Visual syntax in the iconography of Saint Nicholas

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> Like a charade, language is understood only through the interaction of signs,
> each of which, taken separately, is equivocal or banal, and makes sense only combined with others
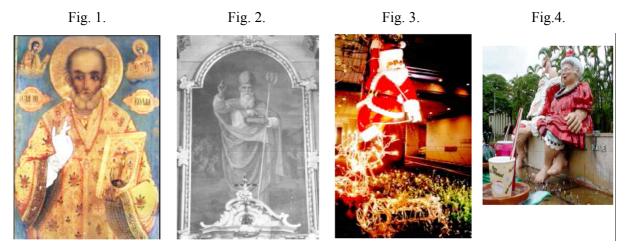>
> Merleau-Ponty

This is an empirical study of some of the semiotic and pragmatic aspects of the iconography of Saint Nicholas. The main reason for undertaking visual research on Saint Nicholas is that this figure is widely represented across a variety of cultures and ideologies, hence the subject lends itself well as a *tertium comparationis* (cf. Eco 1991 [1996]) for global iconographic investigation.

I propose that a persona of Saint Nicholas is a 'complex symbol' consisting of a number of simple symbols (e.g. crosier and miter in the Catholic representations as opposed to the lack of such attributes in Byzantine icons, three golden balls in hagiographic visual narration, etc). These simple symbols entail implicational structuring, which I called the visual syntax of Saint Nicholas. The distribution of thus established visual isotopies reflects the diversified pragmatics of the figure because "generic, decontextualized and anonymized images do more than just construct particular visions of the world. They also iconize and legitimize them" Machin – Jaworski (2006: 363).

The data sample consists of about 400 devotional and cult images of the figure of Saint Nicholas, accessible through databases of several History of Art Institutes (e.g. Bildindex der Kunst und Architektur – Marburg University Database), National Library of the Netherlands, as well as Google Graphics search, resources on the webpage of St. Nicholas Center and representations provided in books on religious paining and ethnographic studies. I also analyze secular representations of Santa Clause (Christmas postcards, publicity brochures, etc.), which appropriate and subsume the iconography and imagology of Saint Nicholas.

A matrix is proposed that consists of the classical Jakobsonian (1956 [2002]) linguistic concepts: paradigmatic/ metaphoric and syntagmatic/ metonymic. The first stage of the research entails singling out several canonical representations which serve as the basis for further analysis. For example, in a classical Jakobsonian framework, Figures 1 and 2 below entail a paradigmatic relation. Another paradigmatic set comprises Figures 3 and 4. Set A (1, 2) is metaphoric while the set B (3, 4) is metonymic with consumerist reductions (semiotic enclaves). The set C (2, 3), on the other hand, is an example of a syntagma.

Fig. 1.	Fig. 2.	Fig. 3.	Fig.4.

[Fig.1. St. Nicholas Mirlikiyski – the Wonder Worker (1814), Yoaniki Papa Vitanov *Icons from Tryavna*; Fig 2. (adapted from Lubos-Kozieł 2004: 396) Julius Schneider Św. Mikołaj, 1869; Fig.3. Japanese Santa; Fig.4. Hawaiian Santa with his wife. Fig. 3. and 4. are taken from internet sources].

Finally the paper analyses and discusses the data in terms of *spreading* and *delinking* (terminology transposed from phonological research) to account for folk reinforcement and consumerist reductions. This leads to 'nano-semiotics' of the studied iconography. The paper concludes that Santa Clause as shown in Fig. 3 and 4 is an epitome of simulacra (Baudrillard 2005): the situation in post-modern society where the reality implodes into its signs and the model precedes facts, generating thus hyper-reality.

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