

Iconic Presence: The Life of Images in Religion

Hans Belting

2015 Balzan Prize for the History of European Art (1300-1700)

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Participating Institutions: Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung, Berlin; Center for Advanced Studies BildEvidenz, Freie Universität Berlin; Center for Medieval Studies, Department of Art History, Czech Masarykovo University, Brno

Period: 2016-

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Iconic Presence: The Life of Images in Religion concerns the central role of images in religions and the significance of material practice in religion, which have become major topics in the field of religious studies as a result of notions like “Iconic Religion” (a project at the University Bochum), “Visible Religion” (the title of a journal of the 1980s at the University Groningen), or “mediation and genesis of presence” (Birgit Meyer, 2012 inaugural lecture, University of Utrecht), not to mention Belting’s own attention to notions of Likeness and Presence (as in the title for the English edition of *Bild und Kult*). The iconic production and ritual enactment of images differ significantly between different religions, focusing the gaze on the specific nature and history of each; likewise, the contemporary significance of religion differs from culture to culture. Therefore, the modern experience of religion, which derives from the Enlightenment, must be re-evaluated in order to understand images in religions other than Christianity.

Presence is today recognized as a category beside and beyond *representation*. Moreover, as agencies of representation or iconic presence, pictures need a material presence. But presence in our case means real presence of the one who is represented in a picture. Real presence, as a stage beyond iconic presence, accordingly was seen as a miraculous intervention of the holy in a material picture. An embodiment of the invisible seemed to transform pictorial matter into a live image.

The history of the long competition between *iconic presence* and *sacramental presence*, between the ‘Vera Icon’ and the Eucharist, has not yet been written. From the thirteenth century onward, it was a driving force that left many traces on both sides. The production of presence as an ‘immediate’ esthetic experience has become a hotly debated topic in today’s humanities as a posthermeneutic phenomenon (H. U. Gumbrecht). The religious realm needs another discussion, as is conducted in anthropology and religious studies (B. Meyer). Whereas art history remains object-based and concentrates on the inborn (visual) qualities of the material picture (or artwork), the concept of *real presence* requires a new attention for the role of ‘mediation’ of images by the religious authorities in charge.

RESEARCH PROGRAM: RESULTS AND PLANS

The funds of Hans Belting’s Balzan Prize offer support to young scholars to do research on images and to involve literary or cultural studies as well as religious studies. For this purpose, Belting has initiated cooperative programmes with three different institutions which will address the project from their different perspectives. In the Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung in Berlin (ZfL), the former director, Sigrid Weigel (*Grammatologie der Bilder*, 2015), renowned for her work in image theory, is a partner in the project. The subject of religion is well established at the ZfL, as can be seen by the work of Martin Tremml. A postdoctoral position (50%) for three years has the task of cooperating with the two other institutions in organizing conferences, seminars, and publications. Secondly, the programme Research Group Evidence of Images has been instituted at the Free University in Berlin, where Belting is an elected Fellow. The Berlin project is directed by the art historian Klaus Krüger (*Grazia: Religiöse Erfahrung und ästhetische Evidenz*, 2016), who is known in the field of image theory. A PhD position (50%) for three years coordinates research in conjunction with the other two institutions. The third institution is the Center for Medieval Studies in the *Seminar dejin umeni* (art history) at the Czech Masarykovy University in Brno, where art historian Ivan Foletti, editor of the international journal *Convivium*, author of *Zona liminare. Il naratece di Santa Sabina a Roma* (2015), and lecturer at Brno and at the University of Lausanne, heads the project. A postdoctoral position (100%) with emphasis on late Antiquity and the Middle Ages in East and West has the task of broadening the perspective of the project in the spatial and temporal sense.

In 2017, the three institutions that host the project initiated a newsletter with the intention of offering information about the ongoing research of the individual projects of the three Balzan fellows, Johanna Abel, Henry Kaap and Zuzana Frantová, and the related activities on a regular basis. A workshop was held in Brno from November 27 to 28, 2017.

Plans for 2018 include a workshop on “Presence” at BildEvidenz, followed by another on “Performativity and Image in Iconic Presence” at ZfL for the fall/winter.

INDIVIDUAL RESEARCH PROJECTS

Johanna Abel (ZfL Berlin)

The project “Corporeal Presence in the Hispanic Cult Drama or *Auto sacramental*” began with Abel’s attending the Corpus Christi procession in Seville, Spain, after which she contributed a short note on *What is an Auto Sacramental?* as well as notes on the Spanish image cult today to the *Iconic Presence* newsletter. Thus, once the ritual practice of ‘Corpus Domini’ had been introduced in a diachronic perspective, the ZfL group dedicated a reading session to Victor Turner’s *From Ritual to Theatre* (1983), a work that has known recent actualizations in religious studies, theatre, performance and medieval studies. The discussion of Turner’s conceptualizations of dramatic ritual and ritual drama with Hans Belting and Martin Treml helped to establish the theoretical framework of the subject. The development of the project was also shared with the ZfL fellows of the research area *World Literature* in a January 2018 session.

Abel’s paper, “Images on Stage. Sacramental Theatre Representation in the Hispanic *Auto alegórico* (1616-1689)” led to fruitful discussions about auratization and the dynamics of early modern affect control. The project focused on Spanish sacramental plays and the iconology of the Baroque period (1600–1700). In these *Autos sacramentales* the sacramental host of the Eucharist was put on public display in a multimedia spectacle. Connecting theology and poetry, the drama texts demonstrate how literature generated presence in its own way. First, images were carried around in the Corpus Christi procession. Afterwards, poetical *conceptos* were animated on stage and performed as speaking and bodily enacted allegories. In a continuum of *iconic presence* (images), *real presence* (the consecrated host on display) and *copresence* of the public with the actors performing sacred figures, ritual and theatre were entangled in a constant media alternation to transfer immanence. In order to compensate the

invisibility of Christ's body in the host and the lack of life in material images, the event mutually potentiated each category in the production of presence. To explore the reciprocity of these two modes of mediation, the project focuses on three plays that demonstrate how an embodiment of allegories served to represent the unrepresentable body of Christ in the host. The sources are both the drama texts and stage instructions (*memorias de apariencias*) documenting the effects and efficiency of 'presence machines'. Further archive material helped to elucidate the pre-modern stage practice. Calderón's *The True God Pan* (1670) employs prefiguration, incorporation in *personae dramatis* (e.g. "La Idolatría") and trans-figuration of images on stage. Thus, the picture of a lamb turns into a sculpture of the Immaculate Conception in order to exemplify a poetics of transubstantiation.

Henry Kaap (FU Berlin)

The project is concerned with the period when the religious presence or real presence in medieval images turns into the aesthetic presence of Renaissance art. High Renaissance paintings by Raphael and Titian that are recognized as masterpieces today were famous as agents of miraculous power in their own time. Thus, two kinds of experience seem to clash: the belief in heavenly intervention and the impression of visual efficacy. The Reformation, which led to demolishing church inventories and destroying cult images, was paralleled by the coming into existence of art collections outside the religious space, a movement that was followed by a new kind of art literature.

How do these phenomena add up? To answer such a question, the project would like to readdress the interrelation between the religious experience of presence and the visual/bodily presence in an artwork. The research project interprets the San Rocco *Christ Carrying the Cross* (attributed to Titian or Giorgione) as a contribution to a longer history of artistic reflections on religious presence and the visual or bodily presence in an artwork. Therefore, the task at hand is to analyze its aesthetic structure and to contextualize it not just in its historical setting as a miraculous image but also within the broader frame of the Balzan project. Kaap investigates how this painting was – literally and metaphorically – reframed as a 'miraculous image' within the Church of San Rocco. From 1520 onwards, immediately after the first healing miracles had occurred, the adjacent Scuola Grande di San Rocco did not just adjust the interior setting of the Church to guarantee a prominent visibility of the *Christ Carrying the Cross* next to the main chapel, the Scuola also started to promote the new cult that arose around the painting by sending out printed woodcuts, which resulted in an even bigger flow of incoming pilgrims. While the prints promoted the miracles of

the painting, the newly added lunette – showing *God the Father with Angels Carrying the Arma Christi* – on a pictorial level created an interconnection between the *Christ Carrying the Cross* and the other sacred objects owned by the Scuola Grande di San Rocco. Further artistic and poetic responses to the miraculous agency of the painting are Eustachio Celebrino's treatise *Li stupendi et maravigliosi miracoli del glorioso Christo di San Rocco* (ca. 1523) as well as Pordenone's decorations of the church (ca. 1527), which depict a stream of pilgrims bearing votive offerings and directing their sole attention towards the miraculous San Rocco Christ. The study of the aforementioned artistic articulations in relation to the example of the *Christ Carrying the Cross* will lead to a better understanding and further discussion of the intertwined relationship of 'iconic presence' and 'real presence'.

Ivan Foletti (Masaryk University, Brno)

After finishing their field workshop *Walking to Places and Living Images* in France in early summer 2017, Ivan Foletti and his research group returned to Brno and continued their work at the Center for Early Medieval Studies. Reintegration into static structures was more difficult than the team had expected after having walked for four months.

Meanwhile Zuzana Frantová (media coverage and support from Masaryk University) closed the first phase of her sub-project "Liminality, Embodiment and Iconic Presence. Serial Images in French Pilgrimage Churches" by drawing a clear conceptual outline of her research subject. This resulted in a new exposé, which was also sent via the *Iconic Presence* newsletter. The contribution of Foletti's research team to Belting's Balzan project is connected with the Brno experimental program of "Migrating Art Historians", which is meant to introduce an aspect of body experience into the approach to pilgrimage art from an anthropological point of view. Having experienced the effects of pilgrimage on the human body, they pose the question of how far "Iconic Presence" as an aesthetic experience can be biologically facilitated by specific body techniques, for instance regulating human endorphin flow.

Zuzana Frantová (Masaryk University, Brno)

In this specific conceptual frame, the common denominator of Zuzana Frantová's project is the rhythm of visual information that the pilgrim encounters on the journey to Santiago de Compostela. The eleventh and twelfth centuries witness the depiction of Theophany on the portal tympana of the important pilgrimage churches through the subject of Christ in glory, which in previous periods was located only in the

apse. The new way of transmitting the message has been explained by the promotion of the Gregorian Reformation, or the struggle with the new heresies (Manicheans, Cathars). The phenomenon of pilgrimage churches is commonly explained as a new visual culture that connects one church with the other. Frantová's project focuses on the personal experience of the participants by employing two basic anthropological concepts: liminality and embodiment. In her project, the desire of *Iconic Presence* is studied as a body experience in a series of visits of the same Theophany image.

WORKSHOP

Brno, November 27-28, 2017

The year 2017 opened with the January workshop *Iconic Presence, Real Presence and Sacred Art* at the Center for Advanced Studies BildEvidenz, Freie Universität Berlin, and closed with another workshop organized by the Brno research team from the Center of Early Medieval Studies. Within the project the complex anthropological phenomenon of *Iconic Presence* is defined as a claim to experience the real presence of an invisible world via the iconic presence of artifacts. In this view, the emphasis is placed on the beholder. This emphasis on the viewer was also the topic of the workshop *Walking to Places of Iconic Presence* in the Hans Belting Library at Masaryk University in Brno. The papers presented there asked questions about whether the movement of the beholder/pilgrim to distant sanctuaries had an influence on what iconic presence might be. In the introduction, Ivan Foletti formulated the conference's main interests: firstly, the aspect of movement and its role in the experience of *iconic presence*, which happens in proximity to the *real presence* of relics, thus implying the existence of a dialogue or dance between these two presences. Hans Belting discussed a 'modern' portrait of Christ invented in the 1430s for the court of Phillip the Good, duke of Burgundy.

The papers which followed were derived from the results of the experimental project "Migrating Art Historians", initiated by the Center for Early Medieval Studies. Its aim was to study artistic monuments through physical experience. Within this project the students walked 1500 km through France to explore their own perception of the medieval pilgrimage architecture. As one of the participants of this pilgrimage, Martin Lešák (Masaryk University, Université de Poitiers) reflected on the possible capacity of architectural silhouette in the landscape to evoke presence, not only proving this hypothesis by the example of Mont Saint-Michel, but also outlining the wider apotropaic potential of the site by the engagement of other senses, e.g. hearing, and movement.

Katarína Kravčíková (Masaryk University), also a “migrating art historian”, focused on the maintenance of presence outside the physical object itself through the architectural disposition of space and through collective memory. Zuzana Frantová (Masaryk University) came back to specific objects, examining the anthropological effect of the depiction of Theophany, which is repeated on the portals of pilgrimage churches of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Through the example of the famous reliquary of St. Foy, Ivan Foletti (Masaryk University, Ca’ Foscari University, Venice) demonstrated several ways of making this saint ‘present’. Adrien Palladino (Masaryk University, University of Fribourg) finished the Monday sessions by presenting the covered portal of the cathedral of Lausanne (added to the original structure in the years 1225–1235) as a liminal space leaving an exceptionally intimate impression on the beholder due to the close dimensions and the positions of the statues all around the inner perimeter of the structure. Ondřej Jakubec (Masaryk University) launched the next morning session with a paper focusing on the Moravian baroque pilgrimage and normative texts of re-catholization, indicating the impossibility of the complete reconstruction of the experience of an ‘ordinary’ pilgrim because of the nature of accessible written sources which are all products of the church elites and thus only represent an ideal practice. Bissera Pentcheva (Stanford University) showed that it is possible to partly bring this individual experience of the pilgrim closer through the study of all the sensual impetus affecting the beholder – not only of an image, but also of light, music and movement in space. In the context of late antique sacral architecture, Vladimir Ivanovici (Masaryk University) further developed the concept of ‘performative iconicity’ in the structuring of the space and the hierarchizing of the figure of the bishop, evoking his assimilation with the image of the God in the apse. The effect of the change of spatial disposition on the contemplation of holy places was the topic of Michele Bacci’s paper (University of Fribourg) on the Basilica of Nativity in Bethlehem. Johanna Abel (ZfL Berlin) devoted her paper to the theatricalization of the sacrament in the feast of Corpus Christi in baroque Spain, analyzing the dramatic elements of an image procession and the ritual elements of religious drama – the early modern *auto sacramental* – both staging the Eucharist. Her aim was to show how ‘walking images’ and stable images, which become embodied and alive on stage, interact with each other to produce presence on multiple levels. Martin Treml (ZfL Berlin) concluded the conference with a presentation questioning the liminal phase as an anthropological concept by Victor Turner (*The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Ithaca 1969). He then introduced the ‘techniques of the body’ (Marcel Mauss) to characterize the experience of the pilgrim in terms of a unique practice that can facilitate presence. The workshop concluded with a resolution to organize a follow-up conference in Berlin to carry on this interdisciplinary project.