From Sacral Images to the Image of the Sacred: Elizabethan Visual Propaganda and Its Popular Perception

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The Reformation of the sixteenth century gave rise to two mutually exclusive (or at least contradictory) tendencies in the ecclesiastical and artistic life of Britain. First, the reformed Anglican Church, even though less resolutely than continental Protestants, rebutted sacral images such as the icons, sculptures of saints, or crucifixes that formerly adorned Catholic churches and served as objects of veneration for the faithful. Even though neither spontaneous iconoclastic outbursts under Henry VIII nor the forceful campaign against 'idolatry' under Edward VI[1] succeeded in total obliteration of images in Anglican churches, the essence and role of images in liturgical practice underwent a radical revision. Early confessional documents such as *The Ten Articles* and *The Book of Homilies* composed by Thomas Cranmer and apologetic treatises by Anglican theologians all refused to grant images any holiness. Even though their presence in a church was allowed, images were not to be worshipped or treated with too much reverence. Pictorial or sculptural images of Christ, the Virgin Mary or saints were equated with mundane material objects. Bishop John Jewell likened them to a book that narrates the events of sacred history but is not, in itself, an object of worship.[2] This viewpoint was made part of official royal proclamations and eventually became a law.[3]

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[1] On various aspects and stages of iconoclasm in England during the Reformation see J. Phillips, *The Reformation of Images: Destruction of Art in England, 1535 – 1660* (Berkeley, 1973); M. Aston, *The King's Bedpost: Reformation and Iconography in a Tudor Group Portrait* (Cambridge, 1993) (hereafter Aston, *The King's Bedpost*); E. Duffy, *Stripping the Altars* (New Haven, 1992) (hereafter Duffy, *Stripping the Altars*).

[2] *The Ten Articles* (1536) stated that "icons may be deemed capable of displaying images of virtue and the good example, of encouraging good thoughts, especially as regards the images of Christ and the Virgin Mary . . . as for incense and immoderate worshipping of images, the commoners should be diligently taught not to indulge in these." See *English Historical Documents,* vol. 5 (London, 1967), 780. The established Anglican stance on the essence of icons and other church images are exposed in the homilies "Of the right use of the church or temple of God, and of the reverence due unto the same" and "Against the peril of idolatry and superfluous decking of churches."

[3] *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, ed. P. L. Hughes and J. F. Larkin (New Haven, 1964-1969), vol. 1, No. 353.

Parallel to this development, one reconsidered the actual possibility of expressing the idea of the sacred through art. Human attempts to fathom and convey the image of the omnipotent and incomprehensible Creator were deigned unsuccessful and, as everywhere in protestant areas, English Bibles and religious texts ceased to display anthropomorphic pictures of the Godhead. They were replaced with Hebrew inscriptions denoting the divinity or other abstract symbols.[4] Thus, as far as theory is concerned, Anglican theology made a clean break with the visual tradition customary for the former ecclesiastical culture.

The second tendency in the Tudors' official propaganda and artistic policy contradicted the first. Strengthening the monarchy and calls to absolutism in sixteenth-century English political thought, the revived medieval theory of the divine nature of the royal power, and the assumption by the secular ruler of the functions of the head of the Church went along with the idea of the sacred nature of the king's person. To express and promulgate this idea, visual arts were indispensable. This tendency reached its peak under Elizabeth I, although her predecessors had made some initial steps in this direction. Not infrequently did courtly painters and engravers represent Henry VIII and Edward VI as Old Testament characters – heroes and the wise and pious kings Solomon and Hosea – using iconographic formulas traditional for these cases.[5] The art of the first half of the sixteenth century did not, however, sacralize the royal person. Elizabethan propaganda went further by creating an image of the queen as a trans-terrestrial and indeed a supernatural being. The literature and art of the period primarily borrowed from the rich trove of Classical images; the queen was likened to a variety of antique gods and goddesses. Leaving the pagan mythological component aside, this study focuses on how the official art made use of the symbols derived from Christian iconography designed to convey the idea of the sacred. I imply here such typical attributes and allegories of the creator, Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints as the pelican, the phoenix, the rose, the lily, the celestial sphere, and others. Particularly appealing in this context are those pictorial sources that were not intended for "internal" use within the limited courtly circles, but rather addressed a wider public. They may thus be seen as visual propaganda: engravings reproduced on the front pages of Bibles, political tracts, historical treatises, widely circulated portraits of the queen available in every store, memorial medals and medallions, stamps, and the like.

The problem of Christian symbolism in Elizabethan official art and its perception by the masses has not been fully researched, primarily because the most authoritative scholars have concentrated mainly on the formation of Elizabeth's cult in the elaborate and elitist courtly culture.[6] In recent decades, the

[4] This tendency is also reflected in the title page of the official edition of the Bible translated by Miles Coverdale (1535), wherefrom the antropomorphic image of the Godhead had disappeared.

[5] Aston, *The King's Bedpost.*

[6] E. Auerbach, *Tudor Artists: A Study of Painters in the Royal Service and of Portraiture on Illuminated Documents from the Accession of Henry VIII to the Death of Elizabeth I*

problem of power representation has been considered in the broader context of a dialogue between monarch and subjects, with the analysis focused particularly on the ruler's image as formed 'from below' as well as on 'competition for representation.' Still, the question as to how exactly official Elizabethan art affected popular culture has not yet been answered satisfactorily.[7] Furthermore, research into the Christian component of Elizabethan visual propaganda and its interpretation by contemporaries is more difficult because of the compound nature of the symbols listed above. As a rule, they had originated from the Classical mythological and literary tradition and only later were adopted by Christianity. Any of them could have given rise to a broad range of associations depending on who beheld it and what the cultural background of the 'recipient' was. For example, the phoenix, widely reproduced in engravings of the second half of the sixteenth century as Elizabeth's symbol, should have made highly educated courtiers recall Herodotus' *Histories* narrating the legend of the wonderful Arabian bird, or Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book 15, 393-402). In sixteenth-century English courtly poetry and drama the phoenix stood for such qualities as uniqueness, exceptionality, and matchlessness, the last in particular as applied to the ruling queen.[8] At the same time, the meaning acquired by this image in the Christian tradition – of eternal life, hope, constancy of faith, and resurrection – moved to the background in secular lyrics or was not referenced at all. It is likely, however, that the image of the phoenix would have prompted other associations in simple folk or even relatively well-educated townsfolk (hardly capable of quoting Herodotus or Ovid by heart, even though they might have been familiar with fragments from these authors studied in the second half of the sixteenth century in any grammar school). In the same way, mentioning the pelican could have reminded some people of Pliny's *Natural History*, some would have recited a line from Dante's *Paradise*: "This is he, who lay upon the bosom of

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(London, 1954); F. Yates, *Astraea: The Imperial Time in the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1975); R. Strong, *The English Icon, Elizabethan and Jacobean Portraiture* (London, 1967) (hereafter Strong, *The English Icon*); *idem*, *Portraits of Queen Elizabeth* (Oxford, 1963); Idem, *Tudor and Jacobean Portraits*, vol. 12 (London, 1969); *idem*, *Splendour at Court: Renaissance Spectacle and Illusion* (London, 1973); *idem*, *The Cult of Elizabeth* (London, 1977); *idem*, *The Tudor and Stuart Monarchy: Pageantry, Painting, Iconography*, 3 vols. (London, 1995); D. Howarth, *Images of Rule: Art and Politics in the English Renaissance, 1485 – 1649* (London, 1997).

[7] J. N. King, *Tudor Royal Iconography: Literature and Art in an Age of Religious Crisis* (Princeton, 1989); *idem,* "Queen Elizabeth: Representations of the Virgin Queen," *Renaissance Quarterly* 43 (1990): 30-74; M. Aston, *Faith and Fire: Popular and Unpopular Religion 1350 – 1600* (London, 1993); *idem*, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in the Medieval Religion* (London, 1984); S. Frye, *Elizabeth I: The Competition for Representation* (New York, 1993).

[8] A characteristic example of the use of this symbol is found in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, where Elizabeth is called the 'maiden phoenix'; W. Shakespeare, *King Henry the Eighth* (act 5, scene 3, line 40).

our Pelican . . .;" a highbrow theologian would, perhaps, have recalled the commentaries by St. Jerome or Thomas Aquinas.

Upon what grounds were the reactions and associations of the inexperienced and not-too-well educated beholders based? What was the background knowledge of those who contemplated wondrous birds on the portrait of the queen purchased for a few pence? The pelican tearing flesh from its own breast to feed its young on its blood was one of Elizabeth's favorite symbols. This image of the pelican, a commonly accepted allegory since the third century AD, shedding its blood for humankind and a symbol of the eucharistic sacrifice, did not enter Elizabethan artistic propaganda until the second half of the 1570s or early 1580s, the time when England's confrontation with the Catholic world reached its peak and the queen's own life was in danger. This context made it indispensable to stress Elizabeth's adherence to the true faith, her resolve, and her readiness to sacrifice her own life for the triumph of Protestantism. At this time, probably around 1575, Nicholas Hilliard painted the queen's portrait with a brooch of pelican on her bosom.[9] This painterly model was widely copied in engravings, and thereafter the pelican became a permanent attribute of Elizabeth's portraits. It was present in the cartouches framing her images on charters and patents, it figured among purely heraldic symbols, and appeared on the columns flanking the queen's figure in the engraving by Crispin van de Passe.

In contemporaries' eyes this allegory was full of Christian signification: on an obelisk with all the queen's symbols, produced for one of the royal festivities, the pelican was designated as 'pelican in piety'[10] – an unambiguous indication that this particular pelican was not that simple bird from *Natural History* whose young had died from snake's venom. Most beholders apparently had their associations based on other sources than the Classical mythological layer of the history of this image. It is quite probable that an important place among these sources was held by the texts of the Holy Scriptures, the commentaries on these, and sermons by Anglican parsons. The population's level of literacy, the accessibility of the text of the Scriptures in Elizabethan England, and a certain "bibliocentrism" of protestant culture in general, which made every Biblical word and notion an object of thorough interpretation and argument in debates on the true faith, probably made the reference to a pelican in a Biblical text, "I am like a pelican of the wilderness; I am like an owl of the desert" (Psalm 102:6), the most familiar to Englishmen of the period. Christ was also referred to by Anglican preachers' commentaries on the pelican. In spite of theological divergences from Catholic tradition, the Anglican interpretation of Biblical symbols still depended largely on St. Jerome, Thomas Aquinas, Benvenuto da Imola, and medieval bestiaries.

It appears, nevertheless, that the popular perception of this symbol was mainly determined by the earlier visual tradition. The pelican's image was often

[9] The so-called 'Pelican Portrait', Liverpool, The Walker Art Gallery.
[10] R. Strong, *The Elizabethan Image: Painting in England 1540 – 1620* (London, 1969), 461.

present in church space, especially in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, in tandem with the growing veneration of the wounds and blood of Christ.[11] The pelican was not a rare presence in scenes of the passion and crucifixion; it could nest at the feet of the crucified or, alternatively, sit on top of the cross. The pelican was depicted on altar crosses and processional crosses, on shrines, in stained glass, and on altars. The faithful could also find the pelican next to the large cross placed over the screen in the central nave. Note that it was exactly this central crucifix that was replaced in the Reformation era by the royal coat of arms as a symbol of the monarch's supremacy over the Anglican Church.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, however, the liturgy was not the only form of spiritual practice for the faithful; the emphasis in spiritual life kept shifting towards individual meditation, private prayers, reading didactic literature and the Holy Scriptures. The pelican as a personification of the Messiah's charity and sacrifice was often represented on the pages of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century illustrated books for pious reading, as well as in the inexpensive lithographies describing Christ's Passion.

Thus, to the popular mind, the pelican was a habitual and well known allegory of Christ. The use of this symbol by Elizabeth as her personal token should certainly have been perceived as an allusion to the Saviour, to her likeness or, rather, to her readiness to be like Christ.

In the 1570s the phoenix became another equally wide-spread symbol of the queen. It accompanied her image in Nicholas Hilliard's portraits, appeared in the cartouches of official illuminated charters, and figured in book engravings and jewelry. The phoenix was placed on the reverse of medallions, both unique and expensive ones intended as gifts for outstanding political figures and courtiers (such as the famous 'Phoenix Jewel') and more ordinary replicas to be bought by anyone wishing to do so. In Christian symbology, the phoenix was an allegory of Christ and the triumph of eternal life. In the early Christian era the phoenix was often reproduced on tombstones and in Resurrection scenes, where it was meant to symbolize the Christian faith in resurrection and perseverance in the faith; sometimes the phoenix in such scenes is interpreted as an allegory of the Virgin Mary.[12] Just like the pelican, the phoenix was a regular presence in church space and in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century book engraving. Consequently, the adoption of this image as the queen's permanent attribute produced in the mind of the faithful a clear and straightforward association between the image of the queen and Christ.

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[11] On pelican images in the ecclesiastical art see G. Schiller, *Ikonographie der Christlichen Kunst,* vol. 3 (Gütersloh, 1971), 29, 127, 133-136 (hereafter Schiller, *Ikonographie*); G. Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (New York, 1961), 23 (hereafter Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols*); on the cult of Christ's Passion in England see Duffy, *Stripping the Altars*, 324-356.

[12] See, in particular, Schiller, *Ikonographie*, 29, 127, 171, 203, 211, 471; Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols*, 23.

Elizabethan painting and engraving actively tapped into the wealth of symbols and attributes traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary (such as the rose, the lily, and the crescent) and transferred them onto the queen's image. Analogies between the Virgin and the virgin queen were a common place in literature and public consciousness in the later half of the sixteenth century. Elizabeth was extolled as "the first of the earthly maidens," inferior – in regard to her virtues – only to the heavenly Virgin. Cases are known of women placing petitions for intercession or healing at the queen's coat of arms or the queen's name inscribed in church votive images, just as they had done earlier before the icon of the Madonna. The idea of identifying herself with Mary was supported and promulgated by the queen in the course of public ceremonies during church festivals. A miniature by L. Teerlinc, depicting the festivities in honor of Maundy Thursday, shows Elizabeth washing the feet of the poor, clad in a blue dress typical of the Virgin Mary's iconography.

Taking the above into account, one ought to take a closer look at the spectrum of meanings denoted in particular by flower symbolism as presented in the queen's official portraits; possible readings of these meanings by a contemporary beholder should not be omitted either. One of the characteristic attributes of Elizabeth I is the rose. Most often this is a downy red cultured flower surmounted with a crown and accompanied with a royal monogram; at times the rose was depicted in combination with white flowers of the wild climber rose.[13] At first sight, the rose as an element of the Tudor coat of arms is a purely heraldic symbol. A closer examination of combinations in which the royal rose occurs and the mottos that go with it make it clear that there is more to it than just political meaning and heraldic significance. One of the queen's emblems (analyzed by R. Strong in a different context) combines the red rose, the white rose, and the white lily and two mottos. In Christian iconography the red rose is a symbol of perfection as well as of the Virgin Mary's sufferings; the white rose is a symbol of purity. Note that neither of these flowers has thorns, which was bound to make an attentive beholder think of Mary, called by St. Ambrose "a rose without thorns." The white lily was a symbol of chastity and virtue, a customary attribute of the heavenly Virgin. Of the two mottos – *Rosa electa* (the chosen rose) and *Foelicior Phoenice* (happier than the phoenix) – the first formula was also frequently applied to Mary – "a chosen rose." The mention of the phoenix once again references interpretations of this image as a symbol of the Mother of God, the one who suffers yet firmly believes in Christ's resurrection. Altogether, the combination of these elements points to the chastity, purity, and the unwavering faith of the bearer of this emblem, presented as virtually identical to Mary. The Virgin's attributes are disunited from her and applied to the queen, Elizabeth I.

Official portrait painting and engraving made use also of other ancient symbols of purity and impeccability, derived from the antiquity and widely used

[13] Strong, *The English Icon*, 68-73.

in the iconography of the Virgin Mary, particularly the moon and the crescent.[14] I believe, nevertheless, that the courtly cult of Elizabeth as the moon goddess Cynthia, formed in the 1580s and 1590s, as well as the queen's portraits with the crescent as a piece of jewelry referred to Classical mythology rather than to Christian symbolism. This, however, does not completely preclude the possibility of the moon or the crescent on the queen's portraits having been interpreted in the purely Christian sense. Persons with little education but a good knowledge of the Bible (unlikely to have heard of the goddess Cynthia) would most likely have been looking for a clue to the symbols they could not understand in Biblical texts. From this point of view let us consider an engraving displaying Elizabeth's apotheosis, on the front page of the *Annales* composed by the queen's courtly historian William Camden. In spite of the fact that the edition we are looking at came out in Stuart times and thus cannot be regarded as an example of Elizabethan propaganda, the engraving represents a quintessence of the earlier artistic tradition, a *summa* of the notions and meanings customary for the Elizabethans. The queen is portrayed in glory, surrounded by rays of heavenly radiance; on her bosom there is a brooch in form of the sun; her hair is decorated with a crescent; and above her head is a wreath of stars. The emphasis on these symbols is made more perceptible by means of duplication: the angel hovering above the queen is placing on her head a crown above which there is another set of shining stars, the sun, and the crescent.

What could have helped contemporaries decipher this image? What connotations would one's sub-conscience bring up in this context? Apparently, John's Revelations (12:1): "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars." This passage, normally interpreted as a vision John had of the Virgin Mary opposing the great dragon – the Devil – was a suitable analogy for Elizabeth, praised by Camden as a sovereign defending the true faith from the "dragon" of Catholicism.

One might regard the apotheosis of the queen as an allusion to the scene of the coronation of the Virgin Mary as the heavenly queen. Whatever the case, this is obvious attempt to identify Elizabeth with Mary by means of endowing the former with the regular attributes of the latter. The use of the aureoles and radiance, regular signs of the divinity, may be considered as another means to convey the idea of the queen's sacrality. Rays of heavenly radiance emanate from the queen's figure on the state seal designed by Nicholas Hilliard. As the state seal ratified hundreds of documents, this particular image of the queen was spread widely. A still more straightforward identification of Elizabeth with the divinity had a place in the symbolic compositions based on Ptolemy's scheme of the celestial spheres. Traditionally, a composition of this kind would climax in a figure of the Trinity or of the Creator embracing the universe. Illustrations for political tracts on the ideal state arrangement, otherwise following Ptolemy's

[14] Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols.*

model, show Elizabeth above the *sphaera civitatis* (the sphere of the state) in exactly the position of the Omnipotent. Cases are attested when the queen was depicted as a saint in a conventional iconographic formula, as, for instance, that of St. George defeating the dragon, an allegory of Catholicism.

In this manner, the artistic practice of the Elizabethan era demonstrates a tendency for the queen's image to usurp the symbols and attributes normally assigned to the Godhead, Christ, and the Virgin Mary, thus identifying the queen with traditional divine characters. Regardless of whether this was a result of a well-thought-out policy or a consequence of the inadvertent application of traditional artistic language to new political realities, the idea of the queen's likeness to God reached its full expression by the end of the sixteenth century. In theory, Anglican theological thought shunned the idea of sacral images and refuted the very possibility of expressing the sacred in an image. In practice, secular art in the crown's service, appealing to the widest public, continued to use symbolic images and other conventions from the age-old Christian stock to convey the idea of the sacred. This compels us to be more reserved about the thesis that the Reformation yielded a change of cultural priorities such as a shift of emphasis from visual perception to a prevailing verbal perception through word and text. Apparently, the habitual image systems worked out by church art were not abandoned all that quickly. On the other hand, easier access to Biblical texts did not preclude the possibility that the Bible would be used as auxiliary material for understanding the pictorial images.

Images in Medieval and Early Modern Culture

(Approaches in Russian Historical Research)

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Images in Medieval and Early Modern Culture

(Approaches in Russian Historical Research)

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Preface

In recent years, many historians have recognized their special interest in visual sources. The 'iconic turn' has also become vital for the historical disciplines.[1]

Images were a constitutive part of medieval and early modern daily life – with regard to their function and usage as well as their contents, 'language' and perception. Communication with the help of and via pictures played an important role for all strata of society. Therefore, research into the visual system and culture of these periods has become a basic constituent of (social) historical research.[2]

We would like to thank the authors of this volume, Svetlana I. Luchitskaya and Aron Ya. Gurevich in particular, for their interest and readiness to have their approaches towards images, which they had presented at a Moscow conference and in the 2002 special volume of the journal *Одиссей. Человек в истории*: "Слово и образ в средневековой кулмуре" ("Mot et image dans la culture médiévale"), translated into English and published as a 'Sonderband' of *Medium Aevum Quotidianum*. These investigations of the visual culture of the past by Russian historical researchers are an important contribution to the international trends and efforts to include images as parts of medieval and early modern culture and sources for today's (social) historians. The articles offer a wide spectrum: from the history of gestures to various aspects and functions of images in *memoria*, political and religious life. The relevant roles that visual

[1] Concerning the 'iconic' or 'pictorial turn' see, e. g., W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago, 1994); *idem*,. "Der Pictorial Turn," in *Privileg Blick. Kritik der visuellen Kultur*, ed. Christian Kravagna (Berlin, 1997), 15-40; Jan Baetens, "Reading Vision? What Contexts for the Pictorial Turn?", *Semiotica* 126 (1999), 203-218.

[2] See, e. g., Francis Haskell, *History and Its Images. Art and the Representation of the Past* (New Haven and London, 1993); Jérôme Baschet and Jean-Claude Schmitt (ed.), *L'image. Fonctions et usages des images dans l'Occident médiéval* (Paris, 1996); Gerhard Jaritz (ed.), *Pictura quasi fictura. Die Rolle des Bildes in der Erforschung von Alltag und Sachkultur des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit* (Vienna, 1996); Otto Gerhard Oexle (ed.), *Der Blick auf die Bilder. Kunstgeschichte und Geschichte im Gespräch* (Göttingen, 1997); Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, 2001) ; Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Le corps des images. Essais sur la culture visuelle au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 2002); Andrea von Hülsen-Esch and Jean-Claude Schmitt (ed.), *Die Methodik der Bildinterpretation. Les méthodes de l'interprétation de l'image. Deitsch-französische Kolloquien 1998-2000*, 2 vols. (Göttingen, 2002); Axel Bolvig and Phillip Lindley (ed.), *History and Images. Towards a New Iconology* (Turnhout, 2003).

culture played in the Middle Ages and the early modern period are convincingly presented and underlined. Transdisciplinarity and the necessity of contextualization and dialogue are proved to be indispensable.

We do hope that this special volume of *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* will help to intensify and strengthen the international contacts and cooperation among 'image-historians'. An increasing variety of approaches towards visual sources may, on the one hand, contribute to better understanding specific and individual matters of communication in medieval and early modern society. On the other hand, such approaches will open up possibilities for recognizing general patterns of image usage and perception – patterns of intention as well as patterns of response.[3] Analyses of micro- and macro-levels will add to each other. Their structures, contexts and networks will become clearer.

Gerhard Jaritz

[3] See, e. g., some contributions of leading representatives of the social history of art already in the eighties of the twentieth century, as: Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention. On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven and London, 1986); David Freedberg, *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago and London, 1989). See also the important remarks by Keith Moxey, "Reading the 'Reality Effect'," in *Pictura quasi fictura. Die Rolle des Bildes in der Sachkultur des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit,* ed. Gerhard Jaritz (Vienna, 1996), 15-22.