

Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of Medieval Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean

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/Abstract/ The structuring of the Byzantine mystical experience draws on the dynamics of the horizontal mirror – that is, the reflective surface of a lake, which gathers sky and earth – and the process of in-spiriting. Both phenomena appear in two distinct – and, from a modern viewpoint, incompatible – contexts: the Byzantine liturgy and the Late Antique engagement with Anacreontic poetry. What meanings emerge when the call to “forget your earthly worries” of the Cheroubikon sung at the Great Entrance is juxtaposed with the invitation to partake in the halcyon revelry in the Anacreontic? In recognizing that the Byzantine concept of creativity is defined as an act of mirroring and vital in-breathing (in-spiriting), can we put it in a productive relationship to the role of the art historian today of breathing-in new life in the shell of antiquity? The analysis here draws on Aby Warburg’s unorthodox but compelling ideas about the role of empathy in the production and perception of animation.

/Keywords/ Mirror, In-Spiriting, Empathy, Anacreontic, Eucharist, Cheroubikon, Paul the Silentiary, John of Gaza

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Mirror, Inspiration, and the Making of Art in Byzantium

Bissera V. Pentcheva

If there were not in nature's voices such redoublings of onomatopoeia, if falling water did not re-echo the notes of the singing blackbird, it seems that we could not understand natural voices poetically. Art needs to learn from reflections, and music from echoes. By imitating that we invent.

G. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*¹

The extensive study of the mirror in medieval culture focuses on it as object or metaphor and on how the diffusion of optical science in the Mediterranean led to the development of pictorial illusionism in Western painting². This article expands the research by turning to Byzantium, and explores the *esoptron* outside the context of optics. The mirror is here identified not as an object or a metaphor but as a process for structuring a religious and poetic mode of being. The Justinianic church of Hagia Sophia and its liturgy provide the point of departure /Fig. 1/. This interior abounds visually and acoustically in mirroring structures. Optically, they emerge in the book-matched marble plaques /Fig. 2/ and the reflected light from the gold mosaics; sonically, they are reified in the reverberant acoustics of the resonant interior, in the chiastic form of the psalms intoned during services, and in the reflexivity of the iterative root *marmar-* in the Greek words for marble (*marmaron*) and glitter (*marmarygma*)³. My earlier research on Hagia Sophia has unpacked how mirroring and in-spiriting constitute the two operative principles through which a participation in the liturgy produces a non-representational and thus performative "image of God" or *eikōn tou theou* in the interior⁴.

To explain the distinction this paper makes between the mirror as a spatial phenomenon rather than as an object or metaphor, I will evoke the image of the reflective surface of a mountain lake.

The water's top figures the sky on earth; thereby creating a sensory nearness that is simultaneously both visual and removed from the tactile. The immaterial reflection of the sky dissolves as easily as it comes into existence when the wind ruffles the liquid's surface. The ephemerality of the natural picture attests to the ineffability of the act of gathering earth, water, and air and of rendering the celestial present in the terrestrial.

- 1 Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams. An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, Edith R. Farrell trans., Dallas 2006, p. 193.
- 2 On the mirror in the context of the science of optics, see Katherine H. Tachau, *Vision and Certitude in the Age of Ockham: Optics, Epistemology, and the Foundation of Semantics, 1250–1345*, Leiden 1988; Jeffrey F. Hamburger, "Speculations on Speculation. Vision and Perception in the Theory and Practice of Mystical Devotion", in *Deutsche Mystik im abend-ländischen Zusammenhang: Neu erschlossene Texte, neue methodische Ansätze, neue theoretische Konzepte*, Walter Haug, Wolfram Schneider-Lastin eds, Tübingen 2000, pp. 353–408; Gerhard Wolf, *Schleier und Spiegel: Traditionen des Christusbildes und die Bildkonzepte der Renaissance*, Munich 2002; David Summers, *Vision, Reflection, and Desire in Western Painting*, Chapel Hill 2007; Hans Belting, *Florenz und Bagdad: Eine westöstliche Geschichte des Blicks*, Munich 2008; Samuel Y. Edgerton, *The Mirror, the Window, and the Telescope: How Renaissance Linear Perspective Changed Our Vision of the Universe*, Ithaca 2009. For a study specifically focusing on the actual object, the mirror, in Western medieval art, see Herbert L. Kessler, "Speculum", *Speculum*, 86/1 (2011), pp. 1–41. On the mirror as metaphor, see Marcia L. Colish, *Mirror of Language: A Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge*, New Haven/London 1968.
- 3 Bissera V. Pentcheva, "Hagia Sophia and Multisensory Aesthetics", *Gesta* 50/2 (2011), pp. 93–111 and *Idem*, "Icons of Sound: Ontology of the Image in Byzantium", *Critical Inquiry* (2015), forthcoming.
- 4 Bissera V. Pentcheva, "Performing the Sacred in Byzantium: Image, Breath, and Sound", *pri Performance Research International*, 19/3 (2014), pp. 120–128; Pentcheva, "Icons of Sound: Ontology of the Image in Byzantium" (n. 3).



1/ Hagia Sophia interior,
Constantinople, 532–537 and 562

2/ Wall revetment showing the
mirrored image of book-matched
marble plaques in the North exedra,
Hagia Sophia, Constantinople,
532–537 and 562

The mirrored image of the sky on the surface of the lake displays the figural dynamics of the horizontal mirror that gathers corporeal and imagined. By focusing on the ephemeral and immaterial such as breath, reflection, and withdrawal of the self, my analysis charts a new poetics of viewership and experience invested in Byzantine culture. Semiotics or hermeneutics cannot account for this sensual phenomenon of divine nearness; a new method – sensory archaeology – offers a rich potential⁵. It involves the recreation of the conditions of viewing and experiencing, as I have done with the production of short videos recording the appearance of Byzantine objects under candlelight⁶, and in collaboration with engineers – the construction of digital models that allow one to hear the acoustics of Hagia Sophia⁷. My method contextualizes “experience” by investing the analysis firmly in the Byzantine liturgy. Chants, prayers, invocations, and homilies structure the cognitive response to the ritual, and in so doing, they create a Jaussian “horizon of expectations”, a medieval lens that shapes the perception of the ceremony⁸. I turn to the texts of the liturgy in order to access this culturally shared hermeneutic framework.

The horizontal mirror paradigm defines a mode of engagement with the world that holds together material and phantasmal. Religion defines the cultural response to this specular dynamic. Valerie Gonzalez has written some of the most compelling studies about the role of the reflective surface of water in Islamic culture⁹. In the Islamic context and more specifically in the *Sūrat al Naml* 27: 44 in the *Qur’ān*, King Solomon asks the Queen of Sheba, Bilqīs, to walk on a pavement that appears like water. The reflective surface challenges the truthfulness of sight; and Bilqīs’s confusion and inability to distinguish between real (glass) and imaginary (water) is ultimately condemned as a lack of discernment in recognizing true faith. By contrast, the Byzantine sacred space valorizes this confusion between substance and appearance and the subversion of up and down vectors created by the horizontal mirror¹⁰. The Eucharist liturgy circumscribes symbolically this process of destabilization as an act of partaking in the Divine. The confusion, emerging out of the specular redoubling enacted by the disorienting reflections within the architectural body marks a process of transcendence of the self and its integration into something larger. It also demonstrates the release of the object from