

## DIVINE RAPTURE— ICONOGRAPHY OF RELIGIOUS ECSTASIES

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Strictly speaking, images of religious ecstasy have existed only since Caravaggio's *The Stigmatization of St. Francis*, which dates from around 1595 (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The saint has collapsed on Mount La Verna. A youthful angel supports his body, which is in a paradoxical state somewhere between lifeless relaxation and being tensely arched. Christ invoked Francis immediately prior to this moment. According to legend, a seraph is about to imprint the stigmata of the Redeemer on Francis's body. This supernatural manifestation is hidden from the painting's viewer, as is Francis's companion, Brother Leone, in the darkened background, itself illuminated only by delicate streaks of light on the horizon. However, what is visible is the moment when the stigmata begin to appear, and Francis's habit is torn open to reveal what is evidently the first wound, the one on his side. An involuntary movement of Francis's hand gestures toward this incipient corporeal harmonization with the Redeemer.

Caravaggio's painting is the first to convincingly succeed in rendering visible the ecstatic clash between absolute divine power and absolute human powerlessness. During religious ecstasy, a higher power either "tears out" the consciousness of an individual's body, suspending his or her perceptions and other physiological processes, so to speak—or else the higher power penetrates into the individual's consciousness, taking full possession of him or her. In both instances, this "being replete" displaces worldly reality to the greatest possible extent. In Christianity—and similarly in most other religions—moments of religious rapture or elation, of prophetic inspiration or alternatively of overwhelming fear in the face of divine sublimity, can lead to ecstatic states. However, such states cannot actually be induced deliberately. They occur primarily in contexts of extreme reduction, that is to say via physical and spiritual techniques of meditation and prayer that are characterized by asceticism and routine, but also through extreme excess, for instance the sufferings of martyrdom, which are converted into the reward of celestial rapture.<sup>2</sup>

There were attempts to depict such exceptional situations even before Caravaggio, in principle ever since the beginnings of Christian art. The stigmatization of St. Francis, for example, had already been painted by such celebrated artists as Giotto, Jan van Eyck, Giovanni Bellini, and El Greco. Yet the resources for representing ecstatic states were apparently as restricted as the possible responses on the part of the saints were manifold: an "opening" sky and light phenomena are intended to suggest the transmission of divine power; outspread arms and eyes gazing upward (a "heavenly gaze") signal the ecstasy experienced by the saints; a number of other elements were employed less frequently.<sup>3</sup> The difference between genuine ecstasy as a mystical union with God and other forms of dreams, visions, profound inner emotion, yearning, suffering, and so forth cannot, however, be demarcated in an unequivocal way—although the pictorial formula of the "heavenly gaze" was used as an identifying feature of ecstatic states far into the 19th century (cat. no 23, p. 75; cat. no. 28, p. 79).<sup>4</sup>

Beginning in the 1580s and '90s, in the wake of the Catholic reform movement artists engaged in an intense search for new, specific possibilities for depicting this exceptional religious situation. In 1595, for example, Giuseppe Cesari, then Rome's most



1 Caravaggio, *San Francesco in estasi*, ca. 1595–96, oil on canvas, 94 × 130 cm, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum, Hartford (Connecticut), The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund

prominent painter, devised a Francis who is exposed to the divine light with eyes closed, as though frozen.<sup>5</sup> But it was Caravaggio who achieved the decisive breakthrough: he not only assigned an angel to Francis, as was hitherto customary exclusively in the form of accessory figures accompanying Christ in a *Pieta* with Angels, thereby explicitly effecting the total identification of the saint with the Savior (*Christoformitas*).<sup>6</sup> The angel with his dark wings also unmistakably appears as the brother of the youthful Amor painted by Caravaggio in 1602, and is clearly related as well to the artist's youthful lute players. Since the ecstasy of St. Francis was the result of his boundless love for Christ, Caravaggio consistently made use of the elements of erotic iconography: the wound on the side that begins to appear on his body is at the same time the wound inflicted on the saint by the emissary of divine love. It is in particular the saint's posture that links him with the absolute mystical surrender to the divine beloved.<sup>7</sup> And it was only this erotic charging that produced the specific approach to representing ecstasy that would henceforth prove so successful. Only through visual associations with overwhelming sensations of erotic desire does the exceptional situation of ecstasy become at least partially comprehensible to the ordinary viewer, who has after all had no direct experience with such states.

It was not just Caravaggio's fellow artists who recognized the potential of the newly invented "pathos formula" (to cite Aby Warburg), copied his works, and took it up for their own pictures (cat. no. 24, p. 76). In the 16th century, ecstasy was still a marginal term in the literature on art. It appears a single time in Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* (1550, 2nd edition 1568): with reference to Raphael's *St. Cecilia*, he writes that "in her countenance is seen that abstraction which is found in the faces of those who are in ecstasy [*in estasi*]" (fig. 2).<sup>8</sup> In contrast, in an inventory from 1637, a St. Francis painted by Caravaggio—presumably, however, not the painting shown above—is listed explicitly as "S. Francesco in Estasi."<sup>9</sup> In conformity with the pictorial formula, the title "Saint in Ecstasy" is verified as well.



2 Raphael, *Santa Cecilia in estasi*, ca. 1514, oil on wood, 236 × 149 cm, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna



3 Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *The Ecstasy of St. Theresa* (detail), 1645–52, Carrara marble, 350 cm (height), Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome

Caravaggio himself heightened this eroticization even further in a painting of *St. Mary Magdalene* (circa 1606, fig. 2, p. 201).<sup>10</sup> Yet the final step was taken only in subsequent years by painters such as Guido Reni, Francesco Cairo, and Guido Cagnacci, who showed ecstatic female saints now with exposed breasts, thereby providing viewers with visual rather than religious delight and confronting them with the moral quandary of experiencing "too much pleasure," as we read in some contemporary discussions.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the most famous depiction of ecstasy in European art is to be understood against this background, namely Gianlorenzo Bernini's sculpture of *St. Theresa* in the Cornaro Chapel (1645–52) of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome (fig. 3). What explains the impact and the splendor of the group is not just the erotic charge of the *unio mystica*, but also the seemingly life-sized, fully three-dimensional presence of the saint, the contrast between the facial expression, transported by love, and the almost dematerialized body entirely concealed by drapery, which further underscores the tour de force of depicting a mystical elevation in the medium of sculpture, as well as the combination with the youthful, smiling angel.<sup>12</sup>

It is not surprising that with the Enlightenment and secularization, this pictorial formula of ecstasy, based to an extreme degree on ambiguity and the polyvalent quality of love, only worked in part, and that Bernini's St. Theresa, for example, was interpreted as depicting nothing more than an entirely earthly orgasm.<sup>13</sup> In other respects, and in ways consistent with this viewpoint, feminine ecstasy in particular was psychologized and pathologized.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, it is astonishing to note that another medical insight seems to have had no significant impact on its rendering: to begin with, the point of departure for all depictions of ecstasy was the notion,

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4 Agostino Masucci, *L'estasi di santa Caterina de' Ricci*, undated, oil on canvas, 199 x 273 cm, Galleria Nazionale, Rome

held as valid from antiquity until the early modern era, that the human body and spirit functioned on the basis of ethereal “spirits,” *pneuma* or *spiritus*, as messengers and mediators between matter and pure spirit. According to this notion, during states of ecstasy such animal spirits left the body, not just metaphorically but in reality, or were driven out by higher powers.<sup>15</sup> It was not until the mid-17th century, attendant on Descartes, that alternative explanatory models gradually asserted themselves—the cause of ecstasy now resided entirely in the psyche.

It should be emphasized in closing that the ecstatic state of saints, however, were not just recorded in pictorial works. States of (religious) ecstasy also take place in front of and through images, and religious images themselves may even be created in ecstatic states. The seraph that imprints the stigmata on Francis is often depicted as a winged crucifix, but also as a vera icon—when the scenery is not conceived in such a way that Francis meditates on a crucifix prior to receiving the stigmata (cat. no. 30, p. 81).<sup>16</sup> The saints Luigi Gonzaga, Katharina de Ricci, Francesco di Paola, and others experienced their ecstatic states in front of actual images (fig. 4).<sup>17</sup>

Remarkably, a number of pictures seem to have been capable of allowing even the simple faithful to experience ecstatic states. It is otherwise difficult to explain the forms of being “beside oneself” in the presence of a miraculous image of the Virgin Mary, which range from clinging to motionless prostration, as recorded in Michael Ostendorfer’s woodcut of 1519/20 showing the pilgrimage to the Regensburg Madonna (fig. 5).<sup>18</sup> The like is true of reactions to Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* from 1541, whose innovative, overwhelming combination of the theme—the appearance of the judge of the world—and its artistic realization suspended all earthly corporeal categories for contemporary viewers.<sup>19</sup> Admittedly, this again points toward the difficulty of distinguishing ecstatic states from

partially similar phenomena such as overwhelming astonishment (*stupor*).<sup>20</sup>

Finally, in the spirit of the notion of congruence between artist and work, the labors of the (believing) painter or sculptor can themselves be understood as a kind of rapture, a divine inspiration or meditative ecstasy, whereby in the case of artistic creativity the metaphors of love and eroticism may also be employed in order to make such exceptional creative experiences more comprehensible.<sup>21</sup> And although Caravaggio himself was presumably remote from such ideas, he was in any case the first to have understood with such consistency that in images the diversity and incommensurability of ecstatic religious experiences could be rendered more-or-less “tangible” and visually convincing by overlying them with erotic pictorial formulae.



5 Michael Ostendorfer, *Pilgrimage to the “Beautiful Mary of Regensburg,”* ca. 1520, woodcut, 58 x 41.5 cm, Hamburger Kunsthalle

1 Most recently Rosen 2015, Tostmann 2017.  
 2 Mager 1931, cf. Massin 2001, Augner 2001.  
 3 Henning and Weber 1998.  
 4 On the spectrum of challenges of visions and experiences of transcendence, cf. Stoichita 1997.  
 5 Röttgen 2002, pp. 319–20 (cat. no. 82).  
 6 Askew 1969.  
 7 This stands within an extended tradition of erotic metaphor in Judaism and Christianity but goes back to the *Song of Songs* in the Old Testament, which characterizes Christ as the lover and bridegroom of the soul; cf. Schubart 1989; for the intensive preoccupation on the part of the Franciscan with such notions, cf. Treffers 1988.  
 8 Vasari 2006, p. 281.  
 9 Frommel 1971, p. 34 (fol. 580r).  
 10 Poséq 1991.  
 11 Rosen 2009.  
 12 Lavin 1980; Careri 1990.  
 13 Cf. for example Jacob Burckhardt’s verdict of 1855, in Burckhardt 2001, pp. 564–65. In contrast, on the Baroque, Bernini, Theresa, and Francis as forerunners of Expressionism and of the modern sensibility, cf. Bahr 1920, pp. 118–19.  
 14 Müller and Schwerda 2006, Didi-Huberman 2004, Schimpf 2005.  
 15 Klein 1996, Boehnke 2005.  
 16 On an example from the early years of the 17th century that includes a vera icon and a clear reference to Caravaggio’s painting, a work from the circle of Frans van de Kasteels, see Porro and D’Amico 2017, pp. 52–55 (cat. no. 10, Alessandra Acconci).  
 17 Cf. the examples in Morello 2003.  
 18 Neiser 2010.  
 19 Pfisterer 2013, pp. 97–104.  
 20 For an example found as early as in the late 14th century, see Gilbert 1977, pp. 333–34.  
 21 Pfisterer 2014, pp. 46–48.