

Angels as Interpretive Figures

Interdisciplinary Aspects of a New Angelology

Abstract

This article treats Angelology (or Angeletics) as a series of theories about angels. Angeletics applies a communication theory approach to its subject of study. It underlines the elements “message” (content) and “messengers” (media) and suggests evaluating the message (whether positive or negative) and underlining mutual responsibility between communicants.

The classical theory of angels follows a theological approach and is not only based on biblical and Qur’anic narratives but also uses systematic reflections and philosophical speculations. Modern literature rather avoids the idea of angel figures; nevertheless it describes existential situations in which a “heavenly” message is received. For centuries the fine arts have depicted angels in biblical scenes not only in an illustrative but also in a more abstract, even critical, way. Ultimately, angels can be seen as an invitation to develop human virtues, especially those needed in a world full of pain.

Keywords

Angels, Communication Theory, Angelology, Bible, Qur’an, Walter Benjamin, Paul Klee, Ernst Barlach, Wim Wenders, Pope Francis, Ecological Spirituality

Biography

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Composition and Method

In ancient cosmology, angels, even as human-like beings, were assistants of a God seen as directly acting in the world. They helped God in unleashing storms, causing rain and snow, and moving the waves of the sea. Some angels were tasked with communicating messages from God to human beings. Greek philosophy and later Christian theology developed Angelology, the theories of angels.

Why is it useful today for scholarship to deal with these personified energies? And what is the most adequate method for so doing? In applying a hermeneutic approach to probe old narratives and speculations, this author participates in a renewed understanding of angels in our time. Common to these attempts is an examination of the communicative function of angels as messengers.

First, some media scholars use the term Angeletics to raise questions about the content of everyday communication – that is, the relation between the initiator and the recipient, as well as their mutual responsibilities.

Second, theological Angelology gathers and reflects on testimonies about angels in authoritative biblical and Qur’anic texts. What are their central ideas? How can we understand them with modern textual critical and dogmatic (systematic theological) approaches?

Third, the literature of the 19th and 20th centuries created narratives to describe moments of insight and decision-making which can be interpreted as transcendent messages. The term “angel” was thus avoided. Works of fine art, such as paintings and sculptures, illustrate biblical scenes with angels, even in abstract form. The arts can also articulate protest and warning in the form of an “angel of history”, as exemplified in the works of Walter Benjamin and Paul Klee.

Fourth, within an anthropological perspective, angels have become metaphors for human virtues, such as a new ecological consciousness and sense of responsibility.

Angeletics, a Media-Philosophical and Historical Exploration of the Medium

Today, the characteristics of “messengers”, the secular “colleagues” of angels, are approached in a field of study called Angeletics. This represents a specific approach in media communications studies in which the element “medium” is emphasized – more explicitly and differently than in social

science-oriented communications studies. This idea goes back to Marshall McLuhan's findings (1964) that the "medium" as it originates in specific cultural-historical contexts is already part of the message itself ("The Medium is the Message"). McLuhan, as well as other cultural-historical researchers such as Harold A. Innis and Walter Ong, point to the fact that it makes a difference whether something is communicated in an oral or written culture with one-of-a-kind texts, for instance on parchment, or later printed en masse in books, or is conveyed as moving images on film (and later television) or as a spoken word with music on radio, or ultimately appears in new combinations on the Internet.

"Angeletics", as it was developed by Rafael Capurro¹ and Sybille Krämer,² differs from theological angelology, although the terms share the same root. The primary meaning of the Greek word "angelos" is "messenger" or "ambassador" – in the religious sense, the messengers of God, i. e. angels. "Angelía" translates as "message" from which "euangélion", or "good message", is derived.

The "Theory of Message" or Angeletics, is a special philosophical theory of *media* studies. As Krämer has proposed, it falls to media to create an awareness of something while at the same time ensuring the media itself fades into the background; the media is thus in effect 'transparent' in order that the subject might be seen.³ In contrast to today's emphasis on producers and authorship, Angeletics "tries to develop a media theory based on the (archaic) messenger figure and its seemingly uncreative transfer processes".⁴ Messengers are mediating third parties who retreat into the background but remain effective and significant.

We are accustomed to letting sociality emerge from dual-conceived relationships, be it speakers and listeners, broadcasters and receivers, ego and alter ego, lord and servant, me and you. [It is crucial to Krämer] that "dyadic figures are latently triangulated". And does the messenger not precisely exemplify such a figuration of the third [...]? The messenger builds a social relationship through his/her mediating role. And it is not far-fetched to assume that thirdness, not duality, is the nucleus of the

1 Capurro 2003a; Capurro/Holgate 2011.

2 Krämer 2004; 2008; 2011.

3 Krämer 2011, 55.

4 Krämer 2011, 54.

social dimension, that therefore it is only in triadic interactions that it establishes social institutions.⁵

The angelic approach therefore distinguishes the following elements of the communication process:

the producers / source of the message,
the messenger,
the message (which is more than information), and
the possibilities of interpretation and appropriation of the addressees.

The research zeroes in on the element “messenger”. Ethical questions also arise – for example, the correctness, credibility, and respect of the messenger in relation to the addressees. One can, in turn, demand from these questions a fundamental openness and critical thinking. In any case, recipients in the field of mass communication are to be thought of as selective and resistant individuals, as the American psychologist Raymond A. Bauer showed with his theory of the Obstinate Audience.⁶

Rafael Capurro and John Holgate identify the principles of transfer and appropriation by the addressees:

Messages can be of *imperative, indicative or optional* nature. A human sender, an individual or a group, may believe to have a message for everybody and for all times and *vice versa*, someone may think everything is a message to them. Between these two poles there are several possible hierarchies. In order to select or interpret a message *the receiver must have some kind of common pre-understanding with the sender of the message*, for instance a similar form or (linguistic) code.

What kind of specific criteria can be postulated by a message theory concerning the way a sender, a medium and a receiver of messages should act in order to be successful under finite conditions? By finite conditions I mean that neither the sender, nor the messenger, nor the receiver have any kind of certainty that their actions will fit the ideal situation in which:

a sender addresses a receiver, sending them a message that is new and relevant for them, i. e. they follow the *principle of respect*,

5 Krämer 2011, 60.

6 Bauer 1964.

a messenger brings the message undistorted to the receiver, i. e., they follow the *principle of faithfulness*,
a receiver reserves judgement, based on a process of interpretation, about whether that the message is true or not, i. e. they follow the *principle of reservation*.

Messages can be studied according to their *form, content, goal, producers, and recipients*.⁷

Angeletics is understood as a network of questions rather than a developed theory. At any rate, it is an interdisciplinary theory, with psychological, political, economic, esthetical, ethical, and religious aspects.⁸

Even if Angeletics as located in the field of communication studies is explicitly distinguished from angelology, the theological doctrine about angels, one can certainly ask what the application of this secular messenger theory imparts to angels as heavenly messengers. The suggestions are mainly of a formal nature. For further characterization of the process of revelation and for clarification of the function of angels, phenomenological and theological considerations are needed.

In these considerations, for example, God is seen not only as a source of the message, but also as its content (self-communication of God). With respect to their *form*, angels' messages communicate literal stories, because they were told to others following mystical experiences and subsequently recorded. The *purpose* of this particular form is for the addressees to be willing to cooperate with God (in God's plan of salvation). According to the *content*, these experiences are – for the addressees – relevant messages, messages with novelty value (information); at the same time, they also make impossible demands (in faith and trust), often forcing the acceptance of suffering (for example, social ostracism due to illegitimate pregnancy, Luke 1:34), and thus also display characteristics of the bad and the ugly. Capurro suggests that in today's mass media and on the Internet there is also something like “dysangelia” – an excess of irrelevant, sometimes destructive messages.

7 Capurro 2003b, online, chapter “1. Angeletics as an Interdisciplinary Theory”.

8 Capurro 2003a, 107.

Angelology: Theological Theories of Angels

Angels are entities whose presence is “recognized” by devout people when they have religious experiences and “hear” messages or beckonings from God. Angels are ultimately named as such when “listeners” and “seers” speak about them before a community that is already established or has begun to take shape. These people are called “followers” when they later begin to record these messages and give them form. Contemporary perceptions of personal messengers in a given historical context play a defining role in giving form to these spiritual entities. The terminology used to explain who represents God in such matters was drawn from the language of secular rulers in appointing envoys as their diplomatic representatives. These envoys enjoyed diplomatic immunity, and when they spoke, they did so in the first person, as representatives of the ruler who had sent them. They were authorized to negotiate and sign contracts.

The institutionalized role of envoys was transferred to the religious context in depicting invisible messengers. The “seers” and their followers drew on traditional ideas about the physical appearance of angels, identifying insignia and their given names. These identifiers were often assimilated by other cultures. For instance, Hermes, the Greek messenger of the gods, became the Roman Mercury.

Angels are figures used in the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to give shape to special religious experiences. Angels act as *mediators* or as *media* of God’s self-revelation. This communicative function of angels is the focus of this article. Other types of angels that exist in the mythological worldview of former periods are God-praising and adoring angels (the heavenly court), deterring angels (guarding paradise or a holy district), the playful and music-making angels of the rococo (puttos), guiding and healing angels (Raphael in the story of Tobit), warrior angels (Michael), angels of punishment (as in Sodom and Gomorrah), redemptive and nourishing angels (Elijah in the desert), and of course the guardian angels again so popular today. The testimony of the Bible is essential for understanding the role of angels in religious experiences, but systematic theological considerations are also important if we are not to get lost in a polytheistic or esoteric angel cosmos.

At the beginning of the Bible there is only one reference to a nameless “Malak Yahweh” – Malak is the Hebrew word for messenger. For example, Hagar, Abraham’s second wife, whom he rejected, is addressed in the wilderness by such an “angel of the Lord” (Gen. 16:7), and it is said that he heard



Fig. 1: *Holy Trinity*, icon by Andrey Rublyov (about 1411), Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, <https://is.gd/KhMNpB> [accessed 18 January 2022].

the cry of their son Ishmael (whom the Muslims regard as their progenitor) (Gen. 21:17). When Moses had his decisive encounter with God at the burning bush in the desert, an “angel of the Lord” is said to have appeared to him immediately thereafter (Exod. 3:2) to say that God had called out to him from the bush: Moses, Moses! (Exod. 3:4). So, if Yahweh’s messenger in the biblical narratives stands for God, the messenger acts thus out of reverence, to preserve the transcendence of God. When God visited Abraham before Sodom and Gomorrah, there were even *three* messengers who represented God. (In the Eastern Church, Andrey Rublyov’s icon became the canonized representation of the Holy Trinity, see fig. 1.)

And when Jacob, Abraham’s grandson, is spoken to by God in a dream, he sees God at the top of a ladder on which angels ascend and descend (Gen. 28:12 – an image that John claims for Jesus in John 1:51). The fact that the encounter with God – or God’s angel – has something unsettling is shown by the story of Jacob’s struggle with an unidentified visitor emerging out of the dark (Gen. 32:25–31); Jacob wrestles him down, forces him to bless him, and finally says of him, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life was spared.”

Mohammed is similarly held firmly by an angel, whom he later named as Gabriel (Arabic: Jibril). His first revelation was perplexing and distressing.⁹ The 40-year-old Mohammed had retreated to the cave of Hira in 610 for prayer when Jibril came to him and twice called upon him to write down a verse (later Sura 96:1–5). Mohammed replied that he could not write. The third time Jibril squeezed him even more tightly. So Mohammed dictated Allah’s revelations again and again in the following 22 years of his life to those in his growing community of followers who could write.

Mohammed received Allah’s revelations not only at night in dreams or half-sleep, but also during the day when he had to make specific decisions. There is the following tradition:

Yala b. Umayya went to the Prophet and asked him what he should do in Umra. When the revelation came to the Prophet, he was covered with a cloth (cloak). Yala asked Omar if he could see the Messenger of God receiving the revelations. Omar did him the favor and opened a corner of the cape. Yala looked at the Prophet, who made panting noises. He “thought it was the sound of a camel.” [...] So this was how Mohammed spoke to Allah through the Archangel Gabriel, with panting sounds like a camel.¹⁰

The whole Qur’an thus arose through the mediation of the angel Gabriel and is understood as the word “of God the Most Merciful” – a wording with which each of the 114 Suras begins. Even if the individual verses refer to particular military and religious conflicts or contain specific instructions for a religiously ordered life, this statement about God, the Most Merciful, also the righteous judge, is the central meaning of the Qur’an.

Christian dogmatics has the same priority in matters of revelation or the graceful experience of God’s closeness. The content of such experiences, as Karl Rahner says, is always God; it is about his *self-revelation*, not about proclaiming any clarifications about facts. Thus, the angels – seen or heard – are never the *subject* of the revelations, only their mediators, their presented context. When God – the invisible and silent mystery that is with us – wants to communicate with a human being, God’s message must be made communicable before it can be revealed to others. To do so, God must use their

9 See Osama Gaznavi 2016, paragraph “Die erste Offenbarung” (The first revelation).

10 Osama Gaznavi 2016, paragraph “Wie bekam Mohammed Offenbarung?” (How did Mohammed receive revelation?).

native language and take up the ideas and images of their culture, including the image of messengers as God's communicators. The Word of God is thus "never 'pure'; it is only conveyed via the word of man, but as a perceptible word of God, which does not lead astray."¹¹

Since the 19th century, narratives of earlier times have been examined critically: the stories in the Bible, the legends of the saints, as well as secular fairy tales and sagas. Is it possible to *demythologize* these narratives – to use Rudolf Bultmann's term – to free them of these images? The First Testament scholar Claus Westermann writes,

The angels as mythical beings, as intermediary demigod-like forms with wings and flowing robes and idealized faces, have ceased to exist for us [...] On the other hand, the study of the Bible has shown me that these Messengers of God, through some form of exegesis, cannot be purged, eliminated, spiritualized, symbolized, or demythologized from the Bible without removing a central part of it.¹²

Should we eliminate these stories because they are part of an outdated mythical world view? Plato repeatedly used myths in his philosophy as underpinning, even if he no longer adhered to their cosmology. When theologians demythologize, they interpret the substance of a biblical text using only abstract statements about their existential meaning. In contrast, Herbert Vorgrimmler has us "consider whether there are not phenomena which have necessarily, in all their scope, in all the developing facets of the human psyche, to be expressed and told in metaphors, images and even myths, whereas abstract formulations do not interest the 'listeners to the word' in an 'existential' way".¹³

In any event, the biblical texts would lose their narrative quality. The bountiful renderings, drama, and surprises of their personas would be lost, as would the "presentation of the scene" espoused by Ignatius of Loyola in his Spiritual Exercises.

As far as implicit statements about communicating angels are concerned, the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and most church fathers have repeatedly emphasized that angels are subordinate to the one God – this went against the spirit faith and polytheism of the Old Orient – and that they are at God's

11 Vorgrimmler 2000, 460.

12 Quoted in Krauss 2000, 116.

13 Vorgrimmler 2000, 154.



Fig. 2: Winged griffin. Frieze from the palace of Darius I in Susa. Glazed bricks, around 500 BCE, <https://is.gd/Yg5Lul> [accessed 18 January 2022].

service and obey God's commands. Praising and worshipping God is their first task; the second is to convey God's loving devotion to people, to make it tangible. Augustine had long dealt with the nature and power of angels – for instance, their power to enable visions of God. In contrast to Plato and Aristotle, he repeatedly stressed their subordination to God, the one Creator.¹⁴

There were other church fathers (of medieval times) who made ontological statements about the angels: they were pure spirits, could see the hidden, and, for example, read our thoughts – Wim Wenders in Peter Handke's screenplay portrayed this touchingly in his film *WINGS OF DESIRE* (*DER HIMMEL ÜBER BERLIN*, BRD/FR 1987). Nevertheless, in our imagination – and in iconography – they possess bodies, mostly adolescent male bodies. And also wings, an old oriental convention with which their power and influence is expressed: they bear weight, free of earth's gravity; they wield power, they move about in the air, in higher spheres, even if they are earthly animals (fig. 2).

14 See Pelz, 1912.



Fig. 3: *St John the Baptist, Angel of the Desert*, Russian icon, 17th century, <https://is.gd/V8kRyn> [accessed 18 January 2022].

Even John the Baptist, a historical person, is occasionally depicted with wings in Byzantine icons (fig. 3), as the messenger who precedes the Messiah (Mark 1:2).

In medieval scholasticism, the example of angels was used to reflect on (human) freedom, and, as for church and state, hierarchies were constructed, with the three archangels, Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael at the head, along with nine angel choirs and (military) legions. Evil spirits or temptations were understood as fallen angels, especially Satan. Like Christian theology, the Jewish Kabala was very creative in speculating and enumerating angels. Of the myriads of angels, for many today only the personal guardian angel has remained. The surprising and frightening aspects of the appearance of angels, which the Bible regularly expresses, have largely faded. “Fear not, do not be afraid”, say the angels.

One last function of angels should be mentioned: they are proxies or patrons for communities. For example, the archangel Michael, also known as the German “Michel”, is a patron saint of Germany. In addition, the last book of the New Testament, the “Revelation”, refers to angels in the introductory letters to the seven churches. John the seer is tasked, “Write to the angel of the church of Ephesus” (Rev. 2:1). The fact that ‘the angel’ does not mean (only) the bishops of the seven congregations is clear from the content of the church letters: it is about renewal of the first love of God, fidelity in persecution, adherence to sound doctrine, and rejecting false prophets. It is a beautiful thought to entrust such spiritual renewal and development to an angel.

From this function comes the final spiritual interpretation of angels: as companions to the growth and preservation of a moral way of life or virtues. A remarkable confirmation of this role is found in the Book of Tobit, a moral text in the guise of a historical narrative on how to behave in a pagan environment. The faithful Tobit buries fellow believers although to do so was forbidden by the state; when he finds himself in trouble and goes blind, his own wife complains to him of the uselessness of his faith. His son Tobias travels to find a bride and is accompanied by an angel; on his return, the angel heals the blindness of the father. The angel reveals himself to be Rafael and says to Tobit, “I have carried your prayers to God. I was near you when you paid your last respects to the dead fellow believers” (Tob. 12:12–15).

But also outside the Jewish-Christian faith there is a new discovery of angels: in literature and the visual arts. Here angels seem to have found a new cultural home. Westermann writes, “In common language, angels stand for the fact that the human being is not alone on earth, but is exposed to their visitations. They have entered the language of modern man and retain their place there regardless of whether one believes in God.”¹⁵

Angels in Contemporary Literature and the Visual Arts

The topos angels also has roots in (literary) figures that no longer appear in the religious experiences of the present and the written depictions (diaries, novels, etc.) of today. An illustration of this may be found in the conclusion of Heinrich Krauss’ very informative book about angels:

15 Krauss 2000, 116.

Martin Luther King says that in the first few weeks of the bus boycott in Montgomery, he received a threat on the phone at night, still undecided about the nature of his engagement, and then awake with a cup of coffee, full of the threat. ‘Something said to me, “You can’t call on Daddy now, you can’t even call on Mama. You’ve got to call on that something in that person that your Daddy used to tell you about, that power that can make a way out of no way.” With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory: “Lord, I’m down here trying to do what’s right. I think I’m right. I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But Lord, I must confess that I’m weak right now, I’m faltering. I’m losing my courage. Now, I’m afraid. And I can’t let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.”

It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: “Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you. Even until the end of the world.”

The Bible, one might speculate, could have reported in the case of Martin Luther King that an angel from God had appeared and shouted, “Martin, Martin!”, and after the response, “Here I am,” said in a loud voice: “I have seen the misery of my people. Martin, I will send you: Get up and fight for what’s right ...”¹⁶

So, are communicative angels an outdated notion? How does it work in novels of the last two centuries when the protagonist ends up in an existential crisis and looks for a nod or a word from God? Instead of angels, the responding people are parents, grandparents, revered teachers, or educators – in inner or open dialogues. The fact that one sees angels working through these persons has become rather rare – despite the saying “You are an angel”, which means someone helps another person in a dilemma. Today, one hardly calls upon the topos angel to find a meaningful answer in a crisis.

In religious contexts, angels are described as messengers of God. Despite the distinction today between the religious and secular worlds, the separation between the ecclesiastical and state spheres arose only in modern

16 Krauss 2000, 117.

times. In the past, some angelic forms were more figures of a state ideology or personifications of human longings. Statues of victory angels (Nikes) were erected before or after military successes, angels of peace as intercessions or expressions of gratitude for peaceful times. The Cupids of the ancient world were aimed at the pleasurable experience of erotic love; the cavorting and music-making putti of rococo churches, which were designed like banquet halls, were full of anticipation of the fulfillment of all the sensual and spiritual pleasures of heaven. Angels have always been and remain today representationally conceived desires, symbolic figures of feelings such as joy or sorrow – like the mourning angels on graves – but also the fear of death or the temptation to commit evil. Artists have always been aware of their universality and transcendence in everyday life and have given them a corresponding form.

Let us consider literature and the theatre. The baroque depicted virtues and vices, angels and devils in a naïvely dramatic form, such as in the Jesuit theatre with its refined stage technology. In the Enlightenment, however, on the one hand there was skepticism about such representations; on the other, a psychological interpretation of angels and their adversaries emerged. The literary representation of Satanism, established in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), found differentiation and refinement in English Romanticism with Lord Byron, John Keats, and Percy B. Shelley. If one adds the works of the Marquis de Sade and Charles Baudelaire, the dark and the morbid have been transfigured here, steeped even in barbarity. "They probably did not believe in a real-life Satan, but under this topos they wanted to glorify the human longings for absolute autonomy and an unrestricted lust for life, which would be 'demonized' by the prevailing doctrine of the Church", writes Krauss.¹⁷

German Romanticism, however, in its devotion to medieval religiosity, was more oriented towards the holy angels. The group of artists known as the Nazarenes wanted to rejuvenate art on a Christian basis following the example of Old German painting and Raphael. The 240 pictures of the Bible published by the landscape painter Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld in 1860 led the way in creating a style (fig. 4). Alois Senefelder's earlier invention of lithography (1797) aided in their dissemination by making possible a cost-effective mass reproduction of black-and-white representations.

Angels were also rediscovered outside a religious or ecclesiastical context. Many writers of the 20th century took them as a metaphor for the

17 Krauss 2000, 105.



Fig. 4: Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, *Die Bibel in Bildern*, "Jacob's Dream", around 1860, woodcut, Leipzig. Sheet 32: Jakob sees a ladder to heaven in a dream, <https://is.gd/5Pu7hC> [accessed 18 January 2022].

profound dimensions of existence. Among these authors were Rainer Maria Rilke, Nelly Sachs, Else Lasker-Schüler, Franz Kafka, Max Frisch, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Werner Bergengruen, Mascha Kaleko, and Robert Walser. Although Rilke may have resisted identification of the angels in his *Duino Elegies* with biblical angels, as Krauss notes, "he has struck an important foundation of many biblical angelic narratives, namely the shock that occurs when a man becomes aware of the mysterious reality that lies behind his everyday existence".¹⁸

Many painters and sculptors, like the above-mentioned poets and prose writers, shared a desire to express similar experiences in the image of the angel. Paul Klee (1879–1940) began his "Creative Credo" (1920) with the

18 Krauss 2000, 105.



Fig. 5: Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, 1920, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, <https://is.gd/qtRIAr> [accessed 18 January 2022].

following sentence: “Art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible.” A member of the Bauhaus, he tried to depict objects in compressed graphic form – typical characters, human relationships, movements, and thoughts. The root from which his forms grew was “a psychologically interpretive, modern romantic ‘irony with deeper meaning’”.¹⁹ In his more than 80 angelic images, he seems to have grasped what he wanted, but also what appeared as an imminent threat. He produced most of his angel images in the last year of his life, when his progressive illness (scleroderma) made his work more arduous and gave him a

sense of impending death. The titles are remarkable and include *Poor Angel*; *Guardian Angel*; *Angel, Still Feeling*; *Angel, Still Female*; *Angel, Still ugly*; *Angels in Crisis*; *Angels in Three*; and *Angels Everywhere*.

An early angel drawing by Klee is the *Angelus Novus* (New Angel) from 1920 (fig. 5). Walter Benjamin had acquired it in Munich in 1921 and he took it with him when he went into exile in Paris. There he gave it a bleak interpretation shortly before his suicide in 1940, in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”:

A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back

19 Giedion-Welcker 1961, 147.



Fig. 6: Ernst Barlach, *Floating Angel*, <https://is.gd/mETaBE> [accessed 18 January 2022].

is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.²⁰

The term “angel of history” gave not only Benjamin but also an entire generation of thinkers the insight that technical achievements hold a potential for destruction and downfall and that progress does not per se benefit humankind. This critical assessment grew out of the experience of the catastrophes in and around World War I and the use of industrial weapons of mass destruction, acts of war against civilians, and genocide.

Paul Klee’s early painting of an angel and Walter Benjamin’s commentary were the initial spark for the publication series “Angels of History” by Swabian woodcut artist Helmut Andreas Paul (HAP) Grieshaber (1909–1981). From 1964 to his death in 1981, in collaboration with writers Heinrich Böll, Sarah Kirsch, Volker Braun, Franz Fühmann, and Walter Jens, he produced a total of 23 pieces as a total work of art. Grieshaber termed each of these angels an “action”. Each issue bearing Grieshaber’s work was given a title such as “Atonement Angel”, “Disguised Angel”, “Juniper Angel”, “Angel of Psychiatry”, “German Peasant War 450 Years”, or “I have a dream”. The latter refers explicitly to the famous speech given by Martin Luther King Jr in 1963 at the “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom” and to King’s violent death, in the spring of 1968.

With the “The Angel of History”, the demands of political ethics were framed in a memorable figure. A similar form, reminiscent of a historical catastrophe, is the bronze sculpture *Floating Angel* (fig. 6), which Ernst Barlach

20 Benjamin 1969, 249.



Fig. 7: WINGS OF DESIRE (DER HIMMEL ÜBER BERLIN, Wim Wenders, BRD/FR 1987), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6S7mz3u4fc> (00:02:10). Cassiel (Otto Sander, left) tries to prevent the young man's suicide.

(1870–1938) made for a chapel in Güstrow Cathedral as a memorial to the victims of World War I. It was his first monumental work, created without commission and donated to the cathedral community. His motivation and objective are expressed in the following quotations:

For me, time stood still during the war. It would not fit into anything earthly. She hovered. I wanted to reproduce something of this feeling in this figure of fate floating in emptiness. [...] I was aware that I had to give form to a completely otherworldly impassiveness, in a sense a crystallization of the notion of endless time, to do justice to the greatness of this task.²¹

Our final example is taken from Wim Wender's poetic film WINGS OF DESIRE, based on Peter Handke's screenplay. Set in Berlin before the fall of the Wall, the film shows angels as companions of people in many life situations; they can read people's minds and feelings, but they cannot intervene – the angel Cassiel (Otto Sander) leans his head on the shoulder of a man considering suicide but he cannot prevent his plunging to his death (fig. 7). Daniel's (Bruno Ganz) desire to have a body, to feel carnal life and everything that goes with it, arises from this spiritual limitation.

The angelic images of the aforementioned writers and visual artists often reveal distraught or silently grieving beings. They stand in contrast to

21 In Krahmer 1984, 87–88. The author describes in note 128 (p. 138) the fate of this work: "The National Socialists had the Güstrow Angel melted down (1937). The cast, however, could be saved. In 1942, to preserve Barlach's art, a second cast was privately commissioned. Since 1952, it has been hanging in the Antonite Church in Cologne. A third casting was mounted in the original location in Güstrow Cathedral."

the popular – sometimes “kitschy” – representations of today, such as baby angels made of painted plaster or “worry stone” angels made of wood or bronze. They are accompanied by texts and pictures. Their creators choose angels as orientation points for a spiritual way of life and as prophetic callers to a new social responsibility.

Angels as Invitations to Virtues

One contemporary interpretation of angels orients itself toward the idea of life-supporting attitudes in order to lead a mindful life. Mindfulness can be instilled by Christian spirituality, but it can come also from other religious traditions or modern movements such as anthroposophy, New Age, eco-spirituality, or the Scottish Findhorn Community. In almost all these traditions, angels are believed to be helpers or guides for adhering to a chosen way of life. People who believe in these spiritual ideas see angels as mentors who encourage them to follow specific ways of exercising these life-benefiting attitudes so that these attitudes can gradually take hold of them and become “second nature”. Angels thus act as companions for those engaged in internal work, in exercises traditionally called asceticism. Only through repetitive exercise can the attitude of calm, of serenity, for example, be honed to become a routine in everyday life.

This sought-for attitude can then act as a crutch in the face of the constant, destabilizing changes in modern life. It is synonymous with *virtue*, but it has a social component. The Latin word for virtue is ‘*virtus*’: (male-) strength and firmness, from which the English ‘*virtue*’ is derived. In German, virtue (*Tugend*) comes from good, to be capable.

Anselm Grün, today the most published author of spiritual books in Germany, writes,

It is not always clear whether they [angels] are independent beings or just images for God’s loving and comforting presence. [...] Imaginations of a longing for another world of security and lightness, beauty and hope. [...] Angels are images of a deep, enduring longing for help and healing that does not come from ourselves. [...] They are a source of inspiration. [Increasingly, people are convinced] that we can come to an understanding with angels. They give us support and imbue us with new attitudes. [...] Angels represent our potential of transformation and calling them angels

refers, of course, to the fact that these attitudes are only the expression of our own efforts. They are also a gift, grace, wisdom given to us.²²

He suggests choosing one angel for spiritual orientation for a year (or longer), selecting from a list of 50 angels: the angles of love – reconciliation – exuberance – safekeeping – leaving – community – calm – passion – truthfulness – gratitude – risk – renunciation – confidence – solitude – sisterhood – self-surrender – warmth – courage – patience – lightness – openness – temperance – forgiveness – freedom – parting – mourning – transformation – enthusiasm – healing – faithfulness – tenderness – cheerfulness – devotion – harmony – clarity – slowness – retreat – attentiveness – mildness – humility – fulfillment – endurance – trust – compassion – comfort – prudence – reverence – understanding – darkness – quiet.²³

A description of another angel, who represents calls for social change, may be added here: the Angel of Global Responsibility (see fig. 8 for this angel as depicted by Theresia Eben). Only with a new value orientation and its corresponding institutions can our global ecological crisis be overcome. A new ecological spirituality is needed for which an angel can also stand as a representation. Because the nations of Africa and Oceania will suffer more from this crisis, this angel has darker skin, and because poverty affects mostly women, the angel is female.

What symbols does this Angel of History today hold in their hands to remind us of the great challenge of the 21st century – overcoming humanity's ecological crisis? They certainly hold the Declaration of Human Rights. In doing so, they call for equal rights for all, regardless of origin, gender, age, culture and nation, or economic status. Jesus had already linked one of these rights with angels: "See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 18:10).

According to human rights conventions and most constitutions, opportunities and goods are to be distributed fairly both within a nation and internationally – for example between North and South. So that the disadvantaged also receive their rights and the wealthy forfeit some of their abundance, national and international institutions with the power

22 Grün 1998, 7–10.

23 Titles of chapters in Grün 2009.

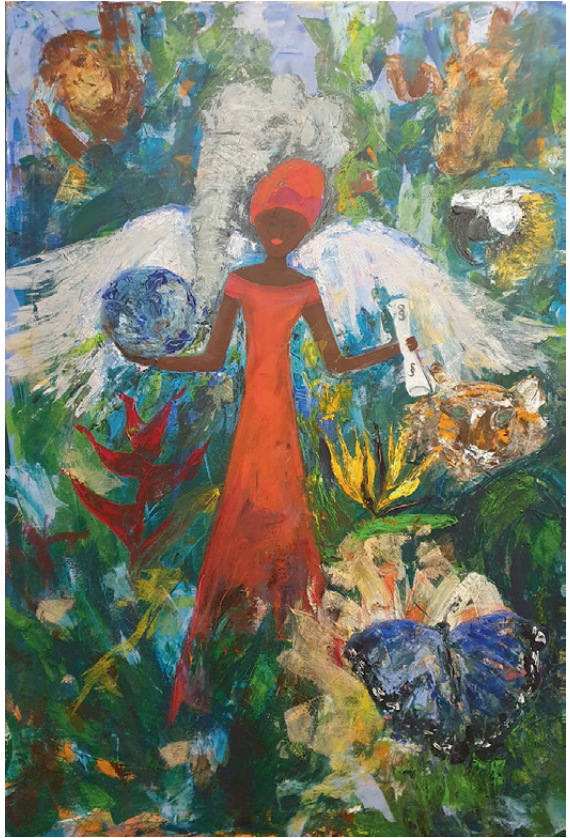


Fig. 8: Painting by Theresia Eben, Assling (Germany), 2021.

to impose sanctions are needed. They can perhaps be symbolized as a courthouse with columns. Such a building is held by the angel in their left hand.

And in their right hand, they hold our blue, vulnerable planet as observed from a satellite or from the International Space Station. In photos taken from space, the slash-and-burn of the Brazilian rainforest or the melting of the Arctic ice cap can clearly be recognized, just two signs of global climate change caused by our industrialization. Pope Francis writes in his encyclical letter *Laudato si*, from 2015: “Whether believers or not, we are agreed today that the earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone.” In order to do justice to this consensus, nothing less is required than a change in our production and economic system and in our way of thinking and planning:

Ecological culture cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate problems of pollution, environmental decay and the depletion of natural resources. There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm.²⁴

Today, however, we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as *to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*.²⁵

The Pope sees here an epochal responsibility:

Although the post-industrial period may well be remembered as one of the most irresponsible in history, nonetheless there is reason to hope that humanity at the dawn of the twenty-first century will be remembered for having generously shouldered its grave responsibilities.²⁶

We have the freedom needed to limit and direct technology; we can put it at the service of another type of progress, one which is healthier, more human, more social, more integral.²⁷

As the image of a scroll bearing legal conventions held in the left hand conveys, a common approach by all nations, major strategies, and effective international conventions are required. In order to anchor the new culture both internationally and locally, local associations and the formation of a new common identity are necessary. And this ecological conversion will not succeed without virtuous life by many individuals or without their change of heart. A dimension and consequence of this conversion is a healthy relationship with creation, following the example of Saint Francis of Assisi and expressed by the plants and animals surrounding our Angel of Global Responsibility.

If angels are interpreted as role models for a spiritual way of life with distinct attitudes and guideposts for new consciousness, ethical questions are

24 Pope Francis 2015, §111.

25 Pope Francis 2015, §49.

26 Pope Francis 2015, §165.

27 Pope Francis 2015, §112.

implicitly raised, with regard not only to the fulfillment of responsibilities but also to the voluntary practicing of virtues and developments with an appropriate mindset. Individual ethics and structural ethics will play equal parts here.

Outlook

Although angels as interpretive figures for religious experiences were developed 3,000 years ago, they remain a prevailing idea today for understanding the formation of the human spirit, not only in the communication sciences but also in secular literature and the visual arts. It remains to be seen whether in the future the shift of meaning within the concept of angel as a foil for the development of the personality will progressively add new aspects through cultural and societal criticism.

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Filmography

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