OF CHURCHES, HERETICS, AND OTHER GUIDES OF THE BLIND

–'THE FALL OF THE BLIND LEADING THE BLIND' BY PIETER BRUEGEL THE ELDER AND THE ESTHETICS OF SUBVERSION –

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Heresy in Pictures

Pictures are a medium of biblical exegesis. By illustrating biblical contents, they provide a specific interpretation of a particular passage, clarifying and disambiguating images even where the Scripture is vague or obscure. First of all, this is due to the nature of the texts in the Old and New Testaments, since it is indeed rare that the descriptions of events and persons are vivid enough for a painter to derive precise instructions regarding artistic composition from them. Pictures, however, are subject to the necessity of putting something in concrete form; therefore, they require legitimization and are part of orthodoxy, whatever it may be.[1]

Since the time of the Reformation at the very latest, pictures have been used as a means of religious canonization to give expression to orthodoxy, but also to denounce the respective opposing side, of course. But whatever their function in religious practice may have been, as a rule they represented instruments of disambiguation. Luther, in particular, valued pictures as a pedagogical tool and took a critical stance against the iconoclasts.[2] For him, their essential purpose was to teach, simply and clearly.[3]

In the following remarks, I would like to explore the reverse case and present pictures as agents of subversion. For the interpreter this poses a task that does not involve certainty, but ambiguity or equivocality. For in this context, semantic ambivalence is not in any way an expression of a modern concept of art in the sense of Umberto Eco's *Open Work*; rather, it is due to the fact that a heterodox meaning is being hidden in the pictures. Thus my first thesis is that subversive pictures contain both an esoteric and an exoteric meaning. They address a group

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1 Cf. Scribner R.W., "Reformatorische Bildpropaganda", *Historische Bildkunde* 12 (1991) 83-106.

2 Cf. Berns J.J., "Die Macht der äußeren und der inneren Bilder. Momente des innerprotestantischen Bilderstreits während der Reformation", in Battafarano I.M. (ed.), *Begrifflichkeit und Bildlichkeit der Reformation* (Bern: 1992) 9-37.

3 For a general overview cf. *Luther und die Folgen für die Kunst.* Ausstellungskatalog Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg 1983/84, ed. by W. Hofmann (Munich: 1983); Warnke C.P., *Sprechende Bilder, sichtbare Worte. Das Bildverständnis in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Wiesbaden: 1987); Bergmann R., "A tröstlich picture. Luther's attitude in the question of images", *Renaissance and Reformation* 5 (1981) 15-25; Münch B.U., *Geteiltes Leid. Die Passion Christi in Bildern und Texten der Konfessionalisierung. Druckgraphik von der Reformation bis zu den jesuitischen Großprojekten um 1600* (Regensburg: 2009) 51-53.

that would have been familiar with the practice of religious *dissimulatio* and capable of distinguishing between the actual and the spurious message.[4]

I will illustrate this hypothesis of religious *dissimulatio* using two pictures by Pieter Bruegel dealing with the subject of religious deviance. To this end, I will first need to introduce Sebastian Brant's thoughts regarding 'religious pertinacity' in the *Ship of Fools* [Fig. 1]. Then I will analyze Bruegel's panel *The Peasant and the Birdnester* [Fig. 2] and his *Tüchlein*, i. e. glue-tempera painting, *The Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind* [Fig. 3] dating from 1568 and addressing these same issues. In doing so, I will try to show that both pictures refuse to accept the obvious orthodoxy, espousing instead the point of view of the deviationists in a manner full of allusions.

Until now, little attention has been paid to the fact that Sebastian Brant in his 1494 *Ship of Fools* devoted a chapter to religious pertinacity. Accordingly, the Early New High German title of Chapter 36 [Fig. 1] is 'Eygenrichtikeit' (pertinacity; literally self-righteousness).[5] The illustration shows a nestrobber fool falling from a tree top to the ground strewn with birds thrown from their nests to die by the careless thief. The associated verse is as follows: 'Whoever wants to fly away following his own mind/ Trying to get bird-nests/ Will often find himself lying on the ground.' (‘Wer will auf eignen Sinn ausfliegen/ Und Vogelnester sucht zu kriegen,/ Der wird oft auf der Erde liegen.’)[6] The invention of this curious allegory is attributed to Brant. Until now the question has not been asked whether or not this allegory is referring to an existing tradition of imagery, a question which I will try to address now. First off, it is of interest in our context to explore what a pre-Reformation *'Schlagbild* (key image) of heresy might look like.

The beginning of the text describes people who have left the right path and do not notice that they have lost their way and gone astray. From the very first verses the humanist emphasizes the pertinacity of such people who consider themselves clever and shrewd, convinced that they do not need help from anyone, until suddenly they realize that there is no turning back from the place of self-inflicted isolation. With the words, 'Woe to him who falls

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[4] I am referring to my own research here, cf. Müller J., *Das Paradox als Bildform. Studien zur Ikonologie Pieter Bruegels d. Ä.* (Munich: 1999). In addition, Müller J., “Ein anderer Laokoon - Die Geburt ästhetischer Subversion aus dem Geist der Reformation”, in Kellner B. – Müller J.D. – Strohschneider P. (ed.), *Erzählen und Episteme: Literaturgeschichte des späten 16. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin-New York: 2011) 389-455.

[5] Brant S., *Narrenschiff,* ed. by F. Zarncke (Darmstadt: 1964). See also Knape J. – Wuttke D., *Sebastian-Brant-Bibliographie. Forschungsliteratur von 1800 bis 1985* (Tübingen: 1990) and Wilhelmi T., *Sebastian Brant Bibliographie* (Bern: 1990).

[6] Brant, *Narrenschiff* 38.

and finds himself alone!' ('Weh dem, der fällt und ist allein!') the text has reached a first climax.[7]

The fifth verse teaches us about the consequences of false pertinacity: 'Often turned into heretics were those/ Who would not be taught through just admonition/ Who relied on their own skill/ So that they might achieve fame and favor.' ('Zu Ketzern wurden oft verkehrt,/ Die rechter Tadel nicht belehrt,/ Verlassend sich auf eigene Kunst,/ Daß sie erlangen Ruhm und Gunst.')[8] What started out as a criticism of foolish behavior is now turned into an accusation of heresy with 'Eygenrichtikeit' considered its cause, which—though the goal may be achieving fame—is ultimately rooted in the inability to listen to others and to follow recognized authorities. The subsequent passage lists examples from the Old Testament regarding the validity of the thesis of dangerous pertinacity presented in the exordium. Once again, reference is made to fools who have missed their way and are climbing after bird-nests, fools who want to climb trees without the support of ladders and, consequently, fall down. Biblical figures like Noah and Korah are mentioned. The reference to Chapter 36, however, is the image of the 'seamless robe of Christ' which we should not dare to divide. Heretics, by contrast, would strive to fragment the Church.

If the passage immediately following states that 'foolhardiness has mislead many a ship' ('Vermessenheit viel Schiff verführt'), this is alluding to the end of the chapter where we can read about Odysseus, who managed to escape the song of the seductive Sirens only by plugging his ears with wax. Here, the song of the Sirens is equated with the false teachings of the heretics.[9] With the image of heretic Sirens, Brant, in the *Ship of Fools*, continues an older tradition of representing heresy that reaches back to the *Physiologus* where we find this statement: 'For they (referring to the heretics, J. M.), like the Sirens, seduce innocent hearts with their sweet words and impressive speech.' ('Denn durch ihre süßen Reden und prächtigen Worte verführen sie wie die Sirenen die unschuldigen Herzen.') Hugo Rahner explored this relationship in great depth, presenting numerous examples of the use of the Siren metaphor by the Church Fathers in his study *Griechische Mythen in christlicher Deutung*.[10]

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7 Ibidem.

8 Brant, *Narrenschiff* 38.

9 'Whoever hopes to leave the ship of fools,/ Has to stop up his ears with wax,/ That's what Ulysses did on the ocean/ When he saw the multitude of Sirens/ And escaped from them only through his wisdom/ Which ended their pride.' ('Wer hofft vom Narrenschiff zu weichen,/ Muß in die Ohren Wachs sich streichen,/ Das tat Ulysses auf dem Meer,/ Als er sah der Sirenen Heer/ Und ihm durch Weisheit nur entkam,/ Womit ihr Stolz ein Ende nahm.').

10 Cf. Rahner H., *Griechische Mythen in christlicher Deutung* (Darmstadt: 1966) 281-292. Regarding the topicality of the iconography of heretic teachings cf. Müller J., "Von der Odyssee eines christlichen Gelehrten -

One of my reasons for presenting this brief summary of Brant's chapter on 'Eygenrichtikeit' here is that it is a popular source in which heresy is associated with the unusual image of robbing a nest. There is an explicit mention of heretics, which means that Brant, by implication, is identifying with the orthodoxy of the Roman Church. It is well known that the Strasbourg humanist worked to a great extent with intratextual references in the *Ship of Fools*; therefore, the impending Last Judgment, which will be accompanied by numerous false teachings, must be mentioned in the context of heresy. Chapter 98 [Fig. 4], after suspecting Saracens, Turks, and pagans of foolishness, continues thus: 'Furthermore, there is the school of heretics/ In Prague on their seat of fools/ Which has spread so far/ That it now also includes Moravia.' ('Dazu kommt noch die Ketzerschul',/ In Prag auf ihrem Narrenstuhl,/ Die so verbreitet ihren Stand,/ Daß sie jetzt hat auch Mährenland.')[11] No doubt, Brant is alluding to the Hussites at the university of Prague whose teachings after 1453 had spread into Moravia, as well. Again and again, he speaks of the heresies of the Last Days, stating in Chapter 99, 'About the Decline of Faith', for instance, that hand in hand with the demise of the Holy Roman Empire goes the decline of the 'Christian faith' which is being diminished daily by the multitude of heretics.[12]

Finally in Chapter 103, which is devoted to the 'Antichrist', Brant turns his attention to those fools who take it upon themselves to 'distort' and 'bend' the Holy Scripture. As we have seen, the description of and reference to foolish-religious heresies is an important motive in the *Ship of Fools*. In this context, 'Eygenrichtikeit' is the intellectual vice that causes people to stray from the right path and become heretics.

The Subversive Picture

The following interpretation of the above-mentioned pictures by Bruegel is associated with the thesis that the genre painting typical of this Flemish painter is a medium of critical statements. The painter is concealing his anti-confessional spiritualistic statements in the crassness of his peasant satires and genre pictures.[13] If one pays attention only to bare buttocks and crude

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Eine neue Interpretation von Hans Holbeins Erasmusbildnis in Longford Castle", *Zeitschrift des deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft* 49/50 (1995/96) 179-211.

[11] Brant, *Narrenschiff* 93.

[12] Brant, *Narrenschiff* 94.

[13] In the tradition of research, Charles de Tolnay was the first to associate Pieter Bruegel with the ideas of Sebastian Franck. Afterwards, Stridbeck in his Bruegel Studies elaborated this interpretive approach further in an exemplary manner. Finally, I tried to develop these issues further in my own research. In general, it was Sebastian Franck who essentially popularized and radicalized ideas of Erasmus. This thinker, though little known today, was very influential. Regarding the relationship between Sebastian Franck and Erasmus, cf. most

sexual jokes, the religious context of his panels will remain hidden. Bruegel makes use of a Silenic metaphorical language which hides that which is valuable under a blunt outward appearance.[14]

In Plato's *Symposium* Alcibiades compared Socrates to Silenus, thereby emphasizing his ability to hide behind a mask of feigned obscenity and simplicity. Erasmus of Rotterdam devoted a separate *adagium* to the Silenic topos, but already Marsilio Ficino in *De Amore* described the discrepancy between the plain appearance and origin of Socrates and his true importance in such a way as if he was talking not about a pagan philosopher, but about Christ himself who was unrecognized as the Messiah.[15]

Reflecting on religious *dissimulatio,* it goes without saying that I would like to present two Silenic genre pictures, both dating from the same year, 1568. In my interpretation of the panel *The Peasant and the Birdnester* I would like to focus briefly on its heretical content and then continue with a more detailed discussion of *The Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind*.[16] One reason, in particular, for mentioning heretical content is that I do not know of any other picture in the history of art that could be considered an apology of heresy, except for Pieter Bruegel's 1568 *Peasant and the Birdnester* [Fig. 2].

At first glance, an interpretation based on such a hypothesis must seem absurd since, after all, we see a well-nourished peasant walking cheerfully toward the viewer, pointing backwards over his shoulder.[17] There we recognize a young man about to rob a bird-nest. He has hooked his legs firmly around the tree trunk to be able to reach directly into the nest. His

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recently: Bietenholz P.G., *Encounters with a radical Erasmus. Erasmus' work as a source of radical thought in Early Modern Europe* (Toronto: 2009) 13-31, 69-93. Regarding my own studies, cf. Müller J., "'Pieter der Drollige' oder der Mythos vom Bauern-Bruegel", in Ertz K. (ed.), *Pieter Breughel der Jüngere, Jan Brueghel der Ältere: flämische Malerei um 1600 (Lingen: 1997)* 42-53; Müller J., "Überlegungen zum Realismus Pieter Bruegels d.Ä. am Beispiel seiner Darstellung des Bethlehemitischen Kindermordes", *Morgen-Glantz: Zeitschrift der Christian Knorr von Rosenroth-Gesellschaft 8 (1998)* 273-296; Müller J., "Bild und Zeit. Überlegungen zur Zeitgestalt in Pieter Bruegels 'Bauernhochzeitsmahl'", in Pochat G. (ed.), *Erzählte Zeit und Gedächtnis: narrative Strukturen und das Problem der Sinnstiftung im Denkmal (Graz: 2005) 72-81*.

14 Cf. Lupi W.F., "La scuola dei Sileni", *Festschrift für Eugenio Garin* (Pisa: 1987) 1-20; Müller W.G., "Das Problem von Schein und Sein in Erasmus' >Sileni Alcibiadis< und Shakespeares >Macbeth<", *Wolfenbütteler Renaissance-Mitteilungen* 15 (1991) 1-18; Müller, *Das Paradox als Bildform* 90-117. An English translation of the Silenus adagium can be found in Mann Philipps M., *The »Adages« of Erasmus. A study with Translations* (Cambridge: 1964) 269-296. The best commentary is by Silvana Seidel Menchi, cf. Seidel Menchi S., *Erasmo da Rotterdam: Adagia. Sei saggi politici in forma di proverbi, a cura di Silvana Seidel Menchi* (Turin: 1980) 60-119.

15 Cf. Ficinus M., *Über die Liebe oder Platons Gastmahl,* ed. by P.R. Blum – K.P. Hasse (Hamburg: 1984) 311-317.

16 Cf. Müller, "Ein anderer Laokoon" 389-455.

17 I am referring to my own remarks here: Müller, *Das Paradox als Bildform* 82-89. Unfortunately, also Todd Richardson, in his dissertation, completely disregards the theological issues. He remains on a purely formalistic level, which regrettably applies to most of his interpretations. Cf. Richardson T., *Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Art discourse in the sixteenth century Netherlands* (Farnham: 2011) 149-159.

falling cap is an indication that this activity is not entirely without danger since he has no hand free to catch it. Based on our discussion of Brant, we are now well prepared to discover the image of a pertinacious heretic in this nestrobber.

Until now, the importance of Brant's allegory for Bruegel has not been sufficiently considered, for a simple reason: If you go back to the Flemish edition of the *Ship of Fools* dating from 1548—although it does contain the image of the nestrobber—the explanatory text was changed drastically.[18] It no longer rails against pertinacious heretics; rather, the chapter warns the reader not to abandon the true path, though without addressing the subject of false religious teachings. There is a simple reason for this change: The Antwerp edition was not based on the German text by Sebastian Brant, but on the Latin translation of his student Locher. To put it another way, the chapter critical of heretics dealing with the rise of heretical teachings during the Last Days was reduced to a humanistic allegory of moderation. In my opinion, it is quite possible, though, that Bruegel worked with the 1497 Low German edition which contains Brant's complete text and accordingly refers to 'vele Ketter(n)' (many heretics).[19]

Let us return to Bruegel's panel. In the background, on the right, we see a farmhouse with a thatched roof. A horse is just being led into the barn and the farm appears downright friendly in the noonday sun. In this part of the picture, the landscape appears flat and accessible, whereas it is barred on the opposite side by the tree trunks. The artist has skillfully directed our perception of the picture—before we are even aware what it is all about, our eye is drawn to the pointing gesture of the cowherd, who has a drinking horn hanging from his belt and is carrying a stick. On the ground to his right is a bag, probably left there by the nestrobber. It might be intended to transport the eggs stolen from the nest. The thief might have betrayed his presence by leaving the bag on the ground. After looking at the picture for a while, however, it becomes apparent that the cowherd is about to fall headlong. He would have done better to apply his wisdom to himself instead of pointing back at the nestrobber, who appears to be able to hold on.

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[18] Ethan Matt Kavaler, in his interpretation of the beekeeper drawing and the panel *The Peasant and the Birdnester* brings up the issue of apt proverbial sense, but is not aware of the ambivalence of the birdnester image. Cf. Kavaler E.M., *Pieter Bruegel. Parables of order and enterprise* (Cambridge: 1999) 248-254.

[19] Cf. Brant S., *Dat narren schyp*, ed. by T. Sodmann (Bremen: 1980). The Low German edition, however, shows the heretic standing in front of the tree. Key to my interpretation is the connection between word and image, since I assume that Bruegel intended the birdnester to mean the heretic and did not simply look for a formal motive.

In order to get closer to the iconography of the picture, we need to use additional examples as a reference. In Brant's *Ship of Fools* there is not only a model for the birdnester, but also for the peasant. In Chapter 21 [Fig. 5] we encounter a fool who wants to show others the way, though he himself is in a puddle.[20] Brant accuses such fools of malice since they are ready to slander everyone, yet unable to perceive the beam in their own eye. Appropriate for this hypocrisy is the illustration which has the fool, who is standing in a puddle, point to a shrine showing Christ on the cross.

Another work of art must be mentioned here. The Kupferstichkabinett (Museum of Prints and Drawings) in Berlin holds a drawing by Bruegel also showing a thief robbing a nest; here, strangely, instead of a cowherd we see beekeepers collecting honey from their hives [Fig. 6]. Repeatedly, the beehive as an allegory of the Catholic Church has been used in this context, including reference to a critical Reformation text by Philips Marnix van Sint-Aldegonde, *De Bijencorf der H. Roomschen Kercke*, which was, however, not published until 1569.[21] Along the lower edge of the drawing there is a Flemish proverb which has long served as a key for interpreting both the drawing and the panel. It reads like this: He who knows where the nest is, has the knowledge; he who robs it, has the nest. No doubt, this elevates the importance of action, the deed, over contemplation. But this wisdom is not appropriate for either the drawing or the panel.

In the nestrobber, Brant sketches an allegory of the heretic whose pertinacity is so great that he loses his way climbing the tree and presumes to look for paths where there are none. At the end of his text, the Strasbourg humanist laments the fact that the heretics have the audacity to divide the robe of Christ. In the *Ship of Fools* he opposes these sectarians who challenge the unity of the Catholic Church. What is interesting here is the isotopy of his text which is the starting point for Bruegel's iconographic design. It deals with a fool who leaves the right and level road and gets lost in the wilderness searching for bird-nests and roads that are blocked. Bruegel's painted image starts from this literary description; however, he turns Brant's supposed wisdom into its opposite. Initially, though, the dramatic narrative of his

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[20] Milla-Villena R., "Deux Moralités de Pierre Bruegel l'Ancien à l'Époque de la Montée du Calvinisme aux Pays-Bas", *La Littérature Populaire aux XVème et XVIème Siècles. Actes du deuxième Colloque de Goutelas. Bulletin de l'Association d'études sur L'Humanisme, la Réforme et la Renaissance* (n. p.: 1979) 188-195; Müller, *Das Paradox als Bildform* 83.

[21] Cf. Sybesma J., "The Reception of Bruegel's 'Beekeepers'. A Matter of Choice", *The Art Bulletin* 73, 3 (1991) 467-478. Cf. also Noll T., "Pieter Bruegel d.Ä. Der Bauer, der Vogeldieb und die Imker", *Münchner Jahrbuch der Bildenden Kunst* 3.F. 50.1999(2000), 65-106. These essays call for a separate interpretation since, in my opinion, the drawing has not been sufficiently understood in art history research. Cf. Kavaler, *Pieter Bruegel* 233-254, and also Mielke H., *Pieter Bruegel. Die Zeichnungen* (Turnhout: 1966) 68-69.

picture seduces us into agreeing with Brant, considering the cowherd as wise, while believing the nestrobber to be in danger—until we come to realize that the exact opposite is the case. The seemingly flat and harmless path on the right is crisscrossed by canals. The climb up into the trees may seem more difficult at first; ultimately though, it turns out to be less dangerous. Indeed, in the final analysis the heretic turns out to be the wise one who, in contrast to the peasant, will be spared a bad fall. I would like to point out the water lily as an additional detail in the picture placed on the same vertical axis as the nestrobber. We need now to raise the question of its meaning, but the answer will be provided later.

Let me summarize: Bruegel, in his picture, obviously utilizes an ironic statement which is aimed at reversal. The supposedly wise turn out to be foolish whereas the fools prove to be prudent. Cleverly, the artist succeeds in updating a famous concept, since it is the metaphor of the two paths that is being suggested in Bruegel's painting. The path of vice starts out wide and appears without danger while that of virtue is arduous to follow.[22] The artist succeeds in creating a clever iconographic program insofar as he manages both to defend heresy in terms of a virtuous path through numerous hints and simultaneously dissimulate this message. Yet another detail needs to be explored further in this context. A few comparative examples have already been mentioned, but an additional motive serving as an expression of the artist's anti-Catholic criticism needs to be included here. For our cowherd actually originates in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel.[23] In my interpretation it is no accident that the artist, by borrowing his motive, gives a metonymical hint at *the* key work of Catholic orthodoxy. It is quite funny, at that, seeing a noble and fearless figure transformed into a clumsy peasant.[24]

As early as the 1560s Bruegel traveled to Italy with the geographer Abraham Ortelius and was, presumably, able to study this fresco in the original.[25] But numerous motives would have been accessible also as reproductions in print [Fig. 7]. As already pointed out by

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[22] Cf. also Harms W., *Homo viator in bivio. Studien zur Bildlichkeit des Weges* (Munich: 1970).

[23] We owe this discovery to Carl Gustav Stridbeck, although his claim, based on this reference, that Michelangelo served a model für Pieter Bruegel the Elder, must be emphatically contradicted. Quite the contrary, here Bruegel parodizes the style of the Florentine artist informed by Laocoon.

[24] In my opinion, the Michelangelo motive is also a metonymical hint at the iconographic program of the papal chapel in which the leadership claim of the Catholic Church is expressed. Regarding the political interpretation of the Sistine Chapel, cf. Pfeiffer H., "Gemalte Theologie in der Sixtinischen Kapelle. Die Fresken des Michelangelo Buonarotti ausgeführt unter Julius II", *Archivum historiae pontificiae* 31 (1993) 69-107; KING R., *Michelangelo and the pope's ceiling* (London: 2002); Accomando Gandini M., *Relazioni e confronti negli affreschi sistini e nel Mausoleo di Giulio II* (Ascoli Piceno: 2004).

[25] Kaschek B., *Weltzeit und Endzeit. Die 'Monatsbilder' Pieter Bruegels d.Ä.* (Munich: 2012) 34-37.

Stridbeck, the artist based his cowherd on a so-called Spiritello [Fig. 8] by Michelangelo.[26] It is important to note here that the boy in the Italian model points behind himself to the prophets and Sibyls. Fearlessly, he strides on. Although he is standing only on a narrow console from where his next step will lead him into the abyss, he is not afraid and puts his trust in God. In the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo plays incessantly with an architecture that is impossible from a static point of view, staging both falling and holding back of all the figures. To the viewer of the fresco, Michelangelo is suggesting this conclusion: Just as God's grace supports all humankind while remaining inscrutable, so inscrutable, too, are the decisions of the Pope regarding the Catholic faithful. Obviously, Bruegel is contradicting this papist world view and ridiculing the supposed superiority of Catholic theology. He does this by selecting a quotation that is not immediately recognizable since he is utilizing a marginal motive that—compared to the famous renderings of the prophets and Sibyls—would not have been readily identifiable. Bruegel has designed a clever pictorial program. He seduces the viewer into identifying with the superior gesture of the cowherd. When we finally notice that the supposedly superior person is the one who is about to fall, it is too late. We, as viewers, have been deprived of our superiority, as well. This applies equally to the scene of the action. Instead of tree climbing, which may initially appear dangerous to us, it is actually the swampy landscape that proves treacherous. It has been suggested that Bruegel's panel could be understood as a subtle discussion of Brant's chapter on 'Eygenrichtikeit'. Going even further, by using a motive in the style of Michelangelo, the Flemish painter is attacking Catholic orthodoxy. Now, how about *The Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind*? Does it contain a commentary critical of the Church, as well?

Traditional Interpretations of *The Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind*

Except for *The Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind* [Fig. 3], there are few works by Pieter Bruegel the Elder that have received such unanimous admiration in the history of art. The painting is signed and bears the date 1568. It measures – height by width – 86 x 154 cm and is now housed in the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples.[27] It is one of two works which were not

[26] Regarding the Michelangelo reception in graphic arts, cf. Barnes B.A., *Michelangelo in print. Reproductions as response in the sixteenth-century* (Farnham: 2010).

[27] During his time in Flanders as secretary of Allessandro Farnese, the Florentine nobleman Cosimo Masi had managed to collect some important paintings, including in addition to *The Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind* also the so-called *Misanthrope*. Both pictures were expropriated, however, and became the property of the Farnese family. Cf.: *Der Glanz der Farnese. Kunst und Sammelleidenschaft in der Renaissance.* Ausstellungskatalog Haus der Kunst, München 1995 , ed. by C. Vitali (Munich: 1995) 265-66.

painted on wood by the artist; rather, it is a so-called *Tüchlein* painting which uses glue as a binding medium for the paint.[28]

The painting depicts a group of six blind men walking across the foreground of the picture from left to right. The arrangement is chosen very skillfully by the artist, particularly because the forward progression is aligned along the descending diagonal connecting the upper left corner with the lower right. This creates the impression that men are joined together like the links in a chain, an impression that has been emphasized by all interpreters alike.[29]

The topic of the fall of the blind is mentioned three times in the New Testament. In the gospel of Matthew (15: 14), Jesus calls the Pharisees 'blind leaders of the blind', who lead the people astray so that both fall into the pit. In Luke (6: 39-41), Jesus asks the rhetorical question whether a blind man can lead another blind man without both of them falling into a pit. And finally, the apostle Paul picks up the image of the blind guide in his letter to the Romans (2: 19) to make clear that the knowledge of God's commandments alone is not sufficient for gaining salvation.

Though the painting has been handed down in ruinous condition, it has been praised in glowing terms by researchers in art history. Wolfgang Stechow calls it an 'absolute masterpiece' in his interpretation.[30] So does Carl Gustaf Stridbeck, who rates it a 'masterpiece' in the very first sentence of his study.[31] Fritz Grossmann considers this work of the Flemish painter the *ultima ratio* of his creativity, stating that Bruegel, in this picture housed in Naples, reached the pinnacle of expression of what had been occupying his mind for years.[32] Similarly, Roger H. Marijnissen concurs with these assessments praising *The Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind* as the most touching work of the painter.[33]

Two positions may be differentiated in an attempt at a rough classification of the interpretations of Bruegel's *Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind*. Hans Sedlmayr saw the blind men as people who were blinded ('Verblendete'), the role of the Synagogue, as it were,

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[28] Regarding *Tüchlein* painting in general, cf. Bosshard E.D., "Tüchleinmalerei – eine billige Ersatztechnik?", *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 45 (1982) 31-42.

[29] Max Imdahl gives a powerful formal description of the inevitable fall, although he sets little store by the iconographic details. Cf. Imdahl M., *Giotto. Arenafresken: Ikonographie, Ikonologie, Ikonik* (Munich: 1988) 99-110.

[30] Cf. Stechow W., *Bruegel*, translated from English by H. Frank (Cologne: 1974) 134.

[31] Cf. Stridbeck C.G., *Bruegelstudien. Untersuchungen zu den ikonologischen Problemen bei Pieter Bruegel d. Ä. sowie dessen Beziehungen zum niederländischen Romanismus* (Stockholm: 1956) 259.

[32] Cf. Grossmann F., *Pieter Bruegel. Gesamtausgabe der Gemälde* (Herrsching: 1973) 203.

[33] Cf. Marijnissen R.H. – Seidel M., *Bruegel.* (New York: 1984) 368.

assigned to them in opposition to the Church in the background.[34] In contrast, Carl Gustaf Stridbeck emphasized the anti-clerical tendency of the picture and assigned a negative interpretation to the Church. Just as Jesus directed his parables against the Pharisees, Bruegel is criticizing the institution of the Church and her priests. In this context, the Swedish art historian points to a passage from Sebastian Franck's *Die Güldin Arch*, in which priests are referred to as guides of the blind.[35]

But how well-known, in general, should we consider the German theologian? In the Netherlands around the middle of the 16th century, Franck was a noted author whose writings had a far-reaching influence. Seventeen of his works were translated into Dutch between 1558 and 1621, followed by several reprints.[36] Also, from the very beginning he was perceived as a critic of the churches and confessions whose influence could only be exerted in secret. His criticism of the official churches targets their secularization, no confession excepted. For him, God can only be experienced internally and has no need for mediation through priests and sacraments. External authority of any kind is being contested. Even the Bible is not an end in itself for him; consequently, he rejects Luther's concept of *sola scriptura*, embracing the Holy Scriptures instead as a tool and possible gateway to greater spirituality.[37]

My attempt at a critical interpretation of the picture following Stridbeck automatically raises the question of Bruegel's religious convictions. Would he not—in accordance with such a heretical approach—criticize each and every confessional manifestation of Christianity as heresy? There is no consensus among scholars regarding the confessional identity of the painter. Generally, the problem is either avoided or declared not answerable. There are only a few interpreters who have taken a clear stand, among them, in the past, Karl Tolnai and, following him in his research, Carl Gustaf Stridbeck who attempted to draw upon Franck's writings time and again in his *Bruegelstudien*.[38]

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[34] Hans Sedlmayr dealt with this interpretation in great depth, cf. Sedlmayr H., "Pieter Bruegel. Der Sturz der Blinden. Paradigma einer Strukturanalyse", *Hefte des Kunsthistorischen Seminars der Universität München* 2 (1957) 1-49.

[35] Cf. Stridbeck, *Bruegelstudien* 262.

[36] Cf. Weigelt H., *Sebastian Franck und die lutherische Reformation* (Gütersloh: 1972) 68.

[37] Regarding Sebastian Franck in general, cf. Wollgast S., *Beiträge zum 500. Geburtstag von Sebastian Franck (1499-1542)* (Berlin: 1999); Dejung C., *Sebastian Franck interkulturell gelesen* (Nordhausen: 2005).

[38] Indeed, there are great theoretical affinities between Erasmus and Franck. For Erasmus, already, the essence of the Christian religion is lost, if one chooses to perceive it as the sum of its rites and conventions. He expressly rejects the veneration of the Virgin Mary, pilgrimages, the concept of real presence in the Eucharist, just to name a few of the points of criticism of Catholic rites he formulated. It is not without reason that numerous writings of the Rotterdam scholar were put on the *List of Prohibited Books* during the 16th century. In retrospect, it appears an irony of history that Sebastian Franck listed the Dutch theologian in his 'Ketzerchronik' among important heretics, and hence true Christians, a fact that is said to have infuriated the latter leading him to intervene with the Strasbourg City Council to request his banishment. Even though Franck owes many of his

Anyone who connects Bruegel with Franck's ideas needs to take into account the status of the latter as a heretic and the difficulties that might have arisen for the artist, as a result.[39] As regards Bruegel, David Freedberg reminded us of the problem of Nicodemism in terms of a critical religious practice. Nicodemism, as it is generally understood, means the merely pretended affiliation with an official church during the time of the Reformation.[40] A person would feign a confessional identity, but adhere to another conviction in secret.

In scholarly studies, Freedberg's assumption has played a minor role, at best. This is also due to the fact that there are no convincing interpretations accompanying his research hypothesis. In his essay, he does not explain what kind of religious convictions Bruegel needed to hide or in what way this manifested itself in his works. Be that as it may, it does not change the fact that the issue of Nicodemism appears to have been of some importance in the Netherlands of the 1560s.

Assuming that Sebastian Franck may indeed have influenced Bruegel's art, this involves an author who had been dead for more than twenty years at the time *The Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind* was created. It would be amiss, however, to conclude that he was therefore unknown. Indeed, the Dutch Anabaptist Dirk Philips authored a polemic paper against the German theologian in the mid-1560s. Two letters dating from the 30s and 40s of the 16th century and written by Franck to heretics he was friends with had been translated into Dutch shortly before and summarized in a small publication. This prompted polemics by Philips lamenting the success of the German theologian. He claimed the reason for Franck's large number of 'followers, readers, and students' was that he advocated a Nicodemic strategy.[41] Hiding one's own Christian convictions was considered hypocrisy by the Anabaptist Philips. He stated that practicing 'false worship' was unacceptable under any

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convictions to the Rotterdam scholar, he is much more radical as regards the consequences and turns openly against all confessions. God, to him, is not a privilege; rather, God is accessible to all mankind and all religions from within. Cf. here the new study: Bietenholz, *Encounters with a radical Erasmus* 13-31, 69-93.

39 Charles de Tolnay and Carl Gustav Stridbeck disregarded this issue.

40 Cf. Freedberg D., "The Life of Pieter Bruegel the Elder", in *The prints of Pieter Bruegel the Elder.* Ausstellungskatalog Bridgeston Museum of Art, Tokyo 1989, ed. by D. Freedberg (Tokyo: 1989) 21-31. In addition, Freedberg D., "Allusion and Topicality in the Work of Pieter Bruegel: The Implications of a Forgotten Polemic", in *The prints of Pieter Bruegel the Elder.* Ausstellungskatalog Bridgeston Museum of Art, Tokyo 1989, ed. by D. Freedberg (Tokyo: 1989) 53-65.

Regarding issues of Nicodemism in general, cf. Zagorin P., *Ways of lying. Dissimulation, persecution, and conformity in early modern Europe* (Cambridge: 1990); Van Veen M.G.K., *«Verschooninghe van de roomsche afgoderye». De polemiek van Calvijn met nicodemieten in het bijzonder met Coornhert* (Houten: 2001).

41 Calvin, likewise, complained about the Nicodemites in his polemic paper published in 1544, "Excuse a Messieurs les Nicodemites." Cf. Busch E. – Heron A. [et al.], *Calvin-Studienausgabe,* vol. 3, *Reformatorische Kontroversen* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: 1999) 222-265.

circumstances; that it was wrong and a 'root of idolatry'.[42] The anger of the Dutch Anabaptist is understandable since Franck had written in one of the letters that it was acceptable even for those who held different convictions to participate in the mass and rites of Catholics.[43]

Continuing now with a close reading of Bruegel's *Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind,* this should be understood in terms of a subversive treatment of the image. This wording may sound more fashionable than intended. By subversion as regards pictures of the Early Modern period I mean three things: First of all, the ability to encode a controversial theological issue of that time in a presumably secular genre painting, in other words, in a supposedly everyday scene. Secondly, the subversive nature of the picture may pertain to the presence of heterodox content in a supposedly orthodox topic so that content critical of religion is concealed in a conventional concept. Thirdly and lastly, subversion involves the issue of religious *dissimulatio*. The artist has to succeed in hiding the *clavis interpretandi* of his work. Put differently, this kind of subversive treatment of a painting facilitates communication of critical theological content. Framed in terms of pathos, it is the function of this kind of art to support religious pertinacity.[44] It goes without saying that such a picture was intended for persons holding the same convictions who would have been able to share the religious clues of the illustration. Though we know that Bruegel socialized with the cultural elite of Antwerp and Brussels, there is no information on the exact circumstances as to who commissioned these paintings, though it is unlikely that they were painted without prior commissioning.[45]

My question, then, is this: What exactly does a heretical picture look like? How can messages that would be called religiously deviant be communicated in and through pictures? What kind of techniques need to be employed, on one hand, to encode this picture content and, on the other, to reveal it to like-minded persons?

Genre or History?

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[42] Cf. Fast H. (ed.), *Der linke Flügel der Reformation. Glaubenszeugnisse der Täufer, Spiritualisten, Schwärmer und Antitrinitarier* (Bremen: 1962) 181.

[43] The Latin letter by Sebastian Franck is included in Hegler A., *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Mystik in der Reformationszeit,* ed. by W. Köhler (Berlin: 1906) 88-90, esp. 99.

[44] Cf. Schwerhoff G., "Gottlosigkeit und Eigensinn. Religiöse Devianz in der Frühen Neuzeit", in Vorländer H. (ed.), *Transzendenz und Gemeinsinn. Themen und Perspektiven des Dresdner Sonderforschungsbereichs 804* (Dresden: 2010) 58 – 63.

[45] The most precise observations regarding Bruegel's environment were made by Bertram Kaschek. Cf. Kaschek, *Weltzeit und Endzeit* 39-107.

Six blind men have banded together to go begging.[46] Presumably, the group is on its way to church to play music for the worshipers entering and leaving the church. This much is certain, they missed the road in the middle of the picture leading to the church and, as a result, ended up on rough terrain. Part of the group would have played music while the rest of them were begging. A hurdy-gurdy is plainly visible and about to be submerged in water together with the leader. The blind man at the end of the row appears to carry an instrument beneath his wide cloak, as well, while the third beggar has a plate hanging from his belt that might be intended for collecting alms. We get a somewhat better mental image of such a scene by taking a look at Bruegel's panel *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent* [Fig. 9]. At the door of the church, a group of beggars is waiting for the mass to end and the rich patricians to come out. Among these pitiful creatures is a blind beggar, whose eyes have been gouged out, with a black and white guide dog at his feet. He is holding out his cap as the man in front of him prepares to put in a pittance.

The accident of the fall of the blind happens in a flat Brabantian landscape. But the awareness of the place of action dawns only gradually on the viewer, so completely are his eyes riveted on the inevitable fall of the men. In the right half of the painting, the late medieval church building identified with the church of Sint Anna Pede near Brussels catches the eye.[47] The church tower reaches to the upper edge of the picture. On account of its height, if nothing else, this late medieval building marks the center of the village with its houses, gables, and roofs recognizable behind the blind man on the left. Along the horizon on the right, there are more buildings including a palace or a castle. Although the church building may have been modeled after Sint Anna Pede, the hill in the background is Bruegel's invention. So what you see is by no means a direct representation of an existing landscape; rather, it is a picture that was enhanced using elements of reality.

While most objects in the background are shown overlapping and blocked, the church is clearly recognizable to the viewer. Furthermore, it is emphasized through the dramaturgy of the painting by its placement on the "decision axis" of the action: We wonder if the third blind beggar from the right will let go just in time or if he will end up in the water with the one about to fall and the one who has already fallen into the water. The staging of this dramatic moment is accompanied by a clever manipulation of the viewer's eye, since our point of sight

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[46] Regarding the representation of beggars in the 16th century, cf.. Nichols T., *The Art of Poverty: Ironie and Ideal in Sixteenth-Century Beggar Imagery* (Manchester: 2007).

[47] Cf. Roberts-Jones P. and F., *Pieter Bruegel der Ältere* (Munich: 1997) 233.

is not in the center of the picture, but at the level of the church. The church is the vanishing point of our perception.

Like other late Bruegel works, this picture shows people from very close up. Inherent in it is a certain monumentality which has something to do not only with the size of the people depicted, but also with our own position. Where are we as the viewers if we extend the space of the picture into the space of the viewer? Are we standing above or below the blind group? This question has no definite answer. If we look at the two falling beggars on the right, we are looking down; if we look at the rest of the group, it seems as though we are looking up. This is a skillful move by the artist designed to unsettle the viewer. Without a firm standpoint we begin to falter, just like the blind in the picture. In addition, we get the feeling that the tottering blind man with the white cap might be looking at us. In a startling way, the artist challenges our traditional notions of seeing versus recognizing since the eyes of this blind beggar were gouged out. He is looking at us without being able to see. To put it even more succinctly: The only blind person to look consciously at the viewer most likely did not suffer from an eye disease that caused him to become blind like his comrades; rather, he was blinded.[48]

Long before there were movie theaters, artists attempted to suggest motion sequences. Even on sarcophagi of the ancient world images were arranged in such a way that one and the same figure was shown in different snapshots of motion. Bruegel's painting *The Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind* is one of those attempts to describe an event in different stages of progression. It does so in several ways: Following the persons from left to right, it is apparent that they show different psychological moments of the action in progress. The man on the far left is still walking along confidently as is evident from the relaxed look on his face. But the facial expression of the person in front of him is already indicating certain uneasiness. The next blind man has a startled expression.

In contrast to these characterizations in terms of increasing uneasiness, the three blind men leading the group are characterized by more dramatic motives of posture and motion, in that the fall of the leader is now beginning to affect the postures of the persons immediately behind him. The upper body of the man in the middle wearing a light-colored cape is jerked forward, as evidenced by his precarious position on the balls of both his feet. Even if he were

48 Regarding individual diseases: Torrilhon T-M., *La pathologie chez Bruegel. Thèses pour le doctorat en médecine* (Paris: 1957).

to let go of the staff joining him to the man in front who has abruptly yanked it forward, he would probably fall since he has already lost his balance.

It is all over for the next blind man, as well. As he is falling, he is looking in our direction in panic. We see only his right leg, which intensifies the impression of instability. He has let go of the staff of the man ahead of him, in vain groping for something else to hold on to. The blind man on the far right, finally, has already tumbled into the morass of the canal. His arms are jerked upwards, his legs flailing helplessly. We can see the underside of his left shoe. The back of his head is about to be immersed in the water.

Bruegel is showing different psychological reactions to what is happening; at the same time, we see motives of movement expressing different stages of stumbling and falling. Against the background of a history painting, this work is a masterpiece as regards the pictorial rendering of emotions.[49] Beyond that, and preceding all iconographic determinations, this work of art is a showpiece of presenting motion. One needs to visualize the demand on the artist here as he tries to express, from left to right, acceleration and a compression of the moment in time. Starting, at the latest, with the blind beggar standing on the balls of his feet and jerked forward by the man in front of him, there is an emphasis on the precise moment in time, which is still further intensified by the men who are actually falling. The artist even omitted painting one of the legs of the second blind man, thus creating the impression of a continuous falling motion of the first two. The cap of the blind man next to the leader is about to fall off his head, yet the fall of the latter is not yet completely finished. His legs are sticking up into the air while the rest of his body is about to be immersed in water. The picture represents and stages not just a tiny moment in time, but also compresses the dramatic moment.[50] Put in modern terms, the last image is a freeze frame, allowing the capture of a moment of motion, in the first place.

The Iconography of the Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind

Since the Renaissance, the parable of the fall of the blind has been widely known. A testimony to its great popularity is the fact that it is a background scene in the encyclopedic *Proverbs* painting [Fig. 10] of the Flemish painter. The Kupferstichkabinett (Museum of Prints and Drawings) in Berlin contains a drawing [Fig. 11] that was for a long time attributed

[49] Regarding the problem of depicting emotion in the context of Italian art theory in general, cf. Michels N., *Bewegung zwischen Ethos und Pathos. Zur Wirkungsästhetik italienischer Kunsttheorie des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts* (Münster: 1988).

[50] Regarding the depiction of time, cf. Müller, *Bild und Zeit.*

to Pieter the Elder but today is considered a work of Jacob Savery, also dealing with the subject of blindness.[51] Here, though, the blind man is being led by a seeing person who is turning around to look at a woman. Her face is not recognizable under her hat. She appears to be coming from mass, a fact indicated by the church spire visible in the background. Whether or not the unchristian attitude of this woman, who has no eyes for those in need, is meant to be denounced here, is unclear. If so, it would mean that a physically blind person is juxtaposed with a morally blind one.

Be that as it may, the subject of the fall of the blind was illustrated a number of times in the immediate environment of the painter. A series of twelve copperplates, probably created after the artist's death, depicts varying motives in Bruegel's work, among them the illustration [Fig. 12] showing two blind men tumbling screaming into a pit. In the surrounding caption, the reader is admonished to pursue his path steadfastly and not to trust anyone but God. Bruegel's son Pieter transferred the theme of this copperplate to a painting [Fig. 13].[52]

The fact that the famous concept of the falling blind encouraged imitation by other artists is evidenced by a painting by Maerten van Cleve [Fig. 14] in which the motive of the blind who has fallen into the canal is repeated almost verbatim. The woman behind the blind men—clearly a reference to the Berlin drawing— also makes it obvious that this is nothing but a pastiche of Bruegel motives. But in contrast to the *Fall of the Blind* in Naples, the last blind man in the group is a pilgrim of St. James identified as a Catholic by the scallop shell, a pilgrim badge.[53]

Finally, looking for models that might have inspired and influenced the picture in Naples, a number of works need to be mentioned. In the visual arts, Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools* from the year 1494 is an important starting point. In the final verses of Chapter 39 the image of the fall of the blind is evoked with the words, 'Whoever sees a fool fall hard/ And still does not take care/ Touches the beard of a fool.' ('Wer sicht eyn narren fallen hart/ Und er sich dennoch nit bewart/ Der grifft eym narren an den bart.')[54] It goes on to say that daily one could observe the fall of fools who were unaware that they themselves were to blame. 'One blind person calls the other blind/ Though both of them have fallen/ [...].' ('Eyn blynd den

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51 Cf. Mielke, *Pieter Bruegel* 82.

52 *Brueghel Enterprises*. Ausstellungskatalog Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht 2002 / Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels 2002, ed. by P. van den Brink (Gent / Amsterdam: 2001) 52.

53 Regarding pilgrim symbolism, cf. Ohler N., *Pilgerstab und Jakobsmuschel. Wallfahren in Mittelalter und Neuzeit* (Düsseldorf / Zurich 2003) 82-84.

54 Brant, *Narrenschiff* 42.

andern schyltet blyndt/Wie wol sie beid gefallen synt/[…].')[55] The associated illustration also depicts the fall of the blind, though in this instance they appear to have stumbled over each other rather than into a pit. Another early representation can be found in the *Haywain Triptych* by Hieronymus Bosch [Fig. 15]**;** in it, the bottom left corner of the central panel shows a man with a child on his back being led by a boy. Larry Silver, among the most recent interpreters, pointed this out and identified the man as blind.[56] But no matter how one interprets this scene, immediately next to it vices are featured which undoubtedly apply to this strange pair, as well.

Blind beggars can also be found in a representation of *Hope*, or *Spes*, by Heinrich Vogtherr [Fig. 16] dating from the year 1545, which features scenes and persons in need of hope, as explained by the accompanying text. In an illustration of the gospel of Luke by Hans Brosamer [Fig. 17], the fall of the blind is part of the picture. While Christ is preaching to his disciples in the foreground, two blind men can be seen falling down on the right, and, on the opposite side, the parable of the mote and the beam is illustrated. Virgil Solis [Fig. 18] treated this topic, as well, and in a similar manner. In the center, we can once again identify two blind men who are falling into a pit. The artist was particularly successful in visualizing the evocative power of the words of Jesus by having Christ produce the "images" right before the eyes of his disciples. Whether Bruegel was familiar with all of these pictures remains an open question, however.

But before we pursue the subject of Bruegel's models and their importance for the artist any further, we need to turn our attention to the copies of the picture because they are essential for understanding it properly.[57] Anyone who has ever had an opportunity to study the painting in Naples up close will have noticed the blurred outline of the upper body of a man in front of the church. Due to improper cleaning of the canvas, the top paint layers suffered serious abrasion, to the extent that some motives are just barely perceptible today. The original body of motives can be reconstructed only after comparing *The Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind* with copies of the work housed in Paris, Parma, and Vaduz. In doing so, we notice that in the meadow between the church and the blind men there is a man leaning on his staff and looking toward the group of the blind while herding geese and cows, all the while unaware that one of his cows has wandered off and is about to tumble into the canal. In order to be able to drink, it is leaning forward so far that it will fall in at any moment.

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55 Ibidem.

56 Silver L., *Hieronymus Bosch* (Munich: 2006) 264.

57 This has been established in secondary literature for quite some time. Regarding the issue of esthetic pictorial form, cf. Sedlmayr, “Pieter Bruegel” 319-321.

The fall of the blind has a thematic counterpart in the fall of the animal; for the viewer, this offers an analogy which permits the identification of the unfaithful cowherd with the Church. This provides additional support for Stridbeck's thesis of an orientation of the painting toward criticizing the Church. In the context of Stridbeck's interpretation an engraving by Antonius Wierix [Fig. 19] deserves mention here; it was executed ten years after Bruegel's painting and also has negative examples of false shepherds as its subject. It is informative insofar as there are two blind men recognizable in the foreground who have left the right road and are falling into a pond. In addition, let me point to the withered and warped tree in front of the church contrasting with the flowering trees around it.

As regards the copies, we should bear in mind that not a single one was done by Pieter Bruegel the Younger. Most likely, they originate with Italian artists of the 17th century whose classicist taste manifests itself in the fact that, at the right edge of the picture, they added the hand that was seemingly arbitrarily cut off and raised the top edge of the painting to complete the missing part of the church building. Comparing all copies, they share the tree-lined road and the downward-sloping terrain in the foreground as a common element.

Repeated references have been made to an undated engraving by Cornelis Massys [Fig. 20] as a comparative example for the Flemish artist. In this example, the blind men take up the entire landscape format of the copperplate completely. Beyond that, Meinolf Trudzinski cited a woodcut by Hans Holbein the Younger [Fig. 21] as an explanatory reference.[58] Doubtless, this constitutes an interesting source for the artistic material of the painter; it is important, however, to state the differences between the two compositions more clearly. What is of interest here is the transformation in connection with Bruegel's concept. A group of intellectual and spiritual authorities like Plato, Aristotle, and the pope, together with other church dignitaries, become simple beggars in the painting in Naples.[59] Moreover, Holbein's Reformation agenda is evident. Congregated on the left are simple evangelical Christians following Christ, the *vera lux,* who is pointing to the burning candle, whereas assembled on the right are the false Catholic dignitaries who fall into the pit despite all their authority and ancient learning. The philosophers represent not only pagan antiquity, but also the intellectualized faith of Scholasticism.[60]

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[58] Trudzinski M., "Von Holbein zu Brueghel. 'Christus vera lux, philosophi et papa in foveam cadentes'", *Niederdeutsche Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte* 23 (1984) 63-116.

[59] *Hans Holbein d.J. Die Druckgraphik im Kupferstichkabinett Basel*, Ausstellungskatalog Kupferstichkabinett Basel, Basel 1997, ed. by C. Müller (Basel: 1997) 16.

[60] Cf.. Hofmann (ed.), *Luther und die Folgen für die Kunst* 187.

Contrary to Trudzinski's view, this woodcut is probably less significant as a direct model. Nevertheless, it is important because it serves as a reminder of the confessionalization accompanying the iconography of the fall of the blind during the time of the Reformation. This confessional reinterpretation is confirmed in an engraving by Pieter van der Heyden that has been linked to Hieronymus Bosch [Fig. 22] by some, since 'Bos' is named as the inventor in it. Two Catholic pilgrims, recognizable by their emblems, are falling into a canal. The scallop shells on the brims of their hats are clearly identifiable. Actually, a fall takes place twice if you take note of the figures in the middle ground who have missed the makeshift bridge and are falling, as well. Although the picture caption claims that the engraving is based on a painting by Hieronymus Bosch, this is actually not the case; on the contrary, Heinke Sudhoff has been able to show that this is once again a pastiche and that the faces of the two pilgrims are taken from the Amsterdam *Christ Crowned with Thorns* [Fig. 23] of the aforementioned painter.[61]

Our brief iconographic overview makes it clear that the biblical parable was utilized long before Bruegel. It might be fair to assume that the motive of the falling Catholic pilgrim dates back to the time of the Reformation. One of the earliest examples I have been able to find in this regard is a drawing from the British Museum attributed to Hans Weiditz [Fig. 24] and dated sometime in the 1520s.[62] The pen-and-ink drawing shows two blind men, one of whom is clearly recognizable as a pilgrim. Furthermore, the motive of the missed bridge is already prefigured here. To my mind, this motive alludes to the biblical passage in which Christ answered Thomas saying, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life.'[63] If we characterize Bruegel's painting in the context of the images represented, what stands out is the fact that he expanded the established pattern of two or four blind men.[64] Moreover, none of the pictures includes such a prominently featured church building or a scene with a careless cowherd and a falling cow.

Still, such a great number of comparative examples have been cited by now that we are better able to describe the esthetic characteristics of the Bruegel painting. What makes his composition of *The Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind* so unique? From the very first glance, the subject of his painting appears more ambivalent than that in other compositions, due to the

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61 Heinke Sudhoff merely points out an adoption, cf. Sudhoff H., *Ikonographische Untersuchungen zur 'Blindenheilung' und zum 'Blindensturz'. Ein Beitrag zu Pieter Bruegels Neapler Gemälde von 1568* (Bonn: 1981) 118-120.

62 Groß S., *Hans Wydyz. Sein Oeuvre und die oberrheinische Bildschnitzkunst* (Hildesheim: 1997).

63 *John* 14: 6.

64 Sudhoff, *Ikonographische Untersuchungen zur 'Blindenheilung' und zum 'Blindensturz'* 137.

fact that it is difficult to decide whether we are dealing with a genre painting or a history painting. Although the actual source of the painting is a biblical parable, we would certainly be somewhat hesitant to classify it as a history painting because of that. Furthermore, though we are confronted with maimed human beings, they are not representations of martyrs, as would be required by the art theory of the Italian Counter-Reformation.[65]

Finally, as regards the formal aspects, the artist takes great pains to treat the genre painting as a history painting. Thus, he has taken a leap regarding the technique by turning a theme typical of a print into a canvas image and changing a small format into an extremely large one. The close-up view and the monumentality of the blind men contribute to this upward revaluation, leaving no doubt that we ought to admire the artist's skill in portraying emotion, in facial expressions, gestures and movements of the figures.

Yet these formal upward enhancements are juxtaposed with the obviously lowly content of the picture: it is simply not appropriate for a history picture to portray maimed human beings whose handicaps are literally put in the limelight. Here, a passage from Alberti's *De pictura* comes to mind in which the Italian art theorist ponders the portrayal of a ruler, demanding that a king who lost an eye in war should be portrayed in profile so as not to detract from his dignity.[66] Alberti's example attests to the demand for observing decorum, something that does not appear to impress Bruegel in the least. Paradoxically, the artist fulfilled all the requirements of a history painting; nevertheless, he did not create one. Ultimately, the question of whether we are dealing with a history painting or a genre painting must be left unanswered. To my mind, this deliberate dehierarchicalization and transparency appear to be constitutive of the art of this Flemish painter.[67]

The Fall of the Blind as a Denunciation of Dissenters

It hardly needs mentioning that a reference to the parable of the blind leading the blind can be found in the writings of all major reformers. The topic of the fall of the blind is one of special interest during the Reformation since it concerns the matter of emphasizing one's own legitimacy with respect to other confessions.[68] Early on, in his programmatic tract *To the*

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[65] Cf. here the detailed list of sources regarding Italian Cinquecento art theory in Settis S., *Laocoonte. Fama e stile* (Rome: 1999).

[66] Alberti L. B., *Della Pittura - Über die Malkunst*, ed. by O. Bätschmann – S. Gianfreda (Darmstadt: 2010) 131.

[67] Cf. Müller, *Das Paradox als Bildform* 90-125.

[68] Enea Silvio Piccolomini, in a retractation bull from April 26, 1463, wrote thus from Rome to the university of Cologne: 'We walked in darkness and, not being content with our own error, we also pulled others into the abyss serving as blind leaders to the blind and falling into the pit with them.' ('Wir sind im Finstern gewandelt, und nicht zufrieden, uns selbst verirrt zu haben, haben wir noch andere in den Abgrund gezogen und

Christian Nobility of the German Nation, Luther already identified the Roman Catholic clergy and the Pope as guides of the blind.[69] But in later texts, as well, the German reformer called the Pope a 'Roman guide of the blind' ('romisch Blindenführer').[70]

Long before Luther, Erasmus of Rotterdam used this parable in his *Handbook of a Christian Knight* dating from 1503. In order to make clear to his readers the consequences of a Christian life, the Dutch theologian writes: 'I have no doubt that even now those foolish wise men and blind leaders of the blind are yelling at you that you are mad because you are ready to follow Christ[...]. Their miserable blindness ought to be mourned rather than imitated.' ('Ich zweifle nicht, dass schon jetzt dir voll Hass jene törichten Weisen und blinden Führer der Blinden entgegen schreien, dass du rasend seiest, weil du bereit bist, Christus nachzufolgen. [...]. Ihre erbärmliche Blindheit ist eher zu beweinen als nachzuahmen.')[71] And later Erasmus is imploring the reader once more to follow the light: 'Leave it [...] to the blind to lead the blind and fall into the pit together.' ('Lass du, [...], die Blinden die Blinden führen und zugleich in die Grube stürzen.')[72]

For Erasmus, the guides of the blind are those persons who keep us from resolutely following Christ. In his Bible preface *Ratio* he even uses the image of the fall of the blind with self-critical intention when talking about the message of his edition of the New Testament.[73] Sebastian Franck uses the parable along the same lines, as well, stating in his *Paradoxa* from 1534: '[...] that is none of your concern; come and follow me. Christ says: Leave them, they are blind guides of the blind.' ('[...] was geht es dich an, komm du und folge mir nach. Da spricht Christus: Lasset sie, sie sind blinde Blindenführer.')[74] Finally, John Calvin in the preface to his 1543 hymnal admonishes all believers regarding the true appreciation of the worship service and its individual parts, stating that a Christian needs to be

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als Blinde den Blinden zum Führer gedient und sind mit ihnen in die Grube gefallen.') Cf. Piccolomini E.S., *Briefe. Dichtungen* (Munich: 1966) 224.

69 A reprint of the original text with a critical commentary is included in *Martin Luther Studienausgabe*, ed. by H.-U. Delius, vol. 2 (Berlin: 1982) 89-167, here 145.

70 *Dr. Martin Luther's sämtliche Werke. Reformationshistorische und polemische deutsche Schriften,* ed. by J.K. Irmischer (Erlangen: 1830) 142: 'We still do not see, so completely did the Roman guide of the blind capture us.' ('Noch sehen wir nit, so gar hat uns der romisch Blindenführer gefangen.').

71 Erasmus Roterodamus Desiderius, "Handbüchlein eines christlichen Streiters", in *Ausgewählte Schriften. Lateinisch/Deutsch*, ed. by W. Welzig (Darmstadt: 1990) 103.

72 Ibidem 269.

73 Erasmus Roterodamus Desiderius, "Theologische Methodenlehre", in *Ausgewählte Schriften. Lateinisch/Deutsch*, ed. by W. Welzig (Darmstadt: 1990) 121-123.

74 Franck S., *Paradoxa*, ed. by S. Wollgast (Berlin: 1966) 293.

illuminated by God in order not to be left with his 'own understanding' ('eigenenVerstand') and the 'foolish wisdom [...] of blind leaders' ('tollen Weisheit [...] blinde[r] Führer').[75]

Furthermore, the secondary literature about Bruegel's *Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind* mentions literary texts referring to the image of the fall of the blind that might possibly have served as sources of inspiration. For the most part, however, this is limited to short quotes that simply document, in the final analysis, how common we must consider the parable in the 16th century. Marijnissen, in particular, lists numerous sources from the first 25 years of the 16th century, including both religious texts and the *Rederijker* theater,[76] adding, however, that there is little that is unexpected in these texts and that they are of little help as regards a deeper understanding of the picture.[77] Heinke Sudhoff is the only one to consider a text as central, maintaining that Bruegel's painting arose from a direct reaction to a play by Dirck Volkertszoon Coornhert. In this context, she interprets blindness as a metaphor of Stoic-Christian moral philosophy, although without an appropriate understanding of the iconography of the painting.

This list could go on indefinitely, but suffice it to say that there are probably few parables besides the parable of the fall of the blind that were quoted with such frequency in order to slander the other confessional position. By slandering the respective other party, one assigned the position of true believer to oneself. From this perspective, orthodoxy would have need of heterodoxy. Yet neither the quotations from the writings of the Reformers nor the literary sources are helpful for a precise understanding of Bruegel's painting.

To be able to discover the relevance of additional possible models, it is first of all necessary to have an appropriate understanding of the formal main point of the painting. To my mind, the artist is giving a hint to the viewer, since, at the very least, his choice of a detail has an important consequence for the representation of the church. We see the church spire cut off, thereby preventing the representation of a cross. This strange detail is why some interpreters have gone so far as to surmise that the picture might have been trimmed at its upper edge. Migroet and Marijnissen, however, strongly rejected this hypothesis by pointing out that *The Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind* showed the black edge typical of a *Tüchlein* painting.[78] In view of this empirical finding it is a moot point that the picture was ever

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75 Jenny M., *Luther, Zwingli, Calvin in ihren Liedern* (Zurich: 1983) 271-281.
76 Marijnissen. – Seidel, *Bruegel* 365-366.
77 Ibidem 365.
78 Marijnissen. – Seidel, *Bruegel* 365.

trimmed. But why, then, did the artist choose this peculiar detail with the cross missing on top of the church tower? This question now becomes all the more important.

As a possible explanation an engraving from 1561 [Fig. 25] adapted from Hans Bol should be pointed out here; it was already mentioned by Heinke Sudhoff in her dissertation, but played no part in her subsequent interpretation. Portrayed here are two pilgrims of St. James, with a man carrying a child on his back added as third and fourth persons. The latter could well be a Jewish hawker or beggar.[79] His fur cap, known by its Polish name *spodik* and typical of Eastern Jews, identifies him as such.[80]

In this context it is important to note the blind man with his dog, in the middle ground to the left, who has stopped at the large house in order to beg. Bol clearly matched the shape of this building to the church building in the background, although the former is a brothel, as can be seen by a glance into the upper window showing a hugging couple.

In contrast to the comparative examples shown so far, this engraving after Bol sets positive examples against negative ones. In the background there are two people stopped at a wayside cross, pointing to it and praying. The dark stone cross stands out distinctly due to its placement on the vertical axis of the picture with the church behind it pointing to redemption by divine grace. In addition, in front to the left, there is a small shrine, familiar to us from Bruegel's *Peasant Dance* [Fig. 26] as well as Brant's *Ship of Fools,* which the blind men passed on their way. Bol is making it plain to the viewer that the blind men missed the Christian message, whereas the devoutly praying people in the background are on the right path to God. The fact that the people in the background have found salvation is also emphasized by the representation of the ship.[81]

Also on the right path to the cross and the church is a heavily burdened man about to cross a small footbridge and soon to join the other believers. The praying people are immediately in front of a church. Here, reference should be made to the third cross, located on the church tower, as one would expect. The church with its cross is explicitly placed in opposition to the blind men. In Bol's iconographic concept, the cross consistently functions as

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[79] Terms for and visualizations of the 'Handels- or Trödeljuden' (trading Jews) have a long tradition. The use of the term dates back to the Middle Ages when Jews – pushed out of the traditional economic system – were limited to money lending, and later also to hawking; cf. *Neues Lexikon vom Judentum*, ed. by Julius H. Schoeps, Gütersloh / München: 1992) 183.

[80] Cf. Somogyi T., *Die Schejnen und die Prosten. Untersuchungen zum Schönheitsideal der Ostjuden in Bezug auf Körper und Kleidung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Chassidismus*. (Berlin: 1982) 137f. I gratefully acknowledge Martin Przybilski (Trier) who pointed out the *spodik* of Eastern Jews to me.

[81] Cf. in this context my remarks about “Zwei Affen” in Müller, *Das Paradox als Bildform* 142-155.

an indication of the true faith, its absence meaning transgression and turning away from that path.

It is precisely this function of the cross—the reference to possessing the true faith—that is not found in Bruegel. By his curious choice of pictorial detail the artist forces the absence of the cross. In fact, he makes the viewer look for it. The cross as a symbol of assured salvation does not appear. In Bruegel's composition it is not a sign indicating the orthodoxy of the good Christian. It does not characterize the orthodox believer as opposed to the erring blind men, as it does with Bol. On the contrary, the cross is simply another object the blind are carrying with them. The second blind man from the left is wearing one around his neck, but that does not keep him from erring nor prevent him from falling. In a subtle way, this is about calling symbolic legitimacy into question.

Negative Theology and Spiritualism

If all observations so far are appropriate, does it not follow that Bruegel's *Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind* should be read as a symbol of the difficulty of searching for God? In his picture, it is evidently not enough to have a cross hanging around one's neck. 'Deus quid sit, nescitur,' or 'No one knows what is God,' is the programmatic title of the first *Paradoxon* in the Sebastian Franck work that I consider significant concerning Pieter Bruegel's art.[82] In it, Franck is turning against all religions that try to comprehend God in a representational mode.[83] He is demanding a radical rejection of all images in favor of a mystical experience of God that directs us inward. The theologian from Donauwörth, at the end of the first *Paradoxon*, warns and implores his readers: '[...] As long as man is dealing with images, he cannot turn to the spirit and to that which is in him.[...]. You must forsake all images and turn to God in the depth of your soul; there you will find God, for the kingdom of God is within you!' ('[…] Alldieweil und solange der Mensch mit Bildern umgehet, kann er zu dem Gemüt und zu dem, was in ihm ist, nicht einkehren. […]. Ihr müsst allen Bildern den Abschied geben, zu Gott einkehren in den Grund der Seele, da sollt Ihr Gott finden, denn das Reich Gottes ist in Euch!')[84]

With some justification, Hans Sedlmayr pointed out the opposition of *Ecclesia* and *Synagoga* in his interpretation of *The Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind*,[85] stating that the

82 Franck, *Paradoxa* 17.
83 Cf. Bietenholz, *Encounters with a radical Erasmus* 13-31, 69-93.
84 Franck, *Paradoxa* 21.
85 Cf. Sedlmayr, "Pieter Bruegel" 17.

stone church was confronting the false teachings of the heretics represented by the blind men. In the statuary art of medieval cathedrals the triumphal cross of the Church is traditionally contrasted with the broken insignia of the Synagogue, who, in addition, is characterized as blind by a veil covering her eyes. Yet, what may appear compelling and plausible in the context of this opposition, is precisely that which is challenged by Bruegel. A closer look at his composition will reveal an upside down Latin cross formed as though by chance at the end of the row. The cross that is carried ahead as a symbol of victory and power has become a fleeting moment of congruity that will soon pass.

In the context of the blind Synagogue and the concept of heretical teachings it is essential to point out Sebastian Franck's *Chronica, Zeytbuch und geschychtbibel* published in 1531, which was translated into Dutch as early as 1558.[86] The 'Ketzerchronik', which is included in it, constitutes an integral part of the *Geschychtbibel*. In his preface, the German theologian starts out by saying that the reader should not assume that he is considering all those he is subsequently going to enumerate to be heretics;[87] quite to the contrary, he states, such a judgment would reflect the opinion of the Pope, rather than that of the author. According to his thesis, it is the judgment of others that creates heretics in the first place. If it were up to him, everything would be reversed and heretics would be declared saints.

He goes on to say that there are many who ended up in the 'sooty cauldron' ('rußigen Kessel') of the Pope whom he considers worthy of immortality. If it were left to the Bohemians, they might put the Pope and his apostles on the list of heretics instead of Jan Hus. Christians, the preface goes on, have been heretics at all times and in all places, an assertion followed by a listing of famous heretics.[88]

It is the nature of the world to interchange good and evil time and again, Franck continues; that the truth of heresy as the expression of true Christianity is accessible only to spiritual persons. The difference between heresy and the true church does not reside in content as such, but in the status of such content, he goes on. According to Franck, the drama of heresy, or better yet, the martyrdom of heresy started with the fact that the official churches fell short of fulfilling their Christian identity because they replaced spiritual identity with institutional authority; Heresy takes place only from the perspective of church authority that declares itself absolute, he claims.[89]

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86 Franck S., *Chronica, Zeytbuch vnd geschychtbibel* (Strasbourg, Balthasar Beck: 1531).

87 Ibidem 233.

88 Franck, *Chronica, Zeytbuch vnd geschychtbibel* 234.

89 Ibidem 235-237.

One can hardly imagine expressing this in more radical terms than Franck, who considered Christ the first heretic and true Christians as standing in his tradition. Even so, he was under no illusions, as is evident when he says: 'If nowadays the Pope or any other supposedly evangelical [sic] sect should sit in judgment on the heretics, exactly the same thing would happen: One sect would persecute and hate the other to death [...]. That is a certain destiny and characteristic of the Gospel and the Truth.' ('Sollten nun zu unseren Zeiten der Papst oder irgendwelche angeblich evangelische [sic] Sekten über die Ketzer urteilen, so würde es genauso zugehen, wie es eben zugeht, dass eine Sekte die andere bis in den Tod hasst […]. Das ist ein gewisses Schicksal und Erkennungszeichen des Evangeliums und der Wahrheit.')[90] For Franck, history from the days of the apostles to Judgment Day is forced to repeat itself: 'Wherever Christ makes himself felt, there are Judas, Caiaphas, Hannas, Pilate and always the entire passion.' ('Wo sich Christus nur regt, da findet sich Judas, Hannas, Kaiphas, Pilatus und stets die ganze Passion.') [91]

To put it in exaggerated terms, Bruegel's *Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind* illustrates this view of the world. He presents a positive assessment of heresy and follows Sebastian Franck's ideas in other works, as well.[92] Similar to what is stated in the preface of the 'Ketzerchronik', the Flemish artist, against expectation, does not take the confrontation of orthodox Church and heresy as his starting point. Quite the opposite, in *The Fall of the Blind* there is no incompatibility between *Ecclesia* and *Synagoga*, but rather a fluid transition. The blind man on the far left is still representing a seeker of God in a positive way, whereas the attributes of the other men increasingly point to the rites of the official churches, their fall appearing to be inescapable. The Church itself is exposed as a guide of the blind in the end.

Against the background of Franck's positive evaluation of heresy, the image of the blind appears in a new light. We have to learn that as regards knowing God, all mankind is blind and unable to change that. The only way God can be experienced is within the heart, beyond all knowable images, all tangible reality. From this perspective, the staff of the blind would be an ambivalent symbol. As long as it functions as a metaphor of the search for God and brings to mind the fact that, in principle, all knowledge is only partial, it carries a positive meaning and serves as a radical metaphor of the fundamental impossibility to know God. If you believe, however, that it can assure the right way and you mistake it as a reliable indicator

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90 Cf.. Fast (ed.), *Der linke Flügel der Reformation* 240; Wagner A., *Das Falsche der Religionen bei Sebastian Franck. Zur gesellschaftlichen Bedeutung des Spiritualismus der radikalen Reformation* (Digitale Dissertation, Berlin: 2007) 371-447.

91 Ibidem, *Der linke Flügel der Reformation* 236.

92 This is the subject of my Bruegel book, *Das Paradox als Bildform*.

of direction—as if you could grope your way toward God—things turn out badly, as we can easily see. The search for God is bound to fail wherever God is sought externally.

This ambivalent valuation of the blind as those who seek and those who err is indirectly confirmed if we refer to a 1571 copperplate that is based on a sketch by Bruegel and shows the disciples en route to Emmaus. It is no coincidence that one of the two Emmaus disciples reminds us of the blind beggar at the far left edge of the *Tüchlein* picture. The pedagogical intent is obvious: Not only blinded people and heretics are unable to recognize Christ, but even his disciples fail to do so. They will be able to recognize him only in a spiritual-eucharistical sense when he breaks the bread with them at the inn. In addition, the walking staffs of the men are not crossed any more, as you can see. With Bruegel, the Catholic pilgrims of St. James of the Reformation period have become seekers of God unaffiliated with any confession. In the copperplate, one of the essential points is that the artist strips his subject of confessional references.

This can be said in a similar way of Bruegel's *Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind.* Expressly absent from his picture is the superiority which the confessions consistently assign to themselves with respect to their competitors in order to downgrade them to guides of the blind. On the contrary, he stages a commentary critical of the church in a manner full of allusions. In terms of ironic-spiritualist theology, his narrative of the fall of the blind is less about personal transgression than about the fall of the Christian religion. Whenever it mistakes itself as an institution with the claim to sole legitimate representation it becomes a guide of the blind. Looking at the men in that light, we need to take a critical stance toward the second one from the left wearing a rosary around his neck. A rosary hanging from the belt of the third man from the right is another hint at the veneration of the Virgin Mary. The original search for God becomes arrogance in terms of an externalized faith. For Franck, the Fall of Man continues when people build churches believing that they can externalize their faith by way of signs.[93] The church that is built is the real guide of the blind!

In his *Paradoxa* Franck also has powerful words for this sinful fall of a Christianity that disregards its spiritual nature.[94] He describes it as an inevitable process, as if the true, invisible church needed to be dispersed and persecuted since its very beginning in the days of the apostles. The 234th *Paradoxon* is entitled 'The Church, a lily among thorns, is scattered

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[93] This is the title of the 89th *Paradoxon*: 'Tempel, Bilder, Feste, Opfer und Zeremonien gehören nicht ins Neue Testament.' ('Temples, images, celebations, sacrifices, and ceremonies do not belong in the New Testament.') Franck, *Paradoxa* 142.

[94] Ibidem 347-352.

among pagans and trampled on until the end.' ('Die Kirche, eine Lilie unter Dornen, wird unter den Heiden zerstreut und bis zum Ende zertreten.')[95] Bruegel seizes on this metaphor. On the right, above the canal and above the falling blind man there is a blooming water lily. The canal itself is hard to see. Almost without transition, its swampy surface merges into the adjoining brownish meadow and the bushes, an optical trap used by Bruegel also in *The Peasant and the Birdnester* [Fig. 2] and based on the same plant imagery. In that picture, as well, the lily is a symbol of the true Church.

In conclusion, we will turn from this interpretation now and point out one additional pictorial detail that has escaped scholarly notice so far. Bruegel would not be Bruegel, if he did not also convey a message to viewers of the painting calling them to humility. After all, they might have been getting along comfortably in a world full of religious fallacies believing that they would be spared such a fall. But the picture makes a point that is aimed at the viewer warning him discreetly. As described earlier, the church spire is cut off at the upper edge of the picture. However, it is precisely this missing section that is visible on the horizon to the left of center beyond the hill. The trees in the immediate vicinity demonstrate the scale of this part of the building. In other words, the artist has the missing section of the church tower reappear somewhere else.

The church spire beyond the hill becomes an axis for the events in the foreground. It separates the group of people who are already falling from those who might perhaps still fall. It marks the point where there is still hope that those at the end of the row might let go of one another and thus avoid falling into the morass. Is it stretching a point to say that this might be intended as a warning to the viewer? He is in the same position as the third man from the left who may or may not fall; at least, we cannot be sure of the outcome. Be that as it may, if the viewer feels that he can disassociate himself from those who are falling, this will be the beginning of his own error and he himself will be in danger of falling eventually. Therefore, he is also under the influence of the Church beyond the hill which, though invisible to him, is nevertheless powerful. Accordingly, the question is not only whether the others will fall, but also whether or not we will fall. It would be wrong for the viewer to place himself above the unfortunate and blinded men in the foreground because he, as well, runs the risk of following a blind guide without being aware of it.

Let us return once more to Franck's letters translated into Dutch at the beginning of the 1560s. As regards theology, they repeat ideas that could have been familiar to an adherent of

[95] Ibidem 347.

the German theologian from his writings. But what makes these letters especially interesting is how clearly they advocate a Nicodemic strategy.[96] The fact that the letters were translated at that point in time emphasizes how urgent this problem was considered.

Advocating Nicodemism, however, was not without risk, as is evident from a certain passage in which Franck expressly asks his addressee Campanus to handle the letter carefully so as not to make him a martyr.[97] He explicitly warns the recipient not to let his letter fall among 'dogs and swine' ('Hunde und Säue') so as not to prepare a 'premature cross' ('vorzeitiges Kreuz') for him, adding that many were led to the gallows by their imprudent and ill-timed idle talk.[98] This practice of secrecy even receives theological justification when he briefly states that God himself is hiding his wisdom 'under the cloak of parables and in mysterious letters' ('unter der Decke der Gleichnisse und Parabeln der Buchstaben') that cannot be understood 'by anyone other than those who were taught by God himself' ('von niemand als von denen, die von Gott selbst gelehrt').[99] He advises caution and speaking only where it is appropriate.

In view of all that has been said it is obvious that an extreme tendency of encryption is associated with Bruegel's *Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind*. The wealth of allusions in this work is such that one can surely claim that it cannot be easily understood. Yet the iconographic program shown is not at all propagandistic; quite the contrary, it has the nature of a subtle theological discourse. The heterodox content in the picture is dissembled. A heretical interpretation is hiding under its surface.

Taking up once more the question of Bruegel's pictorial hermeneutics in *The Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind*, it is important to stress that the artist treats artistic tradition in a very unconventional way. He construes not so much the understanding of his picture, but rather its misunderstanding. Expressed in modern terms, this could be called a transcription procedure. He is using tradition with a critical purpose.[100] Utilizing existing iconographic traditions, the artist is suggesting certainties that prove elusive. He is using prior models in an unconventional way. Bruegel does not draw on themes, types, or motives in order to continue a tradition of meaning, but in order to question it. Yet he does this in a subtle way which can

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96 Fast (ed.), *Der linke Flügel der Reformation* 232-233.

97 Ibidem 233.

98 In a certain sense this also applies to Campanus himself since he spent a large part of his life incarcerated. Cf. “Johannes Campanus”, in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 2 (Freiburg – Basel – Vienna: 1994) 914.

99 Fast (ed.), *Der linke Flügel der Reformation* 233.

100 Müller, “Ein anderer Laokoon” 389-455.

only be captured on a second level of meaning. This *Umschreibeverfahren*, or transcription procedure, as I would like to call it, needs to be pointed out because the relationship between pictures is generally affirmative in nature. The Flemish artist takes a different approach. He points to models in order to contradict, or at least question, their supposed content of truth. He embraces traditions in order to prove them wrong from within. In doing so, the artist does not just contradict certain statements; rather, he goes beyond that by questioning the validity of the value system they represent.

Bruegel's strategy is to lay out everything in the picture without expressing it himself. At no time does the narrative mode of his picture relinquish latency. It is only when I, as the viewer, manage to connect the significant elements that an added hermeneutical value is created. Seen individually, all these details—the cut off church tower, the cross worn by the blind man around his neck, the rosary of another, the added cowherd, the cow falling into the ditch, the spire beyond the hill, the open space in front of the church, the blind man reminiscent of an Emmaus disciple, and the dead tree in front of the cowherd—all these would seem accidental. But if the viewer succeeds in accumulating several elements, a step toward a higher level of meaning can occur; in other words, a new meaning may be created, but this can only be accomplished proactively. If I link the existing elements correctly, meanings may develop that point beyond what is actually shown. Yet the creator of the picture could always reject this as a misrepresentation. Expressed in terms of linguistics, I misunderstand the picture if I confuse *parole* with *langue*, if I believe that the legitimacy of orthodoxy is, of necessity, configured in the fall of the blind, in spite of the fact that this appears confirmed, at least initially, by blind men falling into a ditch.[101]

As we have seen, blindness and the fall of the blind have been part of the defining exclusionary metaphors of orthodox Christianity at all times. In contrast with all other interpretations, my conclusion in reading *The Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind* is that the artist is questioning the assumption that the true Church and heresy are mutually exclusive. Thus I am implying an illuminative-ironic intention in Bruegel's painting. In it, the principle of denunciation and exclusion is being criticized. It describes, in the form of an allegory, how the Christian religion begins as an innocent search for God; how it continues with an externalization in symbols, rites and official churches; and how it ultimately loses its way and falls.

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[101] Saussure F. DE, *Cours de linguistique générale*, ed. by R. Englert, 2 volumes. (Wiesbaden: 1967–1974) 36-39.

In conclusion, summarizing my observations once more, I would like to note that it was not the goal of my lecture to impart specialized iconographical knowledge. Instead, my intention was to discuss the possibilities of visual strategies that have as their goal the communication of religious minorities outside the Catholic Church. My reflections on orthodoxy and heresy in this lecture are not meant to perpetuate the cliché of artists as society's outsiders. Quite the contrary, I am starting from the assumption that religious deviance up to the time of the Council of Trent was more common than we are led to believe by an art historiography oriented towards a strict opposition between the confessions.[102] Finally, let me remind you that we must not value the esthetic experience of Bruegel's painting any less than the historical "information" it is conveying. What comes to mind here is something that Jacob Burckhardt once expressed so well—that a successful work of art is like an arrow that flies through the centuries. If you concur with the well-known Swiss historian, it is the privilege of Bruegel's *Fall of the Blind Leading the Blind* to give us an idea of the enormous transgressions that are part of history. Whoever looks into the empty eyes of the falling blind man will not easily forget that. After all, in these dead eyes we do not only recognize the horror of the impending fall but also the sudden realization of our own culpability.

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Fig. 12. Jan Wierix (?) after Pieter Bruegel the Elder (?), *The Parable of the Blind*, from the series of "Twelve Flemish Proverbs", 1568, copperplate, Ø 17.7 cm, Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie, Graphische Sammlung.

Fig. 13. Pieter Bruegel the Younger, *The Parable of the Blind*, before 1616, Ø 19 cm, panel, Prague, National Gallery.

Fig. 14. Maerten van Cleve, *The Parable of the Blind*, 16th century, oil on wood, 62 x 84 cm, private collection.

Fig. 15. Hieronymus Bosch, *Haywain Tryptich*, ca. 1500, oil on panel, 135 x 90 cm, Madrid, Museo del Prado.

Fig. 16. Heinrich Vogtherr the Elder, *Hope*, 1545, woodcut, 23,5 x 33,4 cm, Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Kupferstichkabinett.

Fig. 17. Hans Brosamer, *Illustration for Luke 6:39-41*, between 1520-1554, woodcut, 10.5 x 14.1 cm, n. p.

Fig. 18. Virgil Solis, *Scenes from the New Testament*, plate 3, Luke 6,3, copperplate and etching, 79 x 50 cm, n. p.

Fig. 19. Antonius Wierix, *The Blind Shepherds*, 1579, copperplate, 200 x 331 mm, Dresden, Kupferstichkabinett.

Fig. 20. Cornelis Massys, *Parable of the Blind*, between 1544-1556, copperplate, 4.5 x 7.6 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

Fig. 21. Hans Holbein the Younger, *Christ and the True Light*, ca. 1526, woodcut, 8.4 x 27.7 cm, n. .

Fig. 22. Pieter van der Heyden (after Hieronymus Bosch?), *Parable of the Blind*, 1540-1570, copperplate, 22.2 x 25.5 cm, n. p.

Abb. 23. Hieronymus Bosch, *Christ Crowned with Thorns*, 1511, oil on panel, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

Fig. 24. Hans Weiditz (previously attributed to Tobias Stimmer), *Parable of the Blind*, ca. 1520, drawing, 15.1 x 11.5 cm, London, British Museum.

Fig. 25. Pieter van der Heyden after Hans Bol, *Parable of the Blind*, 1561, copperplate, 21.8 x 29.6 cm, n. p.

Fig. 26. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Peasant Dance*, ca. 1568, oil on panel, 114 x 164 cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.