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Looking at George Rorris' naked women: Towards an Orthodox Christian theory of gaze*

Introduction: Looking at George Rorris' naked women and how an image was seen as an icon

My desire to reflect upon the gaze was triggered by one of Rorris' paintings depicting a motionless naked woman that I saw unexpectedly on the front cover of a Lacanian journal that is published in Greece.¹ Giorgos Rorris was born at Kosmas, Arcadia Kinourias in 1963. He studied painting at the Athens School of Fine Arts (1982 – 1987) under P. Tetsis and Y. Valavanidis. He continued his studies at the National School of Fine Arts in Paris (1988 1991) under L. Cremonini. Rorris is not an avant-garde painter. Aware though he is of the iconoclastic tendencies of contemporary art and influenced as he may be by the artistic tradition of the 20th century, Rorris returns to figurative and realistic representation and his paintings belong to a general category that might be called “painting of the gaze”. In the past two decades Rorris’ painting consists in representing naked women.²

So when I held the journal in my hands, I noticed that I was overwhelmed by that painting since I couldn’t look at it. Every time I tried to look at it, I had to take my eyes away. Thus, the

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¹ For Rorris’ painting that was on front cover of the journal see [https://www.psichogios.gr/site/Books/show/1005327/FORT-DA-teyxos-tetarto#prettyPhoto\[group1\]/0/](https://www.psichogios.gr/site/Books/show/1005327/FORT-DA-teyxos-tetarto#prettyPhoto[group1]/0/) Last accessed 31/1/2019.

² For Giorgos Rorris’ biography and artworks see the digital platform of Contemporary Greek Art Institute available at <http://dp.iset.gr/en/artist/view.html?id=438&tab=main> last accessed 26/12/2018.

painting “incited a note of anxiety”.³ I immediately wondered why this was happening. Was there something in this image that I couldn’t dare or refused to see? Or was there something (say a particular desire) in the way I was gazing at that naked woman that was not satisfied and made me turn my eyes away? After analyzing my experience, I realized (among other things) that I was overwhelmed by ultimate difference. A woman without clothes was sitting in front of me and had an invisible personal story inscribed on her body.⁴ It seems that it is the artist’s intention to point to the personal story of his naked women for as the painter has stated: “I don’t do nudes but portraits of people without clothes”.⁵ There is great bibliography on the distinction between nude and naked and on the criticism of the male gaze intrinsic in figurative representations of naked women that are exposed as objects to the male spectators’ gaze.⁶ Rorris’ naked women are not put on display (like products ready for consumption). Rorris’ portraits of women without clothes feature the uniqueness of these female persons and embody a particular way of seeing singularity and human flesh.⁷ The painted woman was resisting my covetous gaze that wanted to take possession of its object, understand everything and set itself in a relationship

³ Βλάσης Σκολίδης, «Σημειώσεις για τις γυναίκες του Ρόρρι», *Fort-Da* 4 (2017) 262.

⁴ Rorris has said in an interview that he is interested in painting portraits of contemporary Greek women and in exploring how traces of their history are written on their bodies. Μαριένα Αστραπέλλου, «Γιώργος Ρόρρις: Η ιερότητα της γυμνότητας», *Βήμα* 29/1/2016 available at <https://www.tovima.gr/2016/01/29/vimagazino/giorgos-rorris-i-ierotita-tis-gymnotitas/> Last accessed 26/12/2018.

⁵ Γιώργος Καρουζάκης, Γιώργος Ρόρρις: “Δεν κάνω γυμνό αλλά πορτρέτα ανθρώπων χωρίς ρούχα», Ελευθεροτυπία, 3/11/2007 παρατίθεται στο Χαρίκλεια Κατσαρού, Ρεαλισμοί- το εργαστήριο Cremonini και οι έλληνες νεοπαραστατικοί, unpublished thesis Aristotle University of Thessaloniki 2010, 77 available at <http://ikee.lib.auth.gr/record/114676> Last accessed 26/12/2018.

⁶ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (BBC/Penguin Books: London, 1972).

⁷ Γιώργος Μυλωνάς, «Ο Γιώργος Ρόρρις μιλά αποκλειστικά στη HuffPost Greece» available at https://www.huffingtonpost.gr/2016/02/01/culture-giorgos-rorris-n_9124454.html Last accessed 26/12/2018. Σκολίδης, «Σημειώσεις για τις γυναίκες του Ρόρρι», 257.

that wouldn't respect the otherness of the other or an element of transcendence that remains invisible albeit anticipated and denoted by the painting.⁸ By looking at this painting my gaze was gradually transformed or rather I had my gaze transformed so that I can now confess that this image has become an icon denoting transcendence.

Thereby, my engagement with contemporary figurative art as exemplified by the portraits of naked women of the Greek painter George Rorris, made me consider (his) art as a “locus theologicus” that is critical of any form of objectification, commodification and of the consumption mentality and that can function not only as a source for theological meaning but also as horizon for developing a theology of gaze that could compliment a theology of the icon.

The eschatological perspective of Byzantine iconography and the icon as a defense against the will to power of the gaze

One could undoubtedly draw exclusively upon one type of visual representations of (fe)male persons that has dominated the Orthodox Christian tradition, that is, the Byzantine icon, if they were to develop a Christian Orthodox theory of gaze. A Christian Orthodox theory of gaze is certainly implicit in Byzantine iconography. Byzantine icons represent human sexuate bodies in their eschatological form, that is to say, fully realized and incorruptible but not immaterial or ahistorical. The salvation of the human is not something that happens apart from her embodiment, but even through her embodiment and with her body. The transfiguration of the human entails according to Ouspensky, a transformation of her corruptible embodiment into an incorruptible embodiment. The characteristic features of human embodiment are retained, but it becomes transilluminated thanks to the relationship to God.⁹

⁸ “A painting is what you finally made of what you managed to see”.

Αστραπέλλου, «Γιώργος Ρόρρης: Η τεράστια της γυμνότητας».

⁹ Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, vol. 1, trans. Anthony Gythiel and Elizabeth Meyendorff (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1978)

Exploring the political dimensions of iconology and Byzantine iconography from a feminist perspective, I have argued elsewhere for the possibility of Byzantine icons' functioning/being as women's horizon for their becoming divine in the Eastern Orthodox Church. According to my understanding, it is by means of the frontality and the hypostasizing light of Byzantine iconography (that is not subject to the culturally defined and male dominated public space) that Byzantine icons challenge any kind of objectification that turns (wo)men into objects of desire that can be surveyed, gazed at and possessed by the spectator.¹⁰

Iconography assumes an eschatological gaze that leaves behind the whole theatre of human sinfulness. In terms of Ouspensky, the aim of the icon is to point to the salvation of the human being and to make it present. The icon is not interested only in the "historical Christ" or in the historical person of the saints as they appear to the eyes of alien witnesses.¹¹ Icons are interested in the salvation story and the viewers' relationship to this story. According to the theology of the icon, the right relationship to the icon is not a viewing at a distance (or a voyeuristic gaze) but an involved veneration, where the viewer becomes experientially participatory in that which the icon wants to communicate.¹²

Contrary to the perspective painting where the eye of the beholder is made the starting point for the way the view of the depicted is perspectivized, iconography's flatness and frontality denaturalize the world that we inhabit in favor of another world. An icon

¹⁰ 178; Ola Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies: Incarnation, the Gaze, and Embodiment in Christian Theology*, trans. Carl Olsen (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: Michigan, 2016) 228.

¹¹ Spyridoula Athanasopoulou-Kypriou, "Icons as Women's horizon for their becoming divine: Exploring the political dimension of iconology and iconography", *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research* 19 (2011) 67-78.

¹² Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (James Clark: Cambridge, 1957), 242-243.

¹³ Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, 229; Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, vol. 2, trans. Anthony Gythiel and Elizabeth Meyendorff (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1992) 491.

represents somebody face on and introduces itself by pointing to me; it calls out to me, says ‘you’ to me, without itself being a me who is a subject.¹³ This means that the viewer of the icon also becomes the one who is viewed: “The world of the icon is turned toward man”.¹⁴ It is in this sense that the icon is a defense against the will to power of the gaze. The logic of the icon is namely, according to Marion, that a gaze meets me from the icon before I gaze back.¹⁵ When an image becomes the site of a reciprocal communion, then it functions as an icon.¹⁶

The liturgical gaze

However, a particular gaze is expected by the image/icon in order to function as an icon, that is, a gaze from within the Church (a liturgical gaze) that is enlightened by the Holy Spirit. As Lossky puts it: “It is uniquely in the Church and through the eyes of the Church that Eastern spirituality sees Christ. In other words, He is known in the Holy Spirit. Christ always appears in the fullness of His Godhead, glorified and triumphant: even in His passion; even in the Tomb”.¹⁷ So I think that when Julia Kristeva discusses Renaissance artist Hans Holbein’s painting *The Christ in the Grave* (1521/1522) and claims that “there is not the slightest suggestion of transcendency”,¹⁸ she assumes a non-liturgical gaze. Similarly, when in Dostoevsky’s novel, *The Idiot*, prince Myskin says that “[a] man could even lose his faith from that painting”,¹⁹ the viewer fails to see Christ even in the Tomb. Following Lossky,

¹³ Athanasopoulou-Kypriou, “Icons as Women’s horizon for their becoming divine”, 76

¹⁴ Paul Evdokimof, *The art of Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, trans. Steven Bigham (Oakwood: Redondo Beach, CA, 1990), 225

¹⁵ Marion, “The Prototype and the Image” in *The Crossing of the Visible*, trans. James K.A. Smith (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2004) 83-85; Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, 264.

¹⁶ Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, 265.

¹⁷ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 242.

¹⁸ Julia Kristeva, “Holbein’s Dead Christ” in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press: New York, Oxford, 1989) 110.

¹⁹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Vintage Classics: New York, 2003), 218.

I would dare say that when seen from within the Church, Christ always appears in the fullness of His Godhead and hope remains where death appears. In “The Prototype and the image”, Jean-Luc Marion explains exactly that even if we are confronted with an icon that gives Christ to be seen in his holiness, the viewer might not recognize this holiness.²⁰ Only if one sees in the icon a sign that refers outside of itself to something invisible does the icon function as an icon. Thus an image becomes an icon that opens outwards pointing to something invisible and resisting idolatry only for the one who has eyes to see (the invisible), that is to say, for the one who has faith.²¹

So although a Christian Orthodox theory of gaze is certainly implicit in Byzantine iconography and despite the fact that through certain features the icons are a defense against the covetous gaze, Byzantine icons do not constitute a privileged place for the visibility of the invisible (transcendent). Rather they become a paradigm of how one ought to perceive God’s dynamic presence in the world. For the theology of the icon it is not a matter of confusing visible and invisible or of negating the visible world, but rather, of a glorification of matter.²² Seeing the icon as icon and not as idol is not something given by nature but by grace and must be learned through liturgy. Besides, as Marion has pointed out, it is “the gaze that makes the idol, not the idol the gaze”.²³ Similarly, it is the liturgical gaze that makes the icon.

The gaze as simul iustus et peccator (at once righteous and sinner) and the image as at once the locus of doxology and the locus of repentance

By looking at Rorris’ naked women, my aim is not to identify Christian motifs in his art or look at his paintings merely as a medium for illustrating theological teachings. I neither analyze particular aesthetic phenomena or the beautiful in relation to

²⁰ Marion, “The Prototype and the Image”, 72.

²¹ Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, 262.

²² Ibid, 273.

²³ Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1991)10.

theology nor do I try to find ways for appreciating theologically modern art (in the form of abstract painting, performance art, video art, installations or web-art). I rather focus on seeing/gazing in a Christ-like manner. I thus take into consideration that every image embodies a way of seeing and that our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing in order to develop an Orthodox Christian theory of gaze.

Common to all, however, is the possibility of sinfulness, in its threefold manifestation as recorded in 1 John 2:16: “For all that is in the world- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life- is not of the Father but is of the world”. In the *Confessions* of Augustine, the lust of the eyes receives the most extensive treatment for, as Manoussakis explains, it is the vision that organizes temptation.²⁴

In this paper, I argue for a Christian Orthodox theory of gaze that is not limited to the eschatological vision of the icons but takes seriously into consideration (the possibility of idolatry) and the lust of the eyes as it manifests itself in the desire to know or see what is off-limits with a relative impunity and/or without sacrificing anything. I argue that without recognizing the lust of the eyes and its manifestations one cannot change their vision and assume an eschatological gaze. Otherwise, assuming an unequivocal eschatological gaze would mean turning blind to the world, i.e., closing our eyes in order not to be tempted and denouncing our situated and contingent existence.

I think that Rorris’ painting takes seriously the irreducibility of the human person to any form of representation, respects the ineffability of the flesh and assumes a gaze that challenges the enjoyment of watching other(s) as objects. Rorris’ naked women resist objectification only to expose (as it did in my case/in my gazing his painting) our idolatrous motivation to see and possess even if only through a distance. His portraits of women without clothes become the locus of repentance as they invite the

²⁴ John Panteleimon Manoussakis, *The Ethics of Time: A Phenomenology and Hermeneutics of Change* (Bloomsbury: London, New York, 2017) 98.

spectators to reflect upon their sinfulness and are rendered into visual narratives of one's conversion, that is, one's transforming their "fallen" vision into an eschatological gaze. Looking at the images of these naked women becomes a spiritual exercise and opens the path to an impossible face-to-face encounter. What is thus at stake according to a Christian theory of gaze, is to adopt a Christ-like gaze that never freezes on a visible but remains open to diversity, difference and transcendence without renouncing its situated existence.²⁵

²⁵ Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, 283.