

## ***The incarnated beauty. Between the painting and the pornography***

by Silvia Mei

While looking through the complete works of Giovanni Boldini, the painter born in Ferrara, who belonged to the school of Paris, one comes upon some canvases, evidently the most hidden ones, compared to aesthetic and complaisant portraits that characterized him as the painter of the elegance and Belle Epoque.



The canvas *The Slaughterhouse on the Piazza delle Erbe in Verona* (1890, oil on canvas, cm. 35x27, private collection) is a breakthrough to the twentieth century, and brings the modern European art at least fifty years ahead, arriving to Francis Bacon, who's attraction is direct. The eviscerated and beheaded figure of the animal is the antithesis of women full of heads and eyes of the master: like the *Portrait of the Countess Matilde Franzoni* (1892, oil on canvas, cm. 116x86, private collection), which is definitely out of proportions regarding the dimensions of hands and of the oval face, which is tightened up in a bun, which seems to deform the skull because the skin has been pulled up.



In the scene of the *Slaughterhouse*, Boldini astonishes with the lapse in the lay-out, which is extremely modernist, however, he makes a cut in the snapshot, when the head of the unmercifully butchered animal is replaced by the head of a passerby. This is the comment of the painter, regarding the sexless piece of meat, hung to the hook: surely, the beast is the female, the veal, the tenderest one, therefore the meat of a female, the most trembling one that always quivers and gleams in the soft glimmer, which moves the figure and gives it the soft focus effect. Like in the painting *The nude of the young woman with red hair* (1914, oil on canvas, cm. 80x40, private collection), where the gingery hair functions as the shield of the nude: the chromatic contrast accompanied by the gleam on the surface is too dazzling to allow us to desecrate her body with the look. The perfect curves of the décolleté or the passion that dashes from the nooks on the neck are too slick at Boldini and therefore do not allow us to observe all the rest, to observe clearly the erogenous zones.

Therefore, this cannon fodder emanates the unbearable smell of a woman, of sex; it is the most daring promiscuity that Boldini allowed himself in his sophistication; among all impressionist and postimpressionist canvases this is the most pornographic one. Toulouse-Lautrec would not dare to do something like that, he, who smelled of the brothel to the backbone, he, who practically lived in the brothel. When sex is so explicitly presented on the body of a woman, becomes unrepresentable, becomes a stain or gets zoomorphic forms, like the hips of the ballet dancer Carmen, in the novel written by Merimé, who compares them to the back of the prostitute.



This *unrepresentable*, at Boldini can be visually transferred in the sense which doesn't concern the look: it becomes a scent like in *Violets of thought* (1910, oil on canvas, cm. 46x66, private collection), where the sensuous grasp of two hands, extended and open towards the bouquet, which is so well focused in detail, transforms the limbs, extraordinarily expressive, profoundly erotic, in the vegetable metaphor of the bouquet. The more explicit is the pleasure, the bigger is the transformation. Or: the sexual act becomes so traumatic, when shown in all its carnality that the bodies lose their normal organization, become *unrepresentable*.

This surrender of meat, combined with pleasure, very voyeuristic, reaches the paradox of the painter Frenhofer in *The Unknown Masterpiece* written by Honoré de Balzac (1831; 1837), where the artist, obsessed with his model-lover, creates a shapeless masterpiece, which presents a perfect *analogon* to some nudes of Boldini: the canvas seems as if it were a blurred photography, without an object (fig.).

While observing the canvases of Boldini, that I have just mentioned, I wonder if the pornographic painting existed, like at the end of the nineteenth century, when the veduta, the landscape painting and the portrait competed with the photography.



No, the pornographic painting does not exist, or at least not to such an extent that it could be formally compared to the genre of photography. The pornography in painting is shown as profanation, as the invasive, indiscrete look, inside a tissue, in the piece of meat that evokes the female organ. Doing this, only Courbet manages to be realistically daring in his work *The origin of the world*; in this painting he is strongly ironic, in this non-objectivised surrender of the female body, which has the function of reproduction and not the function of pleasure.

Degas, the woman-hater, the *flâneur*, would have never dared to do something like this, he who evoked the female sex using the oxymoron, like in blood-stains on his painting *Rape* (fig.), that stain the bed of the young woman when being observed by her satisfied client or executioner.



In *Incarnation* Michel Henry writes: “There is an attempt in the pornography to reach the limits of the objectivity of the erotic relation in a way that it could be seen completely”.



Surely, the face is the favored place of the epiphany of the invisible, of nudity and therefore the most appropriate for the profanation of the body. Later, the portrait and the close up in the film immortalized the face in the physiological landscapes of a woman, to be contemplated. The step from Boldini to Klimt is very small: we all know the *Madonna* by Munch or *Judith* of the Vienna secession on the basis of gold. Boldini doesn't joke when assessing the eyes and the snow-white and smooth, almost marble incarnation, which petrifies, as if it were the face of medusa. The medusa that observes herself and in this observation in her auto-profanation, in her exposing, as Henry claims, is petrified. This game of incarnation, profanation and petrification is used extensively in the close-ups of Greta Garbo, whose face became a cult object, a *tout court* that should be observed in contrast to the “corruptible” face of Marilyn Monroe: “The face of Greta Garbo represents that fragile moment when the cinema was about to draw out the

existential beauty from the essential beauty, the archetype was about to bend towards the charm of the corruptible faces, the clarity of the carnal essence was about to make space to the lyric of a woman” (R. Barthes, *The Myths of Today*, 1974, p. 64).

When returning to the pornography, the face is becoming essential in pop porno, being the token for pleasure, *the surface* where the invisible becomes visible. In other words, *the face*, which is physically a surface, not individually characterized, anonymous; more a model than a characterized physiognomy, where the orography of pleasure is drawn. The *facial* is a topos of the pop porno, which is evoked in this musical clip of Mina: it is not exalted thanks to one look, our look, that becomes tactile, stimulated by the internal invasion of the speech organ of the camera and by its flow over the shining surface of the lips and eyes, that emanate the liquidity of sex.

