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Rognald Heiseldal Bergesen

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Functional Cues of Liturgical Artefacts: Affordances of a Reredos in the Church at Vålse, Denmark

Rognald Heiseldal Bergesen 

What made medieval Christians able to appreciate sculptures and paintings of the church, and what made these artworks meaningful to them? What was the connection between material images and the medieval mind? In order to search for answers, the theory of affordance may be of use. This theory is a model for the analysis of visual perception that was introduced by the psychologist James J. Gibson in 1977.¹ Here, it will be tentatively applied on a specific reredos (Figs. 1 and 2) on the altar of the church at the island of Falster in Denmark. It consists of a corpus, two wings and a predella, and was constructed from polychrome oak in ca. 1475 (corpus: 173 × 174 × 15 cm; wings: 173 × 86.5 × 11 cm; predella: 35 × 248 cm).² Its origin is unknown, but it is a part of the so-called Brarup group, because there is a workshop connection to a similar reredos in Brarup Church³ and a fragment in Tor-kilstrup, all on the island of Falster.⁴

The advantage of this theory is that it deals with visual perception and focuses on the object by pointing at its “active” or functional cues from the viewer’s point of view, thus emphasizing a functional level of meaning. Applying such an approach on images emphasizes the participation of the artwork itself in

the beholders interpretation of it. Its shape is partly suggesting its own meaning, even though this does not imply that the work of art has its own agency. This is not very different from more recent ideas presented by scholars such as W. J. T. Mitchell, Wolfgang Kemp and Michael Anne Holly.⁵ Affordance theory is favourable in studies of liturgical art, because it is a perceptual theory that focuses on interaction between the individual and other humans as well as other objects in the environment. This provides new approaches to reception studies of medieval imagery.

After a short presentation of the reredos and of affordance theory, I will discuss the artefact in relation to the theory. Four signifying aspects related to four levels of meaning making provided by functional cues (affordances) of the reredos will be explored. The first level is provided by cues related to the materiality of the reredos. The second is generated by cues of its constructive elements. The third is a level of signification communicated by the figurative dimension of the reredos, i.e. its iconography and the visual appearance of its sculpted figures. The fourth level is generated by affordances connected to the physical location of the reredos in the church of Vålse.



Fig. 1. The Church of Vålse, Lolland-Falster, Denmark The reredos of Vålse. First position. Ca. 1475. On the altar in the Church of Vålse. Photo: Jens Bruun.

The Reredos from Vålse

From a distance the reredos from Vålse looks like most preserved reredoses from the late fifteenth century; however, upon closer inspection some individualities are evident as well. In its



Fig. 2. The Church of Vålse, Lolland-Falster, Denmark The reredos of Vålse. Second position. Ca. 1475. On the altar in the Church of Vålse. Photo: Jens Bruun.

open position it is decorated with polychrome sculptures. The outside of the wings and the predella are polychrome. The central panel of the corpus is a narrative scene, or *historia*. The other sculptures and paintings in the reredos are representational figures, or *imaginis*.⁶ In addition to the central narrative field (the only *historia* of the reredos), the corpus encompasses four smaller niches, two above each other on each side. The central field displays a crowded Calvary scene. Each niche is occupied by a saint figure – St Christopher and St Olav are to the left, and St Anne and St Nicholas are to the right. The 12 apostles occupy the niches on the insides of the wings. The Virgin with child and St John the Evangelist are painted on the outside of the wings. Each saint, except for the two painted ones, is identified by an inscription below escorted by the prayer “ora pro nobis”, meaning “pray for us”. The painting on the predella is a representation of the veil of Veronica held by two flying angels.

The crowded Calvary scene consists of 17 figures, distributed on 3 main fields. Underneath the scene is written: “Maria mater XPI Iohannes evangelista Maria Magdalena Maria Salome Maria Cleoph”. At the top of the picture, Christ the crucified is flanked by the two crucified thieves. Below on the left are the mourners and on the right, the executioners. Following pictorial convention, Christ is crucified on a Latin cross with three spikes and dressed in a loincloth, while the two thieves are tied to T-shaped crosses and are wearing small underpants.⁷ There are wounds on the legs and arms of the thieves from swords and sticks used to break their bones. The Virgin Mary dominates in front among the mourners in the lower left field. Fainting, she is supported by St John the Apostle and Mary Salome behind her. The third person on this row is St Mary Magdalene. There are three people in the back row. Longinus is to the left, stabbing Christ’s chest (the sword is now missing). His helper is in the middle, followed by St Mary Cleophas on the right.

The field on the right side displays three rows of executioners. To the left, in the front row stands Stephaton with a bucket of vinegar. He is lifting the right hand as if holding the lance with the sponge (both now missing) feeding Christ. Beside him is Pontius Pilatus, dressed as a Jewish high priest talking to an anonymous man at his side.⁸ Behind them are five soldiers in two rows.

The medieval stone Church of Vålse is situated on the northern part of the island of Falster and is dedicated to St Olav. In the middle ages, the Danish king was the largest landowner in the area, and the parish was a royal judicial district.⁹ Thus, there is reason to believe that the crown granted *jus*

patronatus, or the right to appoint priests, at Vålse even if there is no distinct evidence of it.¹⁰ The historian Morten Pedersen suggests that the dedication to St Olav is based on the dedication of a previous church at the site.¹¹ Many churches in Denmark were named after St Olav at the time when Olav’s son, King Magnus the Fair, won the crucial victory over the Wends at Hedeby in 1043. In addition, Pedersen links the dedication of the church to Falster’s geographic position close to the Northern German and Polish areas.¹² Not far from the church there are remains of medieval fortifications that, according to the historian Tore Nyberg, probably were used as protection against potential threats from the Wends.¹³

Affordance theory

Affordance theory was not specifically made for church interiors, but it can be applied in this context. Introduced as a part of the field of visual and ecological perception, it is a way of studying how a human or an animal interacts with the environment in order to survive, find a spouse or to solve practical problems in everyday life.¹⁴ Here it will be used to show how the medieval churchgoer might have interacted with the church interior – exemplified by a *reredos* that was a part of the interior – while performing liturgical and devotional tasks. The theory has been rarely used in art history, but it has been adapted to several other fields, especially human computer interaction (HCI), multimodal research, industrial design and landscape architecture.¹⁵ The first time I noticed the theory was when I read *The Design of Every Day Things* by the psychologist and engineer Donald Norman, a book that had nothing to do with medieval art.¹⁶

An affordance is a visual clue as to the function of an object.¹⁷ Humans or animals can perceive this function. The handle of a cup as well as the volume it contains are examples of affordances of a cup. They indicate to the observer how, and how not, to use the cup. The relation between the object and the observer has an interactive character and is seen as a part of a larger system of objects and perceiving subjects, such as many drinking people, chairs, tables, coffee, water and biscuits. When a thirsty man perceives a cup with a handle, he most likely fills the space inside the cup with drinkable liquid and grabs it by the handle. The cup, now filled with liquid, has temporarily acquired new qualities – it has become heavier and will lose its liquid if it is turned upside down.

According to Gibson, the affordance is a stable part of the object in the physical world, not depending on whether it is perceived or not.¹⁸ He suggests that the qualities of objects that we normally pay attention to are those that afford us, i.e. those that are important to us when we perceive the object.¹⁹ Examples of affording objects are flat surfaces, cliffs, air, water, mud, stone, flames, smoke, artefacts, animals and humans.²⁰ Flat surfaces afford stable bases on which to stand. Cliffs afford danger (if one could fall) or obstruction (if one is standing in front of it). Air affords breathing and flying. Water affords drinking, washing, swimming, sailing and drowning. Manmade artefacts such as knives and cups afford cutting and drinking respectively.

Different species perceive different cues of an object. The set of affordances fitting one species, like humans, is termed a niche.²¹ Several niches, fitting different species, exist in the same environment. Every affordance in a niche is not available for all organisms

of its species at all times. They depend on the agent's abilities and interests. For instance, an adult can use a knife properly, an infant cannot.

Affordances of fellow humans

The most elaborate sets of affordances, in a human niche, are those of other people.²² Unlike lifeless objects, such as artefacts or stones, our shape and surface are continuously changing, as we move from place to place, shift posture and change facial expressions. However, our fundamental shape stays the same. The bodies of humans and animals are subject to the laws of mechanics in other ways than other objects. This is so obvious that infants almost immediately learn to distinguish humans and animals from plants and lifeless things, and as Gibson writes "When touched, (...) [other people] touch back, when struck, they struck back, in short they interact with the observer and with each other".²³ The other person is a different kind of object than dead things, because he or she has an agency of his or her own and a potential to react in unforeseeable ways. There is reciprocity between reacting on visual cues from other people on the one hand and other people's reaction to our visual signals on the other. Perceiving such complex mutual affordances is, according to Gibson, based on an on-going pickup of information from touch, sound, odour, taste and ambient light.²⁴

Affordance theory was inspired by the work of gestalt psychologists of the 1930s, who recognized that the meaning of things seemed to be grasped as early as their colour.²⁵ One of them, Kurt Koffka wrote that each thing says what it is.²⁶ A fruit says, "eat me"; water says, "drink me"; thunder says, "fear me". A step invites a two-year-old

infant to climb on it or jump down from it. The mailbox *invites* the mailing of a letter; the handle *wants* to be grasped. Things *tell* us what to do with them. They have what Koffka calls a *demand character* or an *invitation character*.²⁷

By that he means a kind of vector related to perceiving the object that either pushes the observer towards or away from it.²⁸ If it is disgusting or dangerous the observer was pushed away, and if it was perceived as necessary or tempting he or she is attracted. According to Gibson, the concept of demand character is somewhat related to the concept of affordance, despite two differences.²⁹ While affordance is understood as stable, the demand character is understood as changing according to the needs of the observer. In addition, affordance is understood as a physical reality, while the phenomenological demand character is regarded as only existing in the mind. Thus the phenomenological mailbox, on the one hand, only has a demand character when the observer needs to post a letter, and its demand character is related to a phenomenological, not a physical mailbox. The affordance, on the other hand, is present all the time in a physical mailbox, and it is there to be perceived when the observer needs to mail a letter.

Even if the difference between the two is crucial, it is perhaps not larger than the difference between the many uses of affordance among Gibson's followers.³⁰ It has varied, according to whether the construct is understood as only existing when it is perceived, or if it can exist without an observer. William Gaver has partly clarified the construct by introducing three different categories.³¹ Perceptible affordance only consists of the functional cues of which a user is aware; hidden affordance is an action

possibility not perceived by the agent, while the last is the perception of a non-existing action possibility (like a placebo button). One might say that a handle demands to be grasped whether it is regarded as a phenomenon or a physical object.

The reredos at Vålse was a part of the environment of the interior of the church. Consisting of several visual and touchable cues that could tell the user about what could happen to it, and how he or she, or someone else, could operate it, the reredos had its own affordances or demand characters.

Matter and spirit

In the Middle Ages, exegetic literature dealt with far more than understanding the Holy Scripture.³² It articulated a perception of the entire created world, including liturgy, liturgical instruments and the creatures of the world. It also explained the world from the perspective of the history of salvation, i.e. the period from the creation to doomsday. A main structure of the system was based on a dichotomy between the material and the spiritual referred to respectively as *sensus historicus* and *sensus spiritualis*.³³ As a principal, *sensus spiritualis* was a symbolic reality beyond the biblical letter, the liturgical actions and the created things that constituted *sensus historicus*. Separated into several levels, symbolic reality was understood as manifestations of the mysteries of God in the world. Liturgical artefacts were small parts of such an extensive sign system and worked as meeting points of communication between the congregation and the Holy – almost like an interface between heaven and earth.

The focus of the Mass was Christ and the communion; the role of a reredos was auxiliary and it was not the only affording object

in the church. It played part in a complex liturgical system involving several senses with the intention of praising the Lord.³⁴ The church interior, other people, light and incense were specimens of other such objects. One example was the division of the interior into a large nave and a smaller chancel that signalled two different levels of access to the altar, creating a tension between proximity and distance to the Host. Other examples were the ecclesial clothing of the priest as well as the secrecy of his rituals and language that made the ceremony even more inaccessible to commoners. Such details of architecture, clothing and human behaviour were demand characters or vectors that were pushing as well as attracting the attention of laymen and women away from and towards the Altar and the Host.

Gestures and postures of the priest and his clerk signalled different liturgical incidents, most importantly the elevation. The kneeling of the priest in front of the Altar with his back to the congregation, lifting the hand with the Host while reading “hoc est corpus meum” signalled the consecration of the Host. The same did the accompanying sound and sight of the bell that was rung by the clerk, as well as the elevation of the candle he was holding in his other hand to lit up the Host. The churchgoer that responded by kneeling and gazing at the Host, and praying loud and intense probably conformed to other laymen and women behaving the same way next to him or her. With this complex scenario in mind the signifying aspects of meaning making provided by functional cues of the Vålse reredos alone can be investigated.

On a level of materiality, some perceivable properties of the Vålse reredos relate to the medieval beholder’s familiarity with materials. The artefact is mainly made of oak and

coloured by paint and gold leaf. Related to the user’s familiarity with oak and other wooden structures, he or she can make more or less conscious assumptions about its weight, the degree of strength, fragility and its vulnerability related to fire and humidity. The combination of gilding and polychrome in the surfaces was brought to life by the play of natural light from the windows and lit candles. Regardless of this obvious oak-like, painted, gilded and reflecting character, the sculptures are shaped like human beings. There must have been ambivalence between the perception of the materiality of the figures and the perception of their naturalistic moulding and colouring – between their pure materiality and what they represent. This is analogue to a tension between matter and spirit.³⁵

On a level of construction, the reredos could also display how it has been formed and put together. Cues could tell the churchgoer that the figures were attached to the plinth, and how the different parts of the cabinet structure were joined together in order to give space to the figures. Several visual cues, like the hinges and the narrow vertical glimpse between the two wings as well as the box-like shape of the corpus, could invite the user to open and close the wings. This told the beholder that the reredos was manmade and material – and also that it was proper and expensive craftsmanship given to the church to praise the Lord.³⁶ The user could compare the reredos to similar reredos he or she had seen other places, or to previous uses of the same reredos. The opening and closing system and the display of two different polychrome surfaces in the first and second position can be linked to the medieval sign system. They can articulate a transmission from one level of the sign to another.

According to Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen, revealing and subsequent concealing are two opposing visual conditions working in relation to each other.³⁷ In the Middle Ages withholding the sacred, not only from the hands but also from the eyes of the faithful, became as ritually significant and spiritually meaningful as displaying it.³⁸ It all took part in what Peter Brown has termed as a “therapy of distance”, a carefully maintained tension between proximity and distance to the Holy.³⁹ The onlooker was kept in a state of mystical suspense.⁴⁰

Visual points of contact

The images of a reredos were instrumental in the liturgical system, providing grace and security to the Christian. They served as points of contact between the local congregation and the Church Triumphant in heaven.⁴¹ An *imago*, like those in Vålse, was supposed to bring about a memory of the represented person in the mind of the beholder.⁴² This was not only related to the past but also to an eschatological promise of the future. As such a memory, it was not related to historic time, but to *aevum*, the mode of existence of the saints and the angels in heaven.⁴³ *Imaginis* were usually represented frontally, gazing at and confronting the beholder, and shaped like real humans. This articulates a specific demand character of such figures that make them very present, as if each figure is saying: “I am alive! I am here! I am the person I represent! Communicate with me!” As simultaneously present in the church of Vålse and timeless in heaven, they symbolize the presence of the Holy during the rituals.

Yet, the same demand character of *imaginis* could also transform them into idols. Their presence and naturalism could be so

convincing that some beholders could ignore the fact that they were made of oak, and start believing that they were, in fact, the Holy persons they represented. This reveals a kind of redundant potential of the demand character, supplying the image with a surplus of meaning that could transform the function of the sculpture from representation to presentation. To an outsider from the modern age, such cues of an image may appear as false affordances or like placebo buttons (see above), but to many medieval Christians they were regarded as real. It could be difficult for Christians to distinguish between if they should worship the representational image of Holy persons or only the Holy persons themselves, even if the latter alternative was prescribed by the church.⁴⁴ The church made the distinction even more obscure by prescribing several deviations from the rule, such as claiming that praying in front of some specific images was rewarded by indulgence (see below).

The mass in heaven and on earth

Lined up in two rows, each saint underneath their own arch, the composition of the figures in the Vålse reredos signifies a kind of heavenly community. There is a spatial relationship between them, defined by similar size, space and framing. As such they indicate Holy persons performing a heavenly liturgy. Visually they appear as if they are standing in choir stalls in a cathedral – a kind of furniture known to late medieval churchgoers.⁴⁵ Located on the altar, where the parish priest performed the daily mass, the lines of figures on the reredos represented the participation of the Church Triumphant during the Eucharist in the church at Vålse.

According to the Swedish theologian Alf Hårdelin, the main function of a reredos was to focus on parts of the theological content of the mass.⁴⁶ This function is almost obvious since the spacious placement of a reredos is at the back part of the top of the altar, the site of the communion. Thus it is the communion that is happening in the immediate front of the reredos. In some way or another, all the images in the Vålse reredos are relevant to the mass; we have already seen that the rows of *imaginis* express the Eucharistic union between heaven and earth. Even so, it is the crowded Calvary scene in the middle and the veil of Veronica on the predella that have the most obvious Eucharistic references to the incarnation, the consecration as well as to the union between the Church Triumphant and the Church Militant.

The incarnation, that is Christ becoming flesh, is primarily related to the annunciation; however, it is also celebrated by focusing on the body of Christ during the communion. In the Calvary scene at Vålse, this is articulated through the exposing of the body of Christ and the spilling of His blood. Hanging on the cross, most of Christ's body is left naked. He is also bleeding from his five stigmas. The incarnation involves a transformation from one condition to another – from only being spirit to becoming both body and spirit. This transformation is paralleled by the transformation of the Host through the consecration; the Host is changed from being bread to being the Holy body of Christ – even if it still looks like bread. In front of the altar the priest is lifting up the host during the consecration part of the *canon*. In the image this is paralleled by Longinus, who is stabbing his lance into the side of Christ, and thus draining blood from the body. Together these two

incidents tell the churchgoers about related transformations both during the historic crucifixion and during every Eucharist.⁴⁷

Even if the blind soldier Longinus was one of the executioners, and the one who gave Christ the fifth stigma, he was later considered as the first convert to Christianity and the first to enjoy salvation.⁴⁸ According to tradition, one drop of blood fell from Christ into his eyes and made him see again. The interactions between Longinus and Christ via suffering, spilling of blood and salvation mirror the actions of the priest. The latter is lifting up the Host that has been changed by heavenly intervention and has become the body of Christ containing power to save as well as to heal. The local congregation of Christians is represented by the Virgin Mary, St John the Evangelist and the other mourners on the left side of the Calvary scene. Those on the right side are heathens, but with a potential for salvation. There are several paradoxes on both sides. Longinus is both good and bad, and Stephaton, his parallel on the other side of the picture, is also both good and bad. This is demonstrated by the different interpretations of the deeds of the latter in the gospels, as well as in late medieval pictures where he occasionally occurs on the left side and occasionally on the right of such scenes. His act of feeding Christ with a sponge of vinegar is perceived as a good as well as a bad deed; good because he was feeding Christ and bad because he was mocking him.⁴⁹ This complexity reflects the Christian view of humankind as corrupted by sin on the one hand and in need of mercy – and with the potential to receive it – on the other. By participating in the communion either by receiving the Host or by eye witnessing it being consecrated, churchgoers at Vålse could strengthen their bonds to the church as

well as increase their resilience towards worldly challenges like famines, diseases and war. The reredos reminded them of the importance of the mass.

The veil of Veronica on the predella is also related to the Eucharist, especially to the unification of heavenly and worldly liturgies. It visualizes one of the prayers said during *canon* after the consecration, *Supplices te rogamus*.⁵⁰ A part of this prayer is an invocation to the Lord to let the gifts (of Eucharist) be carried by the hands of Holy angels up to the altar before the face of the divine majesty. On the predella the Holy face represents the Eucharistic gift being brought up to the Lord's Altar by flying angels. As such, the image is denoting a translation of the Host from a material to a spiritual state, since the angels holding the relic are flying, and thus lifting the veil.

Negotiating life after death

Another meaning of the latter picture, and partly of the other representational figures in the reredos, is related to indulgence. Indulgence was a way of reducing the punishment for sins, mainly the temporal punishment in Purgatory. Purgatory was believed to be a temporary state after death for those who were destined for heaven but not completely without sin. In other words, every Christian except the saints (who were almost without sin) had to spend time in purgatory after death before entering heaven. In the Purgatory, the dead Christian underwent a process of purification through punishment to become worthy of entering heaven.

One way of reducing time in Purgatory was to pray in front of indulgence images. The painting on the predella of the Vålse reredos appears to have been such an image. Praying

a prescribed prayer while performing a recommended set of actions in front of it were supposed to reduce the purgatorial stay for the Christian who prayed, or for the one on whose behalf he or she prayed. The veil of Veronica, also known as *vera icon*, was the most widespread indulgence motif of the late Middle Ages.⁵¹ Its main features are a bearded face of Christ surrounded by a halo, occasionally including an inscribed Greek cross, on a background that more or less appears like a piece of cloth. This combination of visual features suggested the function of the motif to medieval Christians; it signalled that the image could help them to reduce the time in the Purgatory if used in a proper way.

In the West, the fame of the motif was related to an alleged miracle in Rome in 1216.⁵² Its assumed prototype that was used during a procession from the Cathedral of St Peter to Ospedale di s. Spirito suddenly turned upside down. This and other miracles inspired the pope to grant an indulgence of 10 days to everyone who looked at the motif when they read the prayer *Ave facies praeclara* that he had written for the occasion. During the following three centuries, new prayers to the picture were composed, and the amount of indulgences grew to 30,000 years at the most.

It was the motif of the veil of Veronica that was related to indulgences, not necessarily the original painting in Rome.⁵³ Thus the presence of an image with the motif as an illustration in a book or painting on an altarpiece in the local church (such as the one at Vålse) would be adequate. Actually the Danish Brigittine nun Anna Brahe at the nearby monastery of Maribo at Lolland, Denmark, copied a fifteenth century prayer to the Veil of Veronica; it granted 17 years and 36 days of indulgence.⁵⁴ Even if the indulgences granted for

saying a prescribed prayer in front of a Veronica seems to have been a general practice in Western Europe, the appearance of Anne Brahe's prayer in the same district as Vålse indicates even more that the predella at Vålse was related to indulgences.

Similar approaches might have been used in relation to some of the saint figures of the reredos individually, regardless of whether they were related to specific indulgences. Underneath each of them it is written the prayer "ora pro nobis" (pray for us), which indicates the intercession of the saint. In this context, an intercession means that a saint mediates or intercedes between God and the person praying in order to make the prayer more effective.

The phrasing could be related to the prayer to the saints during mass or to extra liturgical devotions. Every mass in the Middle Ages contained prayers for the dead in purgatory. In the liturgy, this is emphasized through the prayer *Memento etiam domine* (Remember too, Lord) during *canon*.⁵⁵ The priest was praying on behalf of the dead of the local community. He could, on his own initiative, mention the name of someone in particular in the current mass. Another related prayer in *canon* is *Communicantes* (in community with). It invoked the Church Triumphant in heaven, consisting of the saints. The display of "ora pro nobis" underneath each representing figure is, just like the Veil of Veronica on the predella, a visual cue suggesting how the reredos can be used.

Representing human interaction

Experience with affordances of other people – i.e. with their facial expressions, communicative gestures, attitudes and movements – provides a horizon of understanding to the

representations of humans in the reredos. As we recall, fellow humans offer some of the most elaborate sets of affordances in a human niche, according to Gibson. A man or a woman can adapt his or her elastic appearance to changing expressions, such as hostility and friendliness. Sculptures imitating human appearances might signal similar human intentions. Social competence could be transformed from everyday life to the cultic realm and the relation between the churchgoer and the *imago*. As representations of human appearances in a social or an interactive setting, the *imaginis* must have demanded an appropriate reaction from their beholders. Their gazes and facial expressions signalled dispositional characteristics such as authority, dignity and directness. A proper reaction to such utterances in the Middle Ages was humbleness, which was also the prescribed attitude in front of an altar. Such humbleness was generally expressed through kneeling, lighting a candle and praying.⁵⁶

In the Calvary scene at Vålse, human appearance and interaction among figures in the picture functioned as models of proper and improper behaviour. In this image, the figures mainly communicate with each other, not with the beholder. They display what Wolfgang Kemp calls the inner communication of the work of art.⁵⁷ The image consists of people who give each other signs, things that are signs, and events that are communication. Kemp emphasizes that the essence of such inner communication of art is that it takes place under the eyes of the beholder.⁵⁸ In the light of his or her general social competence, the beholder of the reredos from Vålse could study how the mourners responded to the death of Christ by making sad faces, and how St John the Evangelist helped the fainting Virgin by holding her to prevent her falling to

the ground. He or she could also observe the lack of reaction to Christ's death by Pontius Pilatus and the one with whom he was communicating. According to Jens Bruun, the foreground of crowded Calvary scenes generally functioned as mirrors, in which the churchgoers could reflect on human reactions on the death of Christ.⁵⁹ As such they served to help late medieval piety performers to increase their empathy for Christ by visualizing his suffering and the compassion of Mary and the other saints. Saints that were regarded as imitating the ideal of Christ should be seen as models for the behaviour of ordinary Christians. Just as the mourning saints in the picture displayed how the Christian devotees could mourn Christ, the executioners displayed how one should not behave.

Affordances of a maritime landscape

In regard to location, the reredos has its geographical connection to Vålse as well as to its place at the high altar inside the church room. Situated at the northwestern tip of the island of Falster, the location of Vålse has several affordances related to sailing and access to the sea. The sea affords long distance movement, fishing and trade as well as drowning and invasions by seafaring enemies. This can be related to parts of the iconography of the church at the site. As previously mentioned, the church was dedicated to St Olaf, arguably as a protection against the threat from the Wends in the southeast.⁶⁰ This military aspect is underlined by the presence of ruins of fortifications not far from the church. In addition, one of the many capabilities of St Olaf was as a protector of sailors.⁶¹ Thus the dedication of the church to him and the sculpture of him in the reredos had

a double relevance to the site, related to defence as well as to sailing.

Nevertheless, St Olaf was not the only maritime saint represented in the reredos. Both St Anne and St Nicholas were closely related to the sea.⁶² In many Northern European maritime towns, the two was combined; St Nicholas became the patron saint of the captain of the ship, while St Anne protected ordinary sailors.⁶³ Another characteristic of the latter was her alleged ability to protect and increase the wealth of her devotees.⁶⁴ St Christopher, the fourth saint represented by the *imagineis* of the corpus, was known as "Christ-bearer" both due to the legend of his carrying the Child Christ across a body of water and to his enormous physical strength. He was primarily the protector of wayfarers and pilgrims. Nevertheless, he also embodied lesser known abilities, such as the capability to protect sea captains and sailors. As one of the 14 Holy helpers, he was not only called upon in case of plague but also in case of storm, and he protected against sudden death. Hence there are several characteristics of St Christopher that links him to travelling at sea as well as on land. Consequently, three, or perhaps all four, of the representational figures of the corpus are closely related to maritime activities.

These images appear to be related to local circumstances linking the church to the local community, while the rest of the iconography has a more general Christian character mainly related to the communion. An exception might be the Veronica on the predella that indicates a particular devotional situation related to indulgences at Vålse as well as its Eucharistic relevance. According to the art historian Henrik von Achen, parts of the general image program of a reredos can be regarded as a kind of a circumstantial

iconography.⁶⁵ This means that the choice of motifs probably was made due to specific liturgical and socioeconomic arrangements related to the altar on which it was supposed to stand. The four cult statues in the corpus (St Christopher, St Olaf, St Anne and St Nicholas) appear to have been related to the parochial defence situation and the maritime location of Vålse. Their attributes, identifying who they are, are affordances that are linked to central affordances of the location of Vålse, such as the sea and the coastline. The Calvary scene in the middle as well as the apostle figures on the insides of the wings and the paintings of the Virgin and St John the Evangelist are mainly related to the Roman mass in general.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to outline a new analytical approach to liturgical artefacts from the Middle Ages, where the theory of affordance is employed in order to investigate medieval perceptions of physical images. Its essential focus is on how the object was functional to its user. The theory suggests that we have a tendency to focus on the qualities of objects (functional cues or affordances) in the environment that are important to us when we perceive the object, and we more or less disregard the rest. Important qualities of the reredos from Vålse have been discussed at four different levels of meaning making. The levels are related to the perception of the materiality of the reredos, its construction, the signification communicated by its figurative dimension, i.e. its iconography and the visual appearance of its sculptured figures, and by affordances connected to its physical location in the church of Vålse.

At a level of materiality, perceivable properties of the reredos were related to the

acquaintance a medieval beholder had with materials such as wood, gold leaf and paint. The viewer must also have been able to estimate some physical qualities of the artefact, such as how hard and heavy it was, its stability and its temperature. At a level of construction, cues of the reredos indicated how it had been put together as well as how it could be used. The processes of moving the wings, and subsequently concealing or revealing the images inside, were adjusting the perceived amount of closeness and distance to the Holy. At a level of signification communicated by the figurative dimension of the reredos, the motifs were related to the liturgical and devotional use. Important functional cues or affordances were the human-like shape and the confronting gaze of the figures. They signalled the presence of the Holy in the church and demanding the Christian to adopt a subordinate attitude towards them. The physical location of the reredos in the church interior and of the site of the church appears to have been related to the parochial defence situation and the maritime location of Vålse.

In my view, this focus can supply researchers with new knowledge about liturgical artefacts. A focus on perception is of great importance in relation to a purely material perspective on medieval art, mainly because human perception is our only window into the artefact. Material art can be many things, but we only have access to what we perceive of it. Exploring how we perceive the thing is thus giving us more information about its material aspects. Compared to an iconographic approach, an affordance perspective is less related to text and more connected to the shape and material of the object. Its meaning is related to the observer and his or her resources and interests in his or her niche. Focus is directed towards functional

cues of the object, suggesting what it is and how it can be used.


Endnotes

1. James J. Gibson, "The Theory of Affordances", Robert Shaw and John Bransford (eds.), *Perceiving, Acting and Knowing. Towards an Ecological Psychology*, New York, 1977.
2. *Danmarks Kirker VIII*, "Maribo", 1951, pp. 1208–1210; Sissel F. Plathe and Jens Bruun, *Danmarks Middelalderlige Altartavler*, Vol. 2, 2010, pp. 1204–1206. [About post reformation adaptations (*Danmarks kirker VIII*, 1951, pp. 1208–1210).]
3. *Danmarks kirker VIII*, 1951, pp. 1255–1257; Sissel F. Plathe and Jens Bruun, *Danmarks Middelalderlige Altartavler*, Vol. 1, 2010, pp. 140–142.
4. *Danmarks kirker VIII*, 1951, pp. 1137, 1139; Plathe and Bruun, 2010, p. 1037.
5. W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want*, Chicago and London, 2005; Wolfgang Kemp, "The Work of Art and its Beholder: The Methodology of the Aesthetic of Reception", Mark A. Cheetham (ed.), *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 180–196; Michael Anne Holly, *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image*, Ithaca and London, 1996.
6. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, E. Jephcott (transl.), Chicago and London (orig. *Bild und Kult: Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*, München, 1990), 1994, p. 10; Herbert L. Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing. Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art*, Pennsylvania, 2000, p. 1; Panofsky describes the two genres as "Historienbildes" and "Representationsbildes" (Erwin Panofsky, "Imago Pietatis. Ein Beitrag zur Typengeschichte des Schmerzensmanns und des Maria Mediatrix", *Festschrift für Max Friedländer*, Leipzig, 1927, p. 264).
7. Jens Bruun, "Den Figurrige Golgatascene: og de altartavler, hvori den er hovedmotiv", Sissel F. Plathe and Jens Bruun (eds.), *Middelalderlige altartavler i Haderslev stift. Temaer og Katalog*, Herning, 2003, p. 83. Plathe and Bruun write that the direction of gaze and bodily attitudes of the thieves indicate that their position on the reredos has been exchanged (Plathe and Bruun, Vol 2, 2010, p. 1204).
8. Even if he was a Roman official, he sometimes was represented as a Jewish high priest in some late medieval reredos (Bruun, 2003, p. 83).
9. *Danmarks kirker VIII*, 1951, p. 1202.
10. *Danmarks kirker VIII*, 1951, p. 1202.
11. Morten Pedersen, "Det tidlige kirkebyggeri og sognedannelsen på Falster", Kurt Villads Jensen og John Lind (eds.), *Venderne og Danmark: et tværfagligt seminar (Mindre skrifter ud af Center for Middelalderstudier, Syddansk)*, Odense 20, 2000, p. 42.
12. Pedersen, 2000, p. 42.
13. Pedersen, 2000, p. 42; Tore Nyberg, "Olavskulten i Danmark under medeltiden" i Rumar, Lars (ed.), *Helgonet i Nidaros. Olavskult og kristnande i Norden*, Stockholm, 1997, pp. 53–82.
14. Gibson, 1977, p. 67.
15. Donald Norman, *The Design of Every Day Things*, New York, 2013 (1988), pp. 10–23. Human computer interaction is a term that was introduced in: Stuart K. Card, Thomas P. Moran and Allen Newell, *The Psychology of Human-Computer Interaction*, Hillsdale, NJ, 1983. It involves study, planning, design and use of the interaction between people and computers. It is often a combination of computer sciences, behavioural sciences, design, media studies and several other fields. Günter Kress elaborated the construct in multimodal research in: Gunter Kress, *Literacy in the New Media Age*, London and New York, 2003. Here the affordances are related to the modes of verbal language (spoken or written) and the visual picture. The affordance of the first is a sequence of words in sentences related to time, and the latter of visual cues arranged in space (Kress, 2003, pp. 1–8). The literary scholars Ellen Spolsky and Elaine Scarry have used the term in analyses of pictorial art as well as literature in their cross-disciplinary studies (Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, New York, 1985; Ellen Spolsky, "The Affordances of Images: Religious Imagery and Iconoclasm from a Cognitive Perspective", Chanita Goodblatt and Howard Kreisel (eds.), *Religious Cultures and Heterodoxy: Judaism and Christianity in the Early Modern Period*, Beersheba, 2006, pp. 353–366). Early in the 1970s, there was a controversy between art historian Ernst Gombrich and Gibson, but that was before Gibson introduced the theory of affordance (Richard Woodfield, "Introduction to the Debate", electronic, read 27.04.2016 in *The Gombrich Archive*, University of Birmingham, Copyright 2005, The Gombrich Archive, <https://gombrich.co.uk/gombrichgibson-dispute/>); Affordance in Design and Web design: Jonathan R. A. Maier and Georges M. Fadel, "Affordance Based Design: A Relational Theory for Design", Research in English Design, London, 2008; Norman, 2013 (1988). Affordance in landscape architecture: Anne Dahl Refshauge, Ulrika K. Stigsdotter, Bettina Lamm and Kristin Thorleifsdottir, "Evidence-Based Playground Design: Lessons Learned from Theory to Practice", *Landscape Research*, Vol. 40, No 2, 2015, pp. 226–246.
16. Norman, 2013, pp. 10–23. Spolsky also deals with some of the topics that I do (Spolsky, 1985).
17. *The Free On-line Dictionary of Computing*, Affordance, Retrieved 27 September 2016 from Dictionary.com website <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/affordance>; Gibson introduced the construct of affordance for the first

- time in 1966 (James J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, Boston, 1966). This was before he introduced his theory of affordance. He writes: "I have coined this word [affordance] as a substitute for values, a term which carries an old burden of philosophical meaning. I mean simply what things furnish, for good or ill." (Gibson, 1966, p. 285).
18. Gibson, 1977, p. 67 and 78.
 19. Gibson, 1977, p. 75.
 20. Gibson, 1977, p. 68.
 21. Gibson, 1977, pp. 69–70.
 22. Gibson, 1977, pp. 75–76.
 23. Gibson, 1977, p. 76.
 24. Gibson, 1977, p. 76.
 25. According to Gibson, his theory can be distinguished from phenomenology because an affordance is a physical property while a phenomenon of phenomenology is understood as something happening inside the mind of the subject (Gibson, 1977, p. 78). He further writes that affordances are described in ecological physics, not classical physics (Gibson, 1977, p. 67).
 26. Gibson, 1977, p. 77; Kurt Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, New York, 1935, p. 353.
 27. Gibson, 1977, p. 77; Koffka, 1935, p. 353.
 28. Gibson, 1977, p. 78; Koffka, 1935, pp. 345–346.
 29. Gibson, 1977, p. 78; Koffka, 1935, pp. 345–346.
 30. William Gaver, "Technology Affordances", *CHI' 91. Conference Proceedings*, New York, 1991, pp. 80–81.
 31. Gaver, 1991, pp. 80–81.
 32. Alf Härdelin, *Världen som yta och fönster. Spiritualitet i medeltidens Sverige*, Stockholm, 2005, p. 273; Jean Leclercq, *Monks and Love in Twelfth-Century France. Psycho-Historical Essays*, Oxford, 1979, pp. 29–34; M.-D. Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century. Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West*, J. Taylor, L. K. Little (eds. & trans.), Chicago and London, 1968, pp. 99–102 and 141–144. Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis 1. The Four Senses of the Scripture*, M. Sebanc (transl.), Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1968. [orig. *Exégèse médiévale I. Les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, Paris, 1959], Vol 1, p. xix.
 33. Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1978 [1. ed. 1952], pp. 1–3.
 34. Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen, "Sensorium", Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen, Henning Laugerud and Laura Katrine Skinnebach, *The Saturated Sensorium. Principles of Perception and Mediation in the Middle Ages*, pp. 31–32, 45; Kristin Bliksrud Aavitsland, "Incarnation. Paradoxes of Perception and Mediation in Medieval Liturgical Art", Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen, Henning Laugerud and Laura Katrine Skinnebach, *The Saturated Sensorium. Principles of Perception and Mediation in the Middle Ages*, pp. 77–82.
 35. Herbert L. Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art*, Toronto, 2004, pp. 70–85.
 36. Kristin Bliksrud Aavitsland, "Materialitet og teofani. Om bruken av kostbare materialer i romansk alterutsmykning", *Kunst og kultur*, Vol. 2, 2007, p. 31.
 37. Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen, "Cultic Vision – Seeing as Ritual: Visual and Liturgical Experience in the Early Christian and Medieval Church", Nils Holger Petersen, Mette Birkedal Bruun, Jeromy Llewellyn, and Eyolf Oestrem (eds.), *The Appearances of Medieval Rituals: The Play of Construction and Modification*, 2004, pp. 182–188.
 38. Jørgensen, 2004, p. 182.
 39. Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints, Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Chicago, 1981, pp. 87–88; Jørgensen, 2004, p. 183.
 40. Brown, 1981, pp. 87–88; Jørgensen, 2004, p. 183.
 41. Herbert L. Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art*, Toronto, 2004, p. 66.
 42. Belting, 1994, p. 10.
 43. Barbara Nolan, *The Visionary Gothic Perspective*, Princeton, NJ, 1977, p. 39.
 44. As early as ca. 600 A.D. bishop Serenus of Marseilles decided to remove representational images from his church because people appeared to worship them (Celia Chazelle, "Pictures, Books and the Illiterate: Pope Gregory I's Letters to Serenus of Marseilles", *Word and Image*, Vol. 6, No 2, 1990, pp. 139–142). Also in the late middle ages Christians occasionally worshipped images, not only their prototypes (Kessler, 2004, pp. 70–74, 155–156).
 45. Rognald Heiseldal Bergesen, *Sangere i det himmelske Jerusalem: Funksjonsanalyser av middelalderinventaret i Trondenes kirke*, Thesis delivered for the Ph.D. degree, The University of Tromsø, December 2011, Tromsø, 2012, pp. 156–164.
 46. Alf Härdelin, "Mässoskåpet i Rytterne. En liturgiteologisk tolkning", O. Ferm, A. Paulsson, K. Ström (eds.), *Nya anteckningar om Rytterns socken. Medeltidsstudier tillägnade Göran Dahlbäck*, Västerås, 2002, pp. 225–226.
 47. Bruun, 2003, p. 83.
 48. Bruun, 2003, p. 83.
 49. Bruun, 2003, p. 83.
 50. Bergesen, 2012, pp. 168–169.
 51. Belting, 1994, p. 208.
 52. Its story started during the sixth century A.D. in the Byzantine areas and continued in the West from the thirteenth century (Belting, 1994, pp. 209–220; Alexa Sand, *Vision, Devotion and Self-Representation in Late*

- Medieval Art*, New York, 2014, p. 50). In the East it was named the *mandylion* or the Edessa motif, in the West, Veronica or *vera icon* and eventually the veil of Veronica. The apparent visual similarities between the two suggest a relation even if they were connected to different mythological traditions.
53. Sand, 2014, p. 46; Sixten Ringbom, "Bild og Avlat I. Veronikabilden", *ICO. Iconographisk Post*, Vol. 3, 1983, pp. 8–10.
 54. Karl Martin Nielsen, *Middelalderens danske bønnebøger. Med understøttelse af Carlsbergfondet. Udgivet af Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab 1–4*, Copenhagen, 1945–1963, pp. 65f and XXXI.
 55. John Harper, *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy from the Tenth to the Eighteenth Century. A Historical Introduction and Guide for Students and Musicians*, Oxford, 1991, pp. 125–126.
 56. Laura Katrine Skinnebach, "'The Solace of his Image': Images and Presence in Late Medieval Devotional Practice", *Instruments of Devotion, The Practices and Objects of Religious Piety from the Late Middle Ages to the 20th Century*, H. Laugerud, L. Skinnebach (red.), Aarhus, 2007, p. 192.
 57. Wolfgang Kemp, "The Work of Art and its Beholder. The Methodology of the Aesthetic of Reception", *The Subjects of Art History. Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*, M. A. Cheetham, M. A. Holly, K. Moxey (eds.), Cambridge, 1998, p. 186.
 58. Kemp, p. 186.
 59. Bruun, 2003, p. 83.
 60. Nyberg, 1997, pp. 53–82.
 61. Anne Lidén, "Sankt Olavs seglats i medeltida bild och legend. En bildpredikan i kyrkorummet", Øystein Ekroll (ed.), *Helgenkongen St. Olav i kunsten*, Trondheim, 2016, pp. 40–41.
 62. Nyberg, 1997, pp. 53–82; Pedersen, 2000, p. 42.
 63. Virginia Nixon, *Mary's Mother. Saint Anne in the Late Medieval Europe*, Pennsylvania, 2004, p. 18.
 64. Nixon, 2004, pp. 77–78.
 65. Henrik von Achen, "Helgenikonografi og moralteologi. Kirkekunstens teologiske funksjoner – en ikonologisk skisse", *Tro og bilde i Norden i Reformasjonens århundre*, M. Blindheim, E. Hohler and L. Lillie (eds.), Oslo, 1991, pp. 10–13.

ORCID

Rognald Heiseldal Bergesen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2839-5473>

Summary

A medieval reredos from Vålse in Denmark is used as a case to test if the theory of affordance can shed light on how medieval Christians perceived images. An affordance is a visual clue to the function of a physical object; it suggests how the object can be used. Humans can identify affordances when seeing objects in their environment. Four signifying aspects of the reredos will be explored: the first is related to the perception of the materiality of the reredos, the second to its construction, the third to the figurative dimension of the reredos and the fourth to visual clues related to the location of the reredos in the church interior. The reredos from Vålse consists of a main part (*corpus*) and two wings. It is decorated with polychrome carved figures and polychrome paintings. The focus on affordance emphasizes that beholders were able to estimate several physical qualities of the reredos, such as its stability, weight and tactility. It suggests how it is put together and how its wings can be opened and closed. Its figurative motifs were linked to both liturgical and devotional use. The human-like shape and the confronting gaze of the figures were functional cues signalling the presence of the Holy. The location of the reredos in the church interior and of the site of the church itself were related to the defensive maritime location of Vålse. This focus on functional clues of a liturgical artefact relates the object to its original liturgical function.

Rognald Heiseldal Bergesen

The Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, ISK

UiT The Arctic University of Norway

Hansine Hansens veg 18,9019 Tromsø

Norway

E-mail: rognaldb@gmail.com