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Social rhetoric in the iconography of saint Nicholas

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SOCIAL RHETORIC IN THE ICONOGRAPHY OF SAINT NICHOLAS

Key words: social rhetoric, Saint Nicholas, Santa Claus, Tartu semiotics, bodily hexis

Introduction

The paper offers an exploration into some of the aspects of posthumous journey of Saint Nicholas through the perspective of social rhetoric. The iconosphere behind the persona of the Bishop of Myra is particularly interesting because Saint Nicholas has been present in European culture since at least 6th century and his representations changed along with the cultural codes. The choice of particular codes and the elimination of others is culturally relevant and this is the main focus of the paper. Particular iconographic canons are assumed to be a kind of pragmatic presuppositions, which “orient to cultural knowledge of the conventions which organize certain activities (including illocutionary acts) and often accompany conventional presuppositions” [Jalbert 1994:133]. Citing also Luckmann, “[a] world-view maps the way which an organism of our species is to take in order to become a part of the meaningful social and natural cosmos, to become genuinely human in a particular historical form” [Luckmann 2003: 276].

The theoretical framework assumes the structural architecture of cultural production:

Fields of cultural production (literary, artistic, etc.) are also structured by sets of possible positions within them. In fact, fields are, to a large extent, according to Bourdieu’s scheme, constituted precisely by struggles over these positions, which often take the form of a battle between established producers, institutions and styles, and heretical newcomers [Hesmondhalgh 2006: 215f].

In this connection, the theoretical support for the discussion comes also from Lotman's study of artistic texts: in creating and perceiving works of art, the man transmits, receives and conserves a particular piece of artistic information, inseparable from the structural particularities of artistic texts, in the same way as a thought is inseparable from the material structure of the brain [Lotman 1973: 53]¹. More specifically,

Анализ знакового механизма культуры убеждает нас, что культура в своем внутреннем движении постоянно и целенаправленно умножает механизмы, затрудняющие процесс передачи сообщений [...]. Чем ограниченнее опыт того или иного коллектива, тем существеннее для него наличие различных кодов, разнотипных каналов связи и циркуляции по ним различных сообщений [...]. Картина усложняется благодаря тому, что тексты и коды в системе культуры имеют тенденцию меняться рангами, получая всеобщность или сжимаясь до строго индивидуальной понятности [Лотман 2002: 55f].

“Rhetoric” is an important concept for my analysis of the iconography of Saint Nicholas. As stated by Shotter,

traditionally, rhetoric was concerned with the giving of *good* reasons to others in justification of one's actions in these circumstances in which any kind of absolute certainty is impossible [Shotter 1993: 46].

The perspective adopted in this paper follows Shotter's theory of social accountability, where the teleology of the rhetoric dimension was assumed to “move” people, thus to coordinate social action [Shotter 1993: 43]. As such, the rhetoric is an inventory of codified solutions, the persuasion of which redundantly reinforces the underlying code [Eco 1996: 103]. Accordingly, both the religious paintings of Saint Nicholas and the secular representations of Santa would involve the rhetorical plane: both the three children in bath and the bag of gifts would be then rhetorical figures, cooperating in the dialectics of the visual sign and the system of the expectations of the addressee (Fig. 1a, 1b).

In the case of religious paintings, the rhetoric would however be more of a heuristic type, presenting syntagmas of a fixed iconographic value. In other words, particular figurative message would be connoted through received conventions [cf. Panofsky 1971]. On the other hand, consumerist rhetoric would be grounded on the desire to take the addressee by surprise. This technique would surface as the breaking of conventions but, as Eco pointed out [1969: 104f], the movement is only illusory because the addressee is persuaded to do things they do habitually anyway (buy and consume). Whenever the commercial visual text uses the signs of received iconographic value, it is done to correlate through connotation rhetoric with the rhetoric repertoire accepted by a given community.

¹ For Lotman, art is a secondary modeling system (secondary language) and a work of art is a text in this language [Lotman 1973: 37].

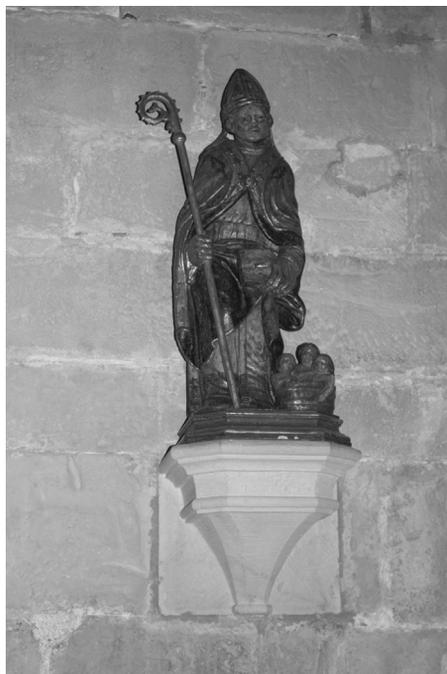
a**b**

Fig. 1a. The sculpture of St. Nicholas in the cathedral of the monastery in Poblet (Spain). **Fig. 1b.** Gregorio de'Ferrari (1647–1726). St Nicholas of Bari. Exhibited in the Art museum in Sevilla (Spain). Source: author

1. Saint Nicholas of Myra: The Wonderworker

Nicholas was a bishop of Myra (Turkey, at present Demre) in the 4th century. Possibly born in 270 a.d., he died between 345–362². He was persecuted by Diocletian. Saint Gregory I The Great recalls that St. Nicholas was captured, put to prison and released only in 313 by the force of Milan edict [Pessel 2001: 49]. The bishop of

² This study extends my previous research on the continuity of the semiotic modeling systems in a case study of the iconography of Saint Nicholas [cf. Haładewicz-Grzelak 2009], where I concentrated on the syntactic aspects of the iconography of the Bishop of Myra (the same reference for the detailed description of the database of representations). The scholarship on Saint Nicholas is substantial. The elaborations fall into two main categories: research on Saint Nicholas and on Santa. For an exhaustive bibliography on Saint Nicholas the reader is referred to e.g. Longosz [2000]; Brock [1972]; Uspienski [1985]. Uspienski provides an in-depth study of relations between the folk cult of Saint Nicholas and earlier primitive Slavic mythology. Taylor [1982], meanwhile, offers an informed sociopragmatic study of Gentile de Fabriano's painting of Saint Nicholas providing the dowries as a reflection of societal axiology. Brock [1972] is the reference for some aspects of the Dutch influence on the persona of the Bishop and the impact of the reformation on the social status of the saint. The American transformation was reported in e.g. Brock [1972] and in the numerous and informed sources on the webpage of Saint Nicolas Centre.

Myra also appears on the list of the participants of the Council of Niceae (325 a.d.). The oldest references to the Bishop of Myra date back to the 6th century but the earliest depiction of St. Nicholas's life is assumed to be that authored by the patriarch Methodius in the 9th century [Gusiev, Woznienskijskij 1999, in: Topp 2004: 138]. The Latin translation of this work by Ian, a Neapolitan deacon, contributed to the popularization of the cult of Saint Nicholas in the western world. The version of St. Nicholas's life published in Slavic languages dates to the beginning of the 10th century, a compilation of earlier Greek tales and hagiographies edited by Simeon Metafrastes on the request of Cesar Constantine VII Porfirogeneta [Gusiev, Woznienskijskij 1999, in: Topp 2004: 138].

The first signs of the worship of Saint Nicholas date from the 6th century in Myra and Constantinople. By the 9th century there were already a few churches consecrated to Saint Nicholas in Rome [Fros, Sowa 2000: 417f] and, by the end of 10th century in Germany, supported by Queen Teofano. On 9th May 1087 Nicholas's relics were moved from Turkey to Bari (Italy). In 1089 Pope Urban II personally consecrated Saint Nicholas's tomb [Pessel 2001: 47]. Soon the cult caught on in Europe and Russia, in particular, to the extent that Saint Nicholas became its official patron saint. In 1969 Pope Paul VI officially denigrated the bishop of Myra, erasing him from the liturgical calendar of saints [Pessel 2001: 49], and in the light of the canonical law, Saint Nicholas is no longer a saint.

Hagiographic medieval accounts and apocrypha have often been compared to a kind of entertainment literature, catering for the craving for fantasy and curiosity [Plezia 1955, in: Topp 2004: 140]. The life of the Bishop of Myra was undoubtedly very inspiring for the myth-mongrels. Nicholas is said to have had wealthy parents who left him a lot of money and he lived with his uncle (a priest). For the present research the most pertinent are the following legends: the story of freeing three officers who were unjustly imprisoned, the story of three poor maidens who were saved from prostitution (they got married using money in the form of three golden balls provided by the saint) and the tale of three youngsters saved from the death sentence by his personal intervention in Constantinople. Nicholas of Bari is also believed to have saved sailors from the death in rough seas with his prayer and to have raised from death three children, who had been chopped up and put into a marinade by a villainous butcher³. A recurring apocryphal theme is the fight with pagan idols – chasing demons out of trees and out of a source.

The cult of saints is one of the crucial elements of the paschal mystery [Nowak 2002: 8]. In the catholic faith, in many ways the saints supplement the mystery of Christ: they are considered to be the manifestation of his presence and the authentic witnesses of the evangelic truth [Nadolski, in: Nowak 2002: 8]. In the Orthodox Church there exists furthermore the worship of saints "present" in icons. This is expressed in the special collection of icons (iconostas), placed near the altar. There is

³ We might mention here the other St. Nicholas (Sionites) which was also a wonderworker saint traditionally conflated with St. Nicholas of Myra [see also Ševčenko, Patterson Ševčenko 1984].

an organic connection between the cult of saints and the cult of an icon. An icon thus, in Orthodox Christianity is a means of saving from destruction and strengthening the vivid bond maintained with the saint [Uspienski 1993: 133ff]⁴.

Dobrowolski [1961] points out that there are several modes of existence of cultural relics (Lat. *relinquo* – ‘leave’) in contemporary culture. I assumed that the consumerist icon of Santa falls within the scope of the third category enumerated by Dobrowolski: it is hard to decipher the original cultural meaning of the relic which subsists in the contemporary cultural framework but has lost its primordial sense without diachronic study. When considered in this wider milieu, the much discussed transformation of Saint Nicholas into Santa Clause no longer seems so outré and decontextualized. Both devotional and secular images of Saint Nicholas, as well as the hypersecular image of Santa may thus be viewed as cultural artifacts consisting of a number of elements. As such, they fall into a more general process of cultural clash in which various features are based on different criteria which leads to the superseding of a complex relic through a gradual reduction of its qualitative elements [cf. Dobrowolski 1961: 50f]⁵.

What follows, the stake in the fight for the meaning of the social world is the power over classificatory schemata and the classification system which underlie representations, and by that, the mobilization and demobilization of groups [Bourdieu 2005: 589]. It might be thus posited that the persona of Saint Nicholas, being a particularly strong recipient for accumulating social meanings, reflects collective identities which are of course translatable into societal axiology.

⁴ Notwithstanding the differences in the canons of the religious iconography of Eastern and Western church, there is one crucial similarity that all the analyzed works of art shared. This similarity, in the form of the recalled characteristics of postulated religious art can best captured in the citations from Friederich Overbeck, who in the letter from 1827 to Johann Passavant declared that “for me, I have to admit it, there is no art deserving to be called ‘art’ but the art totally Christian, that is the art having its roots in the religion, nourishing on it and shaping its earthly shell. The art has thus to be spiritual [...], modest, humble, far from any lasciviousness, not mundane or haughty” [Overbeck 1827, in: Lubos-Kozieł 2004: 72]. Passavant, elaborating on Overbeck’s ideas, further stresses the importance of ethical-ideal values: “the Christian art is not that art which deals with Biblical themes, because these can be also treated in a very unchristian way, but it is an art which is modest, humble and not haughty” [Passavant 1828, in: Lubos-Kozieł 2004: 72]. The characteristics of Christian art are thus decided not by its topic but by its intrinsic values. What is more, the creator of the painting devoted to the God’s glory has to be endowed with qualifications far beyond artistic merits: “Only decent and impeccable style of life gives him [the artist – L-K] this peace of heart which is indispensable for creating truly pure works of art” [Overbeck 1811, in: Lubos-Kozieł 2004: 74].

⁵ For example, Vlad Dracul “devil” and his son Vlad Tepes (Palownik), two Moldavian princes who ruled Moravia in 15th century, have become the inspiration for a novel written by Bram Stoker (1897). In the novel the two personas blended into one literary villain, Dracula. The novel was a great success, apparently much greater than history books, and since then the posterity has taken the Rumanian Vlads for one iconic vampire. The reality was thus reduced by the fiction, although it not for us to judge whether in this particular case the fiction was more horrifying or the reality. The factual existence of the personalities based in Moldavia adds only some piquant flavor and justifies the story but as it were, the fiction precedes the reality, just as it was the case of Santa.

2. Analysis and discussion

The discussion of the rhetoric aspects in the iconography of Saint Nicholas will start with the hands, as the locus for placing the attributes and as a medium for performing gestures. According to Schmitt [2006: 104], the majority of gestures are performed by the hands. Also, if power or supremacy can pass on from one person to another, from one body to another, it is performed through a touch or a hand gesture. Medieval art emphasizes the power of divine gesture and the most commonly represented is the gesture of blessing [cf. Schmitt (1990) 2006: 112, and references therein]. For the Medieval culture the act of performing gestures inscribes into a different order that in our contemporary culture. According to Schmitt [2006: 24], the basis of the symbolic efficacy of ritual, magical and sacramental gestures is the order of faith. Medieval ages can be thus called the “culture of gesture”⁶.

The most frequent in iconic canons is *gestus communis*. This is the position shown for example in the painting in the Fig. 2b: the tip of the middle finger touches the tip of the thumb. There is also a variant of this hand position, as shown in Fig. 2c but the canonical (most frequently occurring) is the one in Fig. 2b. The blessing is one of the means to denote the direct transition of the divine power from the Gospel to a reader of the icon and it is an obligatory element in all the icons of Saint Nicholas I was able to access.



Fig. 2a. Icon of Saint Nicholas. 10th century. St. Catharine monastery Sinai. Photo taken at the exhibition in Bari Castle (source: author). **Fig. 2b.** St. Nicholas, icon, a property of a private collector, 19th century. Photo: courtesy Beata Wewiórka (<http://www.wewiorka.pl/en/index.php?id=main2>, retrieved on 10th June 2008). **Fig. 2c.** Pskov School (taken from: www.auburn.edu/~mitrege/, retrieved on 10th June 2008, courtesy of George Mitrevski)

⁶ Due to the space limits this study entails several argumentum shortcuts. For example, a discussion might also be merited on the mediaeval representations as a symbolic violence of hegemonic discourse legitimizing poverty.

The left hand in iconic canons always upholds the Bible. I specifically use the terms “upholds” rather than “holds” because I interpret the gesture as denoting more supporting than possessing. The fingers of the supporting hand are most frequently presented as in the icons in Fig. 2b. The tips of the fingers are pointing upwards. This shape of hand connotes divine creative power. According to Schmitt [2006: 116], the canon of representation of God with fingers pointing upwards is a possible sign to show that the Godly power is present also on Earth, but at the same time it symbolizes the performative power of the Word. Other gestures which are present as an inter-text (in the main text of an icon, about ¼ from the top of the icon on both sides of the representation of Saint Nicholas) in iconic representations are performed by Jesus and Mary: Jesus leans down from the cloud and bestows a blessing and the Holy book, Mary returning to Saint Nicholas the bishop’s stole which had been taken away from him (cf. Fig. 2b). It is a reference to the legend, whereby after Diocletian’s persecution Saint Nicholas was put to prison. During the night, Jesus and Mary came to him, returning the stole that had been taken away from him and giving the Bible⁷. As can be seen in Fig. 2b, general iconic canons with respect to the position of hands are also observed in the representation of Mary: the palms are outstretched, pointing upwards, they seem to support the stole rather than hold it. The gesture of Jesus upholding the Bible is the repetition of the position of the palm of the Saint.

Let us next briefly inspect the distinction between gestures as proposed by Schmitt [2006: 27ff]. *Gestus* denotes gestures conceived as a sort of formalized discourse (cf. Fig. 3). Quoting Gwibert after Schmitt [2006: 26] *rationis iura consulerem*: the teleology of *gestes* is to learn to subordinate the body to the mind. The reason of *gestes* is hence the right of the mind to control the gestures. The next category, *motus* is for Schmitt not a synonym of *gestes* but it denotes a broader concept: a motion, of which a gesture is but a part. For the medieval culture, the mobility was tinted with pejorative meaning and connoted temporality. The suspicion with respect to mobility intermingled with the suspicion with respect to the body as such. The subsequent category is *gesticulation*. According to Schmitt [2006: 26], this notion refers to all gestures which are deemed to be exaggerated, vane or sinful. Hence, the dyad *gestus* : *gesticulation* is a prominent axis of antagonism between the order (cosmos) and chaos in the medieval scene of gestures. Finally, *gesta* subsume spontaneity and in contrast to *gestes*, are not an element of social relations but rather belong to the realm of supernatural.

⁷ This is in fact the only apocryphal event rendered in the main text of an icon: the representations of other hagiographic events, as well of other figures if shown at all in an icon of Saint Nicholas, can occur only as a co-text, that is in the frame of the icon, omitted from the analysis here.

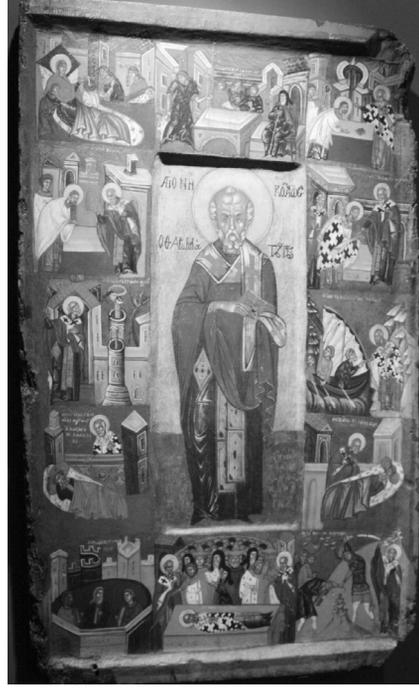
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Fig. 3a. A detail from an icon: possibly 18th century, Ukrainian. Photo: courtesy of Jakub Zaborowski from a private collection. **Fig. 3b.** Anonymous. A story of St. Nicholas life. Korçe, Museum of Medieval Art. Photo taken at the exhibition in the Museum of Bari (Italy). Source: author

In this taxonomy, the iconography of the data source can be divided into three basic classes. It might be hypothesized that the Orthodox (subsuming here both Byzantine and Russian schools) representations fall strictly into the category of *gestes*. The bishop is canonically shown in the standing rhetoric (*en face*) posture, the left hand supporting the Bible, the right hand raised in blessing. On the other hand, although of course, such a hypothesis is an analytical generalization, catholic and evangelic renditions seem to give preference to *motus* and *gesta*. Finally, the secular representations subsume the idea of *gesticulatio*.

To present the spatiality of social relations in non-devotional thread in the iconosphere of Saint Nicholas, I suggest introducing a taxonomical distinction into secular and hyper-secular renditions. The expansion of consumerist Santa totally runs roughshod over that fact that in Eastern Europe, before the entrée of Santa, apart from the devotional aspect which has been discussed supra, there was a vivid and meticulously cultivated secular image of the persona of the Bishop of Myra. From this perspective, “Santa” would be an example of a hyper-secular, hyper-reality invention, while the secular presence of (white) St. Nicholas in Eastern Europe before Santa will be the secular stage of St. Nicholas posthumous journey.



Fig. 4. Some aspects of *gesticulatio* in contemporary imagoes of Santa. **Fig. 4a.** A shop selling Santa toys (source author). **Fig. 4b.** A Hawaiian Santa with his wife. **Fig. 4c.** A Christmas hoarding. Source: author

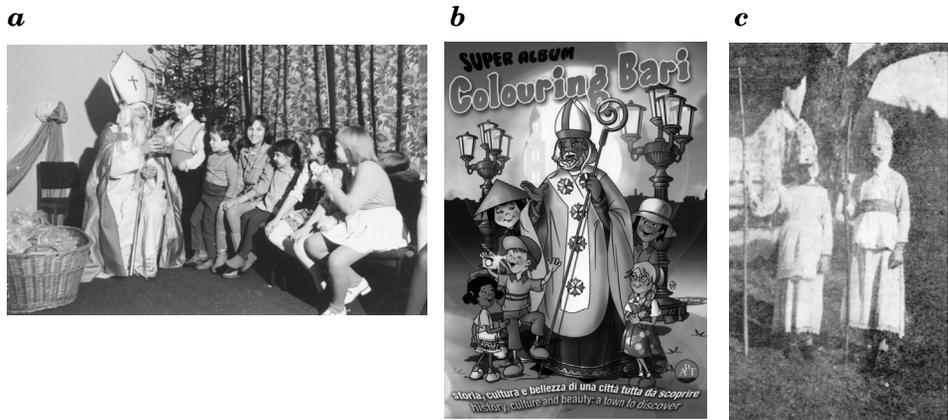


Fig. 5. The white Santa. The stage of the iconography which has practically disappeared from the iconosphere of Saint Nicholas. **Fig. 5a.** A visit of Santa to a kindergarten, a photo from an exhibition *Święty Mikołaj w PRL-u* held at Muzeum Śląska Opolskiego, December 2008. **Fig. 5b.** A brochure issued by the city of Bari. From the author's collection. **Fig. 5c.** Nicholases from Brenna near Cieszyn, Poland, 1937. Picture republished with permission from Pośpiech [1987: 26f]

The analysis of hyper-secular avatars of St. Nicholas will be more illuminating along the axis of symbolic violence rather than symbolic power, which has been the co-ordinate for the previous subsection. According to the concept of rhetoric of violence [Mamzer 2006], visual violence subsumes the forms of activity aimed at the reification of the perceived subject. One type of violence is implicit, where the addressee directly witnesses the violent acts. The transparent, hidden violence relies on the feeling of empathy created by the discourse. Most crucially, the propagation of the ideology of success and opulence is also an act of violence [cf. Mamzer 2006] because it entails inscribing poverty, the opposite of opulence, into the area of societal rejection.

It must be noted that the process of symbolic violence through conceptual expulsion is not limited to poverty. The modern marginalization affects other concepts as well, for example that of “death”. Both concepts are subjected to dehumanized attention because they oppose the post-modern ethos of the autotelism of corporeality.

This, then, by implication means that the thought of death has acquired a quasi-obscene meaning – definitely one that has to be chased away from thought. Philippe Ariès, in his book *Western Attitudes towards Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* [1974] and in other writings, describes changing attitudes over history. Death, which has ever been a natural event, accepted as such, even though it was painful for the families, is now becoming a failure to be avoided or at least pushed far away into time. (As Woody Allen has satirically remarked, “in North America death is optional”) [Varga 2005: 223].

This subsumes the devaluation of “normality” and the dissociation of moral values (ethical aspect) from habitus. As Bourdieu [2005: 265] pointed out, in the contemporary society (extending his original formulation “the middle class”) there prevails the instrumental attitude to the body. This instrumentality is evidenced in all the practices in which the body is a target or a wage, e.g. the choice of a diet, cosmetics, attitude to illness or preoccupation with the health, the choice of sports entailing strenuous effort of pain (boxing) or staking one’s life (extreme sports). Varga [2005: 221] subsumes this process under “materializing and scientificizing the body”.

The changes in the iconography of Saint Nicholas neatly capture this mutating attitude to corporeality. In the icon, along the interpretation presented *supra*, the body is primarily a means to experience and transfer the divine power. The icon is thus a means to show the transcendental reality [cf. Uspienski 1995]. In the Western iconography, although the latter aspect is still present, we can also single out the notion of body as a factor distributing earthy power. Furthermore, I interpret the studied canons as somewhat enveloping – wrapping – the body by divine connotations, covering the earthiness of the body by the multiplication of attributes, somewhat hiding this earthliness behind the institution. Secular (or rather, non-devotional) representations, on the other hand (Fig. 5), seem to be, just as icons, transparent in this respect. They do not connote symbolic power nor violence to the body. Particularly, in Fig. 5c the crozier came back to what it was supposed to denote: a stick, which, as a means to manage the herd, could also be a means to inflict punishment in order to keep the flock in line. In hyper-secular (grafted) imagoes on the other hand, the power dimension took the form of symbolic violence. The violence performed both to the marginalized societal values and the violence towards the body. This can be particularly evident in Fig. 4b and Fig. 4c: the body is treated as a commercial commodity, carrying the grafted reference to Santa.

Let us now inspect the reflection of symbolic violence in terms of rhetoric perspective. The three canons presented in Fig. 6 show the progression of distancing reflected in the posture of the bishop. Fig. 6a and Fig. 6b contrast the religious and devotional renditions of Eastern and Western Christianity and I added to them a secular representation, painted on commission by Haddon Sundbloom (Fig. 6c). In the

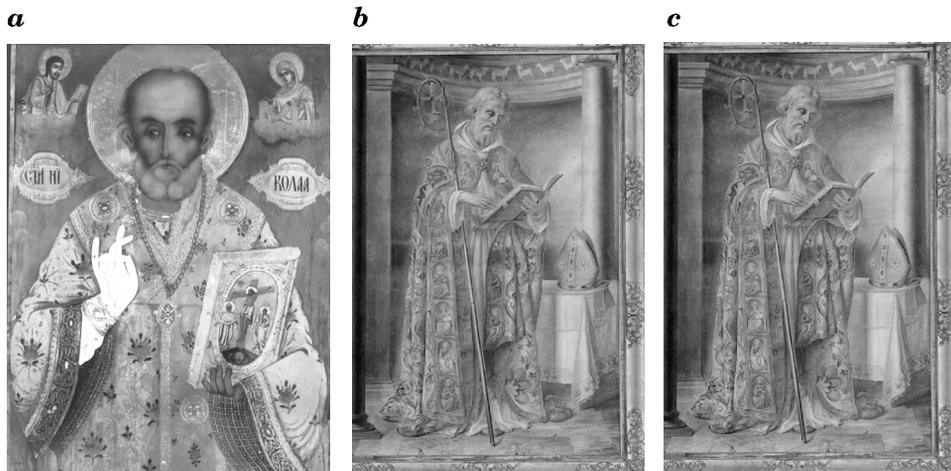


Fig. 6a. St. Nicholas Mirlikiyski (1814) Papa Vitan (a Bulgarian Calendar from the author's collection). **Fig. 6b.** Carl Herrmann (1837). Saint Nicholas (photo: courtesy Lubos-Koziel 2004). **Fig. 6c.** Sundblom's drawing for "Harper's weekly" (1862). Santa visits the Union Soldiers

iconic canons the figure is rhetorically presented (*en face*), implying a direct communication with the reader of an icon. Western European devotional paintings rarely select this position. Most frequently, the bishop is portrayed from the perspective looking about 30° to the side (*profiled*). The intricate relations with the addressee are thus augmented with the dimension of "distance". The saint is not here "for us only", he faces some other implied interlocutor, we can only participate in the scene as on-lookers.

In the last representation (Fig. 6c) Santa has turned his back on the addressees. The visual narration precludes any possible bond: Santa is talking to the soldiers ignoring possible addressees of the picture. Turning one's back to the interlocutor can be classified as a strong act of violence. Symbolic violence is a very complex term. It basically refers to the imposition of a set of cognitive schemes that have a status group basis to the collectivity as a whole as "natural"; it of course may have nothing to do with the position of figures within the diegetic reality of a picture, nor with intended messages of neglect or disdain toward a possible audience member. Yet, for the purposes of this paper as a working memorandum, I assume the interactive perspective and treat breaking the communicative bind as purposeful act of maximal distancing.

First of all, it could be noticed that the pictures in Fig. 7 reflect strong references to nature, which in my framework can be interpreted as abolishing the power of institution. For example, in Fig. 7c Santa has a wreath of leaves on his head instead of a halo and the limbs strongly remind of animals' limbs. We can also notice the weird canon of drawing, which makes the figure portrayed sometimes gnome-like and sometimes half-human and half-animal-like, especially goat-like. Such characteristics seem to put Santa's transformation in perfect compliance with all iconoclastic movements in the past. To wit, according to Uspienskij, the iconoclasts, after they had withdrawn all

the effigies of saints from churches, at first proceeded to collocate there the pictures of plants and animals [Uspienskij 1993: 86].

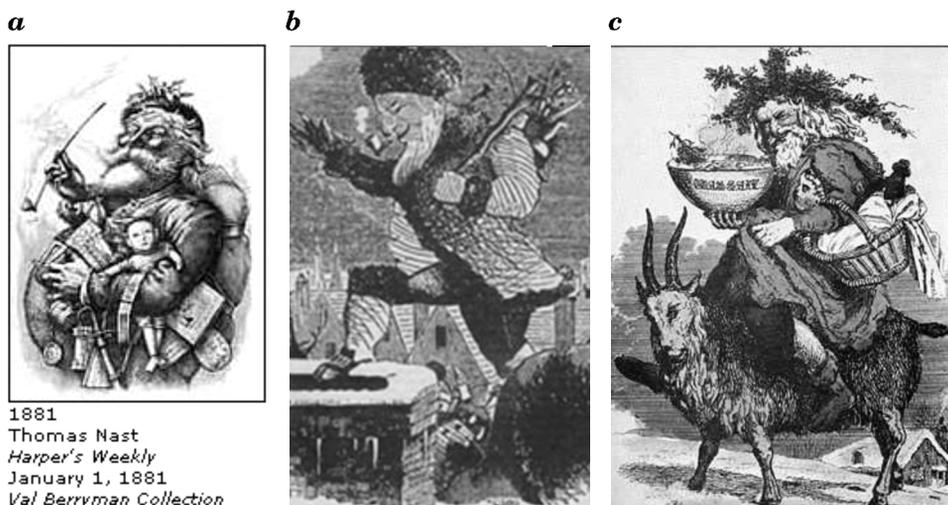


Fig. 7. Depictions of Santa by Boyd and Thomas Nast (www.stnicholascenter.com). The exhaustive description and visual renditions of this iconographic stage can also be found at: www.foedarley.org/visit2a.html. Retrieved on 10th June 2008

The analysis of the renditions in Fig. 7 shows that hyper-secular representations explicitly defy the institutional codes of the church. It can be noticed that any references to institutionalized experience have been methodically removed. Most importantly, the crozier, which carries the most of institutional load in the West Christianity renditions, is practically nonexistent in this stage of Saint Nicholas's iconographic journey. The only visual attribute which seems its closest "cognate" is the pipe, both in terms of the material (wood) and the shape. Along these lines, the pipe *per se*, apart from being a rhetoric provocation in the imagology, also can be interpreted as an instrument of symbolic violence to the body, or the power of habit inscribed into the hexis.

The possible charge against my perspective would be the assumption that there is no connection whatsoever between Saint Nicholas in the icon and the secular or hyper-secular imago, between the venerated, firm and hieratic saint, "whose icon, renowned for blessings and protection from evil, simply cannot turn into a postcard" [Topp 2004: 139] and the jolly dwarf in red robe. For example, Camelia Cmieciu (personal communication September 2007), confirmed that in Rumania – the country that still cherishes vividly Saint Nicholas – Santa and Saint Nicholas are perceived as two absolutely separate entities: the day of Saint Nicholas is on the sixth of December and Santa comes on the 24th and it would seem preposterous to derive any connection between them.

Yet, in Poland, for example, there has never been a taxonomic split for the two personae. Both the Wonderworker and the Santa figure are called *Święty Mikołaj* 'Saint Nicholas'. What happens, then, is that the Poles tend to justify the ubiquitous

presence of the bearded dwarf in red at Christmas both by reference to tradition and to religious beliefs: the figure in red clothes has the right to be present everywhere in the Christmas time because he was a saint and Christmas is a period connected with religion. Hence paradoxically, we get a situation where consumerism is justified on some level by the religious reference.

The final aspect of power in the imagology is the consumptive aspect reflected in the weight of the figure. In terms of the tenets presented *supra*, the protruding stomach connotes opulence and plentitude. The axis is thus again that of symbolic societal violence rather than power. The acceptance and the ethos of the opulence necessarily implies the rejection of poverty and of lower economic status. We can thus see how the analytical axis intersect. The control parameter is shifted from the institution to the body as such: it is the body that is the most important, that has control and power over mind, it is at the same time a subject and object of symbolic violence.

Through iconographic diegesis we can also trace how the semantic accretions which are culturally grounded replace and eradicate earlier semes, grafting there their opposite: according to the hagiographic narration, Nicholas the bishop of Myra fasted on Fridays and Wednesdays all his life. Moreover, in many icons St. Nicholas also holds a gospel book opened to the discourse known as the Beatitudes, where Christ says "Blessed are the poor for yours is the Kingdom of God" (Matthew 5: 3). Through the unforeseen twists of the semiotic pendulum, he was turned into an icon of consumerism, and a vessel for the rhetoric of success, although the message behind the persona had been exactly the opposite. Brock has commented on the process as follows: "Once the religious interpretation has been removed, the particular item or aggregate of items is open to further manipulation and change" [Brock 1972: 545].

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Summary

Social Rhetoric in the Iconography of Saint Nicholas

The societal presence of Saint Nicholas of Bari spans more than 15 centuries. Throughout this time, the persona of the bishop accumulated and carried changing values. This paper offers an exploratory tour through cultural temporalities. Along the coordinate of social rhetoric, the author analyses some aspects of power and bodily hexis. The study is conducted on the basis of a representative selection of the renditions of Saint Nicholas, which subsumes in total 350 pictures of devotional and religious representations (Western and Eastern Christianity), folk extensions and secular representations.