

GLENN PEERS, *Byzantine Media Subjects*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2024. 300 pp., 41 b&w and 38 colour ill. – ISBN 978-1-5017-7626-7

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A photographic portrait by Yousuf Karsh shows MARSHALL MCLUHAN (1911–1980) at work. Two large volumes, *Pliocene Mollusca of Southern Florida* (1953) and *The Seventeenth Century: New Developments in Art from Caravaggio to Vermeer* (1951), lie closed on his desk. Another book about molluscs is pressed under his elbow. With his left hand he holds a copy of ANDRÉ GRABAR’s *Byzantine Painting: Historical and Critical Study* (1953) open to pp. 102–103, where a mosaic portrait of Alexius Comnenus the Younger is reproduced. In the year this photo was taken, MCLUHAN and QUENTIN FIORE published a small book called *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (1967). It seems that Karsh has captured the moment when media studies first crossed paths with the history of Byzantine art.

MCLUHAN is among several thinkers invoked by GLENN PEERS, who also mentions FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE and MARTIN HEIDEGGER and repeatedly refers to BERNHARD SIEGERT and FRIEDRICH KITTLER. ‘Unser Schreibzeug arbeitet mit an unseren Gedanken’, NIETZSCHE said apropos of the typewriter he had to use because he could not see well. ‘[D]ie Technik ist es, die von uns verlangt, das, was man gewöhnlich unter «Wesen» versteht, in einem anderen Sinne zu denken’, HEIDEGGER wrote. KITTLER asked ‘ob technische Medien nicht Konzepte wie Autor und Subjekt obsolet machen’.

It was in Weimar that PEERS first developed, ten years ago (p. xiii), his book’s concept. The autonomous self of Cartesian thought (‘I think, therefore I am’) does not exist: ‘the meaning and being of the human is produced through the workings of representation’ (p. 3). ‘A humanist expectation of an autonomous human agent is just a dangerous fantasy’ (p. 24). Any manufactured object can *act* independently of the will or forethought of its maker(s). ‘[I]nstruments possessed voices, minds, agency’ (p. 137); ‘media... are prior to and formative of the human, as such’ (p. 6); ‘the authentic actors of history are the... tools that shape and direct [it]’ (p. 242). A thinking subject is therefore not some solid self-contained entity but the point

where various media pressures converge, the product of a ‘subject-making machinery’ (p. 3). This explains the word ‘subjects’ in PEERS’s title.

The qualifying adjective ‘Byzantine’ needs no explaining: PEERS is a professional ‘scholar of Byzantium’ (p. 15) with a ‘long apprenticeship and practice of Byzantine art history’ (p. 22). He views his field from a high vantage point and treats it as a totality: there was, for instance, ‘a Christian representational system at the heart of Byzantine culture’ (p. 30). This global view makes it easy to discuss within a single chapter objects from the tenth, eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries (pp. 31–88). Dating, the preoccupation of pedantic positivists, matters but little: while an artifact can be repaired, reshaped, repurposed, or copied, it remains *active* as long as it is actually or virtually *present*. It drifts through time. Correspondingly, PEERS thinks by association. The original *Mandylion*, an offprint of Jesus Christ’s face upon a piece of cloth, is now lost. We see it reproduced in a tenth-century *icon*, where its onetime recipient, the first-century King Abgar, spreads it over his lap. Abgar is endowed with the facial features of Constantine VII, a tenth-century emperor who recovered the relic. His pose resembles that of the Virgin Annunciate in a late twelfth-century *image*: the pairing of king and *Mandylion* may consequently be interpreted as symbolic wedlock. Beside being held close to the body, the cloth can also be worn upon one’s head or face as a sort of mask – and thus, because Christ brings victory to those who believe in Him (Χριστὲ ὁ Θεός, ὁ εἰς σὲ ἐλπίζων οὐκ ἀποτυγχάνει ποτέ), as a visored helmet. A message supposedly written by Jesus to Abgar was ‘sealed’, as seen in a fourteenth-century *copy* from Trebizond, with the inscriptions IC XC NIKA and ΨΧΕΡΑ.<sup>1</sup> The grid-like arrangement of these Greek letters recalls certain drawings which illustrate middle-Byzantine military manuals. The icon of Jesus’ face was thus harnessed in the service of a Byzantine ‘war machine’. ‘The history of warfare in the Byzantine world, from such a standpoint, has yet to be written’ (p. 80).

Like most monographs nowadays, *Byzantine Media Subjects* is structured as a series of case studies. These focus not on individual artifacts but on various media: image, text, sound. It must be said that PEERS’ contact with what used to be called primary sources (his ‘archive’, p. 26) was most often indirect, that is, doubly and sometimes multiply mediated. In one case (July 2015) he visited the Monastery of Vatopedi and was able to see the real

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1. The latter acronym is explained in Christ’s missive itself: MARK GUSCIN, *The Tradition of the Image of Edessa*. Newcastle 2016, pp. 82, 85.

thing, an illustrated liturgical manual (*typikon*) from AD 1346 (pp. 164–199). Other than that, the model *Mandyliion* (pp. 30–88) which perished ca. 1790 remains known through countless replicas, while the eleventh-century (sic) Smyrna *Physologus* (pp. 92–136) was partly photographed before its burning in 1922. Just one among nine surviving manuscript copies of a description of the moon written ca. 1300–1325 by Demetrius Triclinius carries a drawing whose prototype, Triclinius says, was made by ὄν ἐν τῷ καθ’ ἡμᾶς χρόνῳ ἄριστον τῶν γραφέων ἢ πατρις ἡμῶν τυγχάνει πλουτοῦσα Θεσσαλονίκη, τὸν τῆς ἀστραπῆς ἐπώνυμόν φημι χαριτώνυμον<sup>2</sup> (pp. 1–3, 200–240). One can re-imagine a particular fifth-century musical performance thanks to the account of a certain Isaac who witnessed it (pp. 137–163). Gracefully translated from the original Syriac by ROBERT KITCHEN, his *carmen* is appended to to the main text of the book (pp. 247–252). On the basis of its English version, PEERS investigates how ‘the cultural techniques of psalmody described by Isaac lead to a loss of discrete subjectivity on the part of the monks’ (p. 138).

Greek source texts are likewise translated (pp. 187, 253–260), and I must admit that I found their English hard to understand without recourse to the originals. Many words are rendered with excessive literalness: εὐώνυμος (‘left’) is ‘well-named’, ἡ μεγίστη Σύρτις (‘the Gulf of Sidra’), ‘great Syrtis’ (p. 258). Even a short, straightforward instruction how to celebrate the feast of St Eugenius has become rather abstruse (pp. 253–254).<sup>3</sup> This

2. Χαριτώνυμος is a well-known Byzantine circumlocution for ‘John’: ABRAHAM WASSERSTEIN, *An Unpublished Treatise by Demetrius Triclinius on Lunar Theory*. *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 16 (1967) pp. 153–174 at p. 171. Cf. the translation in PEERS, p. 257: ‘gracefully named after the lightning’.

3. DIRK KRAUSMÜLLER cannot have spent a lot of time translating this text. He has skipped one phrase by oversight: Ἐν δὲ τῷ Ἀμώμῳ δίδονται κηρία τῷ λαῷ, μεθ’ ὄν κάθισμα τῶν ἁγίων. (The Ἄμωμος is Psalm 118.) Ζήτηι εἰς μάρτυρας does not mean ‘look for the martyrs’ but ‘look up the [generic] Gospel reading for martyrs’, i.e. there was no special reading (*pericope*) for the feast of St Eugenius. Πρὸς Σήμερον τῆς σωτηρίας ἡμῶν τὸ κεφάλαιον. Σήμερον ἡ ἐκκλησία στολιζεται τοῖς ἄσμασι καὶ ἡ οἰκουμένη φαιδρύνεται τοῖς θαύμασιν means that ‘Today the church is adorned with songs and the world is illumined with miracles’ was chanted to the tune of ‘Today is the chief part of our salvation’ (KRAUSMÜLLER just lumps the two hymns together). Λαμβάνουσιν ἐπ’ ὤμων τὰ τῶν ἁγίων λείψανα ἐκ τῆς σοροῦ... καὶ εἰσφέρουσι ταῦτα ἐντὸς τῆς πόλεως is not accurately translated with ‘[they] take the relics from the casket on their shoulders, and carry it... into the city’: ταῦτα is plural (i.e. ‘them’, the relics) and σορός clearly stands for ‘shrine’ rather than ‘casket’ (or did the clergy carry the saints’ bones bared and unprotected?). Ἐκκλησιάρχης is a singular noun, hence ‘when the *ekklesiarches* wish it’ should be corrected to ‘when the *ekklesiarch* wishes it’. Χριστώνυμος λαός, a fancy way

instruction is found in the aforesaid *typikon* of 1346, which also contains a versified church calendar: it was easier to remember which saints were celebrated in the course of a given month if their names had been strung together in a poem.<sup>4</sup> Each of the twelve months is personified (cf. Emily Dickinson's *Dear March, Come In!*) and addresses us readers directly. December, for example, says Ἐγὼ δὲ Ναοῦμ, Ἀββακούμ, Σωφονίου | καὶ Βαρβάρας, Σάββα τε καὶ Νικολάου | φέρω κατορθώματα, i.e. 'I bear the feats of Nahum, Habbakuk, Zephaniah, and Barbara, of Sabbas and Nicholas' etc. One sees (Fig. 6 on p. 188) small numbers written in red above the text line: these refer to the date when the respective saint is commemorated. PEERS translates the verses with 'I, of Noam, Habakkuk, Sophronius, | And of Barbara, of both Sabas and Nicholas | bear the feats' (p. 187), explains that 'the speaking subject is identified... as the first-person narrator' and that 'the presentation... has the actual agency of a speaking subject, which is the manuscript', and sums up: 'The striking address in these lines, moving from a command with unclear speaker to identification of agent and action, mobilizes in a succinct and direct fashion the constant present of the manuscript and the various relations among reader, maker, and book the manuscript produces' (p. 188).

The point is that the calendar 'is a machine of invisible time-making. Inside the medium, only *its* time is imaginable and livable' (p. 21). In general, '[m]anuscripts are a medium that show the particular ways technology like a book can make a human subject' (p. 107). A text re-forms its readers. The *Physiologus* dissolves the customary distinction between man and beast, setting up dumb animals as moral *exempla* (pp. 104–119). The *typikon* of 1346 replaces the progressive cradle-to-grave time of a personal life with the ever-recurring cycle of the church year (pp. 167–189). Triclinius' description of the moon isolates and dehumanises vision by reducing it to reflection in a mirror (pp. 1–4, 210–234). *Byzantine Media Subjects* itself forces one to think in new, unfamiliar categories and undermines one's sense of intellectual identity. I found this a healthy experience.

'I want to break, sometimes, the smooth surface of scholarly argument, exposing its own invisible mediations, however uncomfortably' (p. 22),

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of saying 'Christians', is rendered with 'the people that has its name from Christ', while Vespers, Matins, and the Divine Liturgy are termed, in plain English, *hesperinos*, *orthros*, and the *leitourgia*.

4. PEERS ignores the critical edition of these verses by RUDOLF STEFEC, *Die Synaxarverse des Nikephoros Xanthopoulos*. *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 62 (2012) pp. 145–161.

PEERS says. It is striking that he would not apply his own posthumanist doctrine to himself: '[t]he move, if followed to its natural conclusion, leaves insufficient room to breathe' (p. 23). He, the author, is not a media subject and does not renounce any of the customary attributes of subjecthood. He dedicates his book to his partner and children (p. xv). He traces his intellectual ancestry all the way back to the 1930s (pp. 98–99 n.18).<sup>5</sup> His *Schreibzeug*, the personal computer, evidently took no part in the formulating of his thoughts.

This contradiction stems from the fact that PEERS's theory is a form of false consciousness: it projects onto scholarly discourse the alienation inherent in a capitalist economy. Because the property regime under which we live estranges workers from the products of their labour, inanimate man-made objects can be easily imagined as agents and even masters of reality. '[T]he agency of the puppeteer is supplanted by the puppet' (p. 179 n.120). As long as the stakes stay low ('my own joy and pleasure in the Byzantine things', p. 23), we can safely continue playing our academic parlour game. The real task, however, is not to *think* about the world but to *change* it.

#### Keywords

history of the self, media theory

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5. PEERS thinks that the racist views of JOSEF STRZYGOWSKI (1862–1941) taint STRZYGOWSKI's scholarship (pp. 21, 96). How could this be if 'Strzygowski' was a *so-genannter Mensch* rather than an integral – and therefore morally responsible – individual?