Hierotopic Approaches to Representations of God
in the Visual Culture of the High and Late Middle Ages

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Abstract:

This paper examines various approaches of representation of God in the visual culture of the European High and Late Middle Ages, with a particular focus on spatial and symbolic depictions. Methodologically, it engages with contemporary visual theories articulated by Whitney Davis, Hans Belting, and Alexei Lidov. The research investigates worshippers' multisensory perception of the deity through the framework of hierotopy, or the creation of sacred spaces. The study acknowledges the impact of medieval theological thought, on these representations, particularly of St. Augustine of Hippo. It aims to contribute to the scholarly discourse on the creation of sacred spaces. By examining the interconnections between theology, liturgy, and iconography, the author aims to elucidate the methods employed to depict the divine in medieval visual culture and to identify connections between medieval visuality and theological concepts. The primary objective is to address how the divine entity can be visually represented in space, through both, mental and physical images.

Key words: God, visual culture, middle ages, hierotopy, image, sacred space

Introduction

The recent experience of the worldwide coronavirus pandemic has prompted a re-evaluation of the practice of religious life from isolation, evoking images of medieval plague epidemics and drawing a parallel between the medieval period and the present regarding the experience of divine mysteries. In the present, the phenomenon of online streaming of Holy Mass offers a solution to the challenges posed by the impossible physical presence in the sacred space. Although already familiar to the congregation before COVID-19, this practice has gained heightened importance and popularity during this critical period. Such novel approach of engagement with the divine mystery without the need for physical presence of the worshippers within the sacred space[1] – making God present through the monitors of computers and other electronic devices – raises significant questions about the possible ways of representing and experiencing the transcendent. This is particularly pertinent in light of historical contexts where such technology was not yet available and religion played a more prominent role in human life.

Such practices open new questions within the long-lasting problem of visual representation of Christian God. The problem of (any) representation of God is intrinsically linked to his essence as an ahistorical entity, for which no uniform depiction exists. This absence of an established depiction of the divine is a common denominator of Christianity

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[1] For more on sacred spaces and hierotopy see for example: LIDOV, A.: Hierotopy. The Creation of Sacred Spaces as a Form of Creativity and Subject of Cultural History. In: *Hierotopy. The Creation of Sacred Spaces in Byzantium and Medieval Russia.* Ed.: LIDOV, A. Moscow 2006.

and Judaism.[2] Despite the medieval world's theocentric nature and the profound significance of God[3] in the lives of Christians at the time, the question of his representation and perception remains one of Christianity's great mysteries. This paradox has been addressed through art and visual culture, which have historically sought to resolve the challenge of depicting the divine.[4]

Christianity is essentially a religion of the word, with its fundamental theological conception rooted in understanding *Logos* as a means of revelation and mediation of the divine truth. This notion is expressed in the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Despite this dominant role of the word, Christian tradition cannot be reduced exclusively to textual or verbal expressions, since from its very beginnings it had also worked with visual representation of theological concepts, hence the image has become an equally important medium of theological reflection. This combination of word and image leads us to the fundamental question, if God is word, could it be said that God is also an image? In the Christian tradition, word and image are in constant interaction, with both elements working as interconnected instruments of knowledge and communication of the transcendent. Yet while the word expresses divine truth through scripture, image allows one to grasp invisible spiritual realities through visual means. Whether these images are physical, or mental (created in the minds of believers through *imaginatio*), both are dependent on words to provide the interpretive framework for their meaning.

However, in order to perceive the given (physical) images sensually, we need a physical medium. Hans Belting explains the perception of material images by viewers using his image-medium-body triad.[5] We need the sense of sight (the body) in order to perceive images (of God), which are depicted on a (physical) medium. According to Stephanie Rumpza mediation is a concept that, with its unique possibilities and limitations, facilitates encounter over a distance that would otherwise be impossible to overcome. Rumpza's recent philosophical engagement with the paradox of representing the unrepresentable, as articulated in *Phenomenology of the Icon: Mediating God through the Image*,[6] offers a particularly relevant framework for our research. The author offers a nuanced analysis of how images within the Christian tradition not only mediate but simultaneously constrain or even negate the full representation of the transcendent God. This paradox—the effort to represent that which by nature exceeds the limits of depiction—is, according to Rumpza, intrinsic to the very logic of the icon, wherein the image operates as a medium of divine presence without enabling complete visual apprehension. In the context of medieval European visual culture, such philosophical framework may provide valuable insight not only into the theological but also to the aesthetic strategies employed to grapple with the portrayal of the divine.

Together with Hans Belting, Alexei Lidov[7] or Bissera Pentcheva[8], Stephanie Rumpza belongs to

[2] BELTING, H.: *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art.* Chicago 1994, pp. 45–46.

[3] In our research, we work with the Trinitarian thought which posits the existence of three divine persons within God. This doctrine asserts that God is one in essence and three in person: Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. This concept is based on the Trinitarian doctrine introduced, for example, by St. Augustine of Hippo in his writings De Trinitate. See: AUGUSTINE, St.: *The Trinity (Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century).* Translated by Edmund Hill, Ed.: ROTELLE, J. E. New York 2010.

[4] Given the extensive temporal and geographical scope of the visual representation of God, this study concentrates primarily on the European Christian West, examining a diverse array of media over approximately one millennium. Our analysis
will engage with the traditions of Western Christianity, reflecting our academic and geographical proximity to these traditions. While we recognise that there are many areas of overlap between the Western and Eastern rites of Christianity, due to the scope of this study, the focus of this work will be predominantly on the Western rite.

[5] BELTING, H.: *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body.* Princeton 2014, p. 15.

[6] RUMPZA, S. – MARION J.: *Phenomenology of the Icon: Mediating God through the Image.* Cambridge 2023.

[7] LIDOV, A.: Creating the Sacred Space. Hierotopy as a new field of cultural history. In: *Spazi i percorsi sacri, I santuari, le vie, i corpi.* Eds.: CARNEVALI L. – CREMONESI C. Padua 2014.

a group of contemporary scholars that are using interdisciplinary methods in their research. From a Central European perspective, it is Milena Bartlová[9] who to some extent considers the representation and objectification of the divine entity through images, which extends beyond mere visual perception. These approaches collectively shift the focus from the image as an isolated object to its dynamic role in rituals, thereby transforming the perception from that of a flat surface to that of a spatial emanation. These methods emphasise the importance of the surrounding environment and the spatio-material qualities of the divine image, while also acknowledging the crucial role of the observer's sensory engagement. This trend in multi-disciplinary methods has largely motivated our research, and we posit that a combination of traditional and contemporary theories and methods is one possible way of gaining a more comprehensive view and answers to questions related to the representation of God in the visual culture of the Middle Ages. This brief bibliographical review comprises what we consider to be the most significant writings on the subject.

Hierotopy – God in space, space for God

The first method of representation of God in a sacred space is described by hierotopy, a concept which lies at the centre of this study. This compound term introduced by Alexei Lidov has its roots in Greek, where *hieros* means holy and *topos* refers to a place or space.[10] It describes a way of creating sacred spaces by combining several multisensory perceptible aspects into a unified whole. Such aspects include, for example, the dramaturgy of light, liturgical gestures, sound sensations, the arrangement of images, the organisation of scents, words, and, last but not least, the active participation of the observer.[11] It is not merely a matter of describing these spaces, rather it is a way of actively and purposefully creating them through a number of elements.[12] As Bissera Pentcheva notes, it is a human activity that focuses on the creation of structures within a temporal and spatial framework, engaging with multisensory experience and materiality in space.[13] Instead of taking the position of creators of sacred spaces, we adopt the position of their observers.

Michele Bacci points to a change in the methodology employed to study sacred spaces as something different from their purely architectural framework. This space has recently come to be conceptualised as a framework of interactions between multiple factors, including priests, lay people, images, church furnishings, and, most notably, the divinity itself, which is made present through the performative power of ritual and various strategies of monumental staging.[14] Bacci defines the hierotopic approach as a method of analysis that focuses on the various strategies by which the divine entity is evoked in specific ritual contexts, spatially, visually, and materially.[15] From a psychological perspective, these techniques seek to evoke an emotional response in the observer. The observer, therefore, perceives the material space as imbued with supernatural qualities.[16] In this context, Milena Bartlová also emphasises the

8   See for instance: PENTCHEVA, B.: *Aural Architecture in Byzantium: Music, Acoustics, and Ritual*. London 2017; PENTCHEVA, B.: *The Sensual Icon: space, ritual and the senses in Byzantium*. Pennsylvania 2010.

9   BARTLOVÁ, M.: *Skutečná přítomnost. Středověký obraz mezi ikonou a virtuální realitou*. Praha 2012.

10 As Michele Bacci and many others have rightly noted, the Greek term „topos" refers to the designation of sacred „spaces" rather than sacred „places" as topos is usually translated. See: BACCI, M.: Sacred spaces versus holy sites: on the limits and advantages of a hierotopic approach. In: *Icons of Space: Advances in Hierotopy*. Ed.: BOGDANOVIĆ, J. Routledge 2021, pp. 17, 23.

11 LIDOV 2014 (see in note 7), p. 62.

12 SIMSKY, A.: Image-paradigms: the aesthetics of the invisible. In: *Icons of Space: Advances in Hierotopy*. Ed.: BOGDANOVIĆ, J. London 2021, p. 31; SCOLLINS, K.: A Haymarket *Khozhdenie na osliati*: Raskolnikov's Donkey Walk and the Failures of Iconic Performativity. In: *Journal of Icon Studies*, 3, 2020, p. 5.

13 PENTCHEVA 2010 (see in note 8), p. 9.

14 BACCI 2021 (see in note 10), p. 16.

15 Ibidem, p. 16.

16 Ibidem, p. 16.

importance of movement, which unites synaesthetic sensations into a unified experience.[17]

In relation to the participant's movement through the sacred space and their subsequent sensory experience of the various elements within these spaces, we introduce the concept of *ductus*, which has been extensively addressed by Paul Crossley and Mary Carruthers.[18] Carruthers defines *ductus* as a dynamic process, whereby a work of art guides the viewer through its various elements and layers. This type of experience prompts the viewer to move across the various structures of the work, which gradually direct their attention and sensory experience of the sacred.[19] Paul Crossley illustrates *ductus* by drawing a comparison between the sacred topography of Chartres Cathedral and the Noah's Ark of Hugh of St. Victor, suggesting that liturgical acts and visual images have the capacity to condition a certain series of journeys through the body of the viewer.[20] Crossley proposes the 12th century architectural mnemonic exercises written by Hugh of St. Victor. The fundamental idea is that the mind is directed towards a specific objective.[21] In the case of pilgrimage churches, for example, this may refer to the relic of a saint which marks the destination of the pilgrimage. This is considered not just a journey of the body, but also a journey of the mind. Crossley presents Chartres Cathedral and the manner in which the building itself guides the pilgrim towards the destination of the pilgrimage, the Santa Camisa, the sacred tunic supposedly worn by the Virgin Mary at the birth of Christ.[22] In the context of the celebration of liturgy, *ductus* can be understood as a symbolic journey of the believer towards a goal. Within hierotopy, this goal may be defined as the moment of the elevation of the host – transubstantiation. This is the definitive experience of representation and evocation of God in a given space and time.

In both cases, with hierotopy, as with *ductus*, the viewer is an active participant in the process and in the space, thereby contributing to the creation of the sacred space through their (physical) presence. The two concepts can be understood in conjunction as follows: the medieval church as a whole creates the sacred space through the combined effects of individual elements such as light, burning incense, words spoken during the liturgy, chanting, and so forth. These elements act on different senses, which in the context of *ductus* can be understood as a journey. In *ductus*, the diverse elements represent the individual steps of the believer throughout the liturgy, which culminates in a specific location and temporal context representing the ultimate objective – the moment of transubstantiation.

Within hierotopy, Lidov introduced two additional concepts: the spatial icon and the image-paradigm, as Andrew Simsky correctly asserts.[23] Lidov presented the spatial icon as a kind of reconstruction or reproduction of a specific (biblical) event. He described it as an "energic re-enactment of an icon in the real world, possessing the same miraculous,

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[17] BARTLOVÁ 2012 (see in note 9), p. 232.

[18] See: CROSSLEY, P.: Ductus and memoria: Chartres cathedral and the workings of rhetoric. In: *Rhetoric Beyond Words: Delight and Persuasion in the Arts of the Middle Ages*. Ed.: CARRUTHERS, M. Cambridge 2010; CARRUTHERS, M.: The concept of ductus, or journeying through a work of art. In: *Rhetoric Beyond Words: Delight and Persuasion in the Arts of the Middle Ages*. Ed.: CARRUTHERS, M. Cambridge 2010.

[19] CARRUTHERS 2010 (see in note 18), p. 190.

[20] CROSSLEY 2010 (see in note 18), p. 234.

[21] Ibidem, p. 230.

[22] Ibidem, p. 218.

[23] SIMSKY 2021 (see in note 12), p. 29; While our research is primarily focused on the concept of hierotopy, it is imperative to also address the two other relevant concepts, introduced by Lidov: spatial icon and image-paradigm. The spatial icon, unlike traditional icons displayed on flat surfaces, is represented by a series of elements distributed throughout a given space. It can be illustrated by the example of the Spiš Jerusalem, a set of chapels designed to symbolically evoke the Stations of the Cross, thereby creating a sacred space. The image-paradigm can be illustrated on the idea of the Heavenly Jerusalem and its projection in a Medieval church. To be specific, it can be demonstrated on the upper hall of the narthex in the Church of St. Peter in Moissac, France. This space is conceived as an exact replica of the Heavenly Jerusalem described in the Bible (Rev 21:2-14, 16, 23). For more on the Church of St. Peter in Moissac, see: FOLETTI, I. – LEŠÁK, M.: *Poutní umění ve středověku jako tělesný zážitek*. Brno 2022. Parva Convivia 2, II., p. 129.

transporting qualities as a material icon".[24] To illustrate this concept, Lidov cites the ceremonial entry of Jesus Christ into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (Matthew 21:1-11). This popular motif in Byzantine medieval art is one of the Orthodox customs taking place in the centre of Moscow, also known as the "Donkey Walk". This event transformed Moscow into an icon of the Holy Jerusalem.[25] According to Lidov, the objective is to create an iconic image that links the real city with the terrestrial and celestial Jerusalem. This ritual is to be interpreted as a kind of a living image, a dynamic (and perhaps spatial) reconstruction of an icon or event.[26]

A similar approach could be taken concerning the moment of transubstantiation. As Miri Rubin correctly observes, this ritual formed the basis of an entire religious system in which bread was transformed into flesh, a physical object becoming a spiritual entity – God.[27] Believers were physically present during this act, and the sense of sight functioned here to connect the material world with the transcendental one. It is an event that occurs repeatedly in the same manner, yet, as Milena Bartlová noted, it also happens differently every time – in a different place, at a different time, and in the presence of different participants.[28] However, as this is not a specific biblical event but a theological concept, it is pertinent to question – what was visualised in the minds of believers at the moment of transubstantiation?

„Take and eat, (take and see?) This is my body"

Before any further discussion, it is essential to consider the different forms of reception of the Body of Christ during the Middle Ages. The manner of receiving Holy Communion during this period significantly differed from the practice observed today, as the Eucharist was not as accessible to the faithful in the same frequency. Following the decision of the Fourth Lateran Council, most believers received the Body of Christ on a single occasion per year, namely at Easter, after confession and purification from sins.[29] The Fourth Lateran Council established the doctrine that bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ during the celebration of liturgy. This teaching is based on a literal interpretation of the words spoken by Christ at the Last Supper:[30] "While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:26-29).

The Eucharist presented a means of achieving the closest possible proximity to God - during the Mass, through the Host in which his body was present. This, according to Camille, was not considered to be an image, but something akin to a relic, something that had real power.[31]

The celebration of the Eucharist has played a central role in Christian tradition, as it commemorated Jesus' Last Supper and was a symbol of his sacrifice. To prevent laypeople in the Middle Ages from questioning the true presence of God in the Eucharist – a concern that was fairly widespread – the Fourth Lateran Council formally endorsed the doctrine of transubstantiation (specifically the concept of concomitance), affirming that Christ's body

[24] SCOLLINS 2020 (see in note 12), p. 10.

[25] For more on the topic of the Donkey Walk in Moscow and Lidov's spatial icon see: SCOLLINS 2020 (see in note 12), p. 8.

[26] LIDOV 2014 (see in note 7), p. 76.

[27] RUBIN, M.: *Corpus Christi. The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*. Oxford 1992, p. 1.

[28] BARTLOVÁ 2012 (see in note 9), p. 339.

[29] BIERNOFF, S:. *Sight and embodiment in the Middle Ages. The New Middle Ages*. London 2002, p. 140.

[30] Ibidem, p. 141.

[31] CAMILLE, M.: *Gothic Art: Visions and Revelations of the Medieval World*. London 1996, p. 108.

and blood are fully present in every particle of the consecrated host.[32]

Since the believers were unable to partake in the Eucharist on a daily basis, various *substitutional* forms of reception of the Body of Christ emerged, including kissing the *pax*[33] or gazing at the host at the moment of transubstantiation, a practice known as *ocular communion*.[34] This concept proposed the notion of observing the transformed host as a substitute for consuming the bread. The perception of the miraculously transubstantiated bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ through the sense of sight has become a substitute for *consuming* Christ through the sense of taste.[35] The act of seeing the Eucharist thus became a significant aspect of how the faithful could experience this sacrament.[36] *Manducatio per visum* was particularly supported by the optical theory of intromission,[37] which posits that images emit rays that strike the eye's retina. In this case, the host emitted these rays towards the observer.

This habit is associated with the alterations in liturgical practice that occurred at the beginning of the 13th century, which encompassed the introduction of the gesture of elevating the host at the moment of transubstantiation. This *transubstantiatio* was, as Milena Bartlová observes, described as a form of visual piety. The medieval theory of vision regarded seeing as a tactile activity. Consequently, even a fleeting glance at the host at the moment of transubstantiation was believed sufficient to fulfil the need for physical contact, comparable to the act of eating.[38]

The sight of the host, which was intended to evoke the Body of Christ, presented a challenge to the faithful - how to imagine, under a physical object such as a round wafer, the Body of Christ that the object symbolised? Physical images offer a partial response to this question. In the context of the transubstantiation, the iconography of the Mass of St. Gregory is particularly demonstrative. As an illustration of the so-called *Augenkommunion*, the iconographic motif of the Mass of St. Gregory is most often cited, depicting the miracle of the appearance of Christ as the Man of Sorrows before Pope Gregory during the celebration of the Eucharist.[39] According to this legend, Pope Gregory the Great doubted the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but Christ appeared to him as a Man of Sorrows at the moment of consecration to demonstrate his presence.[40]

Jacobus de Voragine in his *Legenda Aurea* offers a version of the legend according to Paul the Deacon.[41] He describes the miracle of St. Gregory and a woman who doubted the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, which miraculously transformed into flesh in the shape of a finger.[42] Panel painting from the altarpiece of the Church Fathers in Sabi-

[32] BYNUM, C.: *Holy Fast and Holy Feast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Berkeley 1987, p. 51; KUBÍN, P.: Stručná historie eucharistického dogmatu. In: *V oplatce jsi všecek tajně. Eucharistie v náboženské a vizuální kultuře Českých zemí do roku 1620*. Ed.: MUDRA, A. Praha 2017, pp. 24–25.

[33] For more on the role of the pax in the late Middle Ages see: CHAMPION, M.: The Role of the Pax in the Late Medieval Church and a Recently Rediscovered Example from St. George's Church, South Acre. In: *Norfolk Archaeology* XLVII, 2017, pp. 487–497.

[34] SAUER, M. M.: Architecture of Desire: Mediating the Female Gaze in the Medieval English Anchorhold. In: *Gender & History,* Vol. 25, no. 3, 2013, p. 552.

[35] BIERNOFF 2002 (see in note 29)*,* p. 141.

[36] VAN AUSDALL, K.: Communicating with the Host: Imagery and Eucharistic Contact in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Italy. In: *Push Me, Pull You: Imaginative and Emotional Interaction in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art*. Eds.: BLICK, S. – GELFAND, L.: Leiden 2011, p. 450.

[37] TIMMERMANN, A.: *Real Presence: Sacrament Houses and the Body of Christ, c. 1270-1600*. Turnhout 2009, pp. 3–4.

[38] Ibidem, s. 263.

[39] BRAUNFELS, W. – KIRSCHBAUM, E.: *Lexikon der Christlichen Ikonographie, Zweite Band*. Freiburg im Breisgau 1970, pp. 199–200.

[40] SCRIBNER, B.: Popular Piety and Modes of Visual Perception in Late-Medieval and Reformation Germany. In: *Journal of Religious History*, 15, 1989, p. 449.

[41] ROYT, J.: Eucharistické zázraky a výtvarné umění. In: *V oplatce jsi všecek tajně. Eucharistie v náboženské a vizuální kultuře Českých zemí do roku 1620*. Ed.: MUDRA, A. Praha 2017, p. 234.

[42] VORAGINE, J.: *The Golden Legend*. Princeton 2012, p. 647.

nov illustrates both versions of this legend (Fig. 1). Inside the church during the celebration of a Mass, Pope Gregory, dressed in a golden chasuble, hands an object resembling a finger, instead of a host, to a kneeling woman over a golden paten. Behind him, on the altar table, a diminished Christ is depicted as the Man of Sorrows, before whom a golden chalice is placed, referring to both of the transfigured substances –Body and Blood of Christ.

By looking at the round wafer, which undergoes a transformation into the Body of Christ during the moment of transubstantiation, the faithful could mentally visualise images related to the Body of Christ, such as the aforementioned Man of Sorrows, or, as Achim Timmerman notes, the act of elevation of the host symbolically recalled Christ's institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper and the lifting of the cross and his body at Mount Calvary.[43] As previously stated, the image played a pivotal role in the context of devotion. The entire devotional experience and activity were built on visual perception and experience. According to Bob Scribner, the gesture of elevating the Eucharist during the service, a kind of "exposition of the sacrament," was intended to evoke the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ.[44]

Bissera Pentcheva identifies a category of images she refers to as "performative icons," or images created in the mind through song and liturgy. Similarly, Ivan Foletti describes this concept in his paper on angels in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages,

Fig. 1: Workshop of Master Paul of Levoča, panel painting with the scene of the Mass of St. Gregory. Altar of the Church Fathers, Church of St. John the Baptist in Sabinov, Slovakia. 1510-1520. Photo: Institute of Material Culture of the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period, Austria - CC BY-NC-ND.

indicating that in a sacred space which was decorated with still images (of angels), there must have been other images that were created in the mind through chant and liturgy, forming an integral part of hierotopy.[45] These images were no less real even though they were not physical but mental, as defined by Hans Belting and Whitney Davis.[46] As Andrew

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[43] TIMMERMANN 2009 (see in note 37), p. 4.

[44] SCRIBNER 1989 (see in note 40), p. 459.

[45] FOLETTI, I.: Poslové, prostředníci a ochránci: Andělé v pozdní antice a raném středověku. In: *Šumění andělských křídel anděl v evropském výtvarném umění.* Ed.: ELBELOVÁ, G. Olomouc 2016, p. 33.

[46] Hans Belting distinguishes between images and works of art. In his view, a work of art represents a material object, and thus requires a medium that materialises this image. Conversely, the image resists such attempts at materialisation, often occupying a liminal space between physical and mental existence. It is essential to consider the image as both a product of the medium and a product of the individual, as the latter creates images in the mind (dreams, imaginings, visions, etc.), which are then compared with images in the visible world. Consequently, images are not only regarded as physical material (visual) objects, but also as images created in the mind and therefore of a non-material nature. For more on Belting and his theory of image see: BELTING 1994 (see in note 3). Similarly, Whitney Davis differentiates between images and pictures, adopting a distinction that is parallel to that made by Belting. Davis proposes that neither of these entities need to be wholly, or even partially, visual. A picture is, without doubt, a representation. A material image is a material visual representation of the entity it depicts. However, it is evident that representations need not be pictures, even if they are visual and visible. He differentiates between the term „image," which he defines as „the generation of visual space," and the term „picture," which he defines as „an artefact in visual space that extends visual space into a virtual space of virtual objects." For more on Davis and his theory of the image see: DAVIS, W.: *Visuality and Virtuality: Images and Pictures from Prehistory to Perspective.* Princeton 2017; DAVIS, W.: *A General Theory of Visual Culture.* New Jersey 2011.

Simsky observes in his paper on the image-paradigm, mental images have received far less attention than other aspects of religious practice.[47] Nevertheless, we contend that mental images, like their physical counterparts, constitute an integral aspect of *devotio* and play an indispensable role both in the life of the worshippers and in the process of representation and evocation of the divine entity in sacred spaces.

In the context of hierotopy – the creation of sacred spaces – it is crucial to consider the full range of sensory elements that played a role during the moment of transubstantiation and contributed to the creation of such spaces. These include the elevation of the host, the ringing of bells, the burning of incense,[48] the words spoken during the liturgy, and notably, the ritual fanning of the host with a *flabellum*.[49] It is a complex synaesthetic experience in which the entire human body is engaged with all its senses. In her study, *The Performative Icon,* Bissera Pentcheva discusses the phenomenon of synaesthesia in relation to the sensory perception of Byzantine icons. In this instance, however, the author does not employ the term "synaesthesia" in its conventional psychological sense, namely as a sensory experience resulting from the stimulation of a different sense. Instead, the concept is viewed as a consonant sensation, or "the simultaneity of senses".[50]

Accordingly, in the context of the hierotopic approach, the rituals mentioned above should not be examined as separate activities, but rather as a unified set of acts that, through active participation of the believer, can evoke and represent the divine entity in a given space and time. There is a shift in focus from theorising the ontological nature of sacred spaces to examining the various strategies employed in the visual representation of the divine. Each aspect mentioned above encouraged active participation in the devotional act, playing an essential role in the context of *devotio*.

Hagioscopes – windows to the divine

The ritual act of elevating the host is closely connected to the architectural development of choir screens, which physically and visually demarcated the sanctuary – housing the altar and officiating priest – from the congregation. As a result, at the pivotal moment of the Eucharistic transformation, Christ became concealed within the sanctuary, which together enclosed the priest and the divine presence off from the eyes of the worshipping community.[51] This visual distance and separation between the laity, situated in the nave, and the sacred ritual unfolding in the sanctuary was mediated through hagioscopes – specific purpose-built apertures in the church walls that permitted the faithful to witness the moment of the elevation of the host.

Given the importance of vision and visuality in religious life in the Middle Ages, it is essential that our research elucidates the distinctive apertures in the walls of medieval churches - hagioscopes. Different from conventional stained glass or medieval church windows, hagioscopes represent a unique type of openings in the walls of late medieval churches across Europe. Derived from the Greek *hagios* (holy) and *scopio* (to see), these architectural elements can simply be defined as devices for seeing God. Although they have been given numerous functions, our paper will assert that the primary purpose of these apertures was to act as mediators between the faithful and the divine. In the context of medieval vision theory and visuality, it is essential to emphasise the necessity of a more complex understanding of hagioscopes, not merely as isolated instruments for seeing the divine, but as integral components of the architectural structure of medieval churches. These structures, in conjunction with other elements such as light, burning incense, or bells, create hierotopy of sacred spaces which

[47] SIMSKY 2021 (see in note 23), p. 35.

[48] For more on the importance of scent in sacred spaces see: TICHÁ, P.: Poutníci, mniši a posvátno ve středověkém kostele. In: *Poutní umění ve středověku jako tělesný zážitek.* Eds.: FOLETTI, I. – LEŠÁK, M. Brno 2022. Parva Convivia 2, II., p. 156.

[49] For more on the topic of the flabellum see: KESSLER, H. L.: *Images Borne on a Breeze: The Function of the Flabellum of Tournus*

as Meaning. 2012. Available online: https://bpb-us-w2.wpmu-cdn.com/voices.uchicago.edu/dist/3/137/files/2011/09/Kessler-Images-Borne-on-a-Breeze.pdf

[50] PENTCHEVA, B.: The Performative Icon. In: *The Art Bulletin* 88, no. 4, 2006, p. 631.

[51] BYNUM 1987 (see in note 32), p. 57.

need to be experienced through the engagement of multiple senses.

The emergence of hagioscopes is related to the birth of rode screens during the late medieval period in Europe. Hagioscopes within these partitions separating the presbytery – the space for the clergy, from the nave – the space for the laity, permitted a view into the presbytery for individuals who lacked access to it. In this instance, hagioscopes served as visual aids, enabling the faithful to see the Eucharist with their physical eyes during the moment of transubstantiation. They thus constituted a means through which the faithful could engage with the divine mystery in a visual and auditory manner. Examples of these architectural openings are found especially in countries where the Counter-Reformation was unsuccessful. Two examples from our geographical background present the Romanesque church of St. Margaret of Antioch in Malá Mača (Fig. 2) and the chapel of the Zvolen Castle. As Štefan Oriško notes in his article on the chapel of the Zvolen Castle, there is no mention of this architectural element within the medieval monuments of Slovakia, which would describe it in more detail, or which would offer information about its occurrence.[52]

God as light, light as image

In examining sacred spaces and the representation of God within them, it is also necessary to focus on the role of light, which has played a central role in Christianity. The concept of God as light is introduced at the beginning of the Bible in the book of Genesis and is reiterated throughout the Scripture numerous times. As Georges Duby notes, light held a substantial position in ancient philosophical thought. This significance was subsequently embraced by medieval thinkers such as St. Augustine of Hippo and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, both of whom celebrated God as light.[53] Within

Fig. 2: Hagioscope in the presbytery of the Romanesque church of St. Margaret of Antioch in Malá Mača, Slovakia. 14th century. Photo: www.apsida.sk

the broader context of imagery, vision and visuality, light undoubtedly assumes a pivotal role, serving as the very condition for the visibility of images. Alongside liturgical gestures, singing, and images, light also contributed to hierotopy or the creation of sacred spaces.

To comprehend the role of light within the medieval churches, one firstly needs to be aware of the atmosphere of these sacred spaces and their original lighting conditions. As Ivan Foletti emphasises, contemporary viewers with a post-modern perspective often find it challenging to comprehend medieval sacred spaces, even when attempting to cast aside the assumptions of positivist thinking.[54] The lighting conditions differed profoundly from those observed in temples today.[55] In some instances, the quantity of artificial illumination almost equates to the amount of lighting in an over-lit gallery or museum. Yet, the heightened visibility strips the space of its essential mystery and transcendence. The result is a dissonance: the contemporary lighting undermines the

[52] ORIŠKO, Š.: K problému kaplnky Zvolenského zámku. In: *Archaeologia historica*, vol. 37, 2012, no. 2,, p. 602.

[53] DUBY, G.: *Věk katedrál. Umění a společnost 980–1420*. Praha 2002, pp. 104–105.

[54] FOLETTI 2016 (see in note 45), p. 33; In this context, Foletti makes a specific reference to the role of angels in shaping the mental space influenced by liturgical practices.

[55] Bissera Pentcheva's research is centred on the original lighting conditions in temples in relation to Byzantine icons. For more on the topic see: PENTCHEVA 2010 (see in note 8).

sacred atmosphere, ultimately diverging from the original intent, which was not to showcase artefacts, but to evoke a sense of divine presence through controlled and often minimal illumination.

In the Middle Ages, the principles of light employed in Gothic churches were markedly different from those applied today. The method of interior lighting was sophisticated and sacred spaces were subsequently illuminated through the use of coloured stained glass or artificial light from candles or oil lamps. Among the most discussed "architects of sacred spaces" in the canon of art history is undoubtedly Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis (1081-1151). This popularity is undeniably attributable to Erwin Panofsky's seminal interpretation in his essay *Suger, Abbot of Saint-Denis*.[56] As Herbert Kessler and others have observed, Suger's reconstruction of the abbey church at Saint-Denis, France, was arguably the most ambitious attempt in the medieval West to construct an elevated theological programme using images, and it was he who initiated and led the rebuilding of the abbey and church into the so-called "Gothic" form.[57] The rebuilding of the abbey could be contextualised within the broader medieval conceptualisation of light within the church and the furnishing of the presbytery with coloured stained glass windows and their anagogical interpretation.[58]

Based on the Neoplatonic philosophy of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, God is not subject to any form of knowledge apart from creation. Only through the medium of created symbols can he be known. Pseudo-Dionysius posits a paradoxical relationship between God and humanity. God can,

according to him, "illuminate" us, he can be presented or revealed to us, but only to the extent that he is veiled or hidden from us. The Neoplatonist explains the knowledge of God by means of symbolism, illuminating people anagogically, hidden in sacred veils.[59] As Panofsky observed, all created entities, whether man-made or natural, become symbols of that which the senses cannot perceive. They thus represent a step on the path to heaven.[60]

Suger's stained-glass windows at Saint-Denis used a significant quantity of "*vitri vestiti et saphirorum materia*," interpreted by Kessler as alluding to the dual aspect of glass encompassing both its veiled imagery and its glow, which evoked gems.[61] However, the stained-glass windows at Saint-Denis were not just a feast for the eyes. It can be reasonably deduced, that their primary function was to evoke the divine light of the Scripture, which, as the Neoplatonist Pseudo-Dionysius elucidates, banished spiritual darkness.[62] The objective was to imbue the artwork with a tangible clarity that would illuminate the viewer's mind with spiritual light. The formula *lux nova*, the new light of the Gothic presbytery that replaced the dark Carolingian apse, refers to the improvement of lighting conditions and speaks of the light of the New Testament as opposed to the darkness or blindness of the Old Testament.[63] In this context, physical light can be understood as a symbol of God working in accordance with the tenets of Neoplatonic philosophy. This is evidenced by Suger's assertion in one of his poems according to which light illuminates the space, and it also illuminates the mind of the believer on the path of knowing God:

[56] PANOFSKY, E.: *Meaning in the Visual Arts*. New York 1955.

[57] JAŠŠOVÁ, M.: Opát Suger v predstave Panofského a Kidsona: Dva pohľady na problém vytvárania konceptu umeleckého diela v stredoveku. In: *Ostium*, roč. 8, 2012, č. 2.

[58] KESSLER, H. L.: The Function of Vitrum Vestitum and the Use of Materia Saphirorum in Suger's St. Denis. In: *L'image: Fonctions et usages des images dans l'Occident medieval (Cahiers du Léopard d'Or, t. 5)*. Ed.: PASTOUREAU, M. Paris 1966, p. 182; DELL'ACQUA, F.: The Christ from San Vincenzo al Volturno (9th c.): Another Instance of 'Christ's Dazzling Face'. In: *The Single Stained-Glass Panel. XXIV. International Colloquium of the Corpus Vitrearum (Zurich, 30th of June – 4th of July 2008)*. Ed.: TRÜMPLER, S. Bern 2010, pp. 14–15.

[59] JAŠŠOVÁ 2012 (see in note 66); PERL, E. D.: Pseudo-Dionysius. In: *A Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages*. Eds.: GRACIA, J. J. E. – NOONE, T. B. 2005, p. 547.

[60] PANOFSKY 1955 (see in note 56), p. 149.

[61] KESSLER 1966 (see in note 58), p. 183.

[62] PANOFSKY 1955 (see in note 56), p. 130.

[63] Ibidem, p. 130.

Once the new rear part is joined to the part in front,
The church shines with its middle part brightened.
For bright is that which is brightly coupled with the bright,
And bright is the noble edifice which is pervaded by the
new light.[64]

Entrance to Suger's presbytery illuminated by stained glass windows pulsating with colour was, according to Herbert Kessler, an experience reminiscent of prophetic visions of God – not only his distant observation, but his immediate vision. This form of vision, which Augustine described as "spiritual" and was allegedly experienced by Isaiah or John in the Apocalyptic vision, creates a parallel between the mystical experiences of the saints and the transcendent effect of Suger's chorus.[65] St. Paul had a similar experience, which is related to the persecution of Christians on his journey to Damascus, as Jacobus de Voragine comments.[66] The Bible also describes this event: "As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do" (Acts 9:3-6).

Paul's experience of God's light and losing his sight meant a shift from physical to spiritual vision, as Ivan Gerát adds, "The spiritually enlightened apostle lost his physical sight for three days. […] The meaning of the word *visio* in this context has shifted significantly from physical vision to spiritual vision".[67] This corresponds with the theory of vision of St. Augustine, according to whom spiritual vision is not perceived through the eyes of the body, but through the eyes of the mind. St. Paul was thus illuminated by God' light not only physically, but also spiritually – this illumination, similarly to Suger's presbytery,

Fig. 3: Bust of Christ in one of the oldest surviving stained-glass windows in San Vincenzo al Volturno, Italy. Around 830. Photo: KURMANN-SCHWARZ, B. – PASTAN, E. (eds.).: Investigations in Medieval Stained Glass. Leiden 2019, p. 80.

illuminates the faithful on both levels, spiritual and physical.

The idea of God as light is amplified in the Gospel of John, where Jesus utters the phrase, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). This biblical passage may have served as a direct inspiration for the depiction of Christ in one of the earliest surviving stained-glass windows in San Vincenzo al Volturno, Italy, dating to the second half of the 9th century (Fig. 3).[68] This fragment of stained glass probably depicts Christ, as evidenced in particular by the red and green cross nimbus, to the left of which can be seen the letter Alpha, denoting Christ as Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end of all things, as it is written in Revelation 21:6, "And he said to me: "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End".

[64] Ibidem.

[65] KESSLER, H.: *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art.* Philadelphia 2000, p. 148.

[66] VORAGINE 2012 (see in note 42), p. 119.

[67] GERÁT, I.: *Legendary Scenes: An Essay on Medieval Pictorial Hagiography.* Bratislava 2013, p. 153.

[68] DELL'ACQUA, F.: The Christ from San Vincenzo al Volturno (9th c.): Another Instance of 'Christ's Dazzling Face'. In: *The Single Stained-Glass Panel. XXIV. International Colloquium of the Corpus Vitrearum* (Zurich, 30th of June – 4th of July 2008). Ed.: TRÜMPLER, S. Bern, Peter Lang AG, 2010, p. 15.

Particular attention must be paid to how Christ's face is depicted –through transparent glass, devoid of any facial features. As Francesca Dell'Acqua points out, there is no evidence on the stained glass that any pigment was used to render facial features or the drapery of the monogram. This visual strategy carries multiple layers of meaning – it allows the light to penetrate the space in which it is located, it affirms Christ's visibility and therefore his humanity (as the incarnate God in human body of Jesus of Christ), while simultaneously indicating the unknowability of his face, made of pure light.[69]

This physical image of the "stained-glass Christ" served as a visual aid for believers who sought to conceptualise God as light, or as *verum lumen*, according to Suger.[70] For this instance, it would be beneficial to reflect on Whitney Davis's assertion that "we do not see images, then; we see *with* images".[71] Regarding the stained-glass figure of Christ, it is not mental images that facilitate our vision, but rather physical images. In other words, we see mental images by means of physical images – the physical image of the stained-glass Christ, which allows the light symbolising God to penetrate, enables the creation of a visual representation of God in the mind through the use of mental images. The image, whether mental or physical, in this case serves as a channel of communication between the physical and spiritual realms.

Francesca Dell'Acqua proposes a hypothesis according to which the stained glass was originally located in the crypt of Abbot Epiphanius (824-842) in the monastery of San Vincenzo al Volturno. Special attention is devoted to the architectural context of this stained glass, especially its location in the eastern window of the crypt and its iconographic associations. Above the opening is the depiction of the Manus Dei, emitting a ray of light, as if directly from the stained-glass window. This detail suggests that the stained glass was not just a mere representation of Christ, but carried a more profound theological and symbolic significance.[72]

In this context, the stained glass may be interpreted as both figurative and symbolic representation of God. Figuratively, God is depicted in the form of Christ, while symbolically he is present through light – a symbol deeply rooted in biblical tradition and the theology of light in the Gospel of John. This dual function of stained glass underscores its significance within the sacred space – not only did it physically illuminate the crypt, but it also spiritually illuminated the minds and souls of the faithful with God's light. In this sense, the stained glass was not merely an aesthetic and architectural feature, but an actively participating element in the liturgical and spiritual atmosphere of the space.

Francesca Dell'Acqua emphasises that depicting Christ's face with indistinct features was the only viable way to represent Christ—as God—while respecting the theological concept of the impossibility of visualising him. The roots of this decision may be traced back to Holy Scripture, where in the book of Exodus, God declares, "You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live" (Exodus 33:20).

Conclusion

In the presented text, we have attempted to discuss some of the symbolic and spatial forms of representation of God in the visual culture of the High and Late Middle Ages. In conclusion, the hierotopic approach emphasises the significance of active physical participation of the believer in the sacred space, which is then experienced by the observer through multiple senses. This study underscores the significance of vision and visuality in the act of devotion, illustrating the pivotal role of visual representation in establishing a connection with the divine. The concepts of hierotopy and *ductus* serve to further elucidate the importance of the environment and the viewer's journey in the context of the sacred experience. The study also highlights the pioneering use of light in medieval churches, notably through stained glass, as a means for symbolising and experiencing the divine presence. These insights are paralleled with contemporary practices, where the online streaming of Holy Mass represents a contemporary adaptation of historical approaches, emphasising the evolving

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[69] Ibidem, p. 15.

[70] PANOFSKY 1955, (see in note 56), p. 131.

[71] DAVIS 2011 (see in note 46), pp. 203, 278.

[72] Ibidem, pp. 21–22.

yet consistent desire to see and experience God. The integration of traditional iconographic analysis with contemporary interdisciplinary approaches enables a more comprehensive and nuanced interpretation of the visual representation of God. This comprehensive approach demonstrates the continuity and adaptability of religious practices in addressing the human longing for the image of the divine. Ultimately, this synthesis of medieval and contemporary perspectives serves to enhance our appreciation of how visual culture continues to shape and reflect the sacred experience across time.

Hierotopické prístupy k reprezentáciám Boha vo vizuálnej kultúre vrcholného a neskorého stredoveku

Resumé

Nedávna pandémia koronavírusu poukázala na výrazné paralely medzi stredovekou a súčasnou náboženskou praxou, predovšetkým v súvislosti s prežívaním božského tajomstva z izolácie. Online prenosy svätých omší sa v súčasnosti stali fenoménom, ktorý otvára otázky týkajúce sa (vizuálnej) reprezentácie a prežívania posvätného v historickom i súčasnom kontexte. Štúdia sa zameriava na skúmanie vizuálnej reprezentácie Boha prostredníctvom obrazov, s dôrazom na priestorové a symbolické zobrazenia. Analýza vychádza zo stredovekých a súčasných teórií videnia a vizuality. Výskum stredovekej vizuálnej reprezentácie Boha sa často sústreďuje na ikonografiu Najsvätejšej Trojice, avšak novšie interdisciplinárne prístupy zdôrazňujú dynamickú úlohu sakrálnych obrazov v liturgickej praxi, opierajúc sa o koncepty ako hierotopia a *ductus*. Koncept hierotopie, predstavený Alexeiom Lidovom, označuje proces tvorby sakrálneho priestoru prostredníctvom multisenzorických prvkov, zatiaľ čo *ductus* sa vzťahuje na putovanie pohľadu diváka naprieč umeleckým dielom, čím sa prehlbuje jeho zmyslové prežívanie posvätného. Tieto prístupy zdôrazňujú význam priestorového kontextu a senzorického zapojenia pozorovateľa. Štúdia sa ďalej venuje aj stredovekým liturgickým praktikám, ako je *manducatio per visum*, teda zvyk vizuálneho prijímania Eucharistie ako náhrady za jej fyzickú konzumáciu, ktorý odráža teologickú dôležitosť zraku pri sprostredkovaní božského tajomstva. Zároveň analyzuje úlohu svetla v stredovekých chrámoch, najmä v podobe vitráží, ako symbolu božej prítomnosti. Spojením tradičných a súčasných metodologických prístupov štúdia prispieva k diskurzu o rôznorodosti reprezentácie Boha v stredovekej vizuálnej kultúre.

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