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Performing the Icon in the Midst of Contemporary Iconoclastic Gestures

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the performative aspect of Byzantine iconography from two distinct perspectives: that of the icon maker and the viewer of icons. In light of Bruno Latour's categorization of contemporary image-haters (the iconoclasts), I first consider how the icon is performed from the Byzantine iconographers' perspective. Turning to the Byzantine symbolic realistic way of seeing an icon and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's notion of flow, I underline the importance of total absorption in the process of icon painting. As a corollary, I show how the Byzantine canons of the eternal prototype, reverse perspective, light, color, and gesture direct the iconographer into an ecstatic state whereby images flow out from him or her effortlessly and spontaneously. Secondly, I examine the Byzantine hypostatic experience of viewing an icon in relation to Fischer-Lichte's analysis of the performative turn in the arts. Fischer-Lichte's account of the de-semanticization thesis and self-referentiality offers a modern perspective on how the construction of the Orthodox icon might parallel an artistic event (where the viewer witnesses a shifting relationship between the observer and observed). Ultimately, I underscore the significance of taking this the performative aspect of the Orthodox icon into account when evaluating the intentions and effects of image-makers (and images) today.

Keywords: Byzantine iconographer, experiential pattern, flow experience, iconoclasm, performativity.

[T]here is no way to stop the proliferation of mediators, inscriptions, objects, icons, idols, image, picture, and signs, in spite of their interdiction. No matter how adamant one is about breaking fetishes and forbidding oneself image-worship, temples will be built, sacrifices will be made, instruments will be deployed, scriptures will be carefully written down, manuscripts will be copied, incense will be burned, and thousands of gestures will have to be invented for recollecting truth, objectivity, and sanctity...

Latour and Weibel,
Iconoclasm (2002, 23)

INTRODUCTION

Humans have respected and feared images throughout history. The fear of images, in particular, has engendered recurrent cycles of “refacement” and “defacement” of objects (Belting and Weibel 2002, 390)—cycles which seem to ensue as frequently today as they have in the past. While iconoclasm is not always violent, where it does occur the tendency to destroy images seems to erupt with as much vigor and impetuosity as those reverse trends inspiring the creation of art.

With respect to the subject of iconoclasm today, art historian Sven Lütticken claims that we are currently witnessing a “fundamentalist version of ‘the society of the spectacle’” (Lütticken 2009, 22).¹ In his *Idols of the Market*, Lütticken suggests that Christian, Muslim, and Enlightenment fundamentalists² are increasingly imposing their monotheistic values over images projected through the mass media. One of the latest examples of this trend, proffered by Lütticken, is the protests of Presbyterian, Catholic, and Anglican Church leaders against a Christmas nativity scene installed in 2004

¹ ‘The society of the spectacle’ is a phrase originally coined by Marxist theorist Guy Debord in France in the 1960s. In his book *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord states that in a capitalist society, commodities (both tangible and intangible objects) are transformed into an ensemble of independent beings that overpower reality. Through a selection of pictures and symbols, agents of capital transform the modern fragmented culture into a fictitious, unified space of images in which individuals are invited to find everything they lack in life. The notion of ‘the spectacle’ stands for an illusory space where commodities compete, not for the attention of consumers in terms of their concrete content, but at the level of their brand images.

² Lütticken here refers to a secular discourse driven by contemporary political agendas and drawing upon conceptions of freedom and democracy (in the manner that these were developed by Enlightenment thinkers). Lütticken suggests that this discourse has been instrumental in the War on Terror. ‘Enlightenment fundamentalists’ construct “Islam [as a religion that is] intrinsically backward and evil” (Lütticken 2009, 15). For Enlightenment fundamentalists, democratic values are essentially incompatible with Islam.

at the Waxwork Museum of London, England. Widely advertised throughout Western Europe, the sculpture features David and Victoria Beckham as the figures of Joseph and the Virgin Mary. The controversy this sculpture has aroused is not incomparable with the intense debates that surrounded the caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad published by the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, in 2005. The controversy engendered by both the wax sculpture and the caricatures of Muhammad seem to affirm a statement made by French sociologist and anthropologist Bruno Latour that, “since 11 September 2001 a state of emergency has been proclaimed on how we deal with images of all sorts, in religion, politics, science, art and criticism—and a frantic search for the roots of fanaticism has begun” (Latour and Weibel 2002, 37).

Latour's comments and the instance of iconoclastic debates in our own time raise interesting questions about similar debates in other historical contexts. The dispute between iconophiles and iconoclasts in Byzantium in the eighth and ninth centuries CE,³ for example, offers a most interesting case study of just such a debate. The Byzantine dispute seems to have stemmed from a clash between realistic and symbolic ways of apprehending an icon—a row between two interpretive lenses which also happens to characterize many iconoclastic controversies in the modern context.

In his *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought*, intellectual historian and critical theorist Martin Jay offers a helpful elucidation of these two modes (that is, realistic and symbolic modes) of apprehending an image, which are common to both the Byzantine and the contemporary context. Jay defines the realistic mode of apprehending an icon first, as seeing an image with the human eye. He describes symbolic apprehension, by contrast, as seeing an image with “the eye of the mind” (Jay 1993, 29). Jay's description of these two different modes of seeing recalls both the possibilities and the inadequacies of visual perception on its own (that is, seeing in the realistic mode). For example, while visual perception, on the one hand, may be trusted to show how things are in their materiality, visual perception alone may not equally convey the sense of personal or political value or the significance to human life which one might otherwise derive from a work of art. With respect to the semiotic content of an image, therefore, human sight, on its own, is somewhat suspect—perhaps the realistic eye cannot be relied upon as the most truthful purveyor of meaning. In fact, in relation to the

³ The dispute referred to here was a controversy over the use of icons in churches. It occurred, more precisely, between 727 and 843 AD.

social or political implications of a work of art, this mechanical sort of sight might even be considered deceiving or confusing. 'Seeing with the mind,' or symbolic apprehension, on the other hand, might be understood as expanding the limited capacities of the human eye, bringing to light signifiers or meaningful potentialities passed over by a realistic mode of apprehension. Unlike a realistic mode of sight, symbolic sight engages both a personal and an ideological lens—involving an individual in an infinitely richer engagement with the object of his or her sight.

For some groups and individuals, the arousal of such an intense and involved attention to images, entailed in the symbolic mode of perception, is problematical. Phobia of images which engage symbolic modes of apprehension (images which speak to the “mental eye”—that nerve centre of emotional and ideological commitment) has fired up the ire of many iconoclasts, occasioning both the destruction of ideologically challenging pieces as well as the suppression of their makers.

Byzantine iconoclasts can be understood as sharing this phobia of images (that is, a fear of images as carrying potentially threatening or perverse symbolic/ideological implications). However, their own opposition to the creation of icons in Byzantium was, in many respects, a product of a symbolic way of seeing also. The difference between iconoclasts and iconophiles in this context (as in many others) lay specifically in what each side perceived as the religious implications of a work of art. Byzantine iconoclasts, for example, argued that it was impossible to represent an omnipotent God in a concrete visual form, using earthly materials such as wood panels, and tempera colors. By conceiving the divine through man-made objects, icon makers were looking to overturn the original order between ‘the uncreated’ (God) and ‘the created’ (human beings). In particular, those icons depicting Christ's human-like figure generated an especially severe reaction on the part of those who felt that God should not be represented by His creation. This reaction issued from a belief that icons could only serve to undermine the divine nature of Christ. From the perspective of iconoclasts, no earthly representation could adequately convey Christ's transcendence of the bounds of the material world. Indeed, earthly representations of Christ could only degrade human perceptions of His divine nature. For iconoclasts, in depicting the material side of Christ (His created form), Byzantine icon makers essentially falsified and mislead their viewers about the 'real' or true nature of God.

In this same context, iconophiles defended themselves by calling attention to the hypostatic union of Christ's divinity and humanity. From the

perspective of those who supported the making of icons, icons served to reveal Jesus' dual existence (his human and divine nature). Icons of Christ were consecrated by both their content and the method of their creation. They did not offer a symbolic abstraction of the 'uncreated,' nor were they merely attempts to portray the 'created' through a realistic depiction of the Christ's body. Rather, for iconophiles, the iconographer's project was one of revealing that sacred quasi-hypostasis⁴ of the divine—a project paying due reverence to (by equally combining) Jesus' material and spiritual parts.

What is it about images that generates their veneration and destruction? What conditions or impressions produce an iconoclast? In his consideration of the Byzantine debate between iconoclasts and iconophiles, Bruno Latour remarks upon a number of qualitative differences among iconoclasts themselves. According to these differences, Latour separates iconoclasts into five distinct categories.

The first group of iconoclasts observed can be characterized by the desire for the complete destruction of all icons (religious iconoclasts in this category have the aim of 'liberating' believers from untruthful images and fictitious attachments). By disposing of all icons—which this first group conceives of as 'barriers' to truth—these iconoclasts feel that they will be better able to maintain, within themselves, an unadulterated image of God or Truth; an image that rests closer to the original nature of Reality or the divine—which is always 'pure.'⁵

The second category of iconoclasts Latour distinguishes also destroy icons, but these iconoclasts do not consider it imperative to erase all images. For this group of iconoclasts, "truth is image but there is no image of truth" (Latour and Weibel 2002, 27). That is to say, there is no *one* image of truth. As a consequence of this logic, these iconoclasts feel that obsessive loyalty to any specific type of image is unwarranted, since such a loyalty does not reflect the transformational nature of life. For this second category of iconoclast, it is appropriate to destroy *an* icon in order to clear the way for another. That is, for a new or improved image.

The third type of iconoclast Latour identifies has "nothing against images in general: [such a person is only opposed to the image that] their opponents

⁴ I call it 'quasi-hypostasis' since, from an Eastern Orthodox perspective, the only true hypostasis is the union of the divine Trinity; the union of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (all of whom share the substance).

⁵ Pure meaning untouched by human hands.

cling most forcefully to” (Latour and Weibel 2002, 28). Such iconoclasts may still react quite severely to images they perceive as threatening; they might, for example, commit terrorist attacks, take hostages, burn flags, demolish statues, and tear paintings. This type of iconoclast could most appropriately be termed a “reactionary.”

The fourth category of iconoclasts Latour calls “innocent vandals” (Latour and Weibel 2002, 28). Although many iconoclasts can be blamed for vandalism, “innocent vandals” are not ‘real’ vandals in Latour’s estimation as they are unaware of the destruction they effect. An art restorer could be considered as belonging to this category. In their effort to restore an icon, such a “vandal” would create an aestheticized and idealized image which would ultimately have the effect of transforming that image (by the standards of those who consider it a venerable icon) into something profane and irreverent.

Finally, the last category of iconoclasts which Latour defines is one that ridicules both iconoclasts and iconophiles. These “iconoclasts” question the dichotomy between “idol breakers” and “icon worshippers” and doubt the significance of any form of mediator in the art event (Latour and Weibel 2002, 30). In fact, they mock the mediators of an art event. The attitude of such an iconoclast affirms his or her uncertainty about all claims to absolute knowledge. The manner in which such an iconoclast expresses this uncertainty, however, generally leads to the destruction of icons (or, at best, to the toleration of this destruction by others). The ironic disposition of these iconoclasts can be understood, not only as literally defiling a work of art but (perhaps more appropriately) as symbolically defiling it (for example, this type of iconoclast blasphemes a holy image by her very attitude toward it).

According to Latour, modern Westerners generally view images from a scientific (or quasi-scientific) perspective. This perspective is shaped by a desire to access truth and objectivity (perhaps, more accurately, Truth *as* objectivity), which, in turn, assumes that there is a perspective which lends itself to this sort of access. For the Western gaze, Latour asserts, an image is viewed in one of two ways: “either it is made or it is real” (Latour and Weibel 2002, 24). While it may be particular to a Western populace today, this distinction—between an image which issues from human hands and an image which is ‘uncreated’—is surely not foreign to other historical and geographical contexts. In the Byzantine era, for example, this same distinction animated, to a great extent, the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy. In many ways, the debate that arises from it is quite predictable, since within itself the distinction between “made” and “real” opens up a range of epistemic, ontological, and religious questions

that remain as pertinent today as they ever were—questions about the nature of knowledge, Truth and reality. In considering some of these questions, for example, one might ask, what makes an image (or an idea or any other object) ‘real’ (which we tend to accord with ‘true’) in our estimation? What is the character of representation? Does representation imitate an objective empirical reality that lies before us? Or does it create or participate in this reality? Can a human-made image construct another actuality (beyond what it perceives according to its own sensory capacities)? What would be the nature of this construction? Do human hands have access to what is ‘real’? How do we understand this ‘real’? How do we understand the provenance of our own knowledge and perceptions?

In considering these questions, we must acknowledge how significant images are generally. Humans use images all of the time to interpret the world around them. Remarking upon the great significance of visual representations generally helps us to appreciate why and how an image can become iconic; images not only harbor, but translate, communicate, challenge, and (can even) negate a range of social, political, religious, and philosophical commitments. Much like a word, the scope of potential meaning contained within a single image only increases the import of any particular interpretation of that image (that is, the ambiguity of an image and the host of latent meanings swimming within it only serve to increase the ideological charge of any one particular reading of it). Conceptions of the origin of an image have an especially intense bearing upon the construction or perception of an image’s meaning, precisely because these conceptions are so deeply engrained in the field of ideological and existential questions that we have traced above. This observation, in turn, helps us to appreciate why the veneration and destruction of images has such a passionate and enduring history.

Having remarked upon the significance of images generally, now I would like to take a close look at a specific type of image within a specific historical context; I would like to explore the character of Byzantine iconography from two distinct perspectives: that of the maker of icons; and, that of the viewer of icons. In the following section of this paper, I will consider the performative aspect of the icon from the Byzantine iconographers’ perspective. Turning to Victor Turner’s account of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of *flowing*, I hope to underline the importance of total absorption in the process of icon painting according to Byzantine rules. As a corollary to this, I will try to show how the canons of the eternal prototype, reverse perspective, light, color, and gesture direct the Byzantine iconographer into an ecstatic state whereby images flow

out from him or her effortlessly and spontaneously. I will, as well, employ Bernard Lonergan's idea of a *purely experiential pattern* to further highlight the concept of *flow* from this Byzantine perspective. Finally, I will turn to Anton Ehrenzweig's concept of *selective inattention* (which complements Lonergan's theory of patterns) to broaden the picture of what Byzantine iconographers experience when painting icons.

In the final section of this paper I will consider the way viewers perform the ritual of seeing an icon. Looking at Byzantine *acheiropoietic* images in particular, I will argue that the place of the invisible nature of divinity (recognized by iconographers as that aspect of the divine superseding human visual perception) within the visible form of an icon is dictated by a *symbolic-realistic* way of looking at icons. Following this, I will consider the Byzantine hypostatic experience of viewing an icon in relation to Fischer-Lichte's impression of the performative turn in the arts. Fischer-Lichte's account of the de-semanticization thesis and her understanding of the concept of self-referentiality offer an interesting perspective on both the construction of the icon and its transition into an event (where the viewer witnesses a shifting relationship between the signifier/signified and observer/observed). Finally, I would like to consider Eric Jenkins' iPod ads analysis which, I think, offers an interesting ground for comparison of Byzantine and contemporary aesthetics (with particular emphasis on the performative and transformative aspects of each). Ultimately, I hope to underscore the performative aspect of the Orthodox icon and to show the significance of taking this performative aspect into account when evaluating the intentions and effects of image-makers (and images) today.

MAKING AND PERFORMING THE ICON: THE BYZANTINE *FLOW EXPERIENCE* AND *PURELY EXPERIENTIAL PATTERNS*

From the maker's perspective, the performative aspect of a Byzantine icon is disclosed when one is totally consumed in the action of painting (that is, when one is totally absorbed in following the Byzantine canons to create an image). According to the renowned Russian iconographer Léonide Ouspensky, the genuineness of an Orthodox icon stems from all its parts forming a synchronized union (Ouspensky 1992a, 499). Ouspensky's remarks call attention to the way in which Byzantine aesthetics visually unify a binary opposition between symbolic and realistic representations. This unity is made possible only by constructing a certain balance between the constitutive elements of an icon—which include raw materials and narrative-structure—and the visual techniques involved in its composition. In striking such a

balance, an iconographer is able to erase any distinction between the visible and invisible components of an image. In order to better understand how this distinction dissolves, it will be useful to consider four major visual rules of Byzantine iconography which lend themselves to such a break (between the visible and the invisible parts of an image that is).⁶

Firstly, Byzantine icons should represent invisible prototypes. This prototype is a part of the divine that can be experienced beyond the senses. Bishop Auxentios of Photiki states that an icon embodies “a real image of that which it depicts. The image is in some way a ‘true’ form of the prototype, participating in it and integrally bound to it” (Auxentios 1987, par. 15). Auxentios’ remarks shed some light on the nature of the veneration of an icon by viewers. That is, for religious viewers, an iconic image may resemble a divine prototype which stands for the quasi-hypostasis of the visible and invisible Christ.

Secondly, Byzantine icons must abide by the rule of inverse or reverse perspective. This rule ensures that an icon is invested with an active role; it intensifies the sense of awe a religious viewer experiences before an icon (Ouspensky 1992a, 492). An inverted linear perspective gives the impression that the vanishing points of an image protrude through the flat surface of an object by diverging from the lines of the horizon. From this perspective, the objects nearest to an observer appear smaller than those more distant ones. Depth is absent in this perspective and the vanishing points are placed in the foreground to create an illusion of imagery that is enlarging and opening up in the real space of the onlooker.

The third rule of icon painting stipulates that it begin by the application of a dark layer of color. After this application, the iconographer successively includes lighter tones above the dark by adding a certain amount of white. The succession and renewal of tones become lighter with each application. The transitional process from a darker to a lighter tone is seen as a spiritual journey beginning from a state of darkness and moving towards a transcendental light. The colors used in Byzantine icons have a unifying quality; they radiate light from the motif itself and not from a conjectured exterior source (as in Renaissance paintings). This visual quality of the Byzantine icon is generally understood as eliminating the dichotomy between the material and immaterial world.

⁶ The work of an iconographer is to bring the mystical realm of the divine (which is invisible and beyond the sensory) into the visible form of the icon.

Fourthly, in the creation of Byzantine icons, it is a general rule that the figures depicted appear as emotionally neutral; an iconographic saint exhibits minimal expression(s) as he or she ‘suffers’ a spiritual transformation. The inner change of the saint’s soul is supposed to be translated into the outer change of their body. The figure depicted on an icon generally has an abstract, anonymous, and inorganic form, supposed to signify the essence of the human body. While enveloped “by the divine, captured in prayerful communion or penitent reflection” (Ouspensky 1992b, 480), the stillness of the iconographic saint communicates a divine presence. The restrained hand gestures and the ascetic facial expression of the holy figure allow the viewer to focus on his or her transcendental (rather than human) form. The anonymity of the saint, reflected in his or her impersonal features, allow the viewer both to identify with the figure and to participate in a quasi-hypostatic union with the invisible, sacred nature of the divine.

In considering the rules of Byzantine iconography generally, the close connection between the experiences of making and viewing an icon becomes apparent. Each of these acts, for example, are performed from the perspective of a *symbolic realistic* mode of seeing; that is, both viewers and makers of an icon recognize the icon as (1) a realistic depiction of an object and (2) as a divine symbol.

The philosopher Stephen Edelston Toulmin says that “there is only one way of seeing one’s own spectacles clearly: that is, to take them off. It is impossible to focus both on them and through them at the same time” (1961, 101). However, what seems impossible to Toulmin becomes in the context of Byzantine iconography, quite possible indeed. As noted above, Byzantine iconography engages a *symbolic realistic*⁷ mode of seeing. Byzantine icons are intended to appear as a tangible embodiment of a metaphysical state revealing a “[quasi] hypostasis of the spiritual and the material” (Jenkins 2008, 470). To engage these icons in a fitting manner, therefore (that is, to see the transcendent in a concrete embodiment), requires that viewers balance both symbolic (seeing through one’s lenses) and real (seeing the lenses themselves) modes of seeing. Remarking on the viewing of icons, Eric Jenkins defines *symbolic realism* as seeing with the *divine eye* (481). In Byzantine iconography,

⁷ Robert N. Bellah refers to *symbolic realism* as “an epistemological orientation which asserts the existential “reality” of religious symbols, without necessarily accepting their factual reality” (Robbins et al., 259). For Bellah, *symbolic realism*, as a shared framework between the contemporary language of theologians (involving the meaning and values of religion) and the language of scientists (or the canons of scientific objectivity), could have important implications for “the reintegration of our fragmented [visual] culture” (93).

this divine eye sees with both the physical and the mental components of the eye by creating a union of (1) subject and content, and (2) object and form, both at the level of the image. Such a union makes the icon “neither wholly secular nor sacred, neither body nor spirit, neither concrete nor abstract, neither mere appearance nor mere representation, neither grossly material nor solely symbolic” (Ouspensky 1992a, 178).

Ultimately, by its display of a transcendental experience in concrete garb, the icon encourages a viewer's participation in an incomplete scenario where (prior to the viewing of the icon) the missing component is the viewer him or herself. The scenario becomes complete only when the viewer performs the ‘ritual’ of seeing the icon in a manner which attunes the viewer to the embodiment of transcendence within the icon (which is accomplished in the use of a *symbolic realistic* lens). The *symbolic realistic* mode of seeing enables viewers to revere the sacred message of an image by attending to the transcendent content of that image, thereby deflecting any negative ideological implications that an image—as an image wrought by human hands—might carry.

Byzantine iconographers are not thought of as creating or interpreting God’s image, but rather, as transporting that image from the realm of the invisible into the realm of the visible. The origin of an icon is, therefore, not considered to be the icon-painter him or herself—for a painter can only offer forth what is first presented to him or her. Ultimately, the Byzantine icon is believed to emerge from a divine source; Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the saints are thought to communicate quite literally with an iconographer during his or her process of painting. Thus, it is God Himself who imprints His image on the wood panel of an icon through the hands of an iconographer. At the thought of such a happening, one wonders what Byzantine iconographers must feel when they paint icons. How precisely, is the mediative process supposed to happen?⁸ To understand more closely how this process works, I refer to Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of *flowing*, which is similar to Jenkins’ idea of quasi-hypostatic immersion.

The process of Byzantine icon painting is comparable to being in a state of *flow* as Csikszentmihalyi defines. The *flow* experience stands for an “effortless action” through a total immersion in a form of creative or transformative experience (Csikszentmihalyi 1997, 29). For example, athletes

⁸ For a visual understanding of what it means to perform the Byzantine icon, see a video documentation (entitled *Portrait of an Icon Maker*, 33:14 min) of my icon (*symbolic realistic*) practice at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwF-kDpBtk8>.

refer to the *flow* as ‘being in the zone,’ religious mystics as being in ‘ecstasy,’ artists and musicians as aesthetic rapture” (29). When applying the concept of *flow* to the experience of painting an icon, the iconographer’s form of creation can be described as being temporarily suspended in a state of existence whereby the body does not feel any physical restraints (such as fatigue or hunger). In the process of *flow*, the icon maker loses the sense of a personal identity to the point where his or her hands seem to be moving and painting by themselves.

Csikszentmihalyi remarks that in the study of creativity, it is generally assumed that in order to experience a state of *flow*, one must master a highly developed technical skill and knowledge of a certain field. As in other fields of art, therefore, it might be imagined that once the technical skill of Byzantine icon painting is mastered, an iconographer is able to enter into an ecstatic state where images flow out from her or him effortlessly and spontaneously. Referring to what artists and creative people feel when being in a state of *flow*, Csikszentmihalyi states: “You are in an ecstatic state to such a point that you feel as though you almost don’t exist...My hand seems devoid of myself, and I have nothing to do with what is happening...And...[the image of the icon] just flows out of itself” (Csikszentmihalyi 2004). According to Csikszentmihalyi, the feeling of *flow* in an act of creation entails the participation of all senses, which follow an internal meaning without any conscious interference. The process of icon painting in particular, and the environment in which an iconographer operates, are bound through a feeling of complete control allowing the iconographer a continuous experience from one action to the next. This experience unifies the past, present, and future by making no distinction between “stimulus and response” (Turner 2001, 56).

For Csikszentmihalyi, the notion of *flow* extends to all human forms of expression such as sports, science, religion and literature. Expanding (what was initially) an analysis of sports to art practice and religious experience, Csikszentmihalyi distinguishes six general conditions for a *flow experience* to take place.⁹ Let us consider briefly the six conditions of *flow experience* that Csikszentmihalyi describes.

First, for an experience of flow to occur in Csikszentmihalyi’s estimation, there is a need for harmonious union between the action of an artist and his or her mind. A Byzantine iconographer, for example, must be wholly immersed in

⁹ Csikszentmihalyi also notes, however, that once one is actually in a state of *flow*, any form of rule required to reach it becomes irrelevant.

the making of an icon to enter into *flow*. For any artist, over-consciousness or over-analysis of one's movements produces a gap in the creative process (seeing the self from an outward perspective is especially distracting) which breaks the flow. Byzantine iconographers experience *flow* when the union between their mind and their action reflects the physical and visual qualities of the icon itself—which, when brought together by appropriate technique, form a harmonious union (Ouspensky 1992a, 499).

The second condition of the *flow* experience hinges on an artist's focus. He or she must concentrate on a certain selection of inspirational stimuli. His or her attention must be narrowed to the present time and it must also exclude everything irrelevant to the artistic process. At this juncture, Csikszentmihalyi notes a parallel between the experience of *flow* through artistic practices and the experience of *flow* in various forms of play and sport (through physiological methods). Just as specific rules are applied in sports or games, so too are specific canons applied in the creation of Byzantine iconography. To elaborate the analogy a little, we might consider a game of football.

By virtue of a strict set of concrete rules, football players compete with each other within the framework of a certain class of tactical norms. These rules and norms encourage players to discard any source of distraction or outside stimuli from their surrounding social reality, in order to focus their attention on one specific goal. Just like Byzantine iconography, football builds a 'special' world converging around a particular set of rules by which all players abide and become immersed in the activity of play. By conforming to the rules of the game, players (like Byzantine iconographers in their adherence to the Byzantine canons)—and the game itself—are separated from ordinary life. Commenting insightfully on the organization of the sport, Richard Schechner states:

[T]he rules are designed not only to tell the player how to play but to defend the activity against encroachment from the outside...Special rules exist, are formulated, and persist because these activities are something apart from everyday life...This 'special world' is not gratuitous but a vital part of life.... It is special only when compared to the 'ordinary' activities of productive work. (Schechner 2003, 13)

As we might see in the analogy with football, restrictions imposed by the rules of an activity can sharpen a special sort of awareness which enables the *flow* experience. The analogy with football can only be taken so far, of course. For the football player, the *flow* is ultimately a means to a goal. Conversely, for the icon painter, "the flow's the thing" and the structural components of his or

her experience include “inner resources” as well (Turner 2001, 56).¹⁰

Moving onto Csikszentmihalyi’s third condition of the experience of *flow*, we note that for the experience of this state, one’s ego must be nearly absent. Csikszentmihalyi claims that the self is what separates people participating in common actions (such as actors on a stage or players in a game). The rules of a game (or those of a common undertaking), however, serve to connect individuals’ separate actions and the more intensely an individual engages with these connecting conventions, the more he or she achieves the self-forgetfulness essential to total immersion in the *flow* of an activity. The influence of a shared set of rules or canons operates in this way for both viewers and painters of Byzantine iconography. The quasi-hypostatic experience engendered by Byzantine iconography is figured on a set of rules which shifts the ground of ordinary perception. In this artistic context, perceptual reality is reduced “to [a] point that is understandable, definable and manageable” (Goleman and Davidson 1979, 65) and there is a significant experience of “self-forgetfulness”—but this forgetfulness should not be understood as a loss of self-awareness. For Csikszentmihalyi, self-forgetfulness entails, above all, a relinquishing of the notion that the self is all that can be known to exist. While losing *this* sense of self (the self as that knowable centre of Reality), an iconographer gains a different kind of self-awareness which sharpens his or her sense of his or her own bodily movements and mind. In the *flow* experience of Byzantine iconography, everything—including Nature, mind and body—is felt to be one.

The fourth criterion of Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of *flow* demands that one be in complete control of one’s actions and the context in which *flow* occurs. This criterion highlights the importance of abiding strictly and adeptly by a set of technical rules. Of course, it is never easy to achieve a perfect harmony in any activity demanding adherence to a strict set of rules—whether that activity is a sport or an art. For Csikszentmihalyi, nonetheless, Byzantine iconographers in particular, must achieve this harmony between their action and the canons of Byzantine iconography in order to enjoy a *flow* experience. Somewhat paradoxically, for Csikszentmihalyi, iconographers must be in a state of *flow* in the first place, in order to genuinely perform their work in full accordance with the standards of the Byzantine canons. Thus, while the *flow experience* cannot be achieved outside of complete adherence to the canons themselves, “due to the multiplicity of stimuli and cultural tasks...[particularly]

¹⁰ For Bernard Lonergan, the icon painters’ *flow experience* is based on inner resources that follow *purely experiential patterns*. I will elaborate on this topic in the following section.

in industrial societies, with complex social and technical division of labor” (Turner 2001, 57), authentic performance of this same art form (in accordance with all of its canons), itself demands the experience of *flow* wherein the skills of an iconographer are exercised in complete harmony with the demands of their craft. In this skilful harmony, an iconographer has eliminated outside distractions and gained the personal sense of control over his or her environment and actions that his or her art requires. This will, in turn, dispel whatever fear or stress the artist might feel (which would otherwise threaten to damage his or her art). While this experience of *flow* now appears to be a state of almost total control, Csikszentmihalyi specifies that, during the *flow experience*, one is actually unaware of the extent of their own control (that is, over their actions and environment).

The fifth criteria distinguishing states of *flow* stipulates that such a state is comprised of “coherent, non-contradictory demands for action” which furnish “clear, unambiguous feedback” on one’s actions (Turner 2001, 57). A univocal interconnection between the requirements to perform an action and one’s appropriate reaction to these requirements is made possible for iconographers particularly by limiting their attention to the activity of iconography itself. The significance of profound, single-minded concentration clearly cannot be overstated in articulating Csikszentmihalyi’s conditions for an experience of *flow*.

The last condition that Csikszentmihalyi identifies regarding the *flow* experience is that the experience itself be *autotelic* or internally driven. The word *autotelic* merges two Greek words *auto* (self) and *telos* (goal). This aspect of a *flow* experience contrasts with one that is externally driven (for example, a process motivated by rewards such as power, comfort, etc). The *autotelic* person has no other aim than the *flow* itself. Csikszentmihalyi remarks:

[*Autotelic* people] need few material possessions and little entertainment, comfort, power, or fame because so much of what [they do] is already rewarding...They are more autonomous and independent because they cannot be as easily manipulated with threats or rewards from the outside. At the same time, they are more involved with everything around them because they are fully immersed in the current of life. (Csikszentmihalyi 1997, 117)

In his book *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play*, British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner asserts that, before the industrial age, ritual supplied communities (including tribes, moieties, families, etc) with core “cultural flow-mechanisms and patterns” (Turner 2001, 58). In today’s industrialized culture, however, Turner argues that egocentrism and rationalism have overtaken ritual. As a result, he remarks, the place of *flow*

has shifted to art, sports and other types of leisure. As noted above, to have an experience of *flow* in the process of any activity (at least, according to Csikszentmihalyi's criteria), it is necessary that an individual be very skilled in the activity he or she undertakes. This skill, in turn, demands a solid knowledge of and strict adherence to that set of rules circumscribing the performance of a particular activity in a given context. While the rules of a game or sport like football may, indeed, channel an individual experience of *flow*, external motivating forces surrounding that game or sport (including, for example, fame or money) are often in competition (with the activity itself) for a player's attention. The *flow* experienced by players of a game or sport is, therefore, generally threatened by a range of external forces which may distract or disorient the concentration of players at any time. This is, importantly, not supposed to be the case for Byzantine iconographers—for the Byzantine iconographer is not (supposed to be) driven by any external temptation in the making of his or her art (furthermore, unlike players of a game or sport, Byzantine iconographers do not compete with each other). Of course, one could, conceivably, paint icons for commercial purposes, but, in this case, it is believed that such an iconographer cheats the rules of his craft. If we are to assume Csikszentmihalyi's criteria for the experience of *flow* as valid, a "commercial" iconographer would not, therefore, be in a position to experience *flow* at all (as this experience hinges upon a deep immersion within the particular rules or conventions of a given activity—and in the case of Byzantine iconography, these rules discourage the creation of icons for commercial gain).

Bernard Lonergan's notion of a *purely experiential pattern* may help us to further grasp Csikszentmihalyi's concept of *flow* (with special respect to the making of Byzantine icons). In Lonergan's analysis, a pattern is "pure" because it comes out naturally and unpremeditated from a subject.¹¹ The pure pattern is "of the seen as seen, of the heard as heard, of the felt as felt" (Lonergan 1988, 214). The spontaneous artistic experience of this pattern can be instructive, but it cannot be taught, conceptualized, or imposed on someone as 'truth' in order to serve an ideological agenda. The *purely experiential pattern* also cannot be described conceptually because its impression on one's mind is sensed as 'religious bliss.' The unexplainable feelings directed towards a Byzantine icon by its viewers, much like the structural component of an icon painters' *flow experience* (both of which include inner resources based on patterns that are purely experiential) are robust examples of Lonergan's

¹¹ In addition to "the retinue of associations, affects, emotions, [and] tendencies," the *purely experiential pattern* contains a feeling of awe or uncanniness (Lonergan 1988, 214).

thought. So too is the distance from external motivations that iconographers are expected to maintain. Lonergan acknowledges the problem of outside influences in disrupting modern experiences of *flow* when he argues that the rationalization of feeling triggers the instrumentalization of experience (Lonergan 1988, 213). This rationalization is especially evident in an industrial context where humans' sensory capacity is highly instrumentalized. Consciousness in this context is advanced upon by "alien patterns" (Lonergan 1988, 213) (which one might liken to those external influences threatening the *flow experience* of today's sports players. Of course, the same capacity for a break in the experience of *flow* does exist in one respect for iconographers as well. For example, contemporary iconographers could be tempted to instrumentalize their art by reading the Byzantine canons in an exclusively conceptual—rather than religious—light).

Lonergan refers to "experiential patterns" as those patterns experienced and objectified in the artistic process. Lonergan's understanding of patterns helps us to envisage how Byzantine iconography can be seen as transmitting a "true" image of God. That is, without altering or undermining the divine nature of God, the artistic process of Byzantine iconography can be understood as functioning as the objectification of a lived religious experience—perhaps best described as a *purely experiential pattern*. It is the 'real' aspect of this experience that should be emphasized here. As Marie-José Mondzain asserts, "the world of saints is that of the colored pattern of any living and sensible reality" (Mondzain 2005, 326). To get a firmer grasp of the *purely experiential pattern*, it will be useful to consider each of these terms individually.

A *pattern* refers to a group of inner connections between colors, sounds, movements, and volumes. Patterns are apprehended in the physical world through art. Lonergan emphasizes that "the pattern is a set of internal relations between these tones, or between these colors, or between these volumes, or between these movements" (Lonergan 1988, 211). The written form of a musical composition, for example (that is, the visual pattern of the musical notes), is fully realized when it is transposed into sound. In this way, music can be conceived of as the outcome of the internal relations of musical scores. These very 'inside links' also serve to unify other forms of art, like iconography.

The word *experiential* indicates an awareness or perception of something which is patterned at the sensitive level.¹² As opposed to the intellect, which

¹² *Sensitive experience* refers to the physiological senses of the human body such as sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch, which give input for perception.

reads patterns in a specialized manner, consciousness acts as the organizer of one's perceptions. For Lonergan, the presence of patterns is experienced by consciousness through three levels of intensity (according to different moments in a twenty-four hour timeframe). At the first level of intensity, consciousness functions at its lowest capacity (while sleeping during the "dream of night" (Lonergan 1988, 212)). During this period of time, experiential patterns are less tangible because the body is affected by the digestive system and other biological functions. When the "dream of morning" (Lonergan 1988, 212) arrives, patterns become more intelligible because the body is not as preoccupied with a particular organic task. During the morning, while one is still asleep, consciousness becomes increasingly active and more capable of distinguishing patterns. This is the second level of conscious intensity. Throughout the course of the day, when one is completely awake, consciousness is at its peak. At this third point, being in full control of one's physical senses, one is fully able to tune into a range of experiential patterns (for example, one can listen to a song and hum along with it). Of course, one's ability to grasp different patterns naturally depends upon the complexity of these patterns as well. For example, while one might be able to hum along with a song, one would likely have a hard time reproducing "a series of street noises" (Lonergan 1988, 212). In the latter case of the outdoor sounds, one's ability to distinguish patterns is not as strong because the patterns themselves are less clear.

According to Lonergan, human experience is patterned, "because to be conscious of something involves a patterning of what is perceived and a pattern of the feelings that flow out of and are connected with the perceiving" (Lonergan 1988, 212). For Lonergan, the pattern is the essential structural element in human sight (at the conscious level). In consideration of visual perception (with respect to distinguishing patterns), Lonergan makes a distinction between different kinds of patterned objects which call for different modes of sight. For example, he remarks that there is a difference in the perception of hand-made ornaments that are imprinted on a carpet or curtain, and the perception of organic patterns found in nature (such as those patterns on trees or plants). In spite of these differences, however, visual perception seems to grasp either pattern more easily and fully if these patterns (on an object) are contrasted with blank surfaces.

The *pure pattern* Lonergan speaks of refers specifically to a sensitive experience that is untouched by any "alien patterns that instrumentalize experience" (Lonergan 1988, 213). The instrumentalization of one's sensory

capacity which is foreign to this *pure pattern* may be described in four different ways.

Firstly, while the human senses function as transferring signals which connect one's subjectivity with one's environment, there are cases when these sensory receptors only mediate among external, ready-made elements (for example, when they mediate between traffic lights and the mechanical motion of a car). In such cases, the *sensitive experience* becomes a mere tool in an automatic activity. The pattern of such an experience is, accordingly, not *pure* (by Lonergan's standards) since it does not emerge from the subject him or herself.

Secondly, according to Lonergan, "any type of subordination, of putting one's spontaneous consciousness at the disposal of intellect or of a mechanical society, is an instrumentalization of experience" (Lonergan 1988, 213). We can understand what Lonergan means in this second description of instrumentalized experience when we consider the example of a scientist. The scientist's sensory experience is directed largely by intellect and his or her knowledge is patterned following particular theoretical categorizations. A scientist differs from an ordinary person in his sensitive capacity to experience the natural world (insofar as his scientific training has oriented his sensory capacities toward the world in a specific way). For example, based on a system of definitions constructed with *genera* and *differentiae*, a certain type of scientist (like a zoologist) will see and observe a range of features in an insect that most other people (lacking a scientific education and orientation) would overlook. Now, unlike a scientist, an icon painter does not have a special knowledge of the material world and his or her ability to experience nature has not been trained or instrumentalized according to specific theories. But the instrumentalization of one's sensory capacities could conceivably be experienced by Byzantine iconographers as well. If an artist directed his or her attention to the external relations of patterns during the creation of an icon, for example, he or she would end up creating a representative image—and this image would reflect precisely the instrumentalization of the artistic process itself.

A third way of understanding the instrumentalization of experience calls attention to psychological and epistemological variants which also play a significant role in determining one's sensitive awareness (as well as one's understanding of self and others). One's understanding of objectivity in relation to these variants can shape one's spontaneous experience in very particular ways. The perception and representation of tangible objects in the light of a

particular understanding of objectivity very frequently leads to an instrumentalization of sensory experience. For example, if perceptions are believed to be based on objective knowledge while their patterning is, in fact, subjective, the pattern of sensory experience itself can be considered as depreciated. As Lonergan remarks, the difference between subjectivity and objectivity does not occur at that level of experience when “one thinks that one knows when one arrives at truth” (Lonergan 1988, 214).

Fourthly, the instrumentalization of sensory experience is perhaps most easily observed by the influence of utilitarian concerns in shaping a person’s actual intentions to act. In asking, ‘what’s in it for me?’ one may, in fact, be attending to a very important question. But for Lonergan, utilitarian concerns subject the senses to ends that are ultimately external. Thus, they ultimately inhibit the sensitive experience of a *pure pattern* directed by inner resources within one’s own consciousness.

While Lonergan’s emphasis on the importance of consciousness as an organizer of one’s perception is appreciated here, it is still to be acknowledged, in relation to Byzantine iconography specifically, that there are moments when the attention of an artist must fall into a shifting rhythm of conscious awareness and unconsciousness. More precisely, an artist’s withdrawal from the process of icon painting can be, for the creation itself, as important as the iconographer’s experience of the *purely experimental pattern* during the painting. According to Richard Schechner, the creative process “involves not only the push of doing [the process of icon painting] but the release of undoing, the meditation of non-doing” (Schechner 2003, 234). In relation to Byzantine iconography, this means that the creative process extends beyond the making of the icon. The patterns of the image do reveal themselves in pure form when an artist’s mind is completely focused at the conscious level—but this fact does not negate the corresponding significance of the artist’s unconscious interaction (or release from conscious engagement) with these same patterns in the progressive process of creation. In reflecting upon the shifting rhythm of consciousness, it will be helpful to consider Anton Ehrenzweig’s notion of *selective inattention* (Schechner 2003, 229).

Selective inattention is a condition in which the mind has its being, simultaneously, in a state of waking and sleeping. This state enables an analogous channel of pattern perception within the mind. As opposed to deep concentration, *selective inattention* is a hypnagogic state where hidden unconscious elements mix with conscious experience. As Ehrenzweig reflects:

How often have we¹³ not observed how an artist suddenly stops in his tracks without apparent reason, steps back from his canvas and looks at it with a curiously vacant stare? What happens is that the conscious gestalt is prevented from crystallizing. Nothing seems to come into his mind. Perhaps one or another detail lights up from a moment only to sink back into the emptiness. During this absence of mind an unconscious scanning seems to go on. Suddenly as from nowhere some offending detail hitherto ignored will come into view. It had somehow upset the balance of the picture, but had gone undetected. With relief the painter will end his apparent inactivity. He returns to his canvas and carries out the necessary retouching. This “full” emptiness of unconscious scanning occurs in many other examples of creative work. (Ehrenzweig 1967, 24-25)

In this relaxed experience of the ‘curiously vacant stare’ that Ehrenzweig details, we may observe how the invisible and the visible intersect. At this point in artistic creation, details previously unnoticed are unveiled. Moving the attention into a state of calm, receptive inattention allows for a subtle infiltration of the *flow* feeling in the creative process.¹⁴

SEEING AND PERFORMING THE ICON: THE BYZANTINE EVENT AND THE COLLAPSE OF BINARY OPPOSITIONS BETWEEN THE OBSERVER AND OBSERVED

In Christian tradition, *acheiropoietic* images of Christ, the Virgin Mary, Veronica’s veil and those marks imprinted on the Turin Shroud, have been worshiped for centuries as ‘pure’ in origin; that is, as images untouched by the human hand. The significance of this conception of an image over the centuries has been rather remarkable. In the medieval era, for example, both iconophiles and iconoclasts believed that the divine directly invested *acheiropoietic* images with its presence (that is, both recognized the visible and invisible nature of the *acheiropoietic* image). These images were eventually used as prototypes for the creation of Byzantine icons.

It is significant to note that the phobia of icons which defined iconoclasts in the medieval controversy did not emerge strictly from a fear of images per se, but, rather, by a fear of the threat of impurity images denoted (being fashioned by human hands). The opposition to human-produced images of God (or images that were acknowledged as being made by humans) in this context was influenced both by laws and by cultural customs in different places which indexed the appropriateness of behavior, beliefs and objects according to a

¹³ In this case “we” refers to the viewers who directly observe the artist’s process of art making.

¹⁴ I think it is pertinent to note, however, that, in respect of Orthodox icons, I disagree with Ehrenzweig’s statement that the blankness of the unconscious could scan ‘unbalanced images’ or ‘offending details.’ In the creation of Byzantine iconography, the Byzantine canons themselves prevent any form of disruption or disturbance that would require an iconographers’ ‘correcting’ or ‘retouching’ his art.

paradigm of purity/impurity. One example of this paradigm might be found in the book of Leviticus where observance of food laws mandates a separation between blood and flesh (if the latter is to be consumed, that is). Byzantine theology, in particular, was rooted to a great extent in the understanding of a division between terrestrial and divine worlds. The material and spiritual components of a human being could, accordingly, be understood as quite distinctive. In spite of their obvious residence on earth, for example, Byzantine theologians held that humans belonged essentially to a superior, spiritual world. For Byzantine iconophiles of the medieval period, however, the Incarnation had challenged any simple division between humanity and divinity, or between matter and spirit. Christ had made Himself visible in human flesh. Their understanding of the event of this visibility determined, to a great extent, the way iconophiles engaged with Byzantine theology. Besides spiritual salvation, the Incarnation of Jesus in the material world meant also the redemption of the worldly character of humanity. If Jesus was willing to assume a tangible, human form, why would it be wrong, subsequently, to portray Him in this tangible human form? The Incarnation, according to iconophiles, abolished a simplistic division between pure incorporeality and impure corporeality. The Last Supper was further evidence of the insignificance of such divisions; it brought humans together to consume a mixture of blood (wine) and body (bread) at the very same time.¹⁵ In the event of his hypostasis, Jesus had brought salvation to all of humanity in all of its fleshly being. For iconophiles, those who discarded the human Jesus rejected also the living form of Christ “who was God’s image incarnate” (Jenkins 2008, 473). Those who could not accept the full, fleshly nature of His Incarnation were, therefore, those who committed the true heresy—for the Incarnation was what, precisely, brought humanity (as embodied human beings) into the hallowed plan of salvation.

In response, finally, to the debate over the creation of icons (and, addressing themselves specifically to iconoclasts’ fear of icons as earthly and (therefore) impure images), Byzantine iconographers developed a *symbolic realistic* mode of creating images which put an end to the ideological anxieties of both sides. By using colors and contours in a very particular way, Orthodox iconographers claimed that they were able to depict the living Christ (and

¹⁵ At least, according to scripture: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him...He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day... As the living Father sent Me and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me will live because of Me" (Bible Gateway, New American Standard Bible, Jn 6:56, 54, 57).

thereby pay reverence to his Incarnation) without sullyng His divine infinity (with their human hands). Careful to avoid any idolatrous implications that their work might suggest, iconographers claimed that the real presence of God was, in fact, missing from the handmade icon. His pictorial absence, however, actually became His visibility—as transfigured by a viewer’s gaze. The invisible nature of the divine was, therefore, not enclosed in the icon, but produced in the visual, human interaction with it (that is, while the infinite nature of the divine remained pictorially concealed, it could still be perceived after a fashion from a religious perspective). In this way, how one looked at an icon determined the place of the invisibility of the divine nature in His visible form. Ultimately, the recognition of the invisible in the visible would lead to a hypostatic event between an icon and its viewer. As iconophiles had argued from the beginning, it was only the human gaze that could sully an image of God and mislead viewers about His nature—it was not in the power of the image itself.

ART AS PERFORMANCE

There is an interesting parallel to be made here between Fischer-Lichte’s description of performance art as event and the Byzantine quasi-hypostatic experience of viewing an icon. Both events can be seen as challenging the division between the aesthetics of production of a piece of art (on one side), from the reception of that art by viewers (on the other side).

Fischer-Lichte asserts that when a viewer directly engages in the process of creation, the binary opposition between an artist and a spectator is destabilized (Fischer-Lichte and Jain 2008, 17). By establishing an oscillatory connection between the signifier and signified, an artistic/quasi-hypostatic event offers an audience the opportunity to undergo a metamorphosis which generates new meanings and identities. In order to be observed and decoded in this context, an art object must not function independently of either its creator or its viewer. Offering the example of Marina Abramović’s performance of the *Lips of Thomas*,¹⁶ Fischer-Lichte points to the transformation of Abramović and

¹⁶ *Lips of Thomas* was performed in 1975, 1993 and 2005 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. In the span of seven hours, Ambramovic tested the limits of her body by consuming one kilogram of honey and one liter of red wine followed by whipping herself, cutting a five pointed star on her stomach and laying down in a crucified position on ice blocks shaped into a cross. Embedded with religious symbols, her performance ends when members of the audience cannot stand seeing her pain anymore and finally remove her. This intervention of the public into her performance challenged the modern relation between viewers and artworks. Also, the video documentation of cutting a star on herself with a razor blade became symbolic in the history of performance art.

her spectators into “co-subjects” in the experience of Abramović’s performance. Through a shifting relationship, she observes, (both of) their action(s) simultaneously determines the course of the art event (Fischer-Lichte and Jain 2008, 17). Furthermore, she notes, the success of the performance is contingent on the subject and object of the performance being “self-referential and constitutive of reality”—that is, neither can depend upon any predefined meaning assigned to them (Fischer-Lichte and Jain 2008, 21). Fischer-Lichte asserts that when one perceives an object as self-referential—a mode of seeing in which an object is perceived in its specific materiality and sensuality—the ‘secret’ meaning of the phenomenal world is unveiled “in and through the act of perception” (Fischer-Lichte and Jain 2008, 17). As opposed to a more passive engagement with the object of a performance, when an audience perceives the object of a performance as self-referential, that audience begins to assume an active role in the art itself; in this way, the audience is made a co-producer of the art event.

This same form of participation takes place through the *symbolic realistic* mode of seeing called upon by Byzantine iconography (where an onlooker becomes engaged in a quasi-hypostatic transformation). This mode of seeing differs from that involved in an exclusively symbolic or realistic perception. In the latter case, the icon would only exist as a mere sign or artifact—thus impeding the viewer’s experience of art as event. Referring to the relationship combining meaning and material in the viewing of a work of art, Fischer-Lichte states:

For hermeneutic as well as semiotic aesthetics, every aspect of a work of art is seen as a sign. This does not imply that they overlook the materiality of a work of art. On the contrary, every detail of the material is given closest attention. Yet, everything perceptible about the material is defined and interpreted as a sign: the layers of paint and the specific nuance of color in a painting as much as the tone, rhyme, and meter in a poem. Thus, every element becomes a signifier to which meanings can be attributed. All aspects of a work of art are incorporated into this signifier-signified relationship, while any number of meanings could be assigned to the same signifier. (Fischer-Lichte and Jain 2008, 21)

Fischer-Lichte, also points out how the traditional way of viewing a work of art (as a generator of signs waiting to be interpreted by viewers), creates a distance between the observer and the observed—a distance which blocks the possibility of a genuine transformative experience (for both sides). She interprets the transformative power of Abramović’s performance specifically through John L. Austin’s definition of *performative utterances* in speech acts (Fischer-Lichte and Jain 2008, 24). Differentiating between constative and performative utterances, Austin claims that “linguistic utterances not only

serve to make statements but they also perform actions” (Fischer-Lichte and Jain 2008, 21). The term “performative” is applied by Fischer-Lichte to the *Lips of Thomas* in particular relation to the physical acts of the artist and the spectators—these acts are self-referential. In my view, Austin’s theory of speech acts is equally relevant to understanding the *symbolic realistic* way of seeing a Byzantine icon. The hypostatic event of this viewing is not predefined. The viewer performs the icon without relying on “pre-existing conditions, such as an inner essence, substance” and without expressing any “fixed, stable identity” (Fischer-Lichte and Jain 2008, 27). While immersed in a quasi-hypostatic experience, the viewer of an icon does not reenact a prescribed social or religious role (there is, as well, no formal expectation that a viewer be able to recall a specific scripture). In their encounter with the icon, the viewer’s identity is created through the very act of seeing and feeling that icon. Furthermore, in this encounter, as in the quasi-hypostatic event, materiality and semiotics are not mutually exclusive, but, rather, coexist together in the very perception of the icons.

According to Fischer-Lichte’s de-semanticization thesis, the bodies of actors or performance artists (and other theatrical elements such as costumes, music, and dance) appear in their phenomenal being or self-referentiality. When these elements are apprehended without any predefined meaning, a viewer is able to make a connection to new phenomena, ideas, feelings, and memories. This is the same sense in which an icon’s phenomenal being appears as “de-semanticized” (Fischer-Lichte and Jain 2008, 141). Referring to the emergence of meaning in Abramović’s performance, Fischer-Lichte states:

I am perceiving all these phenomena *as something*. I do not respond to an unspecific stimulus, I perceive something as something. The things signify what they are or what they appear to be. To perceive something as something means to perceive it as meaningful...Materiality does not act as a signifier to which this or that signified can be attributed. Rather, materiality itself has to be seen as the signified already given in the materiality perceived by the subject. To use a tautology, the thing’s materiality adopts the meaning of its materiality, that is, of its phenomenal being. What the object is perceived as is what it signifies. (Fischer-Lichte and Jain 2008, 141)

The ‘isolation’ of the materiality of an object from any preset contexts can determine (in different ways) how the various elements of that object are perceived. For example, Abramović’s gesture in cutting a pentagram on her body in the *Lips of Thomas* was not interpreted by her viewers symbolically (that is, it was not understood in relation to the historical or religious connotations of the geometrical shape). On the other hand, however, in respect of this gesture, Abramović’s performance “was not perceived as insignificant,

but merely as that which it performed,” allowing for “an immense pluralization of potential meaning” (Fischer-Lichte and Jain 2008, 140). The multitude of potential meanings generated by this sort of art (as event) facilitates viewers’ engagement in the art event itself. It is this engagement which eventually completes or fulfills the original scenario. The semiotic possibilities opened up by the de-semanticization of the pentagram in Abramović’s performance offers an instructive basis for comparison with respect to the Byzantine elements presented in Eric Jenkins’ analysis of iPod ads. The elements depicted in these ads appear as devoid of any particular meaning; that is, they present themselves as “purely ‘sensual’ phenomena” (Fischer-Lichte and Jain 2008, 140). By using and organizing the elements of perspective, light, color, and gesture in a particular way (that is, after the manner of Byzantine iconography), these images simulate the ecstatic experience of music (heard through earphones). This is accomplished, more specifically, by fusing the elements of the image in such a way that the dancing figures, the neon background settings, the upbeat music, and the music player appear in their concrete materiality—that is, without any particular meaning attached to them. Every component of the image, and its placing is significant. In the span of only 30 seconds, iPod ads seek to reproduce a nearly universal, phenomenological experience (dancing or being captivated by music). Reflecting on this shared experience, Jenkins comments; “anyone who has traversed public space while entranced in their favorite song recognizes the experience, similar to the feeling one gets when consumed in dance. The world seems to become mute [free of any prescribed meaning], while people appear to move in harmony with your song”¹⁷ (Jenkins 2008, 477). When a viewer of the iPod ad is immersed in music, therefore, the meaning of the ad’s image is generally not perceived as something imposed on the ads themselves. Rather, this meaning in the viewing itself; specifically in the *symbolic realistic* perception of the image. The Byzantine elements of the ad prompt the spectator into a meditative immersion where “intrinsic meanings” are revealed—a “secret meaning ‘given’ in the phenomenal being of the object” (Fischer-Lichte and Jain 2008, 142). Due to its self-referentiality, the meaning of the ad emerges (or rather its effect arises) by breaking the separation between a viewer’s mental process of ascribing meaning and his or her sensual-physiological experience of the object. However, as soon as the viewer’s attention is directed away from their phenomenal being toward a “realm of association” (Fischer-Lichte and Jain

¹⁷ By claiming to sell this quasi-hypostatic experience, the iPod becomes more than an ordinary commodity in the capitalist market competition. Therefore, Apple Inc. declares itself as different from other corporations whose ultimate motive is only profit and consumerism.

2008, 142)—a space where ideas, feelings, and memories are connected and mingled—the iPod ad becomes a signifier, thus impeding one’s participation in its event.

Eric Jenkins’ analysis of Apple commercials in relation to the Orthodox canons is especially indicative of the performative power of the Byzantine icon. Considering, specifically, the dancing silhouettes¹⁸ broadcasted by Apple between 2001 to the present, Jenkins’ analysis shows how Byzantine aesthetics turn the Apple products into an event.¹⁹ Jenkins begins his analysis by identifying the use of inverse perspective, light and color in the commercials that synecdochically embody the quasi-hypostatic contemplation of music (Jenkins 2008, 480). The Byzantine perspective he discerns is partly provoked by the uniform bright background colors and the missing shadows of the silhouettes, which take away any effect of depth. Instead of watching the ad passively (as one would when looking into a linear perspective), the shifting camera angle of each scene—from close-ups to full point of views—urges viewers to picture themselves in the event. The Byzantine-like light symbolically differentiates the terrestrial, telluric silhouettes of the human figures of the ad from the heavenly aspect of the colors in the backdrop. The bright background colors (bright blues, reds and yellow) recall a spiritual experience much like the heavenly colors of the Byzantine icons do. Jenkins notices a parallel between the soft gleam surrounding the dancing silhouettes

¹⁸ Consistently shown on television, print ads, posters, and the Internet, these commercials contain five essential features such as the bright colored background, the dancing dark human figures, the iPod in a distinctive white color, rhythmic songs from both mainstream and slightly unknown artists, and a minimal quantity of text.

¹⁹ Defining the ideological components of the ads, Jenkins separates these into three different groups. Firstly, he identifies the message of ‘hip’; an idea of what is trendy and young-looking which is communicated by upbeat music and different neon colors animating the background of the ad (generally referencing nightclubs and urban environments). The idea of ‘hip’ suggests, among other things, a certain freedom of thought and action (perhaps even evoking the impression of a release from traditional forms of authority). Secondly, Jenkins identifies the notion of individual liberty and the idea of the uniqueness of the self. These ideas are expressed by the solid black figures of the ads which are imaged in various poses—generally each is captured performing a unique dance step. The figures display a distinctive fashion and hairstyle which change each time the camera angle changes. These postures and appearances speak to a particular and popular image of individualism, an image associated with personal independence, free expression and even a sense of abandon. Analyzing the images, Jenkins remarks that “the self is condensed to body through the darkness of the silhouette and the association with the sensual pleasure of dance; yet the amazing [dance] moves allow individualism to shine through” (Jenkins 2008, 476). Finally, Jenkins calls attention to the enthusiastic ambience created by the ad. This feeling is generated especially in the images of energetic dance moves (performed by the black human-shaped silhouettes) following a progressive musical tempo and reaching a climax before the display of the textual message and the Apple logo.

and the whiteness of their ear buds with the image of the halo depicted in Orthodox icons as well (Jenkins 2008, 479). He also observes a similarity in the way colors are used to render the figures of both the Byzantine saints and the dark silhouettes of the iPod ads (which stand out from the glowing neon colors of their background). In both cases, such a technique gives these focal figures something between a realistic and a symbolic representation. The earth-colored silhouettes of the ads also give a realistic representation of ordinary young people while their specific identities are erased (for example, racial or facial details are omitted). The anonymity of the human figures in the ad thereby facilitates an easy identification with them on the part of viewers. As is the case with Byzantine iconography, these iPod ads create an ‘incomplete scenario’ where the missing component of the scenario is the viewer/consumer him or herself. The scenario becomes complete only when the viewer participates in the ‘ritual’ of seeing the commodity through a *symbolic realistic* lens. This happens (that is, the performance event ultimately crystallizes) at the moment when *the* iPod turns into “*my* icon” (Jenkins 2008, 481)—that is, when the dancing silhouettes on the ads successfully beckon the viewer into participating in this transcendental experience in concrete garb. In its simulation of a quasi-hypostatic experience, the commodity, in addition to its symbolic, exchange and use-values,²⁰ is now invested with a *cult-value*.²¹

CONCLUSION

Commenting on today's iconic images and what he refers to as the “idols” of consumer-capitalist society, Latour writes that “suspicion has rendered us dumb. It is as if the hammer of the critique had rebounded and struck senseless the critic’s head!” (Latour and Weibel 2002, 25). What Latour importantly calls to attention here is a lack of critical analysis: that is, there is not sufficient consideration today of the power of *the spectacle* (a power to transform meanings and identities, a power to translate interests and ideologies, a power to conceal power itself).

In our contemporary context, we might look to Byzantine iconography (and the modes of its perception) to kick-start our own reflection upon the nature and effects of images. As a point of departure for consideration of

²⁰ In *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx explains that every labor-product has a *use-value* that facilitates the satisfaction of a human need. When labor-products are traded as a commodity in markets, in addition to *use-value*, they acquire an *exchange-value* that is translated as money (Marx 1904, 38).

²¹ Jenkins explains that profit-driven corporations use the concept of *symbolic realism* to encourage consumers to visually recognize the *cult-value* of commodity’s imagery so as to indulge them in the worshiping of products.

contemporary iconoclastic debates, for example, the Byzantine icon can show us many things—not least among these, the power of the performative aspect of an image. Consideration of this aspect of an image, could help us, in turn, to reassess the nature of our own relationship to various consumer goods and/or to the *cult-value* of mass media images on which these goods are borne. This essay is not the expression of such a reassessment, but perhaps it can offer a jumping-off point for those who would consider such an undertaking.

In reflecting upon the relation of the Byzantine icon to contemporary modes of image production, it would probably be remiss not to mention how the modern production of images is at odds, in a way, with the somewhat aniconic flavor of the Byzantine historical and religious era. Image production in medieval Byzantium was carefully circumscribed by very specific canons. The opposite of this circumscription governs image production today (the scale and proliferation of image production in the modern period seems truly unprecedented). One wonders how differently we might experience God, Nature, Truth, or Science, if image production had remained confined to such specific standards of creation. What would our lives look like now without so many images? Latour asserts that controversy over the production of images once reached a point "where being an iconoclast seem[ed] the highest virtue, the highest piety, in intellectual circles" (Latour and Weibel 2002, 14). Needless to say, a great many attitudes toward the production of images have changed.

But while the production of images may not, today, seem as controversial as it once was, the power of an image to incite political, religious (or other) unrest undoubtedly remains. The ideological power of images the world over simply cannot be denied. This power should not be overlooked. Images, and the way we perceive them, are phenomena which demand our close attention—as much today as they once did in Byzantium.

Byzantine iconoclasts of the eighth and ninth centuries were skeptical of an icon's capacity to communicate the full and true presence of the divine. As objects of human creation, icons seemed to be essentially 'corrupt' in their material nature. In this same context, however, iconophiles critiqued iconoclasts for their seeming inability to perceive the living Christ—the Truth—in what was materially visible. While the debate over icons eventually came to a resolution in its own time (due, in great part, to iconographers' cultivation of the *symbolic realistic* lens), the ideological and existential questions it raised continue to call for our reflection today. Among these questions stands the issue of how we perceive something as 'true' or 'real.' As Bruno Latour has argued, Western culture generally tends to privilege a realistic mode of sight in

its perception of reality. Scientific images, for example, are perceived from this standpoint; that is, they are judged according to a perception of their objectivity (that is, their ‘uncreatedness’) in revealing the Truth (in revealing a ‘pure’ reality).²² Thus, as Latour remarks, “in the two cases of religion and science, when the hand is shown at work, it is always a hand with a hammer or with a torch: always a critical, a destructive hand” (Latour and Weibel 2002, 16). Does this mean that the authority of an image (in its presentation of God or Truth) depends upon a ‘virgin’ origin that is ‘uncontaminated’ by human hands? One could also pose the question in reverse by asking if the human hand (in its image-producing capacity) is, in fact, essential to the apprehension of reality or divinity? Is Truth mediated by our own productive and visual capacities?

In consideration of the controversy over and creation of Byzantine icons, my main goal has been to rethink the Byzantine icon from the perspectives of both (1) the viewer of an icon and (2) that of an icon-maker. From these perspectives, I hope that I have brought into view the significance of the experience of *flow* for icon-makers and the place of a *symbolic realistic* lens in the viewing of religious (or other) art. By expanding the scope of my reflection to include contemporary approaches to image production, I hope I have shown the debt that some modern forms of image production owe to Byzantine techniques and hermeneutics, and, more generally, how these techniques and hermeneutics complicate any easy distinction between “the made” and the “the real.” In this particular vein, I hope I have drawn attention to the ideological and existential charge of images generally, opening up (for further consideration), the way in which images can destabilize notions of truth and divinity, as well as notions of subjectivity and objectivity.

²² Lorraine Daston (Daston and Galison 1992, 81-128) argues that one of the ways in which science legitimates itself (as a harbinger of Truth) and by which it distances itself from accusations of inaccuracy or unreliability is by demonstrating that the images (of for example, the earth, the human body, etc) it produces have not been altered by a human hand (by laboratory technicians, for example). This helps us to see the great extent to which science derives an impression of its own legitimacy from *acheiropoietic* (not handmade) images today. Estimations of its ability to access and convey Truth rely in great part on its perceived objectivity (that is, on the degree to which it can distance itself from the products (or fallibilities) of human hands).

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