

Topologies of the Virtual. Spaces, Images, and Bodies in Early Modern Choir Stalls

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Early Modern choir stalls are spaces within spaces, they separate spheres such as public and restricted, profane and holy, as well as open and closed. Members of the convents perform their daily devotions here and are assigned to respective seats. They are installed, according to the name of the place "stalla". The inlaid decoration on each seat reiterates the specific spatial and religious formation. This article wants to explore how choir stalls immerse their users and viewers in pictorial and religious environments.

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Media archaeology of virtuality and immersion has traced the steps back to early film, panoramas in the 19th century and the magic lantern in the 17th century. Using an open notion of virtuality, especially in context with arts, the historical connection can start in antiquity (Grau 2003). This article aims to build on Oliver Grau's notion and wants to consider inlaid Early Modern choir stalls as environments for virtual experiences in the context of religious practices in Early Modern Christianity. Having pictures that directly comment the spatial relation of the choir stalls to architecture and symbolic spaces in churches and cathedrals, virtual spaces shall in accordance with Vavra be understood

as space that always emerges when real topographical elements of coordination and spatial formation are superimposed by constituents of other categories. Sensory perceptions, functionally or intentionally demanded spatial boundaries, or alternative perceptions, e.g. of a literary or pictorial nature, can lead to the superimposition of everyday spatial perception patterns with other ideas of space and thus situate a virtual space in real space. (Vavra 2005, IX).

In the following, I want to explore the situations that are made possible by wooden choir stalls on a social, spatial, and pictorial level. These objects create spaces of hybridity that bind bodies, architectures, materialities, techniques, senses, and lastly Christological presence. In the technique of inlaying, a



complicated spatial and pictorial relation of the virtual and the actual emerges, that could serve as a reference for Early Modern European views of the relations of seeing and space.

MEDIA THEORY AND THE SACRED

Religious spaces in Early Modern Times were one of the major places of image production. Religions also have, as has been pointed out by various scholars of media and religion, a specific affiliation to things, objects, materials, practices and rituals. Religious scholar Robert M. Geraci describes religions as “both natural and social artifacts; they exist as a consequence of the people, places, and communities that compose them and, increasingly, the technologies through which they are mediated” (Geraci 2013, 324). In being produced and hybrid, religions share a common denominator with the Virtual, as he argues further: “Virtual worlds are, of course, also assemblages of the natural and the social” (Geraci 2013, 324). Media scholars Friedrich Balke, Bernhard Siegert and Joseph Vogl describe the relation between media theory and sacredness on a semiotic level. They attest media theory in the following of Marshall McLuhans famous dictum “The Medium is the Message” a (productive) conflation of information and its channel: “Those who confuse meaning with the fact, information with matter, light with conduction, are going down the paths of media theory, but also those of the sacred. Whoever thinks noise for a message places themselves in the tradition of the mystics.” (my translation, Balke, Siegert, and Vogl 2015, 8). In media theory, they propose, media reinscribe themselves into the message in a way that makes it unfeasible to separate the two. The other way around, the message is always shaped by the medium and its materialities, actors and environments.

Following this understanding of sacredness and media theory, I want to take a closer look at the way objects such as choir stalls shape liturgic rituals and create hybrid spaces between the actual and the virtual. A connection to Early Modern image theory might be drawn via the technique of inlaying that was prominent in Northern Italy in the 15th and 16th century. Not coincidentally this is also the place of formative events for Renaissance imagery and the development of the central perspective method. In the following, I will shortly outline the connection of the new type of pictorial paradigm, that was established with the technique of central perspective and relate it to the artistic technique of inlaying or intarsia.

CENTRAL PERSPECTIVE AND INLAYING

In the early 15th century, Florentine architect and artist Filippo Brunelleschi conducted two experiments, that are often construed to be the origin of a systematic method of central perspective with Brunelleschi as their ingenious creator. While correct implementation of central perspective guidelines can

be found sporadically before, Brunelleschi is thought to be the first to use a repeatable and systematic method. In his first experiment, Brunelleschi painted the Baptistery San Giovanni on a panel with a conical hole in it. Placed on a certain spot in front of the Baptistery, one could verify the accurate depiction of the building by holding the panel in front of one's face, picture side facing away from the head, and a mirror in the other hand. Looking through the hole in the panel, one saw the reflection of the painting in the mirror; by taking the mirror away, one could check if the picture aligned with the *real*, three-dimensional building. A disturbance in the static depiction proved to be the moving clouds in the sky over the baptistery. Brunelleschi confronted this disturbance by applying silver foil in the picture where the sky would be. The real clouds were mirrored by the silver foil (and then again in the mirror).

The second experiment used a panel with a depiction of the Palazzo della Signoria (today Palazzo Vecchio), which was cut to suit the form of the Palazzo. If the viewer positioned themselves at a specific point in front of the building, one could again verify the accuracy by alternating holding the panel in front of the building and removing it. Brunelleschi's *tavolae* and with them the following central perspective drawings and paintings were henceforth examples of an abstract and schematic method of constructing pictures, especially of architectural spaces. The abstract view of the central perspective objectifies vision and binds it to a body, that is single-eyed and male coded (Randolph 2014, 85–88). But Brunelleschi's experiments also point to a very much *situated* vision, since the *tavolae* only develop their effect from a very specific standpoint.

Brunelleschi's experiments are often placed in a direct relation to Leon Battista Alberti, who elaborated on central perspective as a method in his 1435/1436 treatise *De Pictura*. With it comes the famous quote, to imagine the painting as an "open window". Alberti describes the process as an instruction for other painters: "First I trace as large a quadrangle as I wish, with right angles, on the surface to be painted; in this place, it certainly functions for me as an open window through which the *historia* is observed" (Alberti 2011, I, 19). Art historian Friedrich Teja Bach offers a different understanding of the connection between Brunelleschi's experiments and the paradigm of the central perspective image. To him, the used metaphor of the "open window" symbolizes an exclusion and separation of the image, that cannot be uphold given the way, how Brunelleschi's experiments very much interplay with their surroundings, the bodies executing them and the used materials. Teja Bach proposes to understand Brunelleschi's pictorial experiments as inlays themselves. He supports this claim with a different story that is delivered about Brunelleschi in the *Novella del Grasso* by his biographer Antonio Manetti. One day, Brunelleschi was duped by his friend, intarsia carver Manetto Ammanatini. Brunelleschi decides to play a trick on him by making him believe that he is not Manetto anymore, but a shady character with the name of Matteo. Since many people are involved, the trick is indeed successful, leading to an incarceration of Manetto/Matteo and a serious uncertainty about his own identity. Only after a couple of days and many further entanglements, the trick is resolved and the ashamed Manetto leaves Florence to work at the Hungarian royal court.

As cruel as this episode may be, it serves Teja Bach as a third experiment of Brunelleschi and an example for a different pictorial paradigm, since it also plays with perspective and the relation of virtuality and actuality and connects them to the technique of inlaying: "The concern of both panels as well as of the *Novella* is to inlay artificial, simulated reality into actual reality." (Teja Bach 2007, 163). Central perspective with Brunelleschi is not meant to separate the spheres of depicting and depicted, but rather to link them. Teja Bach therefore sees it as no coincidence, that Manetto is a carver and maker of intarsia. In a metonymic shift, the body—and the life—of Manetto become an inlay: "he himself, the intarsia specialist, becomes intarsia" (Teja Bach 2007, 163).

Teja Bach critiques the interpretation of art history of the central perspective image as a window, which includes notions of separation, objectivity, and distance. This critique is backed by art historian Adrian Randolph, who includes not only the usual image panels of the Renaissance in his analyses but also furniture such as "boxes, chests and trays" which according to him "offer accounts of renaissance space that are quite different from the dominant trope of the Albertian window" (Randolph 2014, 71). Furniture opens up a connection to a Renaissance material and visual culture, that is more characterized by privacy and intimacy, the sense of touch and female-coded spaces. Furniture was still seen as defiant in the 20th century by sociologist Georg Simmel: "In the case of the piece of furniture, we make contact with it constantly, it intervenes in our life and thus has no right to exist for itself." (Simmel 1994, 14). Choir stalls as furniture make no exception, they come in touch with the bodies several times a day, they *intervene*, intrude and impose. Seating furniture especially forms and structures the body in a way, that by no means can be understood as natural but has been subject to historical, cultural and geographical influences. In the following I want to point out the role sitting and the according furniture has played in the role of everyday life but especially religious practices to lastly establish choir stalls as a multisensorial, hybrid space at the intersection of virtuality and actuality.

SITUATION AND INSTALLATION. CHOIR STALLS IN EARLY MODERN RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Sitting is, like many other activities, described by the sociologist Marcel Mauss as a technique of the body (Mauss 1973), and therefore shaped by factors such as geography, culture as well as gender. Cultural historian Hajo Eickhoff has worked through these factors and could show that sitting in history has not always been an everyday practice for everyone, but rather a privilege of the few and either associated with the ruling class or the clergy: "Sitting on chairs [...] has two roots: the real throning of the king and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ" (my translation, Eickhoff 1993, 93). The crucifixion and subsequent ascension of

Jesus Christ is described by Eickhoff as the institution of Christ on God's judicial throne (Eickhoff 1993, 12). Sitting in medieval Christian practice is therefore an approximation to Christ and as such reserved for the clergy only. Especially in the order of the Benedictines, the service included a decided sequence of standing, sitting, and kneeling: "The realization of the alternation of standing, sitting and kneeling called for in his [Benedict's] rule requires a special device, the choir stall, which was born in the monastery church in the 11th century." (my translation, Eickhoff 1993, 108). Choir stalls were placed in the choir, the holiest place in Early Modern churches and cathedrals and were conceptualized as a connected bench with separated seats. To accommodate the constant changes in body positions, the seating boards were foldable.¹ Folded up seating boards often had a wider edge, called *miseri cordiae*, to provide the namesake mercy and relief for monks and nuns to lean on while long standing parts of the service. Standing was also believed as standing upright in front of God, therefore these *miseri cordiae* were hybrid places, often decorated with mythic creatures, demons and devils to remind the clerics of their illicit behavior (Eickhoff 1993, 114).

The stalls were mostly U-shaped and opened up to the east. They therefore also enclosed the space of the choir and marked a space they themselves do not occupy. Sitting, standing and praying in it was a highly ritualized practice that combined bodily, social, and Christological aspects. Each choir stall had as many seats as members and each new member of the chapter was assigned a certain seat, a *stalla*: "Everyone who was admitted to the order or to the community of canons was assigned a place in the choir stall. With this assignment (*in-stallatio*) they received seat and vote in the chapter" (my translation, Urban 1953). Sitting in one's place in the choir stall is therefore a material and bodily as well as a symbolic practice. In choir stalls with two rows, the higher ranked persons were situated on the outer and higher rows; bishops, abbots, and abbesses were placed at the turnpoint of the U, directly opposite to the altar.

Topologically as well as symbolically, architecturally as well as socially, the structure of the choir stalls forms an included exclusion, since the parish did not have access to the choir as well as the privilege of sitting. Choir stalls also include a space within a space, playing with the topologies of opened and closed, public and private spheres. The space of the choir informed Christian architecture significantly, leading to a special focus on the choir and the altar: "Not the abstract opposition of two spaces becomes the characteristic of Christian construction, but the extreme tension of opposition with simultaneous unity, which the table of the Eucharist establishes as the cultic center of both" (my translation, Eickhoff 1993, 94). Choir stalls are structures that emerge at the cross section of the spatial connection of the architecture and the bodily techniques of Benedictine worship.

¹ Eickhoff relates this seating arrangement to today's theater seats or lecture hall stairs and therefore different kind of spectacles, cf. Eickhoff 1993, 10 and 101. While service, a dramatic play or a lecture are different settings, they share spatial and visual similarities such as the division of a crowd and a mostly single actor, the according distribution of seeing and been seen and the centering of the furniture (and therefore the bodies of the viewers) around a visual focal point.

This interlaced and complicated relation is mirrored by the inlaid decoration that were often attached to the back walls of the outer rows, the dorsals. Many inlaid choir stalls were made in Northern Italy in the 15th and 16th century and many showed a similar pictorial program, that directly referred to the structure of the choir stalls themselves and therefore an interplay of openings and closings.

Most inlaid furniture shows images, that differ greatly from the religiously informed pictorial program of other artistic media of the time such as paintings, frescoes, stained glass and so on. Instead of biblical narratives and depictions of Saints, intarsia are more prone to depictions of seemingly lifeless objects; a property they share with depictions that focus the central perspective method. The choir stall of the Olivetan (a subgroup of the Benedictans) convent of Monte Oliveto Maggiore shows images that can be found throughout many North Italian choir stalls [Fig. 1]. Only two out of the 48 intarsiated dorsals made by the Olivetan monk Fra Giovanni da Verona and his workshop show religiously informed imagery, two Saints flank the beginning and end of the choir stall. The other pictures show alternating insights into cupboards and cabinets and outlooks onto cities, landscapes and architectures. What was later separated in the theory of painting as two different genres, still life and landscape, with associated different positions in the pictorial hierarchy, shows its similarities in the medium of intarsia: they appear as mediated and layered depictions of space. The view is always divided into fore-, middle-, and background, leaving it to the middle section, either opened cupboard doors or framing architectural round arches, to present the enclosed objects. The image composition is not displayed in a way that aims at disguising the conditions of their mediality, as it is often associated with Alberti's paradigm of the open window and has been coined with the term "transparency", in concordance with the window-paradigm. Rather, these conditions, here the framing devices, are amplified by appearing



Fig. 1
Fra Giovanni da Verona
and Workshop, Choir Stall,
1503-05, Monte Oliveto
Maggiore, image courtesy
of Ruth Hauer-Buchholz.

in every picture as a metapictorial reference to the operation of showing itself.

The abundant use of *trompe-l'œil*-motives further accentuates the metapictorial reference. Either as hanging or protruding objects, these motives challenge the notion of clearly divided spaces by transgressing them. In case of the half-opened lattice doors, this transgression even seems to reach into the space before the picture and therefore of the viewers, connecting the virtual space of the image and the actual space of the viewer. Philosopher and media theorist Jean Baudrillard views the *trompe-l'œil* as the place of "anti-representation" (Baudrillard 1988, 54) when it comes to painting. In the case of *trompe-l'œil* the painted objects do not refer to any real objects in an indexical way, nor do they invoke any narrative or *historia*: "there is no fable, no narrative. No 'set', no theatre, neither plot nor characters" (Baudrillard 1988, 53). They are striking in their absence of human depiction—or anything alive for that matter. *Trompe-l'œil*-objects appear to be cut off and isolated from interaction: "These are objects, that have already endured: time here has already been, space has already taken place. The only relief is that of anachrony, that is to say an involutive figure of time and space" (Baudrillard 1988, 55). The isolation of the *trompe-l'œil* imagery in the dorsals directly reflects the isolation of each individual seat. Here, objects are put in niches the same way the bodies are placed into their individual nooks. To Baudrillard, the game with reality is the true essence of the *trompe-l'œil*:

In trompe-l'œil it is never a matter of confusion with the real: what is important is the production of a simulacrum in full consciousness of the game and of the artifice by miming the third dimension, throwing doubt on the reality of that third dimension in mining and outdoing the effect of the real, throwing radical doubt on the principle of reality (Baudrillard 1988, 58)

Images, especially *trompe-l'œils*, are not solely a representation of reality but a part of it. It is not images who imitate reality, but reality is approximating the realm of images. As such, Baudrillard assigns even political power to images, such in the case of the small, isolated (and inlaid) *studioli*:

Even the space of politics falls under the influence of trompe-l'œil; for instance, the studiolo of the Duke of Urbino, Federigo da Montefeltre, in the ducal palace in Urbino and Gubbio: miniscule sanctuaries, all done in trompe-l'œil, set at the very heart of the immense space of the palace. The whole palace is the achievement of a scholarly architectural perspective, the triumph of space disposed according to the rules. The studiolo is the inverse microcosm: cut off from the rest of the palace, without windows, without space to speak of, here space is perpetrated by simulation. (Baudrillard 1988, 59–60).

Siegert relates the *trompe-l'œil* not to the order of representation but to the order of the figural, with reference to the philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard. The order of representation emerged at the end of the fifteenth century and assumes

a separation of “sign and sign carrier, figure and ground” (Siegert 2015, 190). The order of the figural on the other hand, allows for a copresence of representation and represented: “the sign carrier—the materiality and dimensionality of the medium—cannot be separated from the sign itself” (Siegert 2015, 190). As such, *trompe-l’œils* act as “figures of self-reference” (Siegert 2015, *passim*), they allow for the signifier to coincide with the signified. This self-reference turns out to be even more evident in the inlaid choir stalls, given the circumstance, that the depicted object and the depicting medium are often the same in the material of wood. Wood in Early Modern symbolics is also closely connected to Christ. It was perceived as a humble yet anthropomorphized material. Wood grows, lives, works and dies; it has individual drawings and changes depending on the environment and season (cf. Pastoureau 1993, 26). In this liveliness, wood exhibits strongly anthropomorphized features. Processed, it is also a lifeless material and was therefore closely connected to the belief of Christ being on the border of death and life as well. Further, as archaeologist Thomas Kühtreiber and art historian Heike Schlie have pointed out, wood was also thought to be a passage, a medium so to speak, between the virtuality of the pictures and the actuality of the viewer: “The depiction of grained wood surfaces in interior representations or on individual pieces of furniture may have intended the purpose of affective inclusion of, for example, biblical narratives in the present time of late medieval recipients.” (my translation, Kühtreiber and Schlie 2017, 9). Viewers could connect the depiction of wood, i.e. in devotional books or on altar paintings with the ubiquitous wooden furniture that was either placed in their private rooms or in the churches and therefore incorporate the narratives into their own lives. This “affective inclusion” was mediated especially by books of hours and therefore devotional objects that are highly valued, carried close to the body and interacted with on a daily level. The miniature paintings in the books of hours were able to reference certain materials, such as wood. Choir stalls on the other hand are able to simultaneously show *and* reference the material wood. The depicted objects are mostly made from wood themselves, such as writing tools, musical instruments or the ubiquitous lattice doors that seem to open up into the space of the viewers. Another motif of self-reference can be found in the omnipresent framing of the inlaid images, which can be *real*, i.e. three-dimensional, or part of the flat images and thus two-dimensional. The difference cannot be experienced merely visually (and even harder when it comes to photographic reproductions), but rather includes other senses such as touch and therefore an experience that involves the entire bodies of the viewers.

While the examples of frames make it visible, that inlaid pictures are self-referential in that way, it is a different panel, again made by Fra Giovanni, that connects religious practice with spatial relations and questions of copresence. This panel [Fig. 2] is located in the sacristy of Santa Maria in Organo in Verona and shows the already transubstantiated host inside of a monstrance. In a typical *trompe-l’œil* manner, the monstrance is placed inside a niche and slightly protrudes over the border, encompassed by a decorated

Fig. 2 (next page)
 Fra Giovanni da Verona
 and Workshop, Sacristy,
 1519-23, Santa Maria in
 Organo.



(two-dimensional) frame. Many more pictorial elements such as the curtain, the niche, the vitrified host and the shadow-double of the monstrance, refer to a dialectical understanding of showing/seeing and hiding, the same way, the choir is simultaneously exposed and hidden. The desire of pre-reformist Christian practice oscillates between hiding and de-monstrating the most holy places and objects, made evident by the monstrance which is to be carried around at the procession of Corpus Christi. The host testifies to the copresence, that was evoked with the order of the figural, on a religious level, being the wafer *and* the body of Christ at the same time. In its isolation in the niche, the monstrance does not demonstrate religiosity in a way, that a depiction of a biblical narrative would. Rather, it refers to the practical and operative function, that it itself as an object has and to the visual regime, a desire of seeing, that was established in medieval Christianity. Since the most holy, similar to the choir, cannot be accessed just like that, the host has to be put into the monstrance which itself is put into a niche and behind a curtain, which itself is enclosed by a two-dimensional frame which itself is surrounded by a three-dimensional frame and so on... Withdrawal—on a spatial and visual level—is here connected to a simultaneous excess of deictic devices. As room in a room, the panel showcases that space is not thought as distinct and clearly separable areas but rather as recursive and therefore topological. Lastly this recursion can be traced back to a technical and material level, since intarsia themselves are made up of pieces that are embedded into each other. With inlaid images, technique, motifs and the furniture themselves correspond to each other in terms of spatial relations and of connecting virtual to actual spheres.

Inlaid choir stalls are objects, that interlace virtual and actual spaces on many levels: as furniture, they shape and organize bodies along social hierarchies; as objects they encompass spaces they themselves do not occupy; as part of religious ceremonies they make us aware, that godly presence is not simply given, but has to be actively produced by acts of the clergy and the parish together with the devotional objects and furniture; lastly the inlaid pictures demonstrate a semiotic (and religious) copresence of virtual and actual. As pictures that are made from wood and show wooden objects, they blur the distinction of real space and pictorial space and directly refer to the host, which is bread *and* the body of Christ at the same time. In inlaid furniture, spatial, architectural, pictorial, material, religious and semiotic spheres correlate to create hybrid environments.

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