



Wi-Fi in Plato's Cave: The Digital Icon and the Phenomenology of Surveillance

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Abstract: The following article takes the negative attitude of the Orthodox Church to the internet as a phenomenon, which derives from a complex development of theories of the icon-medium. I argue that the internet can be interpreted within the patterns of a false icon – or idol. That means a medium, which is diametrically different from an icon in substance, but appears with the icon's phenomenological attributes, i.e. an imagined gaze, watching the human being. I continue with a discussion of the meaning of the notion of *virtual reality* in relation to patristic and modern versions of icon theology.

Keywords: transparency, mirror, surveillance, icon, image, art, gaze, virtual reality

The internet is usually regarded as a tremendous media revolution in human history. But with all the problems that accompany it – everything from decapitation videos to naked selfies of movie stars – our lives are at an increasing rate becoming dominated by a parallel realm of images (in Greek *eikones*). This parallel realm, or so-called virtual reality¹, gives the feeling that our time has a certain uniqueness. We can talk about pride in the technological achievements of our epoch, which at the same time turn into fear, as exemplified by the scandal around Edward Snowden's revelations of the activities of US National Security Agency (NSA). However, this virtual reality does not necessarily represent something substantially new in the perception of images. The perception of the internet is, rather, formed in a com-

¹ I use the term 'virtual reality' in its most extended etymological sense as a possible reality, which is perceived in images, not to be confused with *cyberspace*, which Scholz understands as an extreme form of virtual reality, where the illusion of a three-dimensional space is made perfect by using a helmet with a screen inside (2010: 660).

plex intermedial relationship between different iconic paradigms, which can be traced far back in our culture.

The task of this article is to map some of these paradigms within a Russian-Orthodox approach to the internet. My aim is – on basis of literary sources related to the icon tradition – to give *one* possible explanation (among many others) for the Orthodox negative attitude to internet. I will limit my research to the Orthodox *denouncement* of the internet. The value-neutral everyday use of the internet by millions of Orthodox believers (including all levels of the Church clergy), or positive attitudes will not be a part of my research. I will study the negative attitude to the internet as a phenomenon and will seek to explain it within different, to some extent contradicting, attitudes to the historically and theologically main medium of the Orthodox Church – *the image* (in Greek: *eikon*. In Russian: *icon*).

My first hypothesis is that the Orthodox icon-medium provides one of the possible mental frames for perceiving and conceptualizing the internet-medium. The Orthodox ‘technophobia’ can therefore be regarded as a result of an internalization of both archaic and modern tendencies of image theory. I am going to research the *effects* of certain phenomena associated with images – like transparency, mirror-reflection and gaze – in four textual/visual discourses: medieval icon theology, 20th century secular image theory, 20th century icon theology, and internet surveillance. My approach will be from the ‘point of view’ of the media themselves, not from the ‘point of view’ of the thinkers (their intentions and social context). How, for instance, does the mirror-medium change, develop or pervert itself from discourse to discourse? In its variation between a patristic and modernistic position the icon will be regarded as a cultural technique for conveying a contemporary negative attitude to the internet. My second hypothesis will then be that the Orthodox fight with the internet is a fight with what is historically regarded as ‘false icons’, or idols, which resemble the icon without being the icon.

My second hypothesis can be demonstrated by a photograph from an article on pravmir.ru about internet-addiction². We see the face of a child at an early stage of a transformation, which may perhaps end in the child’s complete disappearance and replacement by the demonic mask of Darth Vader. The face is like a palimpsest where different layers symbolize different levels in his development towards either salvation or perversion. These levels correspond to a platonic distinction in Pavel Florenskii’s book *Iconostasis* (1996: 433 ff.) between ‘litso’ (=face), ‘lik’ (=iconic idea / ontology of the face) and ‘lichina’ (=mask / perversion of the face). The child’s eyes are *iconic*, but the demonic mask – *lichina* – is reflected in his forehead. The teeth of the child resemble the grid in the mask. At the same time the teeth are the only visible part of the skull – this death’s head, which every human being wears under the face, and which in its hard, material consistence is similar to Darth Vader’s metallic mask. In this way the photograph demonstrates two typical features of the anti-icon or idol, which in the perspective of cultural history can be traced back to either the biblical narrative of the golden calf (Ex. 32, 4) or the shadows in Plato’s cave. On the one hand, the idol is a false god, which lacks reality. Darth Vader is no more than a computer image, similar to a shadow. On the other hand, this lack of reality does not prevent the idol from influencing our behaviour. The prisoners in Plato’s cave believe that the shadows are bodies, just as the Israelites in

² See Image 2 in Mikhail Suslov’s article ‘The Medium for Demonic Energies: “Digital Anxiety” in the Russian Orthodox Church’ in this issue of *Digital Icons*, p.13.

the Sinai Desert believe that the golden calf is alive. By virtue of a certain psychological force both the calf and the shadows are able to replace the reality or shape their own reality (see Bredekamp 2010: 37). In this meaning the internet – represented in this picture of a boy – can be interpreted as a false icon. Then ‘internet-addiction’, regardless of which form it takes, will necessarily turn into false praying.

This picture of a boy completely emptying himself into a virtual reality illustrates a technophobia, which is of course not only Orthodox. In secular contexts, too, there is a fear of internet addiction or different kinds of radicalisation arising through the internet. The internet – or more precisely a kind of *imagined internet* – is provided with agency. The most prominent example is the perception of NSA as a gaze, observing us wherever we are. The peculiarity of the Orthodox perception of the internet – and this will be my third thesis – is the anti-evolutionary view of history, where any development in society and technology is perceived within patterns from the far past. In this collapsed chronology, contemporary problems, concerning the media, are partly perceived under the consideration of medieval dogma, partly by the internalization of modern intellectual tendencies.

Image 1. A black mirror



Source: https://www.nsa.gov/about/_images/pg_hi_res/nsa_aerial.jpg (accessed 5 May 2014)

The article develops along two lines of research: for the first I will focus on the fear of virtual reality as a phenomenon within the conceptual *history* of the Orthodox image. For the second

I will draw a few parallels to the *contemporary* Orthodox attitude to internet, which is further elaborated in this issue's *Digital Icons* article by Mikhail Suslov, 'The Medium for Demonic Energies'. Because of the article-format of my investigation, the second line of research will naturally be of a more speculative character than the first one. Different from other approaches to digital Orthodoxy in the present volume this is not an empirical investigation. This is rather an attempt to discover *theoretical mechanisms*, explaining why the negative discourse about internet (like in the example with the boy's face turning into a mask) in the Russian-Orthodox Church seems to suppose proximity of internet to idol. Thus my article addresses the need for further research, which, building on the theoretical problems described here, can investigate the connection between theory and practice in the Orthodox attitude to internet.

The surveillance-mirror

I will start by describing the architectonic features of a quadrangular building (Image 1), connected with the thus far most 'apocalyptic' scandal concerning the internet. We see an interaction between black and white elements. At the same time the walls function as gigantic black mirrors reflecting the entire surrounding environment. The building is the headquarters of the NSA. I interpret its appearance as a medium for the functions ascribed to NSA by international newspapers. Like a mechanical reflection of the world in a black mirror, the electronic double of the world with its billions of e-mails and websites is automatically copied into the software of the agency.

As a mirror NSA has two distinctive features. The first is its own invisibility. The mirror's transparency is its opacity. An ideal mirror veils itself in the illusion of being a continuation of our three-dimensional reality, like in Leon Battista Alberti's notion of the painting as an 'open window' (1877: 79). The eyes can grasp the 'hardware' (or building) of this American 'Kaaba'. But the NSA's 'software' – its rules, routines, aims and capacity – exceeds the (public) human mind. Analogous to an icon, the NSA emerges into visibility from invisibility. Like a mirror it remains invisible in a bodiless visibility.

The second feature of a mirror is its complete impotence. A mirror receives forms without creating them. In the case of the internet this ability can be related to the automation of all kinds of functions in today's society. At an increasing rate everything from the instruments of our daily life to artworks, prognoses etcetera are becoming *acheiropoietic* – a Greek word, which means *not made by hands* (in Russian: *nerukotvornii*). However, this *acheiropoiesis* goes hand in hand with both a quasi-religious fear and market capitalism. This connection between apparently different fields can be illustrated by a screenshot from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, asking the rhetorical question 'Do the secret services claim to be God?'. Already in its appearance the 'apocalyptic' message of the article is neutralized by the elements on the screen. In the left column we have the unpleasant image of video cameras forbidding the mind to go beyond their visible surface. In the right column are some apparently pleasant people offering me the attributes of success: career, power and an attractive body. The technocratic eyes of surveillance contradict the seductive eyes of market capitalism, which invite me to look at and click on them.

Image 2. A screenshot

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) website. The main headline is 'Halten sich die Geheimdienste für Gott?' (Do the secret services consider themselves God?). The article is dated 09.09.2013 and written by Frank Rieger. The main image shows several surveillance cameras mounted on a pole. The article text begins: 'Im Verborgenen waltet eine Elite von digitalen Allessehern, die bloß vorgibt, unser Bestes zu wollen. Weder Politiker noch Gerichte können sie kontrollieren. Die Demokratie wird zur Benutzeroberfläche.' The page also features a sidebar with 'Debatten' (Debates) and 'Was die Geschlechter der Namen von Stürmen bewirken' (What the genders of storm names do).

Source: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/ueberwachung/ueberwachungsaffaere-halten-sich-die-geheimdienste-fuer-gott-12564894.html> (accessed 5 May 2014)

As in George Orwell's famous dystopia *Nineteen Eighty Four*, the NSA is presumed to possess information about our individual desires, needs, values, and psychological strength to promote those values. However, there is a profound difference between the 'omnipresent' NSA, and Orwell's both omnipresent and omnipotent state. If the condition for Orwell's dystopia was a dysfunctional Marxist economy, then the internet as a virtual 'Doppelgänger' of reality is made possible by efficient capitalism. Therefore the internet on the one hand realizes an ideal of freedom, anonymity and grassroots' activism; but on the other hand it produces unprecedented tools for exerting control. The NSA incorporates both tendencies. The shape of the NSA is a 'mirror reflection' of consumers' preferences. In this sense the agency is a product of my freedom to express myself either verbally on different websites, or with mouse-clicks on what ironically enough are called 'icons'. Through Snowden's revelations, the NSA acquires a power similar to the power of my own mirror-reflection over me – a power expressed by the influence of the mirror on my appearance, on what I show and what I hide.

In other words: the NSA achieves its imagined omnipresence by the apparent negation of its omnipotence. The question 'Do the secret services claim to be God?' is then answered negatively in the way the question is graphically presented. A mirror is merely a medium. The NSA's 'surveillance mirror' incorporates an immanent model of the omnipresent 'Eye of Providence' gazing back at the person standing in front of it. This brings the question posed by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* from the centre of theology to its periphery, where re-

ligion confronts the society and culture in which it exists. I will in the following argue that the idea of the icon contains two contradicting aspects of the phenomenology of internet surveillance: on the one hand the mirror's feature of passive reflection; on the other hand the NSA's alleged omnipresent gaze.

The acheiropoietos-icon as an imaginary image

From pre-Christian times the principle of *acheiropoiesis* has been embedded in the idea of what an image is. We find it in Pliny's description of how the first painting was produced: The shadow of a Corinthian soldier – i.e. an acheiropoietic image – was projected on a wall. Around the contours of this image a woman drew an outline. Later her father filled the contour with clay, and made an image, which was worshipped in the temple (Stoichita 1999: 11 ff). The story implies an age-old distinction between painted images (*technei eikones*) and images like shadows, mirror reflections and prints (*physei eikones*)³, which are caused by natural factors (Scholz 2010: 620 ff). To the last category Karlheinz Lüdeking even considers adding technical images like photographs, where the human being doesn't produce the image itself, only the conditions for its production. The success of acheiropoietos-legends in the history of images can be explained by the fact that we would usually regard an image, caused by what it depicts, to be more reliable and *objective* than a drawing. As Lüdeking points out: 'Images are either generated from the subjects, which use them, or from the objects, which in them become visible' (2006: 13).⁴ The following graphic documents an image 'not made by hand', but *caused* by the hands of the model and projected into both reflection and shadow:

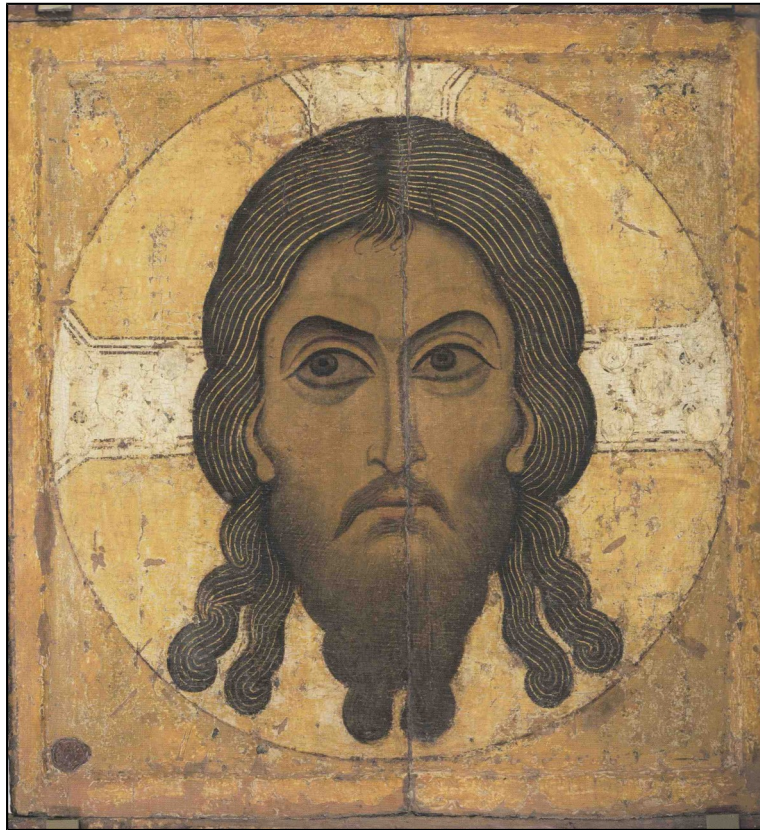
Image 3. Acheiropoiesis



Source: <https://fabianheffermehl.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/dsc01047.jpg> (accessed 2 July 2014)

³ To avoid confusion with the aspect of the icon as a *physical* thing, I will in the following use the term *caused images* instead of *physical images*.

⁴ 'Bilder werden entweder von den Subjekten erzeugt, die sie verwenden, oder sie werden von den Objekten erzeugt, die darin sichtbar werden'. If nothing else is indicated in the bibliography all translations from German and Russian into English are mine.

Image 4. The Saviour not made by hand

Source: https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A1%D0%BF%D0%B0%D1%81_%D0%9D%D0%B5%D1%80%D1%83%D0%BA%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9#/media/File:Christos_Acheiropoietos.jpg (accessed 6 June 2014)

In late antiquity legends of *acheiropoietic* images were incorporated into Christianity. According to the most common narrative, Christ's face made a print on a piece of cloth. The cloth was sent to king Abgar of Edessa to heal him from a disease.⁵ Another legend tells how the cloth saved the city from a Persian attack. During the battle the king bricked it up inside the city wall to save it from the enemy. But the light from the icon penetrated the stones and became visible to the Persians, who fled the city (Iazykova 2012: 97). In other words the *Acheiropoietos*-icon is realized through both natural and supernatural projections. The icon is defended, not in its aspect of being a painting, and not as being a trace of the human intellect, but as a print showing the archetype in a 'mirror' reflection. The painted images are replicas of the reflection and secured in a genealogical, subordinated relationship to the archetype. This acknowledgment is demonstrated in the famous Novgorod-icon *Spas nerukotvorny* [The Saviour not made by hand – 12th century]. The head is put into the, in the platonic sense *ideal*, geometrical forms of a circle and square (Timaios 20, 53c-55c), which demonstrate the icon's origin in an intelligible principle of nature.

⁵ The alleged contact between king Abgar and Jesus Christ was mentioned for the first time by Eusebius, who does not write about the icon (Eusebius. *History of the Church*. 1.13.5 – 1.13.22).

John of Damascus (8th century) relied in his image theory on the cosmology of Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita (5th century), who proposed both a dualistic and a hierarchic structure of the universe. The church hierarchy on Earth is a mirror reflection of the angels' hierarchy in the heavenly realm. At the same time each level of the hierarchy is compared with 'mirrors without flaws' (*esoptra dieidestata*), transferring an image from the upper to the lower level:

The purpose, then, of Hierarchy is the assimilation and union, as far as attainable, with God, having Him Leader of all religious science and operation, by looking unflinchingly to His most Divine comeliness, and copying, as far as possible, and by perfecting its own followers as Divine images, mirrors most luminous and without flaw, receptive of the primal light and the supremely Divine ray, and devoutly filled with the entrusted radiance, and again, spreading this radiance ungrudgingly to those after it, in accordance with the supremely Divine regulations (Dionysius the Areopagite 1899: chapter III).⁶

Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita drafts a world-view, which to my point of view is similar to a virtual reality – i.e. a reality in images, where everything belonging to the earthly realm is only an 'image' of the 'real' reality of God. Similar, at least in its algorithmic construction, to the automatic collection of information into an electronic cosmos of the NSA, these reflections exclude the creative interference of the human being. The mirror functions as a union between mechanics and divine energy. In an icon *not made by hand* there is neither place for the icon-painter, nor for his studio, nor for the technical or aesthetic experiments which are prior to the final image. John of Damascus does not write a single sentence about how a painting comes into being. Instead he proposes a *given image*, a result without a process, like a print or mirror reflection.

In his *Logoi* against the iconoclasts, John of Damascus defines the icon as '...a likeness and pattern and impression of something, showing in itself what is depicted'⁷ (2003: 95). The emphasis on likeness or similarity (*homoioma*) means that the icon resembles Christ by appearance. But by its substance the icon is not Christ. The difference between appearance and substance can be illustrated with the icon and the Eucharist. The icon looks like Christ, but is of another substance. The Eucharist *is* Christ by the same substance, but has no similarity with Christ (see Schönborn 1984: 156). The definition of the icon as venerable in its appearance implies in my view that the *finished* icon, which has achieved similarity, and therefore shows 'in itself what is depicted', is on a higher level of reality than its materials before they are completely adapted to the image of Christ. It follows the meaning of icons in terms of *kenosis* (=emptying). In the process of the icon's creation the painter has to 'kill' both the artist in himself (Zinon 2003: 36) and the means of producing an artwork. Venerable is neither the craftsman, nor the craftwork, but the image alone.

By his emphasis on *likeness*, John of Damascus disregards the physical substance of the icon. This implies in my opinion a deeper understanding of the concept of *acheiropoiesis*.

⁶ 'Skopos oun ierarchias estin e pros theon os ephikton aphomoiosis te kai enosis auton echousa pases ieras epistemes te kai energieas kathegemonia kai pros ten autou theiotaten euprepeian aklinos men oron os dynaton de apotypoumenos kai tous eautou thiasotas agalmata theia telon esoptra dieidestata kai akelidota, dektika tes archifotou kai thearchikes aktinos kai tes men endidomenes aigles ieros apopleroumena, tauten de authis athonos eis ta ekses analampona kata tous thearchikous thesmous'. Dionysius Areopagita 1857, Chap. III, § II.

⁷ 'Eikon men oun estin omoiomata kai paradeigma kai ektypoma tinos en eauto deiknyon to eikonizomenon' (Kotter 1975: 125).

What is not *made* by hand is also not intended to be *touched* by hand. The image appears as an abstract idea, as an imaginary image, because in a physical, non-imaginary painting every visibility remains dependent on its haptic materials. For instance, will the golden sky in the icon look golden simply because it is made of gold; the blue looks blue because it contains lapis lazuli. Because a painter has to use certain materials, which at least in their physical pigments are similar to what they depict, a painting can never be a sole appearance independent of what it consists of. The only images, which are sole appearances by virtue of negating their materials, are mirror reflections or mental images in our memory, thoughts, dreams, imaginations or hallucinations. If you 'dissect' a painting by taking away the upper layers of colour, you will still see in the lower layers traces of the process, which are similar to the finished painting (Images 5, 6, and 7). But if you dissect a brain, you will not see any images, and the same is the case if you jump into the image reflected on a surface of water, or break the mirror wall of the NSA. Between the image and its manifestation in a material substance there is no nexus. Mental and caused images have no physical body, and are not results of a process, which involves human activity.

Images 5, 6, 7. 'Roentgen analysis of a painting by Degas showing different steps of the painting process.'



Source: Glyptoteket, Copenhagen. Photo: Fabian Heffermehl.

Where the pictures on computer screens are concerned, they should be considered as new 'species' among images. The image on a screen is a caused immaterial picture, a projection of an image based on a code of binary numbers hidden in plastic and aluminium. We have a chain of discontinuity between the image and its material manifestation. The image is both in its essence and appearance different from the binary code. The binary code is both in its essence and appearance different from plastic and aluminium. Like a mirror reflection or shadow the electronic image is *not made by hand*, and it occurs without any direct human interference. Electronic automation can here be seen as a transformation of the icon's kenosis into a new pattern. But at the same time the electronic image avoids the icon's contradiction of being both an appearance *not made by hand* and a hand-made object. The paradox of electronic images can be formulated as a phenomenological coincidence with the icon as an imaginary image of its theological idea, but at the same time an opposition to what an icon is as a non-virtual, physical thing, existing in the world.

The surveillance-gaze

Pretending to reformulate the conditions for visibility, both the internet and the doctrine of the icon represent structures with universal, all-embracing pretensions. Image 2 shows that this is also how the internet is perceived. But the fear of surveillance is not so much a fear of electronic globalization or omnipresence, as of our own transparency confronted with a gaze, which is as opaque and transparent as a black mirror. This fear of being gazed at brings a problem into the discourse, which unlike the *acheiropoietos*-mirror is not so much connected with the phenomenology of the icon's material substance or lack of substance, but rather with the phenomenology of perception.

Articles in German newspapers accuse the NSA 'of having access to our thoughts' (Bamford 2013). More precisely, the secret services can know the *traces* of our thoughts in what we write, say or click on, but not the thoughts as such. The NSA can only know what we *look at*. Through the electronic media, which in this context are not so much media as a parallel virtual reality, we get an effect, which Jacques Lacan described in the field of psychoanalysis: *We are gazed at by what we see*.⁸

Lacan characterized the relationship between the gazed seeing subject and the world as an 'inverted use of perspective' (1981: 92). In fact the 'inverted perspective' is a term which was introduced by the Russian art historian Dmitry Ajnalov (1900: 103, 111, 219) and in 1919 adopted by Pavel Florenskii in the title of his essay *Obratnaia perspektiva*.⁹ At around the turn of the 20th century, linear perspective goes through both a geometrical deconstruction by Cezanne, Picasso and Braque, and a no less important ideological deconstruction with the introduction of new terms. Florenskii connects the so-called 'reverse' or 'inverse' perspective to peculiarities of the Orthodox icon. In a broader sense, which includes not only Florenskii, but also Lacan, the reverse perspective can be interpreted as an organic and dynamic counter conception to linear perspective.

First, a few words about what actually is being inverted: Alberti in his book *Della pittura* [The Picture – 1435] introduced perspective as a rational, geometrical construction, allowing the artist to create a perfect illusion of space. In Alberti's own words the flat surface of the painting should be transformed into 'an open window' – *una fenestra aperta* (1877: 79). To see something in a painting was now made equivalent to seeing something in the three-dimensional world. The main principles of perspective are shown in Image 8.

We have a vanishing point far back in the painting, where the lines along the floor go together. This point was meant to correspond to a single eye in a fixed position in front of the painting – and only by this static position would the illusion be regarded as complete.

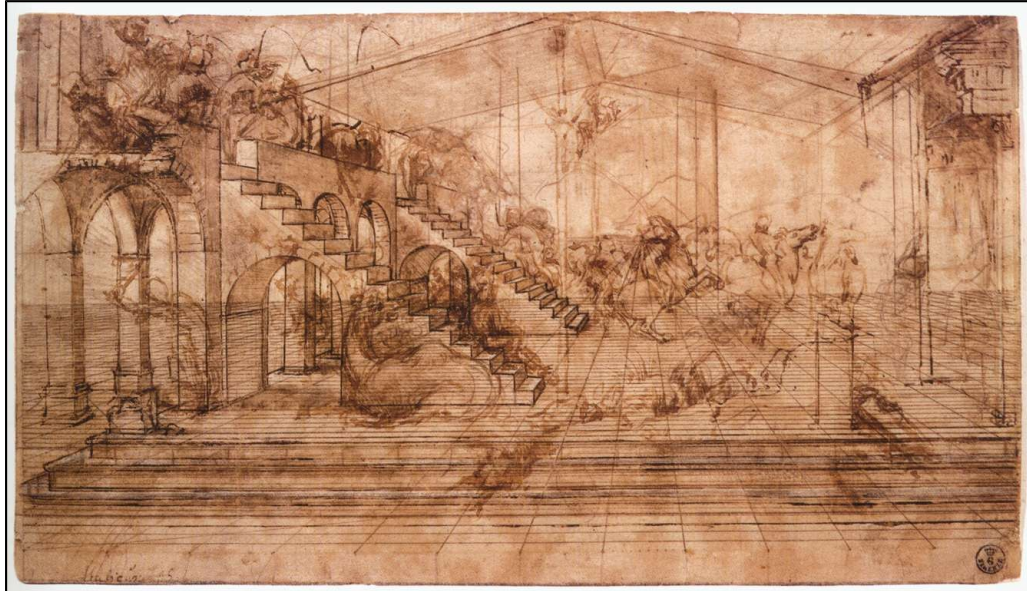
In Byzantine thinking the icon became part of a cosmological structure, which comprised not so much the material picture as its immanent context as a whole. With his linear perspective Alberti brings the image 'down to earth' – to the 'area' of seeing. At the same time this perspective, by regulation of the particular position of the observer, introduces a clear distinction between the subject and the object of seeing. Internet surveillance, on the contrary, transforms in its own virtual reality the objects, which we see, or the texts, which we read,

⁸ 'This is how one should understand those words, so strongly stressed, in the gospel, *They have eyes that they might not see*. That they might not see what? Precisely, that things are looking at them' (Lacan 1981: 109).

⁹ Florenskii's essay *Obratnaia perspektiva* was published for the first time in 1967, three years after Lacan gave his lecture on *Line and Light*.

into 'subjects' 'looking back' at us. In this sense the perception paradigms of surveillance are opposed to those of linear perspective.

Image 8. Leonardo da Vinci: *Perspectival study of the Adoration of the Magi*



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adoration_of_the_Magi_%28Leonardo%29#/media/File:Leonardo,_studio_per_l%27adorazione_dei_magi,_uffizi.jpg (accessed 11 June 2014)

The fear of surveillance can be regarded as a reflection of the phenomenological consequences of a struggle with linear perspective. Instead of a 'dead' object for the eye constructed by means of a geometrical mechanism, the painting should 'organize a matrix' for the materialization of a gaze (Boehm 2006: 25). The famous anamorphosis in the painting of Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533) serves as an example. At first glance the painting is a typical albertian 'window', into which the eye projects its desire for wealth and power – a desire which is symbolized by a mystical figure similar to a phallus rising up from the floor. This is how the painting seems to an 'ideal' observer, standing in a place corresponding to the vanishing point. But what happens if we move from this fixed position, for instance down to the left – to a more 'Oriental' and 'obedient' position according to Florenskii's contemporary art critic Anatolii Bakushinskii (1923: 256) – or up to the right, to a flying position, maybe corresponding to the weightlessness we feel in dreams? From both alternative points of view we will be confronted with our own 'nothingness, in the figure of the death's head' (Lacan 1981: 92).¹⁰ The phallus appears to be a skull, and, if we follow Lacan, a symbol of castration gazing back at the observer. In Holbein's picture there is a chiasmus (crosswise reversal) between the human eye and the gaze of the skull, which both adapts to and rejects the rules of perspective. It has a doubleness, approaching the antinomy between fertility and death, Eros and Thanatos, between the desire to click on everything tempting and to be under surveillance in our desire.

¹⁰ 'Il nous reflète notre propre néant, dans la figure de la tête de mort' (Lacan 1973: 86).

For Lacan the gaze belongs not only to portraits, but also to every part of the material world. Another of his examples is a sardine can, ‘gazing’ at him while floating in the sea off the coast of Brittany (1981: 95). The gaze is not the same as a representation of the biological eye. Lacan refers to the legend of Parrhasius, who made a painting of a curtain, which was so perfect that even Zeuxis was tricked. In the belief that the curtain was real, Zeuxis asked Parrhasius to draw it aside, so he could see the picture. The gaze in Parrhasius’ image is connected with what is ‘behind’ the curtain – with a desire to see something beyond the illusion, which through our desire to see it becomes valuable for us, and in this sense gazes back.

Image 9. Hans Holbein: *The Ambassadors*



Source: https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ambassad%C3%B6rerna#/media/File:Hans_Holbein_the_Younger_-_The_Ambassadors_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg (accessed 23 May 2014)

With his sardine can Lacan makes visible some implications of modernist painting, which in my opinion can be illustrated by a story from Wassily Kandinsky’s autobiography from his time in Munich before the First World War. One evening Kandinsky entered his studio, filled with impressions after a long day’s painting, and suddenly saw a picture ‘too beautiful to be

described, and filled with an inner glow' (1977: 20).¹¹ At first he hesitated, not understanding what he saw. Then he realized that the picture was his own, but at an angle like Holbein's skull. Kandinsky was gazed at by something without any similarity to an eye – an anamorphosis in the painting, which suddenly came into his consciousness, where it hadn't been before, and therefore depended solely on the painting's own reality.

Instead of Alberti's image window, which served the eye, and had no meaning outside the realm of perception, Kandinsky, according to my interpretation, is a protagonist for an idea of an image, acting on its own. As a gazed-at observer I am not alone in the process of perception. Who is the observer and what is the image becomes relative. In Vologda, in connection with his ethnographic research, Kandinsky became aware of himself as a part of the image's reality: 'They taught me to move inside the image, to live in the image' (1977: 18).¹² The logical conclusion of this chiasmus between the observing subject and the observed object is that the image is no adaptation to what I expect to see in 'an open window', but in an interaction between itself and me as an image. The image becomes a reality in itself, in its own materiality, corresponding to me as a material being.

Image 10. Wassily Kandinsky: *The first abstract aquarelle*



Source: <http://www.wikiart.org/en/wassily-kandinsky/first-abstract-watercolor-1910#super-sized-artistPaintings-189305> (accessed 2 July 2014)

The icon's gaze

The transformation from the classical academic perspective to the non-figurative autonomous painting is the consequence of an upgrade of the matter – or more precisely of the material picture's ability to create reality. In accordance with my hypotheses, modernistic theories of

¹¹ '...als ich plötzlich ein unbeschreiblich schönes, von einem inneren Glühen durchtränktes Bild sah'.

¹² 'Sie lehrten mich, im Bilde mich zu bewegen, im Bilde zu leben'.

painting have been adapted by the 20th century's theories of the icon. When, in 1900, the art historian Ajnalov used the anachronistic notion of *reverse perspective* for the first time it was with reference to a deconstruction of perspective:

Cases of application of the reverse perspective are especially obvious in the depiction of books in the hands of the four evangelists. These books are represented with an unnatural extension upwards as a result of the circumstance that the carver shows the thickness of the book not from two sides, but from every side (1900: 111).¹³

In other words, 'unnatural' deformations in Byzantine paintings are associated with a diversification of the observer's point of view. Ajnalov expresses this diversification in negative terms. The reverse perspective is regarded as a failure due to the icon painter's lack of knowledge of linear perspective. Nevertheless Ajnalov gives words to a phenomenon, which would soon become normative for modern art. Kandinsky's painting proposes an intuitive point of view, which is not determined by the geometry of linear perspective.

The German art historian Oscar Wulff translated in his article of 1907 Ajnalov's term into 'umgekehrte Perspektive'. According to Wulff's theory there is an imagined point of view within the image. The icon painter chose the biggest figure in the painting as his imagined subject ('Einfühlung'). All other elements in the composition are seen with decreasing dimensions dependent on the distance from this subject. In fact this theory of reverse perspective remains within both a methodological and a dialectical dependence on linear perspective. Like linear perspective, reverse perspective is understood as a model of seeing, where things close to the subject look bigger than things far from the subject. The only difference is that the subject is located somewhere inside the image, while the vanishing point is placed in front of it. This can be illustrated by the left pedestal in the Trinity icon of Alberti's contemporaneous painter Andrei Rublev:

Image 11. Andrei Rublev: *The Holy Trinity* (detail)



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity_%28Andrei_Rublev%29#/media/File:Angelsatmamre-trinity-rublev-1410.jpg (accessed 8 June 2014)

¹³ 'Sluchai primeneniia obratnoi perspektivy osobenno iasny v izobrazhenii knig v rukakh chetyrekh evangelistov. Eti knigi predstavleny neestestvenno rasshiraivushchimsia kverkhu vsledstvie togo, chto rezchik pokazyvaet tolshchinu knigi ne s dvukh storon, a so vsekhs storon.'

If we understand the left pedestal by means of perspective, the lines on each side, presumably parallel in physical reality, seem to go in a 'reverse' direction. They do not meet at a point in the depth of the picture (compare with Image 8), but somewhere in front of it. In other words, the notion of 'reverse perspective' is founded on an idea of a diametrical opposition between the icon and the renaissance painting. Leonid Uspenskii claims that 'the perspective of the visible world is in [the icon] opposite to the evangelical perspective; the world lying in sin [is opposite to] the resurrected world'¹⁴ (2008: 361).

As a symbolist Florenskii understands the gaze as something belonging to every part of the visible world: 'All things gaze at each other. They reflect each other thousands of times. All things are centres of outgoing mysterious forces' (1999b: 151).¹⁵ In *Iconostasis* he defends the icon as a 'window' from heaven to earth (1996: 443; see also Bakushinskii 1923: 228). The window metaphor of Alberti is inherited, but at the same time transformed. Instead of a subject, which arbitrarily sets its optic perception of a three-dimensional space in place of the canvas, the icon is now understood in terms of God's gaze back on the human being. The difference from Wulff is that it is no longer the icon painter, who *imagines* himself to be a point of view from the icon's inside, but rather a point of view, which objectively exists. Therefore Florenskii writes: 'For no matter where on earth the saint's remains are, and no matter what their physical condition, his resurrected and deified body lives in eternity, and the icon that constitutes him does not *depict* the holy witness but *is* the very witness himself' (1996a: 165, translation modified).¹⁶ Paul Evdokimov writes:

Perspective is often reversed in icons. The lines move in a reversed direction, that is, the point of perspective is not behind the panel but in front of it. (...) The effect is startling because the perspective originates in the person who is looking at the icon. The lines thus come together in the spectator and give the impression that the people in the icon are coming out to meet those who are looking on. The world of the icon is turned *toward man*. (Evdokimov 1990: 225)

In other words, the icon is a technique, which by its geometrical reversal of the vanishing point creates an interaction between the observer and the depicted saints. The icon *is* the holy. The signifier *is* the signified (see Suslov's article in this issue of *Digital Icons*, pp. 1-25). Therefore it gazes back toward man.

The digital icon

The different notions of gaze proposed by Lacan, Kandinsky, Ajnalov, Wulff, Florenskii and Evdokimov have a common root in the modernistic discourse of meta-reflection on what

¹⁴ 'Perspektive vidimogo mira v nei protivopostavliaetsia perspektiva evangel'skaia, miru, vo grekhe lezhashchemu, – mir preobrazhennyi'.

¹⁵ 'Vse veshchi vziraiut drug na druga, tysiachekraty otrazhaiut drug druga. Vse veshchi - tsenry iskhodiashchikh tainykh sil'.

¹⁶ 'Gde by ni byli moshchi sviatogo i v kakom by sostoianii sokhrannosti oni ni byli, voskresshee i prosvetlennoe telo ego v vechnosti est', i ikona, iavliaia ego, tem samym uzhe ne *izobrazhaet* sviatogo svidetelia, a *est'* samyi svidetel'' (Florenskii 1996b: 526).

characterizes the painting as a medium, i.e. a discourse, which finally implies a displacement of the point of view. Nevertheless, this analysis should not keep out of mind the fact that the mentioned thinkers operate with strikingly different methodological and scientific ‘languages’. Lacan constructs his gaze as an ‘inverted use of perspective’ (1981: 92) within psychoanalysis, which in this case is not compatible with esthetical and theological theory. Kandinsky’s intuition of a gaze belongs to the area of modernistic aesthetics. Ajnalov, Wulff, Florenskii, Uspenskii and Evdokimov are closer to a geometrical understanding of the gaze as far as they argue for a systematization of space within the icon. Wulff approaches a psychological understanding of imagination (‘Einführung’). While Florenskii, Uspenskii and Evdokimov’s reverse perspective denies psychology. The reality of the icon’s gaze is a witness of God’s omnipresence, and not of a human mental construction.

However, it is the *differences* in psychological and theological methodological approaches to the gaze, which I regard as constitutive for a Manichean rejection of the internet as it is shown in Image 2 in Suslov’s article in this issue of *Digital Icons* (p. 13). The ‘inverted use of perspective’ functions as a technique for the gaze within discourses, which mutually negate each other. The alleged incorporation of a gaze in surveillance technology transforms the internet into the antipode of the Orthodox icon – into this dark world, where Darth Vader replaces the child’s iconic face (*lik*) with his mask (*lichina*). The boy appears so to speak as a prisoner on the inside of the computer’s virtual reality, which is a perversion of the icon’s perspective. This confirms my hypothesis: the Orthodox fight with the internet is a fight with false icons – i.e. idols. And as shown by the example of the golden calf, the idol’s power over the Israelites is of a psychological character. There is no objective life in the statue, as there is no body in the shadows in Plato’s cave. But nevertheless life is perceived.

As shown by the example of reverse perspective, the framework for an Orthodox rejection of the internet combines both modernistic aesthetic and archaistic rhetoric. Therefore, reverse perspective can be understood as both a break with, and dictate from, the Orthodox tradition. Icon theology is no monolithic phenomenological system. Through 1,300 years it has developed partly in accordance with Orthodox self-understanding as a coryphée of the tradition, partly in response to tendencies within the secular culture.¹⁷ A clash of iconic paradigms becomes evident in a question posed in some Russian-Orthodox online forums: *Am I allowed to pray in front of an icon on a computer screen?*¹⁸ In all its simplicity this question illustrates the double media context, which confronts millions of Orthodox believers. On the one hand the internet is without doubt their most *used* medium. Through the internet the human being orientates itself in the world’s complexity of practical and theoretical issues. On the other hand the most authoritative medium for an Orthodox believer is the icon. But then the next question arises: which idea of the icon – the idea of John of Damascus or Florenskii? In my view, patristic and modernistic icon theologies produce different effects for a contemporary Orthodox discourse about the internet. If the question above is answered negatively, then it is with reference to modern theologians like Florenskii or Uspenskii (e.g. ‘Mozhno li molit’sia’ 2007). But when the question gets a positive answer, then it is mostly¹⁹ with refer-

¹⁷ For a more thorough comparison between modern and patristic icon theology see Heffermehl (forthcoming).

¹⁸ See the essay ‘My Digital Collection of Icons’ by Father Tikhon (Kozushin) in this issue of *Digital Icons*, pp. 181-193.

¹⁹ In my analysis I do not consider internet discussions where the question above is answered positively on the basis of a general assumption that praying is always desirable as long as it is conducted faithfully. Such an as-

ence to the Council of Nicaea of 787 A.D. or John of Damascus ('Pochemy ikony ne' 2009). In an interview which was transcribed online, the priest paraphrases John of Damascus without directly referring to him (Iukov 2008).

The different answers to a relatively simple question reveal a split within icon theology. On the one hand, Florenskii, Evdokimov and Uspenskii propose a distinction between the 'icon' (*ikona*) and the artistic picture (*kartina*) in order to underline the uniqueness of the icon, even in relation to its reproductions in other materials, e.g. paper icons or digital icons. They define the icon primarily with regard to concrete icon paintings – like the *Trinity* of Andrei Rublev – and therefore also to explicit painting techniques and materials. On the other hand, in the icon theology of the Church fathers there is no fundament for rejecting images occurring from a computer file. Instead the material world is subordinated to a reality, which in modern terms can be regarded as virtual. For John of Damascus too great an emphasis on the icon's material aspects would be accompanied by a suspicion of idolatry. For Florenskii, on the contrary, the material is linked with a symbolic meaning. It is the virtual or illusive which has the attributes of the idol.

As asserted by Uspenskii, every image made of 'artificial' materials, such as plastic, is witness to a denial of nature – of God's creature – and therefore of God himself: 'The border between permitted and non-permitted in the material is there, where the matter loses its originality and character, passing itself off as something other than it is, that means creating an illusion' (2008: 467).²⁰ In this way Uspenskii incorporates a modern auto-thematization of the image's medium-specificity, where materials like wood and tempera have to appear as nothing other than what they actually are – wood and tempera – but with a rhetoric rooted in an age-old narrative of the icon's resistance to the idol. The problem of the internet as a virtual reality can be reduced to the problem of an icon on a computer screen. A digital icon is similar to an icon painted on a piece of wood, but it lacks the wood's being. Within a Manichean paradigm this combination of an *identity in appearance* and *difference in substance* amounts to a diabolic formula: 'No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light' (2. Cor. 11, 14).

Conclusion

This article started with a hypothesis of the internet as a false icon, resembling the icon without being the icon. During the course of the article I have shown that, translated into modern terms, the Byzantine mirror as a medium and cosmological metaphor can be interpreted in the category of 'virtual reality'. It is on the basis of this virtual reality that the internet resembles the icon. However, the denouncement of this resemblance as a falsification derives from a modernistic framework. The 20th century's struggle with linear perspective makes clear the distinction between the image as a virtual illusion and the image as a material thing.

However, I regard the very Manichean nature of the discourse – where God-given reality is opposed to virtual reality, God's creature to Darth Vader – as an extension of the rhetoric,

sumption implies a reduction of the medium of prayer, where the central question does not concern icon theology, but the believer and his / her psychological relationship to God, see 'Ne grekh li' 2008 and Val123 (2012).

²⁰ 'Gran' mezhdue dopustimym i nedopustimym v veshchestve prolegaet tam, gde materiia teriaet svoiu podlinnost' i kharakter, nachinaia vydavat' sebia za nechto inoe, chem ona est', to est' takzhe sozdavaia illiuziiu'.

which can be traced at least as far back as iconoclasm – a violent struggle about icons, which in the 8th and the 9th centuries almost brought the Byzantine Empire to civil war. The medieval context was different from today, where we have a concurrence between a multitude of categories of images, like the internet, kitsch, ready-mades, advertisements, blogs, Hollywood-films, computer games, concerts, street-art, tattoos, museums etcetera. In the 8th century there was no struggle for one image in relation to other images, but for the very *existence* of the image. Because of its history as an apologia for the image as such, the Orthodox icon tends by its doctrine to proclaim itself as being representative, not of one type of image among others, but of visibility itself. Images which are outside the definition of icons are therefore not to be considered as *competitive images*,²¹ but as *non-images*, for instance as ‘instruments [...] like cars or electricity’ (Ponomarev et al. 2009: 113), or as demonic idols.

The icon’s claim to be a true ‘model’ for visibility itself is expressed in Florenskii’s polemic against linear perspective, which he blames for being an ‘apparition’ or ‘double’ of the world (1999a: 79). The illusion of space in the appearance of a Renaissance painting is for Florenskii a false reality, which distracts our attention away from truth. He refers to Plato’s *Politeia* [The Republic], where a seductive reality is realized deep inside a cave, in front of prisoners chained to the wall: ‘...now people felt the need of *illusion*. And so, presupposing that the spectator or the stage designer was chained fast, like the prisoner of Plato’s cave, to a theatre bench and neither could nor should have a direct vital relationship to reality...’ (2002: 210).²²

Is this narrative so different from worried newspaper articles about children neglecting their health, while spending all their time in front of electronic images of perfect bodies; or unfortunate gamblers, losing their money to websites promising wealth and power; or when a constructed reality of antagonism on the internet attracts confused outsiders to terrorism? What is image and medium replaces what is mediated. The icon replaces the archetype. Maybe Wi-Fi in Plato’s cave gives the clammy, dripping stalactites a more trendy design, but it makes no substantial difference to the shadow-game, which is also a medium game if we follow Marshall McLuhan’s famous assertion that the “‘content’ of any medium is always another medium’ (1964: 8).

According to the church-historian Konrad Onasch, an Orthodox church resembles a cave by its introvert architecture (1996: 11). However, if the image-world inside Plato’s cave is the centre of ignorance, then the innermost part of the church – the sanctuary separated from the nave by the image-wall – corresponds to the highest level in a hierarchy of reality. An Orthodox church is in my view a platonic cave with the inside out. The secular world, physically existing outside the church, is reduced to shadows, while the interior with its cosmos of icons mirrors paradise. The dialectic between the church and the cave is also a dialectic between two acheiropoietic images – shadow and mirror – both shown in Image 3. And as far as an acheiropoietic medium denies its materials – as stated in section 3 – the icon achieves its most complete realization as an icon in a state of antinomy: by its similarity to Christ to-

²¹ An example of what I here characterize as ‘competition’ is in the Catholic Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Rome, where postmodern installations are exhibited together with religious paintings from the Renaissance, both as valid expressions of belief.

²² ‘...teper’ stala chuvstvovat’sia nuzhda v illiuzii. I vot, predpolagaia, chto zritel’ ili dekorator-khudozhnik prikovan, voistinu, kak uznik Platonovskoi peshchery, k teatral’noi skam’e i ne mozhet, a ravno i ne dolzhen, imet’ neposredstvennogo, zhiznennogo otnosheniia k real’nosti...’ (Florenskii 1999a: 54).

gether with its non-similarity to the piece of wood which carries the image. In its veneration of visibility, icon theology contains a paradoxical 'Gnostic' element in the sense of denying the icon's dependence on physical matter. At the same time this 'Gnosticism' serves an argument for the unification of images in the one and only print and mirror reflection of Christ. Not only is the matter denied, but also every alternative image – not to mention a virtuality pretending to replace the reality. A cult of images is not separable from a fear of images. By its boundless production of acheiropoietic images, and by generating surveillance-gazing back on human beings, the internet-medium intensifies the icon-medium and brings it to a new scale, pace and pattern. At the same time the internet re-invents an age-old iconoclastic conflict, which lies at the core of Orthodox Christianity.

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