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# Staging Mnemosyne

a cura di Daniela Sacco, Emily Verla Bovino

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# Horror on Stage in the Dutch Republic.

Re-thinking a *Tableau Vivant* from Joost van den Vondel's *Gysbreght van Aemstel* (1637) through Aby Warburg's *Pathosformeln* and *Denkraum*.

Tim Vergeer

## Introduction

Halfway through *Gysbreght van Aemstel* (Vondel 1637; *Gysbreght*) – the tragic masterpiece by the Netherlands' most famous poet Joost van den Vondel (Cologne 1587 – Amsterdam 1679) – the Kennemer and Waterlander people invade Amsterdam on Christmas Eve circa 1300 C.E., plundering the city and murdering innocent civilians. It appears that in original performances, none of the atrocities were represented on stage as they were considered too grave to be shown in theatre. This unwritten rule, however, was apparently broken once to show the audience the most intense moment in the tragedy: on stage, the nuns of the Order of Saint Clare (Klaerissen) are raped and stabbed to death before the eyes of the audience. The nuns lie dead, their bodies in heaps across the floor of their beloved monastery, like a fallen garland of red and white roses (Vondel, *Gysbreght*, ll. 1438-1439). To leave the most intense impression, all action in the play is suspended and the characters stand frozen for some ten minutes (Albach 1987, 332). This means a prolonging of the massacre and, thus, the spectator absorbs every detail of the scene. On stage, Bishop Gozewijn, Abbess Klaris van Velzen, the nuns, Witte van Haemstede (Hollander Count Floris V's bastard son) and the mythical Sparrewouwer Giant are all entangled in a bloody fight to the death (Fig. 1) captured in a theatre practice known as a *tableau vivant*, a combination of theatre and painting. In the extraordinary interval of the *tableau vivant*, the scene is transformed into a spectacle designed for the expression of intense affects (Korsten 2010, 19 and 25).

The *tableau vivant* of what in Dutch scholarship is called the *Kloostermoorden* (in English, *The Monastery Murders*) was consistently part of the *Gysbreght*-performances during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The literary and theatre scholar Ben Albach describes the *tableau vivant* as such a success that foreign audience members of performances repor-

ted Dutch audiences continued being entertained by the spectacle into the late eighteenth century (Albach 1987, 332). The screaming nuns, shouting soldiers and despairing Bishop and Abbess shocked by the horrific act, generated affects so powerful that critics doubted the Dutch public could emotionally absorb it (Albach 1987, 332). They questioned whether the



Figure 1 Simon Fokke, [The Middle Medallion of] *Five Scenes* from Vondel's *Gysbrecht van Amstel*, etching, 1775, University Library Leiden.

emotions evoked by the *tableau vivant* were relevant to the moral of the story or if the true aim was simply to titillate the masses with spectacle.

To answer this question, this article focuses on reactions to the *tableau vivant* and how they relate to the poet Vondel's authorial intentions. First, the article looks into what is known about the performance history of the *Kloostermoorden tableau vivant* and reviews common assumptions and hypotheses in Dutch scholarship about this particular *tableau vivant*. Second, the historical context of the *Gysbreght* is presented. Third, the intertextual and intermedial sources of the *tableau vivant* will be examined, along with how these sources can help understand the meaning of the *tableau vivant*. Last, the questions raised throughout the article will be answered through both classical theories on emotion, including Aristotle's catharsis, Quintilian's rhetoric, and seventeenth-century commentaries on these theories, and modern concepts of emotions as developed by the German art and cultural historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929), who introduced the concepts of *Pathosformeln* (1905, *pathos formulas*) and *Denkraum* (1920, thought space) to explain mankind's motives to create art. As will be discussed, the *Pathosformeln* and *Denkraum* are employed by mankind in their creation of art as useful tools to cope with daily fears and sorrows.

### Reconstructing the *Tableau Vivant*

In discussing the scene of the *Kloostermoorden*, a problem always arises. No eyewitness reports exist regarding the original performances, and the text itself makes no mention of a *tableau vivant* being performed in initial stagings. Albach suggests that the scene, which despite these holes in the historical record still may have been part of the original play, might have been omitted during the first performances in 1638 (Albach 1987, 329). In that case, the deletion of the *tableau* could have been the result of a powerful Calvinist lobby in Amsterdam objecting to apparently Catholic acts being performed in the play (Albach 1987, 329-330). It may be that the massacre of the nuns was likewise suppressed in this context. As a consequence, any mention of the *tableau vivant* would have had to be omitted in the text as well (Albach 1987, 329-331). This would explain why staging of the *tableau vivant* can only be deduced from textual fragments from the script, specifically from the dialogue between Badeloch, Gijsbecht's wife, and the messenger in act five, when the messenger tells Badeloch that:

*De vyant stont versuft, en deide om deze zaeck.* (Vondel, *Gysbreght*, l. 1431)

[The enemy were standing idle, and they were looking at this spectacle.]



This verse indicates a standstill and Albach argues that the audience may be being asked to remember the *tableau vivant* while the messenger relates recent events (Albach 1987, 330-331). The messenger then describes that the nuns were slaughtered one by one, while the enemy raged in anger. The nuns lie dead and Vondel uses elaborate metaphors to describe the scene the audience previously witnessed:

*Zy vielen over hoop, en lagen by malkander  
In 't rond, gelijk een krans van roozen, wit en root.  
(Vondel, Gysbreght, ll. 1438-1439)*

[They fell apart, and they lay together  
In a circle, like a garland of roses, white and red.]

Once again, this language of an immobile moment suggests the frozen *tableau vivant*. According to this theory, the original *tableau vivant* would have been quietly reintroduced into the play when the *Gysbreght* started to be performed again on a regular basis every New Year's Day (Albach 1987, 329-331).

Another possibility is that the playwright and rhetorician Jan Vos came up with the *tableau vivant* when he assumed the position of theatre director of the Amsterdam City Theatre in 1647. According to this theory, Vos realised that the tableaux vivant attracted an audience and helped productions generate higher revenues (Albach 1987, 328-329; Porteman and Smits-Veldt 2013, 524-525). It was common for Dutch plays from the middle of the seventeenth century to include one or more *tableaux vivants*: several examples of this practice are *Vrou Iacoba* (Lady Jacqueline, 1638) by the rhetorician Theodore Rodenburgh, Vos' own spectacle piece *Aran en Titus*, of *Wraak en Weerwraak* (*Aran and Titus, or Revenge and Counter-revenge*, 1641) and the popular and patriotic play *Belegering ende het Ontset der Stadt Leyden* (*The Siege and Relief of the City of Leiden*, 1645) by the playwright Reynerius Bontius. Additionally, Vondel himself also included several *tableaux vivants* in his famous allegorical play *Palamedes*, of *vermoorde onnozelheid* (*Palamedes, or Murdered Gullibility*, 1625). Vos designed a *tableau vivant* for the sacrificial scene in Vondel's *Jeptha*, of *Offerbelofte* (*Jepthah, or Sacrificial Promise*, 1659) (Porteman and Smits-Veldt 2013, 378-379 and 524-525). These examples are only a selection of the vast repertoire of productions that incorporated *tableaux vivants*, and the participation of both Vos and Vondel in this tendency provides strong support for the

theory that the *tableau vivant* in the *Gysbreght* was conceived to be part of the original performances in 1638.

Whether the *tableau vivant* was originally devised by Vondel or not, from around 1650 the *Gysbreght* included a *tableau vivant* representing the *Kloostermoorden*, and this practice remained in one form or another until the nineteenth century. The middle medallion in an etching (1775) attributed to Simon Fokke and identified as the Five Scenes from Vondel's *Gijsbrecht van Amstel* (Fig. 1) is often cited as proof of the existence of the *tableau vivant* in eighteenth-century performances (Albach 1987, 332). In 1753, an explanatory programme was published to accompany the showing of tableaux vivants in theatre plays, with different verses supplementing different seventeenth-century tableaux vivants in Dutch plays: these verses were intended to be recited while tableaux vivants were presented to audiences. This was a common tradition employed by rhetoricians who worked with tableaux vivants (Oey-de Vita 1984, 12; Hummelen 1973, 152; Albach 1987, 331). The verse devoted to the *Kloostermoorden* reads:

*Ziet hier de Kennemers, als dol en uytgelaaten,  
De menschen moorden als baldadige soldaaten,  
De Bisschop en de Abdis, o gruwel, nooit gehoort!  
Die werden hier zeer wreed en jammerlyk vermoort.  
Geen altaar werd verschoont, 't werd al door hen verslonden:  
Zo woedt het krygsvolk hier als snoode en dolle honden.  
Hoe duur kwam Amsteldam deez' Kersnagt niet te staan,  
Nu al haar rykdom moet door vuur en zwaard vergaan.  
(Vondel 1753, 5r.)*

[Look over here at the Kennemers, frenzied and rampageous,  
These people kill like larrikin soldiers,  
The bishop and the abbess,  
They are butchered and pitifully killed here.  
It is an abomination, never heard of before!  
No altar is spared, all are consumed by them:  
In this way the soldiery rages here like heinous and frenzied dogs.  
At what price comes this Christmas Eve for Amsterdam,  
While presently her riches perish as the result of fire and the sword.]

It can thus be surmised that the *tableau vivant* of the *Kloostermoorden* was at one point included in performance of the *Gysbreght*, either devised by Vondel as part of the initial performance of the play, or added later on by Jan Vos under his directorship of the Amsterdam City Theatre, where it was performed.

## The Historical Context: the Dutch Revolt

To be able to understand the significance of the *Kloostermoorden tableau vivant*, one has to grasp the historical context in which the *Gysbreght* was written; only then does the intensity of the play, and more specifically the emotional quality of the *tableau vivant*, become clear to a present-day perspective. During the better part of the seventeenth century, the Dutch were looking to formulate an identity in a geopolitical environment that was constantly contesting Dutch sovereignty. The Spanish Empire did not recognize the sovereignty of the Dutch Republic until 1648 and the Peace of Westphalia: thus, in 1637, the year the *Gysbreght* was written, the Dutch Republic was working to assert an identity that would help to legitimize its sovereign right. Cultural historian Simon Schama has explained how the Dutch Republic “reinvented” Dutch identity through earlier incarnations: “its manufacture was in response to what would otherwise have been an unbearably negative legitimation: rebellion against royal authority” (Schama 1987, 67). According to Schama, by revolting against Philip II of Spain “the Dutch had committed themselves irrevocably to a “cut” with their actual past, and were now obliged to reinvent it so as to close the wound and make the body politic whole once again” (Schama 1987, 67).

Schama writes that the Dutch drew on three kinds of sources to reinvent the identity of the Dutch Republic: “[t]he first reached behind and beyond the immediate past to an imaginary or heavily embellished Dutch antiquity and an equally obscure medieval history[;]” the second source was drawn from contemporary history, which was used to underscore Dutch invincibility; finally, the third employed association by analogy, in which the Dutch origin myth – the so-called Batavian Myth – tracing back Dutch sovereignty to pre-Roman times, was most commonly used (Schama 1987, 67–68). These three sources resulted in many chronicles, Latin tomes and theatre productions being written to glorify Dutch sovereignty. Hooft’s Geeraerd van Velsen (1613) about a Hollander nobleman rebelling against his de jure overlord – to which Vondel’s *Gysbreght* was intended to function as a sequel – is an early example of this phenomenon.

It was against this background that Vondel wrote his *Gysbreght* and unsurprisingly, he employed all three sources for the new Dutch identity when he wrote his masterpiece. For example, the Vondel’s *Gysbreght* alludes to the many sieges that occurred during the first years of the Dutch Revolt and this would surely not have escaped the audience’s notice. Vondel very precisely described the offensives (see Vondel, *Gysbreght*, ll. 1318–1344) and

these descriptions would no doubt have recalled memories from recent history amongst which figured the sieges of Haarlem (1572-1573), Alkmaar (1573) and Leiden (1574). In addition, the artifice of using a 'zeepaerd' (a reinterpretation of the Trojan horse) would have brought to mind the Siege of Breda of 1590, when Prince Maurice of Orange took the city of Breda with the ruse of a turfschip (Eng: peat ship) (Prandoni 2007, 56 and 89). The Spanish Empire recaptured Breda in 1625 with Prince Frederik Henry of Orange retaking the city in October 1637 only months before the *Gysbreght* was performed for the first time. It is probable that this recent event would have played in the minds of the Amsterdam audience as they watched Vondel's *Gysbreght*.

The *tableau vivant* of the *Kloostermoorden* would also have surely recalled the massacres of the Dutch Revolt, the most distressing being the Massacre of Naarden in late 1572. After capturing the city, the Spanish imperial forces had forced the population of Naarden to gather in the city's central church. There the population was submitted to a slaughtering similar to that of the nuns of Saint Clare in Vondel's *Gysbreght*. The printmaker Frans Hogenberg, who sympathized with the Protestants, depicted the violent scene in a 1615 engraving (Fig. 2).

Another important event was the Spanish Fury in Antwerp of 1576. As in Naarden, the city was plundered and the civilians were killed. The sixteenth-century counterpart of Amsterdam, Antwerp was a major metropolis, and after its fall in 1585 many of its protestant families fled to cities in the Dutch Republic with Amsterdam being a popular destination. When the massacre in Amsterdam was presented to the audience, surely



Figure 2 Frans Hogenberg, *Massacre of Naarden of December 1572*, engraving, 1615, University Library Leiden.

Figure 3 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Massacre of the Innocents*, oil on panel, 1565-1567, Hampton Court Palace, British Royal Collection, England. © 2014, HM Elizabeth II.

those with roots in Antwerp, like Vondel, were reminded of the so-called Fury in Antwerp.

Investing a literary work or a work of art with a politically-charged message was not uncommon in the Low Countries. Pieter Brueghel the Elder, for example, painted the biblical story of the Massacre of the Holy Innocents (completed in 1567) replacing the traditional Roman soldiers with Spanish soldiers commanded by none other than the Duke of Alba himself (Fig. 3). By replacing the Romans with Spanish soldiers he reflected on the atrocities committed by the Spanish and their commander the Duke of Alba<sup>1</sup>. Vondel would have been drawing from this artistic tradition by employing the same intertextual and biblical source of the Massacre of the Holy Innocents to shape the scene of the *Kloostermoorden* and its *tableau vivant* in his *Gysbreght*.

### The Nuns of Saint Clare and the Massacre of the Innocents

Before the Kennemer and Waterlander invaders enter the monastery in act three of Vondel's *Gysbreght*, the chorus of the rey van Klaerissen (the nuns of Saint Clare) contemplate their situation. They sing about the Holy Innocents, the babes who were taken from their mothers' breasts and massacred by the Romans before their mothers' eyes (Matthew 2:16-18). Initially, it is not evident why the nuns choose to sing about the Massacre of the Holy Innocents. The chorus chants and asks how Herod can endure the light of Christmas, prideful in his command over the destruction of innocent souls whose screaming has woken everyone:

*O Kersnacht, schooner dan de daegen,  
Hoe kan Herodes 't licht verdraegen,  
Dat in uw duisternisse blinckt,  
En word geviert en aengebened?  
Zijn hooghmoed luistert na geen reden,  
Hoe schel die in zijn ooren klinckt.*

1 Shawe-Taylor and Scott 2007, 88-91. Unfortunately, parts of the painting were painted over on commission of Emperor Rudolph II. As a Habsburg emperor, he disliked the political message Brueghel had added. Therefore, he altered parts of the painting and renamed it Village Plundering. However, copies made by Brueghel's son Pieter Brueghel the Younger show distinctive details indicating the initial message of his father's original work. For example, the standard originally displayed five gold crosses on a white ground – the arms of Jerusalem. For its modern adaptation it was appropriate, since Philip II of Spain was also styled King of Jerusalem. Other details include the herald who originally bore the Habsburg eagle on his tabard. The armoured knights in the centre are led by a man, whose features have been altered. In other versions he has the distinctive drooping eyes and long white beard associated with the Duke of Alba.

*Hy pooght d'onnoosle te vernielen,  
 Door 't moorden van onnoosle zielen,  
 En weckt een stad en landgeschrey,  
 In Bethlehem en op den acker,  
 En maect den geest van Rachel wacker,  
 Die waeren gaet door beemd en wey.  
 (Vondel, *Gysbreght*, ll. 903-914)*

[O Christmas Eve, more beautiful than the day,  
 How can Herod endure this light,  
 Which shines in your darkness,  
 And which is celebrated and worshipped?  
 His pride knows no reason,  
 Even if reason shrills in his ears.  
 He tries to destroy the innocents,  
 By killing innocent souls,  
 He wakes a city and incites their cries in the provinces,  
 In Bethlehem and in the field,  
 He wakes the soul of Rachel,  
 Who wanders over meadow and pasture.]

When the *tableau vivant* is shown to the audience, however, it becomes clear what the nuns intended with their chorus: they were comparing themselves to the innocent babes. As previously discussed, in Act Five, the messenger then recounts to Badeloch that the nuns are lying dead like a garland of red and white roses. The same comparison is made earlier in the chorus chanted by the nuns:

*Wie kan d'ellende en 't jammer noemen,  
 En tellen zoo veel jonge bloemen,  
 Die doen verwelckten, eerze noch  
 Haer frissche bladeren ontloken,  
 En liefelijck voor yder roken?"  
 (Vondel, *Gysbreght*, ll. 933-938)*

[Who can name the misery and the whining,  
 And count so many young flowers,  
 Which then withered, before they even,  
 Sprouted their fresh leaves,  
 And could spread a lovely smell?]

This comparison is also triggered at the moment the *Kloostermoorden tableau vivant* is shown, in a chain of associations that link the chant of the chorus about the Massacre of the Holy Innocents with the nuns' chant

about “young flowers (...) withered” and the messenger’s later garland metaphor. For this reason, it is important for the massacre of the nuns to be regarded within the intertextual frame of the biblical slaughter of the innocents: this way, one slaughter functions as the model for another.

In this context, Renaissance Theatre scholar Marco Prandoni demonstrates that the rey has a double function within the play. First, it is reasonable to presume that the enemy will plunder the monastery at one point or another (see Vondel, *Gysbreght*, ll. 951-953). As such, the rey functions as a preparation for their deaths. The parallel with the Massacre of the Holy Innocents specifically functions to prepare them for a martyr’s death, which like the offer of the babes of Bethlehem is an innocent offer. Second, the chorus offers the audience a frame of reference for what will happen in the upcoming scenes. The chanting of the nuns activates a so-called martyrial frame, which functions as a frame of interpretation representing the massacred clergy as martyrs (Prandoni 2007, 99). The nuns also become directly involved in the action onstage together with Bishop Gozewijn and Abbess Klaeris van Velzen (Eversmann 2012, 297).

Since Vondel drew inspiration from Virgil’s epos *Aeneis*, Renaissance Theatre scholar Marco Prandoni argues that the audience could recognize the intertextuality between the *Gysbreght* and Virgil’s epos, if they payed attention (Cf. Prandoni 2007, 21). In the same way, I believe that the story of the Massacre of the Holy Innocents offers an intertextual link with the scene of the *Kloostermoorden*. In turn, such intertexts are framed by cultural codes, which “shape the way in which readers/spectators act in a given historical time and particular sociocultural context.” In the Dutch Republic the audience was made up of a rather homogenous interpretive community capable of understanding, judging and interpreting a literary work, “[b]ut even non-theatrical intertexts could be activated in the interpretation of *Gysbreght van Amstel*, [with] this work serving as a good example of osmosis between the fields of theatre and literature in the Renaissance culture. As a result, the spectator/reader could recognize a rich interplay of multiple genres” (Prandoni 2012, 273-276).

As regards what Prandoni calls the “osmosis between fields” and the “rich interplay of multiple genres,” it should first be noted that the art of poetry and the art of painting were frequently written about as interrelated: Horace wrote in his *Ars Poetica* that painting and poetry are alike (“*ut pictura poesis*”), a common notion associated with antiquity (Horace 1980, l. 361). Another classical source is Plutarch who argued that painting is

silent poetry and poetry is painting that speaks (Plutarch, *De Gloria Atheniensium*, 3). In the Low Countries, this perspective on art and poetry was propagated by the influential rhetorician Matthijs de Castelein, active in the first half of the sixteenth century. De Castelein recounted Plutarch's words in his anthology and didactic poem *De Const van Rhetoriken* of 1555 (De Castelein, *De Const*, 16; see also Moser 2001, 180-181) and this relationship between painting and poetry has remained a central part of the rhetorician's legacy<sup>2</sup>.

Second, it is of course the case that many artists have created interpretations of the biblical story of the Massacre of the Innocents. Brueghel's work is one example in painting, but others in the Low Countries and in other European countries, also provided their own iterations. For instance, the Massacre of the Holy Innocents (c.1485-1490) fresco from the famed Tornabuoni Chapel cycle by Florentine painter Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449-1494) shows a use of the martyrial frame (a specific frame of interpretation framing the victims as martyrs) that looks to be comparable to that employed in the *tableau vivant* in Vondel's *Gysbreght*. Ghirlandaio's fresco shows the emotional struggle between the mothers of the holy innocents ordered murdered by Herod and the Roman soldiers carrying out Herod's commands (Fig. 4). The gestures of the mothers, central to the emotive impact of the composition, are discussed by Hamburg historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929) as examples of *Pathosformeln* (or pathos formulas) in a 1907 article, *Francesco Sassetti's Last Injunction to His Sons* (Warburg [1907] 2010, 275-276). In the article, Warburg is discussing what he calls the "iconographical position of (...) grisaille" or sections of a painted composition executed in shades of grey usually for the purpose of implying sculptural form or relief. Warburg's principal interest is a scene of oration before battle or adlocutio that reappears in the Massacre of the Holy Innocents fresco after Ghirlandaio had already used it in his decoration of the Sassetti Chapel in Santa Trinita. Warburg notes that the oration scene appears "together with a relief of battle scene on the triumphal arch in the background of the Massacre of the Holy Innocents; and if we look closely at the intense foreground drama of the struggle between women and soldiers, their apparently spontaneous gestures are revealed as the conventional warlike attitudes of Roman sculpture, as copied from the reliefs on Trajan's Column by the builders of the Arch of Constantine." (War-

2 Cf. Van Dixhoorn 2009, 189-190. Dutch scholars agree that De Castelein's *De Const van Rhetoriken* was part of the rhetoricians' common archives; his *De Const* was, therefore, a codification of the rhetoricians' traditions.



burg [1907] 1999, 249; Warburg [1907] 2010, 275-276). He follows this by noting that, “Ghirlandaio is known to have kept an archeological sketch-book (...) the source of the emotive formulas [*Pathosformeln*] that infuse the prose of the Tornabuoni frescoes with the loftier style of an idealized antique rendering of motion. Once freed, the votaries of antique emotive gesture could no longer be kept discreetly at a distance.” (Warburg [1907] 1999, 249; Warburg [1907] 2010, 275-276). Thus, extremes of gestural and physiognomic expression are stylized in tragic sublimity, first in the copied Roman sculptural reliefs, then in the grisaille in Ghirlandaio’s fresco, and yet again, a third time in the martyrial frame of the “intense foreground drama of (...) struggle between women and soldiers” (Warburg [1907] 1999, 249; Warburg [1907] 2010, 276). These extreme gestural expressions that Warburg calls *Pathosformeln*, formulae of intensely felt expressions, are irrational (Warburg [1905] 2010, 176-178 and 181), or as Warburg explains in an article from 1905, “Dürer and Italian Antiquity”: “*Es war das Volkslatein der pathetischen Gebärdensprache, das man international und überall da mit dem Herzen verstand, wo es galt, mittelalterliche Ausdrucksfesseln zu sprengen.*” (Warburg [1905] 2010, 181) (in English: “This was the Vulgar Latin of emotive gesture: an international, indeed a universal language that went straight to the hearts of all those who chafed at medieval expressive constraints”, Warburg [1905] 1999, 558).

By expanding on Warburg’s discussion, the same *Pathosformeln* can also be found in Cornelis Cornelisz, *Van Haarlem’s Massacre of the Innocents* (1591). The same emotional struggle enacted in Ghirlandaio’s fresco is played out in this painting (Fig. 5), and thus, a so-called *Etappenstraße*, or route of artistic migration, is revealed as connecting fifteenth-century Florence to the



Figure 4 Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Massacre of the Innocents*, fresco, 1485-90, Cappella Maggiore, Santa Maria Novella, Florence. © 2006, SCALA, Florence/ART RESOURCE, N.Y.

Figure 5 Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, *Massacre of the Innocents*, oil on canvas, 1591, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem. © 2015, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem.

seventeenth-century Dutch Republic (Warburg [1905] 2010, 181). Since the *Pathosformeln* in Ghirlandaio's circa 1480s fresco seems to reappear in Vondel's circa 1630s *Gysbreght*, it is possible that artistic exchange or even direct emulation was responsible for the conception of the Kloostermoorde*n tableau vivant*. The previously-cited engraving by Fokke, which scholars agree was inspired by the *Gysbreght tableau vivant* (Fig. 1) is, in fact, strikingly similar to both Ghirlandaio's and Van Haarlem's compositions (Fig. 6, 7 and 8). Perhaps Fokke thought that resonance with Ghirlandaio's and Van Haarlem's interpretations of the Massacre of the Innocents would strengthen Vondel's interpretation of the murder of the nuns. Fokke happens to have been related to several Amsterdam actors, thus it has been concluded by some scholars, that Fokke would have had considerable knowledge of acting and the Dutch theatre environment (Albach 1987, 332). The intertextuality and intermediality exemplified by these tangled interconnections can be considered an example of how what Warburg calls *Pathosformeln* would have enhanced the emotive impact of the *tableau vivant*, multiplying the affects provoked by the frozen silhouettes of living bodies staged in the *tableau vivant*.

### Expressing Emotions

When comparing Warburg's *Pathosformeln* to gestures used on stage, however, a few important notions of pre-modern Dutch theatre should be discussed. Since a *tableau vivant* is a moment within a theatrical production in which action is suspended, one could indeed say that the audience is witness to a frozen moment. However, the characters are played



Figure 6 Detail of Figure 1, *The Abbess Klaeris van Velzen and Former Bishop of Utrecht Gozewijn Are Being Stabbed to Death*.

Figure 7 Detail of Figure 4, *One of the Women Fights a Roman Soldier*.

Figure 8 Detail of Figure 5, *The Women Fall in Agony*.

by flesh-and-blood actors, and therefore the gestures reside in bodies that remain very much alive (Korsten 2010, 25). In a way, a *tableau vivant* could be considered a ‘life-painting’. In this way, the intermedial link between painting and theatre is emphasized.

*[denn] nicht der Gipsabguß, wohl aber der festliche Aufzug, in dem heidnische Lebensfreude eine Freistätte volkstümlichen Fortlebens sich bewährt hatte, war die Form, in der die Gestalten des Altertums in der bunten Pracht bewegten Lebens vor den Augen der italienischen Gesellschaft leibhaftig wiedererstanden.*  
(Warburg [1898] 2010, 172)

[The figures of ancient myth appeared before Italian society not as plaster casts but in person, as figures full of life and color, in the festival pageants through which pagan *joie de vivre* had kept its foothold in popular culture.]  
(Warburg [1898] 1999, 161)

In the Low Countries, there was also a fondness for festival culture. The so-called Burgundian Theatre State is a collective term to designate the many pageants, contests, processions and performative entertainments native to the Low Countries’ culture (Van Bruaene 2008, 205-206, 214-221; Ramakers 1996, 56-62). As in Florence, one may say that pageants, processions and contests were the only time for the Dutch to behold alive those characters typically only acted out through *tableaux vivants*. The rhetoricians’ culture, of which *tableaux vivants* were a major part, had outlived the Burgundian Theatre State, thus the rhetoricians were thought of as holding the cradle of Dutch theatre culture. Although the rhetoricians were modest in sharing their poetic concepts with the public, Vondel appended his *Gysbreght*-editions of 1637 and 1638 with several laudatory verses devoted to the elite art of theatre. One of these verses explains the assets of theatre and Vondel suggests that theatre is a living art:

*Tooneelspel quam in 't licht tot leerzaam tijdverdrijf.  
Het wijckt gheen ander spel noch koninglijcke wonden.  
Het bootst de weereld na. het kittelt ziel en lijf,  
En prickeltze tot vreughd, of slaet ons zoete wonden.  
Het toont in kleen begrip al 's menschen ydelheid,  
Daer Demokrijt om lacht, daer Heraklijt om schreit.*  
(Vondel, *Gysbreght*, 14r.)

[Theatre play came into the light as an instructive pastime.  
It is not inferior to any other game nor royal inventions.  
It copies the outside world; it tickles the soul and the body,  
And it can either excite, or it can strike at our sweet wounds.]

It shows us at retail all of humanity's vanity,  
Theatre is at which Democritus smiles, and which Heraclitus cries about.]

According to Vondel, theatre is an art form that reflects the outside world and it is because of this quality that it can be considered revelatory of a more general human nature. In another verse Vondel emphasizes the representative nature of theatre by saying that daily life is equal to what an audience sees unfold on stage. Like an actor in a play, everyone has a part to play in life. Accordingly, Vondel claims that the worries of daily life, and the tragic action played out on stage are fundamentally the same:

*De wereld is een speeltooneel,  
Elck speelt zijn rol, en krijgt zijn deel.*  
(Vondel, *Gysbreght*, G3v.)

[The world is a stage,  
Everyone plays their part, and gets their share.]

The first sentence in this passage was, in fact, inscribed on the entrance gate of the Amsterdam Theatre and its famous words were well-known throughout Europe, albeit in other phrasings. Several decades earlier in 1600 C.E., Shakespeare had alluded to these words when he has Jacques in *As You Like It* say:

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts.  
(Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II.VII.138-141)

The Latin original, of which both phrases are free translations, reads: "*Theatrum mundi*": it is likely that the audiences attending the 1638 performances of the *Gysbreght* were most likely familiar with this concept and, hence, they knew that theatre productions had the aim to reflect the outside world. As a result, the *tableau vivant* of the *Kloostermoorden* reflected the outside world in the same way as theatre did in general. The question remains, however, as to what instructions Vondel actually gave the actors who were employed to act out the *Kloostermoorden tableau vivant*. During the preparations, Vondel could have expressed his ideas on how the *Gysbreght* should be performed, since we know that he attended rehearsals. Dutch literary scholar Stijn Bussels stresses the importance of decorum in the Renaissance: "[t]he early modern painter and rhetorician were supposed to complete

their characters by closely taking into account their specific role” (Bussels 2005, 262). De Castelein asserts the same in his *De Const van Rhetoriken*: with significant references from the classics, De Castelein shows that Vondel’s sources for the *tableau vivant* actions must have been the classical orators (De Castelein, *De Const*, 60). Vondel, being a rhetorician, was surely familiar with De Castelein’s instructions. As Bussels points out, Quintilian stresses the importance of facial expressions and the use of hand gestures, since with them emotions are better expressed and often stronger than with words and language alone (Bussels 2005, 263-266). As Quintilian writes:

Consequently, where we wish to give an impression of reality, let us assimilate ourselves to the emotions of those who really suffer; let our speech spring from the very attitude that we want to produce in the judge. Will the hearer feel sorrow, when I, whose object in speaking is to make him feel it, feel none? Will he be angry, if the person who is trying to excite his anger suffers nothing resembling the emotions he is calling for! Will he weep when the speaker’s eyes are dry? Impossible! (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 6.2.27)

De Castelein agrees by saying that the body needs to be capable of producing tears and moans, and needs to be skilled in the use of the voice and the eyes (De Castelein, *De Const*, 59).

Are these intentional, controlled and codified gestures comparable to the *Pathosformeln* as Warburg conceives them? At first sight, it seems unlikely. However, since the emotion of dramatic action is created while being performed, actors have to depend on their expertise in channelling emotion, whilst being caught up in the dramatic moment: what they show the audience are extreme affects stylized in tragic sublimity. In the case of Vondel’s *Gysbreghts*, the nuns are slaughtered and their blood colours the floors of their monastery red. As withered white petals the nuns lie, inanimate and mutilated in heaps across the floor: through their configuration, the nuns employ *formulae* of intensely felt expressions, which may be described by Warburg’s conception of the *Pathosformeln*. With the *Kloostermoorden tableau vivant*, the audience is consumed by emotion, then Vondel, in accordance with classical Aristotelian drama, transforms the affects, providing the audience with a channel for emotive release.

### Coping with Emotions

The principles of classical poetics would have demanded from Vondel that the plot of the *Gysbreght* conform to the unity of action (Cf. Aristotle,

*Poetica*, 1451a.). As a result, the emotions staged in the *tableau* had to be transformed into something different. The nuns-as-garland-of-roses *tableau vivant* – if thought of as an example of *Pathosformel* – serves an extra purpose within the context of the play. The purpose art, or cultural products in general, can serve within society, is discussed by Warburg in a 1920 article, *Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther*. In the article, Warburg aims to explain the resurrection of the pagan gods during the Reformation and the way these deities were employed in astrology and astrological predictions “in order to ascribe [the] otherwise unaccountable, even superhuman powers” of a man like Martin Luther “to a higher, cosmic cause, dignified by the name of a god” (Warburg [1920] 1999, 650). He expands on this by noting that “the fear of natural signs and wonders, in the heavens and on the earth, was shared by all Europe” (Warburg [1920] 1999, 622). Warburg describes how in astrology “great and greatest conjunctions were systematically distinguished: the latter, stellia of all three superior planets, Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars, were the most perilous of all. (...) The more planets there were in the conjunction, the more alarming it was” (Warburg [1920] 1999, 616-617). Therefore, in order to be able to neutralize the otherwise negative effects of a planet such as Saturn, mankind has an overwhelmingly inner, primeval, compulsive human need to establish a mythical causation (Warburg [1920] 1999, 641). According to Warburg, man is “trying to insert [a] conceptual space [*Denkraum*] of rationality between himself and the object” (Warburg [1920] 1999, 650). Furthermore, Warburg argues that “logic sets a mental space [*Denkraum*] between man and object by applying a conceptual label; magic destroys that space by creating a superstitious – theoretical or practical – association between man and object” (Warburg [1920] 1999, 599). As a result, art serves to transform a magical and mythical logic into a spiritual and intellectual one: “the malignant, child-devouring planetary god [Saturn], whose cosmic contest with another planetary ruler seals the subject’s fate, is humanized and metamorphosed by [artists like] Dürer into the image of the thinking, working human being [*Melancholia I*]” (Warburg [1920] 1999, 644).

As such, Warburg considers it to be a general defining principle of human civilisation that distance is created between the outside world and the inner world of the subject (Warburg [1929] 2010, 629): this subject is both the maker of the work as well as the beholder, or, in the case of a play, the audience. In the seventeenth century it was still believed that according to the mediaeval model of the humours, “passions circulate[d] both within and between bodies. In the theatre, the emotions of the actor were carried across to the bodies of the spectators in a quite material view of the opera-

tions of affect, based on agreement of the spirits and humours of actor and audience” (Steenbergh 2014, 99-100). Consequently, the emotional distance of the author would have been thought of as literally ‘circulated between’ the author and audience members.

The distance between the outside world and the subject is, in this model, facilitated by the means of objects, which – like a *tableau vivant* – function as interspaces between bodies. In the introduction to *Mnemosyne* from 1929, Warburg explains it as follows:

*Bewusstes Distanzschaffen zwischen sich und der Außenwelt darf man wohl als Grundakt menschlicher Zivilisation bezeichnen; wird dieser Zwischenraum das Substrat künstlicher Gestaltung, so sind die Vorbedingungen erfüllt, dass dieses Distanzbewusstsein zu einer sozialen Dauerfunktion werden kann, die durch den Rhythmus von Einschwingen in die Materie und Ausschwingen zur Sophrosyne<sup>3</sup> jenen Kreislauf zwischen bildhafter und zeichenmäßiger Kosmologie bedeutet, deren Zulänglichkeit oder Versagen als orientierendes geistiges Instrument eben das Schicksal der menschlichen Kultur bedeutet.* (Warburg [1929] 2010, 629)

[The conscious creation of distance between oneself and the external world can probably be designated as the founding act of human civilization. When this interval becomes the basis of artistic production, the conditions have been fulfilled for this consciousness of distance to achieve an enduring social function which, in its rhythmical change between absorption in its object or detached restraint, signifies the oscillation between a cosmology of images and one of signs; its adequacy or failure as an instrument of mental orientation signifies the fate of human culture.] (Warburg [1929] 2009, 276-277)

When this emotional distance is established, it serves to create what Warburg called a *Denkraum*, a thought space, which as such serves human nature as a mechanism of defence<sup>4</sup>. The *tableau vivant* of the *Kloostermoorden*

3 Sophrosyne is a Greek concept which means as much as prudence, moderation or temperance.

4 See Warburg [1923a] 2010, 575-579, 587; Warburg [1923b] 2010, 540, 543, 551, 559-561; Warburg [1929] 2010, 629. Especially during his stay with the Pueblo Indians in New Mexico, Warburg came to realise that humans retained a magic and mythic worldview, fundamental for coping behaviour and the creation of cultural products. For instance, since the modern human no longer fears lightning, he will not try to protect himself from it. As a result, he will not make a mediatory product between himself and the outside world which, as such, should reshape his fear into something with which he can cope. See also the anthology published in 2014 on Warburg’s conceptualization of *Denkraum*: Martin Trembl, Sabine Flach, Pablo Schneider (eds.), Warburgs *Denkraum: Formen, Motive, Materialien*, Paderborn, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2014.

acts as such a mechanism of defence: it is a manifestation of the conscious creation of distance. As a representation of the outside world, the *tableau vivant* mirrors daily life, however, an audience is given this incident to experience through an in-between space, a controlled and safe staging between the self and the outside world.

It could be said, using Warburg's term, that after a *Denkraum* or space of distance, is created the spectator can cope with intensely lived emotions. The fear, compassion and sorrow, exacted by the murder of the nuns of Saint Clare, is transformed into something else, something the audience can now absorb. The *tableau vivant* is an interval, alive and yet frozen, a suspension of time within the action of the play. Warburg's motto "*Du lebst und tust mir nichts*" (in English: "You live and do me no harm") summarizes what is meant here (as quoted by Gombrich 2001, 39) in the sense that the nuns are live actors that as characters die but as actors stay alive.

Similar to the way in which Aristotelian drama creates a catharsis, *Denkraum* functions as a distancing mechanism of defence for coping with intense emotions. In the Dutch Republic, the humanist Daniel Heinsius commented on Aristotle's concept of catharsis asserting that people who repeatedly see miserable things, learn to have compassion (Heinsius, *De Tragoediae Constitutione*, 12-13). The same applies to fear, or as Heinsius says: "Who regularly watches things which cause fear, is himself less fearful, like it is appropriate" (Heinsius, *De Tragoediae Constitutione*, 12-13). Heinsius argues, therefore, that theatre should be used in the same way: it is a training school in emotions that evokes intense feeling in a controlled situation not merely because emotions are useful in life, but because they are indispensable. Furthermore, since emotions are being experienced within a safe and controlled situation in theatre, they can be redirected and eventually transformed through catharsis. Emotions are an indispensable part of life, but they should only be allowed in moderation<sup>5</sup>. In this regard, the literary scholar, Kristine Steenbergh has recently explained that in the Dutch context catharsis should be understood as a tempering of the passions, rather than a purging of the emotions (Cf. Steenbergh 2014, 97). By experiencing the emotions of fear and compassion many times over, the audience learns to cope with and moderate emotion. In theatre, the audience

5 Heinsius, *De Tragoediae Constitutione*, 12-13. "Ita qui miserias frequenter spectat, recte miseratur, & quemadmodum oportet. qui frequenter ea quae horrorem movent, intuetur; minus tandem horret, & ut decet. Quo & referenda sunt, quae in theatre exhibentur. quod affectuum nostrorum quaedam quasi est palaestra qui, cum non modo utiles in vita, verum etiam sint necessarii, praeparari ibi & oportet, & absolve". With thanks to Ton Harmsen for his translation.



can then become independent of its emotions. Catharsis is the terminus of Aristotelian tragedy<sup>6</sup>. The final scene is the terminus the audience is looking for: in Vondel's *Gysbreght*, when Rafael promises a better future, a reversal of a situation takes place that threatens to evolve into a catastrophe (Prandoni 2007, 124). Now the audience can release the emotions it had been repressing since the *Kloostermoorden tableau vivant* was first presented to them. The audience's emotions are moderated. The audience can now confront its emotions and the tragic experiences of daily life. It could be said that in this regard, the *tableau vivant* of the *Kloostermoorden*, like the *Gysbreght* in general, functioned as a way of helping the Vondel's contemporaries cope with the world that surrounded them. Since the start of the Renaissance, Dutch society had been beset by ongoing crises caused by the Dutch Revolt. As Warburg would say, art then expresses “[die] individuelle Stellung des Einzelnen im Kampfe mit der Welt” (Warburg [1907] 2010, 260) (in English: “[the] stance of the individual at war with the world”, Warburg [1907] 1999, 240).

This stance of the individual at war with the world is explained at length, in a lecture held by Warburg at Kreuzlingen, during his institutionalization in 1923. Warburg argued that the Pueblo Indians employ art forms, such as rain dance, to provide for enough rain to water their crops, since they depend on maize as much as on meat. The Pueblo wear masks while performing their dance. As such, “his masked dances, which seem at first sight like a festive show accompanying the daily round of his life, are in reality meant as a means of providing food for the community by the art of magic. The masked dance is essentially a serious, and indeed a warlike, measure in the struggle for existence [*Dasein*]” (Warburg [1923] 1939, 281). Warburg explains man's need for producing art as a “vaccination”, as a defence mechanism of the human nature: a defensive measure in the struggle for *Dasein* that tries to inhabit the phobic mind in its full range on the one hand, and in its full emotive force on the other. Through representation the impressions of the outside world are objectified and, as such, they become objects of defence (Warburg [1920] 1999, 597-651; Warburg [1923a] 2010, 576-579). This is exactly what the *tableau vivant* tries to accomplish. Since the Dutch Republic's war with the Spanish Empire had not yet subsided in the first half of the seventeenth century, Vondel's audience was still trying to grasp its situation. Fearful of the possibility of a Spanish reclamation of the rich provinces of the Dutch Republic and horrified by the idea

6 Aristotle, *Poetica*, 1449b. Although Aristotle employs the term catharsis without really explaining it, it may be derived from the text that he means a metaphorical purification and release of emotions, amongst which compassion and fear.

that massacres similar to those acted out in the Kloostermoorden *tableau vivant* could reoccur, the Dutch audience would have needed a space within which to gain distance from intensely lived emotions. By addressing this phobic position, the Kloostermoorden *tableau vivant* like Vondel's *Gysbreght* in general, would have offered a space of distance – a Warburgian *Denkraum* – for the audience to experience its anxiety and release its fears.

### Conclusion

The Kloostermoorden *tableau vivant* in Vondel's *Gysbreght* was surely intended as a spectacle to draw an audience, however, as this article has attempted to show, it provided the audience with more than spectacle alone. By creating what Warburg called a *Denkraum*, Vondel's *Gysbreght* and its Kloostermoorden *tableau vivant* offered the audience relief from the daily fears and sorrows. The experiences of the outside world were transformed and objectified into a representational life-painting. The Kloostermoorden *tableau vivant* shows how the *Pathosformeln* Warburg identified as migrating between sculpture, painting, literature and theatre, are one of the ways in which art creates space for emotive distance. When considered as an example of Warburg's *Denkraum*, the Kloostermoorden *tableau vivant* are understood as a way in which Dutch Republic audiences were being prepared for a possible loss of sovereignty. Within the context of the Dutch Revolt the audience relived Spanish atrocities through the *tableau vivant* conceived as a safe space for the experience of intense fear and grief, and a channel for eventual transformation of these emotions through catharsis. In this way, through the *tableau vivant*, a Dutch Republic audience would have been able to become independent strategic operators of their own emotions.

It remains to be seen to what extent the *Gysbreght* is unique regarding its specific employment of the *tableau vivant* described in this article. The already mentioned plays *Vrou Iacoba* (1638), *Aran en Titus, of Wraak en Weerwraak* (1641), *Belegering ende het Ontset der Stadt Leyden* (1645), *Palamedes, of vermoorde onnozelheid* (1625) and *Jeptha, of Offerbelofte* (1659) all might allow for similar analyses. Other plays may be sources of this practice as well; one might think of Vondel's *Gebroeders* (Brothers, 1640) and many plays by the afore-mentioned Jan Vos. The analysis offered in this article may apply to all or several of these plays. In the case of the *Gysbreght*, this function of the *tableau vivant* as coping mechanism was mainly caused by the Dutch Revolt and the prospect of Spanish reconquest of the Republic. The interspace of the *tableau vivant* and its martyrial frame – the specific frame of interpretation framing the massacred clergy as martyrs – of murdered nuns-as-gar-

lands-of-roses create the space for an intensely lived experience of powerful emotions mediated by the contemplation of distance: these qualities make the Kloostermoorden scene the conceptual climax of Vondel's *Gysbreght*. Unsurprisingly, the *Kloostermoorden tableau vivant* has always been considered the most interesting part of Vondel's *Gysbreght van Aemstel*.

## ENGLISH ABSTRACT

For two centuries the most emotional scene of the *Gysbreght van Aemstel* (1637) written by the Dutch dramaturg Joost van den Vondel was the Kloostermoorden *tableau vivant*. This remained the case until the nineteenth century, after which the *tableau vivant* was finally omitted during the performances. This article tries to reconstruct the emotional effects of this *tableau vivant* by placing it in the context of the Dutch seventeenth century. The analysis draws from intertextual and intermedial sources centred on the biblical story of the Massacre of the Innocents, which functioned as a model for the design of Vondel's *tableau vivant*. Then, the article demonstrates how the Aristotelian *catharsis* and Aby Warburg's concepts of *Pathosformeln* and *Denkraum* offer a fruitful framework for understanding which purpose the Kloostermoorden *tableau vivant* served within the play and within Dutch society as a whole.

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