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Kosky - Iconic Revisions of the Modern World Picture - JCRT 4.1
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We live in an age of image. This simple statement, often repeated, has complex ramifications; for the extent of the image is much wider than art and television where it obviously appears most often. To even begin to measure it's the significance of the image, we must consider a complicated web of discourses, ranging from art and aesthetics to science and technology, and passing through theories of subjectivity and the possibility of God or the gods. For, as the art historian Hans Belting has said, "the history of religion and the history of the human subject" ¹

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3. That many-stranded history reached a new moment with the advent of the modern age. With the epoch-making abandonment, or refashioning, of religious conceptions of God and man human in the fifteen to through seventeenth centuries, the image fell under the sway of the subjective activity of making and judging. Describing the consequences of this in the sphere of art and aesthetics where it might be most immediately apparent, Belting puts it this way: "Art becomes the sphere of the artist, who assumes control of the image as proof of his or her art'. Subjects seize power over the image and seek through their art to apply their metaphoric concept of the world. The image, henceforth produced according to the rule of art and deciphered in terms of them, presents itself to the beholder as an object of reflection" (*Likeness and Presence* 16). But this interpretation of the image can be generalized beyond the sphere of art, and it is not too much to say that such a generalized interpretation of image has been decisive throughout modernity insofar as the modern world has persistently considered the image a reflection of man that serves the self-seeking interests of autonomous human subjectivity.²
 4. But in light of more recent cultural experience, such a notion of the image might no longer ring true. Can we still say that the image reflects and serves the interests of an assertive, self-grounding human subject when the world we make seems to make us in and through, for example, the out of control advertising that dictates lifestyles (life as style)? shape us in and through – advertising for example – the dictates of lifestyle (life as style)? Have we "seized power over the image" when the intricate complexities of an electronic network culture

¹It should be noted that, against man's temptation to delude himself into the mistaken belief of having overcome all distance, Heidegger reminds us that "the frantic abolition of all distance brings no nearness" ("The Thing" 165); for the "distanceless" and the "near" are not the same.

²Originating in a break with the medieval worldview, the very notion of "world-picture," according to Heidegger, is itself characteristic of the modern age: "the world picture does not change from an earlier medieval one into a modern one, but rather the fact that the world becomes picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age. For the Middle Ages, in contrast, that which is, is the *ens creatum*' Never does the Being of that which is consist here in the fact that it is placed in the realm of man's knowing and of his having disposal, and that it is in being only in this way" ("The Age of the World Picture" 130). Similarly the world picture is distinct from the ancient or classical approach to the real. If in the modern age, one sets the world before himself as image or picture in and through the act of representation, for the ancient world, by contrast, the world "does not come into being at all through the fact that man first looks upon it, in the sense of a representing" that would set it before him as a picture to be seen. "Rather, one is the one who is looked upon by that which is" ("The Age of the World Picture" 131). I will pursue some of what Heidegger suggests in these passages later in this essay when we examine the Christian icon.

seem to have us caught inextricably in their captivating webs? If the technologies we have used to make and control the world as image now seem to control us, to what extent can we maintain the modern understanding of image? When the technological determination of life has reached such a point that we are made by the images in whose web we are caught, doesn't it seem time to rethink our modern inheritance? And yet, so saturated with image is our culture our culture is so saturated with image that it would make little sense to completely abandon the notion. It would seem instead that a new theory of image is needed.

5. One way to approach this theory, I want to suggest, is through a reading of the medieval icon where the image is not so much a picture reflecting and serving man its maker as something before which man bends his knee in worship, that is, something whose vision commands the devotee to assume the position demanded by it. To this end, I offer a reading of the icon that takes its departure from a classic text by the medieval cardinal Nicholas of Cusa, *De Visione Dei* (*The Vision of God*), and considers the icon whereupon the icon is considered from three different perspectives: phenomenologically, in terms of how it is experienced; theologically in terms of its relation to God, its prototype; and technically or "aesthetically" in terms of its production. Iconically revising the modern notion of image seeing the image through the paradigm of the icon might therefore suggest an understanding of image that is, according to an essential anachronism, paradoxically post-modern. And if Belting is right that "the history of religion and the history of the human subject [are] inseparable from the history of the image," this would bring with it new possibilities for understanding who comes after the subject and what might follow the loss of the gods.
6. We might start to explore these issues in and through a reading of Martin Heidegger's claim "the fact that the world becomes picture is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age" ("The Age of the World Picture" 130). According to Heidegger, the becoming picture of the world is correlative to the ascent of man to the central position of subject striving for mastery, control, and domination in the midst of what is: "that the world becomes picture is one and the same event with the event of man's becoming *subjectum* in the midst of that which is" ("The Age of the World Picture" 132). The subject, Heidegger argues, emerges as that being who relates to the world first and foremost as ob-ject thrown or cast (*ject*) in front of (*ob*) him; the world is, in other words, that which the subject sets or places (*stellt*) before (*vor*) itself through the operation of representation (*Vorstellung*). Man Human, as subject, represents beings, which therefore are, but are only as objects represented by and for this subject itself. As operator of representation, man the individual as subject positions himself themselves as the ground and "relational center" ("The Age of the World Picture" 128) of all that is in and through this very act of placing or setting objects before himself them. The word 'picture' now means the structured image that is the creature of man's producing that represents and sets before. In such producing man contends for the position in which he can be that particular being who gives the measure and draws up the guidelines for everything that is" ("The Age of the World Picture" 134). On this reading, man produces or constructs humans produce or construct the world as an image, and the pictured world therefore owes its order, measure, and even its very existence to this subject, its master: – man the human. This explains one of the more remarkable features of modernity: namely, that it can be seen at once as the most subjective of all ages and at the same time as the age most dominated by an all pervasive objectivity. The more the world becomes picture, or representation, the more man has become subject who masters, dominates and controls the world, which, as picture, is precisely a world of his making; and the more man one becomes subject who masters, the more the world

becomes a picture, representation, or object which is available to his dominating grasp.

7. In this struggle for mastery and domination, according to Heidegger, man one finds an indispensable ally in the technology which makes the world available and puts it at his disposition. Through the technological extensions of sight and reach, man's the human struggle for mastery achieves truly global proportions, annihilating distance and setting or placing before man everything from one end of the earth to the other. Reflecting on the distance denying effects of modern technology in a lecture from 1950, Heidegger observed, "All distances in time and space are shrinking. Man One now reaches overnight, by plane, places that formerly took weeks and months of travel. He One now receives instant information, by radio, of events which he formerly learned about only years later, if at all'. Distant sites of the most ancient cultures are shown on film as if they stood this very moment amidst today's street traffic'. The peak of this abolition of every possibility of remoteness is reached by television, which will soon pervade and dominate the whole machinery of communication ("The Thing" 165).³⁴
8. With the benefit of his technological prosthesis, modern man extends his reach globally, making all distances, both temporal and spatial, short and easily crossed, putting far corners of the world at his disposal. With this, a truly global picture of the world emerges. The modern world picture is indeed a picture of the world as a whole in its totality, seen up close and personal as a picture on the television screen or heard on the radio receiver in the domestic familiarity of man's being at home.
9. Seen in conjunction with the planetary deployment of global technologies, the becoming picture of the world marks the triumphant moment of modern man's struggle for autonomy in and dominion over the world. But this struggle did not begin in the 20th Century. It began, according to Heidegger, with the emancipation of man from the medieval, Christian conception of the world. Shaking off obligation to the external authorities of revealed truth and church doctrine, modern man seeks, independently and by his own effort, to achieve certainty and security of his dominion over the world by committing himself to a world-order that he himself has legislated.⁵ He becomes self (*auto*) legislating, the maker of the laws (*nomoi*) that govern the world to which he one submits; in other words, he one becomes autonomous, literally self-legislating, obeying only a world order which he himself they them self underwrites. Man's Our struggle for mastery or dominion, his our search for certainty and security, is thereby guaranteed success since it transpires in a world of his our own devising.

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⁴The cult image thus conveys something like what Heidegger sought to recall even amid the frenzy of modern technological life: "the frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness" ("The Thing" 165).

⁵Originating in a break with the medieval worldview, the very notion of "world-picture," according to Heidegger, is itself characteristic of the modern age: "the world picture does not change from an earlier medieval one into a modern one, but rather the fact that the world becomes picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age. For the Middle Ages, in contrast, that which is, is the *ens creatum*' Never does the Being of that which is consist here in the fact that it is placed in the realm of man's knowing and of his having disposal, and that it is in being only in this way" ("The Age of the World Picture" 130). Similarly the world picture is distinct from the ancient or classical approach to the real. If in the modern age, one sets the world before himself as image or picture in and through the act of representation, for the ancient world, by contrast, the world "does not come into being at all through the fact that man first looks upon it, in the sense of a representing" that would set it before him as a picture to be seen. "Rather, one is the one who is looked upon by that which is" ("The Age of the World Picture" 131). I will pursue some of what Heidegger suggests in these passages later in this essay when we examine the Christian icon.

10. The age of the world picture is thus the age of the human subject who constructs the world as image in and through the act of representation. On this reading, our contemporary image saturated culture would mark the ultimate triumph of man and subjectivity: when everything is image and image is everything, man one sees only his their own productions; the world becomes a totality of images of the human, representative subject. "Man' One exalts himself to the posture of lord of the earth. In this way the impression comes to prevail that everything man one encounters exists only insofar as it is man's our construct. This illusion gives rise to one final delusion: It seems as though man we everywhere and always encounters only ourselves. himself" (QCT, 27). On such a reading, picture or image is used to denote a world that reflects and serves only our selves, its maker, in it. man, who sees only himself, its maker, in it.
11. When "man everywhere and always encounters himself," no place remains for mystery and otherness. The world picture as Heidegger describes it would thus be disenchanting in the sense given by Max Weber. "It means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanting" ("Science as Vocation" 139). On this reading, then, the becoming picture of the world must be seen as part of the (perhaps more general) loss of God, the gods, and all other forms of mystery and enchantment that would characterize a pre-modern, un-Enlightened, or supposedly still primitive age'ages where revelation or other external intervention could at least possibly interrupt the predictable world order and resist man's struggle for mastery. Heidegger will also suggest the inverse: namely, that the emancipation of man from the Christian God and all other forms of the incalculable and enchanting would go hand-in-hand with a transformation in the notion of image. Heidegger calls this transformation "the event of art's moving into the purview of aesthetics" ("The Age of the World Picture" 116). Having lost or abandoned the gods, modern man the modern, according to the scientific world view, relates to images as objects to be seen and judged'which is the task of aesthetics, a discipline which considers images as completed human achievements, products of man that reflect him the human being that and illustrate his the world.⁶
12. The connection between the emergence of an aesthetic notion of image and the disenchantment of the world or the loss of the gods can be approached productively through a reading of

⁶In her essay "Two Kinds of Representation in Greek Religious Art" (*Representation in Religion: Studies in Honor of Moshe Barash*, Jan Assmann and Albert I. Baumgarten, eds. Leiden: Brill, 2001.), the art historian Margalit Finkelberg confirms Benjamin's point, at least in the case of ancient Greek art, showing that cult statues were indeed not made to be put on display, but were instead kept hidden away. Considering textual evidence from ancient Greek authors as well as material evidence from archaeological discoveries, Finkelberg distinguishes cult statues from the temple statues which were regarded as an offering to the deity. As offerings, the temple statues were fashioned in such a way as to reflect and display the wealth and generosity of the donor (in the dedication), the skill of the artist (they were signed), and the self-image of the city state'clearly, objects produced by man in order to be seen; after all, why would so much lavish effort and extravagant outlay of cash on a statue commissioned from a famous sculptor culminate in hiding this statue from the public eye? The cult statues, by contrast, were rumored to have fallen from heaven and to possess the power to inflict punishment on those who displeased them. These statues, "in apparent contradiction to their function as representational artifacts, [were] not meant to be seen at all" ("Two Kinds of Representation in Greek Religious Art" 36); they were brought out of hiding only on ceremonial occasions when they were meant to be bathed, dressed, or otherwise venerated'not simply to be seen. Finkelberg concludes: "in ancient Greece there were images of gods which functioned as cult objects proper but were not intended as objects of contemplation: in fact, notwithstanding their representational character, not a few of these images were not meant to be generally seen. On the other hand, there were images especially designed as objects of contemplation but which, at the same time, were not regarded as cult objects proper" (p. 38-9). It is in this latter group (non-cultic, meant to be seen) that Finkelberg detects the emergence of art and aesthetic consideration, and she cites many texts where "things artfully made" and "worth seeing" are contrasted with antiquities of little or no artistic skill.

Walter Benjamin's now classic essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In this essay, Benjamin famously analyzes how modern techniques of image production have effected what he calls a "decay of aura" such that one might see the rise of the artistic object in an intimate connection with the absence of mystery and loss of the gods.⁷

13. Stated most broadly, Benjamin means by aura "the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be" ("The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" 243). Auratic art possesses a certain presence or authenticity which it maintains, he asserts, by keeping the human subject or spectator at a distance. This distance is not fundamentally a function of space and time, but of the cultic setting of the image. "The essentially distant object is the unapproachable one. Inapproachability is indeed a major quality of the cult image. True to its nature, it remains 'distant, however close it may be. The closeness which one may gain from its subject matter does not impair the distance which it retains in its appearance'" ("The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" 243). Appearing in distance and retaining its distance even in its appearance, the cult image is defined against human efforts to set or place it before man as an object at his disposal.⁸ In this cultic or ritual setting, Benjamin argues, the image was not primarily meant to be seen or put on view. Its cult value, in other words, was distinct from its exhibition value such that "its cult value would seem to demand that the work of art remain hidden. Certain statues of gods are accessible only to the priest in the cella; certain Madonnas remain covered nearly all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are invisible to the spectator on ground level" ("The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" 225).⁹ Aura would bespeak a certain invisibility of the image, an invisibility that "it retains in its appearance," and this invisibility would maintain the distance essential to the auratic image.¹⁰

⁷G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*. Cited in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" 245.

⁸The cult image thus conveys something like what Heidegger sought to recall even amid the frenzy of modern technological life: "the frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness" ("The Thing" 165).

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¹⁰It should be noted that this understanding of beauty already approaches the notion from an aesthetic perspective where beauty would be a subjective determination of an object, the product of a judgment. Other notions of beauty appear in Heidegger's notion of the work of art and even in Christian theological notions of divine beauty. For both Heidegger and Christian theology, owing probably to a Neo-platonic inheritance, beauty is not the characteristic of an object (not a subjective determination of an object), but the radiance of the thing-itself.

14. With the advent of the modern age, however, new techniques of production, reproduction, and dissemination have wrest the image from its cultic setting, be it the holy cathedral or the sacred grove, and enabled it to “meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation,” hanging on the walls of his drawing room or resounding from the gramophone in his living room (“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” 221). When man one can set the image in a place of his own choosing, the “phenomenon of distance” that characterizes aura is overcome, and the image is domesticated: the collector arranges it on the wall in accordance with his own taste; the auditor listens whenever it suits his fancy; etc. With the new setting of the image, now in a setting controlled by the subject, Benjamin claims “exhibition value begins to replace cult value” (“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” 225). Images become valuable precisely because they can be exhibited or seen, and this exhibition is arranged by man one according to his own convenience, the result being that the world’s collection of pictures is put at the disposition of man people and, at least potentially, available to anyone at any time. With the incredible expansion of technological capabilities, it is “easier to exhibit a portrait bust that can be sent here and there than to exhibit the statue of a divinity that has its fixed place in the interior of a temple” (“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” 225). Reduced to its exhibition value, the image is made, by man humans, to come and stand before man the human them self, himself who, far from transporting himself them self to the ends of the earth in search of the aura of the original, brings the representation or picture to himself them self in the exhibition he they organizes or the television screen he they places before himself them self nightly.
15. In its irreducible distance, essential invisibility, and in short sheer unavailability, the auratic image would thus distinguish itself from the aesthetic image or picture made to be exhibited as part of the disenchanted modern world picture. This distinction is summarized in a passage Benjamin quotes directly from Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*: “Images were known of old. Piety at an early time required them for worship, but it could do without *beautiful* images. These might even be disturbing. In every beautiful painting there is also something nonspiritual’. Fine art has arisen in the church, although it has already gone beyond its principle as art.”¹¹ The distinction between modern artistic images (which would be the object of aesthetics) and auratic images “known of old” concerns a certain understanding of beauty—in other words, of their visibility. Made to be seen by man people, the image as an object of art has to be beautiful in order to please the subjective viewer and the determination of beauty is the result of a subjective judgment.¹² This is what Heidegger means by saying the image “moves into the purview of aesthetics.” In an auratic image belonging to piety and religion, however, this beauty is disturbing precisely because it lets the gaze settle on a visible object available to it, rather than orienting man to the invisible or nonspiritual which lies in some as yet unspecified way beyond the “purview of aesthetics” and the image’s “principle as art.”¹³

¹¹G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*. Cited in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” 245.

¹²It should be noted that this understanding of beauty already approaches the notion from an aesthetic perspective where beauty would be a subjective determination of an object, the product of a judgment. Other notions of beauty appear in Heidegger’s notion of the work of art and even in Christian theological notions of divine beauty. For both Heidegger and Christian theology, owing probably to a Neo-platonic inheritance, beauty is not the characteristic of an object (not a subjective determination of an object), but the radiance of the thing-itself.

¹³The art historian Moshe Barash suggests that the omnivoyant image was a common motif in both eastern and western Christianity. Barash refers us to the *Legenda aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine and then cites the Byzantine Nikolaos Mesarites description of the image of the Pantocrator: “His look is gentle and wholly mild, turning neither to the left nor to the right, but wholly directed toward all at once and at the same time toward each individually” (“The Frontal Icon: A Genre in Christian Art.” *Imago hominis: Studies in the Language of Art*. Vienna: IRSA, 1991. 34). The obvious parallel with

16. Linking the loss of the gods with the image's displacement into aesthetics, the decay of aura results from the ascent of a self-assertive, productive human subject whose power of representation is enhanced with the assistance of modern technology. Though Benjamin notes the important role that photographic reproduction played in the simultaneous decay of aura and advance of the picture, this is nowhere more evident for him than in the most modern of art forms: namely, film or the motion picture. Modern technologies of making motion pictures dissolve even the last stronghold of aura, the presence of the human person. The decay of the aura of the human person is seen, according to Benjamin, in two notable ways: first, the intervention of the camera in the presentation of the person in the motion picture; and second, the role of editing in creating the picture.
17. The camera that presents the performance of the film actor to the public need not respect the performance as an integral whole. Guided by the cameraman, the camera continually changes its position with respect to the performance. The sequence of positional views which the editor composes from the material supplied him constitutes the completed film. It comprises certain factors of movement which are in reality those of the camera, not to mention special camera angles, close-ups, etc. ("The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" 228).
18. The film actor does not present his own person. Through techniques of framing, zooming, etc., the camera makes his person as a picture, producing even human motion through its own movements and rapid cutting. Similarly the editor produces the actor's presence in a representation through the "composition of many separate performances" filmed at different times and assembled in the lab or editing room ("The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" 230). The picture is, in all senses of the word, synthetic: it is a bringing together and assembling (or synthesis) of different sequences shot at different times, often in different places, with cameras positioned at different angles, etc., in order to manufacture a man-made (synthetic) representation.
19. Though the theory of disenchantment, decay of aura, and rise of the world-picture were all crucial in inaugurating the modern age, there is much to suggest that, in the wake of modernity, these theories may have lost the ring of truth. To return to the sphere of art where our notions of image might seem most clearly brought to light, it is fair to say that the widespread growth of site-specific or performance art in the contemporary age would mark an important departure from the decay of aura characteristic of the modern age. Site-specific art is, quite simply, site specific: it is not made to be brought before the subject; it makes the subject, inversely, come and stand before it. More generally, does the image or world-picture today in what might be thought, at least chronologically, as the post-modern age still reflect and serve the interests of the self-assertive human subject struggling for mastery and control in the midst of what is? If man humans triumphed over the world by instituting the world-picture in and through modern science and technology, today it seems that science and technology might have triumphed over man humans' remaking him them in its image. This is not the place to debate these points, but I take them as fairly common preoccupations in humanistic, social scientific, and scientific circles.
20. What this means is that the modern world-picture needs to be rethought. This might be attempted through a reading of the medieval icon where the image is not so much a picture reflecting and serving man its maker as something before which man one bends his their knee

Cusa's account lends weight to the importance.

in worship, that is something whose vision commands the devotee to assume the position demanded by it. In what follows I want to approach the icon from three different perspectives: phenomenologically, in terms of how it is experienced; theologically in terms of its relation to God, its prototype; and technically or “aesthetically” in terms of its production. Throughout, it will be apparent that this iconic revision of the world-picture entails rethinking the notion of the subject who sees it and the God who may appear in it.

21. A beautiful phenomenological account of the icon is provided by the fifteenth century cardinal Nicholas of Cusa’s (b. 1401) in his short text *De Visione Dei* (*The Vision of God*)..Written as an aid to the contemplative life for monks at the Benedictine Abbey of Tegernsee, the text was sent to the monastic community along with a “picture,” both of which together were intended to “transport”¹⁴
22. In a startling reversal of the modern world picture, the image or icon of God is itself, according to Nicholas, the source or point of departure for vision. For purposes of training in the mystical transport to things divine, Nicholas writes that he has “found no better image suited to our purpose than that of an image which is omnivoyant—its face, by the painter’s cunning art, being made to appear as though looking on all around it” (*The Vision of God*_3). Nicholas goes on to offer precise instructions as to how this all-seeing or omnivoyant image was experienced by the monks of the community:

“This picture brethren, ye shall set up in some place, let us say, on a north wall and shall stand round it, a little way off, and look upon it. And each of you shall find that, from whatsoever quarter he regardeth it, it looketh upon him as if it looked upon none other’. If now while fixing his eye on the icon, he walk from west to east, he will find that its gaze continuously goeth along with him, and if he return from east to west, in like manner it will not leave him’ So he will come to know that the picture’s face keepeth in sight all as they go on their way though it be in contrary directions” (*The Vision of God* 4-5). In this experiment, a man monk walks from west to east and then back from east to west without at any time discovering that the fixed and immobile picture has stopped looking at him as he travels across the room, moving from one place to another. Its vision is in this sense “omnivoyant” or all-embracing of the world in its totality. Likewise when all stand still in a semi-circle surrounding the picture, each alike reports that the picture sees him. This phenomenological report would apparently suggest that for Nicholas and the devoted community of monks the subject (man, the one looking at the painting) does not occupy the relational center, does not stand at the center around which space and time would be organized into an ordered and measured system of coordinates. If each of the brethren is regarded equally no matter what place they occupy, and if a single one of them can be seen equally wherever he places himself in the room, this can only mean that the picture itself marks the center.¹⁵

¹⁴On darkness that reveals, see most especially *Mystical Theology* 1001A: “then he breaks free, away from what he sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing” and 997A-B: “Lead us up’ where the mysteries of God’s Word lie simple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.”

¹⁵The art historian Moshe Barash suggests that the omnivoyant image was a common motif in both eastern and western Christianity. Barash refers us to the *Legenda aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine and then cites the Byzantine Nikolaos Mesarites description of the image of the Pantocrator: “His look is gentle and wholly mild, turning neither to the left nor to the right, but wholly directed toward all at once and at the same time toward each individually” (“The Frontal Icon: A Genre in Christian Art.” *Imago hominis: Studies in the Language of Art*. Vienna: IRSA, 1991. 34). The obvious parallel with Cusa’s account lends weight to the importance.

23. What then does the monk see when he venerates or devotes himself to contemplating the icon? In a sense, nothing or at least no thing or object; for what is seen by the monk, according to Nicholas' testimony, is another gaze which looks back at me. "The longer I look upon Thy face the more keenly dost Thou seem to turn the glance of thine eyes upon me" (*The Vision of God* 23). Seeing the icon then does not mean letting one's gaze fall on an object placed before one. The icon is not seen; it provokes a vision or experience—the experience of being seen. In other words, what is seen by the man one who looks at the icon is a gaze looking at him back, rendering the devoted monk the (quasi-) object of a gaze. Reversing the modern formulation which, according to Heidegger, placed the representational activity of the subject at the ground and origin of the picture, the icon is seen only to the extent that it first gives itself to be seen in and through its appearing to the devoted monk. This appearing or giving itself to be seen does not give an object but is in fact the experience that Nicholas describes as my being seen by it or its seeing me. "In beholding me, Thou givest thyself to be seen of me, Thou who art a hidden God. None can see Thee save in so far as Thou grantest a sight of Thyself, nor is that sight aught else than Thy seeing him that seeth Thee" (*The Vision of God* 19-20). The iconic image appears, letting itself be seen, only to the degree that it looks at man. This being looked at is, inversely, precisely and only what man sees in seeing the icon—which is why Nicholas can assert God to be "a hidden God" even amidst his God's giving himself of divinity to be seen in the icon.
24. The precedence of the icon to its devoted subject, the fact that in this relationship all initiative belongs to the "picture," goes so far that Nicholas will even say "I exist in that measure in which Thou art with me, and since Thy look is Thy being, I am because Thou dost look at me, and if Thou didst turn Thy glance from me I should cease to be" (*The Vision of God* 16). The reversal of the modern world picture could not be put in a more striking fashion: here man, the subject, owes his being to the gaze communicated in the picture, not the inverse. In contrast to the self-legislating, self-grounding subject, the man one who sees the icon is himself themself posited by what he sees. Nicholas' account of the image is not limited to strict phenomenology. He also offers a theological account of the icon in which the icon is embedded in a certain conception of the divine and its relation to man the viewer. This theology will have a decidedly "aesthetic" cast on account of its organization by the icon or image of God, but this aesthetic will be fundamentally altered by its theological direction toward an invisible God. This theological understanding would structure the aesthetic according to an irreducible dialectic of revealing and concealing, seeing and not-seeing, visibility and invisibility that would at once validate an aesthetic and render it inadequate. According to this theological aesthetic or aesthetic theology, God would be manifest in the iconic face precisely as the hidden or invisible God whose face is beyond all faces.
25. The theological account centers on the relation between God's face and the face that shows itself in the icon. According to Nicholas, God's face is, on the one hand, "the pattern and true type of all faces, and all faces [are] images of [this] face" (*The Vision of God* 24); and on the other hand, God's face is "beyond all forms of faces that may be formed, and all figures' beyond all faces, and all likenesses and figures of all faces, and all concepts which can be formed of a face" (*The Vision of God* 26). As pattern or true type, God would thus be manifest and revealed in every icon or image as the prototype or truth figured therein. This is why God would, as Nicholas says, look at me when I look at the icon. What is more, since all faces are patterned after God's face, every face may become an icon of God as Nicholas asserts when he claims that a lion would make a lion into an icon of God, an ox an ox, and an eagle an eagle.

This theological aesthetic is extended cosmologically such that the cosmos in each of its parts would be an image or picture letting God be seen: "Thou hast appeared unto me," Nicholas writes of God, "as One to be seen of all since a thing existeth in the measure wherein Thou dost behold it, and it could not exist in reality did it not behold Thee' Thus my God' Thou art visible in regard to the Being of the creature" (*The Vision of God* 54). At the same time as he God would be visible in each and every image, be it iconically or cosmologically, God would be absent from them all and not show himself not be revealed visibly therein since, as the unique pattern or prototype, he God is "beyond all forms of faces that may be formed." This is why Nicholas reminds us that the God who gives himself to be is seen by seeing me, remains a "hidden God." He writes, "Thou hast at times seemed unto me, Lord, as One not to be seen of any creature, because thou art a hidden God" (*The Vision of God* 54).

26. This fundamental and irreducible intertwining of showing and hiding, visibility and invisibility, is essential to understanding the theological aesthetic embodied in the icon. Nicholas states it in several declarations that must be taken as they give themselves without trying to simplify or eliminate the paradox. "In all faces is seen the Face of faces, veiled, and in a riddle" (*The Vision of God* 26). Or better: "Thou, therefore, my invisible God, art seen of all and art seen in all seeing. Thou art seen by every person that seeth, in all that may be seen, and in every act of seeing, invisible as Thou art" (*The Vision of God* 54). The icon, and in fact its realization cosmologically, lets us see the invisible God *as such*, as hidden or veiled in a riddle that is not so much solved or untied by the icon as presented in its essential and irreducible hiddenness and invisibility. The world-icon, to clearly mark the opposition to the modern world-picture, would thus issue in a cosmology and aesthetics wherein all seeing sees the invisible in everything it sees such that we never fully "get the picture" or bring it to stand before us.
27. This theological account of the icon stands in an essential continuity with the theological defense of icons put forward in the 8th century and best represented in a classic series of apologies collected under the heading *On the Divine Images* written by St. John of Damascus. In the third and final of these apologies, John claims, "all images reveal and make perceptible those things which are hidden.' The image was devised that secret things might be revealed and made perceptible' enabling us to perceive hidden things" (*On the Divine Images* 74). This is an explicit generalization of St. Paul's declaration concerning Christ as "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15), and it is echoed in John's reference to "the eloquent Gregory" whom he paraphrases: "Since the creation of the world the invisible things of God are clearly seen by means of images" (*On the Divine Images* 77). John also refers frequently to the authority of the sixth century Syrian monk Pseudo-Dionysios, whose writings were foundational texts in the history of Christian mysticism: "[images] are visible manifestations of hidden and marvelous wonders," and "the Sacred veils of the Scriptures and ecclesiastical traditions' clothe with shapes and forms things which are shapeless and formless" (*On the Divine Images* 34). The icon, according to these authoritative formulations which echo in Nicholas account, is not an image of the visible, but precisely of the invisible. The invisible as such rises into visibility in the icon, "bringing within our reach that for which we long but are unable to see" (*On the Divine Images* 77). Whereas the world-picture makes everything visible and available to man the individual and puts it at his their disposition by overcoming the distance that keeps it out of reach, the icon brings the invisible near, within our reach, but in all this nearness never fully overcomes distance because we cannot see the invisible thing as such visible right before us.

28. Within this theological understanding of the world-icon, the invisible God can be approached by a certain aesthetic, but an aesthetic of the invisible where every aesthetic must undo itself as ultimately inadequate to the divine invisibility. That the aesthetic approach to God suggested by the icon does not culminate in the ultimate availability of an object at the disposition of man the individual, is what Cusa suggests by stressing the invisibility and unknowability of God. According to Nicholas, "it behoveth, then, the intellect to become ignorant and to abide in darkness if it would fain see Thee" (*The Visions of God* 59). The darkness is thus revelatory in this theological aesthetic where what is seen is precisely invisible and shrouded in mist or darkness. God "cannot be seen until above all faces a man enter into a certain secret and mystic silence where there is no knowledge or concept of a face. This mist, cloud, darkness or ignorance into which he that seeketh Thy face entereth when he goeth beyond all knowledge or concept, is the state below which They face cannot be found except veiled; but that very darkness revealeth They face to be there" (*The Visions of God* 27). Strongly evocative of passages from Dionysios' *Mystical Theology*,¹⁶ Nicholas suggests that the "aesthetics" of the icon is articulated according to a theo-logic wherein the icon leads sight to see a God who is approached only along a path of unseeing which ends endlessly in a cloud of darkness and ignorance where God is unseeingly seen in the dark.¹⁷¹⁸
29. To deepen Nicholas' phenomenological and theological account of the iconic undoing of the modern world picture, we can make a brief detour through the work of today's art historians, recognizing that the historical perspective might be more suited to contemporary tastes. Situating the picture in the sphere of devotional image rather than work of art, recent art historians treat it not as an object to be seen, interpreted and evaluated according to aesthetic standards, but as a symbol to be worshipped, one commanding devotion and respect and demanding that the viewer bend the knee and transform himself in response. This move is evidenced, first, by their displacing the scene of the image from the museum to the church, convent, or chapel and, second, by their transforming its status from an object that appears in the gaze of the spectator to a presence that intends to alter the status of the devotee. By moving the image from the sphere of aesthetics into that of ritual, devotion, or even mystical practice, these contemporary art historians step out of the modern world picture in ways that Nicholas of Cusa suggests in his own phenomenological and theological accounts of the icon.

¹⁶On darkness that reveals, see most especially *Mystical Theology* 1001A: "then he breaks free, away from what he sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing" and 997A-B: "Lead us up' where the mysteries of God's Word lie simple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence."

¹⁷A contemporary attempt to convey this aesthetic ascent through unseeing and misty vision might be found in the recent installation *Blur*, exhibited at Swiss Expo 2002 by the architectural collaborators Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio. Their massive installation involved a three story tall, several hundred foot long architectural scaffolding off the coast of a Swiss lake. The minimal structure was clad in a water system that pumped thousands of gallons of water from the lake itself into a vaporized mist, enshrouding the structure itself in a mist, fog or blur into which participants could enter, clad in raincoats, and remain, enjoying a water bar and "angel deck" affording no view or sunlight at the top. The project could perhaps be read as a 21st Century enactment of the theological situation described by the Christian mystical tradition from Dionysios to Nicholas and beyond, including of course the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*. In the future, these texts should be read in conjunction with Diller and Scofidio's project.

¹⁸From an art historical perspective, these devotional images are, of course, different from icons like that which Nicholas gave to the brethren at Tegernsee: whereas an art historical notion of icon would present its subject matter as, most often, an image of impassive eternity inspiring awe and reverence before the holy, the devotional image generally modeled a particular mood or aspect for a patient's experience. Nevertheless, both the icon and devotional image can be taken as, in the words of Hans Belting, "a pictorial concept that lends itself to veneration" rather than as a style, technique or particular content' in which case they both teach the same lesson: the image is not a picture" (*Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art* 29).

30. Jeffrey Hamburger, for instance, argues that in the late Middle Ages the barriers between artistic images and mystical experience had narrowed to the point that even monastic circles recognized "the formative role of artistic images on contemplative experience. Whereas Saint Bernard had argued that imagery was an obstacle to transcendent experience, by the end of the thirteenth century imagery was, to the contrary, frequently considered an ideal vehicle for transporting the soul to God" (*The Visual and the Visionary* 169). Against a long tradition of art historical scholarship that had accepted (a certain reading of) St. Bernard's dismissal of images and therefore omitted them from art historical consideration, Hamburger asserts that medieval practice made frequent use of the image in its transport to God. What Hamburger calls the "formative role of artistic images" and their use in "transporting the soul to God" suggests, however, that these images did not operate aesthetically, at least not in the modern sense: the image is not an object formed or produced by the subject and his judgments, but is instead a quasi-agent exercising a "formative" function over the devotee.¹⁹
31. The formative role operates, according to Hamburger, in that the image modeled patterns of experience that textual evidence shows was then experienced by the nuns and monks, even if only in visionary moments. The Dominican nun Margaret Ebner, for instance, reports a mystical transport in which she saw the loving soul appear "as she is painted," and Gertrude of Helfta fully admits the role of devotional images in her mystical experience when she places a crucifix resembling the one in her convent at the beginning and another at the end of her vision. Hamburger cites a tremendous amount of additional evidence to support the point. For our purposes, it all clearly addresses the question: What does it mean to "see" the image? If Hamburger, contrary to Bernard and the art historians who have believed him, rehabilitates the status of the image, what sort of image is it? If its primary intention is to inspire visions or mystical transport, the image is not so much a purely aesthetic image meant to be seen, as it is an image to be answered by imitation. In other words, it is not seen when it becomes the object of an aesthetic gaze, but only when, after first presenting itself to the devotee, the devotee assumes the posture, position, and stance demanded by it. The image or picture is not a reflection of the man who produced it such that man or the self is the true subject, both the agent who makes it and the truth revealed by it; rather, the man reflects the image. The image presents a prototype, first, to which the subject gives itself over, after the fact, in devotion.²⁰
32. If Cusa's phenomenological and theological accounts describe an iconic alternative to the modern world-picture, and if the findings of recent art history confirm this in the popular reception of images, the same can be seen from a technical consideration. That is, the techniques adopted in the production of icons combine to effect a displacement of the subject underlying

¹⁹From an art historical perspective, these devotional images are, of course, different from icons like that which Nicholas gave to the brethren at Tegernsee: whereas an art historical notion of icon would present its subject matter as, most often, an image of impassive eternity inspiring awe and reverence before the holy, the devotional image generally modeled a particular mood or aspect for a patient's experience. Nevertheless, both the icon and devotional image can be taken as, in the words of Hans Belting, "a pictorial concept that lends itself to veneration" rather than as a style, technique or particular content' in which case they both teach the same lesson: the image is not a picture" (*Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art* 29).

²⁰That seeing the image happens when the devotee has modeled himself after it, rather than when it reflects him, is something Nicholas also explains: "I know that Thy glance is that supreme goodness which cannot fail to communicate itself to all able to receive it. Wherefore it behoveth me to make myself in so far as I can, ever more able to receive Thee. But I know that the capacity which maketh union possible is naught else save likeness' If therefore I have rendered myself by all means possible like unto Thy goodness, then, according to the degree of that likeness, I shall be capable of the truth" (*Visions of God* '16). Becoming like God who looks out of the icon is thus the way to receive the supreme goodness that gives itself to be seen in the icon.

the modern world-picture. To consider this, I want to turn to a book that is remarkably simple and accessible as well as learned and informative, *The Icon: Image of the Invisible (Elements of Theology, Aesthetics, and Technique)* by Egon Sendler.²¹

33. According to Sendler, the most important technique involved in the production of icons is the careful manipulation of perspective. He begins his account of perspective in the icon with the following observation. In examining an icon, we are often struck by the strange architectural forms and distorted mountains; the walls of buildings and the rocks give the impression of moving toward the spectator. Objects seem to be seen from two sides, and in a space that has little depth; they do not have a stable position. Examining more closely, we also notice that parts of the human body as well as faces are drawn in a clumsy way, so it seems; it is as though the painter was incapable of drawing these details according to their natural form (*The Icon* 119). What distinguishes the icon is the fact that the objects pictured in it appear to advance upon the viewer, and to do so without appearing upon or against a horizon but from a "space that has little depth." The picture is thus animated in such a way that it seems to move on its own, pulsating with its own life. The spectator is often surprised and taken aback, "struck," by the picture which thus appears to advance upon him. Seeming to occupy no "stable position" where the viewer could place it before him so as to see it clearly and distinctly, the icon eludes the viewer's gaze. There is no single, central location, where the viewer can stand and so survey objects that "seem to be seen from two sides," and the absence of depth means there is little background and no horizon against which the viewer can project a comprehensive gaze that would situate objects in a coordinated world. The icon is not ordered and measured, in other words, as the world picture.
34. While these effects of the icon might seem at first to be the result of an incapacity or lack of ability on the part of the painter, in fact, Sendler shows, they are produced by precise perspectival practices. Echoing Erwin Panofsky, whose classic work *Perspective as Symbolic Form* set the stage for a voluminous tradition of scholarship on the subject, Sendler stresses that perspectival techniques are more than just means to create, or not to create, the illusion of space; they are meaningful forms in themselves that tell us much about the conceptions of subject, world, and picture in a given culture or image. Versions of perspective are, in other words, expressive of the cultures that invented them, and a reading of these forms will have much to teach us about the modern culture of the world-picture and, by looking at alternatives, perhaps about the culture that might have come after it.²²
35. Two forms of perspective are employed most often in icons: isometric and, perhaps most importantly, inverted perspective. Both forms are distinct from the perspective with which we are probably most familiar since the Renaissance: "the perspective we currently consider

²¹That seeing the image happens when the devotee has modeled himself after it, rather than when it reflects him, is something Nicholas also explains: "I know that Thy glance is that supreme goodness which cannot fail to communicate itself to all able to receive it. Wherefore it behoveth me to make myself in so far as I can, ever more able to receive Thee. But I know that the capacity which maketh union possible is naught else save likeness' If therefore I have rendered myself by all means possible like unto Thy goodness, then, according to the degree of that likeness, I shall be capable of the truth" (*Visions of God* '16). Becoming like God who looks out of the icon is thus the way to receive the supreme goodness that gives itself to be seen in the icon.

²²As James Elkins observes in *The Poetics of Perspective* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), the idea that perspective might be a symbolic form indicative of a "worldview" or revelatory of a culture's underlying assumptions is not accepted by everyone. E. H. Gombrich, for instance, argues that perspective "is based on simple facts of vision and is 'merely' a discovery, not a symbol of some 'new philosophy' or *weltanschauung*." Perspective is nothing more than what it claims to be: a technique for representing something as it would be seen from a particular vantage point.

‘natural’ perspective but which more appropriately should be called linear perspective, or as it is known today, modern central perspective (*The Icon* 121). Originating in the early fifteenth century studio of Brunelleschi and subsequently spread through his students Ghiberti, Masaccio, and Donatello, modern central perspective became the most popular means of organizing (ordering and measuring) a picture and was quickly associated with natural or realistic representations of reality. As James Elkins notes in his discussion of Panofsky,²³

36. Central perspective was first and foremost a means to represent space. Only on this basis would objects appear and then only by being set or placed within this perspectival space. Panofsky cites one Pomponius Gauricus, an artist and theoretician active at the beginning of the 16th Century, who claims, “Every body exists in some state and it is necessary for it to exist in some place...It is necessary for the place to exist prior to the object. Therefore the place must be in the first instance designated” (*Perspective as Symbolic Form* 123). Through a complicated consideration of the play between the spectator’s eye, the vanishing point, and the plane of the canvas, perspective opened the representation of a three dimensional space that mapped each of these places which objects could then fill. Within this perspectivally ordered totality of places, objects held identifiable positions in the “grid,” distances between them were measured and consistently fixed, and dimensions were naturalized relative to their surroundings on the canvas. Conceived as a set or ordered and measured places, space in the picture was thus prior to what appeared in it and objects took their place within the picture only by agreeing with the demands of this space drawn up according to the guidelines of a subjective point of view.
37. At this point, it is important to recall the first condition of perspective. The space that opens up in – or perhaps better, as – the picture is opened by the subject gazing into it. As Sendler remarks, in the ordering and measuring of the picture, “it is important to note that the movement starts with the spectator who enters into the represented world: the canvas is like an open window” (*The Icon* 122). The picture and all its component parts were ordered, measured and arranged in accordance with the requirements demanded by the viewing subject and his vantage point. The scales of depth and width (the coordinates) which governed the pictured space and the representation of objects in it were created by a technique which depended on a line emanating from the eye of the viewing subject running through the canvas toward the vanishing point. This subject stands in front of the canvas, gazing into it while all space and every object falls into place around it. His eye The eye is was fixed and immobile, marking the center of the perspectival apparatus. In language that foreshadows much of what Heidegger had to say ten years later in “The Age of the World Picture,” Panofsky describes the paradox of perspective producing a seemingly objective or naturalistic representation of reality all the while depending on a thoroughly subjective point of view. The passage is worth citing in full. “Perspective creates distances between human beings and things...but then in turn it abolishes this distance by, in a sense, drawing this world of things, an autonomous world confronting the individual, into the eye. Perspective subjects the artistic phenomenon to stable and even mathematically exact rules, but on the other hand, makes that phenomenon contingent upon human beings...the way [these rules] take effect is determined by the freely chosen position of a subjective” point of view” (_The Icon_ 67).

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38. Allied with the developments of modern technology, perspective lets us see distances in space precisely by letting them be crossed and therefore abolished in the gaze that encompasses them and in fact sets the standard for measuring them in the first place. In Heideggerian terms, what is set before man in central perspective is placed there according to laws he himself dictates such that the objective difference of the picture is immediately overcome. Pictures in perspective, like the world of the modern scientific man scientist, seem pervaded by an all-encompassing objectivity that organizes them according to objective mathematical and physical laws; and yet this objectivity testifies all the more to a greater degree of subjectivity in that these laws are put into operation from a subjective point of view that sets the guidelines governing the picture.” Thus the history of perspective ²⁴
39. This “distance-denying human struggle for control” is all at once rendered inoperative by the pictorial techniques adopted by the medieval iconographers. In contrast to central perspective and its abolishing distance in the sweep of the gaze, Moshe Barash wrote of “the frontal icon of Christ epitomizes epitomizing that genre of Christian religious art in which the Holy is portrayed not insofar as it is human or suffering or emotional, but rather *qua* Holy.”The icon introduces the Holy *qua* Holy and thus, unlike the picture in perspective, retains an element of distance in the midst of its appearance that is essential to the definition of the Holy as set apart or at a distance.”This [the Holy] The Holy cannot be achieved by a picture alone. It requires both a firmly established tradition of visual articulation, and no less crystallized patterns of reading the visual image.”[¹⁴] That these patterns of reading and traditions of visual production entail a displacement or de-centering of the subject can be seen by returning to Egon Sendler’s *The Icon: Image of the Invisible*. Referencing the conclusion of Panofsky’s *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Sendler notes that the icon opens a space where “supernatural events so to speak irrupt into visual space’ and ‘penetrate’ [man] with their spirituality thanks to this very irruption” (*The Icon* 123). ²⁵ Far from adopting the place of the subject who measures and arranges the picture, man the human being is put into place, a passive or receiving place where he they are is “penetrated” by the irruption or advance of the holy, supernatural or mysterious event in the icon.
40. This phenomenological data (the advance or irruption of mystery, the penetration of man one by an event beyond his their control) can be correlated with artistic techniques known as inverted perspective. As the name would suggest, the principle of inverted perspective is that the lines of perspective do not meet at a vanishing point behind the canvas but at a point in front of the canvas. Instead of the canvas being organized by a line emanating from a

²⁴Sendler here echoes, though with important differences, Panofsky’s conclusion in *Perspective as Symbolic Form*: “It [perspective] opens it [religious art] to something entirely new: the realm of the visionary where the miraculous becomes a direct experience of the beholder, in that the supernatural events in a sense irrupt into his own, apparently natural, visual space and so permit him really to ‘internalize’ their supernaturalness” (p. 72).The difference is instructive and needs to be emphasized. For Panofsky, perspective may let the supernatural event irrupt into the visual and be experienced, but this event appears only in a space opened previously by the subject itself. If the supernatural is indeed experienced by means of perspective, it is experienced within the world that is familiar and natural precisely because previously ordered and measured by the subject. In this, as in so many other places, Panofsky repeats Kant.

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subject gazing into the picture, the lines of the picture seemingly record the points where the perspectival gaze of an invisible subject standing beyond the picture and looking out through it burst into the visible. These lines themselves designate a point of convergence where the viewer himself would be set or placed before the picture. The icon thus establishes the position from which the subject must see it; the subject is put in place by the icon, removed from his sovereign place at the origin of perspective and the center of sight. This place to which the subject is displaced would correspond precisely to an inverted vanishing point or, in other words, a point of arrival or appearance toward which the icon advances. To see the invisible mystery advancing in the icon, the viewer must go to meet it at the point where it intends to arrive." In this sense, the icon is the opposite of a Renaissance painting; it is not a window through which the mind must go to have access to the world represented. It is rather a place where a presence is encountered. In the icon the represented world shines out toward the person who opens himself to receive it. In inverted perspective, space itself becomes active instead of the observer who in fact is acted on" (*The Icon* 127). The vanishing point of the icon is, in this sense, found in the observer, who in and through receiving the icon appears there where the icon vanishes. The subject arises or begins the moment he assumes the place of the vanished because received icon, whose reality the viewer now mirrors or reflects in a complete inversion of the modern world-picture. Thus is enacted in space and performance the same truth we saw in the art historians' observation that devotional imagery modeled patterns that shaped subjectivity and in Cusa's claim that God's sight makes his Being.

41. While inverted perspective alone is a decisive departure from the modern world picture, the icon disrupts it again by another perspectival technique: namely, the use of multiple perspectives or points of view." In fact, Sendler writes, we cannot really speak of a system whose vanishing point is found in the observer because in icons, there is rarely only one convergence point, and often each represented object has its own perspective" (*The Icon* 127). The operation of multiple perspectives would explain aesthetically the phenomenological account of omnivoyance described by Nicholas of Cusa: since each element of the picture had its own perspective, it would be possible to feel as if the picture was looking at you as you adopted different positions throughout the room. In contrast to the fixed and immobile subject who viewed Renaissance pictures, the point of view in iconic art was mobile and multiple."Very often each building, each piece of furniture has its own point of view. Each object thus affirms its proper existence independently of the whole" (*The Icon* 143). The spectator would have to move around or displace himself, precisely in the way the Cusa described, in response to the perspectival demands of the icon. Dominated by rather than dominating the icon, the subject again finds himself moved by the image.
42. If this phenomenological, theological, and technical or aesthetic account of the icon seems too foreign and difficult an experience for us today, this is only to the extent that we inhabit the modern world-picture. We subjects of representation, men who strive for mastery and control over the world and achieve our victory by approaching it as a picture, we children of the motion pictures—we have lost our sense for images such as the icon. They simply do not appear in a world-picture where the world always appears as picture for a subject of representation.
43. But is this who "we" still are today? As many philosophers and theologians, psychologists and sociologists, as well as cultural critics in general, have argued for years, the self-assertive, autonomous human subject may have run its course, disappearing in the very culture it seems to have inaugurated. If the modern world-picture opened with the emergence of this subject, it would end (as Foucault, Derrida, Lacan and all the other canonic "post-moderns" indicate)

with its displacement at the hands of what precedes and undoes it'be this the precession of language, the unconscious, history, the Other, the event of Being, or any of the other names which have authorized the so-called "death of the subject." Postmodern cultural studies in general has documented well enough the extent to which the cultural world produced by the self-assertive human subject seems in turn to dominate man and defy his efforts at comprehension. In this "we" postmoderns might be more medieval than modern, more bent on mystery than disenchantment, structuring our very selfhood according to the logic suggested by an iconic revision of the modern world picture.

Notes

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