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### Review of Michael Viktor Schwarz's, *Visuelle Medien im christlichen Kult. Fallstudien aus dem 13. bis 16. Jahrhundert*, Böhlau (Wien / Köln / Weimar 2002)

Viola Belghaus  
*TU Dresden / EPHE Paris*

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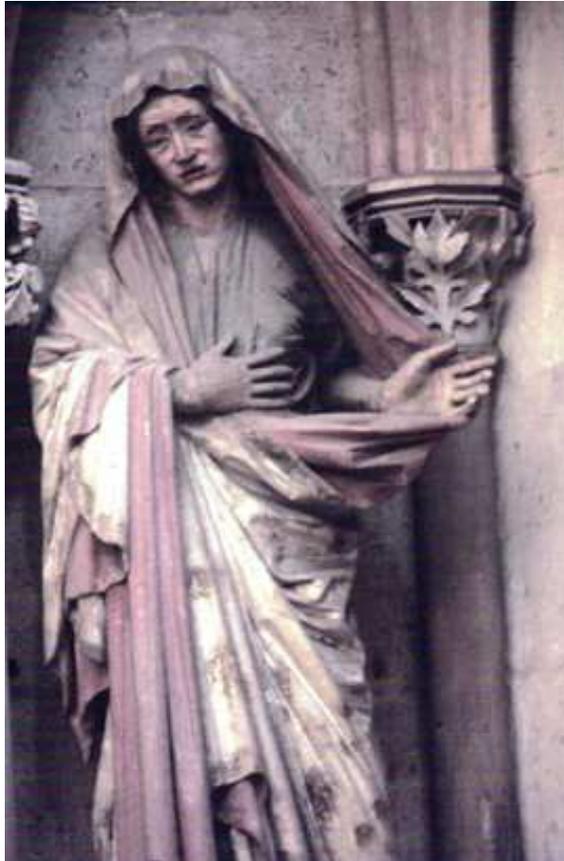


**Review of Michael Viktor Schwarz's, *Visuelle Medien im christlichen Kult. Fallstudien aus dem 13. bis 16. Jahrhundert*, Böhlau (Wien / Köln / Weimar 2002)**

**By Viola Belghaus,  
TU Dresden / EPHE Paris**

Even more than the ongoing debate regarding the German education system, books like this serve as a gauge for the difficulties of the state-financed university system. In times of shrinking budgets, resulting in crisis of justification and intensified struggles between the different subjects, art history is also seeking its new methodological position within the humanities. The only way out of this dilemma seems to depend on their adaptability to the, in public discourse strongly present, keywords of information and communication and their medial and technological innovations. For that reason, a field like media studies (Medienwissenschaft) has achieved a principal position within the university subjects, conveying its paradigm of media into nearly all other fields of research.

With nothing less than a “medial turn,” Michael Viktor Schwarz announces his new book. It assembles independent case studies of well known and most widely discussed examples of western art history, combined under the common focus of their mediality. The central point is focused on the specific relationship of image and reality, describing and defining the different levels of their representation of reality thereby achieving virtual reality, restricted representation or symbolic references. The functional role of the images as media within the process of communication Schwarz describes particularly with reference to their material character including their functions, context, stylistic devices and their artistic character. He adamantly refuses the notion of transforming art history into a history of images (*Bildwissenschaft*), where, in his opinion, the specific shape of the works of art are neglected.



**Figure 1:** *Mourning Virgin from Naumburg Screen, Naumburg Cathedral, 1245-60.*  
Photo: H.J.B. Stanley



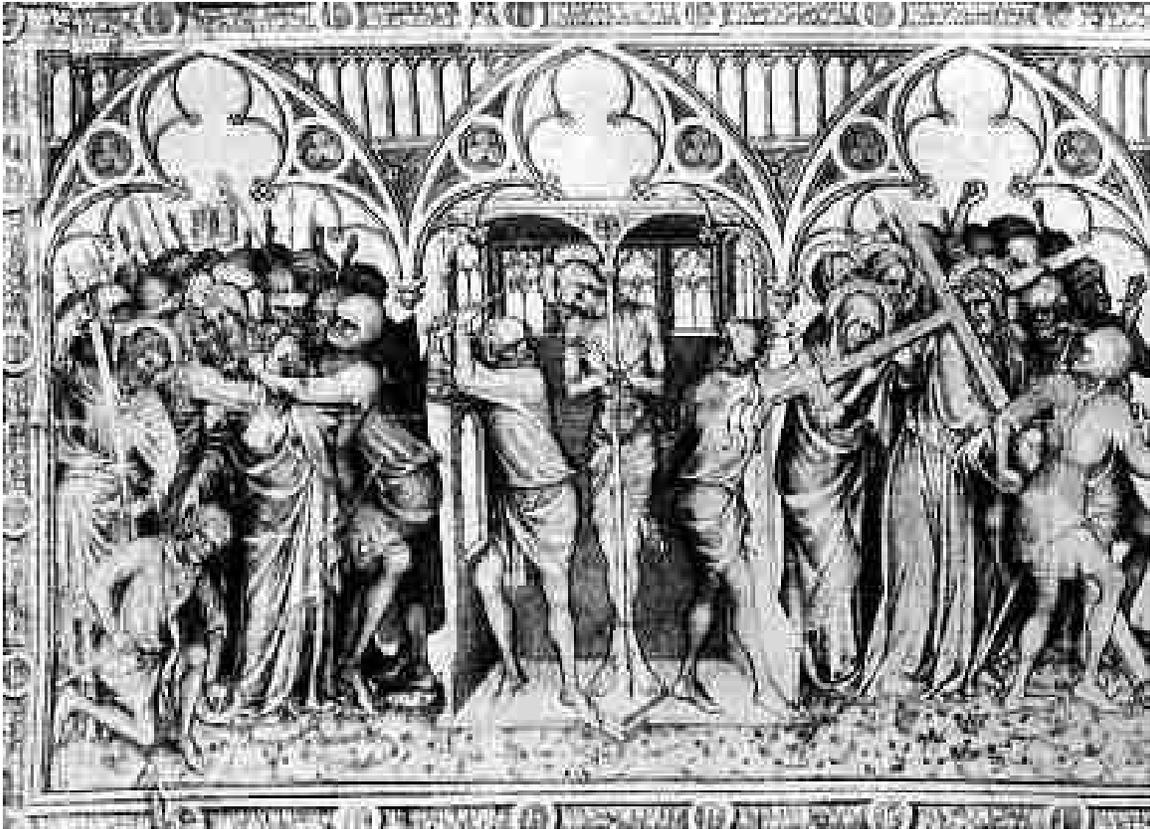
**Figure 2:** *Halberstadt Crucifix, Romanesque Period.* Photo: Arnold Pettigrew.

With his first example, the author focuses the highly-problematic and often-debated question of the function and role of images in medieval society. With its exceptional rood screen and the remarkable donor sculptures, the celebrated western choir in Naumburg has inspired many descriptions of different characters and from different origins. Out of this reception (which always emphasized the stupendous realism of the sculptures) Schwarz develops the concept of their immediate appearance (*Unmittelbarkeit*), which forms the leitmotif of his analysis. Therefore the author understands the presence of the represented figures, especially of the crucified Christ at the screen portal, as part of their medial effect resulting from a specific contract of perception (*Wahrnehmungsvertrag*). Rather than generating the distance between image and observer, it simulates within its immediate appearance the virtual reality of epiphany. Schwarz clarifies this tension between presence and representation by referring to the generic conceptions of rood screens and rood crosses. Compared with the function of the architectural type of rood screens, the juxtaposition with the eastern choir in Naumburg very clearly demonstrates the different conception of the Naumburg screen. The eastern choir with the ensemble of rood screen, altar and the now-lost rood cross on the one hand encloses the choir as a clerical space, defining on the other hand a place for laity and their liturgical setting. The screen of the western choir, however, functions less as a border and more as a threshold and portal. **(fig. 1)** Moreover, one can observe some significant

distinctions to traditional types of rood crosses. Compared with the rood cross of Halberstadt, (**fig. 2**) Schwarz strengthens the independence of the solution at Naumburg, where the Crucifixion is placed within the portal rather than above the screen, achieving its liturgical presence by abstaining from all symbolic and allegoric systems of references still used in Halberstadt. In this context Schwarz refers to the anthropological theory of liminality<sup>202</sup> describing how cultic communities during their ritual encounter with God are able to overcome the limitations of time and space within transitory moments. The immediate appearance of the crucified God prepares, while passing the threshold into the other sacral space of the Naumburg choir, an intensified liturgical experience that includes Christ's epiphany during the Eucharistic ritual. Whereas the Halberstadt Cross, with its symbolic references, clearly demonstrates its status as an image and therefore enables a didactic usage, the Naumburg Cross indicates the tension between didactic and evident qualities of the medieval imagery. Consequently Schwarz explains the different conception of the Naumburg sculpture explicitly, not in stylistic terms (as transition from Romanesque to Gothic) or with new forms of piety (the practice of *compassio*), but rather as a media discourse reflecting the function and the power of images. Even though in theological discussion the function of imagery is strictly limited on didactic purposes, Schwarz focuses a clerical use of images. Numerous narratives of miraculous images and affective approaches to religious imagery document an elitist image discourse, where overcoming the strict borders of image and prototype was absolutely allowed and desired. Even though Schwarz's analysis provides an appropriate description of the specific quality of representation, the still striking fact remains, why would a medium of this elitist discourse been placed towards the nave of Naumburg cathedral – a place always accessible for the laity?

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<sup>202</sup> T.L. Carson, *Liminal Reality and Transformational Power* (Lanham, Maryland 1997), 85-88.



**Figure 3:** Detail of *Parement de Narbonne*, 1375-80, Louvre. Photo: C.M. Radcliffe.

This question is pursued during the following chapters, reflecting once again the mode of representation within liturgical furnishings, focusing an illusionistic fresco in Assisi and the *Parement de Narbonne*. (**fig. 3**) Schwarz characterizes the representation of a sedilia in San Francesco as part of an illusionist liturgical furnishing demanding commemoration and liturgy by the visitors and the clerics of the church. The illusionistic character once again, with its exact description of details and impressions of improvised elements, suggests that the painting belongs to the real space of the church, therefore providing a discourse which explains different degrees of reality and levels of unreality. Confronting the beholder, for example, with the actual appearance of the heavenly figures within the altarpiece of the chapel, the former experience with the illusionistic sedilia enables the beholder to identify the artistic character of that illusion – thereby rebinding the presentation into its context of picturality. In this case, the realism serves not as a trigger or an increase in the quality of immediate appearance, on the contrary, it refers to the difference of image and prototype. A similar phenomenon, Schwarz presents, can be seen in the *Parement de Narbonne*, with its grisaille painting fitting into the practice of medieval Lenten observance<sup>203</sup> on one hand, and on the other hand reflecting a phenomenon which Rudolf Preimesberger's has described as a self-referential discourse

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<sup>203</sup> M. Teasdale Smith, "The Use of Grisaille as a Lenten Observance," *Marsyas. Studies in the History of Art*, VIII, 1957-59, 43-54.

of art.<sup>204</sup> The striking contrast of colorlessness and artistic character questions, according to Schwarz, the relation of cultic use and artful fashioning. The *Parement*'s function as a covering for an altarpiece during Lenten observance as its principal role does not supply a substitute for imagery, but rather removes the existing imagery out of sight. Thus Schwarz understands the mode of representation as a functional and media specific decision in which the representation of an image defuses the visual presence of the image. The role of grisaille painting is therefore not to be described as a simulation of art, like Preimesberger understood its purpose, but rather as a representation of an absence or temporal invisible image.



**Figure 4:** *Tomb of Archbishop Henry Chichele, Canterbury Cathedral, 1424-26.*  
Photo: Sarah Blick.

While Schwarz hitherto focused almost solely on pictorial media describing even sculpture as images, within the following chapter he questions one of the principal issues of medieval images expounding the problem of body, image, and embodiment within tomb sculpture. The archbishop's Henry Chichele tomb in Canterbury Cathedral is a well-known example used to apply Ernst Kantorowicz's influential theory of the king's two bodies.<sup>205</sup> (fig. 4) Seldom contradicted and further developed during recent years, Schwarz once again puts the predominate implications of a double portrayal as representation of, on the one hand, official and on the other hand, individual, body under discussion. He doubts a visual implementation of the theory of the two bodies within the so-called double-decker tombs concerning the tradition of medieval tomb sculpture.

<sup>204</sup> R. Preimesberger, "Zu Jan van Eycks Diptychon der Sammlung Thyssen-Bornemisza", *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* LIV 1991, 459-489.

<sup>205</sup> Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies. A Study in Medieval Political Theology*, Princeton 1957.

Nonetheless, it remains an indisputable fact that the *Gisant* forms the traditional type of tomb sculpture, whereas the *Transi* represents a younger invention, not able to establish a former tradition and thus remaining as an exceptional case. Assuming that the individual (*Transi*) is enlarged by the official body (*Gisant*) and in a strict sense yet to be completed, seems to be a highly-problematic and vague thesis without any evidence found in written or material records. Rather than emerging from political theology, Schwarz proposes that the practice of funeral liturgy explains the typical difference of the transient corpse and the tomb image used to present official dignity. With reference to perpetuated funeral layout (Tomb of Henry II of England in Fontevrault Abbey) and to the usage of effigies (during the funeral ceremony of English and French kingship), Schwarz indicates the *Transi* models defined their function most of all as the corpse's liturgical deputies. Some illuminations from manuscripts containing poetics of death and lamentation prove the idea of a present corpse during requiem and other liturgical funeral practices. Moreover, these illuminations likewise illustrate different modes of representation – the reality of the decomposed corpse and the conventionality of the tomb image – strengthened by inscriptions where a fictional speaker addresses the audience, thereby suggesting a real presence. Hence the different modes of representation should not be described as a comparison of the official and individual body, but rather as representation of a present corpse juxtaposed with a commemorative image illustrating the former presence of a living. The *Gisant* portrays that which is entirely past, while the appearance of the *Transi* illustrates eternal presence and truth.

In the two final chapters, using Raphael's Sistine Virgin and the self portrait of Anton Pilgram in Vienna Cathedral, Schwarz works out some specific problems of early modern image culture. First, he describes recent research on the famous Virgin as part of the liturgical furnishing of San Sisto in Piacenza.<sup>206</sup> Outlining the calculated strategy of glances and gestures applied to the altar with the presented host and the rood cross, he emphasizes its implied references to Christian doctrine and their visual and substantial manifestations. The image's specific shape Schwarz considers, in a second step, as rivalry between the visual appearance of the image and the substantial presence of the host, therefore contributing a reflection on the ability of painting to visualize the invisible. Thus approaching the positions of early modern art theory, he relativizes, with his last example, the largely-discussed commonplace of the development of the individual during Renaissance art and theory. The self portrait of the artist Anton Pilgram serves less as a proof for individualization, than as an example of a strong typology of portraiture which stages the artist's piety and places his self into the church community.

Even though Schwarz analysis without exception contains new and revealing insights and provides stimulating questions, he does not actually describe the mediality of the image. That different forms of picturality are linked with different forms of liturgical usage remains a rather old and well-known fact and is, as a result of a new methodological approach, not weighty enough. In addition, some of his major terms are used in a highly variable manner. For example, the function of realism is described in one case as being used to overcome the difference of image and prototype (Naumburg) and in another case to reinforce the same difference (Assisi). From the viewpoint of the

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<sup>206</sup> P. Ceschi Lavagetto, "L'immensa dolcezza e grandissima utilità. Il coro di San Sisto a Piacenza," Bologna 1989; A. Prater, "Jenseits und diesseits des Vorhanges. Bemerkungen zu Raffaels sixtinischer Madonna als religiöses Kunstwerk," in: *Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst* XL, 1991, 117-136.

demanded medial history of images this arbitrariness of definition is critical. Moreover, the author, by defining his central term of mediality explicitly as a term of form and not of function, excludes central issues of a medial-orientated art history the reader would expect. One wonders, why Schwarz is obviously not interested in the form and function of prints – a new technology always linked with the media revolution – why he seems to lack any interest in the relationship of text and image, etc. Furthermore, his metaphorical writing is highly problematic – particularly in case of a foundation of a new methodological approach, a more precise terminology would have been desirable.

Despite this criticism, the author displays an instructive and stimulating history on the various roles of images in religious cults, including the material and formal shape of his analyzed examples, with more consequence than many other art historians. Nevertheless a medial history of art has to be written elsewhere.