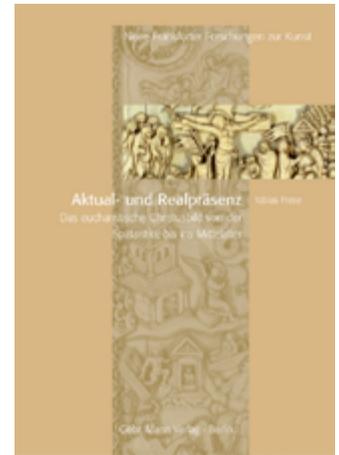# Tobias Frese, *Aktual- und Realpräsenz*

Das eucharistische Christusbild von der Spätantike bis ins Mittelalter (Neue Frankfurter Forschungen zur Kunst, 13)

Berlin: Gebrüder Mann Verlag, 2013

8/ *Aktual- und Real-präsenz*, book cover

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Ever since Hans Belting published his book, *Bild und Kult. Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*, in 1990, the discussion about what has since been called a cult-image has not come to an end[1]. Against his own former criticism of grand narratives in art history[2], in this book Belting defined the Middle Ages as an era of the image before the work of art, as opposed to Modernity, where artificiality is acknowledged to be essential to all works of art. The medieval image, he stated, tends not only to assimilate or substitute the object it represents, but is also free to act independently, especially in para-liturgical circumstances. In German-speaking art history especially, Belting's book gave rise to a broad and fashionable type of discourse. It became one of the cornerstones of the new *Bild-Anthropologie,* which was promoted subsequently by the author himself and was taken up in many variations to form a new and broader conception of art history, after the so-called "iconic turn".

It took some time for the critics to come together and formulate their arguments against Belting's model of thought. His definition of the medieval cult-image has been characterized as offspring of "*kunstwissenschaftliche Ikonenmystik*" (Peter Schmidt), thereby taking part in a "nostalgia for immediacy" (Jeffrey Hamburger)[3]. Martin Büchsel, the chair of the medieval art department at Frankfurt University, is without doubt one of its most outspoken opponents. In 2007, he organized a colloquium to address the concept of the

cult-image critically[4]. Tobias Frese, a participant in this meeting, presented some of the key passages of his upcoming book there. One of the central arguments in this discussion is surely the question of the importance of theology and liturgy in understanding the role images played and of the form and iconography each one took on.

This background is essential to understanding the value and importance of Frese's book on the image of Christ, from Early Christian art to the fifteenth century. Frese studied with Büchsel, actively took part in the questioning of Belting's thoughts at the Frankfurt colloquium, and his book appeared in the same series of publications as the proceedings. It gives valuable answers to many of the questions left open in this debate, while at the same time presenting the reader with a fascinating journey through time and space to many works of art in the Western and Byzantine spheres.

Of course, the title of Frese's book, *Aktual- und Realpräsenz*, may not seem very sexy at first glance, and the question of Eucharistic implications in works of art as mentioned in the subtitle does not normally stir up a great deal of interest in a broader readership either /**Fig. 8**/. This kind of wording might even seem threatening to those non German-speaking scholars who have been martyrized by the rather complicated language of many German PhD theses. This is a pity, though, because the title brings the precise content of the book to the forefront. Frese compares two ways of representing Christ in liturgy: the first

(*Aktualpräsenz*) by enactment through the celebrating priest, the other (*Realpräsenz*) through the transubstantiation of the Eucharist. Since the importance and interpretation of each kind of presence are subject to historical changes, the relationship between the different forms of Christ's presence in liturgy and his representation in works of art around the altar must be central for an understanding of Christian art. Or, put more simply, the question is: what kind of presence is an image of Christ referring to?

But why this insistence on liturgy? Contrary to Belting and others, who underscored the role of private devotion and extraordinary para-liturgical enactments, while simultaneously stressing the impact of the visual on belief, Frese rightly makes the point that the celebration of mass is and has always been the principal function of churches and that, consequently, their decoration is most likely meant to refer to this primary function. It is, in fact, the "everyday" liturgy that churches are built for, and where people go to attend mass. The importance given to mass and liturgy is even more interesting given that earlier studies on images of Christ in Early Christian times and the High Middle Ages by, for instance, Celia Chazelle, Anne-Orange Poilpré, Manuela Beer and Katharina Schüppel focused more on theology than on liturgy[5]. According to Frese, theological debates have been overvalued, thus neglecting the practical, liturgical context of these images. Liturgy therefore becomes a methodological issue of primary importance.

In his first chapter, Frese starts off with two major examples of Early Christian images of Christ placed above the altar in the apse dome: *San Giovanni Evangelista* in Ravenna and *Santa Pudenziana* in Rome. The parousiastic content of the *Santa Pudenziana* mosaic had already been highlighted by Josef Engemann in 1979. Frese accentuates this interpretation by linking it to passages in liturgy. He emphasizes the visionary character of liturgy, which had been regarded as εἰκών since the fourth century. The image of Christ is centered on the correlation between the celebrating clergy and their identification with the heavenly liturgy. All is therefore performed "*Aktualpräsenz*", which is further enriched by a strong

ecclesiastical and eschatological meaning. He finds, however, no evidence for any Eucharistic identification. Instead, the sacramental aspect is emphasized in the Ravenna mosaics as well as in a series of liturgical vessels and reliquaries. Frese concludes that the treatises about the true nature of the Eucharist by Ambrose and Augustine do not seem to have had an immediate impact on the image of Christ in late Antiquity.

A change took place from the sixth century onwards, when, in the Byzantine Empire, the new Cherubic Hymn accompanied the bringing of the sacred vessels for the Eucharist during the liturgical ceremony of the "Great Entrance" (chapter II). Not without criticism from theologians and Patriarchs, who condemned this acclamation of the not-yet-consecrated gifts of bread and wine as foolish, this innovation accentuated the importance of the Eucharist. Be it in liturgical vessels or in Byzantine apse decorations, the new emphasis on the Eucharist can be linked to new themes, such as the representation of the four living creatures around Christ (*Maiestas Domini*). The *Aktualpräsenz* of the celebrating clergy is thereby increasingly complemented by representations related to the *Realpräsenz* of the Eucharist, albeit not always correct dogmatically. The invention and widespread use of the theme of the *Theotokos*, the Virgin Mary with the Christ child, as a symbol of his incarnation and therefore directly related to

1   Hans Belting, *Bild und Kult. Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*, Munich 1990 (English edition: *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, Chicago 1994). Erwin Panofsky, "Imago Pietatis. Ein Beitrag zur Typengeschichte des Schmerzenmannes und der Maria Mediatrix", in *Festschrift für Max J. Friedländer zum 60. Geburtstag*, Leipzig 1927, pp. 261–308.

2   Hans Belting, *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte?*, Munich 1983.

3   Peter Schmidt, "Sinn und Unsinn des Kultbildes. Die Intellektualisierung und die Modernisierung mittelalterlicher Kunst", Tagung am Kunstgeschichtlichen Institut der Universität Frankfurt am Main in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Liebieghaus, 22.–24. Juni 2007, *Kunstchronik* LXI/9–10 (2008), pp. 457–461. Jeffrey Hamburger, "Hans Belting: Bild und Kult. Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst, 1990", in *The books that shaped art history: from Gombrich and Greenberg to Alpers and Krauss*, Richard Shone, John-Paul Stonard eds, London 2013, pp. 202–215.

4   Martin Büchsel, Rebecca Müller, *Intellektualisierung und Mystifizierung mittelalterlicher Kunst. 'Kultbild': Revision eines Begriffes*, (Neue Frankfurter Forschungen zur Kunst, X), Berlin 2010.

5   Celia Chazelle, *The crucified God in the Carolingian Era. Theology and Art of Christ's Passion*, Cambridge 2001; Anne-Orange Poilpré, *Maiestas Domini. Une image de l'Eglise en Occident (Vᵉ–IXᵉ siècle)*, Paris 2005; Manuela Beer, *Triumphkreuze im Mittelalter. Ein Beitrag zu Typus und Genese im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert*, Regensburg 2005; Katharina Christa Schüppel, *Silberne und goldene Monumentalkruzifixe. Ein Beitrag zur mittelalterlichen Liturgie- und Kulturgeschichte*, Weimar 2005.

his presence in the Eucharist on the altar beneath, is part of this development.

Western artists and theologians were less occupied with these liturgical subtleties, and did not hesitate to insert pictures of clear Eucharistic reference into the Sacramentaries before the canon of the Mass and hence before their consecration. Different theological conceptions of the Eucharist in Carolingian times, according to Frese, led to different iconographic associations, underlining the glorious resurrection more at times and, at other times, the redemption by suffering and sacrifice. Here, Frese discusses as many ivories as he does manuscripts and traces a development, which can be summed up as leading from the *Maiestas Domini* to the crucifixion.

In his third chapter, Frese starts from Carolingian miniature paintings like the *Maiestas Domini* in the Sacramentary of Metz (*BNF*, ms. lat. 1141), where he identifies the small round object in Christ's hand as the host. He interprets this scene as a reference to the conception of the Eucharist as expressed by Ratramnus of Corbie († 870). In Ratramnus' opinion, the Eucharist is consumed only in remembrance of a single, non-repeatable event, and refers therefore to the glorious body of the risen Christ. The association with the Christ in majesty seems therefore to link the Eucharist and the vision of Christ in his eternal glory explicitly.

This idea, however, was heavily debated. Paschasius Radbertus (785–865) defended a conception of the Eucharist that accentuated the historical act of salvation as performed at the crucifixion, and which therefore refers to the sacrificed body of Christ. This theological thought found its way into representations of the crucifixion, such as on the ivory book cover of the Munich pericopes (*BSB*, cod. lat. 4452, Clm 57). Standing beside the dead Lord on the cross, the personification of the *Ecclesia* is receiving the blood streaming out of his side wound. Frese interprets this as an analogy for the mass and the sacraments. In the long run, however, this conception of the Eucharist and its link to the representation of the crucifixion took the lead and prevailed over the old iconographic theme of the *Maiestas Domini*.

Three very small chapters conclude the book and give an outlook on further development towards the later Middle Ages. Taking the 970 Gero Crucifix and the Crucifix of Benninghausen (1070/80) as examples /**Figs 9,10**/, Frese refutes all earlier attempts to connect these and similar sculptures to special liturgical occasions like the *Adoratio crucis* or to the veneration of miraculous relics such as fragments of the true cross. Instead, he insists on them being linked to the standard liturgy. Frese then suggests the origins of the sculpted groups of the triumphal cross (Halberstadt, Wechselburg) as a fusion of two iconographic themes, the *Maiestas Domini* and the Crucifix. In the last pages of the book, he then jumps right into the fifteenth century. The success of the iconography of the man of sorrows is presented here, again as the result of different positions in theology and popular piety towards the Eucharist. The growing skepticism towards the true nature of the Eucharist led to a greater accentuation of the subjective side of liturgy. The sacrament could now even be displayed separately for adoration, isolated from its former liturgical context. Frese thus finishes his argumentation where the bibliography starts to get denser and where the Reformation, with its subsequent discussion of the Eucharist, will take the development in another direction.

As convincing Frese's thoughts are, many questions are left open. This is, of course, only natural given the large time span and the sheer quantity of objects his approach could be applied to. There is, however, already a lack of equilibrium within the book itself. The two hundred pages of the first half of the book stand against only sixty in the second half. It is as if time and money had run out, but, it must be said, without the thoughts expressed in these last three chapters, the line of his argumentation would have been incomplete and much less compelling. It is here that Frese points to the things yet to be done, where he might best inspire others to take up and to develop his ideas.

A second problem inherent to his approach is that the choice of his examples can always be questioned – because it must necessarily remain incomplete. The question of choice arises already in the first chapter, where he limits his analysis to images visually related to the altar in the apse dome (*Santa Pudenziana, San Giovanni Evangelista*). The triumphal arch of *San Paolo fuori le mura,*

9/ Crucifix, church of St Martin, Benninghausen, ca 1070/1080

10/ Gero Crucifix, cathedral, Cologne, ca 970

for instance, is neither discussed nor mentioned, despite the fact that the image of Christ there is intrinsically linked to the altar and liturgy beneath. In order to have a fuller vision of the problem, one needs to therefore consider other bibliographies. Even if some examples of monumental art may be lacking, Frese gives an important and interesting perspective on the problem of the connection between monumental and portable representations of Christ by introducing a series of liturgical vessels such as the Berlin pyxis of Abraham, the reliquary of *San Nazaro Maggiore* in Milano, the silver paten of Stuma (Istanbul) and the chalice of Antioch (New York).

As Jean-Michel Spieser demonstrated in his latest book, images of Christ were copious and multifaceted in Early Christian art[6]. It is therefore surprising that the relationship between images of Christ linked to a cult in a church and those free from fixed liturgical obligations is not touched upon. Up to where in a church are the liturgical explanations Frese is offering valid? What about portals and their relation to apse decoration – for instance when dealing with the *Maiestas Domini* in Romanic times? Often the context of the images is of greater importance than it seems in the book.

One last point to be mentioned concerns the importance of formal issues of works of art. Taking Heike Schlie's book on the *Corpus Christi* in late Netherlandish altarpieces, Frese, in his introduction, briefly touches upon the question of whether artistic realism can be used to convey the idea of the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Can the term "sacramental realism" therefore also be used for works of high medieval art? This problem, however, is never brought up again and questions of style and form are not dealt with further, even when speaking about the Gero Crucifix cited above[7]. This is certainly not Frese's fault, as it goes far beyond what one single author can achieve in one book. It is, however, an important indication of the connections we need to consider between the visual and the intellectual.

Frese's book is interesting to read, stimulating and innovative. His plea for increased caution in making analogies between art and theology should be heard. At the center of liturgy, today as ever, we have the Eucharist – the real *corpus* – and not the work of art, considered to be only its shadow (*umbra, imago*). His argumentation is not always simple and it may be difficult to "hop" into one chapter without having followed the development of his ideas in the previous pages. However, for the specialist as for the medievalist in general, his book, with its solid arguments and subtle observations, is certainly important and should be taken into account.

6 Jean-Michel Spieser, *Images du Christ. Des catacombes aux lendemains de l'iconoclasme*, Geneva 2015.
7 For the further development of the concept of "*sakramentale Repräsentation*" see Daniel Weidner, "Sakramentale Repräsentation als Modell und Figur", in *Sakramentale Repräsentation. Substanz, Zeichen und Präsenz in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Stefanie Ertz, Heike Schlie, Daniel Weidner eds, München 2012, pp. 13–28.

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