Icons and Photographs: An Ontological and Aesthetic Comparison[1]

CORNELIA A. TSAKIRIDOU
Professor of Philosophy, La Salle University

This paper explores ontological and aesthetic similarities and differences between icons and photographs and the tensions that characterize them. It looks at photography's auxiliary role in Athonite iconography, its influence on the depiction of contemporary saints, and its use in the reproduction of icons for public consumption. The comparison shows that photography has the plastic and expressive capacity to engage spiritual realities.

The notion that in its quest for immutable realities the mind replaces sensuous with noetic forms originates in Plato's metaphysics. Whether in nature or in art, sensible things are seen as fragmented and disjointed, like the conflicting perspectives they elicit in their viewers, and in need of organization from a higher conceptual level. Thus, as the mind leaves the physical world behind, it substitutes simplicity for plurality, clarity for opacity, and integration for dispersion. This form of idealism was embraced by Orthodox theology when it cast images as theological primitives that are good for the illiterate or serve as prompts for devotion and contemplative prayer, but not much else.

The idealist construction of art is problematic because it is too restrictive. We can see this in Hegel's aesthetics where, as in Plato, images are incrementally subordinated to concepts.[2] The logic is simple and appealing. Even though it is the originary form of transcendental reflection, art is too sensuous to host speculative categories once these

[1] For Father Andrew Louth.

[2] C.A. Tsakiridou, 'Art's Self-Disclosure: Hegelian Insights into Cinematic and Modernist Space', *Evental Aesthetics* 1, n. 1 (2013). 45–72. Idem, '*Darstellung*: Reflections on Art, Logic and System in Hegel,' *The Owl of Minerva* 23, issue 1 (Fall 1991), 15–28.

become clear for the mind. Eventually the Absolute moves beyond art and religion and toward perspicuous expression in philosophy. It is inevitable that in the transitional phases, sublated aesthetic modalities will be present in religious thought as will theological modalities in philosophy.

This is evident in ascetical literature. The often terse, aphoristic counsels of the desert elders, with their sharp contrasts, vivid imagery and the use of similes borrowed from nature and in some instances from the arts, create mnemonic icons and graphic analogies for their audiences.[3] Salient imaginal components also exist, as we know, in the compelling visuality of Byzantine hymnography, where language becomes *ekphrastic* by imitating sense perception (painting through words) or articulates the paradoxes of Christ's *theanthropy* with vivid contrasts and rhythmical juxtapositions.[4] This kind of poetic imagery, however, is too complex, dynamic, and at times profound, to be reduced to a mere resource or prompt for thought. And it points at the problem in Hegel's conception of visuality in art and literature.

The logical advance of the Absolute creates a hierarchical order in which images have an elementary position and utilitarian function that excludes them from participation in higher levels of transcendental reflection. Yet, anyone who has studied the masterworks of various artistic traditions and of Orthodox iconography knows that participation and augmentation rather than subordination and reduction is how image and mind interact in such contexts. Images move in-between the boundaries of perception and intellection. They probe deeper into the being of things (what constitutes carnality, rhythm, expression, etc.). They push concepts beyond their designated limits (e.g., in some icons of the Passion that depict Christ as living and dead), embodying them and testing their plasticity, revealing ontological omissions or lacunae in their scope, and in general, displaying a dynamism and synergy with higher levels of thought that the Hegelian model ignores.[5]

[3] Examples and the comparison of the Holy Spirit to a painter in St. Diadochus of Photike are discussed in C.A. Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity: Orthodox Theology and the Aesthetics of the Christian Image* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 159–161.

[4] The hymns of Romanos Melodos, George of Nicomedia and Symeon Metaphrastes are saturated with imagery of this kind. C.A. Tsakiridou, *Tradition and Transformation in Christian Art: The Transcultural Icon* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 80–91.

[5] Ibid., 40–41, 109–120.

If we then think of theology and art as open domains that exchange and share aesthetic and noetic realities in this manner, there is no room for the unilateral or arbitrary determination of the one by the other. Questions, for example, about what type of material media and artistic genres are appropriate to Orthodox iconography are to be settled synergistically: not only in terms of past artistic practice and precedent but also through the exploration of the ontological and aesthetic implications of Christian theology, and the expressive and intentional peculiarities of different art forms.

Take the aesthetic impact of the Incarnation and the renewal of creation in Christ. In a world where matter is sanctified and divine grace enhances the actualizing reasons (*logoi*) of things, all media are in principle capable of spiritual subsistence—even those, like photography and cinema, that may seem inappropriate or unfit from the standpoint of set iconographic norms. In fact, these norms and their dogmatic justification are more often than not a matter of ideology rather than theology. Orthodox theology, as I have shown in previous studies, is far less restrictive aesthetically than the purist, exceptionalist iconologies that have been associated with the revival of the Byzantine icon in the 20th century would lead us to believe.[6]

Other iconographic traditions have recognized art's seminal place in transcendental experience by citing its intuitive grasp of reality that thought cannot match. This is the case with Zen Buddhism, which sees art as one of many paths to enlightenment. Thus, the arts of *sumi-e* (painting in ink) and *chodo* (calligraphy), associated with Buddhism for centuries, are widely practiced by Zen monastics and laity today. Zen's diffusion in Japanese culture, in tea ceremony, martial arts, pottery, garden design, Noh theatre, etc., and its popularity among American avant-garde artists since the 1960s has prompted the exploration of alternative media, including cinema and photography, as

[6] Formed within a western artistic milieu with primitivist and nativist tendencies, Fotis Kontoglou (Greece) and Leonid Ouspensky (Russia, France) attempted to create an Orthodox modernity by advocating the supremacy of the Byzantine and post-Byzantine icon to western art. Both presented ideologically construed (and thus restrictive) notions of tradition to justify their projects. Tsakiridou, *Tradition and Transformation*, 166–184.Tsakiridou, Icons in Time, 106–107, 133–144. On style and contemporaneity in icon painting, see George Kordis, 'Creating a Christian Image in a Postmodern World', *Seeing the Invisible: Proceedings of the Symposium on the Aesthetics of the Christian Image*, edited by Neda Cvijetic and Maxim Vasiljevic (Alhambra: Sebastian Press, 2016), 44–64.

forms of spiritual realization for Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, or as powerful commentary on the human condition.[7] No such experiments that use photography, cinema, or theatre as forms of contemplation and encounter with God were undertaken, to my knowledge, in Greek Orthodox art, under the influence of modernism or in response to various renewal trends in iconography in the twentieth century.[8]

And yet, it is not difficult to discern significant parallels between Japanese ink paintings, icons, photographs, and the cinematic image that take on an aesthetic and spiritual dimension. In photography (excluding CGIs), a picture is formed at the trip of the shutter, with the same irreversibility and speed that characterize *sumi-e* painting. In *sumi-e*, the essence of a thing is captured as an instantaneous and indistinguishable act of mind and world that is delivered simultaneously by brush, hand, consciousness, and nature. Orthodox iconography (in its various ethnic, regional, and historical expressions) shares with photography the qualities of stillness and presence. Both are premised on the inescapable passage of time and the ability of the image to deliver some form of permanence. Their ontological convergence is also evident in the case of the spontaneously or miraculously formed icons, known as *acheiropoietai* (made without human hands), that emerge on wood or stone surfaces like images on light-sensitive paper (see below).

The fluid, apparitional imagery of cinema has the same elusive quality that Zen attributes to the phenomenal world when, in art or experience, it becomes the object of a reifying and yet mutable consciousness. The way that cinema liberates perception from the fixed frame of painting and photography resonates with the icon's engagement in liturgical space and time, as we shall see below. In the liturgy, icons shed their immobile and isolated (literally 'iconostatic') form when they enter experience, memory, and contemplation. Participants in a phenomenal and noumenal world, they retain their sensuous and

[7] For aesthetic principles drawn from Zen and Tao, see Andrew Juniper, *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2003), 1–30. For Zen on the American art scene and its influence especially on avant-garde composers and choreographers, see Kay Larson, *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012). The cinematography of Akira Kurosawa is shaped by *chodo* and indirectly Zen (e.g., in *Akahige*, 1965, and *Ran*, 1985, as a meditation on impermanence and suffering).

[8] For the Greek icon and modernism see Tsakiridou, *Tradition and Transformation*, 166–184. More recently, artists like Pavlos Samios (b. 1948) have explored iconography in alternative media.

physical qualities as they become objects of tactile veneration. Analogies between the liturgy and the cinema emerge at this point. A compelling example is Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Andrei Rublev* (1966). Intertwining visual, aural, and eschatological realities proliferate on the screen until the film's final scenes, when this dissonant imagery disappears in the silence and redeeming gaze of the medieval iconographer's *Savior*.

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II

With the exception of icons that are considered supernaturally formed, an icon typically takes longer than a photograph to make and is thus more open to intervention. Two things place an icon more solidly in the realm of artistic and cultural construction: first, the fact that its content is formed by replication and study of other examples in its tradition, and second, the fact that the image as such has no optical contact with the physical world—in the way that a film or digital photograph normally do. By contrast, photography draws its subject from the 'raw' and often unpredictable world of fluid things and events, where intentional mediation is far less evident and at times absent. We make a painting but take a photograph—as if we lift it from the world and walk away with it. This is not to ignore the use of the medium for propaganda purposes or for influencing perception and desire, as, for example, in advertising. But nothing predisposes photography to interpretation, whereas that usually is not the case with icon painting.

Despite the fact, then, that photography has its own kind of intentionality, the freedom to interpret reality belongs to painting ontologically and to photography circumstantially. The reason is that photography's ontological disposition (in both film and digital formats) is to catch the likeness of an existing thing rather than imagine or imitate it. Its objects are typically found rather than created. All photographs in this

respect (CGI hyper realistic images excepted) begin as ready-mades. Icons, unless miraculously composed, do not.

Another point on which we may contrast the two types of image is their relationship to temporality. Time is an intrinsic dimension of photographs since it is essential to the process by which the semblance of an object is captured and recorded on film, sensor, or any light-sensitive surface—as it is also essential to the developing and printing process in film photography. But time also registers in photographs with a factuality that painting cannot replicate. Time determines whether an object has sufficient detail or not: whether, for example, the texture of a wooden surface, or the detail on someone's face is visible or not. It can add mood or atmosphere to a photograph depending on the length of exposure. It makes colors appear saturated or washed out. Time is a potent compositional tool in the hands of the apt photographer. In painting, by contrast, things have a spatial and temporal detachment similar to that of ideas and cognitional objects (this makes painting more contemplative).

Perhaps one of the most intriguing contrasts between a photograph and an icon is the purported realism of the one and the transcendent scope of the other. Photographs, one might argue, are of this world, icons of another. Traditionally conceived and executed in prayer (a condition that does not always apply to their commercial versions), icons are from the start sanctified objects, designed to host holy persons and present a world redeemed and transfigured by divine grace. Inside their frame (be it on a wooden panel, canvas, or a wall), holy beings appear that exist perpetually in another realm but continue to intervene in human affairs by partaking of the physical world that they once inhabited.

The existence of photographs of canonized men and women for at least a century now (more recently Saint Sophia of Kleisoura, 1883–1974, Saint Porphyrios of Kavsokalyvia, 1906–1991, and Saint Paisios of Mount Athos, 1924–1994), has had a clear influence on iconography and demonstrates photography's ability to document the spiritual life. A transcendental quality, that is not typically associated with the genre, affects the photographs of a saint on which icons are modeled, while realism, a quality that we spontaneously associate with photography, turns out in icons that derive from photographic prints. The result is

often a mixed genre image that combines iconography, photography, and painting, as in the examples below.

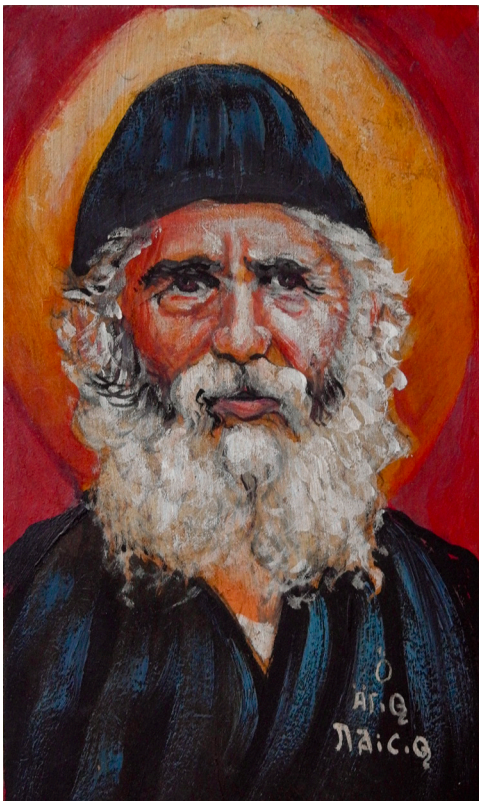

Figure 1: Saint Paisios the Athonite, oil on wooden panel, 2019.

Figure 2: Saint Sophia of Kleisoura, egg tempera on wooden panel, Monastery of Panagia Mavriotissa, Kastoria, contemporary.

An icon is a document of a culturally mediated visual identity. It presents us with persons whose precise physiognomy is lost in the distant past but whose identity acquires its evidentiary force through repetition and popular acceptance (as we know, for example, from portraits of Christ or the Theotokos). In the same way, multiple copies of a photograph may solidify the existence of a reality that was staged or manipulated (one of the mechanisms of propaganda is to inundate).

Photographs are designed to register the presence of their subjects in the here and now, even though every photograph paradoxically also places its subject in the past. The term 'presence' can be understood in two ways: mechanically, as the recording and preservation of a live act

(A or x was present in such and such a time and place), and aesthetically, as a set of qualities in the composition of an image that make its content lively or animated. In the second sense, presence can be conveyed with the term *enargeia* (vividness, animated existence), a term with significant aesthetic and theological connotations that I have analyzed in depth elsewhere.[9]

An image has aesthetic presence on the basis of *how* it is photographed or painted and not because of its semiotic content or referents (the what). Icons achieve presence by typically positioning their subjects frontally or in a three-quarter view and using aesthetic elements like rhythm, highlights, color, line, volume, depth, etc., to impart energy, liveliness, and immediacy to what they depict. In photography, presence is achieved by the instantaneous and imprinting nature of the shot itself, and by the use of additional aesthetic elements that may enhance the vitality and vividness of the composition, such as angle, distance (e.g., a close up or long shot), color, detail, contrast, texture, etc.

Despite the fact that presence is established aesthetically along the same lines in both types of image, there is a significant difference when it comes to how non-aesthetic elements may interfere with the perception of presence in each case. In photography, as noted, a physical contact with a subject takes place in a specific time and place through an optico-chemical or optico-digital event. The subject participates actively or passively (for example, by posing or being caught unaware) in her depiction. What is photographed under these conditions is de facto present first (nothing is usually photographed that does not exist), and aesthetically present second (rendered in this or that form).

By contrast, presence in an icon is first determined by its transcendent status. Icons of Christ, the Theotokos, archangels, and saints work like apparitions or physical manifestations marking the perpetual presence of holy beings in human life. In this case, spiritual presence comes first and aesthetic presence second. People go to icons in order to relate spiritually to a holy being rather than delight in the image as such. The aesthetic aspect may thus be noticed or ignored, depending on the viewer's knowledge, habits, and disposition. In icons that perform miracles, and are supernaturally charged, aesthetic qualities

[9] Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time*, 49–71.

may be totally obscured by the agency and intentionality attributed to the image (e.g., healing, falling, walking, sailing, striking, etc.), or by its assumption of a somatic function (e.g., sweating myrrh, weeping, etc.) that animates it physically rather than sensuously.

Ideological and eschatological saturation is another aspect worth considering in this context. Here, the icon may have an advantage over the photograph, based on its long history and politization, most famously during the Byzantine Iconoclastic controversies. By comparison, photography is barely two centuries old and, despite its extensive use in state propaganda, it lacks the modality that gives the icon its dual role as an ideologically and supernaturally potent image. The closest photography has come to the latter function is in the leadership cults propagated by totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century. Images burdened with eschatological (an icon's salvific role in an epidemic or war) or ideological significance (photographs of a worshipped leader), may thus suffer from the suppression or subduction of their aesthetic aspects.

Another point of comparison is photography's literal ability to make the invisible visible and the icon's claim to do the same with divine grace, in which its subjects are believed to partake. There are many examples of how, through its capacity for visual detail and split-second exposure, the camera can record and reveal aspects of phenomena that are otherwise imperceptible—to which, in other words, we are physically or habitually blind. This includes all kinds of details in our perceptual and social environment and the trajectories of moving objects that cannot be seen with the naked eye.

The task of iconography, by analogy, is to show the presence of divine grace in real life. According to Orthodox theology, the sustaining and actualizing *logoi* or reasons that are present in all things are enhanced by participation in the living Christ.[10] This plerotic effect is physical and perceptible—as was witnessed archetypally in the miracles, Transfiguration, and Resurrection of Christ. Master iconographers use a variety of compositional techniques, aimed at achieving the physical

[10] Saint Maximus the Confessor, *On the Difficulties in the Church Fathers, The Ambigua, Vols. I and II*, edited and translated by Nicholas Constas (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014). *Ambigua* (I) 7.37 (PG91:1097AB). *Ambigua* (II), 31.8 (1280B). *Ambigua* (II), 41.9 (PG:1309C), 34 (PG91:1285D-1288A).

subtlety and spiritual limpidity of deified flesh, and a quiet intensity in expression and gesture to suggest the tranquility of noetic prayer and contemplation. Examples include the gradual layering of pigment (typically egg tempera) from darker to lighter tones and highlights and the golden or empty background against which persons, nature, and things appear at once timeless and temporal, spatially bound and free.

Yet, the icon cannot match photography's visual range and empirical immediacy. The camera (increasingly smaller, more agile, personal, and intrusive) turns its lens directly at the world of things and persons, wherever they are, and as they are. This includes capturing holiness. There are photographs of St Paisios that show his humility and spiritual acuity, simply because these qualities were present in his gaze, posture, and demeanor and the camera aptly (or even accidentally) captured the living image of holiness that he was. Likewise, monk Gavriel of Philotheou Monastery has photographed Athonite monks in moments

Figure 3: Monk Gavriel of Philotheou Monastery, "Laurel-Crowned" Mule, 1997.

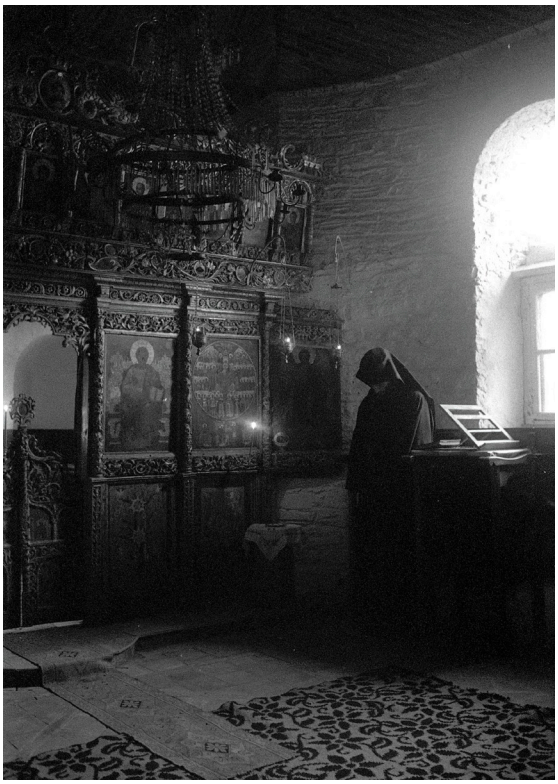

Figure 4: Monk Gavriel of Philotheou Monastery, Philotheou Monastery, 1997.

of grace-filled communion with nature or immersed in the fluidity and mystery of liturgical life.[11]

III

Photography can meet spiritual realities where they happen, in contrast to the detached way that painting recalls or imagines them. The medium's portability, automation, and pictorial neutrality—the fact, as we noted, that it can generate intention-free images (e.g., in surveillance)—and the speed and accuracy with which it can register its objects, lend it an existential gravity, unmatched by painting. Photojournalists have relied on this quality to challenge the public's visual and moral complacency—as did Mary Ellen Mark (1940–2015) in her photographs of Bombay brothels and homeless youth in Seattle.[12] In these and other instances, photography brings prominence to the marginalized and disrupts regimes or habits of individual and collective blindness by entering the lives of drug addicts, prostitutes, or incarcerated persons and finding there instances of grace that would have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Comparing a photograph of this kind to an icon is perfectly reasonable. In both cases, existence is sanctified: in the icon through the painter's intervention; in the photograph, through the photogra-

[11] Monk Gavriel of Philotheou, *Glimpses of the Holy Mountain* (Thessaloniki: Monk Gavriel, 1997), 22, 62.

[12] Mary Ellen Mark, *Falkland Road: Prostitutes of Bombay, Photographs and Texts* (New York: Knopf, 1981). Idem., *Streetwise* (New York: Aperture, 1988).

pher's discovery. In photography, grace is encountered. In painting, it is expressed. The viewer who is familiar with the conventions of iconography may object to the photograph's lack of intentionality or its transient nature, but at the level of the image, grace looks the same. We observe an interior liveliness that transcends the person's given material or physical circumstances and momentarily infuses them and their ambient world with serenity, radiance, and hope. We notice an openness in their way of being, a restful and welcoming way of carrying one's self, in full receptivity and communion with others (including the viewer). There are photographs of ordinary people that have these qualities and icons of saints that do not.

Photography may capture the ontological fullness of personhood in a fleeting moment, but it may also reveal the exuberant and at times charismatic being of a wall, a flower, or a street—a state that popular wisdom conveys by saying that an image speaks or has a voice. Nothing is exempted from the photographic lens, just as nothing is exempted, in principle at least, from the iconographer's brush and pigments.

The sayings of the Desert Fathers are replete with encounters that open sanctification to all beings. A pestering paralytic brings the grace of an angelic visitation (*en gar aggelos Kyriou*) to a compassionate *abba* (Agathon) who patiently obeys his demands—in the end, the man blesses the elder and vanishes before his eyes (*oudena eide*).[13] A female entertainer (*gynaika theatriken*) of presumably loose morals becomes an occasion for an elder's (Pambo) repentance (*syndakris*) and self-reproach—when she emerges on the one hand, as his alter ego, a mirror image of his frailties and faults, and on the other, as a check on his conscience, since she loves men more than the *abba* loves God.[14]

And there are similar stories from the lives of contemporary saints, like the serendipitous visit of St Porphyrios to an Athens brothel on the Feast of the Theophany, and his joyful blessing of the women that worked there—who were transformed in that instance into icons of grace and spontaneous repentance.[15] These worlds, that we encounter repeatedly in the lives of the saints, are worlds made for photography

[13] *Apopthegmata Patrum*, PG65: 117CD.

[14] Ibid., PG65: 369B. Helen Waddell, *The Desert Fathers* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1957), 67–68.

[15] St Porphyrios of Kavsokalyvia, *Wounded by Love: The Life and the Wisdom of Saint Porphyrios*, translated by Father John Raffan (Limni: Denise Harvey, 2005), 64–65.

(and cinema). Certainly, not any photographer (or cinematographer) willing to find redeeming and transcendent moments in human life can automatically provide us with images of a grace-filled existence. But if she knows what she is looking for, and she suddenly finds it, her work will show it as it is.

Photography is thus capable of eschatological realism. It can provide evidence of how ordinary lives partake of divine grace and salvation, here and now, rather than in a distant, apocalyptic future. From an Orthodox perspective, the fact that these instances are just that, 'instances' or transient moments of human and divine synergy, reflects the ongoing presence of God in human life through the Incarnation—a presence that the painted icon can portray but photography can actually demonstrate.

The existence in Orthodox tradition of icons reputedly made without human hands is another example of eschatological realism, where divine grace literally paints or forms an image (on wood, marble, or stone) and invests it with miraculous energies and efficacy. Any icon is in principle open to this kind of transformation, including those made of paper prints mounted on wooden panels that use photographs of actual icons. The case (2011) of the myrrh-streaming icon of the *Virgin of the Tender Heart* (*Kardiotissa*) in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Saint George in Taylor, Pennsylvania, USA, is a good example. The icon was a print made at Holy Protection Greek Orthodox Monastery in White Haven, PA. It is clear in this case that the medium used to depict holy beings is immaterial to the workings of divine grace—a notion that de facto opens Orthodox iconography to new technologies and materials.

Miraculous images and photographs have a living, organismic quality about them. The secretion of substances in icons resembles that of physically active, living organisms that engage in spontaneous or provoked acts of self-expression. In the Taylor icon, for example, the myrrh is streaming from the wood panel and permeates the print's surface, altering its appearance. The image is thus 'repainted' by an interior gesture, that of the holy persons to whose agency the icon's animated existence testifies. Photographs too give the impression of emanating from the living world that is in part responsible for their existence and expressive force. A man goes by and his photograph is taken. The image is his in the manner of a footprint or an impression.

His gait, demeanor, or gestures are acts of life before they become a picture—left behind by a living being, to whose transient presence and physicality the photograph testifies.

Another quality that photographs and icons have in common relates to de-contextualization, or their ability to single out and remove their subject from its ordinary environment and milieu. Images made for art typically set their content as something worthy of attention (a stand-out)—and in the case of the icon, of honor and veneration. Persons that merit representation typically do so on account of their unique spiritual, moral, or physical qualities, their social and political prominence, or their importance to the painter, photographer, etc. To represent something is thus to invest it with value and in many cases to idealize it. But the converse also happens when a picture proclaims what society devalues or shuns (insanity, poverty, sexual deviance, etc.)—a trend in the visual arts since the twentieth century.

Ontologically, the removal of persons from their immediate circumstances and their transference to the realm of representation and art, creates a typology of characters and situations (e.g., 'icons' of femininity and masculinity in advertising) that assumes a life of its own—a sort of parallel imaginal world that often intersects with ordinary life. When a person becomes an 'icon' in that sense, he is de-substantiated and de-socialized before re-entering social space as an idealized exemplar of a norm or idea. An example is the actress Marilyn Monroe, whose Hollywood image (as 'the dumb blond') displaced more salient and authentic aspects of her personality (a reflective, sensitive person)—qualities that the incisive eye of Henri Cartier-Bresson was able to discern and photograph.[16]

When a man or woman is canonized a saint, their lives are recast from that perspective, erasing inconsistencies, contradictions, and flaws. In icons, personality is distilled in a few elements that include characteristic expressions and poses, while clothing items, sacred objects, like scrolls or icons, or blessing gestures typically associated with icons of saints, help position them in holy space. Icons of St Porphyrios holding an icon of the *Hodegetria* are popular and derive from photographs that show him in a similar pose. His radiant smile is conveyed more in some

[16] *Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Impassioned Eye*, directed by Heinz Bütler (Palm Pictures/Umvd, 2006).

icons than in others that have opted to portray him with an intense and serious expression, gazing directly at the viewer (as in the example below)—as one would in a studio photograph. The hybridity here is hard to miss although it is not disorienting or dissonant.

Figure 5: St Porphyrios of Kavsokalyvia, 2016, egg tempera on wooden panel, Icon Workshop, Holy Protection Monastery, Whitehaven, PA.

Iconography turns to photography for its documenting capacity, since it keeps records of things that may otherwise elude one's memory or preserves visual information about its subject that the iconographer finds useful. This is not a new development. The use of photography to stage icons in the manner of *tableaux vivants* was a common practice on Mount Athos by the middle of the twentieth century, as iconography there took on a more naturalistic style under European and especially Russian influence. Introduced and adopted by the Russian monasteries (e.g., St Panteleimon Monastery) almost one hundred years earlier, photography was used to document architecture, the members of monastic brotherhoods, gatherings at important feasts, and the work of iconographic workshops.[17]

[17] *Agioreitike Photographia 2, Photography on Mount Athos*, edited by Ploutarchos L. Theocharides, (Thessaloniki: Cultural Center of Northern Greece of the National Bank of Greece, The Mount Athos Photographic Archive, 1993), 28–29, 32, 40. For a brief history of photography on Mount Athos and photographs of iconographer monks with details of their icons, staged devotional scenes and portraits of monks posing alone or with visitors, see also idem, *Agioreitike Photographia 1, Photography on Mount Athos*, (Thessaloniki: Cultural Center of Northern Greece of the National Bank of Greece, The Mount Athos Photographic Archive, 1993), 16, 30, 35, 36–39, 42, 43, 45.

During that period, traditional sketching notebooks (*anthivola*) of icons were replaced with photographs.[18] Photographs helped to catalogue existent works painted by a particular workshop (e.g., the Iosaphaioi and Kartsonaioi brotherhoods) or record live icons where monks, dressed in various hieratic costumes, would model a traditional composition. As aids to anatomical and compositional study, these 'photo-icons' brought an element of play (or theatre) to icon painting and drew attention to the technical aspects of the art and the accurate rendering of proportion, highlights, and detail.

Images of photographed monks in the roles of archangels, hierarchs, and saints, created transcendental scenes with an ephemeral quality and a lightness that is usually not associated with the solemnity of the iconographer's task—as emphasized, for example, by Photis Kontoglou.[19] Since the middle of the nineteenth century, *tableaux vivants* became a form of entertainment for Greek literati. It included the public staging and performance of paintings with historical, folkloric, nationalist, and exotic themes—sometimes to the accompaniment of music. Seen in that context, the Athonite experiments show a similar preoccupation with verisimilitude and historical reconstruction and the validation of tradition through the adoption of contemporary artistic conventions.[20]

Performing a painting in this way and bringing it to life is not arbitrary. Animation is a condition that images beg by combining stillness and life-likeness (performing an abstract image does not make the same sense). When life is caught in a still picture, the movement that characterizes it ceases. In vivid pictures, this effect is minimized but the static quality persists. The stillness is there and is irreversible. In photography, what appears to be on the verge of returning to life never does.[21] Yet, every time that we see the picture, that potential is there. The anticipation of movement is photography's ontological opening to cinema. The same gesture is found in icons.

[18] A. Kayias and G. Fousteris, 'Zografikē kai Photographia: Photographikes Martyries yia tēn Drasē Enos Agiographikou Ergastēriou sto Agion Oros to Proto Hmisē tou Eikostou Aiona', *Proceedings of the First Scientific Symposium of Modern Greek Ecclesiastical Art* (Athens, 2009), 286–298. I am indebted to Professor Iliana Zarra for this reference.

[19] Tsakiridou, *Tradition and Transformation*, 166–184.

[20] Panayiota Konstantinakou, 'Early 20th Century *Tableaux Vivants*: Staging the Nation', *Filmicon: Journal of Greek Film Studies* 4, December 2017, 195–226.

[21] The classic study of this dimension is Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* translated by Richard Howard (New York: The Noonday Press, 1981), 76–85.

In the Orthodox liturgy, icons are transformed into vital participants in church life. In veneration, supplication, or contemplation, they are engaged with intimate gestures such as kissing or touching or prolonged gazing. Despotic and feast icons, but also the humblest image that is embedded in the liturgy or housed in a church or chapel, enter into that kind of communion with their viewers and through them with each other. This animation is consistent with the mystical undercurrents of Orthodox liturgy where, led by the Eucharistic mystery, all things physical and material assume a spiritual subsistence. The verb '*eikonizo*', when used in this context, means that the holy and divine beings that live in images on the walls and iconostasis of the church find embodiment in the women and men that venerate them. In this respect, the Orthodox liturgy resembles a *tableau vivant*, but one that breaks out of the singular frame of the icon and, like cinema, enters the fluid realm of sensory experience and consciousness.

III

The comparison of photographs and icons opens an intermedial space, formed by the shared qualities of the two media and characterized by dynamism, plasticity, and fluidity. Significant similarities are evident in the ways that icons and photographs negotiate time, light, presence, realism, context, performance, movement, stillness, or the revelation of ambient natural and transcendental realities. In theological language, intermediality is a perichoretic state that implies, as the term *perichoresis* suggests, a coinhering relationship between artistic genres, in which their similarities and differences are affirmed, articulated, and recalibrated.[22]

Intermediality also means that we can think about photographs and icons in new ways. For example, we can see photographs as perceptual and mnemonic fields, where things deposit their impressions and subsist in a literal and representational eternity, detached and yet fully immersed in the world from which they were extricated. And we can look at icons as frames that configure a noetic or pneumatic space,

[22] The ontological distinction in Maximus the Confessor (ca. 580–662) between *tropoi* and *logoi* is relevant to the integrity and relatedness of media in intermediality. Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London: Routledge, 1996), 57–58, 73, 174 (*Difficulty* 5, 1052A).

where beings linger free from the constraints of physical existence, without, however, relinquishing their physicality. Rather than dissolve matter, photographs and icons carry it over to another dimension and themselves exist in that order, fusing phenomenal and ontic realities.

In both art forms, figuration is determined reciprocally by the luminosity of matter and the materiality of light. The photographer, like the iconographer, is aware at all times that nothing appears that is not ordained to light. She observes beings emerge from non-existence at the sight of even the faintest illumination. The iconographer has a similar photic sensibility that draws more directly from the imagination. With their gold background, gold highlights, and the layering of pigment that creates glowing flesh tones, icons bring light into matter and thus animate it ex nihilo—an act of creation that theologizes aesthetically.

Countless examples point to a photographic dimension in Orthodox iconography and the confluence of the two genres. The two-tone figures of Theophanes the Greek (1340–1410, active in Russia), resemble images formed on a light sensitive plate, embodying, in their luminous austerity and somber joy, centuries of hesychastic experience, and intimating the angelophanies and theophanies of Christian mysticism. In the Constantinopolitan church of the *Hogedetria* (*Afentiko*) (1310), in Mystras, the bodies of angels (e.g. the chorus of the four angels holding the Glory of Christ) and prophets (e.g, Abraham or Zachariah the Righteous) emerge out of chromatic fields and glittering highlights, like the shapes of objects once did in the processed prints of film photography.[23]

Comparing photographs and icons opens new paths of inquiry into their ontologies. Today postmodern developments are pushing the arts more programmatically than in the past (and perhaps more artificially) beyond their designated limits and set identities. The advantage of Orthodoxy is that its theology has ontological implications that are not only consonant with these developments but also help us reimagine and redefine their aesthetic foundations.

[23] Manolis Hadjidakis, *Mystras: H Mesaionikē Politeia kai to Kastro* (Athens: Ekdotikē Athēnon, 1987), 62, 65.