

Conturbatio, Meritatio

I

In Jean-Luc Godard's 1985 film *Hail Mary*, the angel Gabriel arrives in Geneva aboard a jet plane, accompanied by a young girl—a fellow angel—who refers to him as her uncle. The pair descends upon the city as night falls, rudely pushing their way through the airport to locate Joseph at the taxi stand. In Godard's version of the story, Joseph is a sullen taxi driver, and Marie, his girlfriend, works at her father's gas station, playing on a local girls' basketball team in her free time. The angels ply Joseph with a wad of US currency and direct him to Marie's gas station, where the Annunciation transpires in an urgent volley of affirmations: "It's you, it's you Marie!" Looking upward toward the crescent face of the moon—God as silent witness—Marie receives the ultimate Word: "You're going to have a child." The wind howls intermittently as Marie reckons with this truth. As the angels depart, Gabriel's assistant bids her a portentous farewell, "*Marie, sois pur, sois dur, ne cherche que ta voie*"—which translates, roughly, as: "[B]e pure, be tough, seek no path but your own."

From Michael Baxandall's 1972 primer, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, we learn of the five Laudable Conditions of the Blessed Virgin, which late medieval preachers elaborated in their homilies as an aid to visualizing the mystery of the Angelic Colloquy—that is, rendering the moment-by-moment interactions between Mary and the intruding angel vivid and image-like in the mind of the listener. The five conditions chart the successive unfolding of the Annunciation, beginning with *Conturbatio* (disquiet), followed by *Cogitatio* (reflection), *Interrogatio* (inquiry), *Humiliatio* (submission), and *Meritatio* (merit). Of these five, the first was by far the most frequently illustrated—Baxandall quotes from a sermon by Franciscan friar Roberto Caracciolo da Lecce:

The first laudable condition is called Conturbatio; as St. Luke writes, when the Virgin heard the Angel's salutation—'Hail, thou art highly favored, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women'—she was troubled. This disquiet . . . came not from incredulity but from wonder, since she was used to seeing angels and marveled not at the fact of the Angel's apparition so much as at the lofty and

*grand salutation, in which the Angel made plain for her such great and marvelous things, and at which she in her humility was astonished and amazed.*¹

As this overwrought explanation suggests, fifteenth-century preachers took pains to downplay Mary's "disquiet," reassuring listeners of her cheery and obliging nature. In paintings of the Annunciation, however, the relationship between angel and Virgin was frequently construed as agonistic, a point that rankled believers in the preachers' account of the mystery—including Leonardo da Vinci, who warned his fellow artists not to take liberties with the Gospel: "[S]ome days ago I saw the picture of an angel who, in making the Annunciation, seemed to be trying to chase Mary out of her room, with movements showing the sort of attack one might make on some hated enemy; and Mary, as if desperate, seemed to be trying to throw herself out of the window. Do not fall into errors like these."²

1. Robertus Caracciolus [Fra Roberto Caracciolo da Lecce], *Sermones de laudibus sanctorum* (Naples, 1489), quoted in Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, second ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 51.

2. Leonardo da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1956), quoted in Baxandall, *Painting*, 56.

Despite Leonardo's admonition, the subject of Mary's "trouble" has continued to attract artists. In *Hail Mary*, for example, "Uncle Gabriel" cuts a thuggish figure, setting upon Joseph with explosive violence, while Marie experiences the immaculate conception as a form of beatifying torture. In the throes of her disquiet, she flails about in her bed, lamenting her plight: "[T]here won't be any more sexuality in me. I'll know the true smile of the soul—not from the outside, but from the inside, like a pain that's always merited. It's not a matter of experience, but of disgust with everything and hatred for everything—not a matter of morality or dignity." While these anguished lines betray the intensity of Marie's *Conturbatio*, they also mark her trial as a test of gender: As a woman, she finds her relationship with the world changed by the child within her, whose arrival promises to stifle her access to desire. Although Godard conceived of the film as a love story, he pushes the genre into unfamiliar territory, following Marie's agonized acceptance of "mastery" (her word) over her male partner, who yearns to touch her but cannot. As both Marie and Joseph discover, confronting their relationship without sexuality is the

ultimate disorientation. The film's pivotal scene places Joseph on his knees before a half-dressed Marie, who guides him in rescripting the codes of their intimacy, teaching him to honor her pregnancy without laying a hand—only thus does she agree to receive *his* word: “I love you.” Reconciled at last, Marie lifts her shirt to reveal her navel, which faces him with its irreproachable dark hollow.

Joseph's lesson is also Godard's: As Kaja Silverman has argued, the director's conception of filmmaking in the mid-1980s began to coalesce around an aesthetics of receptivity, recoding the artist—formerly an author, or auteur—as receiver. For Silverman, this abandonment of authorship in favor of reception entailed a corresponding shift in subjectivity, locating a source of the self in the phenomenology of perception: “Godard suggests . . . that the seen precedes the seer—that our perceptions are a gift from elsewhere. Extraordinarily, he also maintains that the seer himself emerges out of what he sees: that the visible world not only gives *itself* to him, but gives *him* to himself.”³

3. Kaja Silverman, “The Author as Receiver,” *October* 96 (Spring 2001): 29.

As Godard clarifies in *Hail Mary*, this reversal, by which the “seer” finds himself outside himself, implies—and, in a sense, requires—a parallel transformation at the level of desire. To fully accept the Annunciation, Joseph must also relinquish his sexuality, receiving Marie not as flesh—not as the *part* that touches him—but as an image of perfect autonomy: a *whole*. But a whole that is nonetheless open to him. That is the miracle.

II

With her 2026 exhibition *Annunciation*, Hanna Hur recasts the Angelic Colloquy in terms particular to painting, testing her capacity (and ours as well) to bear the burden of its mystery—and to become a “receiver” in Silverman's sense of the term. The exhibition takes the Annunciation as its point of departure, staging a dialogue with Antonello da Messina's *Virgin Annunciate*, a painting from around 1475. Antonello's treatment of the Annunciation has long captivated art historians, including Baxandall, who proposes a related work by the artist as an exemplary image of *Meritatio*. In this fifth and final Laudable Condition,

Mary finds herself alone, the angel having departed her. Here, again, is Fra Roberto's description:

*And the bounteous Virgin at once had Christ, God incarnate, in her womb . . . So we can justly suppose that in the moment when the Virgin Mary conceived Christ her soul rose to such lofty and sublime contemplation of the action and sweetness of divine things that, in the presence of the beatific vision, she passed beyond the experience of every other created being. And the bodily sensations of the Child being present in her womb rose again with indescribable sweetness. Probably, in her profound humility, she raised her eyes to heaven and then lowered them towards her womb with many tears, saying something like: 'Who am I, that have conceived God incarnate etc.'*⁴

Listening to Roberto's sermon, it is hard not to hear the preacher straining to talk his way around Mary's jouissance, with all its carnal "sweetness." For a lay audience in the late fifteenth century, the association of Christ's conception with his mother's orgasm would perhaps not

have been difficult to comprehend—even Roberto seems to have struggled to imagine the immaculate conception otherwise (that is, asexually).

Sex is not the subtext of Antonello's painting. With extraordinary austerity, he pictures the Annunciate against a dark background, her body shrouded in an azure veil. Framed by the veil's shadow, the oval of Mary's face is a study in subtlety: Averting her gaze just slightly, her expression is impassive, unreadable. At her table, a book remains open on its stand, although she has let go of the pages—her left hand holds together the two ends of her veil, securing it around her, while her right hand reaches toward the viewer with a gesture that defies easy description; commentators have variously interpreted it as an entreaty (beckoning near) and an admonition (warding away). This ambiguity conveys the mystery of *Meritatio*, in which the Blessed Virgin experiences, for the first time, the bodily fact of her pregnancy, yet in a state of utter solitude. The world around Mary has gone dark, and even the angel has left her to confront the enormity of her circumstance: leaving her pregnant without having first known the pleasure and pain of sex, alone with the Word of God.

⁴ Robertus Caracciolus, quoted in Baxandall, *Painting*, 55.



Antonello da Messina, *Virgin Annunciate*, c. 1475

Antonello's composition figures doubly in Hur's *Annunciation*, providing the source imagery for her two *Auto Annunciate* works. Hung on two opposite walls in the exhibition, each painting borrows from the *Virgin Annunciate* the motif of Mary's azure veil, imprinting the surface with its ghostly outline. In both works, the shape of the shroud interrupts an otherwise abstract composition. As in all her

recent paintings, Hur prepares the canvas with a base layer of gestural marks, laid down wet-on-wet, over which she then traces a linear pattern—here, a grid with circles at each intersection. Perpendicular to these works are a pair of Hur's *Angels*—their subtitles, *xv* and *xvi*, mark their place in an ongoing series she initiated in 2023. Like the *Auto Annunciate* paintings, Hur's *Angels* each take shape within a grid atop a rhythmic base layer of calligraphic strokes, completing the composition with a skeletal framework of semicircular vertebrae and bar-shaped ribs: the angel incarnate.

A fifth grid painting, *Suspension*, occupies a space all its own, embodying the vacancy—a supercharged nothingness—between Mary and Gabriel. *Suspension* joins two separate canvases, over both of which Hur layers a uniform blue plane, leaving only a thin border without the blue around its outer edges. Butted together, the two panels form a vertical seam, marking a break in the rhythm of Hur's brushstrokes—and thus a rift in the void, an excess of the image. Superimposed over this rift, the blue layer sutures the annunciatory field, while also creating a

visual threshold associated with Mary's veil: The pigment incorporates lapis lazuli, an ultramarine hue historically linked to the Virgin's shroud.

For Hur, who defines her practice of painting as "an act of submission," the Annunciation is much more than a metaphor.⁵ As she describes her methodical process, the repetition of artistic gestures serves less to fill the canvas with a predetermined design than to invite—and receive—the appearance of an image from outside herself:

*Repetitive gesture becomes a petitioning of the gods for the image to come near. When a form begins to come into focus, it is unwieldy and thwarts the gaze. The image demands a total relinquishing of self, of vision even. When it allows for its body to be seen, it appears only through a mirrored reflection of itself. The original image will not be looked at directly, it requires mediation, refraction. Looking at the sun dissolves vision, seeing becomes a way of dying.*⁶

As each painting takes shape, the artist becomes, in a sense, the medium of "an other volition," as Hur puts it—a sentience, willing itself incarnate as image.⁷ For Hur, who was raised in a devout Pentecostal household and frequently experienced glossolalia (speaking in tongues) during church services, the notion that a person might channel an extrinsic agency or spirit is deeply familiar. In her own practice, Hur describes how, through the rote expenditure of artistic labor, her paintings take on a life of their own—each concretizing "its own subjectivity or specific presence" through her submission to the work.⁸

Hur's angel is one of several such incarnations. As she describes these encounters, each manifests with different characteristics, appearing visually rather than verbally:

I began to recognize who had arrived. An angel. Glowing and blessed, undeniably benevolent. Its light blinded me. The red angel emerged quickly afterward. In it

5. Hanna Hur, press release for *Two Angels*, Kristina Kite Gallery, Los Angeles, 2023.

6. Hur, *Two Angels*.

7. Hanna Hur and Christopher Lew, "My Way of Being," interview for *Independent*, New York, May 2022.

8. Hur, "My Way of Being."

*I saw a different angelic nature: a pre-religious, pre-moral being. Benjamin's angel. Or, the being that will come to you when you die. Both angels are impervious to vision's limits. They never close their eyes. Vision, for them, is their entire bodies. They watch all earthly bliss and terror, never departing.*⁹

In this telling, Hur becomes Annunciate: the one to whom the angels reveal themselves. It is a wordless Annunciation, however, manifesting a strange, inhuman form—a body without a face that sees, omnisciently, without eyes. In other recent works, Hur channels different heavenly physiognomies. In her *God's Eye* paintings, for example, lines radiate (and sometimes undulate) around a circular vanishing point, the locus of omniscient vision. Similarly, her *Visitor* series interrupts the grid pattern with symbols suggestive of female anogenital anatomy—a circular form hovering above a labial squiggle. That shape recurs in the Greene Naftali exhibition in a drawing titled *Annunciation*, with a small slit—made through the rub of erasure—centered

within a rendering of the room in which it hangs. Marking the carnal as divine, and vice versa, these bodily signifiers ascribe powers of all-seeing vision to the most unsightly aspects of human anatomy: Hur's eye of God resembles an all-consuming sphincter, recalling Georges Bataille's association of divinity with anality (and also blindness); and with Hur's *Angels*, the modernist grid becomes a sort of flayed flesh, exposing the viewer to the sight of a body turned inside-out.

"Seeing becomes a way of dying." For Hur, Annunciation—exposure to the angel—portends annihilation. In our millenarian culture, angels often play a death-bringing role, as heralds of the end. But dying is not always fatal. The angel whom we encounter in Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History"—and who appeared to Hur as well—"would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed," thus ending history and mortality at once. However, against the angel's wishes, this messianic horizon extends indefinitely in Benjamin's parable, deferred by the storm "we call progress" that renders the end unending,

9. Hur, *Two Angels*.

paused on the brink of *Meritatio*.¹⁰ Because humanity, in its catastrophic gyre, can neither receive nor conceive it, the Word goes undelivered.

In Hur's paintings, exposure to angelic sight leads, not to death, but to the self-outside-itself. At its terminus, the Annunciation announces (and anoints) the body, which takes shape in her work as something other than a void to be filled by someone else's desire—a body sacred and inviolable, sentient in its every part: anus and vulva unblinking, self-aware. Like the oracular swell of Marie's belly, Hur's paintings challenge us to see them—and to be seen in turn—apart from sex; and to visualize a body (God's body) that is not the fulfillment—the missing part—of someone else.

Such is the mystery of Mary and Joseph, writes psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto, whose 1977 book *L'Évangile au risque de la psychanalyse* (translated in English as *The Jesus of Psychoanalysis*) provided an important source text for *Hail Mary*. For Dolto,

the Annunciation offers a metaphor for ideal human relationality: "That is what Mary represents: she is an image, a metaphor of perfect openness. This is what Joseph represents [as well]; his virginity, his chastity as a husband and father mediate the same truth: being open. Both of them, she in the waking state, he fast asleep, welcome the Word of God. The desire in their flesh acquiesces to that of God who desires to incarnate himself as a man."¹¹ Their respective acceptance of this Word announces, in effect, their mortality as subjects of desire—a death Dolto calls "love."

— Daniel Marcus

10. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 257, 258.

11. Françoise Dolto and Gérard Sévérin, *The Jesus of Psychoanalysis: A Freudian Interpretation of the Gospel*, trans. Helen R. Lane (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1979), 30.