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VOICES FROM ALTARPIECES: MAKING SENSE OF THE SACRED[1]

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"The meaning of all things that are what they are, not by nature but because they have been created either by God or by man, depends on purpose".

Karl Lőwith, Meaning in History

Abstract: The article is a cultural-philosophical response to Ivan Gerát's *Legendary Scenes* and his art history interpretation of the function of Slovak hagiographic pictorial art of the Late Middle Ages. The thrust is on paintings of Christian ethical extremism, reflected in the principle of *imitatio Christi.* It led to the deaths of martyrs and saints in the name of the Faith. The preponderance of brutal scenes involving the tortured human body in this period art is examined in detail and it is suggested that these portrayals are disincentives that put off the mass culture beholder. The contextualist art history method employed in Gerát's book is gradually explored, along with its potential to transform the uninterested postmodern beholder into an intelligent beholder and art tourist. Attention is paid to the educational and national branding aspects of *Legendary Scenes*.

Key words: Ivan Gerát; Hagiographical pictorial art; Slovakia's altarpieces; Art-historical interpretation; Art-cultural tourism.

Painting in blood

Your attention will be caught the very moment you catch a glimpse of the book's front cover. You are confronted with the image of a half-naked woman. She is fastened onto a wooden frame, her hands in the crucifixion position and her head crowned. The victim has company: her coarse-faced tormentors with their hideous contraptions—large garden

[1] The article has been prompted by Professor Ivan Gerát's study of art history (Gerát, 2014) and the ensuing discussions it provoked, including those at the Bratislava Liberal Arts College (BISLA), hosted by the Vice-Rector, Professor František Novosád, Slovakia's prominent Professor of history of philosophy. This article continues that debate.

shears. For a change, this horticultural tool is being misused: the men are, in fact, gouging out the woman's breasts; the shears have been turned into instruments of passion; the blood streams out of her wounds. Three more men—their fine attire suggesting individuals of superior social ranking – are in attendance. Not one of the latter, however, seems to show any moral qualms about the ethically questionable spectacle. What is the uninitiated to think of the scene? Is it an illumination to Dante's Inferno? A document of a grim fit of sado-erotic indulgence? Surely, it could have served as a prototype for Pascal Laugier's 2009 TorturePorn film production *Martyrs*. If you venture to turn the pages of this sumptuously illustrated volume, more mind-boggling scenes await, but the genre becomes clearer. The book, *Legendary Scenes*, is in fact a scholarly monograph on medieval panel painting, by Ivan Gerát, Slovakia's foremost Professor of Art History, an authority on medieval visual art. The humanistic mission of the book is nothing but laudable: to bring back from obscurity the richly embroidered tapestry of symbolic meanings encountered in medieval panel painting. A medium primarily used to portray the exemplary lives of Christian saints and martyrs.

This mission can only be achieved, and here Gerát introduces a caveat, once we "correct" the handicap of historical detachment and adopt "a more appropriate counterbalance to medieval superstition" than mere condescension or downright mockery (Gerát, 2014, p. 16). Reconstructing the past should not become either construction or revision. Given the "oddity" of the subject, it should be explored in an air of preservation and respect, "exercised judiciously so as not to induce scepticism or a cynical approach to the stories which were essentially intended to be about spiritual rather than empirical truth" (Gerát, 2014, p. 16). On a lighter note – and acknowledging "the father of modern history" Leopold von Ranke—when dealing with history, one has to have the guts not to be shocked at what one finds out ...

Creating the sacred

Legendary Scenes is about the medium of panel painting in the Late Middle Ages, which the author has narrowed down to an examination of artefacts produced in the northern regions of the former Kingdom of Hungary (now Slovakia). The hagiographical pictorial narratives of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, whilst naturally echoing the early Christian and Byzantine tradition, were supposed to meet more criteria than simply the erstwhile *non humana manus factum* (an insight elaborated in staggering detail and with incision by Hans Belting in his synoptic exploration of the icon (Belting, 1996). The iconomachy officially over (despite the debate never having reached a definitive conclusion, due to the absence of biblical grounds for such images), the Church proceeded cautiously in its pursuit of more lavish church decoration. The newly mastered medium of panel painting seemed to answer the Church's various new ideological needs. In the vivid pictorial programmes, the reader learns from the "Introduction" that the altars displayed episodes in the lives of the saints and martyrs, a glorious cohort of fervent Christian believers, consecrated to God. Ill-treated and persecuted by the imperial Pagan authorities, these individuals from early Christianity met violent ends in the name of the Christian faith. Gerát fleshes out the historical background before giving a general interpretation of the images: such Christian "souls on fire" furnished

for the contemporary congregations of the faithful role models compatible with the needs of the community. Referencing to František Novosád, any society will define itself through its ideals and ideas of what "the right person" should be. In promoting and asserting a model, not only does society rely on the model's "spontaneous" appeal, but "brings institutional pressure to bear in order to assert the model" (Novosád, 2016a, pp.157-158). In the medieval period, it was the Christian Church that shouldered the task of sculpting people – into god-fearing, ascetic, and disciplined individuals—in order to secure control over the population and to train people for the beginnings of what would become capitalism. Images on altarpieces exhorting the faithful used to be part and parcel of such "grooming."

"Dark medieval stuff"

The pictorial narratives from the Middle Ages that sought to portray the creeds and deeds of the saints and martyrs fail to meet the commonplace expectations mass culture consumers have of art. What has precipitated this alienation? Firstly, the vital links with the Hellenistic and Byzantine tradition were broken after the fall of Rome, and the visual arts had almost become extinct in pre-Carolingian Europe, consequently the deterioration in art skills meant that figural representations were often little more than caricatures. Then there is the subject-matter itself, which seems quite baffling (we need only consider the embarrassing iconography showing venerable haloed and bearded saints—either wriggling and writhing ecstatically or looking dumbstruck and stupefied). Here we can reiterate a further worry: the dominance of atrocious scenes of the subversion of human body in panels intended for viewing at *loci sancta*. Not entirely unsurprisingly, the beholder is forced to ponder the rationale for this over-representation of cruelty. These medieval hagiographical depictions *are not* easy on the eye. Viewers find themselves exposed to depictions of humans hanging upside down on wooden frames, broken across a wheel, roasted on a gridiron, chopped up, or crucified. How can one's mind cope with this gory naturalism, the vomit-inducing phenomenology of severed heads or a pair of gouged out eyes staring at you from a serving dish?

Alain de Botton is not one to shy away from openly talking about this predicament, incorporating it into a broader perspective. He asserts that one of the pervasive, yet silenced, features of our relationship with "serious" art is the reality that an "uncomfortable proportion of the world's art collections" can come across as a bit scary, boring, "alien and repulsive" (Botton, 2013, p. 50). Hagiographic scenes of the tortured human body no doubt fall into this disfavoured category of "dark medieval stuff." Further, we propose that among the disincentives which make hagiographical pictorial legends "foreign" is that they are rooted in that period of history popularly perceived of as altogether "dark." The Age of Faith would later come to be associated with the oppressive dominance of the Church and crusading Christianity, a dogma viewed through Nietzsche's lens, that is to say, as a way of entering heaven through poverty, as a martyrist apology, a paean to suffering (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 33). Few, even in learned circles, have been quick to discern that the Dark Ages were peppered with a number of renascences (Erwin Panofsky), surges of monastic spirituality and scholarship, ideas and insights, and wondrous tangible culture that is customarily credited to Modernity.

Imitatio Christi

Yet another factor that has demoted hagiographic depictions in the eyes of subsequent generations was the chasm wrought by the advent of Renaissance humanism, notably in the way it radically altered the view of man and the mundane world, for good. This rift is chiefly responsible for making the medieval mindset and products of medieval imagination impregnable to generations of modern and postmodern progeny. The intellectual and humanistic triumph of Gerát's book is the way in which it succeeds in transforming the religiously illiterate reader into a discriminating beholder. By way of example, Gerát recites the reasons for the gory predilection of hagiographic pictorial art so as to render—through cognitive surplus—postmodern beholders better preservers of their own past. He suggests that the scenes of the inconceivable suffering of human flesh provided "refulgent examples of sanctity," for medieval religious consciousness, intended to foment empathy and catharsis in the viewer; "martyrdom was an example of overcoming death, the culmination of Christian life," and the highest form of *imitatio Christi* in the flight from the ordinary and banal. *The Golden Legend*, an authoritative proto-text of pictorial narratives, cites a testimony, Gerát dramatizes his point, to the effect that St. Peter rejoiced greatly when he saw his wife being led to her execution (Gerát, 2014, p. 267); hence, on her way to the eternal kingdom. The saints were assessed against the inimitable example of Christ, while the faithful were in turn inspired by the passion of the saints' martyrdom.

Gerát's art history interpretation method succeeds because of his keen awareness of the political instrumentality of the religious art of the era. The values deemed by the Church to be beneficial for cementing the community and for strengthening the Church's grip on it were painstakingly inculcated through the meticulously designed and carefully orchestrated synergy of distinct, yet complementary "symbolic forms." Gerát's monograph offers the reader a panorama of the ritualized medieval world of extreme piety, instilled through unflagging repetition and reinforcement. The saints' life stories were commemorated on their respective feast days throughout the liturgical year; relevant panels were positioned on the altarpiece to foster involvement and integration in the ongoing liturgical activity; sermons and liturgical texts were used to explain the images; and liturgical music and ritual actions contributed to the atmosphere, conducive of the intended perception of the prescribed pictorial narratives. Overall, one comes to realize that Christian ethical extremism and practices of penitential discipline were hammered home through "Scripture-drenching" *Repetitio est mater studiorum.*[2]

[2] In fairness to history, when explaining the outgoing Paganism following the conversion of Emperor Constantine, Edward Gibbon is sympathetic to the Pagans who "credulously received the fables of Ovid and obstinately rejected the miracles of the Gospel" (Gibbon, 2000, p. 352). Paganism was encouraged through custom rather than argument and public drill (and lots of fire-and-brimstone sermons, one might add).

Eros in the chapel

The book is not without a Freudian twist to it; once Gerát sets out to clear the hagiographical depictions of human nudity of the charge of evoking an inappropriate, eroticised response. He does not shy away from tackling the ticklish phenomenon. Certain scholars, Gerát concedes, hold that the depictions of a tortured naked male or female body could have elicited a lascivious response in the minds of medieval viewers. Yet he cites a modernist bias, resolutely rejecting radical accusations of "religious pornography" or "sado-erotic spectacles" on the basis that they lack substance. Quite a number of the historical instances of erotically enticing religious art, one may retort, considerably taint the chaste historical record promoted by Gerát. We need only recall the biblical story of the Elders stealing a peep at Susanna or the juicy language of *The Song of Songs.*[3] Overall, Eros-related images within the pale of religious art aroused controversy in that era. It is not just a postmodern response: quite a few critics objected to Bernini's *Teresa* on moral grounds at the time. It would be amiss not to mention Egon Schiele's satire on this dilemma, *Cardinal and Nun,* the composition of which was inspired by Klimt's *Kiss* (Gaillemin, 2006, p. 82).

Eulogy of Gerát's method

Why should the postmoderns even wish to understand the niceties of such a demanding art medium? De Botton proves, once more, instrumental:

> Art that starts by seeming alien to us is valuable because it presents us with ideas and attitudes that are not readily available in our familiar environments, and that we will need in order to accede to a full engagement with our humanity. (Botton, 2014, p. 58)

Gerát's art history interpretation makes a convincing case that this hugely significant part of European heritage can be reclaimed, for our narcissistic consumerist times. Ranke's well-worn aphorism tells us that every historical epoch is "immediate to God" and its value by no means depends on how it has impacted the future. Gerát's research confers honour on panel painting (*tabula*) as a medieval invention *par excellence*, a blend of laboriously acquired craftsmanship and artistic imagination aflame with the faith. The veneration of the behavioral model "gave people the chance to get in touch with the ideal in their own lives, offering them an orientation point beyond the horizon of what was possible in reality, and its existence assured them that human endeavor should have meaning" (Gerát, 2014, p. 296). By no means is Gerát's study a quixotic academic extravaganza. The vivid glimpses of the medieval world and of the hagiographical pictorial legends give the beholder a sense of the

[3] Bernini's sculptural rendition of the Carmelite nun and mystic St. Teresa of Avila steals the show: "The flung back face of a woman asleep, or perhaps she has already died of pleasure" is one summary of its popular perception (Kristeva, 2015, p. 3). The scene in the chapel shows the transverberation or "piercing" of Teresa heart by an angelic spear, a sign of mystical union with the godhead. The art historian Franco Mormando admits that the technically dazzling sculpture is still one of the most admired artworks. Yet, he is quick to add that the reason for the popularity of Bernini's *Teresa in Ecstasy* is not merely religious, but has a lot to do with sex. (Mormando, 2011, p.161).

historical. Gerát's writing feels beautifully Burckhardtian in its explicit commitment to "how it was for *them*" and to new attempts at appropriating and reconstructing the past—unless, to paraphrase Burckhardt, people choose to forget it and lose their own existence. Instructed by the book, the beholder not only becomes capable of hearing "the sound and the fury" of the tempestuous past, but also learns to discern the voices coming from the altarpiece as they urge us today from the "spring" of Modernity. There is a strong historical case for suggesting that whatever value we still derive from life originated in those "mad" medieval times.

Regardless, it is a fact of life that the semiotic anchorage of medieval art symbolism is discouragingly overtaxing, and the triumphant mass culture is biased against anything that is not immediately satisfying. Gerát's emphasis is on conveying to condescending postmoderns the constructive might of the imagination of medieval artists, who, "on a flat surface and with some paint", managed to illuminate the mystique of the world created by the Word and express the inexpressible, something at which the desperate would-be St. Augustine marvels in his *Confessions*: "How there could be such a thing as a spiritual substance?" (Augustine, 2014, Book VI, 245). He reiterated his perplexity in the ensuing Books: "But as to the mystery encapsulated in the Word made flesh, I could not even begin to imagine it" (Augustine, 2004, Book VII, p. 343).

The beholder's share

Gerát's civic ambition in the book is to render hagiographic pictorial legends readable for the postmodern public as artworks in the Heideggerian sense: "To work-being there belongs the setting up of a world" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 171), and the world is "the self-opening openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the history of a historical people" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 172). What then are the survival prospects of hagiographic panels and "serious" art as works of art, not just mere objects of the art world and art trade? Above all, this is about educating the keepers—scholars and lay public alike, and Gerát's volume is a palpable example of how to go about that. With a good eye for historiography and primary sources, Gerát avoids the Procrustean bed of rigid models. Behind the solution of any one semiotic puzzle, the reader can smell skilled archival labour. An artwork is not just an isolated artistic outcome, but the product of a particular historical imagination and circumstance. To illuminate, Piero della Francesca's *The Baptism of Christ*, despite being about a key event in the history and theology of salvation that occurred on the River Jordan, treats the scene as if it had taken place in the upper Tiber valley, in the vicinity of his native town of Sansepolcro, at the foot of the mountain of Montevicchi (Banker, 2014, p. 14). Gerát's volume thus presents the reader with a unique occasion to fully comprehend the hagiographical pictorial legends executed in the wood panel medium—a notoriously opaque cosmos of elusive allusions and Protean symbolic meanings.

In search of the sacred

We now come closer to Slovakia, and her saints and altars. As one reads the monograph and all the notes alongside the multi-coloured plates, it is increasingly evident that quite a number of the saints and martyrs, whose depictions used to grace altars in fifteenth

century Slovakia, have migrated to neighbouring Hungary. Besides the more obscure and intractable methods of expatriation, hundreds of carefully selected unique masterpieces were "borrowed"—to a letter disjointed from Slovak altars—for the magnificent celebrations of the one thousandth anniversary of Hungarian statehood. They have never been returned. The sorry reality notwithstanding, there are still opportunities aplenty, as you will learn from the monograph, to visit aesthetically and otherwise fulfilling destinations all over Slovakia. You might choose to go to places where miracles used to be wrought: to Levoča, where the Altar of St. Nicholas includes a picture of Margrave Leopold, the later saint and patron of Austria, miraculously reacquiring his wife's veil; to Košice—to see the emotional parting of future saint Elisabeth from her husband and the ensuing melancholy of her premature widowhood as portrayed on the High Altar in Košice Cathedral; or to Sabinov—to receive a lecture on Christian humility while, tutored by the book's exposition, contemplating the scene of *Emperor Heraclius Bringing the Cross back to Jerusalem – gate closed*, on the Altar of the Holy Cross. Besides its many academic assets, Gerát's monograph is a formidable promotional campaign for Slovakia's medieval religious art. As such, the book will whet the appetite for testing out one's newly gleaned knowledge *in-situ*, thus raising issues concerning the postmodern travel bug and art and culture tourism. A sterile tour of cathedrals, palaces, galleries, and museums leaves one unchanged rather than elevated. From their travels, Botton suggests, the discerning tourist should seek knowledge for life, for the appreciation and better enjoyment of everydayness. Engaging with art is not all about becoming entranced or enthused. Artistic representations of even unexciting household objects of solid reality may well make the attentive viewer perceive the practical beauty of everyday artefacts, and admire their survival serviceability and ingenuity.

Farewell to art(s)

As one goes through *Legendary Scenes* (which clearly demonstrates how much reflection, rather than emotion, is involved in our engagement with art), the question begs itself as to whether the role of art in our lives has shrunk. An important clue is to be found in Hegel's aesthetics. In the opening passages of his *Lectures on Aesthetics,* the consummate philosopher and lover of art Hegel worded his famous autumnal prophesy. Art, he argued, "in its highest vocation" remains for humankind a "bygone matter", for it has "transformed into our ideas instead of maintaining their earlier necessity in reality. "What is he getting at in this thesis?" The point Hegel is making is not that people will give up "dabbling in art", but that they will not experience it "in fear and trembling," as it were, or, as Heidegger would say, as truth of their historical existence, for art's existential urgency and ecstasy as a survival-prompted immune system (Sloterdijk) is beyond recovery. Thought and reflection have spread their sobering wet blanket on the fiery imagination of earlier people. Erik R. Kandel's none other than scintillating neuro-scientific quest to understand the unconscious in art confirms rather than refutes the proposition. The Nobel neuroscientist ventures the scientistic claim that reductionism and the biology of the brain "in no way deny the richness and complexity of human perception or lessen our appreciation and enjoyment of the shape, colour, and emotion of human faces and bodies" (Kandel, 2012, *xvii*).

Promethean brood

Back to the meat of our intellectual concern. Hagiographical images and legendary scenes, even those still *in-situ*, have little future in terms of attracting queues. Heidegger's prognosis for the Greek temple at Pestum could be aimed at them: "World-withdrawal and world decay can never be undone. The works are no longer the works they were" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 167). And yet. In rationally appreciating past modes of and reasons for *escapism* from the world (Oswald Spengler attributes this impulse towards transcendence of the *status quo* to the Faustian-Promethean essence of the Westerner), Gerát's treatment of the heroic sanctity opens our eyes to the current human condition of *inescapable* immersion in the being-in-the world.[4] No top-down globalization can ever deliver this ethically binding message. It is only reasonable to emphatically concur with Botton that art

> peels away our shell, and saves us from our spoilt, habitual disregard for what is around us. We recover our sensitivity, look at the old in new ways. We are prevented from assuming that novelty and glamour are the only solutions." (Botton, 2013, p. 65)

Gerát's incisive and nuanced inquiry into the phenomenology and iconology of the rich tapestry of medieval culture, religiosity, and artistic imagination is neither a eulogy nor a swansong of all things medieval. It makes for a delectable specimen of a methodically well-balanced art history discourse, complete with sociological assumptions, penetrating psycho-analytical observations, and enlivening cultural-anthropological excursions. It is, in fact, a dialogue of postmodernity with its own roots. *Legendary Scenes*—through the unwritten law of never ending semiosis (Lotman, 2004)—may be viewed as immortalizing those who, in their specific "end times," sought to transcend the mediocre, to overcome presence, and challenge the signpost of the possible. This, perhaps, constitutes the core of the Christian, ever Faustian, and ethos of "vertical tension" (Sloterdijk) which the Christians of the great aplomb bequeathed to further generations. This transcending spirit is epitomized not only by such souls ablaze as were Ignatius Loyola, but also Joanna d'Arc, the Raven King Matthias Corvinus, Peter the Great, Otto von Bismarck, Nicola Tesla, Rachel Carson, or Alexander Csoma de Kőrős.[5] One cannot dream of exhausting the rich heteroglossia of this "altarpiece", but, if properly tutored, one can learn to make out individual voices and their echoes.

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[4] One of Damien Hirst's (he dominated the art scene in the UK at the end of the 20th century) signature installations is titled *The Acquired Inability to Escape*. The clinical aesthetics of an office table and chair enclosed in a glass vitrine, with further symbols of entrapment and absence of freedom, are symbolic of a sealed existence under the conditions of a technological treadmill.

[5] For his self-sacrificial contribution to the opening up of Tibetan studies to Western scholars and to research into Buddhism, this exceptional Hungarian, initially an employee of the East India Company's library of the Asiatic Society, was officially recognized by Taisho University in Japan as a Bodhisattva—a Buddhist saint and awakener. Sometimes with a British stipend, sometimes without resources, for years "toiling in the cold of the Himalayas, "whole months without fire, light or the ground to sleep on," Csoma performed a Herculean pioneering scientific labour (Lopez, 2013, pp. 181-184).

By way of adding the finishing touches, one might wish to compliment the author of this nourishing piece of medieval social art history for making "the dark medieval stuff" sparkle with an explosion of pigments and beckon the ever sceptical postmoderns with its phenomenological abundance and spiritual levitation. The paintwork of the altars, decked out with images of the "heroes of faith," carries existential meanings, which are infinitely more fundamental than any dogmatic truths and commandments. Christian symbolism is our common property, and, like pop culture, something we are exposed to daily (Detwailer & Taylor, 2003). The "unholy" appropriations can be found all around—Madonna's stage name and her hit "Like a Prayer", to begin with. When the digital pioneer Steve Jobs, the king of "thought that spontaneously indulges in the game of possibilities" (Novosád, 2016b, p. 86) died, a periodical portrayed the business genius in Byzantine-style as a Christian saint, complete with a halo and the famous Apple logo. The fact that Steve Jobs had practised Buddhism was insubstantial ("Oh what times! Oh what customs!" might one echo Cicero's exclamation). Of true significance, however, was Job's saintly transcendence of the ordinary, his over-human standards, his unstoppable daring to create a new order. After all, it might not be all that irrational to share in Kendal's optimism and start believing that neuroscientific insights into the processes of visual perception and emotional response may well stimulate a new discourse on art, unheard-of art formats and, not unlikely, even new expressions of artistic creativity.

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