

# Visual Literacy and the Crux of the Visible: Is Stained Glass a Manifestation of the Diaphanous?

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**Abstract:** The present paper addresses the tension between two possible readings of stained glass in relation to theological discourse, taking as case study the landmark Abbey of Saint-Denis. According to Norman Bryson, these readings may be characterized as discursive and figural. On the one hand, there is an iconological reading of stained glass as a suitable means for illustrating the Scriptures, which responds to an analogical reading prompted by its material qualities (colour and light). On the other hand, we encounter its interpretation as a means of materializing the philosophical notion of *diaphanous* given its transparent nature and its aesthetic properties associated with light in the Middle Ages (*lux, splendor, claritas*). I claim that, in the particular situation of stained glass, these readings are not mutually exclusive, but complementary, given the analogical function of stained glass imagery suggested by Panofsky's reading of Suger. This can be seen as a way of conveying the distance between divine and created light found in early Christian philosophy. Thus, I claim that the metaphor of light, understood as a field of visibility and as a transcendental carrier of spiritual enlightenment (*meta-phoros*), becomes crucial for understanding the architectural function of stained glass within gothic architecture.

**Keywords:** Iconography, Stained Glass, Suger, Aesthetic of Light, Metaphor, Christian Theology

## The Metaphor of Light – from Theophany to Aesthetic Experience

The phrase "metaphor of light" refers to the symbolic framework in which the artistic use of light was prescribed from the Middle Ages until the 18th century by the onto-theological discourse of philosophy. The metaphor describes the constitutive, intimate relation between sensuous light and its intelligible meaning, rather than a mere comparison between earthly light and divine reason and power. Metaphor has been described as a figure of speech resulting from the substitution of the word that is the object of comparison with another word-image. At the same time, it is a figure of transcendence in

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act, literally carrying over a meaning (*meta-phoros*). As Paul Ricoeur noticed, metaphors can also be described as producing a tension at the level of the enunciation or the whole phrase, which, therefore, produces the resemblance rather than results from an existing similitude. Therefore, by means of metaphoric language, a new and unforeseen meaning is produced, which reveals the productive powers of imagination<sup>2</sup>.

Metaphors often occurred in philosophical language, enabling the translation from form to concept<sup>3</sup>. For instance, in Kantian philosophy, the metaphor becomes a model invested with a paradigmatic function, from which a "rule of thought" can be speculated and applied in using the idea of reason<sup>4</sup>. Visual perception is a part of the process, whereas the metaphor of light is related to the idea of participation.

Analyzed for the first time by Aristotle<sup>5</sup>, the metaphor was understood as a correspondence between two separate entities. Aristotle did not distinguish between the construction of metaphor as a horizontal play between two separate ontological planes and the vertical dependency which supports the comparison, postulated by the Platonic concept of analogy. However, the relation of similarity between the visible forms and their ideal prototypes is utterly important for Plato, who analyzes it from the perspective of the binder between the two terms<sup>6</sup>. The relation between the elements that form the comparison is ontologically understood by Plato as a hierarchical communication.

The Neoplatonist concept of emanation is also important for the understanding of the metaphoric ontology of light. Unlike Aristotle's idea of metaphor, which foresees a reversible relation between its elements, the Neoplatonist use of the metaphor supposed a constitutive analogy based on the dependency on a prototype. For Plotinus, light is radiant because it is a derivation of the One. The Sun, a source of the idea of God in ancient cultures, became a mediator between *sensibilia* and *intelligibilia*. The Neoplatonist Christian tradition implicitly continues the development of the concept of light by associating the immaterial with a concrete form of representation. Thus, light becomes a mediator between immanency and transcendence.

For Hans Blumenberg's, light is regarded as best suited for

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<sup>2</sup> P. Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, Routledge, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> H. Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, Cornell University Press, New York, 2010, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> The idea of the "metaphor" is present in works like *Rethorica* (trad. Maria Cristina Andrei, Editura IRI, București, 2004) or *Poetica* (transl. Stephen Halliwell), *The Poetics of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary*, The University of North Carolina Press/London and North Carolina, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> See Platon, *Thimaios*, 28a, 31-32, in Plato. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9 trans. W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1925.

expressing experience and knowledge<sup>7</sup>. From antiquity to modern times, the German philosopher reveals the way light accompanies human knowledge, from the light of the mind to the light of reason during the Enlightenment period. One could question the choice of metaphor in detriment of other figures of speech which resort to analogy, such as the parable or even the symbol. The option for metaphor is explainable due to its capacity of mediating between different regimes such as the sensible and intelligible, matter and spirit. Unlike the symbol, which mediates between a (material) sign and its (ideal) signification by means of a conventional relation, the metaphor mediates between two different signs, signifying distinct concepts. Concerning light, it appears to speak about something else than itself; it is a sign that relates to another sign. Blumenberg considers light to be a metaphor *par excellence*, the paradigm for the relation between sensible and intelligible that the artwork produces in its concrete representations, saving the interpreters from awkward logical exercises<sup>8</sup>. Framed by the discourse of Christian philosophy, light makes possible the analogy between matter and spirit, visuality and mystic intuition, visuality and reason.

### **Between light and matter – the diaphanous**

Before taking into account the philosophical discourse of medieval theology which could have had an influence on Suger's own thinking about the light, we could also take into account its occurrences in ancient Greek and early Christian writings.

The Greeks seemed to accommodate three different theories about view and light. The first one, belonging to Empedocles, states that of the "rays of light" come from inside the eye and with their help we may distinguish the objects from the immediate reality; Leucippus and Democritus theory of "simulacra" sustains that travelling forms composed of atoms detach themselves from the surface of the objects. The third theory, Aristotle's theory of the "diaphanous", that is, the in between space which, as a place of encounter and manifestation of light, mediates between our vision and the objects (and Themistius's commentaries), will be discussed in detail<sup>9</sup>.

Originating from the Greek *δια* and *φαίνω*, the adjective *diaphanous* (*διαφανής*) is explained today as a medium of low density, which allows light to come through, without clearly distinguishing forms and outer shapes, something transparent, translucent, the original Greek meaning being that of *visual sharpness* or *luminous clarity*<sup>10</sup>. The word is frequently used by

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<sup>7</sup> H. Blumenberg, „Light as a Metaphor for Truth”, in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993, pp. 30-62.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> Th. X. Thuan, *Les voies de la lumière*, Gallimard, Paris, 2007, pp. 42-43.

<sup>10</sup> A. Vasiliu, *Despre diafan*, Polirom Press, Iasi, 2010, p. 70.

Aristotle, in order to define his concepts of *medium*, *mediation* and *the in-between*<sup>11</sup>. Later, it has been translated into Latin not as *perspicus*, *perspicuitas* (which could have been closer to the Greek source), but as *transparens* (a neologism in the 12th century), a term that will rapidly enter the language of scholastic philosophy and will illustrate the comparison between intellect and light, as well as between color and light as a manifestation of transcendence<sup>12</sup>. For Aristotle, the diaphanous is a transparent medium whose luminescence is received as a radiance that lights from within. Also, it may be regarded as a place of encounter between view and the viewed object, a place where the manifestation of light reveals the image, instituting the *epiphany* of the visible<sup>13</sup>.

Aristotle openly speaks both about the significance of this space and the nature of light. According to him, there is nothing visible without light, every color can be seen only in light. The nature of light is to set into motion the transparency in its actuality<sup>14</sup>. Thus, the diaphanous becomes a linkage between the object, light and the eye. The transmission and reception of light can only take place in this diaphanous medium. At the same time, the notion is connected with basic elements of physical existence – such as water, air, and even solid matter. Thus, it marks a certain movement that accompanies the action of light – the luminous energy that inseminates matter<sup>15</sup>. The relation between light and the diaphanous is a specific relation of causality. The diaphanous is related to light as an effect is linked to its cause. It is even confounded with the incandescent light that remains its source of luminescence<sup>16</sup>. At the same time, it becomes a paradigm of mediation<sup>17</sup>. The diaphanous remains the space in which different media, either forms or spirits, interact, but also a distance which is necessary to their presence and manifestation. Light also reveals the presence of matter in the invisible. As we will see, this idea is crucial for the medieval metaphor of light. Both light and the diaphanous are incorporeal elements, but light can have a material character which becomes present only in contact with matter.

The phenomenological attribute of the presence of light is related to both visual perception and contemplation. The model of visual perception follows the model of intellectual activity while the coherence of the demonstration imposes the introduction of the diaphanous, a middle term, a third genre, a notion which equates the nature of soul in Neoplatonist commentaries. As long as it renders the world visible, light is itself visible in

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 71.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 70.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *Despre suflet*, Scientific Press, Bucharest, 1969, II 7, 418b, p. 64.

<sup>15</sup> A. Vasiliu, *op.cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 74.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 65.

an intelligible way<sup>18</sup>.

Aristotle also introduces a negative definition of the diaphanous. Transparency is regarded as that which is not visible in itself, but through a colour which is foreign to it<sup>19</sup>. We may conclude that the diaphanous, as transparency, is manifest only as the *the distance of an alterity*. It may resemble the *divine*, but Aristotle never uses this word. Only Themistius associates the divine and the celestial body. Constrained to admit the impossibility of an ontological definition of the diaphanous, Aristotle will define it through its visual aesthetic manifestations. Themistius identifies the nature of the diaphanous as “superior body” and its relation with the divine. When attributing divine properties to the superior body, he refers to the fifth element, the ether, defined by Aristotle in *De cælo* as divine, the impossibility of defining light and the diaphanous other than by transcendence<sup>20</sup>. Themistius considers the eternal and divine superior body as being the first of the receivers of light which emanates from a source, light being the only transcendent and incorporeal element<sup>21</sup>. As one may easily notice, the principle of emanation, the metaphor of the source of light from which light may propagate will also be encountered in Plotinus’s thinking.

### **The Diaphanous, a Space of Manifestation for Celestial Hierarchies**

For Dionysius, God the creator and the created world constitutes a whole, hierarchically structured on charismatic basis, while the entire creation is energy. He sees the universe as a moving whole in permanent relation with God, and in his Hierarchies he designs a cosmology overwhelmed by the flames of light and *ekstasis*. The system of hierarchies has a theophanic function in that it is a scintillating row of symbols of God’s greatness, forming at the same time the medium for its accomplishment. The hierarchies mediate knowledge; they are vehicles of revelation, of theophany<sup>22</sup>. Dionysius conceives revelation as a light that comes from God and exudes upon the entire creation. In this context, the space of the angels appears as the in-between space which receives its energy from God. The angles in the Christian scenario are the successors of the of stars in previous believes; they are angelic fires and pure intelligences, at the same time vehicles of divine irradiation, only lower in glory to the intelligible light of the divine<sup>23</sup>. By populating the in-between space between God and Being

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 83.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotel, *op.cit.*, 418 b, p. 64.

<sup>20</sup> Vasiliu, p. 100.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 128.

<sup>22</sup> A. Louth, *Dionisie Areopagitul*, Deisis Press, Sibiu, 1997, pp. 73, 74.

<sup>23</sup> K. E. Gilbert, H. Kuhn, *Istoria esteticii*, trans. Sorin Mărculescu, Meridiane Press, Bucharest, 1972, p. 143.

Dionysius solves a universal problem, that of the in-between space within the dualistic structure of the world, but also that of filling in the void, and bridging the gap between God and human beings<sup>24</sup>. Angels remain the privileged medium of revelation, being simultaneously close to God and humans<sup>25</sup>.

Aristotle's diaphanous is understood as a luminous contact with the divine, a deification occurring in the material manifestation of light<sup>26</sup>. In this context, Dionysius clearly pictures the rays of light as being indistinctly merged with their divine source. He also portrays the lit, transparent air, which rarifies while elogning away from its source, while the hierarchies are themselves seen as a row of stairs that descend from the source.

Dionysius is certainly influenced by the emanation principles of Neoplatonist philosophy. However, the hierarchical structuring of the space as a result of emanation and its relation to light and matter is a specific element of his doctrine. The denser is the medium it permeates, the more difficult is the distribution<sup>27</sup>. The hierarchy becomes the fundamental element for the processes of *purification*, *illumination* and *union*<sup>28</sup>.

The manifestation of light is superposing on the act of creation and is identified with it. Light appears first as pure and unmingled, bright, clean, then as celestial, clear and transparent, light which defines the visible horizon, then as moonlight, and finally as night light, signaling distance. Accordingly, we may notice the concentric distribution of the rays of light, which are often represented in Christian iconography. Another worthy aspect is the fact that this sense of light, as pouring away from the initial spring, offers the possibility of regaining the relation to the original, divine light<sup>29</sup>. For him, any form of existence, either material or immaterial, becomes at a certain moment an image, a symbol, an echo or a reflection<sup>30</sup>. While the diaphanous remains a theological and cosmologic notion, Joan Scottus Eriugena will turn this notion into an aesthetic and metaphysical concept<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> A. Plesu lists these writings in the chapter *Lumile intermediare de la Platon la Walter Benjamin*, in *Despre Îngeri*, Humanitas Press, Bucharest, 2003, pp. 23-32.

<sup>25</sup> A. Plesu, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

<sup>26</sup> A. Vasiliu, *op. cit.*, p. 71 n.1.

<sup>27</sup> Dionisie Pseudo-Areopagitul, *Ierarhia cerească, Ierarhia bisericască*, XIII, 3, trans. Cicerone Iordăchescu, Institutul European Prees, Iași, 1994, p. 62.

<sup>28</sup> A. Louth, *Dionisie Areopagitul*, p. 74.

<sup>29</sup> Ștefan Afloroaie, *Triadă și procesiune a luminii*, postword at Dionisie Pseudo-Areopagitul, *Ierarhia cerească, Ierarhia bisericască*, Institutul European Press, Iasi, 1994, p. 147.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 149.

<sup>31</sup> A. Vasiliu, *op. cit.*, p. 182 n. 1.

## Created and Uncreated Light: Several Interpretations of Light in Early Christian Philosophy

An important question for the Christian Church Fathers is the determination of the nature of uncreated light in relation to physical light, created by God in the fourth day of Genesis. Light appears as a manifestation of divine Grace and as a sign of the union of the soul with God, a secret of Christian mystics. Origen discusses the nature of light in the 3rd century, in his *Commentaries* to the Gospel of Joan. He distinguishes between two types of light, the sensible and the incorporeal. The latter is associated with the intellect. Origen notices the associations of Christ with light – “Light of the world”, “The true light”, “The light of the people”. While the sensible (*aisthétón*) luminescence of light is the Sun, which radiates over the physical world, the Saviour is the light of the intelligible world, because it enlightens the rational beings<sup>32</sup>. Origen frequently uses the analogy between world and stars and the Church and the Apostles, but also between the incorporeal light of Christ and that of the human intellect.

For the Cappadocian Fathers, the nature of light is related to the nature of uncreated energies and unseen attributes of God. The main distinction here is that between the first day of the creation, a reflection of these energies and attributes of God, and physical light, the diurnal light of the fourth day, when the creator separates night and day, thus introducing distinctions in the physical time. Saint Basil talks about the role of the energies that are distinct from the Being that remains unknown<sup>33</sup>. The uncreated energies are called “Rays of God” that permeate the created universe. St. Gregory of Palama will call them *uncreated light* or *grace*<sup>34</sup>. Similar ideas can be found in the writings of Gregory of Nazianz, Joan of Damascus or Maxim the Confessor. In the poetical writings of Simeon the New Theologian, the function of uncreated light is to transform, to pierce the mind (νοῦς) and senses<sup>35</sup>. The one that participates to divine energy becomes one with the light in a certain way<sup>36</sup>. Although it bears no direct relation to the Fathers of the Eastern Church, the transformative function of light is itself very important for the subsequent uses of anagogical interpretation during Suger’s times at the abbey of Saint-Denis.

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<sup>32</sup> Origen, *Comentariu la Evanghelia după Ioan*, Institutul European Press, Iași, 1995, XXV, 158-166, XXVI, 167-174, pp.62-63.

<sup>33</sup> V. Lossky, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, trans. Vasile Răducă, Anastasia Press, Bucharest, 1993, p. 101.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>35</sup> N. Matsoukas, *Istoria filosofiei bizantine*, trans. Const. Coman, N. Deciu, Bizantine Press, Bucharest, 2003, p. 125.

<sup>36</sup> Sf. Grigorie Palama, *Omilia la Intrarea în biserică a Sf. Fecioare*, in V. Lossky, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, p. 253.

We may also notice how light becomes a substitute for divine grace. However, divine light does not have an allegoric meaning in itself, but a very concrete one: it is the very light of the Creation. Uncreated light is indivisible, unlimited and constant in its manifestations, unlike created light, which is limited. Saint Basil the also offers an explanation of uncreated matter through a critique of the notion of initial matter. Here, the concept of diaphanous is again useful. Light was created before the Sun, who was created to uphold and distribute it. The air received light through an instantaneous diffusion<sup>37</sup>. The concept of diaphanous is often used by the Cappadocian Fathers in relation to air, which is transparent and diaphanous; it receives the images of the objects and conveys them to the beholders<sup>38</sup>. Saint Basil also mentions that the nature of light is itself delicate and diaphanous, as it does not need time to pierce through the air<sup>39</sup>.

### *Lux, Lumen, Claritas, Splendor*

Christian Middle Ages also witnessed a new conception of beauty – beauty as light and beautiful form, which is already referred to as an aesthetic of light. Just like in the former Byzantine Empire, the main philosophical ideas were born out of theology<sup>40</sup>. The lack of aesthetic concerns in medieval theologians have often been remarked, because of the prevalent moral concerns and low interest in pleasurable arts, because beauty has often been confounded with the name of God<sup>41</sup>. However, philosophical attempts of determining the nature of visual beauty, but especially of framing and conceptualizing the aesthetic experience of the believer in relation to mystical experience, have gained momentum. In this context, we should mention that the capacities of sensuously influencing the believers' emotions were accepted and even supported by the clerics, while the pathos of medieval preachers was regarded as connected to visual passion, both acting by seduction and force<sup>42</sup>.

The whole medieval philosophy, based on Plotinus's philosophical elements, resurrected by Dionysius the Areopagite and by those of Bonaventura or Saint Thomas Aquinas, is clearly based on Neoplatonic doctrines. That is why the enthusiastic use of light in medieval art is justified

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<sup>37</sup> E. Gilson, *Filosofia în Evul mediu*, Humanitas Press, Bucharest, 1995, p. 62.

<sup>38</sup> Sf. Vasile cel Mare, *Scrieri – Partea Întâia (Omiliile la Hexaemeron, Omiliile la Psalmi, Omiliile și Cuvântări)*, trans. D. Fecioru, Biblic and Missionary Institute of Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1986, p. 87.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 93.

<sup>40</sup> N. Matsoukas, *Istoria filosofiei bizantine*, p. 251.

<sup>41</sup> K. E. Gilbert, H. Kuhn, *Istoria esteticii*, pp. 126-127.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 129. Even Sf. Augustin taught that a Christian preacher should not be "apathetic, cold and sleepy", but his role would be "to horrify, to speak to the heart, to put passion in his words" (*Despre doctrina creștină*, IV, II), in order to impress the believer.



as a consequence of Neoplatonism. Physical light was thus the light of the Holy Ghost, the spiritual light that had the function to illuminate all the believers that were present to the holy sermons. For instance, stained glass became a gate for the Holy Ghost, a gate that made visible the power of God and Saints.

One of the fundamental principles of medieval aesthetics is *splendor* – obviously associated with light. Albert the Great defines it as the splendor of form that shines in the proportionate parts of matter<sup>43</sup>; Saint Thomas calls brightness the third property of beauty after integrity and proper proportion or consonance. The brightness of beauty in the sense of Saint Thomas means the brightness of the form of an object, either of an artwork or of nature, in such a way that it is presented to the mind in all the richness of its perfection and order”<sup>44</sup>. The terms that designated light — *claritas, splendor, resplendentia, fulgor, lux, lumen, illumino, lucidus, and illustro*— are often encountered in the vocabulary of western medieval writings<sup>45</sup>.

If we consider the glare of the ceramic tiles of the mosaics, colored glass of windows or the gold of the illuminated manuscripts as concrete examples of this aesthetic splendor, we realize that the attraction of color and their brightness are instruments for enhancing the seduction of splendor. In order to realize its full power, we need to understand that the mystics have permanently seen a light that was different from the physical light of the Sun<sup>46</sup>.

Light played a crucial part in the life of the medieval man, which had to assimilate spiritual light. The anagogical method seemed the most convenient to produce the ascension from material to spiritual world. According to Umberto Eco, Saint Bonaventure creates a metaphysics of light on an almost analogous basis<sup>47</sup>. For Bonaventure, light appears as a substantial form of the bodies, a primary determination that the material assumes in his becoming into being<sup>48</sup>.

Light becomes the principle of every beauty, and if we can speak of a medieval aesthetics, it is a light at the same time seen as a primordial source, medium, brightness or even color. The distinction between the physical and metaphysical light in Western philosophy seems artificial, since there was only one light. Its beauty was immediate, but at the same time incomplete without the ecstatic vision and divine glory that derives from it<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> Albert cel Mare, *Opus de pulchro et bono*, in K. E. Gilbert, H. Kuhn, *Istoria esteticii*, p. 141.

<sup>44</sup> Toma D’Aquino, *Summa Theologie*, in K. E. Gilbert, H. Kuhn, *Istoria esteticii*, p. 141.

<sup>45</sup> K. E. Gilbert, H. Kuhn, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>47</sup> U. Eco, *Arta și frumosul în estetica medievală*, Meridiane Press, Bucharest, 1999, p.63.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, p.64.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p.65. „How much splendor will rule when the glory of the eternal sun will light the saved souls... A great joy can not be hidden if it jogs in joy and songs for those who will reach the kingdom of heaven”, in Sf. Bonaventura, *Sermones*, VI.

*Lux nova*, that Suger mentions in one of his poems, could be interpreted as an improvement of the conditions of lightning the space of a church by the new type of architectural solutions which allowed for the walls and ceiling to be elongated and made room for larger windows, but also as the Light of the New Testament. Creation was itself the light present in all. Besides the metaphor of light, the metaphors of the veil and of mirroring appear as similar, complementary manifestations, mediators that offer the human being accessibility towards the complex world of mystical and theological symbols. During the Middle Ages, contemplation was regarded as a supreme art, an activity during which the soul can see God, in the soul's inner mirror. This conception of the unity between the mirror and the mirrored<sup>50</sup> should result in the transformation of matter into light.

### **The Lit Image: Between Iconographic Program and Aesthetic Experience**

What is the role of theology in the study of medieval art? To what extent do these aesthetic ideas represent a compound of codes and symbols that was accessible within artistic image during the Middle Ages? And what is the extent to which the artistic materializations of the metaphor of light may be themselves held responsible for its creation, taking into account the social dimension of aesthetic experience as religious contemplation?

These questions may be answered in at least three ways. First, one may claim that theology is irrelevant for the creation of images in medieval art, even though it does not have a negative influence upon their construction. Such a position is advocated by Hans Belting<sup>51</sup> who tries to show that the theologians did not contribute to the production of images, but claimed them only at a later stage, when their power was already increased<sup>52</sup>. When images became more powerful than the institution of the Church and started to act directly in the name of God, they became unwanted<sup>53</sup>. Belting attempts to show how the control over images through words is not simple, since images imply a multiple experience. Visual experience is a direct one, easily perceptible and which can be read by the believers from all social fields. Thus, images resemble the sermons that addressed hearing rather than written word, which was accessible only to a few – priests or scholars, usually. However, its effects are not prescribable. Thus, the formative role of images was not, according to Belting, an allied for theologians. In the best case, they

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<sup>50</sup> K. E. Gilbert, H. Kuhn, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

<sup>51</sup> H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, The University of Chicago Press, 1994, capitoul *The Power of Images and the Limitations of Theologians*, pp. 1-8.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*.

remained passive, responding to practices, commenting and canonizing various forms in which images may be used, but never taking initiative, in the sense of being patrons or initiating ways of composing and perceiving the image<sup>54</sup>. The cultic image or the sacred one had little to do with religion, and more with the society that expresses itself in and through religion<sup>55</sup>. At the same time, the role of the religious image, which for a long time was the only type of image to be in society, cannot be understood exclusively in terms of its theological content<sup>56</sup>. For Belting, theologians act either as iconoclasts or iconographers, who were content only when they could explain images<sup>57</sup>. It is the medieval theology of the image that determined the failure of the development of a real theory of images until modern times<sup>58</sup>.

Unlike Belting, David Freedberg suggests the constructive role of theology. Philosophers are regarded as “provocateurs” in the creation process of the images, being aware of their inherent power, rather than as censors.<sup>59</sup> Freedberg claims that the ontology of sacred images is fundamental for all types of images. Contrary to Belting, he advocates that what is typical for the Middle Ages is, in fact, normative for the whole human history<sup>60</sup>. Thus, Freedberg tries to minimize the distinction between “popular piety” and the “elite spirituality” proper to theologians.

The social aspect of artistic production becomes crucial. On the one hand, we have the popular understanding of the religious feeling and experience, on the other hand, its cultural understanding, based on theological writings. Theology thus worked as a factor that generalized, conceptualized and institutionalized the spiritual experience of the believers. In this sense, theology becomes, in relation to the artistic uses of light, a theorizing principle for material, sensuous light. It is responsible for transforming this medium into a metaphorical language.

A third possibility of understanding this relation belongs to Norman Bryson. In the first chapter of his book *Word and Image*<sup>61</sup>, Bryson argues for the idea of combining the discursive value of the image in terms of its iconographic principles with the illustrative, figurative one throughout the

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<sup>54</sup> J. Hamburger, *The Place of Theology in Medieval Art History: Problems, Positions, Possibilities*, in *The Mind's Eye: art and theological argument in the Middle Ages*, in *The Mind's Eye: art and theological argument in the Middle Ages*, ed. J. Hamburger and A.-M. Bouché, Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 12.

<sup>55</sup> H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, p. 3.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> H. Belting, *Bild – Anthropologie, Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*, München, 2001, in J. Hamburger, *The Mind's Eye: art and theological argument in the Middle Ages*, p. 12.

<sup>59</sup> J. Hamburger, *The Mind's Eye: art and theological argument in the Middle Ages*, p. 13.

<sup>60</sup> D. Freedberg, *Holy Image and Other Images* in *The Art of Interpreting*, ed. S. C. Scott, State College, Pennsylvania, 1996, in J. Hamburger, *The Mind's Eye: art and theological argument in the Middle Ages*, pp. 69-89.

<sup>61</sup> Norman Bryson, *Word and Image*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981.

history of art. According to him, the discursive function of the mind, who thinks in words, interacts in the perception of images with the illustrative, figural one<sup>62</sup>. Unlike its functions in Renaissance or in modern times, the discursive function is paramount during the Middle Ages. For Bryson, modernity is viewed as a balanced mixture of the discursive and the figural. The discursive regime designates those elements that reveal the influence of language over the image<sup>63</sup>. Analyzing the Window of Canterbury, Bryson shows that the Biblical text precedes and anchors the image, which is dependent upon the text. The text associated with the images gives us clear instructions on how the whole panel should be regarded. We are dealing with a textually saturated image<sup>64</sup>, which is paradigmatic for the whole medieval iconographic program. Bryson advocates that written and spoken language supports and clarifies the reception of images<sup>65</sup>. Images become instruments of both reading and visual contemplation.

The figural aspects refer to the attributes of the image which are proper to it in the absence of any textual reference. Thus, image lives through itself, independently of any linguistic structures<sup>66</sup>. By their own composition, medieval images bring into question textual elements, both of the Scriptures and of contemporary theologians or commentators. The depicted scenes have a Biblical source, but their visual composition, the juxtaposition of scenes, their succession in a whole, the images, they all refer to the theological explanation of their construction, prescribing a certain perception of their thematic content. Thus theology structures visual discourse; it is a platform for constructing the text that defines the image.

Far from being mutually exclusive, the discursive and the figural aspects of medieval images, which are examined here from the perspective of the metaphoric and aesthetic uses of light in stained glass windows, can be considered complementary. This complementarity can be revealed within the anagogical interpretation of stained glass images. I claim that stained glass is an artistic materialization of the diaphanous character of light, which, in itself, illustrates the metaphoric character of light, both as a symbol of spiritual illumination and a sensuous mark of the light of creation. Therefore, stained glass is not only a material support for a series of images whose elements contain symbols of light or God, but also a means for converting the believer. They suggest the similarity between light and God, and they mark its presence in the world as a condition of possibility for meaning.

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<sup>62</sup> The term of *figural* is translated from the English term *figural* and is used having the meaning of figurative, allegoric, just like we find it as an adjective in DEX (Dicționarul Explicativ al limbii române, 1998), but also having the meaning of representation.

<sup>63</sup> N. Bryson, *Word and Image*, p. 5.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

## Abbey Suger and the Anagogical Interpretation of Stained Glass in Gothic Architecture

Influential priest at the court of Louis the VI-th, abbey Suger is considered the initiator of a reconstruction program for the Abbey of Saint Denis, between 1137-1144. It is here that the constructive system based on ogival arches will be used for the first time, as well as other architectural elements that will later define the gothic style. Suger's ambitions were similar to those of a mecena, eager to make his project literally bright. *Ordinatio*, *De Conservazione* and *De Administratione* are the writings that consign his artistic program, and, according to Erwin Panofsky, are dated around 1140-1148 (Rudolph 1990, 20)<sup>67</sup>.

Against the Cistercien monks and St. Bernard in his *Apologia ad Guillelmum* (1125)<sup>68</sup>, Suger considered that nothing can be a bigger sin that to deprive the service of God from the things that nature was meant to offer – including gold, precious stones, stained glass etc<sup>69</sup>. Any celebration became an occasion for spectacle and glamour. According to Panofsky, Suger was a real scenographer, while acting as a museum curator whenever he made acquisitions. He chose to selectively respond to Bernard's critiques, which made his program an innovative and coherent one<sup>70</sup>.

Suger was certainly not a theologian interested in the most difficult debates of his time. He tried to adopt whatever could serve as an argument for his architectural program. As a theologian, he advocated an *anagogical* interpretation, an experience that leads the believer to ascend towards a higher level of spirituality, in line with the hierarchical structure of energies described by Pseudo-Dionisie and Ioan Scottus Eriugena<sup>71</sup>. It is here that the function of stained glass becomes of greater importance. The iconographic program of Saint Denis depicts subjects of allegorical rather than typological

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<sup>67</sup> C. Rudolph, *Artistic Change at St. Denis – Abbot Suger's Program and the Early Twelfth-Century Controversy over Art*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1990, p. 20.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15. *Apologia* Sf. Bernard is one of the most complex writings regarding art in the Middle Ages, in which he presents four main categories which should be debated in the artistic programs from monasteries – the ritualism (for example, avoiding excessive rituals, just as it happened in the Old Testament), materialism (for example the usage of expensive and precious materials for cult objects), the diminishing of isolation for monks (reducing their involvement in different social and political activities) and avoiding art as spiritual entertainment (this was the main point of criticism that the program of Suger brought).

<sup>69</sup> E. Panofsky, *Arhitectură gotică și gândire scolastică*, trans. Marina Vazaca, Anastasia Press, Bucharest, 1999, p. 22.

<sup>70</sup> C. Rudolph, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>71</sup> E. Panofsky, *Arhitectură gotică și gândire scolastică*, p. 29.

nature, which are able to separate us from the bonds of material concerns in order to conduct our attention towards spiritual matters.<sup>72</sup>

Suger's preference for allegorical meaning is based on a discursive program, which certainly seems to advocate for Bryson's and Freedberg's position. Many of his poems contain numerous references to Neoplatonic metaphysics of light. For him, it is bright whatever is associated with light, and therefore, with its virtues, such as *splendor*<sup>73</sup>. An inscription commemorates the inauguration of the new apse and prefigures the way light will fill the new middle part of the abbey that was still under construction. If the term *lux nova* referred to the illumination conditions as a result of applied new architectural forms, the words *clarus*, *clarere*, *clarificare* denote significations related not to the perceptual side, having rather a metaphysical meaning. The word *claritas*, as we have already seen, was chosen by Joan Scottus to designate the multiple Greek words attributed to Dionisius, in order to express the glare and shining originating from the Father of Lights<sup>74</sup>.

In another poem that describes the decorations of the western portico, Suger exposes the theory of anagogical illumination, more precisely, the fact that the material radiance of the artwork has the function to determine the spiritual light of the viewers, through a process of spiritual illumination<sup>75</sup>. With the help of material things, the soul will be guided by the true lights – *lumina vera* – of the bright stained glasses, towards the true light – *verum lumen* – and will be raised, like Christ in the golden bronze relief, towards the Kingdom of Heavens<sup>76</sup>.

Stained glass occupies a lot of space along the aisle and apse. In *De Administratione*, Suger describes a part of the church's windows starting from the one dedicated to the *Tree of Jesse* (from the Eastern part of the Holy Virgin's chapel) and finishing with the western rose window above the main entrance (Rudolf 2011, 402)<sup>77</sup>. Beyond narrative and allegorical meaning, stained glass also uses its aesthetic effects, due to the brightness of colors under the rays of Sun, in order to elevate us towards spiritual matters (Alciade 1989, 14)<sup>78</sup>. Impressing the believers should go further than the mere contemplation of the beauty of stained glass.

### Stained Glass as a Materialization of the Diaphanous

The metaphor of God as light is, therefore, conveyed by means of

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 31.

<sup>74</sup> E. Panosfky, *Arhitectură gotică și gândire scolastică*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 33.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>77</sup> C. Rudolph, „Inventing the Exegetical Stained-Glass Window: Suger, Hugh, and a New Elite Art”, *Art Bulletin*, CAA, vol. XCIII, nr. 4, decembrie 2011, p. 40.

<sup>78</sup> V. Nieto Alcaide, *La Luz, Símbolo y Sistema Visual*, Cátedra Press, Madrid, 1989, p. 14.

stained glass. It functions as a screen for the outer natural light. Inside the church, light does not have the power, neither the value that has in nature, that is why, in contact with translucent matter, it transforms into immaterial light, light that has its own force of illumination. The force of light activates the translucent medium of glass, enlivening the colors. It is light that sets into motion the whole gothic iconography. Therefore, it is a condition of possibility for any meaning to be produced.

I would like to offer two arguments in support of the idea that stained glass can be regarded as an artistic materialization of the diaphanous, which sets into motion the metaphor of light, despite its inherent iconographic character, that is, as a support for an illustrated narrative. The first one regards the structural function of stained glass in gothic architecture. The second concerns the reception of stained glass in their original context of production.

Concerning their architectural function, one may notice that, in Romanic church, whenever it was present, stained glass was an element subordinate to its architectural condition of window, through which a limited amount of light could enter. It was a closed form, dependent on the walls in which it was severed. Gothic cathedrals differ not only in the dimension of their windows, or the amplification of its inner size, but also in offering opportunities to develop its symbolic character. The difference between wall and window is attenuated, supporting the characterization of gothic architecture as translucent<sup>79</sup>. The controlled, pointed and locally focused light from the Byzantine architecture which came from multiple sources, was also replaced with a space bathed in diffuse light. Thus, the very notion of window was set into question<sup>80</sup>. If, in the Byzantine architecture, the dimension of the window determined the quantity of light that could fill in the space, the quantity of light in Gothic architecture will be measured qualitatively through color and the atmosphere created by filtered light.

In supporting this idea, Panofsky introduces the transparency principle of Gothic architecture. Janzen or Simson propose the term diaphanous architecture<sup>81</sup>, relating transparency with notions of medium and spatiality. The diaphanous itself cannot be visualized unless under certain conditions, which the colors of stained glass offer by their transparent nature. At the same time, Gothic architects elaborate the articulation of spatial media in a system of optical fiction<sup>82</sup>. They use various means to alter the usual sensorial experience and intentionally alter their supportive effects. For instance, Gravity seems to be annulled given the elongation of the Church.

Reminding the distinction between the spiritual light proper to God

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 23.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 24.

<sup>81</sup> Otto von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1956, p. 4.

<sup>82</sup> V. Nieto Alcaide, *La Luz, Símbolo y Sistema Visual*, p. 32.

and the corporeal light as an expression of God, Witelo applies it to the interior space of Gothic architecture in order to show the intimate relation between the two in stained glass<sup>83</sup>. Another function of light was to unify interior space. Beginning with Rayonnant Gothic style, around 1230, is the final step for French architects to build *in light*<sup>84</sup>. Thanks to illuminated walls, rayonnant architecture succeeded to translate the supernatural in a space of worship by enhancing dematerialization<sup>85</sup>.

In this context, one can analyze the power of light to pierce glass without damaging it, as well as the explicative power of the mysteries of God given this property of light. It crosses the materiality of stained glass without altering it. As solid matter, glass allows light to penetrate it just like the Holy Ghost penetrates the human body. This image, an analogy that explains the mystery of embodiment, is used by Pseudo Saint Bernard as follows. Just like the splendor of the Sun crosses glass without breaking it, thus the Word of God penetrates Mary's womb and gets out of it pristine<sup>86</sup>.

Nieto-Alcaide identified two major functions of stained glass – one of them is connected to the symbolic configuration of space, just like we have shown in the previous chapter, and the other one is represented by the fact that stained glass becomes a vehicle of iconographic programs integrated in the iconologic system of the cathedral<sup>87</sup>. Regarding light, we encounter two types of language with distinct characters, which converge towards the same reading of the cathedral. In connection to symbolic values and visual metaphors, the stained glass does not play a simple role of painting on the glass or of a creative filter of a spatial environment. Through the proposed visual metaphors, the stained glass brings forward the doctrinal idea itself of *God as light*<sup>88</sup>.

Some of the topics found in stained glasses were introduced in iconography at the Saint Denis Monastery and they spread everywhere from there. Many of the aspects from iconographic programs were artificial. They had to transform the cathedral into an encyclopaedia of stone in which different artistic representations had to come in a row and combine like the letters of a holy text. For example, in order to represent the way in which Christ illuminated Jerusalem with his sermon, a master from Amiens<sup>89</sup> represented the person of Christ with a lamp in his hand in front of the walls

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<sup>83</sup> S. Sebastian, *Mensaje Simbólico del Arte Medieval*, Ediciones Encuentro Press, Madrid, 1994, p. 345.

<sup>84</sup> Ph. Plagnieux, *L'architecture gothique est-elle lumière?*, în *Le Symbolisme de la Lumière au Moyen-Âge: de la Spéculation à la Réalité*, Chartres, 2004, p. 43.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>86</sup> Pseudo Saint Bernard cited by L. Grodecki, *Les vitraux de France, du XIe au XVIe siècle*, Caisse Nationale des Monuments Historiques, Paris, 1953, p. 40.

<sup>87</sup> V. Nieto Alcaide, *La Luz, Símbolo y Sistema Visual*, p. 39.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 39, 43.

<sup>89</sup> L. Godeski, *Le vitrail Gothique*, Office du livre Press, Friburg, 1984, pp. 109-110.



of the city. The variety of conceptions is surprising. It includes the entire range of representations, knowledge, traditions and ideals in its iconographic system which defined the consciousness of the human being in the Middle Ages. The Old and the New Testament were represented, the old legends of saints, fragments from old myths, epic poems and obscure folk beliefs.

The varied topics approached by the creators of stained glasses include the Birth of Christ, the Virgin with Jesus as a baby, the Crucifixion, the Passions, the Resurrection, different scenes from the New Testament, scenes from the life of Saints and portraits of Biblical characters are painted in vivid, powerful colours. The interpretation of the metaphorical function of stained glass in connection to the symbolism and aesthetics of light is presented in the epoch's literary proofs. It is also there where we find the literary definition of the metaphor integrated in the concept of stained glass. For example, Pierre de Roissy, the chancellor of the Cathedral from Chartres and the manager of the Theological School, stated in 1200 that "the stained glasses that are inside the church and through which sunlight passes signify the Holy Scripture which protects us from evil and illuminates us in all"<sup>90</sup>. A similar idea had Durand, the Bishop of Mende, when he stated at the end of the 13th century that "stained glasses are like writings which appear in the light of true sun, meaning God, illuminating the choirs of believers in the church"<sup>91</sup>.

The symbolism of colours makes its appearance also at the level of stained glass – red remains an imperial colour, blue is the colour of the Virgin, and also of the Kings of France, green is rather troublesome reminding us of the idea of seductive youth, while yellow is the one which signals dangers and fraudulency. Gold had the supreme value, while white and black were the two extremes associated in a symbolic way with good and evil, purity and impurity<sup>92</sup>.

The rosace from the Western façade or the ones that belong to the sides of the transept, present during all Gothic phases, especially in the maturity period, very well illustrate the medieval artists' ability of composing architectural space. The centred compositional system is one of the most normal and balanced which can be naturally found in the conscience of the viewer, just like Rudolf Arnheim stated in his Gestalt norms<sup>93</sup>. Centricity refers to defining the human being, through motivation and human attitude, as a centre of the universe<sup>94</sup>, but even more than this, centricity manages to connect the human being with a landmark. And according to medieval thinking, the landmark was a clear one, represented by God. The centre was

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<sup>90</sup> Pierre de Roissy, cited by E. de Bruyne, p. 15, in V. Nieto Alcaide, *La Luz, Símbolo y Sistema Visual*, p. 46.

<sup>91</sup> Durand de Mende, in L. Grodecki, *Le vitrail français*, Colin, Paris, 1958, pp. 39-40.

<sup>92</sup> J. Le Goff, *Introduction*, in *Omul Medieval*, Polirom Press, Iași, 1999, p. 32.

<sup>93</sup> R. Arnheim, *Forța centrului vizual*, Meridiane Press, Bucharest, 1995.

<sup>94</sup> C. Jurov, *Arhitectura ambianțelor*, Capitel, Bucharest, 2006, p. 290.

fixed and unchanged, everything started and came back to Him; just like the human being places oneself in the centre while being egotistic, through illumination, the human being can be placed under the centre, becoming aware that it has the ability if not to touch it, at least to be inclined towards reaching it.

Who had access to this type of image discourse? How much was it possible for the viewers to read from the aesthetic program of medieval theology, materialized in stained glass? And how could the symbolistic of light become accessible to the viewers?

Doing a research on the perception of image in that period, Conrad Rudolph<sup>95</sup> tried to prove the fact that, even if not very long ago, the artistic program launched by Suger was considered emblematic for reviving allegory and symbolism after hundreds of years, his plan should be reconsidered, taking into account the exegetic value of this allegory. In fact, his program seems to be more of a source for the new art of the elite. Monumental art, with its exegetic character, thus became accessible only to those *litterati* who could assimilate somehow crypted meaning of artistic images. Gradually, this type of art spread towards the fresh urban elite who had access to written theological culture, but was still numerically reduced. Rudolph also analyzed the usage of exegesis in the visual art from Saint-Denis in connection to other works of art, showing how the conceptual part of works of art, intellectual and spiritual in the same time, was practically restricted and dedicated to an educated contemporary viewer<sup>96</sup>. This thing was essential for understanding the rapports between art and its perceivers during this period.

The metaphors of light have remained not only at a literary level, but also, through the preachers and their sermons, they transmitted their symbolic power through concrete explanations<sup>97</sup>. Thorough mediation, many of these images became familiar to believers, and the degree of efficiency of symbols and of understanding of their value was still subordinated to the word<sup>98</sup>. This system of visualizing symbols and metaphors through words was absolutely necessary, taking into account that, in many situations, according to the ones stated by Conrad Rudolph in his above-mentioned article, the images with an exegetic value became accessible to a mass of initiated people which was more and more reduced. But the idea according to which the viewer can decrypt the meaning of images in a transparent way, without further exegesis is thus questioned. In connection to the visions regarding light discussed in the first part of the article, it means not only that the image has a discursive role, respecting the terms of Norman Bryson, being subordinated to medieval

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<sup>95</sup> C. Rudolph, „Inventing the Exegetical Stained-Glass Window: Suger, Hugh, and a New Elite Art”, in *Art Bulletin*, CAA, vol. XCIII, nr. 4, 2011, pp. 399-422.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>97</sup> V. Nieto Alcaide, *La Luz, Símbolo y Sistema Visual*, p. 50.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibidem*.

theology, but also that the figurative elements of the images from stained glasses – their shiny character, the clarity and splendour associated to coloured glass – play a just as important role in supporting the anagogical effect associated to the iconography of stained glasses. The spiritual conversion of the viewer which sends us from the earthly light to the divine, uncreated one, is underlined through the figurative character of the stained glass, through its aesthetic effects which are immediately accessible to the uneducated viewer.

### **Conclusions**

Being understood as a materialization of the diaphane, the embodiment of transparency which makes possible the visualization of images without being itself a palpable element in the visual field, the stained glass thus remains a paradigmatic example for the idea according to which light approximates God, keeping in the same time the distance between Him (as uncreated light) and His earthly manifestations. Consequently, far from being antagonical, the discursive and figurative aspect of stained glasses can be reconciled in a complementary functioning inside the visual paradigm of the diaphane. In theological writings, as we could notice, light itself is a symbol of divinity, and also a metaphorical example of God, Who is *like* light, without being confunded with it. Light offers the believer the possibility of perceiving its glory and slave. But, in its spacial materialization through the means of stained glass, it simultaneously becomes an environment in which images can be perceived and also a means through which the distance between profane and divinity is reinforced.

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