vaulted ceiling while the angel stands over her, and Peter Martyr observes from the wings. The interior space of the fresco suggests the cool bareness of the friar's cell, and the arch of the ceiling is repeated in the gently curved spine of the Virgin and the edge of the angel's wings (fig. 4). Yet, despite the delicate composition, I do not feel that this painting holds

the same power as the corridor *Annunciation*. The Virgin in cell three is on a lower register than the angel, and she does not seek his eyes but looks instead into the middle distance. Her head is already lowered, and her subjectivity seems all but departed. It seems that in this image she is already handmaid and vessel,



Fig. 4. Fra Angelico, *Annunciation*, 1440-41. Fresco, 190 x 164 cm, Convento di San Marco, Florence.

and it would be more likely that a friar would contemplate her from the archway in the role of Peter Martyr, as a spectator to her grace.

Likewise, in the corridor fresco Hood describes Mary as already "fully consenting to a course of action that will disrupt her life," whereas I feel she has not yet reached this stage of acceptance and is still casting about in her mind. Hood asks of his

consenting Virgin, “but was not this readiness, even eagerness, to do God’s will, no matter what it might cost the ideal disposition of a Dominican friar?”<sup>26</sup>

I would concur to the extent that, yes, the friars would be compelled to identify with the Virgin’s condition here, but not because of her eagerness or readiness. This is a fundamental misrecognition of the moment depicted in the fresco. Rather, the friars are drawn to her disquiet and hesitation as she ponders “what manner of salutation this should be.”

Conventual life was far from an idyllic existence for the friars, and novices in particular faced daily the daunting task of conditioning their bodies and minds for religious life and preaching. The periods of isolation in the cells must have seemed at times an insurmountable trial and the feelings of uncertainty and unsuitability that arose there all-consuming. In this way then, I would suggest that the friars found in Fra Angelico’s Virgin a sympathetic surrogate: a figure who mirrored for them their own vocational doubts. As a model, they could also trust in her judgment since she, the Virgin Mary, overcame her doubt and submitted ultimately to the greater wisdom of God’s plan. Unlike other Annunciations that depict the moment of the Virgin’s submission, I would create for Fra Angelico’s dormitory *Annunciation* its own visual category that focuses not on the imminent Incarnation, but on the moment a few breaths earlier. In this moment there hangs a question that has not yet been answered, and we see, encapsulated, the turmoil of the self as it considers a vast and weighty

proposal.

It is this that I would argue speaks to any viewer who mounts the stairs into the dormitory at San Marco. For the fifteenth-century friars, the paragon of religious life, the spiritual abess of their Order, is also the ultimate instructor and surrogate in their spiritual journeys. Taking in her image at the top of the stairs, it is her face that would accompany them into their cells where they would practice the thought and gestures that would inform their preaching and ministry. If they were uncertain of their role, her journey from *Conturbatio* to *Meritatio*, or merit, would inspire them. While the cell frescoes instructed them how to behave as part of the community they had chosen, only the Virgin could speak to their personal journeys, which could be fraught with internal battles.

Nevertheless, the joy of the Incarnation and its promise of redemption, although visually absent from Fra Angelico’s composition, was never far from the friars’ minds. Anticipation of this event would have been unavoidable no matter how austere the Annunciation scene for it was embedded in the Christian consciousness. Therefore, I would conclude by saying that it is equally this anticipation, this foreknowledge of what is to come inside the image that allows the friar/viewer to identify with and embrace the preceding interval of disquiet. It is the foregone knowledge of the rest of the Christian story and the comfort this history brings that allows the viewer to linger over and learn from a moment of profound uncertainty.

What I am pointing towards, ultimately, is not the full



emancipation of the Virgin Mary in Renaissance art, but towards the slight rupture of the visual order of things—a tear in the template of Quattrocento Annunciations—that could be seen as the start of something bigger. After all, we can read the same look of consternation in the eyes of Rossetti’s nineteenth-century Madonna as in Fra Angelico’s. And where this rupture of the visual fabric occurs is where two eyes meet at the top of the stairs. The Incarnation it is the point where the material and the ineffable merge. It is at once a point of contact and a point of challenge.

**Notes:**

1. Luke 1:38.
2. Luke 1:28-89.
3. Quoted in Paolo Berdini, “Women Under the Gaze: A Renaissance Genealogy,” *Art History* 21, no. 4 (1998): 567.
4. Michael Camille, “Before the Gaze: The Internal Senses and Late Medieval Practices of Seeing,” in *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance*, ed. Robert S. Nelson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 207.
5. Three of Fra Angelico’s earlier Annunciations also show the Virgin in eye contact with the Angel although not as explicitly or largely as in the dormitory, as does Duccio’s fourteenth-century *Annunciation* from the *Maesta* altarpiece, but these are the only other Tuscan examples I have found.
6. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Intertwining—the Chiasm,” in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, ed. Clive Cazeaux (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 165.

7. *Ibid.*, 169.
8. Luke 1:30.
9. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 51.
10. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), 133.
11. *Ibid.*, 130.
12. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1970), xx.
13. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 770.
14. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 127.
15. *Ibid.*, 198.
16. William Hood, “Saint Dominic’s Manners of Praying: Gestures in Fra Angelico’s Cell Frescoes at S. Marco,” *Art Bulletin* 68, no. 2 (1986), 196.
17. *Ibid.*, 201.
18. William Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 267.
19. *Ibid.*, 272.
20. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 191.
21. *Ibid.*, 259.

22. Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*, 271.

23. *Ibid.*, 269.

24. *Ibid.*, 258.

25. *Ibid.*, 272.

26. *Ibid.*

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## Response

Thank you very much Grace for presenting us with such an interesting paper. In particular, I liked how you were able to tie in notions of performance and repetition into your interpretation of these images at San Marco—how these Dominican friars would mimic the gestures of the figures painted in their cells, and how such bodily emulation was thought to engender a kind of spiritual emulation (and indeed, transformation). This vein of thought is particularly appealing in relation to the 1450 *Annunciation*, in that the gestures of Gabriel and Mary are rendered in a very similar fashion, both with their arms lightly clasped over their lower torsos and in how their postures incline towards one another. Although located at the end of a corridor in the dormitory, significantly near a stairwell, the greeting that William Hood proposes as required of the passing friars (this requirement to pause, if just briefly, whenever passing this image) further seems to suggest that this would be an image that they would relate to in a significant way in their daily movements throughout the monastery. The friars would then, perhaps, not just identify with the greeting Archangel (in enacting their

own greeting and in their closer proximity to the fore-fronted Gabriel) but also, as you suggest, to this Virgin figure, frozen as she is in a moment of consternation (but mimicking, nonetheless, the greeting gesture of Gabriel). It seems that this kind of dual figural identification would likely then be carried into cell three where, as you suggest, the meditating friar would surely gaze, like the Archangel and Peter Martyr, upon the Virgin who in turn gazes somewhere exterior to the painting. I imagine that from his kneeling position, the friar would also be aware that he was bodily reenacting this moment of Mary's acquiescence.

I wonder, however, at your identification of the corridor *Annunciation* as an image of the Virgin in *Conturbatio*, and to what extent this identification rests on the gazes of Mary and Gabriel meeting. It is clear to me that the gaze of the Virgin is not downcast, which is significant, and that there is also something telling about her seated posture in relation to the kneeling Archangel; however, it seems to me that while Gabriel does indeed connect his gaze to the Virgin's face, she seems to look slightly past him, either to the column that separates them or to a point just above the Archangel's head. Or, perhaps, she is portrayed as experiencing a very different kind of vision, an internalized vision that might be appropriate to the depiction of an apprehension of a divine realm. A broader understanding of the vision depicted in the 1450 *Annunciation* may further link this figure of Mary to the performance of meditation as it was practiced within San Marco.

Perhaps, then, it can be understood as a depiction of both physical and spiritual vision as well as how these two kinds of vision were often considered to occur in conjunction.

I am hoping that, before I open up the floor to other questions, you could quickly outline the elements of this 1450 *Annunciation* which would have made it evident to the passing friars that this was not the more commonly depicted celebratory scene of *Humiliatio*, but rather that more fraught moment where all is suspended and the artist depicts, as you so eloquently indicate, “how the world becomes world.”

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