

THE JOHANNESSCHÜSSEL AS ANDACHTSBILD:  
THE GAZE, THE MEDIUM AND THE SENSES\*

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*When the word turns into a body  
And the body opens its mouth  
And speaks the word from which it was created –  
I will embrace that body  
And lay it to rest by my side.*

(“Hebrew Lesson 5”

Chezi Laskly, *The Mice and Leah Goldberg*)

This article takes as its starting point a specific image type that occupies a complex position in the iconology of the decapitated head: the *caput Iohannis in disco*, or head of St John the Baptist on a platter, for the sake of brevity identified by the German term *Johannesschüssel* [Fig. 1].<sup>1</sup>

The *Johannesschüssel* has a very particular relationship to the material culture of the isolated head in Western Europe. On the one hand, the artifact remained connected to its prototype, the skull relic; on the other, it grew into one of the most important devotional images of the Middle Ages in both sculpture and painting. In so doing, the *Johannesschüssel* made the cult of the severed male head a channel for important Christian

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\* This article offers a further exploration on the senses of what I did in *Caput Joannis in Disco*. {Essay on a Man’s Head}, (Visualising the Middle Age VMA 8), 2012. With thanks to Georg Geml, Lise de Greef and Soetkin Vanhauwaert.

<sup>1</sup> I will use the German loan word. Réau L., *Iconographie de l’art chrétien*, 2. *Iconographie de la Bible*, 1. Ancien Testament (Paris: 1956) 431–463; Combs Stuebe I., “The Johannesschüssel. From Narrative to Reliquary to Andachtsbild”, *Marsyas. Studies in the History of Art* 14 (1968–1969) 1–16; Arndt H. – Kroos R., “Zur Ikonographie der Johannesschüssel”, *Aachener Kunstblätter* 38 (1969) 243–328. See also my essays: “Le chef de Jean Baptiste”, *Graphè. La Bible, Arts, Littératures, Philosophie* 16 (Lille–Arras: 2006) 91–125; “Saint-John’s head on a plate by Andrea Solario (1507, Louvre). Transmission and transformation of an ‘Andachtsbild’ between Middle Ages and Renaissance, between North and South”, *Critica d’arte* (2007) 62–86; “Saint-John-in-disco. Prolegomena to the History of a Man’s Head”, *Mitteilungen für Anthropologie und Religionsgeschichte* 20 (2009) 221–287; “He must increase, but I must decrease. On the spiritual and pictorial intertwining between the Johannesschüssel and the Vera Icon (1200–1500)”, in Enenkel K. – Melion W. (eds.), *Meditatio-Refashioning the Self. Theory and Practice in Late Medieval and Early Modern Intellectual Culture*, Intersections. Interdisciplinary Studies in Early Modern Culture 17 (Leiden: 2011) 323–366.



Fig. 1. Unknown artist, *Johannesschüssel* (1500–1515). Limestone, diam. 42 cm. Cologne, Schnütgen-Museum (K 156).

ideas, such as the role of the gaze and empathy in the process of looking, the performative activities of processional images and relics, the archetype of the evil-averting visage, the involvement of the entire sensorium in spiritual experience, and, finally, the role of medium in the transition from the Middle Ages to modernity.

Scripture says that John the Baptist's head was severed by order of Herod; later martyrologies claim that his skull was found in the course of the fourth century.<sup>2</sup> The existence of a head relic becomes apparent

<sup>2</sup> Innitzer T., *Johannes der Täufer* (Vienna: 1908) 397.



Fig. 2. Skull relic of St John. Amiens, Cathédrale Notre-Dame.

from the twelfth century onwards in letters and registries from the East.<sup>3</sup> After the Fourth Crusade of 1204, a small deluge of supposed skulls of St John flowed westwards: no fewer than twelve skulls were venerated as John the Baptist's by the end of the Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup> In northern Europe the most popular of these skulls was without a doubt that of Amiens [Fig. 2].<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Semoglou A., "Les reliques de la vraie croix et du chef de Saint Jean Baptiste. Inventions et vénération dans l'art Byzantin et post-Byzantin", in Lidov A. (ed.), *Eastern Christian Relics* (Moscow: s. d.) 217–233.

<sup>4</sup> Réau, *Iconographie de la Bible* 431–463; Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 245.

<sup>5</sup> Rückert R., "Zur Form der byzantinischen Reliquiare", *Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst* 3, 8 (1957) 7ff.; Breuil A., "Du culte de saint Jan Baptiste et des usages profanes qui s'y rattachent", *Mémoires de la Société des Antiquaires de Picardie* 8, s.l. (1846) 3–90; du Cange C., *Traité historique du chef de saint Jean-Baptiste* (Paris, Sebastien Cramoisy &

Brought back from the crusades by Walo of Sarton, it had allegedly been found immured in Constantinople. Walo's skull relic had a cut above the left eyebrow. This cut retroactively gave rise to the legend that Herodias had stabbed John's severed head in a fit of rage.<sup>6</sup> According to the *translatio* legend the head was originally kept on a costly platter with a silver cover, but Walo sold the platter for a large sum of money.<sup>7</sup> To this day, the cathedral of Genoa claims to possess the 'original' platter relic of brown agate.<sup>8</sup>

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Sebastien Mabre-Cramoisy: 1665); Salmon A., *Histoire du chef de saint Jean-Baptiste* (Amiens: 1876); Pardiac J.B., *Histoire de saint Jean-Baptiste et de son culte* (Paris: 1886).

<sup>6</sup> This well-established legend was a variation on an early Christian version in which Herodias was said to have posthumously pierced John's tongue with a needle, because it was with his tongue that he had chided her and incurred her wrath (*infra*); Combs Stuebe, "The Johannisschüssel" 5. This incident is mentioned in the Egyptian *Serapion martyrrium* (c. 390): *The Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 11 (Manchester: 1927) 234–287, 456. The *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine (c. 1260) does not mention the motif; Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend. Readings of the Saints*, ed. W.G. Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton: 1993) 132–140. Later, however, it was picked up in the mystery plays (*supra*). See also: Thulin O., *Johannes der Täufer im geistlichen Schauspiel des Mittelalters und der Reformationszeit* (s.l.: 1930).

<sup>7</sup> Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 245.

<sup>8</sup> For other examples of skulls and platters in the East and the West, see Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 252–253. The gilt silver rim and the decorated holder on the back, with vines as a symbol of the Eucharist, were added later, presumably c. 1300 in a French workshop (Müller Th. – Steingraber E., "Die französische Goldemailplastik um 1400", *Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst* 3, 5 (1952) cat. no. 16). An inscription on the rim reads: INTER NATOS MULIERUM NON SURREXIT MAIOR JOHANNIS BAPTISTAE (Matt. 11:11). Around 1420, a small head of St John in gold enamel was added to the middle of the dish and mounted in an aureole set with rubies. In medieval lapidaries, the agate was associated with the sea. When submerged, it was believed to attract pearls. The *Physiologus* calls it the gem of the precursor, because when thrown into the sea, it attracts the pearls and points the fishermen to them. In the same way, John pointed to the spiritual pearl: Seel O. (ed.), *Ecce agnus dei; Der Physiologus* (Zurich–Stuttgart: 1960) 42. The red ruby, the gem of gems, was compared to Christ, as the divine light, but of course also to the blood of the Passion. In the context of John the Baptist, the ruby refers to the blood of his martyrdom. In his last will and testament of 1492, Pope Innocent VIII (Giovanni Battista Cibo) asked for the brown agate dish of Salome to be placed in the chapel of St John the Baptist in Genoa cathedral, beside the reliquary with the Baptist's ashes. The text is quoted in Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" note 100, and published by Banchemo G., *Il duomo di Genova* (Genova: 1855) 208 ff. See also Grosso O., "Le Arche di S. Giovanni Battista e il Piatto di Salome", *Dedalo* 5 (1924) 432. The last will specifies *Bellissimo bacile de calcidonio, ossia agata*. This emphasis on chalcedony refers to the martyrdom of the Baptist as mentioned in the *Legenda Aurea* (1260), following the *Historia tripartite*; Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea. Vulga Historia Lombardica Dicta*, ed. T. Graesse (Dresden–Leipzig: 1846) 356; see also, for the Latin edition: Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, ed. G.P. Maggioni (Florence: 1998); Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend* 132–140. On Ascension Day and the Feast of the Decollation of St John (29 August), the Genoa dish was put on display on the altar. The pope had, in fact, been given the dish by the French cardinal Balu, who had acquired it from a church 'from the East'. It is not clear whether this dish is the same agate dish described in a pilgrim's account in the sixth-century Church of the Holy Sepulchre: Breviarus de Hierosolyma (*Ubi*

In short, during the age of the Crusades, a new image type came into being that simulated St John's head on a platter. The earliest *Johannesschüsseln* survive as independent objects, but they can also be found on keystones, Johannite seals, and amulets. The concept of the *Johannesschüssel* is based on the words of Salome,<sup>9</sup> in *Matthew* 14:8: 'Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter' (*in disco*). This artifact in turn forms a kind of *Ersatz-* or *Devotionalkopie* (Kretzenbacher) for the mother object of devotion: the skull.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, *Johannesschüsseln* often feature a cut above the eyebrow, a direct reference to the relic in Amiens. Some even contain actual relics.

### 1. *The Johannesschüssel: Quid?*

The *Johannesschüssel* is an image type that sprang from both text and relic. It is an image that *presents death*. This death is not an ordinary death; it is the mother of all deaths: the decapitation of the last of the prophets and the first of the martyrs. Indeed, on the basis of exegetical interpretations,<sup>11</sup> John was the *Precursor* (*prodromos*) and the *proto-martyr*. He belongs to the Old and the New Covenant. This special position will be important for the meaning and the function of the Platter of St John. *Johannesschüsseln* are usually made of wood or precious metal, but papier-mâché and terracotta were also used as popular and inexpensive alternatives. We have relatively little information on the actual use of these platters. When on display, the *Johannesschüssel* was venerated (like the relic) as proof

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*est ille discus ubi caput sancti Johannis portatum fuit*); Kötting B., *Peregrinatio religiosa. Forschungen zur Volkskunde* 33–35 (Regensburg-Münster: 1950) 360. Aristocrats collected precious 'Salome dishes'. Jean, Duc de Berry, owned an extremely valuable specimen in gold, agate and gems, including sapphires, emeralds and rubies; Guiffrey J., *Inventaires de Jean, Duc de Berry* 2 (Paris: 1896) 80.

<sup>9</sup> Her name is mentioned for the first time by the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (c. 37–after 100); Michl J. et al., "Johannes der Täufer", in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* 5 (Freiburg: 1960) cols. 1084–1089.

<sup>10</sup> Kretzenbacher L., "Johannishäupter' in Innerösterreich. Ein Beitrag zu Verehrung und Brauch um Johannes den Täufer", in *Carinthia I. Festschrift zur Vollendung des 60. Lebensjahres des Hofrates Universitätsprofessor Dr. Gotbert Moro* 152 (1962) 232–249.

<sup>11</sup> The foundations of the exegetical tradition and its hermeneutics were laid open by Hartmann M., *Der Tod Johannes des Täufers. Eine exegetische und rezeptionsgeschichtliche Studie auf dem Hintergrund narrativer, intertextueller und kulturanthropologischer Zugänge*, Stuttgarter Biblische Beiträge 45 (Stuttgart: 2001). See also Ernst J., *Johannes der Täufer. Interpretation. Geschichte. Wirkungsgeschichte* (Berlin: 1989); and Lupieri E., *Giovanni Battista fra Storia e Leggenda* (Brescia: 1988); Pape D.R. – Goodwin K., *Der Vorläufer. Johannes der Täufer, Prophet und Wegbereiter des Herrn* (Stuttgart: 1991).





Fig. 3. Unknown artist, *Johannesschüssel* with epigraphy INTER NATOS MULIERUM NON SURREXIT MAJOR JOANNE BAPTISTE (ca. 1500). Papier-mâché, diam. 34 cm. Leuven, Museum M.

against epilepsy, headaches, throat aches, feminine bleeding, melancholy and depression, and men's erotic difficulties in particular.

The *Johannesschüssel* in papier-mâché at Museum M in Leuven was made for the chapel of Saint Peter's Hospital around 1500, and tradition has it that it was venerated on August 29 – the day on which John's decapitation is commemorated – for protection against headaches and throat aches [Fig. 3].<sup>12</sup> The *Johannesschüssel* of Saint Peter's Hospital in Leuven also features a cut to the forehead. The platter has an inscription that

<sup>12</sup> Smeyers M., "Sint-Jan-in-disco", in Bessemans L. (ed.), *Schatten der Armen. Het artistiek en historisch bezit van het O.C.M.W.-Leuven* (Leuven: 1988) 144–147.

reads: INTER NATOS MULIERUM NON SURREXIT MAJOR JOANNE BAPTISTE, from *Matthew* 11:11: 'Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist.' This inscription was also found on the thirteenth-century platter relic of Genoa, and it is known that Guilelmus Durandus began his eulogy for August 29 with these words.<sup>13</sup>

The *Johannesschüssel* is an intensely 'ergonomic' object (Fig. 4). There is evidence that suggests that these platters were used in performative activities.<sup>14</sup> Some platters of St John were part of mystery plays. In the *Mons Mystère de la passion de Jean Baptiste*, adapted by Jean Michel (†1501), we encounter the following stage direction: 'Icy frappe Herodyas d'un Cousteau sur le front du chef de Sainct jehan et le sang en sort'.<sup>15</sup> Lavish experiments with blood, some a bit more gruesome than others, are undoubtedly an essential characteristic of the image type of the *Johannesschüssel*.<sup>16</sup>

Archives inform us that at the summer solstice outdoor processions took place across Europe to ensure the regeneration of the land and the fertility of women. The circular platter was made to correspond to the circular movements of the ritual dance, while the dance was attuned to the sun's orbit.<sup>17</sup> John the Baptist, together with the Blessed Virgin Mary, are the two saints who share with Jesus the distinction of having their nativity marked with liturgical commemoration. In John the Baptist's case the celebration is on June 24, which was at one time the longest day of the year.<sup>18</sup> After that, the hours of sunlight gradually decrease

<sup>13</sup> Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 299.

<sup>14</sup> Combs Stuebe, "The Johannesschüssel" 5.

<sup>15</sup> The original was probably written by Eustache Marcadé (†1440) and performed in Arras between 1420 and 1430. The redaction of Jean Michel was 30,000 verses long and was performed over the course of a week; Cohen G., *Le livre de Conduite du Régisseur et Le compte des Dépenses pour le Mystère de la Passion* (Oxford: 1925) 192; Subrenat J., "La mission de Jean-Baptiste dans les passions du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle. L'exemplaire du Mystère de la passion d'Arras", in *Jean-Baptiste le précurseur au Moyen Âge. Actes du 26<sup>e</sup> colloque du CUER MA* (Aix-en-Provence: 2002) 185–199.

<sup>16</sup> *Johannesschüsseln* were also thrown into the sea because they allegedly remained afloat above places where people drowned. And in Pömbesen, Ostwestfalen, believers carried *Johannesschüsseln* around the altar on their head as a remedy against migraines; Sartori P., "Johannes der Täufer", *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* 4 (1932) cols. 704–765, col. 740.

<sup>17</sup> All over the world human sacrifice seems to be closely linked with the mystery of food production (Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* 23). See also: Green M.A., *Dying for the Gods. Human Sacrifice in Iron Age and Roman Europe* (Stroud: 2001) 165–168. The sun was often imitated in the form of a straw wheel, and then set on fire the night of June 24, preferably at an elevated place. In Limburg, a similar ritual was practiced up until the beginning of the twentieth century in Herderen–Riemst.

<sup>18</sup> *Acta Sanctorum* 25, 644–646.



Fig. 4. Unknown artist, *Johannesschüssel* (early 13th century). Painted wood. Munich, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum.

until December 25: the winter solstice and the birth of Christ. Augustine (354–430) saw in these parallel liturgical birthdays a reference to John the Baptist's testimony in *John* 3:30: 'He (Christ) must increase, but I must decrease'.<sup>19</sup> The idea of "decrease" for the benefit of growth is incorporated in these words, comparable to the cycle of the sun and the light

<sup>19</sup> 'Nam a Natali Ioannis incipiunt dierum detrimenta; a natali Christi autem, renovantur augmenta' [<http://www.augustinus.it/latino/discorsi/index2.htm>].



of days itself. Platters of St John were indeed linked to this archetypal cosmic given.<sup>20</sup>

## 2. *The Johannesschüssel as Andachtsbild*

The mystic Gertrude of Helfta (1256–1301/02) describes in her vision of John the Baptist how young and handsome he appeared to her, though he is always depicted so horribly.<sup>21</sup> This passage is interesting because it shows how the exterior of the Precursor, in the midst of its horror, offers her a paradoxical sort of beauty.

The *Johannesschüssel* exposes death and horror with varying degrees of exhibitionism. One Baptist's head has the mouth hanging open; another has the tongue protruding. Some have wide, staring eyes; the eyes of others are closed or half-closed. Sometimes the bloody neck is emphasized; in other cases one is confronted with the face. The suffering countenance of the *Johannesschüssel*, however, is ambivalent. The beheading itself is macabre, but at the same time the facial expression reflects a martyr's death, which typologically lifts the horror toward a sacrifice made for God. And as Precursor the *Johannesschüssel* must always precede the 'noblesse' of Christ.

By analogy with the perception of Christ's suffering, which is supposed to stimulate viewers' empathy, the naturalistic, suffering face of John the Baptist is not bereft of spiritual meaning. Toward the end of the Middle Ages the *Johannesschüssel* had in many cases come to constitute an *Andachtsbild* related to the iconography of Christ.<sup>22</sup> To begin with, there

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<sup>20</sup> The sun was often represented in the form of a wheel made of straw that was set fire to on the eve of June 24. Such a ritual was still being performed in Herderen–Riemst in Limburg at the beginning of the 20th century. It is possible that *Johannesschüsseln* were produced from less durable materials for these St John celebrations. If so, they would have been far less likely to survive; Caspers C., "Het Sint Jansfeest in kerk- en volksgebruik", in Janssen L. – Loeff K. (eds.), *Getuigenis op straat. De Laremse Sint Janstraditie* (Laren: 2005) 121–135.

<sup>21</sup> Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 266; *Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechtildianaе, I. Sanctae Gertrudis legatus divinae pietatis* (Paris: 1875) 418: 'miro modo amabilis, flore vernantissimae iuventutis [...] quia senex et dispicibilis ubique depingeretur'. The authors assume that Gertrude looked primarily at miniatures of the *Johannesschüssel*.

<sup>22</sup> Such as the handbook of Ludolph of Saxony (ca. 1300–1377/78), which took the life of Christ as a model: 'Quid ergo tu faceres si haec videres? Numquid non te projiceres super ipsum Dominum [...]?' – 'Would you not throw yourself upon the Lord?' In the term *projicere*, James Marrow recognizes a double meaning of projection. The *Andachtsbild* is supposed to evoke empathic emotion, and thereby project the spectator's innermost feelings; Marrow J.H., "Symbol and Meaning in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages

is the physical kinship between John and Christ, who are second cousins. John is usually depicted with wilder hair and rougher beard, as befits the new Elijah.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, John is already less a prophet and more Christ-like.<sup>24</sup> By extension, he is also exempt from all negative depictions of the ethnic Jew in medieval iconography.<sup>25</sup>

We know of a number of *Johannesschüsseln* that may literally have been modelled after the head of Christ. The *Johannesschüssel* by the Master of the Nördlingen Retable, for example, is related to the same workshop's 1462 *Crucifixion* in St George's Church in Nördlingen [Figs. 5–6].<sup>26</sup> The Baptist's head of the *Johannesschüssel* of the parish church of Prato allo Stelvio (ca. 1400) was completed first and only later mounted on a sixteenth-century platter. A *Crucifixion* of ca. 1360 from the same church, however, has identical facial features. Sometimes John also has a forked beard, as he does on an early thirteenth-century exemplar from Naumburg [Fig. 7], taking over one of the typical physical characteristics of Christ as described in the apocryphal Lentulus letter.<sup>27</sup> In some cases the distinction can no longer be made. A Maasland head sculpture (ca. 1370–1380) now

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and the Early Renaissance", *Simiolus* 16 (1986) 155. On the *Andachtsbild*: Noll T., "Zu Begriff, Gestalt und Funktion des Andachtsbildes im späten Mittelalter", *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 67 (2004) 297–328; Schade K., *Andachtsbild. Die Geschichte eines kunsthistorischen Begriffs* (Weimar: 1996); Schmidt P., "Bildgebrauch und Frömmigkeitspraxis. Bemerkungen zur Benutzung früher Druckgraphik", in *Spiegel der Seligkeit. Privates Bild und Frömmigkeit im Spätmittelalter* (exhibition cat.) (Nürnberg: 2000) 69–83; Schmidt P., "Sinn und Un-Sinn des Kultbildes. Die Intellektualisierung und die Mystifizierung mittelalterlicher Kunst", *Kunstchronik* 9/10 (2008) 457–461; Geml G., *Frühe Johannesschüsseln* (unpublished M.A. thesis). (Vienna: 2009) 31–41; Combs Stuebe, "The Johannesschüssel" 1–16.

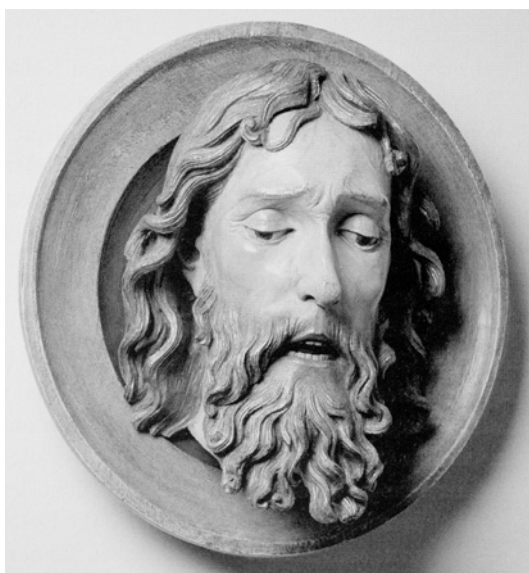
<sup>23</sup> Suckale R., "Der Meister der Nördlinger Hochaltarfiguren und Till Riemenschneider. Exemplarische Beiträge zum Verständnis ihrer Kunst", in Corsepius K. (ed.), *Opus Tessellatum. Modi und Grenzgänge der Kunstwissenschaft* (Hildesheim–New York: 2004) 328.

<sup>24</sup> 'Dies ist nicht das Haupt eines Hingerichteten, eher ähnelt es einer Christusikone. Johannes weicht von der Erscheinung Christi nur durch den längeren Bart und das wirrere Haar ab' (Suckale, "Der Meister" 328). From a strictly genealogical point of view, one would actually have to say that the younger Christ resembles the older John.

<sup>25</sup> See the whole edited volume by: Frojmovic E. (ed.), "Imagining the Self, Imagining the Other. Visual Representations and Jewish-Christian Dynamics in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period", *Cultures, Beliefs and Traditions* 15 (Leiden: 2002).

<sup>26</sup> Suckale, "Der Meister" 327–340. The *Johannesschüssel* comes from a small church in Tajov, Hungary. The exemplar is of the horizontal type: the head lies flat on the platter. A hook on the reverse reveals that it was meant to be hung (see also Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 282). There are other examples in Geml, *Frühe Johannesschüsseln* passim.

<sup>27</sup> The Lentulus letter is a thirteenth-century apocryphal document from Constantinople that claims to go back to a letter from Pilate to Lentulus in which the judge describes Christ's face. Among other things, it explicitly mentions that Christ's hair was parted in the middle. This source standardized the face of Christ in iconography. The Letter of Lentulus also influenced the appearance of the *vera icon*, see Dobschütz E. von, *Christusbilder. Untersuchungen zur christlichen Legende* 1 (Leipzig: 1899) 308–329.



Figs. 5–6. Master of the Nördlingen Retable, *Johannesschüssel* and *Crucifix* (ca. 1460). Painted wood. Nördlingen, Sankt Georg (*Crucifix*). Banská Bystrica, Stredoslovenské Museum (*Johannesschüssel*).



Fig. 7. Unknown artist, *Johanneschüssel* (13th century, platter 16th century). Painted wood. Naumburg, Cathedral Treasure Vault.

preserved in Tongeren has generally been identified as John because it belonged to the collection of the church of St John the Baptist, but the formal conventions and hairstyle are very close to those of the suffering Christ [Fig. 8]. From the perspective of workshop practice it is clear that artists sometimes approached orders for a head of John the Baptist as a 'wilder version of the head of Christ', perhaps using a local Crucifix or Pietà as a model.

The contemporary viewer must have noticed this kinship between Christ and John, given that the two faces were often seen together in one and the same ecclesiastical space. This kinship goes deeper than the physical, deeper than the role of artistic models. There are symbolic meanings



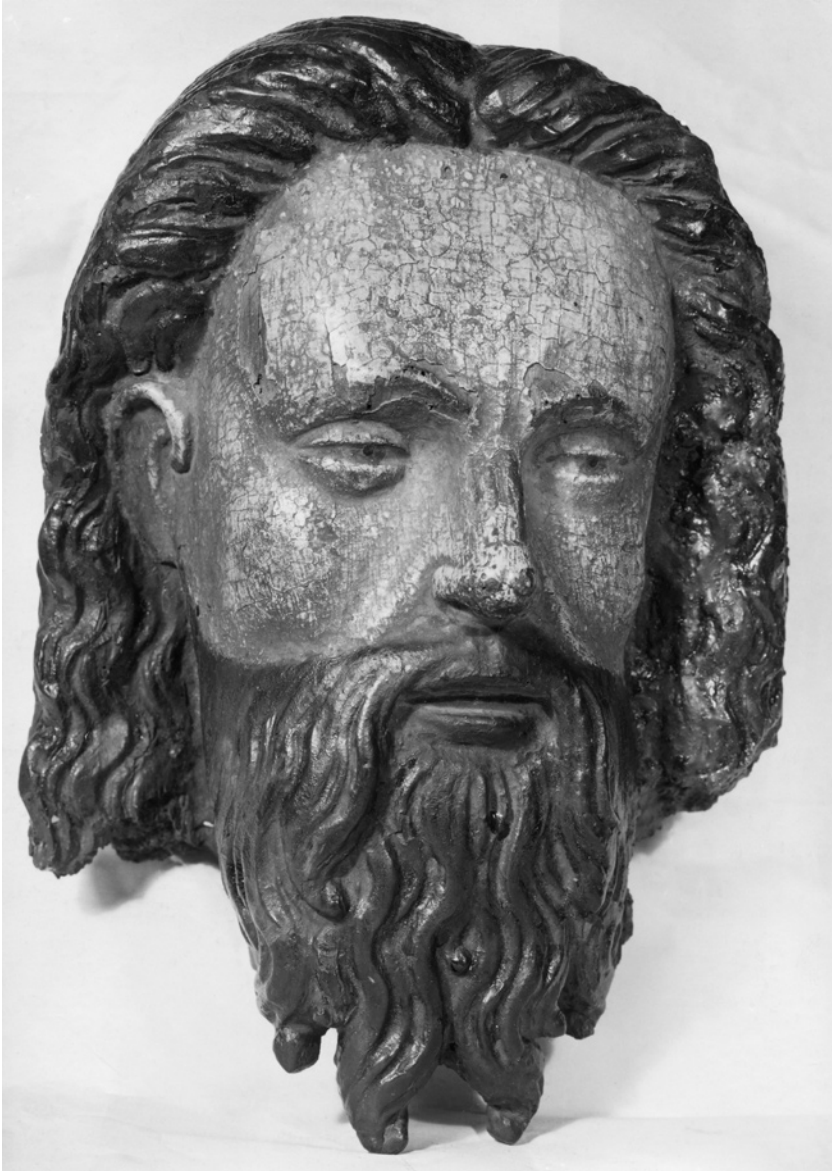


Fig. 8. Mosan unknown artist, sculpture of a male head (1370–1380). Painted wood, 33 cm. Tongeren, Sint-Jan de Doperkerk. Image © KIK-IRPA, Brussels.

at work in the case of John and Christ that were experienced in the tension between the fading away of one man inversely to the other's ascendance. This brings me back to my original question concerning the nature of the *Johannesschüssel* as the Christ-like *Andachtsbild*. What defines the process of the viewer's looking at the *Johannesschüssel*, which has been poured into the mould of Christ's *Andachtsbild* but differs from it in terms of roughness (it is after all a beheading) and form (here we are concerned with the hermeneutics of the platter)?

In what follows I will distinguish between four levels at which the fusion between John and Christ can be interpreted: the relationship between word and image, the absorbing gaze, the *apotropaion* and the senses, and finally the phenomenological tension between head and face.

### 3. *The Epigraphy of the Johannesschüssel*

Many *Johannesschüsseln* bear an inscription. The platter is not only the bearer of the head, but also bearer of the word. The edges of the platters possess the perfect tectonics (i.e. formal structures) for this purpose, and usually they simply report: CAPUT JOHANNIS IN DISCO. Another frequently occurring inscription is the gospel pronouncement: DA MIHI HIC IN DISCO CAPUT JOANNIS BAPTISTAE. The inscription literally turns the *Johannesschüssel* into an interactive object. The phrase NON SURREXIT INTER NATOS MULIERUM MAJOR JOANNE BAPTISTE, from *Matthew* 11:11, is also quite popular and adorns both the original thirteenth-century agate charger from Genoa and the papier-mâché exemplar in Leuven.<sup>28</sup> Guilelmus Durandus' (ca. 1235–1296) praise of John's feast day begins with this pronouncement, which a fourteenth-century manuscript from the cloister of Engelbert shows also to have been widespread in hymns:<sup>29</sup> 'Inter natos mulierum, Hic Iohannes vas sincerum Principatum tenuit'.<sup>30</sup> The *Inter natos* phrase is indicative of the bond between John and Christ. Because the words are Christ's own, he is subtly integrated into the equation: at one level through the speaking of the word; at the other, through

<sup>28</sup> Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 300.

<sup>29</sup> This is the basis on which Durandus justifies John having two feast days. Durandus G., *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* (Hagenau, H. Gran: 1509) fol. CCX: 'Quia inter natos mulierum non surrexit Joanne baptista. Merito ecclesia celebrat festum de illo et facit ei festum duplex. S. nativitatis et decollationis'.

<sup>30</sup> Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 299; Kehrein J., *Lateinische Sequenzen des Mittelalters: aus Handschriften und Drucken*, ed. F. Kupferberg (Michigan: 1873) 356.



Fig. 9. Unknown artist, pilgrim's badge with epigraphy HIC MAGNVS CORAM DOMINO (16th century). Gilded copper, diam. 7,3 cm. Antwerp, Museum Mayer van den Bergh.

the image. By being seen and read at once, Christ and John are woven into a single soteriology that is prepared by a decapitation – a soteriology, moreover, that must begin in the heart of martyrdom.

The degree to which word and image can generate a chain of meanings is also evident from the inscription on a sixteenth-century insignia from the Museum Mayer van den Bergh in Antwerp [Fig. 9].<sup>31</sup> HIC MAGNVS CORAM DOMINO literally means: 'Here is/appears the great one before the Lord'. The phrase comes from *Luke* 1:15 and is also sung in the

<sup>31</sup> Koldewey J., *Geloof en geluk: sieraad en devotie in middeleeuws Vlaanderen* (Arnhem: 2006) 35, fig. 2.20.

Introit of the vigil on the eve of the Nativity of John the Baptist, June 23.<sup>32</sup> CORAM is related to being present, to appearing before someone – for example, *coram iudice*: appearing before the judge.<sup>33</sup> But the meaning of this *praesentia* is ambiguous. John appears to the Lord in death. The moment John dies, he shall look upon the face of Christ. Hence CORAM is also about seeing. And this is precisely the other side of the coin: through the visage of John, we see Christ. The fact that the phrase refers to the *dies natalis* and the medallion itself to the *decollatio* connects the two liturgical feasts of death and rebirth: a rebirth that has made *praesentia* possible for the visage of the invisible God.

A *Johannesschüssel* in relief now preserved in Hamburg's Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe is inscribed: EN QUO PERIT IUSTUS QUASI NON SIT DEO DILECTUS/CUM SIT EIUS PRECIOSA MORS HIC IN CONSPECTU DOMINI [Fig. 10]. This pronouncement is identical to a widely known sequence<sup>34</sup> that recalls *Isaiah* 57:1: 'The righteous perish, and no one takes it to heart'.<sup>35</sup> In this sequence death in the visage of the Lord is foregrounded even more literally. The epigraph articulates looking at the *Johannesschüssel* as a kind of seeing that ultimately leads to the vision of God, the *beata visio*.<sup>36</sup> We have already seen that the *Johannesschüssel* freezes that fraction of a moment that enables an opening to the Hereafter. It even seems as if looking at the *Johannesschüssel* likewise channels the desire to see the impossible. The beheaded head must bring us to the Visage – *In conspectu domini*. The sense of sight is also one of the most important liturgical components of the Eucharist. The priest holds aloft the host – the *ostensio* – and pronounces the words 'Behold the Lamb of God' immediately before administering communion, conflating the Baptist's prophetic utterance with Christ's command to 'do this in memory of me'.

The epigraph MERETRIX SVADET, PVELLA SALTAT, REX IUBET, SANCTUS DECOLLATUR is inscribed on the sixteenth-century reliquary dish from Naumburg mentioned earlier. 'The harlot urges, the girl dances, the king commands and the saint is beheaded.' These words are quoted from a sequence of the *In decollatione sancti Ioannis Baptistae* by Godescalc

<sup>32</sup> Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 299.

<sup>33</sup> Buschmann J.E., *Synonima Latino-Teutonica. Latijnsch-Nederlands woordenboek der 17de eeuw* (Antwerp: 1889) 227.

<sup>34</sup> Kehrein J., *Lateinische Sequenzen des Mittelalters* 452.

<sup>35</sup> And also *Psalm* 116:9, 15: 'I walk before the Lord in the land of the living'; 'Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones'.

<sup>36</sup> Trottmann C., *La vision béatifique: Des disputes scolastiques à sa définition par Benoît XII*, Bibliothèque des Ecoles Françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 289 (Rome: 1995) passim.





Fig. 10. Unknown artist, *Johanneschüssel* with epigraphy EN QUO PERIT IUSTUS QUASI NON SIT DEO DILECTUS/CUM SIT EIUS PRECIOSA MORS HIC IN CONSPECTU DOMINI (15th century). Hamburg, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe.

(†1050).<sup>37</sup> The hymn was widespread in manuscript well into the Middle Ages, and had an influence on theater. The fifteenth-century *Alsfelder Passion Play* simply instructs the choir tersely, 'Chorus cantat: Meretrix suadet'.<sup>38</sup> The Naumburg inscription reduces the narrative to four essentials: urging, dancing, commanding and beheading. In the Middle Ages dancing, jubilation, speaking and singing were forms of active participation in the devotional process.<sup>39</sup>

This brings me to a painted *Johannesschüssel* of ca. 1600 from the Hôpital Notre-Dâme à la Rose in Lessines (Belgium), which is inscribed: O CRUDELE SPECTACULUM [Fig. 11].<sup>40</sup> The words are ambiguous: they may refer to participation in the spectacle of the gospel drama, but also the *spectaculum* that 'helps itself' to the gaze. *Spectaculum* is derived from *speculum*: that which mirrors and reflects like the platter itself, is by extension *specularis*, provoking thought and nestling itself in the mind as the ultimate *compassio*.<sup>41</sup>

#### 4. The Absorbing Gaze

The inscriptions show clearly that John is mediated through hymns, liturgy, sequences and dramaturgy, elevated into a Christ-like *Andachtsbild*. The suffering of John is a prefiguration of Christ's suffering.<sup>42</sup> The *Johannesschüssel* is integrated into the idiom of sacrifice. The liturgy marries word

<sup>37</sup> Kehrein, *Lateinische Sequenzen* 352. This is also included in the *Missal of Naumburg* (1517).

<sup>38</sup> Grein C.W.M., *Alsfelder Passionsspiel* (Kassel: 1874) 28.

<sup>39</sup> Boerner B., *Bildwirkungen. Die kommunikative Funktion mittelalterlicher Skulpturen* (Berlin: 2008) 208: 'Bildkommunikation findet selten ohne jeglichen sprachlichen Bezug statt, auch der kommunikative Gehalt eines religiösen Bildwerks, seine spezifische Botschaft also, steht fast immer im Kontext eines sprachlichen Diskurses'. See also the interesting examples in: Tripps J., "Der Kirchenraum als Handlungsort für Bildwerke: 'handelnde' Altarfiguren und hyperwandelbare Schnitzretabel", in Bock N. (ed.), *Kunst und Liturgie im Mittelalter: Akten des internationalen Kongresses der Bibliotheca Hertziana und des Nederlands Instituut te Rome, Rome, 28.–30. September 1997, Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana* 33 (Munich: 2000) 235–247.

<sup>40</sup> Vandenbroeck P., *Hooglied. De beeldvorming van Religieuze Vrouwen in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, vanaf de 13de eeuw* (Brussels: 1994) 59, ill. 52.

<sup>41</sup> The topic of spectacle and public punishment is too large to be discussed here. See Merback M.B., *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel. Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Chicago: 1999) passim.

<sup>42</sup> Böhme calls this soteriology the 'martyrotheology' of John the Baptist; Böhme H., "Die Enthauptung von Johannes dem Täufer", in Geismar Chr. – Louis E. (eds.), *Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe, Tod* (Vienna–Klagenfurt: 1995) 379–384.



Fig. 11. Unknown artist, *Johannesschüssel* with epigraphy O CRUDELE SPECTACULUM (ca. 1600). Oil on wood. Lessines, Hôpital Notre-Dame à la Rose.

with image so that the event commemorated can be envisioned mentally. The four evangelists surround the *Johannesschüssel* built in relief in Hamburg. This iconography calls to mind paraliturgical schemata, such as the JHS monogram in an aureole surrounded by angels or the four evangelists [Fig. 12].<sup>43</sup> Hence even at the level of iconographic conventions and the idea of the circle, the sacramental meanings of John and Christ become virtually interchangeable.<sup>44</sup>

Looking upon the *Johannesschüssel* and emphasizing the act of seeing given in the epigraphs reveals an intertwining with the *ostensio* and the host, and makes the role of blood, sacrifice and the lamb clear both inside and outside of liturgical space. It is astonishing that a gruesome, severed head was able to provide this channel. Miri Rubin expresses it thus:

<sup>43</sup> Göttler C., "Vom süßen Namen Jesu", in Geismar Chr. – Louis E. (eds.), *Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe, Tod* (Vienna–Klagenfurt: 1995) 292–295, ill. 2–4.

<sup>44</sup> Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 30: 'So liegt die Übernahme eines christologischen Bildtypus vor [...] Allein mit diesem Bezug wird dem Bild der Johannesschüssel ein unvergleichlicher Rang bezeugt'.





Fig. 12. Master W.A., *Christ monogram* (15th century). Copper engraving. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek.



In medieval culture, representations of the body sometimes powerfully assimilated it into moments of agonising sacrificial torment within the language of religion, occasions on which it was made most human, suffering, passing, feminine, tormented, and vulnerable. At such moments frailty and humanity were celebrated, and thus expressed a pact between the supernatural and the natural, earthly and heavenly, the godly and the human. It was a symbol of many reconciliations.<sup>45</sup>

Alongside the fascination for the body part, and even for the abject, there are reconciliation and vulnerability, which according to Rubin are archetypically connected with the sacrificed body, as are the powerful undercurrents of the *Johannesschüssel*. Like Christ, the *Johannesschüssel* is an *Andachtsbild* involved in the arousal of empathy and *compassio*.

Beholding the visage of John is a confrontation with the death of the last prophet and the first martyr. What is beheld is in fact the transition from the Old Covenant to the New. The *Johannesschüssel* is an image *im Augenblick des Todes*, at the moment of death; it is the *Andachtsbild* of the transition to eternal life. The ebbing away of breath, mind and soul at the threshold was, as we see, strikingly depicted in the English alabasters. The curious painting (41 × 33 cm) from the collection of the Comte d'Oultremont in Saint-Georges-sur-Meuse, attributed to Jan Mostaert (1526–1550), also interprets the drama of death in this way [Fig. 13].<sup>46</sup> John's soul leaves his head, accompanied by weeping angels. John's head itself weeps. The ephemeral nature of the tear – it has not yet dried – is meant to move the viewer<sup>47</sup> but at the same time demonstrates the

<sup>45</sup> Rubin M., *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: 1992) 359.

<sup>46</sup> There is a similar painting in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dijon (inv. no. CA 109), previously attributed to various masters and now considered a copy after a painting by Jan Mostaert in the National Gallery in London (inv. no. NG 1080). For Dijon and London, see: Hoogewerff G.J., *De Noordnederlandse schilderkunst*, 5 vols. (The Hague: 1937) vol. II, 458–459; Friedländer M.J., *Lucas van Leyden and Other Dutch Masters of His Time, Early Netherlandish Painting 10* (Leiden: 1973) 70; Rainer B.R. – Krischel R., *Genie ohne Namen. Der Meister des Bartholomäus-Altars* (Cologne: 2001) 378–381, ill. 63–64. There is still no literature on the painting in Saint-Georges-sur-Meuse. With special thanks to Soetkin Vanhauwaert.

<sup>47</sup> To my knowledge, weeping *Johannesschüsseln* are comparatively rare. In this example there is a far-reaching synthesis with the weeping Christ, weeping being the late medieval characteristic of his *Andachtsbild*. From the high Middle Ages in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries onward, tears were no neutral motif but an aspect of soteriology. On this form of lacrymology see Nagy P., *Le don des larmes aux Moyen Âge* (Paris: 2000) 388–412. Tears were part of a culture of purification/confession in which women were particularly active; they often found a model in Mary Magdalen. Geoffrey of Vendôme (d. 1132) states in his sermon: 'We do not read that she spoke, but that she wept. Despite this, we believe that she was eloquent, but with tears and not with words.' The author continues by saying that prayer and confession are purer without the tongue. From the thirteenth century onwards,



Fig. 13. Jan Mostaert (attributed), *Painted head of Saint John* (ca. 1526–1550). Oil on wood, 41 × 33 cm. Saint-Georges-sur-Meuse, private collection of Comte d'Oultremont. Image © KIK-IRPA, Brussels.



Fig. 14. Martin Hofmann, *Johannesschüssel* (ca. 1515). Wood. Strasbourg, Musée de l'Oeuvre Notre-Dame.

freshness of the death (or near-death): the fraction of a moment that will soon lead to the crystallization of the image. By extension, I believe we can also interpret the *Johannesschüsseln* in the sense of this idea of 'transition'. In Martin Hofmann's (active from ca. 1507 in Basel–1530) *Johannesschüssel* of 1515 in Strasbourg [Fig. 14] and Hans Gieng's (ca. 1525–1562) *Johannesschüssel* of 1535 [Fig. 15], for example, confrontation with the gaze, with the ecstasy of death, predominates.

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tears become vehicles of the word; Jansen K.L., *The Making of the Magdalen. Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: 1999) 15; Lauwers M., "Noli me tangere". Marie Madeleine, Marie d'Oignies et les pénitentes du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle", *Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome. Moyen Âge* 104, 1 (1992) 255–256. Guillaume of Auvergne (after 1223) compared this female capacity with childbirth itself. In short, from the perspective of medieval anthropology, weeping was a bodily means of communication that could take over the power of the voice as well as that of childbirth.





Fig. 15. Hans Gieng, *Johannesschüssel* (1535). Fribourg, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire.

To the extent that the function of the *Andachtsbild* expanded during the late Middle Ages, the empathy of suffering seems also to have translated itself gradually into a conscious strategy of the gaze. The viewer was drawn into a form of seeing that transcended mere physical looking. He was conducted in spiritual transport to the invisible visage of God. The physical and symbolic affinities between the faces of John and Christ noted above contributed significantly to this strategy.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>48</sup> The transition from corporeal sight to spiritual vision is an important dynamics in medieval exegesis on sight and insight, discussed already by the Venerable Bede. In his Homily 11.15, he says: 'For indeed all those who believe, whether they be those who saw him in the flesh, or those who believe after his Ascension, share in the most benevolent promise of his in Matthew: "Blessed are the pure of heart for they will see God".' Matthew 5:8 is indeed a central phrase in these reflections on spiritual seeing; Deshman R., "Another Look at the Disappearing Christ. Corporeal and Spiritual Vision in Early Medieval Images",



The gaze that emanates from the *Johannesschüssel* is therefore somewhat paradoxical: the Baptist does not return the viewer's gaze. The *Johannesschüssel* is completely 'absorbing'.<sup>49</sup> But this does not mean that the *Johannesschüssel* is 'gazeless'. With its own dead gaze it channels the seeing of God, even if the eyes are closed, as with the *Johannesschüssel* in the Kremsmünster Stiftssammlungen (last quarter of the fifteenth century) [Fig. 16].<sup>50</sup> Perhaps we should rather speak of a specifically inward-turned gaze. Looking at the *Johannesschüssel* brings about a tumbling into a black hole, into an abyss.<sup>51</sup> Hence, in John's absorbing gaze we can reach unchecked that which cannot be seen physically: the indication of the invisible visage of God.

Caroline Schuster Cordone has called the paradoxical exchange of gazes between the *Johannesschüssel* and the viewer the *Mittlerfunktion*.<sup>52</sup> Artists would rather depict the dying than the dead. The border between life and death marks the moment at which the *Johannesschüssel* could arise *as image*. In this sense, too, John the Baptist is a mediator. The fraction of a moment taken up by the *Johannesschüssel* in order to be transformed from life to image expresses itself in the iconography of flowing: the still fluid blood from the neck or the still falling tear. Herein lies the difference to Christ. Where Christ as a living image has become an icon – the *vera icon* – John's iconic image is seized at a moment when he is being flung out of time. An incredible energy is released, an energy that quite fascinated the medieval and early-modern individual: the *apotropaion*.

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*The Art Bulletin* 79 (1997) 518–546. See also: Kessler H.L., *Spiritual Seeing. Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art* (Philadelphia: 2000) 35.

<sup>49</sup> I am referring to the famous text *De Visio Dei* by Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), in which he uses a painted icon (probably a *vera icon*) as an *exemplum* of seeing God for the monks of the abbey of Tegernsee. The icon follows the viewer with its gaze. See: De Certeau M. – Porter C., "The Gaze: Nicholas of Cusa", *Diacritics* 17, 3 (1987) 2–38; Beierwaltes W., *Visio facialis. Sehen ins Angesicht. Zur Coincidenz des endlichen und unendlichen Blicks bei Cusanus* (Munich: 1988).

<sup>50</sup> Schultes L., "Eine Johannesschüssel in Stift Kremsmünster", *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 46–47, 2 (1993) 657–662.

<sup>51</sup> 'Le trou', says Didi-Huberman G., "Un sang d'images", *Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse* 32 (Paris: 1985) 128.

<sup>52</sup> Cordone C.S. – Gieng H., "Johannesschüssel, um 1535", in *Museum für Kunst und Geschichte Freiburg* (2003) 1–3.



Fig. 16. Unknown artist, *Johannesschüssel* with epigraphy DA MICH I DISCO CAPUT IOANNIS BAPTISTE MARCI 6 (last quarter 15th century). Wood. Kremsmünster, Stiftssammlungen.

### 5. *Apotropaion and the Senses*

The *Johannesschüssel* forms an image type of the black, devouring orifice: the open wound palpitates, the eyes stare the mouth gapes. The consequence of the inward-turned gaze is the abject, the inside-out: tongue, teeth, organs.<sup>53</sup> The *Johannesschüssel* satisfies the desire for an image prototype that unabashedly makes itself felt in the shock of absorption and

<sup>53</sup> Recall the “inner visage” of the wax-filled skull relic in Amiens.

abyss. We will call this shock the *apotropaion*.<sup>54</sup> It is an absorbing energy archetypally defined in the Medusa phantasm (to which I will return). Because the facets of devouring and the abyss by definition focus on the orifice, the *Johanneschüssel*, with its open mouth and open neck (often the aorta, the vertebrae, and so forth, are exposed), is the ultimate *apotropaion*. The shameless ‘visual penetration’ (*per-spicere*) of the black tunnels that John’s head possesses – mouth, throat, ears, nostrils – unleashes upon the viewer the precipitate energy of the evil-averting *apotropaion*. One may ask whether the success of the *Johanneschüssel* in agrarian regions that still maintained contact with deeper, pre-Christian patterns did not lie precisely in the apotropaic feeling of the object. In other words, the *Johanneschüsseln* will have been “charged” with the aforementioned forms of archaic apotropaic energy to a greater or lesser extent depending on the region.

Let us examine the mouth, tongue and throat more closely. The mouth refers to the ingress and egress of our breath. The open mouth evokes John’s final dying breath, the border marked by the *Johanneschüssel*. The mouth is a portal into the dizzying depths of the body. It introduces us to the interiority of the body, which is taboo. Through the mouth, things – including food – disappear, so that it becomes the antechamber of the throat. The mouth, together with the tongue, is one of the organs of speech. Some authors even associated the open mouth of the *Johanneschüssel* with John’s pronouncement ‘Ego sum vox clamantis in deserto’ (*John* 1:22–23).<sup>55</sup>

In some cases the tongue protrudes from the mouth – one might think that this stems purely from a macabre sense of expressionism. But it can also be depicted this way without attempting macabre effects, as on the south-facing outer wall of the west aisle of the Dom of Münster (thirteenth century) [Fig. 17]. The sculpture is composed of several pieces of sandstone. A hand emerges from the wall, carrying a platter which in turn bears a head with a neck. The whole is set against the background of a large rosette aureole. In the south wall of the east aisle, there was an altar dedicated to John the Baptist. This space is still called the St John’s choir. The tongue is considered as the equivalent of the head.<sup>56</sup> This equivalence

<sup>54</sup> Vandenbroeck P., *Azetta. Berber vrouwen en hun kunst* (Ghent–Amsterdam: 2000) 119.

<sup>55</sup> Suckale, *Der Meister* 328.

<sup>56</sup> Chevalier J. – Gheerbrant A., *Dictionnaire des symboles. Mythes, rêves, coutumes, gestes, formes, figures, couleurs, nombres* (1997) 561–562.



Fig. 17. Unknown artist, *John's head* (13th century). Münster, Dom, south-facing outer wall of the west aisle.





Fig. 18. Etruscan, *Medusa* (ca. 500 B.C.). Terracotta. Campania.

is clear in the totem context.<sup>57</sup> The tongue is often kept as a trophy of the killed enemy. It guarantees the transfer of the other's power. The extended tongue is also an *apotropaion*. The forces that repel evil preferably attach themselves to the head, in particular the face. The eyes and mouth maintain the power of protection; Medusa often shows her tongue [Fig. 18].<sup>58</sup>

The tongue is also a topos of the prophet. The tongue joins with the fire of God (*Isaiah* 30:27). The Holy Ghost descended on the apostles in

<sup>57</sup> Gastaut H., *Le crâne. Objet de culte, objet d'art* (Marseille: 1972); Penrose R., *Wonder and Horror of the Human Head. An Anthology* (London: 1953) passim.

<sup>58</sup> This is a phenomenon also noticed at executions; for further development, see: Edgerton S.Y., *Pictures and Punishment. Art and Criminal Prosecution during the Florentine Renaissance* (London: 1985) 126ff.

'cloven tongues like as of fire' (*Acts* 2:3). The tongue, just like the hand, is the revelation of God.<sup>59</sup> The tongue has the power of life and death (*Proverbs* 18:21). The tongue is 'cleft' – indeed, again, a mediator.<sup>60</sup> The tongue is the organ of taste; hence, it distinguishes good and evil.<sup>61</sup> Because the tongue speaks, it also has a judicial connotation. Tongue is speech. Thus, the tongue is also connected to the glossolalia of the orator and the prophet.<sup>62</sup>

As noted earlier, Herodias maliciously pierced the Baptist's tongue with a needle. This legend is thought to date back to the fourth century. The motif became a favorite subject in religious drama.<sup>63</sup> Jerome (347–420) says in his *Apologia contra Rufinum*: 'Herodias in Joannem: quia veritatem non oterant audire, linguam veriloquam discriminali acu confoderunt'.<sup>64</sup> 'Because the one did not want to hear the truth, the tongue (= the truth of the speech) was wronged'. John is the tongue, the voice in the wilderness that was not heard. In other words, the tongue attaches itself to the sense of hearing. Hearing is an extremely primal sense: it is the first and last sense; in principle it precedes speech.<sup>65</sup> After all, hearing is the sense that the fetus first masters in the womb: the fetus hears the mother's voice. It is also said that hearing is the last sense to fall away during the process of dying, and with comatose patients the only sense to remain latent.

At any rate, speech and hearing work together in a knowledge-generating system that precedes the visual-literary epistemology of Plato (429–347 BC).<sup>66</sup> Speech and aural communication belong to oral culture, in which acoustic mimesis – the passing on of values and insights – predominates over written and hence visible laws.<sup>67</sup> Oral culture is a

<sup>59</sup> Glazov G.Y., "The Bridling of the Tongue and the Opening of the Mouth in Biblical Prophecy", *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplementum* 311 (2001) passim.

<sup>60</sup> Benthien C., "Zwiespältige Zungen. Der Kampf um Lust und Macht im oralen Raum", in Benthien C. – Wulf C. (eds.), *Körperteile. Eine kulturelle Anatomie* (Hamburg: 2001) 110–113.

<sup>61</sup> Korsmeyer C., *Making Sense of Taste. Food and Philosophy* (Cornell: 2002) 19–22.

<sup>62</sup> 1 Cor 14:2, 13: 'For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking the mysteries of the Spirit [...] Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret'.

<sup>63</sup> Combs Stuebe, "The Johannisschüssel" 5; Thulin, *Johannes der Täufer*; Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 30iff.

<sup>64</sup> Jerome, *Apologia contra Rufinum*, PL 23, col. 510.

<sup>65</sup> Wulf C., "Das mimetische Ohr", in *Das Ohr als Erkenntnisorgan, Paragrana. Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropologie* 2, 1–2 (1993) 9–15.

<sup>66</sup> Wulf, "Das mimetische Ohr" 9–10: 'Da der Hörsinn rückbezüglich ist, hört sich der Sprechende selbst. Sein Hören folgt seinem Sprechen.'

<sup>67</sup> It is moreover an epistemology that is rooted in magic, such as the reading aloud of spells in order to control nature. According to Christoph Wulf, 'Die Mimesis der Natur

culture of 'intercession,' in which prophets play an important role. For this reason, in certain cultures the tension between speaking and remaining silent is utterly double: it is a tension controlled by the boundaries of taboo.<sup>68</sup> Here we arrive elliptically at the text of the gospel in which the incest taboo is pronounced and judged, and which constitutes the occasion for revenge and death, an intuition that Jerome also formulated in his association of *audire* and *lingua*. And if we witness its effects in drama, insignia and epigraphs, then it appears that precisely these archaic laws of communication were isolated: urging (the voice), dancing (the voiceless that asks to be gazed upon), commanding (the voice), beheading (which leads to absolute voicelessness: taboo).

One could view John the Baptist – the last of the prophets, the voice crying in the wilderness – as the last embodiment of the acoustic system in the anthropology of systems for the generation of knowledge. His decapitation is in this sense a sacrifice made for the sake of seeing God-become-flesh. In this sense, the *Johannesschüssel* is also metaphorically a mediator: a link between the cultural shifts in the hierarchy of the senses.<sup>69</sup> The beheading of John the Baptist silences the cry in the desert – a necessary silence of the *vox* which leaves room for the *logos*. It is moreover fitting that the uterine, fetal character of the sense of hearing is specifically and intensely thematized with John the Baptist when he already recognizes the voice of the new Messiah while still in the womb (*Luke* 1:42).

Returning to the problematics of the *Andachtsbild*, the *Johannesschüssel* also challenges the viewer as a 'sonorous' communication, or more precisely, by the silencing of voice that it represents ('Ego sum vox clamantis in deserto', *John* 1:22–23). To look at the *Johannesschüssel* is to realize that we can no longer hear his voice.<sup>70</sup> Looking "immediately grabs us by the

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vollzieht sich über das "Hören" der menschlichen Stimme durch das "Ohr" der Natur'. See: Wulf, "Das mimetische Ohr" 12.

<sup>68</sup> Hahn A., "Reden und Schweigen", *Askese. Paragrana. Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropologie* 8, 1 (1999) 204–231.

<sup>69</sup> Nordenfalk C., "Les cinq sens dans l'art du Moyen Âge", *Revue de l'art* 34 (1976) 17–28.

<sup>70</sup> The tension between voice and silence is given an unusual form of expression when the *Johannesschüssel* is engraved on bells, as in the Dutch example cited by de Blaauw S., "De klok van Segebodus uit Wittewierum. Bloemhof in Slochteren", *Groninger kerken* 26 (2009) 106–109. It was not unusual for bells to be 'personalized'; they were often given names, like that of Mary or other patron saints. Here, the patron saint John the Baptist is also added to the bell iconographically, which instantiates a metonymy between the bell as embodiment of sound and the *Johannesschüssel* as its being silenced. As dispeller of demons, signal, and guardian of hour and time, the symbolic synthesis of bell and dish could not be stronger.

throat” of the *Johannesschüssel*. The decapitation has reduced the vocal cords, the prophet himself, to an acoustic wilderness.

The throat – *gula* in Latin – in most languages makes use of the sound pattern G-R-G. The word *gorgo* is in fact related to this with derivatives in *Gurgel, gurguli, gurges, gorge*.<sup>71</sup> In Indo-European etymology this phonetic root also means ‘passage’. The throat is a tube, a tunnel, a passage, a transition. On the basis of this connotation the throat also reflects the uterus, or the dynamics of what has been ‘swallowed up’ and can be vomited forth again (*hysteria*).<sup>72</sup> Exorcisms were oriented toward the ‘devouring’ of evil or illness by the *demon-hysteria*.<sup>73</sup> After all, the primary characteristic of the uterus is that it can swell up, can hold or eject considerable quantities of blood. The uterus is seen as a being with tentacles that can spread throughout the entire body, indeed – and not by chance – all the way to the throat.<sup>74</sup>

As a phantasm, G-R-G, or *gorgo*, is thus an entity with the capacity to shrink or swell.<sup>75</sup> The associations between throat, uterus and the spasmodic movements of life itself run deep.<sup>76</sup> In Old Testament tradition it is also the place where life – *nepes* – resides.<sup>77</sup> In this respect it is most telling that *nepes*, a word with a wide semantic range that is often translated as ‘soul,’<sup>78</sup> initially denoted ‘throat,’ the physical locus of the

<sup>71</sup> Root / lemma: g<sup>o</sup>er-1, g<sup>o</sup>er in [<http://indo-european.info/pokorny-etymological-dictionary/index.html>].

<sup>72</sup> See: Kristeva J., *Visions capitales* (Paris: 1998); Schneider L., “Donatello and Caravaggio. The Iconography of Decapitation”, *American Imago* 33 (1976); Veith I., *Hysteria. The History of a Disease* (Chicago: 1965).

<sup>73</sup> Additional examples in: Ritner R.K., “An Uterine Amulet in the Oriental Institute Collection”, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 43, 3 (1984) 209–221, *passim*.

<sup>74</sup> Leyerle B., “Blood is Seed”, *Journal of Religion* 81, 1 (2001) 26–48; Vandenbroeck, *Azetta* 141.

<sup>75</sup> Loo S. van (ed.), *Gorge(l). Oppression and Relief in Art* (Antwerp: 2007) 112.

<sup>76</sup> It should be pointed out that the neck is actually a feminine *topos* of vulnerability, not part of the body of the heroine, but of the victim; Boyarin D., *Dying for God. Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, (Stanford: 1999) 76, note 36: ‘Strictly speaking it is death by piercing or slashing the throat that is marked as “feminine”.’

<sup>77</sup> See: Milgrom J., “Leviticus 1–12: a new translation with introduction and commentary”, *The Anchor Bible* 3A (2000) 1472. Milgrom also explicates that *nepes* was first associated with breath (*ruah*), and only secondly and analogously with blood, the other life-containing organ.

<sup>78</sup> But which ultimately came to denote “life”. See: Brotzman E.R., “Man and the Meaning of Nephesh”, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145, 580 (1988) 400–409; Rousseau V., *Le goût du sang. Croyances et polémiques dans la chrétienté occidentale* (Paris: 2005) 23, contends that in ancient Judaism “soul” was interchangeably used for “life”, but that in Christianity the soul is more specifically conceptualized as distinct from the body, installing a dual human nature.



breath of life.<sup>79</sup> To cut the throat of a victim is fundamentally to cut him off from life.<sup>80</sup> Even today the church of San Giovanni in Venice is called *San Gorgo* by the residents of that neighborhood.<sup>81</sup> The exhibitionism of the *Johanneschüssel* concerns the opening of all possible openings, with the tube of the throat being the most obsessive opening of all. With this G-R-G the *Johanneschüssel* opens the break with life itself, the connecting tunnel that is now cut off. In fact what I am suggesting here is that the exhibitionist drive of the *Johanneschüssel* channels a fascination for the very beginning of life, and hence for the Baptist's life itself.

### 6. *The Phenomenological Tension between Head and Face*

The last of the problematic issues laid out at the beginning of this essay that still remains to be addressed is the phenomenological tension between head and face, platter and veil.

In Indo-European semantics, the root of 'head' and 'skull' is the same as that of dish, pan, recipient.<sup>82</sup> Archetypically speaking, heads and skulls are hollow tools for keeping liquids in a cultic context. Head and platter are equal. The head of St John needs its platter, and vice versa. The relation head-platter is intrinsic. Without the charger, the support, the head is suspended and not 'deposited.' Without the platter, John's beheading would never have become an image. Or rather, without the recipient that doubles the head tautologically – receives it, bears it, relinquishes it – the 'snapshot' of the decollation could not have remained frozen in the fraction of that moment, on the threshold, and the head could not have become the image prototype that stores up within itself the energy of the black and gorgonic. The decapitated head that lies bleeding on the ground, decomposes and is forgotten. The platter is the support that has received the image and presents it plastically as *memoria*. The platter says: 'This has happened'. 'Die Schüssel hat damit die Funktion des Kultbildes, nämlich Medium der Erscheinung (der *imago*) des Heiligen zu

<sup>79</sup> With special thanks to Emma Sidgwick.

<sup>80</sup> Shaw B.D., "Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4 (1996) 273, note 10 and 305.

<sup>81</sup> The kinship of Gorgo with gurgling or guttural sounds is preserved here. But Giorgio, Georgios (Joris) is also a guttural sound in some languages. Remember that both dishes were found by Walo of Sarton in Constantinople.

<sup>82</sup> Root / lemma: (s)kel-1, in <http://www.indoeuropean.nl/index2.html>.

sein'.<sup>83</sup> The skull relic is not a crystallized image; it is an unrepresentable taboo. The platter makes the unbounded abyss of the *Johannesschüssels* constant self-exposure bearable and hence viewable. The skull, by contrast, is a unique, unknowable, unviewable, constantly self-destructing, tragic prototype. The *Johannesschüssel* is an object that shamelessly and hence without mediation makes itself felt by the viewer. Or rather, the *Johannesschüssel* presents itself literally by means of the platter, without the intervention of representation.

When the *Johannesschüssel* also began to appear in pictorial form at the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century, or in relief form like the exemplar in Leuven, the platter bore a 'face' rather than a 'head'. The new medium for the representation of the Baptist's head entailed an even more intense fusion with pictorial elements associated with representations of the face of Christ. This development gradually pried the *Johannesschüssel* loose from its sculptural past and transformed it into a depiction of John's head. The head was given a three-quarter or even a full profile convention. The platter that once formed the key to the *simulacrum* lost its object-like character and became a round frame, a tondo.

In Leuven, the sunken tondo-platter is in turn framed by a lozenge. The edge of the platter thereby becomes part of the image and is framed as such. The platter that became a circle doubled itself in the figure of its opposite: the square or the lozenge. This holds the *Johannesschüssel* firmly in a dynamic between rotation and stability, between performative and permanent, between tactile and beheld, between plastic and pictorial. And as we shall see: between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the *Johannesschüssel* would sink increasingly into 'representation'. Of the once so radical genre of a head on a platter, nothing remains but a safely framed face.

The earliest traces of the production of these painted *tondi*, which inspired around a dozen copies, lead us to the studio of Dirk and Albrecht Bouts in Leuven [Fig. 19].<sup>84</sup> In the pictorial medium, the head of the Baptist loses its tactile directness but gains in macabre illusion. Idol becomes icon. These late-medieval *tondi* show a frontal visage or face in three-quarter

<sup>83</sup> Böhme H., "Die Enthauptung von Johannes dem Täufer", in Geissmar C. – Louis E. (eds.), *Glaube Hoffnung Liebe Tod* (Klagenfurt: 1995) 384.

<sup>84</sup> Smeyers M.-K. (ed.), *Dirk Bouts (ca 1410–1475). Een Vlaams primitiefte Leuven* (Leuven: 1998) 568f.



Fig. 19. Albrecht Bouts, *Johannesschüssel* (late 15th century). Oil on wood, diam. 30,5 cm. Oldenburg, Landesmuseum.

profile like a macabre portrait. The platter is replaced by the wooden bearer itself. Illusionism and *paragone* seem to come to the fore.<sup>85</sup>

We presume that these painted *Johannesschüsseln* were also used as retables and exhibited in public, as can be deduced from the following detail from the 1511 Guttenstetten Altarpiece [Fig. 20]. Erhard Altdorfer shows a small congregation praying before an altar.<sup>86</sup> On the altar is a

<sup>85</sup> On these mergers, see: Koerner J.L., *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago–London 1993) passim.

<sup>86</sup> Barb A.A., "Mensa Sacra. The Round Table and the Holy Grail", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 19 (1956) 61, figs. 10d–10e; Combs Stuebe, "The Johannisschüssel" 6, fig. 3; Benesch O., "Erhard Altdorfer als Maler", *Jahrbuch der preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 57 (1936) 157–168; Wiegand E., "Der Meister des Gutenstettener Altares", *Zeitschrift des deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft* 5 (1938) 125–141, figs. 9–10.





Fig. 20. Erhard Altdorfer, "Veneration of a Johannesschüssel", detail of the Gutenstetten altarpiece (1511). Spruce wood, 106 × 86 cm (each panel). Gutenstetten, parish church. Image © COMBS STUEBE I, "The Johannisschüssel. From Narrative to Reliquary to Andachtsbild", *Marsyas. Studies in the History of Art* 14 (1968–1969) 1–16.



platter with the head of St John. This source demonstrates the para-liturgical function of the late medieval *Johannesschüsseln*. But there is more. The artist has painted the head as a head of flesh and blood, and not as the artifact it must obviously have been. In the severed head, the artist has pushed his imitation of reality to a hyper-realistic extreme, so that it calls forth the actual presentation upon which the represented object is based, and enacted mentally in the religious interaction between spectator and object.<sup>87</sup> Because the head of St John the Baptist was venerated as a prefiguration of the body of Christ, and even *as* the body of Christ, the precursor of Christ therefore preceded Him in sacrifice.

The *vera icon* has always belonged to the world of woven fluidity; the *Johannesschüssel*, to the fixed world of stone. But John's head could not enter entirely into Christ's world without removing its cloak of three-dimensionality. This ultimate step – the exchange of medium – was the necessary sacrifice for a complete *in utroque*. The *Johannesschüssel* would now become the re-presenting (and not presenting) image of death. By the end of the medieval and beginning of the early modern periods, the two men are fused into one single prototype, emphasizing the importance of masculinity sacrificed and salvation by blood in Christian salvation history.

A specific variant of this medium shift and the influence of humanistic pictorial theory is visible in Italy. The tondo by Giovanni Bellini in the Musei Civici of Pesaro (1464–1468, formerly in the sacristy of S. Giovanni in Pesaro) forms the link in this late-medieval phenomenon between northern and southern visual traditions [Fig. 21].<sup>88</sup> Its morphology refers to the northern *tondi*. However, there is no longer any suggestion that the head lies on a platter. Instead, it appears to be suspended in a vacuum. The head is painted with a 'spectacular' *raccourci*, transforming the neck wound into a morbid cynosure.<sup>89</sup> Bellini's work shows the extent to which

<sup>87</sup> Krüger K., "Gesichter ohne Leib. Dispositive der gewesenen Präsenz", in Suthor N. – Fischer-Lichte E. (eds.), *Verklärte Körper. Ästhetiken der Transfiguration* (Munich: 2002) 183–222.

<sup>88</sup> Combs Stuebe, "The Johannesschüssel" 10. The *tondo* was formerly attributed to Mantegna; Paccagnini G., *Andrea Mantegna* (Mantua: 1961) 90–91. It has recently been connected with Marco Zoppo; see also Ghiotto R., *Bellini (I classici dell'arte)*, 38 (Milan: 2004). Bellini may have known the medieval relief of the head of St John on the baptistery of the San Marco in Venice, but the *tondo* does not derive from the relief. San Marco also possessed a skull relic of John the Baptist, though it attracted fewer pilgrims than the Amiens relic.

<sup>89</sup> Ridolfi C., *Le Maraviglie dell'Arte* (Venice: 1648) 40–41, tells the anecdote of a sultan who saw a *Johannesschüssel* painted by his brother Gentile and complained to the artist about the incorrect anatomy of the severed neck. To press home his point, he ordered the beheading of a slave and showed the result to the artist.



Fig. 21. Giovanni Bellini, *Testa di San Giovanni* (between 1464–1468). Tempera on wood, diam. 28 cm. Pesaro, San Giovanni, sacristia.

this subject becomes a focus of the quintessence of painterly possibilities, and how this isolated head thereby becomes the *Andachtsbild* of pictorial illusionism, the ultimate paragon of decollation. In the sobering features of the agonies of death and the emphasis on the neck, the *tondo* links up with the Medusa genre.<sup>90</sup> And after all, did we not consider the very essence of the *Johannesschüssel* to be the image of abyss and absorption?

<sup>90</sup> Karakostas D., *La figure mythique de Méduse dans la littérature européenne* (diss. Université Panthéon-Sorbonne 2002); Huot S., "The Medusa Interpolation in the Romance of the Rose. Mythographic Program and Ovidian Intertext", *Speculum* 62 (1987) 865–877; Stafford B.M., "Medusa or the Physiognomy of the Earth. Humbert de Superville's Cosmological Aesthetics", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 35 (1972) 308–338; Wilk S.R., *Medusa. Solving the Mystery of the Gorgon* (Oxford: 2000).

We can lose ourselves shamelessly in its dark openings. Does this visual penetration not precisely mirror the impact of the *apotropaion*? Is not this throat and open mouth with lolling tongue a remembrance of ancient Medusa?

Julia Kristeva calls the Medusa myth the archetype of the assumption of form and matter, as incarnation indeed.<sup>91</sup> In fact, the early Renaissance reinvents the *Johanneschüssel* on the back of the Medusa archetype,<sup>92</sup> making it the essence of painting and art in general: the very birth of the image as powerful gaze. Or as Christiane Kruse has pointed out: ‘Der Kopf der Gorgo ist immer zweidimensional und frontal, eine Oberfläche ohne Profil und Volumen, er ist, wie die Verstorbenen in der Unterwelt, ein Schatten (eidolon), nicht tastbar und ohne Substanz’.<sup>93</sup> In that sense, the *Johanneschüssel tondo* touches on the matter of “mediality” separating the medieval and early modern periods in the most fundamental way.

### Coda

In an early sixteenth-century drawing by Guercino, which depicts angels worshipping Veronica’s *sudarium*, we see a peculiar “iconogenetic” resonance between John and Christ [Fig. 22].<sup>94</sup> Below the *vera icon*, shrouded in shadow on a wooden table, lies the head of the Baptist on a platter. The head is like a black ink stain, formless, erased and melting into its own medium of shadow, in order that the true face may appear, made visible in the medium of the sharp line, of circumscription. After making a lengthy progress from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, the meaning of the bond between the *Johanneschüssel* and the Veronica has culminated in the waxing and waning of visibility itself. The word made flesh, the face, must increase, but the voice, the head, must dec(r)ease. The head on a platter turns out to be a fading object, an image that appeals to the sense

<sup>91</sup> Kristeva, *Visions capitales* 40.

<sup>92</sup> This intercultural and ethnographic-anthropological angle was developed in my article “The Head on a Plate. John the Baptist and the Image of the Precursor and the Mediator”, *The Annual of the Antwerp Royal Museum* (2006) 9–41. See also: Marin L., *Détruire la peinture* (Paris: 1977) 139–199.

<sup>93</sup> Kruse C., *Wozu Menschen malen. Historische Begründungen eines Bildmediums* (Munich: 2003) 397.

<sup>94</sup> Princeton University, Art Museum; Combs Stuebe, “The Johannisschüssel” 11, fig. 10; Wolf G., “Teller und Tuch, Haupt und Gesicht”, in Geissmar C. – Louis E. (eds.), *Glaube Hoffnung Liebe Tod* (Vienna: 1998) 397–398.



Fig. 22. Guercino, *Vera icon and Johannesschüssel* (between 1591–1666). Oil on copper, 28,5 × 24 cm. Princeton, Princeton University Art Museum.

of hearing. The head on a platter is an ephemeral echo that will soon transform itself, in the persistence of sight, into a face on a veil.

In this article, I proposed to regard the *Johannesschüssel* as an *Andachtsbild*, as the gaze of death. This interpretation of the *Johannesschüssel* as the image at the threshold, at the gate, as both historical and cosmological (as solstice), has implications for the relationship between image and gaze as well as for artistic theory. Metaphorically speaking, the *Johannesschüssel* relates to the archetypal idiom in which images were unmediated and the impact of figurative art was believed to be so great that it could kill (Medusa). It has not yet reached this countenance of the incarnation – visibility – but it is already removed from the all-destructive face, which is consequently forbidden by law – invisibility. The extinguished iris is freed



from the fatal impact of the figurative and is, *at the same time*, not yet that first living gaze of the incarnated face. This zero point on the threshold, this *Mittlerfunktion*, is where the *Johanneschüssel* rests. On account of this function and significance, the head of the Baptist resides in *rigor mortis*, but simultaneously promises new life in the *vera icon*.

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