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Editor: Irina Vainovski-Mihai

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New Europe College  
Str. Plantelor 21  
023971 Bucharest  
Romania

www.nec.ro; e-mail: nec@nec.ro

Tel. (+4) 021.307.99.10, Fax (+4) 021. 327.07.74



## ADRIAN GOR

Born in 1979, in Iasi

Ph.D., Concordia University

Thesis: *A Symbolic-Realistic Guide for Image-Makers: Performing the Contemporary Byzantine-Inspired Iconic Vision from the Spectacle*

Artist in Residence, Berlin Art Institute Germany, (2017)

Artist in Residence, Ottawa School of Art, Canada (2016)

Artist in Residence, GLO'ART, Belgium (2016)

### **Professional Memberships**

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- Universities Art Association of Canada (AAC-AAUC)
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January 14 - February 24, 2018

Archives Gallery 112, Ottawa, Canada, one-person show,  
May 2 - June 23, 2018

“ArtSpring”, Berlin, Germany, group show, 16-18 June 2017.

Participation to international conferences in Banff (Canada), Halifax (Canada),  
Syracuse (USA)

Invited lectures delivered at Concordia University

Several articles published in peer-reviewed journals

# RETHINKING THE ICONIC IN THE AGE OF SCREEN TECHNOLOGIES A BYZANTINE HIEROTOPIC PERSPECTIVE ON SEEING IMAGES AS PRESENCE

## Abstract

This article offers a Byzantine iconographic understanding of creativity to reveal how today's screen technologies may activate an iconic vision—a feeling of (divine) invisibility as present in the physical space. In using the Byzantine theology of the icon in conjunction with Marion's phenomenology of images, it outlines a symbolic and realistic mode of seeing that expose the ongoing metaphysical issues of representation. These views on images underline how the illusory aspect of televisual images and their appearance of real-presence can mark the end of metaphysics of presence, and consequently the impossibility of having an iconic experience. In this regard, a parallel is made between Lidov's hierotopic description of the Hodegetria icon and Verhoeff's performative inquiry into mobile touch screens to define a iconic (symbolic-realistic) vision that reconsiders the evocative/creative aspect of televisual images.

**Keywords:** iconic vision; televisual image; Byzantine icon; Jean Luc Marion; linear and reverse perspective

## Introduction

The metaphysical interrogation of televisual images shows a fixation with their power to objectify human identity and hinder real creative experiences. As the social theorist John Lechte observes, the concern in visual criticism is that digital technology can be used to manipulate images to the point of eliminating all references to a real signified.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, Jean-Luc Marion claims that the consequence of this technological change in the referential status of images is to see 'our world in its accomplished state of idolatry' (2004, 82). The question, however, is *how* to understand creativity in light of an ongoing quest for innovation

of the (omnipresent) televisual screen. If the image is referenced in a way that is indistinguishable from its screen technology, it means that today's viewers lose the imaginative capacity to recall actual events. I propose, then, in this article to reveal the relevance of Byzantine theology of the icon, formulated in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, for understanding the creative limits of televisual images.

Before discussing the Byzantine canonic mode of seeing icons, it is important, here to begin by posing the following question: what is a creative vision? For now, I would respond from Marion's phenomenological perspective by saying that a creative vision forms when images are given in intuition as new phenomena, beyond a viewer's finite mind and intentional gaze. And, Marion refers to five modes of phenomena's *givenness* in intuition that overwhelm the objectifying effect of human intentionality: the event, flesh, idol, icon, and revelation (2002, 228-247). All these examples of phenomena, dubbed as *saturated phenomena*, are appearances that are over-full with intuition, i.e., whose appearances cannot be taken completely into account by a subject's intentional gaze. Most relevant for my discussion, the idol and icon are appearances that signal the presence of an invisible signified through various intensities of light in visibility, which in turn stimulates viewers' creative capacity to evoke an image.

The contemporary (televisual) context in which Marion redefines the theology of icons (true images) and idols (false images) is not specifically focused on the idea of an image as a creative vision. He is more concerned with debunking conventionally established images of truth—also referred as metaphysical concepts that objectify reality—in order to overcome the long-running dispute over the real-presence of a signified in a frame for representation.<sup>2</sup> According to systematic theologian, Robyn Horner a pressing issue in Marion's critique of metaphysics is whether or not any form of invisibility (signifieds), coached in theological terms, has any place in today's philosophical discourse around un-representable phenomena (2011, 335). So, Marion takes up the phenomenological challenge of speaking about the (im)possibility of the invisible to enter the visible phenomena, outside the theological realm and of the metaphysical iconoclasm between philosophical aesthetics and theological beliefs. Correspondingly, he moves away from moral debates regarding the reality of a divine image versus the falseness of an idolater's image by placing the icon (true images) and idol (false images) on the same side of unconstituted *givens*.<sup>3</sup> This move is done in his book, *Crossing of the Visible* by focusing

on painting as the central concern of phenomenology: phenomenality, or the power by which appearances appear. Instead of asking what is an image of truth or untruth, which only invites for iconoclastic disputes, Marion takes the idol and icon as exemplary of two competing models for understanding phenomenality. The first model (illustrated by the idol and “linear perspective”) holds that phenomena appear when they are constituted by a subject’s intentional gaze, where an onlooker constructs space and controls things within that space as objects. And for Marion, the idolic phenomena take the form of paintings, from naturalistic depictions in a linear perspective as in Albrecht Durer’s work to abstract work like in Malevitch’s suprematist compositions. Interestingly enough, both abstract and naturalistic paintings are seen on the same continuum and as opposed to icons. The second model (illustrated by the icon and “paradox”) holds that phenomena appear of their own accord when they meet an intentional gaze with their own power to appear, thus overtaking the power of the subject who attempts to constitute them. Here, an onlooker does not construct space or control things, but the onlooker is shaped by the phenomenon that “looks back” at her/him.

This presentation of the idols and icons in *Crossing of the Visible* relates to Marion’s critique of television screens as the ultimate stage of idolatry. In his phenomenological, secular turn of developing the aesthetics of the idol and icon (a shift that is influenced by his Catholic background), Marion ironically maintains a theological ground (Horner, 2005, 125). Particularly, he sees the television screen as an intensification of the idol (in the theological sense of an illusory image) where to an even greater extent than a painted idol a subject-onlooker can get lost in pure visibility, acting as a voyeur taking pleasure in seeing while not being seen. In other words, Marion takes an iconoclastic view of contemporary televisual culture, claiming that the technological image removes all connections to a concrete signified, thus leading to a loss of genuine experiences and ultimately to the objectification of human identity. For this reason, the concept of the icon is posed as a possible solution in counteracting the objectifying power of the televisual idol.<sup>4</sup>

While the idol as painting can have a beneficial outcome on viewers’ imagination by challenging human intentionality with an *excess of visibility*, the televisual idol limits creativity by resuming phenomena to the expectations of an intentional gaze. More specifically, the painted idol maintains a link to a signified and adds a new perspective on it, such as in contemplating nature through a painted landscape or a person from a

portrait. Every painting acts as an *excess of visibility* (an addition to what nature already gives in a phenomenal form) that challenges or becomes unbearable for the human gaze due to the endless possibilities of a phenomenon's appearance. However, the challenge that the painted idol poses for the gaze will always remain under the horizon of the constitutive power of the viewer's "I" and so not effective enough in countering the extreme version of contemporary idolatry induced by the technological screens. Marion, then draws attention to the icon. The icon becomes even a greater challenge for the gaze as it places the phenomenon into a reverse perspective by exposing it through an "excess of light" that overwhelms the expectations of the viewers' intentionality (Marion, 2000, 197). This iconic creation of images depends on an invisible (divine) intentionality, which (paradoxically) visibly reveals itself in reaction to human intentionality. Subsequently, the icon turns into the best antidote for the idolatry of the televisual spectacle.

This paper continues Marion's similar task in the *Crossing of the Visible* of applying the theology of icons/idols to a critique of screen media, but from a different, Christian Orthodox perspective. It considers Alexei Lidov's Byzantine notion of hierotopy—a term that merges two Greek words *hieros* (sacred) and *topos* (place, space, notion), which consequently reveals what Marion did not consider: the creative and participatory facet of television screens (2006a, 12-13). While he uncovers the evocative potential of the idol at the pictorial level (a topic that will be developed in the next section), his phenomenological turn stops at seeing the televisual image within the limits of iconoclastic thoughts. Hierotopy will help to push further his phenomenological considerations by exposing *when* and *how* televisual screens may induce an iconic vision. This is not only contrary to Marion's iconoclastic view, but it also clarifies why Marion has been widely criticized for dematerializing the idea of an iconic vision, especially when investigating the *givenness* of the phenomenon according to the process of *phenomenological reduction*.<sup>5</sup> Hence, why he never appends to the noun "icon" the adjective "Byzantine", as understood and practiced in the Christian Orthodox tradition.

To that end, it is sufficient to underline here that Marion's (Catholic) view of the Byzantine icon facilitates the possibility to research the semiotic structure of creativity at the iconic level outside the theological realm. He picks up on the Incarnational logic of the image to explain that the icon is neither an *eikōn* nor an *eidolon* for the reason that it escapes the logic of referentiality between a signifier and signified (2004, 83-85). In short, in



Plato's view of mimesis, an *eikōn*-appearance (image) refers to an imperfect material copy of a real invisible model (Forms) and the *eidōlon*-appearance (idol or false being) to an illusion of something non-existent or without essence.<sup>6</sup> The *eikōn* is once and the *eidōlon* is twice removed from the reality of Forms (Marion, 2004, 79). The iconophile's thought (that loves the icons) disengaged from this referential mode of seeing to argue that an image is not the same with the temporal phenomena of materiality. The icon, then, stands for the participation of matter as an imprint of Christ's human form, which presents Him in His absence. While Marion resumes this form of participation at the contemplative vision between the crossing of two invisible gazes, the hierotopic analysis also incorporates the practice of venerating the icon in tangible, lived situations. In doing so, the hierotopic approach enables a Byzantine-inspired critique of the televisual image that moves beyond the Marion's iconoclastic approach. And, this not only helps to see more concretely what type of creativity and presence really remains following the commoditization of the image, but it contributes to contemporary debates about image making with a performative, practical analysis of the subtle aesthetic line between the idolic and iconic creativity.

### **Marion's phenomenology of contemporary idols and icons**

Marion states that the perspectival capability of the human gaze and its ability to address an *intentional object* (a referent of consciousness) in spatial perspective becomes more than just a "historically situated pictorial theory" (2004, 4). It turns into the essential phenomenological mode of being in the world. The process of taking perspective parallels the "aim of intentionality" in Husserlian phenomenology, which is essential for having real experiences, beyond the pure illusions of the televisual spectacle (Marion, 2004, 12). The perspectival gaze stems "from the production of the visible by the invisible" in a similar fashion as "the intentional object results from a production of experience by intentionality" (Marion, 2004, 13). Applied to a painting, the intentionality of a gaze forms an ideal [irreal/irréel] space in the flat surface of a canvas whereby the visible increases proportionally with the gaze's insertion of the invisible into the painted linear perspective (Marion, 2004, 5). If in ordinary vision the invisible stimulates the visible to perceive a space in which we are able to move and perform physically, the invisible in a painted perspective works only

to create an ideal sense of three-dimensionality. However, Marion does not consider the irreal space produced according to the logic of mimesis as deceptive (or idolic in a theological sense) when compared to the physical perspective of the ordinary vision, as both types of spaces are products of the intentionality of our gaze. In actuality, the irreal space provides more visibility than the physical space by stimulating the perspectival gaze to expand the ordinary perception of phenomena through the infusion of invisibility into the flatness/materiality of a canvas. With this non-iconoclastic attitude towards the phenomenology of the perspectival gaze, Marion redefines the idolic painting as a “remarkable achievement” of extracting from ordinary/natural visibility “blocks of the visible” (with no previous aesthetic meaning) to satisfy and even exceed the expectations of the desiring gaze (2004, 25, 33).

While for Marion a painting always creates an image that is contingent on the principle of taking perspective, the televisual image, instead, destroys all references to an actual time and space of an original event. Phenomenologically speaking, it prevents the experience of the world by blocking the aim of intentionality to move in perspective from a signifier to a signified. It follows, then, that in the case of the televisual image the intention of the gaze is absorbed into an “unending flow of time” and spaces, as broadcasted in news with no relation to each other via internet or cable TV connection (Marion, 2004, 48). And this televisual effect of the image, that eliminates the role of time and perspective in producing and organizing visibility, stops the gaze into a frozen image to be advertised (like in a TV commercial) as real-presence. In the case of the painting, the intentional gaze is always at play between a signifier and a signified according to the visual structure of an abstract and/or naturalistic perspective.

Although Marion sees in the painted idol an alternative aesthetic experience to the televisual spectacle, he ultimately aims at opening the painting’s phenomenality to take up the role of the icon, which is a type of painting that “formulates above all an—perhaps the only—alternative to the contemporarily disaster of the image” (2004, 87). So, in *The Crossing of the Visible*, Marion develops an aesthetic view of the Byzantine icon as a kind of redemption to the mediated image in today’s televisual culture. Particularly, the icon has a form of visibility that “participates in a resurrection...[which] imitates Christ, by bringing the unseen [the invisible] to light” (Marion, 2004, 27). This Christological insight (inspired by John Damascene’s writing on the icon) allows Marion to reflect on how the

icon's phenomenality releases the image from the mimetic logic of the idol. On the one hand, the idol glorifies the image as a *new spectacle*, which "doubles in the visible what the original keeps in the visible" (83). In other words, the idol enhances the visibility of the signifier to the point of competing with what it signifies—thus, dazzling the viewer's gaze by fulfilling the human desire for real-presence. Despite the fact that this misleads the viewer to take the signifier for the signified, the idolic painting still maintains a sense of referentiality, which allows for a semi-access to the signified. But, with the advent of televisual technology, the idol culminated into completely eliminating all references to the signified by exposing itself instead as real-presence. On the other hand, the icon does not create a *new spectacle* because its "visible spectacle (a painted face) is radicalized to its prototype, type of an invisible counter-intentionality (a gaze in person)" (Marion, 2004, 84). Subsequently, the aesthetic boundary between the idol and icon is founded on the power of the iconic gaze to disrupt the viewer's (idolic) intention of gazing at his/her own desires as if really present in the tangible space. Though painted in the visible as a type, the iconic gaze remains absent as a prototype. Therefore, the viewer's gaze is directed through the icon's materiality—more specifically, in the direction of the *two painted eyes* of the iconic face—towards a referent that remains beyond the reach of the constitutive aim of the referential gaze or thinking subject. As opposed to the idol, which only reveals a sense of otherness according to the referential measure of the human perspective, the icon inverts the logic of perspective into a counter-intuitive experience that acknowledges the viewer as a divine gift (an *unconstituted* phenomenon). Said differently, in front of the icon the viewer escapes the objectifying effect of the idol over the *other* and discovers himself/herself exposed to a gaze that cannot be enclosed in the idolic, "rigid distribution of the visible in the sensible and the invisible in the intelligible" (Marion, 2004, 85).

Bram Leven, however, has pointed out that despite Marion's aesthetic approach to the idol/icon, his phenomenological theory of the image remains limited to an iconoclastic gesture of "condemning the televisual image" (2005, 61). For Marion, as for many critics who affirm the objectifying effect of the spectacle, the medium of the televisual screen seems to be mistaken for its image. But, as John Lechte notes, the problem with "transferring to the image the qualities of its object" is that it resumes the meaning of the image (even in its idolic televisual form as real-presence) to only that which is visible. The question, thus, remains:

can the televisual screen make present an electronic image that, while critiqued as pure illusion, acts as an absent/invisible signified. This is a question about the referential nature of images in general, which I propose to explore next through three types of creative visions: the symbolic, realistic, and symbolic-realistic. While the first two visions expose the metaphysical issues of representation, the third type tests Marion's phenomenology of painting at the Byzantine level of making an icon. The reason for this practical turn is the creative vision of constructing an icon that was established after the Byzantine iconoclasm. It refers to a tangible, performative aspect of the icon, which was overlooked by Marion—namely that the icon exists in an actual place from where it engages the viewers as direct participants. By emphasizing the crossing of *invisible gazes* in the icon's interaction with the viewer, Marion did not only become subjected to being critiqued for his tendency of vaporizing materiality, but in fact led his theory of painting to be inflexible in analyzing the metaphysical limits of the televisual image.

### **Idolic creativity: the symbolic and realistic visions**

The plausibility of a Byzantine iconographic reflection on the visible and invisible dimensions of televisual images can be estimated when Marion's phenomenology of painting is used to consider two key aspects of an artistic vision: the symbolic and realistic modes of taking perspective. And by following these modes of seeing, I argue, the manifold views in which a new phenomenon is given in today's screen-mediated images can be contextualized by a practical iconographic knowledge that complements Marion's dematerialized version of the icon.

In presenting the challenge of seeing iconically, Marion connects the metaphysics of the image as real-presence to the Platonic-symbolic and Nietzschean-realistic opposing positions on visible phenomena (2004, 78-83). Precisely, these two views about reality place the image in a mimetic rivalry between two spectacles: the visible-perceptible and invisible-intelligible. While Plato initiated the metaphysical iconoclasm, which mistrusts the reality of an image as a mimetic representation of an immaterial origin, Nietzsche freed the image from its unreal status by reversing the Platonic relation of similitude between the visible and invisible. That is, the image is not an imperfect symbolic imitation of an invisible Form, but becomes the real, visible itself. On the account of the

two metaphysical extremes, a creative vision is considered naturalistic when it maintains a spatial contiguity with a material referent (as objectively as possible) through the artist's rendition of shadows, colors, textures, etc. The aim here is to generate a natural (realistic) vision to see the referent in a linear perspective as if really present. An abstract creative vision involves, instead, the symbolic framing (an expressive-aesthetic treatment) of a conceptual or material referent in a way that the viewer's reception is directed towards interpreting what the referent is intended to mean, rather than its 3D appearance in the physical space.

A painting might accept or reject the representation of a linear perspective depending on its emphasis on either the visibility of a referent (naturalistically illustrated such as in the work of the Renaissance painters) or the invisibility of a referent (as exemplified by the abstraction of perspective in the work of the Suprematist painters).<sup>7</sup> So, according to the principle of taking perspective, the naturalistic and abstract aesthetic approaches appreciate the visible according to the pictorial rendition of a referent. The naturalistic painting engages the intentional gaze to play its role of creating invisibility (a spectacle) through the illusion of depth in a painted surface. It particularly does so by inviting the intentional gaze to stage an object in the depiction of a linear perspective. In reverse, the abstract painting is the idolic "instance of total visibility" that prevents the conscious intervention of the perspectival gaze from constructing an intentional object (Mezei, 2013, 288). With its lack of intentional objects, it manifests the invisible referent independently from any acts of consciousness. Marion states that the viewer cannot see in Kazimir Malevich's *Suprematist Composition: White on White* any recognizable material objects, thus his/her gaze is not able to find a place in its visibility to insert the invisible—all the viewer sees is a white square on a white background. Malevich wished to represent pure reality, and in doing so, he liberated the image from the conscious intervention of the viewer and his/her subjective (impure) aesthetic needs. Accordingly, the gazing aim is resumed to recognizing what is already present in the painting without deploying the invisible. In contrast to a naturalistic painting, abstract painting does not allow the invisible to play between "the aim of the gaze and the visible but rather, contrary to the gazing aim, [the invisible manifests] in the visible itself—and is merged with it, inasmuch as the white square is merged with its white base" (Marion, 2004, 19).

In summary then, an artist provides an *excess of visibility* by depicting a referent through various degrees of linear perspective: from abstract

to naturalism. Both aesthetic approaches emphasize unseen visibilities beyond what we already see through the ordinary vision of the physical world. But these artistic visions also reveal the viewers' metaphysical tendency of seeing images as real-presence, which inhibits the iconic phenomenon of bringing to the *real visible* more invisibility than what is already constructed within the limits of viewers' intentional gaze. On the one hand, the Platonic-symbolic vision claims the reality of the image as invisible and outside of the linear perspective. This has the effect of cutting off the invisible from the material in order to value the visible as a resource for symbolic meaning, which, in turn, leads viewers (through a mental process) beyond the realistic vision of the world. On the other hand, the Nietzschean vision, places the image inside the linear perspective in order to reclaim it as visible, thus having the effect of trapping the invisible in the material. This realistic type of image does not point towards a supersensible Platonic world that enforces predefined symbolic values, but to a paradoxical realistic vision that also incorporates the symbolic vision within the perceptible world. It is this later Nietzschean anthropocentric interpretive lens that Marion believes drives our relationship with the televisual screens. The image became, more precisely, *eidolon*-appearances of pure simulations of reality in which everything turned into an instrument for mirroring human desires under the horizon marked by human perspective.

Thus, my aim in the next section is to show that if the performative level of making a Byzantine icon is applied to the phenomenology of painting, visual criticism acquires a new framework of analyzing to what extent the televisual spectacle may be an extreme version of idolatry. The question is: having in mind that human vision is bound to a perspectival gaze in both the iconic and idolic visions, to what degree does the televisual spectacle references itself in order to completely prevent a creative experience? In light of this question, I seek to show that by using Marion in conjunction with the hierotopic aspect of the Byzantine icon, the phenomenological approach to a creative vision opens up the possibility for a practical venue in exposing the metaphysical workings of the image.

### **Iconic creativity: the symbolic-realistic vision**

In contrast to the linear perspective that governs the construction of a naturalistic/abstract painting, the icon constructs a reversed perspective

that brings a surplus of invisibility to the visible. While the idol adds more visibility to the ordinary vision, it does not add anything new to the perspectival gaze itself. Said differently, the painting (as idol) does not create new visibility in addition to what the intentional gaze already perceives and organizes on its own.

From a Byzantine theological view, the reverse perspective of the icon follows the formula: *God (as prototype) sees the viewer and the viewer sees God (as type)*. And the transitive quality of the verb *sees* is guaranteed by the economical (Incarnational) relation uttered by Christ himself: 'He who has seen Me [type] has seen the Father [prototype]' (John 14, 9). From Marion's extreme version of iconolatry drawn from patristic writers, the icon's visibility needs to withdraw before the believer's gaze to allow the invisible gaze of the iconistic face to pass through the icon. The icon's visibility is eliminated in the same manner as Christ's visibility was effaced through His crucifixion. Instead of reproducing the bodily wounds of Christ and lay emphasis on His physical pain, the Cross refers to a visible trace (*type*) or an opening in Christ's body to unveil the invisible (the Father). Likewise, the empty space of the pupils painted on the surface of the icon designates an opening through which the invisible gazes can peer. Of particular importance to the icon's phenomenology is the inclusion of the human figure according to the demands of the "two dots of basically black paint" (the divine pupils belonging to a saint or Christ) in delivering the gaze of the other (Marion, 2004, 83). The dark void of all human eyes are, for Marion, the only part of the human body that offers nothing to be constituted by intentionality. And for this reason, the phenomena of the painted black pupils do not represent the dark space from the inside of the biological human eye. They are the mark of unforeseeable phenomena, which add a sense of invisibility that exceeds the viewer's intuition and capacity to make meaning (including metaphysical knowledge). This iconic type of invisibility differs from the invisible employed in a naturalistic perspective or the sheer visibility of an abstract painting, by manifesting the otherness of an opposing intentionality.

In response to Marion's designation of the human eyes as the central point of attention in the icon, this paper argues that the Byzantines found a more complex, mobile vision. The main attention should not be only on the human eyes as the gate to eternity, but also on the entire physical environment in which the veneration of the icon takes place. Alexei Lidov provides a particular example of the Byzantine vision, which he calls hierotopy, in the case of the miraculous icon of Hodegetria (Pointing

the Way) of Constantinople. Traditionally believed to have been painted by Saint Luke the Evangelist, the Hodegetria icon presents the Virgin holding the Child Jesus on one side, and on the other, the crucified Christ. According to various written accounts from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the icon was used in weekly rites to perform miracles in the Hodegon outdoor market place in the center of Constantinople. Since the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Hodegetria icon and the scenes of the miraculous events became a popular Byzantine iconographic theme. For example, in the icon *The Glorification of the Virgin* from the Cathedral of the Dormition in Kremlin, Moscow, the Hodegetria icon is depicted flying above a figure dressed in red with his arms spread out in a crucified position.<sup>8</sup> The red garment symbolizes the sacred status of those who carried the icon during the rites around the market place. On the left and right sides of the central figure in red, a crowd of worshipers is depicted as witnessing a miracle. Lidov quotes a Latin text from the 12<sup>th</sup> century that underlines the mobile aspect of the iconic vision in creating a sacred space:

On the third day of every week the icon was moved in a circle with angelic power in full view of the crowd, as though snatched up by some kind of whirlwind. And it carried about its bearer with its own circular movement, so that because of its surprising speed it almost seemed to deceive the eyes of the spectators. Meanwhile everyone, according to their tradition, beat their breasts and cried out 'Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison (Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy)' (2006b, 352)

The icon-bearers' activity in the rites is to geographically delineate a sacred space within a commercial, urban place. For this reason, the Hodegetria icon turns into a spatial icon through a combination of surrounding phenomena (from the crowd to material objects) that all contribute to forming a hierotopy. The icon is performed through liturgical rituals beyond its materiality as a flat pictorial image to the point of transforming the entire urban place within the sacred circle into an iconic vision. In this hierotopy, everything (from the icon to the crowd and the visible world) coexists as a collection of spatial iconic images. While the visible border of the sacred space is marked by the icon's materiality in the physical space of the city, the invisible border is marked symbolically at the level of the icon's screen. Lidov comments that the icon miraculously rotated in the air creating a visual effect in which the two images of the icon appeared as one (2006b, 354). The movement of the icon produced



a whirlwind effect before the crowd's eyes inducing an iconic vision that imitates the divine vision. That is, God sees every side of the icon simultaneously by defying the logic of the linear/Cartesian perspective—the divine vision is not limited to time and space. Therefore, in addition to the divine pupils, the Byzantine iconic vision is a (symbolic-realistic) mode of seeing that incorporates the entire space between the visible (realistic) and invisible (symbolic) borders.

According to Lidov, the circling of the market square by the icon-bearers is a re-enactment of the Hodegetria rite performed by the patriarch Sergius I during the Avars' siege of Constantinopol in 626. And the Byzantine victory over the Avar army is attributed to the divine intervention through the Hodegetria icon. It is believed that during the events of the siege, the patriarch carried the icon around the city walls (demarkating a sacred space) with his arms stretched out in a crucified gesture without touching the icon's frame—a sign of the icon's purity of not being touched by human hands. The patriarch's crucified position mimics the Crucifixion painted on one of the sides of the icon. The depiction of the Virgin Mary, from the other side, emphasizes the mimetic significance of Christ by pointing with Her right hand toward the Child Jesus (the path for creating a sacred space). This mimetic behavior is particularly significant in understanding the difference between the symbolic and realistic aspects of an idolic vision and the symbolic-realistic mode of performing an iconic vision. While the symbolic and realistic modes of seeing invite for (static) contemplation based on the referential distance between a signifier and signified, the symbolic-realistic vision breaks that distance through an active, Incarnational mode of imprinting or mapping the signified in the physical space as sacred. While the symbolic and realistic modes of seeing invite for (static) contemplation based on the referential distance between a signifier and signified, the symbolic-realistic vision breaks that distance through an active, Incarnational mode of imprinting or mapping the signified in the physical space as sacred.

When Patriarch Nicephorus (ca. 750-828 CE) questioned the mimetic logic of the image inherited from the Greek philosophical tradition, he disputed that the icon's reference to a model implies a direct relation of identity, in the sense that the goal of a copy is always to replicate an original. What the icon offers, instead, is a novel way to deal with the iconoclastic issue of real-presence in representation through God's Trinitarian logic of relations between persons (God as one will, but triple in organization: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). In brief: the

theological structure of the icon reveals the triple union of the divine persons by subsuming “the properly imaginal character of...the Son and his redemptive iconicity” (Mondzain, 2005, 27). The icon’s formal likeness (also called the Son’s artificial image or type) of the Son’s natural image (which is identical to the Father’s divine essence) brings to the beholder’s presence the invisible face of the Father (the prototype) through the Holy Spirit (the “source of the incarnational operation”) (Mondzain, 2005, 27). It follows then that the natural image is the essential similitude between the Son and Father, apart from the Son’s incarnate form. Moreover, the icon carries His human form, which closely links the human nature to the image of God. Humanity is the image of Trinity and this “imaginal... relationship of similitude” defines the formula of the Byzantine icon. By the same token, Nicephorus understands the Incarnation not as an “in-corporation” but as an “in-imagination” (Mondzain, 2005, 77). It is a “christic mimetic...act by which the image [of the human] rejoins the image [of the divine], because it is the image [of the human and divine] that is the prototype” (Mondzain, 2005, 84).

According to the theology of in-imagination, the Hodegetria rites (from the patriarch Sergius I’s rite to the icon-bearers’ weekly rites) do not reduce the redemptive image of the crucified Christ to a mere matter of resemblance between the real and the imagined Son—like through a referential distance in a painted idol. For there are not two Sons, one invisible and another visible. Similarly, the meaning of the Cross in the rites does not function as a dematerialized counter-intuitive experience in a Marionian sense. The Cross takes the performative-mimetic model of organizing the hierotopic event. Patriarch Sergius I imitates the type (Cross) before the beholders’ eyes in order to simulate the divine presence of the prototype (absence) within the city walls of Constantinople. It is a mimetic event that activates the participation of the crowd in the rite of carving with the material part of the icon (the screen) a sacred space in the urban environment. Likewise, the icon-bearers, who performed the weekly miracles in the Hodegon Square from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, did not aim to represent a historical event. For the people participating in the rites, it was not a matter of being informed about the Avars’ siege of Constantinopol or the Roman crucifixion of Christ (as depicted on the icon) by comparing the real/original event to the staging of that event in the Hodegon market. Instead, they mimetically renewed the patriarch Sergius I’s participation in the icon’s performance of the prototype to become conscious, via the icon, of the divine image. Such Byzantine

form of creating spatial imagery is perpetuated in contemporary liturgical processions through the iconographic depiction of the icon-bearer as shown in *The Glorification of the Virgin*. With his arms in a crucified position and miraculously carrying the levitating icon, the central figure in red functions for today's believers as a mnemonic device (as well as a mimetic device) that ceases to work as a referent. The icon becomes the image of Christ in His absence that enables the viewer to participate and acknowledge the lack of His real-presence.

The Incarnational function of the icon draws attention to the likeness between the divine and humans, which makes humanity an integral part in the historical manifestation of the Trinitarian economy. The role of humanity in fulfilling the Incarnational economy is, then, to evoke with all bodily senses their shared image with God. And this Byzantine mimetic behavior attains a creative mode of combining visual and audible media (from architecture to chants, liturgical objects and paintings) in which the image turns from a signifier into the highest form of knowing human nature as a divine mystery.

### **Idolic creativity: the televisual image from real presence to interactive presence**

Lecthe points that in the critique of digital images, the old stationary media, such as painting, is mostly seen as irrelevant for understanding the current state of televisual culture. The image is associated with the digital format, which dematerializes and de-contextualizes it through the omnipresent Internet and screens. This split between the traditional and technological media is primarily based on the assumption that the image is the same with its medium. Therefore, with the emergence of the new informational technology and mobile (touch) screens, the image acquired a new interactive medium that can be considered as having nothing to do with the static materiality of old media.

Taking my cue from the media theorist, Nanna Verhoeff's performative theory of mobile screens, I propose to reassess the presence of a televisual image in a creative vision using the notion of hierotopy. Verhoeff explains that the development of mobile digital technology has brought a visual mode of navigation that creates *screenspaces* by merging vision and mobility, the virtual and physical domains with a sense of narrative and agency. She calls this dynamic form of vision *performative cartography*

(Verhoeff, 2012, 133). Referencing Michel de Certeau's theory of space, Verhoeff differentiates between the notion of place and space: "every place can be turned into space by the practice of narrative" (2012, 93). Comparing to fixed cinematic/televisual/photographic/painted screens, which produce images (on-screen space) into predefined geographical coordinates (off-screen space), the mobile (touch) screen becomes a software-based mediator that turns the act of seeing into a performative act of making/cartographing space. This performative mode of transporting both the viewer and screen through places generates narrative events as autonomous spaces—that is, without being contingent on any predefined meaning. Recent portable pocket screen gadgets such as smartphones and computer tablets include various input and output devices for digital signifiers, wireless connectivity, camera, GPS receiver, and direct tactile access to multitasking interfaces that act as multiple (conceptual and visual) points of view. Media critic, Brett T. Robinson explains, for instance, that these "vital" functions of mobile devices elevated the status of the iPhone to "sublime descriptors like 'Jesus phone'" (2013, 61). All these features, then added to the portable and tangible aspect of the mobile (touch) screen, immerse the viewer's senses into a navigational spatial relationship with the screen as a physical site for making, communicating, and experiencing images within places—places yet to become meaningful spaces. Verhoeff suggests that this active mode of making images or seeing in motion by appropriating places through narrative (visual) experiences turned out to be the fundamental feature of contemporary vision.

The idea that the technological vision is mobile and the image is concurrently formed with the viewer's direct participation, in a temporal/spatial field of representation, parallels the Byzantine symbolic-realistic vision of crafting a hierotopic space. However, by turning to Marion's concern regarding the televisual screens, it is essential at this point to reflect on the impact of screen technologies in shaping human vision (and implicitly an iconic/idolic vision). The consumptive visual regime of the spectacle, made omnipresent by the rise of technological screens in the media industry, has been widely criticized for exposing viewers to a Nietzschean mode of seeing—the constitution of phenomena in a visual or conceptual perspective so well addressed by Marion, especially in the *Crossing of the Visible*. With the concepts of performative cartography in mind, the interactive power of the digital image appears to induce today's idolatry by erasing the connection to a prior reality that was once aesthetically experienced through old static media. The user of touch

screens not only acquires a tangible freedom for creative abilities (artistic or scientific), but also obtains an intimate (idolic) relationship with his/her own desires that interferes with the referential nature of the image. From a phenomenological stance, the human vision's idolic tendency towards the image might be explained by the "directed movement" of the intentional gaze towards an intentional object, which simultaneously makes present the (idolic) invisibility through the perspectival gaze (Horner, 2005, 28). And with the interactivity of digital screens, as Lechte argues, "the image no longer has to be a recording of reality but can be completely autonomous because it is fabricated in a computer" (2011, 361). The digitization of the image appears then to induce a universal state of iconoclastic suspicion over the nature of knowing and image making.

In writing on the history of recording media, Brian Winston states that the challenge to capture the evidence of a referent in the world (its real existence) relies on the scientific status of the technological screen to provide an objective/realistic/analogous perception of nature (1995, 40-42). The documentary value of the camera-instrument as a "nonliving agent" depends on the realistic mode of seeing, which perceives that the scientific recording device (from the early photographic/cinematic media to the latest digital devices) does not lie and that its naturalistic mode of representation is the most authentic way to measure captured data (to confirm the real-presence of a signified) (Moran, 1999, 11-12). However, viewers doubt the recorded document of a historical event or concrete object when it is linked to the mistrust in human intervention or intentionality. The digital manipulation of the image, facilitated by screen technologies, challenges the faith in a recorded representation to the point of claiming the death of the referent. This is the basic concern underpinning Marion's critique of the televisual image, an idolic mirror that stops the gaze to create its own spectacle with its own reflection (1991, 11-12).

Nevertheless, the question is if the televisual spectacle has the power to induce a new phenomenon, beyond the metaphysical tendency towards real-presence. And if so, how can this creativity be critiqued without limiting the conversation to the iconoclastic debates between the symbolic and realistic visions? This question is essential in outlining a Byzantine framework for understanding the televisual image. The beginning of an answer would be to complement Marion's icon and idol (as *saturated phenomena*) with the Byzantine hierotopic understanding of the image as present, yet completely transparent. By making a parallel between hierotopy and Verhoeff's analysis of the mobile vision, I aimed to show

that the symbolic-realistic vision challenges visual criticism to consider the limits and possibilities of the creativity enabled by technological screens in light of the mystery of Christ's in-imagination. Precisely, it provides an Incarnational vision of the union between the screen, representation, and viewer in a material and spatial arrangement that simultaneously activates an imaginary world and a concrete touchable experience. The focus, therefore, is on the viewer's ability to virtually co-create the spatial construction of visibility, which reveals that the image is neither a Platonic/static picture of reality, frozen in time, nor a material temporal form. The image is an evocation of something absent in a perceptual sense, which is actualized or in-imagined (as in a hierotopy) by the viewer through haptic visuality. In relation to the mobile use of technological screens, the notion of hierotopy highlights that the image is concurrently created with the touch of the screen (wood panel) and the intentional movement of vision. It also shows where the creative (performative) experience of the frame for representation lies and how this interactivity brings together the object, representation, and viewer. Thus, if the creative act is an event of making new meaning (beyond what is already objectified by the viewer's gaze and already offered in a spectacle), then the practice of the Byzantine mimetic act can offer an important avenue for seeing how (and if) contemporary screens interact in a non-predefined and creative way.

As a consequence of the Incarnational logic of the image, the attention shifts from *what* an image represents to *how* a phenomenon is spatially in-imagined as a site for creative expression. Strictly speaking, the hierotopic vision does not stop the phenomenological critique of the televisual screen culture to a problem of representation. For example, similar to the use of the portable Byzantine icon in delineating a hierotopy, the movement of vision in relation to the mobile technological device is not only a matter of explaining the human's ability to travel from point A to point B (a physical action). Like the icon, the mobile screen produces a simultaneity of multiple points of view in the process of creating a *screenspace*. The Hodegetria icon presents a double-sided painted screen, which according to the historical accounts provided by Lidov, induces a compounded vision by wondrously rotating in the air, and the (touch) screen offers multiple application interfaces. This indicates, as Verhoeff states, "a collapse between making images and perceiving them" that disrupts dualistic notions (such as copy/model) and the Cartesian distance between observer and observed (2012, 13).

So, does the hierotopic nature of the image as spatially distributed in a particular time and place apply to the televisual image? In response, I would recall Marion's account of *saturated phenomena* and underline that the idolic and iconic gazes start from the same intuitive aspect of human vision, which is always in search for the invisible by addressing an intentional phenomenon (objects and meanings). That is, both are perspectival visual experiences that aim beyond perception to evoke a sense of meaning. However, the problem with today's screen culture was that it freezes the experience of seeing to a contemplative/informative mind-set or to a particular perspective, which leads the viewer to his/her ultimate reduction as a mere instrument in the dynamics of capitalist production and distribution systems. But if the visual experience is considered as a movement in space, then the critique cannot be resumed to a matter of connecting the notion of image to meaning via the perception of a referential sign. In following the contribution of the mobile vision to the intuitive experience of invisibility in visibility, the image acquires the imaginal aspect of the Incarnation as directly connected to meaning.

### **On the fine line between idolic and iconic creativity**

The Byzantine aesthetic view opens up a potential interdisciplinary field of research on the mobility of a creative vision that is yet insufficiently explored and which may offer an alternative to the televisual image as metaphysics of real-presence. My argument is that the type of image that emerged with the Byzantine icon is a mode of evoking a referent (real or imagined) through a type of mimesis that avoids its reduction to its medium or, conversely, to its exclusion from materiality. And what the hierotopic inquiry brings to the discussion surrounding the presence of televisual images is how the Byzantine image avoids the metaphysical error of separating "two worlds"—one of the imaged and one of the image" (Lechte, 2011, 356).

Given the parallel between the interactivity of new media and the Byzantine icon, it can be seen how Marion's critique of the televisual spectacle mistakes the image for its screen of representation. Even if the spectacle is objectified as a reality in its own image, the idolic desire to travel (imaginatively) into a virtual time and space is perceptually connected with the physical space in which the screen operates. Simply said: there is no image (in an idolic or iconic format) without merging

the virtual and physical time and space. The hierotopic reading of mobile (touch) screens provides a concrete example of how the televisual image is formed through sensory-based spatial experiences that combine both the material and immaterial (digital) worlds (Lechte, 2011, 134). But, should the construction of an iconic versus idolic image depend on the fascination with the latest technological innovations? I believe not. Regardless of technological advances, the viewer is already physically immersed in the mystery of an image through movement in space. The symbolic-realistic line of inquiry that needs to be addressed here is how viewers engage with screens (both old and new) as the target of metaphysical iconoclasm. For this reason, I have contextualized, through symbolic and realistic reflections, the hierotopic relevance of the Byzantine icon for shifting the metaphysical/critical eye at the pictorial (sensorial) level of thinking about invisibility. First, the goal of my Byzantine-inspired critique was to add an Incarnational knowledge to Marion's phenomenology of *givenness*. Second, my intention was to place the viewer inside of what it means to see iconically and ask if the phenomenology of an idolic vision demands a total transparency of the image. This is particularly important in light of the changing media technologies that reposition the viewer as an active, creative participant in relation to the spectacular images, made ever-present through screens.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> According to the contemporary semiotic interpretation images, the signifier refers to the material aspect of an image and the signified stands for what it represents, e.g. an object, event or person that is absent from the viewer's physical space during the act of looking at the image (Chandler, 14).
- <sup>2</sup> For the art historian Jaś Elsner, "iconoclasm in all premodern contexts from antiquity to the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy was about 'real-presence.' The damage done to the image is an attack on its prototype, at least until Byzantine iconoclasm, and it presupposes some kind of assault on real-presence as contained in the image" (2012, 369).
- <sup>3</sup> Horner clarifies that Marion endorsed the theological difference between the idol and icon up until his phenomenological works: *Being Given* (2002) and *In Excess* (2002). Moreover, *The Crossing of the Visible* (2004) is a central work in presenting the theological ground of Marion's developing aesthetics of the idol and icon (Horner, 2005, 125).
- <sup>4</sup> In providing a historical account of the image from theater and cinema to televisual/digital screens, Marion states that the former screens of representation (theater and cinema) keep a sense of reality. Although theater provides us with images originated from fiction, the actor's body, performing in front of his/her viewers, is always present. In the case of cinema, although the medium of film prevents the viewer in having a sensible experience with what is referenced in the screen, the actors can still be seen in reality, such as in film festivals. Televisual image instead, disconnects the real from screen by eliminating the original time and space of the events. While cinematic or theatrical events imply that a viewer would sit and watch for a certain duration, the televisual screen has removed "this time; there is neither a first nor a last showing: without interruption the electron gun bombards the screen and there reconstitutes the images, day and night, around the clock..." (Marion, 2004, 48). The homogenization of reality with fiction is also accentuated by the broadcasting of various events from different regions of the world that gives a distorted sense of space—a clutter of spaces that attains its own reality as a TV screen.
- <sup>5</sup> Marion redefined Husserl's concept of *phenomenological reduction* as a way of "letting appearances appear in such a way that they accomplish their own apparition, so as to be received exactly as they give themselves" (2002b, 7). Nonetheless, several scholars have made the case that Marion seems to offer a symbolic formulation of the *phenomenological reduction*, which is not practically applied in 'concrete lived situations' (Rawnsley, 2007, 691). More exactly, the human body appears to disappear in the aim of the subjective intentionality to reduce any "outside conditions" (both conceptual or material) that prevent a phenomenon to be given unconditionally (Rogers, 2014, 191). Some of the critics who questioned

- Marion's tendency to vaporize materiality are: Peter Joseph Fritz (2009), Steven Grimwood (2003), Andrew Rawnsley (2007) and Brian Rogers (2014).
- 6 As an argument about what an image should be during the Byzantine iconoclasm, concepts of the idol and icon were disputed under a framework of representing reality that resonated with the Platonic issue of imitating an invisible essence through an appearance embedded in the material world. Byzantine iconoclasm took place between 730 and 843 CE and involved a critical response to the devotional practices surrounding icons and their physical destruction. Besançon explains that the "iconic arguments relied both on the biblical prohibition and on the Greek philosophical critique" (2000, 3). In his analysis of John Damascene's doctrine of the image, Schönborn states that "it has been asserted time and again that the Eastern Church derives its concept of the image from Plato's doctrine of Idea and Phenomenon" (212). For more on the influence of the Platonic theme of representation within iconoclasm see: Alain Besançon (2000: 1-5), Jaś Elsner, (2012: 369), Christoph von Schönborn (1994: 161, 229-30), Marie-José Mondzain (2005: 73), and Bissera V. Pentcheva (2006: 636).
- 7 Here, the interpretation of the naturalistic and abstract painting is strictly made in light of the phenomenological principle of taking perspective. However, the difference between the symbolic and realistic visions cannot be made clear-cut when applied to abstract and naturalistic art. Depending on the metaphysical belief, a naturalistic painting can also be seen as visualizing an imaginary referent. This would imply a break in the relationship between the visibility (presence) of an artwork and the invisibility (absence) of a referent. Similarly, an abstract painting can be seen as simply referencing its own materiality (as Clement Greenberg described it), thus disrupting the reference to an invisible something. In this way, the abstract appearance (without a linear perspective) prompts the realistic vision of the visible world in its concrete, measurable materiality and the naturalistic depiction of objects (in a linear perspective) stimulates the symbolic vision as if seeing in an invisible universe. Additionally, according to the Platonic/symbolic perspective, the critique of the image concerns its mimetic resemblance to a signified meaning. For instance, this means that the naturalistic or abstract representation of a chair is illusory. The 'true' chair is never present in a physical form. Conversely, the Nietzschean/realistic perspective regards the image as dissociated from the Platonic Forms to the point where it acts as its own signifier, in the sense that the image is both the signified and signifier. From this realistic perspective, a naturalistic or abstract painting is seen as real as long as its meaning is constituted by the power of the intentional gaze.
- 8 *The Glorification of the Virgin (Akathist Hymn to the Most Holy Theotokos)*, Russia, Novgorod School, 14th century, 78" × 60". Digital image available from: <http://www.gettyimages.ca/detail/news-photo/the-glorification-of-the-virgin-14th-century-russian-icon-news-photo/464420229?Language=en-GB> (accessed July 2, 2017).

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