PRINTING PRESS AND BROADSHEET IMAGERY:
REPRODUCIBILITY AND PERCEPTION DURING THE EARLY GERMAN
EVANGELICAL REFORMATION (1517-1530)

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ABSTRACT

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The invention of the printing press and movable type has been established by sociological, art historical, and media studies scholarship as a pivotal turning point in media consumption and production across Europe, but especially in Germany in the decades following 1517. The press opened up new possibilities for dissemination of texts such as books, pamphlets, and single-leaf broadsheets. Images, either woodcut or engraved, often accompanied these texts. Recent scholarship has undertaken the task of proving the effectiveness of such texts in spreading the Reformation message, but most analyses have bypassed highlighting the wider shift in media consumption with regard to images. This study attempts to chart this broader shift in how the common folk, the target audience of the evangelical Reformation message, interacted with images. The ease of production, affordability and consequent wide dissemination of broadsheets shifted the location of viewing of sacred images. Images thus far seen only by the aristocracy or within liturgical settings were now brought into the street, the tavern, or private homes. This led to a separation from the original ritual, whereby the previous understanding of images as containing the holy made present began to be questioned, most notably visible in moments of iconoclasm. Reproducibility thereby effectuated a breakdown in understanding images as unifying signifier (image) and signified (original, unique thing the image represents). In addition, broadsheet images of this time evoked an analogous effect to Mikhail Bakhtin’s conception of the carnivalesque, where mockery, laughter, and desacralization open up room for the observer to interact and take part in the discourse of the image. Finally, relying upon the fundamental argument of Robert W. Scribner’s work For the Sake of Simple Folk that broadsheet images were
recycled from orthodox and popular origins, it will be seen how recycled images of the peasant remade him as empowered, thereby figuring the observer as an active participant in the evangelical movement. This broader shift in the interaction with images follows the wider trajectory effectuated by the printing press on media consumption in the West of a move away from aura and orthodoxy toward rebelliousness and questioning.
I would like to dedicate this work to my parents, Steve and Debra Reiter, who have spiritually, emotionally, financially, intellectually, and physically supported me my whole life on this academic journey. I have made it this far only because of their love.
I would thank the following people for their contribution and support in making this work possible: Dr. Kirsten Christensen, my undergraduate advisor, who first introduced me to Robert Scribner’s work. Dr. Edgar Landgraf, my thesis advisor, for insightful feedback that challenged me to never stop developing my ideas. Dr. Geoffrey Howes, my committee reader, for steady positive support and encouragement and thoughtful advice throughout this year. George, whose continual support and positive reinforcement saw me through dark times of self-doubt about this project. My colleagues in the AYA program, with whom I experienced these two years and to whom I owe varying degrees of gratitude for their feedback, criticism, and support.
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INTRODUCTION

Although the written word is central to our modern culture, it has not always been the centerpiece of human communication. In the early sixteenth century, German culture was predominantly transferred orally: the vast majority of the population (peasants, artisans, and craftsmen) was still highly illiterate (Scribner, “Simple Folk” 1). Ideas were thus spread by word of mouth, through discussions after sermons in church, in song and hymn, and in the telling of tales (Scribner, “Oral Culture” 83-84). In addition to the oral spread of religious ideas, pictures, paintings, sculptures, and reliefs were also central fixtures of worship and society. Such images were usually ensconced in ritual “where human life was ordered and maintained” (Scribner, “Ritual and Reformation” 105), for example, the reenactment of the ascension of Jesus into heaven after his crucifixion, whereby a figure was pulled up through a hole in the church roof (104).

But with the invention of the mechanical printing press by Johannes Gutenberg around 1440, communication and the role of images in daily life changed. Berndt Hamm points out in his media studies essay on the Reformation that many scholars forget that books, pamphlets, woodcuts, and broadsheets existed before the printing press (“Medienereignis” 160). But the printing press allowed for the quick and cheap production and the wider distribution of already popular forms of media for theological, polemical, informative purposes. These texts included books similar to those we see today, one of the more influential being the vernacular bible of Martin Luther. On a dimensionally smaller scale than Luther’s bible or other such compendiums, however, and hence much more affordable than an entire book, were the broadsheets. These single-leaf documents usually consisting of a verbal text in verse and a woodcut image text.

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1 Only about five percent of the total population of Germany was literate, while about one third of city inhabitants were (Moxey 24).
Although pictorial woodcuts appeared in the late fourteenth century (Ivins 162), and broadsheets boomed in the early fifteenth century, the printing press allowed for speedy production in bulk and therefore relative affordability and wider distribution. There are no complete and trustworthy estimates regarding the circulation of broadsheets. The brittle paper upon which they were printed lacked durability and deteriorated. In addition, most broadsheets were not valued as singular artistic artifacts to be cared for and maintained, or even collected. However, piecing together records from producers and specific broadsheet runs, Robert W. Scribner concluded that the numbers of copies of a single woodcut would have been at least 1500, if not up to 3,000 (“For the Sake” 5).  

As to affordability, although the “market” cost of a single broadsheet cannot be conclusively proven, Keith Moxey cites Bruno Weber’s findings that they were most likely around 4-5 pfennig. In light of Weber’s further findings that a master mason made about 28 pfennig per day and his apprentice 24, Moxey concludes that broadsheets were most likely affordable not just for upper middle class, but for other artisans as well (23).

The focus of this study will be the particular broadsheets implemented in the early evangelical Reformation from the nailing of the theses to the middle of the century. This study will show how the printing press effected a change in medium: it made possible the new proliferation of broadsheet imagery that led to a shift in the way the common folk interacted with imagery. Due to the wider availability of images and text, private interaction with religious images became more prevalent. Additionally, the interaction of the reader was no longer one of observing a figure in a church ritual, which called up associations that were strictly defined by

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2 Scribner aggregates a few pieces of data to draw this conclusion: First, a woodcut block could yield about 3000 before deterioration. Second, in 1522, 1500 copies of a single polemical broadsheet were seized. Finally, a best-selling book would probably find about 20,000 readers over all its editions
the Church. Rather, the remade imagery and new viewing location of the image text invited and allowed the “reader” of such material to make his or her own connections between the images.

This shift in media distribution occurred during a wider theological trend toward targeting the common man with a simplified message that emphasized piety. Berndt Hamm noticed this trend began in the fifteenth century and moved toward a “normative centering” of belief he describes as the *Frommigkeitsthologie*, or “theology of piety” (18). Pure theological goals were thrown out in favor of cultivating “the proper, salutary form of the Christian’s life” (19) with a simplified message aimed at the uneducated believer. The printing press only made such efforts more efficient. Reformation supporters surely valued aristocratic defenders of the new religion as key to its success, but the message of the Reformation was designed not for a select few, but rather for the broader masses. The reproducibility of the broadsheet enabled this message to be conveyed to that audience.

Martin Luther’s own theological arguments illustrate this tendency to move away from an emphasis on church authority and orthodoxy and toward the individual’s authority in personal salvation and participation in the reading of the scripture. In the Leipzig Debates of 1519, Luther argued against the supreme authority of the Church matters of belief and for the importance of the individual believer’s direct reading of the bible to ascertaining the full meaning. This was something hitherto practically unheard of—the Catholic Church, when unperturbed by Reformation ideas, was dominated by ecclesiastical hierarchy and intercessors, so peasants depended on the words and mediation of priests to reach God. Luther’s translation of the Bible into the vernacular also served as an invitation to the common folk to reflect personally on their faith using the scripture. But Luther’s call for a “personal” reading was paradoxical: Edwards noted that Luther later added reading guidelines to his translation in hopes that readers would, in
their individual interaction with the Bible text, be led to all of his same conclusions (167). Luther, however, was unsuccessful in this “[d]espite his strenuous efforts” (167). The argument of this study serves to explain why Luther’s effort was futile: opening the door to personal interaction and interpretation effectively prevented him from making a simultaneous argument for one “correct” interpretation.

Broadsheets of the early evangelical Reformation attempted to capture this same audience of Luther’s message and the general audience of most theologians since the fifteenth century: the common man or Bauer. Luther, in his quest to instruct the common man about the Bible, also recognized the importance of images as a means of instruction expressly for the highly-illiterate peasants: “Above all for the sake of children and the simple folk, who are more easily moved by pictures and images to recall divine history than through mere words or doctrines.” In this way, broadsheets contributed further to the break with church orthodoxy outlined by Luther in that their messages were aimed directly at the common man. Such broadsheets have been likened to propaganda used by supporters of the Reformation and the cause of Martin Luther (Scribner, For the Sake 242). Although Scribner’s work is important to understanding the value of the broadsheet image as a text in its own right, I will argue how broadsheet images did not force a new, strict ideological view upon the observer of the image.

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3 Bauer is also occasionally translated as “farmer,” or, in some modern German texts, “boor,” most likely because of the negative image tradition of peasants as fools. By “peasants” and “common man,” I mean the peasantry of Germany, not including artisans, handworkers, or middle class. This group also included women, although they are more often referred to as “peasant’s wife” (see Moxey 35).

4 This translation of Luther’s original writing, as quoted in Christensen 60.

5 In Chapter 3, I will address in more detail how certain images figured the peasant as a powerful supporter of Luther or as a dangerous subversive and the effects of this new empowered portrayal of the often downtrodden peasant.

6 Scribner’s definition of “propaganda” is not meant in a judgmental sense that connotes negative, unwanted, and destructive influence on the observer. Rather it means the image has a power, different from the text, to explain the world ideologically, not just factually.
Rather, the shift in location of viewing and reproducibility, both effects of the printing press, granted the image a polysemic quality.

Despite its relative ubiquity in daily life in Reformation-era Germany, the image is a fairly unexplored text. Scribner has conducted and authored the most extensive work\(^7\) on the social impact of broadsheets. His analysis tends to focus on the iconographical interpretation of the imagery, which allows him to draw broader conclusions about the efficacy of such texts in persuading the audience to anti-clerical, anti-Pope, or pro-Luther ideas. Additionally, Keith Moxey in *Peasants, Warriors, and Wives* approaches broadsheet imagery from an art historical perspective to urge other scholars to embrace the importance of broadsheet imagery, despite their simplicity and seeming lack of aesthetic quality. Other scholars have focused on the other polemical texts that also proliferated at this time. As Cole observes, these *Flugschriften*, or pamphlets, also marked a shift in the use of texts made possible by the printing press—the printing press now allowed for the creation of “brief, blunt, vulgar Reformation tract intended for a wide but often unsophisticated and sometimes confused audience” (Cole 139). Although I will not focus on pamphlets in this study, it is worth noting that *Flugschriften* were part of a wider shift in media that will be charted here. *Flugschriften*, like broadsheets, were distributed on a massive scale, widely available, and also open to discussion and varying interpretation.\(^8\)

In this work, I would like to address two points in broadsheet scholarship that will lead to a brief discussion of the broader media studies perspective on Reformation imagery: First, that the woodcut images are simple and therefore undeserving of more critical scrutiny, and second, that the woodcut image served merely as an illustration or representation of the text. The

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\(^7\) Other scholars who have addressed this topic recently include Jennifer Spinks, Scott Dixon, Charles Talbot, and Christiane Andersson.

\(^8\) For example, Richard G. Cole notes how a polemical tract in the hands or earshot of “the unlearned or semi-literate” could be misinterpreted (144-145).
simplicity of the lines of broadsheet imagery sets woodcut images apart from previous religious imagery. Keith Moxey laments this disparity as it has caused art historians to perceive the simplistic aesthetics as low quality and therefore undeserving of attention (2). Margaret Miles, for example, understands printed images as inferior to “art.” Putting aside her judgment of quality, however, Miles too observes that woodcut images “did not invite devotional adoration” and were not part of the liturgy, two important factors discussed in detail in this work. Yet she stops short of concluding an important shift in image consumption, instead citing the importance of education and the written word to Reformation supporters (Miles 116). For Miles, the simplicity of broadsheet images and the presence of text consign them to limited powers of denotation that kept “idiosyncratic interpretation at a minimum” (115). Recent scholarship from Pettegree challenges this assumption by questioning the frequency of oral readings of broadsheet images: There is little tangible evidence (only evidence in writings that cannot be taken as fact) that “the polemical messages of pamphlets and woodcuts were disseminated by being read aloud by readers to those who could not read” (120). Furthermore, many broadsheet images are far from simplistic: One example, a sheet from a series by Georg Pencz and Hans Schäufelein published in Nuremberg around 1533 (Moxey 50), demonstrates how talented artists like the infamous Pencz were capable of precise facial and clothing detail when necessary. This work implies that simple lines did not necessarily belie lack of talent, but rather necessity and design for the audience. This image was most likely for aristocratic consumption. We can productively understand the value of the simplicity of broadsheet images by understanding the social effects of this new medium—the reproducible broadsheet. Focusing on the relative simplicity of woodcut images as compared with the complexity of “real” art distracts from the role broadsheets played in shifting media consumption: The simplicity of broadsheets allowed for the
possibility for topical content and ambiguous representation in woodcut imagery. Details were not important as the image was not necessarily to be regarded for such details, but rather for the overall interaction between the juxtaposed images or the implications and allusions called up by a single image. For example, in fig. 1, the title page to a Flugschrift from around 1521 in Augsburg, simple lines were all that was needed to portray the pope and Luther—their special orientation in opposition together, in addition to other factors such as Luther’s book (presumably a Bible), speak volumes. Additionally, juxtaposition in imagery could at times signal cooperation or conspiracy (Scriber, *For the Sake* 24), so the attentive clergy in the background could perhaps be interested in hearing Luther’s new appeal. The image could also offer simple news-oriented information related to Luther’s exploits as a writer and his staunch defense of his writings and ideas at the Diet of Worms in the same year. Although broadsheets may be dismissed for their simplistic lines and lack of exact representation, these polysemic images allowed room for interpretation and interaction on the part of the viewer.

In addition to the ambiguity created by simplistic lines, many scholars position the broadsheet image as a mere representation and elucidation of the accompanying text. This conclusion is not without merit, but it fails to recognize how print culture comes to change the visual experience. Today, our visual experience is shaped by our acquisition of knowledge
through words. Given that literacy had not quite taken complete hold in the early evangelical
Reformation, it is anachronistic to argue the common man would have read an image uniformly
and in a neat and tidy sequence of conclusions. As McLuhan argues in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*,
the advent of print culture in the wake of the invention of the printing press made possible a
product that was uniform and as repeatable as a scientific experiment, which led in general to a
“visual homogenizing of experience in print culture, and the relegation of auditory and other
sensuous complexity to the background” (125). McLuhan sees the advent of the printed word as
the ultimate linear point of view. This tendency—to reduce “experience to the scale of one
sense”—is the effect of typography on the arts, sciences, and human sensibility (125). In
addition, the Consequences of this include the destruction of the “dynamic and plastic” image,
such as early woodcuts or medieval paintings. These consequences, however, in light of Kepes’s
scholarship, cannot be seen as immediate, but represent a process that increasingly took hold as
type became more accessible and more widely distributed.

In this same vein of misunderstanding the image by subscribing to a text-based, print-
influenced method of interpretation is Andrew Pettegree’s criticism of Scribner’s assumed
importance of the woodcut. He takes issue with Scribner’s assumption that complex narrative
woodcut imagery would have been intelligible to peasants without any knowledge of the text
accompanying it (117). Pettegree cites the very famous image of The Divine Mill (113), arguing

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9 Pettegree challenges the fact that many scholars have simply adopted the Scribner’s
assumptions about peasant reading and visual literacy in his seminal work *For the Sake of Simple
Folk*. One important criticism not addressed in this work is the lack of proper optical equipment
at the time for the masses of people (106). Lenses were available, but not to the poorer common
folk, and were often themselves not entirely helpful in our modern understanding of vision
correction. Although this should be remembered when considering the ability of the common
to interact with broadsheet information (image and words)—that is, images of folk gathering
in large crowds to look on an image seems in this light a bit unlikely—it seems just as unlikely
that “blunted vision” prohibited the majority from consuming them in some way.
that “to appreciate the full resonance” of the image, one would have had to possess precise knowledge of the Host Mill, a Catholic doctrinal image of the transubstantiation. Pettegree attempts through this argument to question the power of such images to pass on the designated message of the Reformation, and does so convincingly. More salient to this work, however, is to understand Pettegree’s observation as exposing a more general lack of specific meaning conveyed by broadsheet images. That is, although the image itself potentially contained all necessary meaning, and the peasants were equipped with visual knowledge (from previous doctrinal and popular religious experience) and help from the more educated, the single “reader” could have missed any number of components or interpreted them quite differently. Pettegree’s “new understanding of the visual polemic” as strictly edifying of the text (and thus dependent upon it) thus misses the target by ignoring the possibility for a use of these images outside of their intended use. One example is a woodcut (fig. 2) in the more humanistic rather than religious tradition which serves to show how the image was not a mere reflection of the text and therefore had the potential to call up decidedly different associations in the mind of the “reader.” The image at first glance features four demonic and decidedly malign female figures, one of which is birthing a litter of clergy while the others tend to newborns. The birthed cardinals and pope are clearly identifiable by their traditional dress. The association of clergy with evil is blatant, but the broadsheet also offers additional
meaning to the literate: the text identifies these three caretakers as three classical Furies. Following Pettegree’s assessment, the “full” intended meaning of the image is only accessible with text and image in combination. Yet, this “full” meaning is just one of the many possible meanings. The text is therefore only necessary for one reading of the image and does not preclude alternative readings that do not involve the text. These alternative readings can circumvent, oppose, or even ignore the intended meaning of the image as the image could call up entirely separate associations in the mind of the viewer. These demonic women could perhaps be identified as witches, bringing the meaning into the much more applicable realm of daily life and popular belief, and thereby triggering a host of potentially more powerful associations than information about the Furies, which the reader may have no understanding of. The key here, as opposed to Scribner’s argument, is that the meaning of an image is not exhausted by one interpretation, but rather that there are other possibilities, ones that do not rely upon the text and are actually wholly separate from it. Additionally, since meaning is constructed by the readers, it can only be guided, not controlled precisely, and will vary depending on the reader’s background and experience. Those educated and literate who designed the broadsheet or wrote the text may have had certain meanings in mind, but these were privy to the educated class who was able to read the image and text. The literate were not the sole audience of broadsheet images, however. The common folk specifically could not access the text and therefore could not access the “full” meaning that the educated classes (for example some monastics, higher level artisans, the aristocracy) could, so the meaning of the image could not have been uniform for them all.

Hamm argues that the word-based text accompanying the broadsheet image shows not only that these images were increasingly intended for (and popular with) more advanced readers, but that the texts “provide an interpretive key to unlock those aspects of the images associated
with the ‘theology of piety’” (Hamm 24). This argument, however, ignores outright the possibility that the reader of the image interacted with the image despite any problems with “unlocking” the “real” message. Hamm’s other observation, that the snippets of text incorporated into woodcut images beginning in the fifteenth century “accentuate[d] the meaning intended to be conveyed to the viewer by the visual representation” (Hamm 25), only underscores the fact of the image’s ambiguity without text. This ambiguity of the image without text was also understood by artists and intellectuals of the time. Dürer (as quoted in Miles 116) was a contemporary supporter of the power of the image and text to lead to a “better understanding” by the reader/consumer of the image. Additionally, a church council in Nuremberg confiscated an illustrated anti-Papal pamphlet and rebuked the authors of the texts (Andreas Osiander and Hans Sachs) as well as the publisher, Hans Guldenmund; they soon thereafter returned the woodblocks to Guldenmund and allowed him to use them on the condition he would not include the text (Moxey 27). While Moxey interprets this as evidence of the council’s ambivalent stance toward the Reformation, this anecdote just as much provides evidence of the ambivalence and openness to interpretation of the image when not accompanied by text.

Further examples of this of course include the symbols where a text was perhaps not even necessary. One example of this is the image *Pope and Cardinal as Wolves, with Luther and Christ* (Scribner, “For the Sake” 29). Here, it is now possible to juxtapose a symbol of religious devotion available within orthodox tradition, Christ crucified, with the man of the hour, Martin Luther. Likewise, the ornamented and easily recognizable headgear of the pope is placed on the head of a ravenous dog. These images present obvious connotations, for example, the wolf as the terrible destroyer of the true followers of Christ. However, it is the incorporation of Luther that is interesting. The ease, speed, and cheapness of printing allowed for such topical images to be
paired with orthodox imagery, essentially injecting current issues and debate into seeming orthodox scenes. What is accomplished is the drawing of new connections or aversions within the context of a contemporary debate—the image of Christ crucified in this broadsheet is not necessarily essentially for adoration, for pietistic reflections, or for devotion, but rather is an element of the syntax of the entire work. The printing press, which allowed for use of topical themes and more varied pairings of images, exponentially increased the possibility for new meaning combinations.

This study focuses on the image portion of broadsheets. Building on the important work done by Scribner, Moxey, and other scholars of the broadsheet, my study will trace the broader shift in media at this time and contemplate the changing function of imagery this shift entailed. Where images in daily life had previously been almost exclusively viewed as sacred objects and as art of seemingly magical power, reproducible and readily available broadsheet imagery was severed from this sacred presence. The shift in distribution and place of viewing will be analyzed here to trace the shift from a magical, ritualistic interaction with imagery to a private, individualized, and more ambivalent interaction expressed by the use and subjects of the broadsheet image.

Chapter 1 contains a discussion of such “sacredness” as present in objects by analyzing private devotionals, or images of saints or holy persons that were more widely reproduced because of the printing press. This relationship of the presence of the represented person in the image itself, or the equivalence of signifier and signified, was eroded by the mass reproducibility and shifting location of the image. Private devotionals were massively produced and cheaply purchased, which actually allowed them to become private, that is, used in the home or cloister
The opportunity for private ownership and viewing outside of church marks a shift of location that had not been possible before the printing press. Now, devotion could take place at any time and in any way the observer chose—it was not bound to a communal or liturgy-oriented event. It is precisely this shift of the site of their consumption that was further promoted by broadsheet imagery. Separated from the original and reproduced in great quantities, their authenticity as objects for the use of sacred presence use was open for question and change. It seems to be for this reason that broadsheets were unassailed by zealous iconoclasts who rejected the idolatry of devotional imagery. These images, now outside of the realm of strict Church control and viewed outside of its walls, no longer functioned chiefly as devotional objects but rather invited interaction and questioning from the observer.

The decline in the perceived sacred power of imagery is marked by the cheap and widely available broadsheet image. Not only was this new location of viewing outside of Church walls in a “profane space,” but the new transitory medium and reproducibility invited a new reading, one no longer grounded in the aura created by its ritualistic setting. In Chapter 2, I analyze this separation of the image from ritual as a consequence of the image’s reproducibility. This separation is the consequence of mechanical reproduction, which “emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual” (Benjamin 53). When speaking of broadsheet images, we are not dealing with works of art in the strict sense, but rather of an image that has no unique original. Broadsheet images were created to be reproduced. In addition, in the ritual of liturgy, holy images like the crucifix and the dove served specific representative, devotional functions, clearly outlined and defined by the corresponding doctrine. Within this setting, the role of the

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10 Profane space is identified by Scribner and other scholars as the space of daily life, such as the marketplace, a tavern, a workspace, as differentiated from the sacred space of a church, cathedral, or pilgrimage site (“Ritual and Reformation” 113).
image is defined only by its role in worship. The broadsheet image, now separated from the original ritual, no longer carries with it the same significance. Separated from its ritualistic role, the door now is open, for the image must be reinterpreted: “Printed images did not carry the same dangers as large, painted images. They did not invite devotional adoration, they did not become part of the liturgy by virtue of being placed in a significant position within a church building…” (Miles 115). Broadsheet images do not evince the fusion of signifier and signified. This observation is supported by the fact that broadsheet images were not targets of iconoclastic fervor.

This effect of separation from ritual will be further explored by analyzing the specific broadsheet images that rely upon the grotesque or mockery to create an effect analogous to carnival. The ritual of carnival allowed for suspension of hierarchy and a new protocol for interaction that was less than proper, but rather relied on drollness and laughter to create an atmosphere of universality and renewal:

The basis of laughter which gives form to the carnival rituals frees them completely from all religious and ecclesiastic dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety. They are also completely deprived of the character of magic and prayer; they do not command nor do they ask for anything. Even more, entertaining carnival forms parody the Church’s cult. All these forms are systematically placed outside the Church and religiosity. They belong to an entirely different sphere. (Bakhtin 7)

“Carnival spirit,” accomplished concretely by the use of abusive language and grotesque imagery (Bakhtin 52), was not only present in the carnvalesque ritual, but also in broadsheet
images—and not only in those that depicted carnival.¹¹ This broadsheet imagery, already in
direct opposition (and purposefully so) to Catholic doctrine, relied on a renewing mockery and
desacralization that created a second world of disorder parallel to the world of order and
propriety. I will analyze a few such exemplary broadsheet images to show how this analogous
effect and the unrestricted time of viewing destroyed the distance between observer and
observed. No longer holding sacred power, these religious images instead invite interpretation:
Outside of the literal ritual, the viewer can act as “uninvolved critic” (Scribner, “For the Sake”
98) inviting little bodily danger to themselves.

In Chapter 3, the specific images themselves, and the subjects of broadsheet imagery, can
be seen as marking a shift from the strictness of Church-designated imagery. Such imagery was
recycled, but was given new meaning with profane and vitriolic juxtapositions. This had a
twofold effect: on the one hand, in the sense of a new ritual separated from the original, it created
a second world, a world turned on its head. On the other hand, broadsheet imagery was
ambiguous and it allowed for a “filling of values.” Scribner developed this term while at the
same time criticizing the efficiency of ambivalent imagery in conveying the message of the
broadsheet (Scribner, “For the Sake” 43, 93). The term is especially apt for this work, which
diverges from Scribner’s drive to evaluate the efficiency of the dissemination of the image. It is
precisely because the imagery was ambiguous that it did not impart a strict doctrine, which
allowed for an interpretational space that the ritualistic, doctrine-defined images of the Church

¹¹In Scribner’s most comprehensive work on broadsheet images, For the Sake of Simple Folk, he
has an entire chapter called “The World Upside Down” created by harsh juxtapositions of devil
and pope, animal and human, which is analogue to what Bakhtin describes as “The World Inside
Out” of carnival, which is created by grotesque imagery such as demons, defecation, and animal-
human combinations.
did not allow. Because Scribner was so concerned with seeing the efficacy of such images in spreading the message, he did not emphasize the broader shift in interaction with these images.

The shift from unambiguous to ambiguous is evident in how the common man not only constituted the target audience, but sometimes even figured centrally in broadsheet images. This marked a concrete shift from the traditional fool-peasant symbolism of the previous centuries\(^\text{12}\) to the dignified, capable, empowered peasant standing beside Luther. Here the peasant was not only addressed by the message, but was included as a figural actor (with potency!) in the battle for the true religion. An analysis of several broadsheets will show how this image of the ennobled peasant, which is by no means mentioned in the text, will illustrate the artist’s understanding of the importance of reader interaction with the broadsheet image.

Although much previous scholarship on Reformation media has marginalized the importance of the broadsheet image as mere “embellishment” (Cole 144) or a reflection of the text (Moxey 2), I hope to show how the image is actually a text worthy of study in its own right. I argue that the image enhances an individualistic and private interaction between “reader” and content, which would have gone beyond the mere political or religious message of the word-based text. The medium of the broadsheet moved the site of consumption and increased the scope of its thematic material. Because of its reproducibility, the broadsheet image was now severed from its original role as a ritual object. Broadsheets, usually divested of the sacred presence of images from earlier times, now invited interpretation, laughter, and mockery, which challenged the strict monopoly on religious imagery the Church had hitherto held. Additionally, the ambiguous imagery invited a variety of interpretations and interactions. The polysemic broadsheet image would have beckoned, and over time instructed, the reader to interact with it,

\(^{12}\) Sebastian Brandt’s 1494 satire _Das Narrenshiff_ exhibits distinctive visual examples of the foolish peasant.
ponder it, and react to it. If the broadsheet image is highly significant in the history of media, it is because it exhibits a shift from a sacred, controlled interaction with imagery to a private, desacralized and therefore more ambivalent interaction.
CHAPTER 1

DEVOTIONAL IMAGERY: A TRANSITION

Robert W. Scribner, in his essay “Ritual and Reformation” on the role of imagery during the early evangelical Reformation in Germany (1517-1550), recounts the harrowing details of an act of vandalism perpetrated by a group of men and women in Tomerdingen near Ulm in 1530. A member of the group, Anna Breitinger, snuck into the local churchyard under the cover of darkness, stole the figure of Christ from a scene depicting the events of the garden of Gethsemane, and transported it to a private home. A spinning-bee was in progress, which meant this was not only a place of handcraft, but also carousing—such events were notorious for immorality at the time (113). The Christ figure was placed upon the table to be slowly dismantled, abused, and eventually defenestrated. This process illustrates that the belief in the presence of the holy has not fully vanished, but is open to question. To a modern reader, the disfigurement of an object of holy esteem may initially seem puzzling—after all, this image, when originally in the churchyard, would have been an object of religious devotion and adoration. But what is even more puzzling is the manner in which the disfigurement was carried out. After being set upon the table, the Christ figure was addressed by one of the men in the room. Others spoke to it as well, as if it were a manifestation of Christ himself, and when it did not respond, tensions rose: “If you are Paul\textsuperscript{13}” another man taunted the object, “help yourself!” When the Christ figure (naturally) remained silent, it was thrown from the window (110).\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{13} It is not certain whether this mistaken identification was the fault of the speaker or the recorder of this event. Either way, this confusion has little bearing on the implication of this incident.

\textsuperscript{14} Scribner notes that another woman returned the figure to its original place, although we can never be sure if it was out of guilt for violating the sacred object or simple fear of punishment by the local authorities.
This account serves in Scribner’s work as a somewhat humorous example of iconoclastic fervor that led to the destruction of the material image and the unspoken symbolic power of the image (114). By widening Scribner’s lens here to view this event in context of the wider social and religious climate of the Reformation, it becomes apparent that this event was more than a type of ritualistic desacralization of religious imagery, which is Scribner’s treatment. It instead offers evidence of a wider and more general shift in the early part of the sixteenth century in the way imagery was viewed by the common folk. More precisely, the attack on the image elucidates the shift of the function of imagery from unique sacred objects that possessed or manifested holy powers to cheap (in cost, not necessary quality) reproductions that could be questioned and interacted with. What could allow these folk, as well as many others who participated in the rampant iconoclasm of the time, to feel justified, perhaps even compelled, to attack an object of seeming holy significance?

In this chapter, I will show how the reproducibility of imagery and the change in location of viewing of this imagery led to a gradual breakdown in perception of a manifested holy presence. This gradual shift is seen in the use of devotional images before and during the early evangelical Reformation: although the common folk still used devotional images in much the same way, they were now more widespread, they could be privately owned, and thus be used outside of orthodox tradition. All these characteristics were then amplified in broadsheet

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15 I am relying here on Scribner’s recounting of the event from his research in the documentation at the Stadtarchiv for the city of Ulm (“Reformation and Carnival” 76). There are also other similar accounts from contemporary records in different cities across Germany. One other example recorded by Scribner is that of Hildesheim in 1543, one year after Reformation ideas had been adopted in the city. An image of Christ was removed from the cathedral at the time of Pfaffenfastnacht and offered toasts in various taverns. When it did not return the favor at the tailors’ guild, it was doused in beer. While it is possible that the historical details of such retellings are inaccurate or unreliable because of the bias of the original chronicler, the sheer fact that such similar accounts were recorded attests to a shifting role and use of such imagery.
imagery. The broader movement toward iconoclasm (that is, the destruction of such devotional images that left many broadsheet images unscathed) is final evidence of the crumbling equivalence of signifier and signified and the transition away from understanding the image to contain the holy made present.

**Devotional Images in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries**

The printing press did not bring about instantaneous change in media consumption. The broadsheet, open-air sermon, and small devotional image were popular in the centuries before—the first pictorial woodcuts date from the mid-fourteenth century, although they were expensive to produce then. Thus to understand the functions of imagery as an arc, their role in society before the Reformation must be explored. In the centuries before the advent of the printing press, the common folk of the area now known as Germany would have found images and art chiefly within the confines of a church or cathedral as they had limited access to the collections of the aristocracy. Images within the church, even when placed in different locations, were an integral part of the Church liturgical rituals such as worship, holy festivals, and even popular devotion (Scribner, “For the Sake” xxvi). The images in these situations were not simply looked upon or scrutinized like in the modern day. Instead, the vision was thought of “as occurring when a quasi-physical ray is projected from the eye of the viewer to touch its object” (Miles 96). Vision was thus the most potent way to access the object of devotion. Understandably, visual apprehension of information was given a central role in worship (Scribner, “Popular Piety” 458). In this process of visual apprehension, laypeople—including peasants—would have often used

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16 Scribner makes reference here to freestanding images, images placed on an altar, devotional images placed along the side of a cathedral hall, and the movable crucifix. He observes that there were “considerable differences” in the relationship between the image and the observer, but does specify that these images still functioned *within* the liturgy (xxvi).
what Scribner terms “the sacramental gaze”—or “a prolonged, contemplative encounter” with a holy figure of a saint (461). They would have used this during worship as a chief interaction since the priests were the ones most often speaking and acting in worship (Miles 97). The use of devotional objects and later the interaction with broadsheet imagery figures into this tradition. Even before the printing press allowed for the reproducibility of portraits, such small, hand-held devotional images were by the mid-fourteenth century the most common possessions of cloistered women (Hamburger 435). Such images were also popular and widely used outside convent walls: In the late fourteenth century, souvenirs of pilgrimage in the form of a woodcut were “the first items of mass circulation” (Scribner, “For the Sake” 5). An item of devotion allowed the viewer to “ascend from [the material image] toward a more spiritual form of contemplation” (Zorach 319). Gazing upon a statue or relic emphasized not the exact image itself, but rather the connection that could be made from prolonged, sacramental interaction.

One example of such a devotional image\(^\text{17}\) is that of a painting and subsequent pilgrimage badge from approximately 1520 (see fig. 3). When a workman recovered miraculously after a fall when tearing down a Jewish synagogue in Regensburg, a known miraculous image of the virgin was brought to the site to serve as a centralized fixture of devotion and pilgrimage.

\(^\text{17}\) For further information on this specific example, see Freedberg 100.
To the devotees, the place of viewing of the image was essential, even more essential than the fact that this image was originally not on the scene of the event. It instead seems the case that such an image was necessary to establishing a devotional routine at this place. In addition, at least 100,000 clay and silver badges copied from this depiction of the image were created and distributed to visitors. These images were then meaningful reminders of the visit to the original painting and were effective as devotional tools in reminiscence of the holy presence believed to be manifest in the original.

Other specific examples of such devotion materials are examined by Jeffrey Hamburger in his wider analysis of female spirituality in medieval Germany. He examined a group of nuns in the Dominican convent Schönensteinbach in the mid fifteenth century. Nuns in this century often received devotional paintings or crosses upon profession in addition to the other small statuettes many of them possessed (Hamburger 428). During an internal reform of this specific convent, the reformer Johannes Meyer put specific emphasis on the use of imagery by the nuns. Hamburger observes that because of strict condemnation of the use of such images by nuns, it seems that private devotional items “stand for the expression of the will and the self” that internal church reformers “wished to stamp out. In their view, images, the miracles associated with them, and the visions they inspired were dangerous precisely because they encouraged ‘private’ experience of a kind they could not easily control” (Hamburger 431). Such tokens even sometimes came between nuns and their confessors—the image would take the latter’s place and the nun would have no more need of him (443). In another similar example, when a friar in the thirteenth century prevented convent women from displaying pictures of saints, he “merely elaborated official policy” and supported the Church’s doctrinal authority (Hamburger 431). It
seems fair to assume that this doctrinal authority—and control—would also be maintained over congregants.

In the situation of the cloister, we see a specific conflict between individualized devotion and Church doctrine caused by widespread use and private possession of devotional images. Although such devotion was literally within the walls of the convent, it was self-chosen, self-controlled: It was “the point at which the individual believer invoked and paid homage to the sacred” and it “embodied in practical form the way in which the individual conceived of the more elaborate and systematized structure of belief to which he or she gave allegiance” (Scribner, “For the Sake” 95). This is reflected in the convent example: The time and place of consumption of the image were designated by the owner of the object, and the image was sometimes even a replacement for a human functioning in a liturgical setting (confession). Thus, in comparison with the devotional images in churches and cathedrals, widely distributed popular devotional images fundamentally broke connections with Church doctrine and invited new use and individualized interaction.

Demand for private devotional items was not exclusive to convent and monastery dwellers, but was present even into the evangelical Reformation. Portraits of Luther (see figs. 7, 8, and 9), each of which lent Luther an amount of popular mythological status, were eagerly consumed (Scribner, “For the Sake” 23). Scribner argues that the public’s eager consumption of portraits of Luther “was influenced by a desire for the *heilbringende Schau* (23), that is, the “holy made present”-effect of popular devotional images. Freedberg more fully explains the potential draw of such a view of images: “It brings the transcendent to earth and the supernatural down to the realms of everyday experience” (311). Analogous to the sacramental gaze upon
devotional images in a worship setting, a privately used devotional image would allow the user to come in contact with the divine.

**Iconoclasm and Devotional Images**

This fusion (Freedberg) of signifier and signified and the subsequent possibility for magical character of the image and “emotional involvement” of the viewer were not new ideas, and they greatly complicated the role of imagery. Freedberg notes that iconoclasts, comprehending the power of images in culture, had been attacking them since antiquity (386). This holy presence had been a point of theological debate for and against iconoclasm for centuries due in part to the Old Testament proscription against idol worship and idol carving in the third commandment. Iconoclasm surges were complex reactions, also occasionally stemming from cultural upheaval. For example, during the Roman Christianization, images of the former polytheistic religions were destroyed to make way for the new. Reformers in early sixteenth-century Germany refused to accept the confounding of prototype, or the holy person, and his or her representation, the painting, sculpture, etc. This led to spikes in iconoclastic acts throughout the centuries wherein the displacement of religious imagery to profane spaces outside of Church walls and control was continued as part of the questioning of this fusion. Issues of Biblical proportion—worshipping of idols, as prohibited by the third commandment—were at the core of the debate, although symbols of worldly power were also sometimes attacked. The sixteenth century saw just such a swell in iconoclastic fervor, with roots in the former cause: The massive distribution of imagery and the consequent possibility for private ownership and use, combined with an atmosphere of emphasis on church reform, brought the question of the ontological significance of the image to a fever pitch. Conflation of signifier and signified was in precise
conflict with the biblical proscription of idol worship. Additionally, leading reformers themselves showed awareness of the lack of the presence of the sacred in the image itself. For example, Zwingli’s adoption of this new method of interpreting images is evidenced in his disdainful attitude toward devotees kneeling and bowing before images, adorning them with jewels and seeking remission of sin by touching them (Miles 99).

For the evangelical reformers, the images themselves were not inherently wrong: it was rather the way they were used that caused problems (Zorach 320). But what of the many iconoclastic attacks instigated by the middle and lower classes, such as the event described at the opening of this chapter? The men in the Spinnstube in Ulm attacked the Christ figure itself and interpreted the image as the source of the problem; they did not make attempts to reform their own behavior in interacting with it. It seems there are two main contributing factors: On one hand, these attacks were perhaps part of a broader trend of the Reformation in line with Luther’s call for a direct reading of the Bible, a retaking of liturgical language, and an end to Church mediation (Miles 104). On the other hand, and more relevant to this study, is the possibility that these attacks were expressions of the overall shift in the understanding of the image effected by the printing press. The iconoclastic stage thus marks a transitional phase, where the image still possesses some sacred power, but this power has now shifted and is therefore weakened so that the layperson is empowered to challenge and even destroy this power. The image, for the iconoclast, is open to questioning, to dismemberment, and reclamation. The power of the image is diminished:

He [the iconoclast] sees the image before him. It represents a body to which, for whatever reason, he is hostile. Either he sees it as living, or he treats it as living. Or—perhaps frighteningly—what should be absent (or unknown) is present (or known). In either
event, it is on these bases that he feels he can somehow diminish the power of the
represented by destroying the representation or by mutilating it. (Freedberg 406)

The iconoclast mobilizes a new attitude toward the religious statue, painting, or work of art
whereby the power of the image is not completely absent, but rather shifted. This new form of
interpretation does not divorce the image of power completely or iconoclasts would not have had
any reason to destroy the images. Rather, the new method of interpretation identifies the image
as possessing a power, or signified, different than the signifier—this new weakened yet not
absent signified is however something which may be questioned and attacked.

Key to this shift is the space where the image was viewed. The importance of space is
evident in the fact that “the removal of objects from sacred into profane space was a common
occurrence in acts of iconoclasm” (Scribner, “Popular Culture” 113). Images were carried into
the marketplace, burned, used for other more practical purposes, like building houses, or brought
to less-than-reputable establishments, such as the Spinnstube of the opening anecdote in this
chapter. Once brought out of the holy space, the image was open to attack. Once destroyed, the
significance was destroyed as well. Only in this “profane” space, which was notably space
outside of the direct control of church doctrine and oversight, was it then possible to interpret the
image in a new way. The point, however, is not that the change of location itself divested the
image of all sacredness: As Freedberg observes, objects of devotional pilgrimage said to have
miraculous powers can be seen to function “when they are still outside in the cold, hanging on a
tree, or pathetically painted on some shabby street corner. They work before the fancy and
elevated forms of enshrinement subsequently granted to them” (110). Instead it seems to be that
a shift in location, combined with mass production and wide distribution opened up the door to a
possible new interpretation outside of Church doctrine.
For church images, figures, and emblems, this new interpretational possibility was the questioning of the conflation of the signified and signifier, or the holy presence in the image. Images that then failed this interrogation “were subjected to derision and scorn” (Scribner, “Ritual and Reformation” 113). Further evidence to this is found in other specific attacks on images. In a similar attack in Basel in 1529, iconoclasts in Basel attacked a crucifix. First, as seen in the other example, the figure was removed from its original location, a cathedral, and brought into a more secular space, the marketplace. The figure, just like the Christ figure in Ulm, was then addressed directly: “If you are God, help yourself; if you are man, then bleed!” (112). The full significance and implication of the removal such an image from its original ritual significance into a new “profane” ritual\(^\text{18}\) will be further detailed in Chapter 2. Here, however, this event is important as it reflects both the belief of the iconoclasts that the image is capable of bearing some sacred presence and their ability to disempower that presence by first removing it from its sacred location, the cathedral.

**Iconoclasm and Broadsheets**

Additional evidence is found in art and image trends of the time: Devotional images were increasingly replaced with images of living people and saints were painted in a more “naturalistic style that augmented their interpretation as ‘moral and practical examples of Christian living’” (Miles 116). Such a development would have transferred the expectation from something grounded in mysticism, routine, and tradition to an expectation for a timely and worldly result.

\(^{18}\) Scribner likens the removal of the sacred object to a “profane” space as the first phase of the rite of passage, or the “disaggregation” of the object, which then undergoes trials and is re-appropriated into daily life. As we shall see in Ch. 3, this is precisely what seemed to happen to the imagery used in broadsheets (“Ritual” 112).
Luther’s portraits are an example—here, Luther as saint (see fig. 4) might be adored or used for devotion; Luther as doctor (see fig. 5) or as monk (see fig. 6) might be seen as physically and politically effectual in leading the godly reform of the church. However, the printing press and the subsequent wide availability of images diminished the expectation of an immediate material response. The ready availability of an image at home eroded the understanding of an immediate link with the divine. The Flugblatt image, as opposed to the devotional image, began in the profane—it was not contained within the sacred space of the church, but was rather meant to be viewed in the marketplace, a bar, or a home.

The possibility for reproducibility meant that not just one side of Luther was offered to the viewing public, but rather many different sides. Kepes distinguishes between complex, narrative images and images characterized by linear point of view. The latter images tended to restrict meaning and interaction. The religious portrait of the early middle ages, which represented a holy figure in many different scenarios, is a productive example of the former: “The spectator is led on the picture surface to all the significant spatial references of the subject. This is a dynamic experience of viewing the different ‘essential parts’ of the object in combination” (97). As opposed to a perspective image, which is a “dead inventory of optical facts” (Kepes 98), this image attempts to represent all of the angles of a specific figure and is not
confined to a “reproduction of what [is seen] at any given moment” (97). While some broadsheet images follow this tradition (*The Passional Christi und Antichristi* offers one example, see fig. 8), it seems the high reproducibility and great quantity of woodcuts allowed for separate but similar images on different broadsheets to serve this same visual experience across different broadsheets themselves. Thus, the visual experience of the broadsheet consumer is not defined by the viewing of any particular scene, but rather by the experience of viewing many different sheets on the similar theme over time.

This selection of woodcuts of Luther illustrates how the reproducibility allowed for dissemination of a variety of different images, creating an ambiguous, dynamic, and uncontrolled constellation of images the common folk then interacted with. Images of Luther were in high demand in the early decades of the Reformation, most likely due to the desire to see the great reformer and in some cases to possess a powerful image of him. Unlike a text, which would offer facts, clear stances, and even utterances of the reformer, an image offered more than one angle to the reformer. The viewer was left to fill this in, even to the disdain of reformers wishing to avoid deifying Luther (Scribner “For the Sake” 22). This spectrum of different images created a complex and contradictory general representation of Luther. In addition, the latter style was antithetical to the reformer’s own beliefs about the saints. This image reflects not only the transition phase from devotional imagery outlined above, but also illustrates how such interaction was uncontrolled by both those within the orthodox faith or those within the reformed. Thus Luther as saint may have been the object of devotional practices, but this is not
the only image given. Because of the increased availability of images, as well as the cheapness of production, a wide variety of images of Luther were offered to the common folk creating not one single understanding of the reformer and his function, but rather imbuing him with a variety of characteristics depending on the viewer’s inclination.

The shift in location must have been the key to the broadsheet images’ survival through an age of iconoclastic fervor. These were images, often with religious themes, that were consumed originally in a space outside of church control, under public ownership (although ownership mattered little as they were not printed to last like a piece of art), and were distributed and consumed widely, in every moment of life. These images were thus viewed quite differently because of their designated place of viewing: they “did not invite devotional adoration, they did not become part of the liturgy by virtue of being placed in a significant position within a church building” (Miles 115). Here Miles also emphasizes the importance of the devotional image functioning within a specific space: the liturgy. Although broadsheet images may have offered similar imagery in form, the location of use was outside of a specific doctrinal need (worship, pilgrimage, festival) that would have infused it with devotional qualities.

Rebecca Zorach has also noticed the significance of the lack of attacks on broadsheets and offers a somewhat different explanation. She argues that broadsheets were not victims of idolatry as they “induce[d] an appropriate mental effort” that kept believers grounded in the real world and prevented spiritual transcendence that a more “illusionistic” devotional item might engender (Zorach 322). Zorach thus acknowledges the power of the devotional image as being imbued by the act of viewing with sacred presence. According to Zorach, broadsheet images flew under the iconoclastic radar because their “diagrammatic” imagery presented theology “conceptually” or functioned as “an impetus to a more abstract thought process” rather than pure
mimesis (Zorach 340). Although in slight conflict with such other devotional objects as the arms of Christ and the dove of peace, which were highly abstract, the implications of this finding are important: Now, in a new place and a relatively new form (topical imagery, desacralized imagery), outside of the stable liturgy, broadsheet images could take on new qualities beyond mimesis. Following Zorach, it seems observers had to develop new ways of interacting with these new conceptual and “diagrammatic” images outside of the tradition of devotional imagery. As Zorach argues, broadsheet images did not function devotionally, but rather invited “thought process,” which could potentially lead to ambiguous conclusions. The images demanded a new interpretation, one that was not yet firmly established in tradition and ritual.

In this chapter I have attempted to briefly discuss the long tradition of the sacred devotional image to chart the influence of mass reproducibility in creating a slow change to this tradition in sixteenth-century Germany. The tradition of the image containing sacred power through the fusion of signifier and signified was not only challenged by Reformation ideas, but was further challenged by the cheap, more widely available broadsheet image. When reformers as well as middle-class or lower-class citizens attacked images, they implicitly admitted their knowledge of the power of the image. These incidents serve as evidence to the modern reader that the act and location of viewing, not necessarily just the nature of the image itself, were important in deciding its influence on culture. The broadsheet image was able to escape such upheaval against images as idols most certainly because these images were not viewed as such. They problematized the equivalency of signifier and signified and thus invited and required a new interpretation, a new form of interaction that the now even larger viewing public needed to supply.
CHAPTER 2
SEPARATION FROM RITUAL: THE CARNIVAL EFFECT

As discussed in the previous chapter, religious imagery was essential to the devotional practices of the common folk in sixteenth-century Germany. The role of religious imagery, however, began to shift because of the wide distribution and affordability of private devotional items. Such privately owned items could be used outside of the auspices of Church and community leaders, outside of the ritual of such original devotional images. For example, saints’ images were used in individual devotion within liturgical setting, that is, within Church walls and as part of a wider set of devotional acts. Reproducibility of such images allowed for private interaction. The separation of the image from its ritual place was also the case for broadsheet images. These images, often combined with a text, were largely not used as devotionals and, more importantly, were not designed to be used as such—they were instead intended for the marketplace or to be hung up in the bar and the private homes of peasants (Moxey 22). These images no longer gained significance from their place within the original ritual. Like the work of art in Walter Benjamin’s famous essay, the image is also emancipated from its “parasitical dependence on ritual” through mechanical reproduction (53): In the Reformation context, the image drew its meaning from its function within the church setting and liturgical context. This tradition of devotional viewing meant that the image drew its meaning exclusively from its function in such Church ritual. Ritual effectively closed the door on questioning of the image and on new combinations with other images. In this chapter, this concrete separation will be explored further in a discussion of its consequence: that the image, now outside of the ritual experience, is also disconnected from its original function and significance. Now void of its aura, it invites a new interpretational method that can take place outside of liturgical boundaries.
The reproducible broadsheet image, as opposed to the uniquely created if not uniquely denoted image used in liturgy, is now divorced from the original authenticity, or the unique original art it represents. This unique original functions within the liturgical ritual as a devotional object which in turn manifests the divine person pictured. The statue or work of art within a church serves as an important fixture of devotion because of its unique identity and position.

Walter Benjamin explored the particular importance, or “aura,” of the unique original in his influential essay *Art in the Age of Reproducibility*. In this essay, he argues that precise copies of unique art, such as recordings or prints, are separated from the unique original’s location, existence, and significance to the viewer. Copies therefore have lost the aura of the original. They are not without meaning; they simply require new significance outside of this uniqueness. We can see this very separation, loss, and new significance in the reproduced imagery of broadsheets.

The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a *unique existence*. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in *his own particular situation*, it reactivates the object reproduced. (Benjamin 51)

The example of the pilgrimage souvenir (see fig. 3) and painting from Chapter 1 illustrates the separation of the copied image from the unique original. This type of copy, the pilgrimage badge, was not meant to be read but was rather effectual strictly when owned (Pettegree 106) as the souvenir only echoes the original painting’s efficacy as a devotional object. The badge functioned as a remembrance of the original painting’s miraculous power, putting “the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself” (Benjamin 50).
The small devotion in and of itself is only powerful in its reference to the one original location and image. With respect to devotional images, it seems that the “copy of the original” puts the magical power of the original within human reach. As was the case for the Regensburg church, the devotional painting was itself a copy of a miraculous painting from a different event (Freedberg 103)—for the devotees, the uniqueness of the painting did not affect the overall power of it as a miraculous object worth of adoration. There are two reasons for this: 1) the copies on the scene were at least four (Freedberg 103), but they all were created to access the power of the original art piece and 2) each copy was perceived as manifesting the power of the holy figure (Mary and the baby Jesus) within it. Thus all copies are understood to contain power as they all referenced the power of the one, original artwork, still given a place of prominence within the church.

Broadsheet images, however, had no unique original—they were designed for reproducibility and for variable combinations. Severed completely from an original ritual in which to figure, these images opened the door for a new look, a new interpretation, and a new interaction on the part of the observer. While “the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art has its basis in ritual” (Benjamin 52), reproduction of the broadsheet image has led to a separation from ritual and has invited a new way of perceiving and interpreting the image. The broadsheet does not have the unique value of the “authentic” art image. One such specific example of the effects of the separation from ritual evidenced in broadsheet imagery can be found in a broadsheet by Peter Flötner titled *The New Passion of Christ* dating to approximately 1535 (Scribner, “For the Sake” 98-99). This broadsheet, one of a pair, is a depiction of the common religious devotional motif, the Stations of the Cross, but with one important and common update for the anti-monastic early Reformation: here Christ’s captors are monks. The original ritual,
walking the Stations of the Cross, was “intended as a pious aid to meditation on the suffering of Christ” (Scribner, “For the Sake” 99). With this polemical switch of roles within the image, the clergy is indicted at a time when general Catholic doctrine was under fire. The Stations of the Cross no longer directly refer to the signified, but are rather to be considered and judged in a polemical context. As a reproduction, Scribner argues it is fair to conclude that an image such as the Stations of the Cross is capable of calling up strong emotions that would be associated with the original devotional item (115). Although the image may call up emotions, it does not require a meditative state, but rather a state of thought and thoughtful interaction. Since the image is no longer significant within a ritual, the observer is required to interact with the structure and argument of the image to gain access to its meaning. Another example of this is the crucified Christ in a series of images on the theme of wolves raiding the sheepfold (see fig. 7). Here, the crucifix functions not to reference a unique crucifix within a specific church or the biblical story and therefore invite devotion, but rather serves to indict the pope (figured as a wolf). The viewer is asked to consider the scene, to interact with the juxtaposition and the other elements in the scene to reach a conclusion that has not just spiritual effects, but political effects as well.
Carnival and Ritual in Broadsheet Imagery

To delve further into this separation from ritual as found in the broadsheet, we may turn our attention to one specific ritualistic practice in Medieval Germany, carnival, and how broadsheet images evoked a similar effect. I will argue that the irreverence and desacralization achieved by the foolery and grotesque images in broadsheets analogous to carnival created a second world, one separate from and often in opposition to official culture. This same carnival spirit, which is of parody, mockery, and desacralization, represents an important motif in broadsheet imagery. Whereas carnival spirit allowed for the expression of dissatisfaction or discontent with the established order only within strict boundaries of a specific ritual, broadsheet images evoking carnival spirit were designed to function outside of ritual and opened a similar second world of disorder, but one that was not so constrained by strict doctrinal boundaries. Broadsheet imagery evoking the carnival spirit allowed for interaction that was not bodily, which sublated the distance between the observer and the observed and opened the door for a new, more ambivalent interaction.

Bakhtin understands the carnival as characterized by mockery, foolery, parody, and laughter, often at the expense of the standing order: “The carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (9-10). Although common events carnival included witch or demon hunts and burnings of disliked persons, the ritual “was contained within its own time and space” separate from official reality (Scribner, “Reformation and Carnival” 89). In the tradition of Bakhtin, the grotesque or its base functions is used to desacralize the holy or high or official culture (21). “Grotesque realism” is a key component to this desacralization, whereby bodies are “unfinished and open,” blurring old age and youth, birth
and death, holiness and bodily function, and human and animal (Bakhtin 26-27) (see fig. 8)\(^{19}\). Thus the ugly, dirty, foul, monstrous, and lewd image served to “desacralize the numinous and withdraw it from the realm of religious veneration” (Scribner, “For the Sake” 83). Examples of such desacralization during the Reformation include a 1521 parade in the marketplace in Wittenberg of a pope puppet that was then ingloriously pelted with filth (72) and the consecration of animal bones with dung and grass as “relics” in parody of the consecration of a holy saint’s relics in 1524 in Buchholz (74). In the first situation, human excrement is thrown as a sign of disapproval and to denigrate the effigy image of the hated pope. In the second, such excrement achieves mockery in becoming part of a parallel unholy ritual: instead of clean and sacred substances, filth was used.

Yet while the seemingly subversive ritual of carnival was an integral part of medieval culture, it was actually an inversion and a separation that depended on the dominant paradigm. Medieval carnival was characterized by “distinct fixed boundaries dividing all phenomena and values” (Bakhtin 44). Such carnivalesque behavior has thus been considered a “safety valve” (84) or a “ritual of rebellion” (92).\(^{20}\) Although the events of carnival seemed to promote disorder, chaos, and an attack on authority, they were actually contained and ritualized. Such a ritual means that the “rebellion” that occurred within a closely monitored and controlled space actually

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\(^{19}\) This recycled image was modeled on an original engraving by Wenzel von Olmütz, which appeared in the publication *Roma Caput Mundi* in 1496.

\(^{20}\) This term is as quoted in Scribner from M. Gluckman’s work *Rituals of Rebellion in South-east Africa*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982.
served to uphold and strengthen the social system by airing discontent. Although Scribner agrees that the idea of a contained moment of rebellion can be valuable in understanding the function of Carnival, he also cites at least one example where actual rebellion was enacted with carnivalesque fervor (“Reformation and Carnival” 76). Real-world fear of such rebellion was also not rare: In Nuremberg in the fifteenth century, magistrates allowed only a small group to wear masks and bear staves (91), and in the sixteenth century, magistrates “were always nervous about popular expressions of evangelical feeling” (91).

These characteristics of mockery, desacralization, and the grotesque within a contained ritualistic setting constitute the carnival spirit. An analogous effect can be seen in some broadsheet imagery of the early sixteenth century, whereby grotesque or mocking imagery created a second world by profaning once holy images. These images, by combining seemingly antithetical images to create grotesque creations, do not only refer back to a stable order, but rather to a new order. One key example is the figure of the Antichrist often a hideous amalgam

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21 This was one of the twenty-two recorded carnivalesque events during the Reformation Scribner had traced up to that point. In this event in Basel in 1529, the local magistrates tarried on accepting the Reformation. Protestant citizens, in reaction, armed themselves and broke into the town hall and cathedral in an iconoclastic fervor. It is important to note that other political demands were forgotten once the town council accepted the Reformation and began supervising the image burning (Scribner, “Reformation and Carnival” 92).
or juxtaposition of pope and devil, which serves to vividly desacralize the pope and narrowly identify the two together (Scribner, “For the Sake” 99). In the woodcut (25), a winged upright beast with the hindquarters of a lion and the feet of a bird holds a document in the direction of the pope. Another example is Lucas Cranach the Elder’s *Passional Christi und Antichristi* (see fig. 9). A *passional* was a small picture book showing scenes from the life of Christ or a saint especially designed for devotion (149). Cranach’s *Passional*, constructed in the larger woodcut size, served no such devotional function, but instead paired an image of Christ with one of the pope, shown through a bold headline as well as the simple juxtaposition to be the Antichrist. The holy actions of Christ, for example his peaceful ride into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, are juxtaposed in one image with that of the gallant pope accompanied by soldiers under his power riding toward a hellish haunt of demons. Although the images in this specific example only edge upon the grotesque, the power and status of the pope is mocked and his authority challenged: This example exhibits the possibility for broadsheet images to challenge authority and to use devotional forms that are freed from devotional use. Images freely mock authority and thus open the door to the possibility for the reader to take part in the parody by observing the images presented.

**Carnival and Participation in Broadsheet Imagery**

One underplayed argument of Scribner related to such images, however, illustrates again the shift broadsheets created from more pre-packaged, ritualistic consumption of images to individual interaction and interpretation. Here, the satirical broadsheet parodying a church procession accomplishes what the original ritual could not: The viewer of the satirical and deprecatory broadsheet image did not directly take part in the mockery. He or she was instead
allowed to stand outside of direct danger, still be part of the satire, and maybe even question it. If we return to the broadsheet image *The New Passion of Christ* (Scribner, “For the Sake” 98-99), we can see how this expands upon Scribner’s original argument that the layman can stand “outside of it [the religious procession, common events in church festivals] as an uninvolved critic” (“For the Sake” 99). Although the act of “participation” in the satire of a broadsheet image of a procession seems to be carried out only on an individual basis, it can be considered as a continuing, yet changed, communal act. It is changed in that participation is no longer the shoulder-to-shoulder, bodily interaction with the community, but the forming of a figurative procession enacted by all viewers of the image, independent of the time of viewing. Not forgetting the additional fact of the relative ubiquity of such broadsheets, it seems that because of such imagery, one did not need to be surrounded by others in order to participate in such a cultural event anymore.

Bakhtin suggests a different conclusion. He argues that only with Romanticism of the 19th century does the carnival become individualistic, which he closely associates with the inner life:

Unlike the Medieval and Renaissance grotesque, which was directly related to folk culture and thus belonged to all the people, the Romantic genre acquired a private ‘chamber’ character. It became, as it were, an individual carnival, marked by a vivid sense of isolation. The carnival spirit was transposed into a subjective, idealistic philosophy. It ceased to be the concrete (one might say bodily) experience of the one, inexhaustible being, as it was in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. (37)

The shift from public to private situations of carnival, however, which Bakhtin places firmly in the Romantic era, did begin earlier, albeit only modestly. Scholarship has established that the
modern idea of the individual, which brings with it ideas of psyche and inner life, did not exist in the Middle Ages. Humans did not understand one another in that way—rather, great emphasis was placed upon communal action and communal thought. What is meant, therefore, instead is that the broadsheet images, which Bakhtin surprisingly does not include in his list of types of “humorous literature” (Bakhtin 14-15), mark a first step in the direction away from communal ritual and strict doctrinal tradition. The grotesque and mocking imagery of broadsheets was no longer connected with the original ritual: such images did not recall a particular original situation or occurrence, the aura, but rather the spirit of the event.

It could even be argued that the viewing of such broadsheet imagery opened the door for the creation of a new ritual, one that was no longer based on the aura of the ritual and rooted firmly in magistrate and church control and order. Whereas the carnival ritual is seen as a communal expression (Scribner, “Reformation and Carnival” 95), it could be banned and heavily controlled. The viewing of images could also be censored, but sheer logistics alone dictate it would have been easier to covertly pass around a broadsheet than enact a huge protest-inspired carnivalesque event.

Now separated from the original ritual, the broadsheet image must be interacted with in a different way. But how? Scribner argues that perhaps the images themselves became their own rituals, that is, “rites of passage” in reverse, or a “rite of desecration” that served to pull sacred imagery out of its element, test it, then return it to the world, debased and desacralized (“Ritual and Reformation” 112). This process, however, demands the consideration of images in a uniform way. While there is the possibility for one singular intended or “full” meaning in reading the images a specific way, this does not prevent the possibility for multiple different, non-uniform meanings. Instead, I argue that the separation of the broadsheet image from its unique
original through reproducibility allowed for the creation of confusion about the clarity and order of the social order and orthodox traditions.

Some broadsheet images achieved an effect similar to the carnival spirit, namely, creating a second world outside of orthodoxy by profaning once holy images with grotesque ones: Holy images of figures such as the pope were subjected to mockery, parody, and fundamental questioning. By then combining seemingly antithetical images to spawn grotesque creations, these broadsheet images did not refer back to a stable order, but rather to the new and unorthodox religion. Most importantly, however, is the fact that these images were able to function so differently from related devotional imagery. Reproducibility of the images meant not only that the unique original image simply didn’t exist, but that the copied image was severed from its original significance. Broadsheet images thus required a new form of interaction, one that was not necessarily bodily, grounded in authenticity, closely monitored, or strict, but rather freer, looser, and less controlled. This lack of control meant that the common folk could more easily figure their individual understanding, desires, or point of view into the interpretation of the image, especially when the image itself depicted them as capable of participation in the discussion about the Reformation.
CHAPTER 3

RECYCLED IMAGERY: THE POWERFUL PEASANT

In Chapters 1 and 2, I sought to identify the effects of the printing press upon the consumption of religious images with respect to the site of consumption and their separation from orthodox ritual because of their reproducibility. In this chapter, I will more closely examine the concrete characteristics of broadsheet imagery and the audience it was intended for, the common man. Scribner argues in *For the Sake of Simple Folk* that broadsheet images called upon traditional imagery to spread anti-Catholic and anti-clerical sentiment. He critiques such broadsheet imagery as ambivalent because of its simplicity and reliance on reworked symbols and concludes from this that these images were not as effective in communicating the pro-Reformation message. However, if we circumvent the question of effectiveness, a broader understanding of the changing interpretation of imagery emerges: For it is precisely this ambivalence of simple woodcut imagery that opened the image up to new interpretations and forms of interaction with imagery. To do this, I will first discuss the recycling of imagery and how this ambivalence actually left room for pondering and interaction not afforded by a devotional image. Then, I will discuss the specific image of the peasant and its appearance in woodcut imagery in the early decades of the evangelical Reformation to show how the reader of such imagery was not only allowed room for interpretation, but was invited in to participate in the movement.

Just as simplicity allowed for ambiguity of meaning, so did the use of recycled imagery, which characterized many broadsheet images of the early evangelical Reformation. Instead of a neatly pre-packaged symbol found in an expected location, for example, an artifice of the Virgin Mary with child on a cathedral, the broadsheet image consists instead of an old image with new
meaning. In addition, broadsheets contained not only instituted and orthodox religious images but also diversely coded images from daily life, secular life, and popular culture. By drawing on complex visual codes from multiple and different sources (such as popular culture and biblical metaphor), the iconographical tradition is invoked, but given new meaning (Scribner, “For the Sake” 241). Yet, the recycling of imagery seems to have served an important function in that it allowed for the act of deliberation and decision on the part of the viewer. For Scribner, this process entails that the viewer is “led from the familiar to the unfamiliar and is asked to ponder the implications of this revelation” (“For the Sake” 115). The contemplation, though, was not an event that took place one moment, in one setting, and then was never considered again. Instead, it occurred with each “new” image. This pondering was, in effect, the precise effect religious imagery in the church setting did not produce.

Although broadsheet imagery surely sought to persuade its viewers, it was no longer rooted in the strict religious doctrine of the church. Instead, imagery with new signification required thought and participation on the viewer’s part. No longer was the prize of redemption that a devotional or church artifact could bestow the goal. Rather it was the viewer’s opinion. Both Miles and Hamm argue that these images were designed to instruct (Miles 115) and lead to the formation of a homogenized piety (Hamm 23). Yet, both of these arguments ignore the fact of the “newness” of these images—that is, the fact that they were old images now emptied and restructured—and deny the possibility for an interpretation to exist that departs from the perceived author’s/artist’s intention of the image as persuasive and polemical. The reader is instead “led from one level of argument to another by a chain of associations” (Scribner, “For the Sake” 48). It is a guided, yet fluid act of interpretation. It differs vastly from the devotional view of a portrait or the pre-packaged symbol in a church setting, where the holiness would be
summoned or “felt” with the eyes (Miles 96). Comparatively, the result of viewing the broadsheet image was not necessarily spiritual redemption or pietistic practice, but a journey of association that would lead to a decision—which was often also fluid—about the truth of the statements available.

In an interesting departure from his earlier interpretation of McLuhan’s thesis, Scribner admits the ambivalence of recycled woodcut imagery and sees it as a weak point of pre-evangelical Reformation visual imagery: Broadsheet imagery “did not measure up to its own idea of effectiveness,” that is “did not produce the powerful new symbols of allegiance which might have created a new ‘symbolic universe’ distinctly different from that of the old faith” (Scribner, “For the Sake” 248-49). This analysis is so firmly rooted in the overarching argument about the effectiveness of woodcuts at communicating the Reformation message that it misses the broader media shift. The ambivalent nature of broadsheet images, which prevented a “symbolic universe,” made possible a dynamic visual experience. His conclusion, that since the image portion of the broadsheet was ambivalent in meaning, it was thus “ill-suited to establish any new orthodoxy, or to convey doctrines” (244), should not be seen as a loss, but rather a characteristic of the changing role of media and its interpretation. Of course, it should not be forgotten that the printing press struck the first damaging blow to the Church’s monopoly on religious imagery. It is precisely this ambivalence of meaning that opened the door for individual readers to interpret and interact with the text. This lack of definite strict orthodoxy that was now merely suggested, if at all, marked a shift from the prescribed discourse of the Catholic church to

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22 Miles uses this term (“felt”) in describing a late thirteenth century example of a preacher’s emphasis of the act of “seeing” in the presentation of the communion wine and host. She also establishes the act of “touching” with the eye through viewing as an important interaction as it was thought to have the power to redeem (96).
the more open, private discourse that required (and allows) individual reaction, interpretation, and input.

The woodcut “The Allegory of Monasticism” by Hans Sebald Beham (Scribner, “For the Sake” 43) illustrates the ambiguity of woodcut imagery, specifically the peasant image. As Scribner notes, this image could be “read” differently depending on who the reader is (peasant, monk, etc.): Either the peasant doles out the divine message to an unwilling monk who attempts to reject it, or a monk is held back by the vices on his path to fulfilling his monastic duty of proclaiming the word of God. Scribner attempts to clarify multiple possibilities of the meaning of these images (43), but in so doing, he misses emphasizing the apparent fact that there is no definitive interpretation. The lines may be simple, but the message is ambiguous even when attempting to decode it using popular knowledge and understanding of the iconographical tradition of medieval Germany. No reader could ultimately say here which interpretation is the “correct” one. Additionally, this specific image highlights how ambiguous broadsheet imagery may have led to a shift in how the peasantry understood their political significance: the possibility for an interpretation of the peasant as the sole provider of the Gospel to the erring monk is not absurd given the importance of monastic reform and peasant education to the Reformation supporters. Here, the potential power of the peasant is made manifest.

The Role of the Peasant

The prevalent use of the image of the peasant in evangelical Reformation woodcuts is another example of how the new medium also enabled the use of new subjects. Throughout the Middle Ages, peasants appeared in Christian iconography, political treatises, histories, and agricultural handbooks (Moxey 35). But the image of the peasant did not always cast a positive
light on the peasant of reality. In the second half of the fifteenth century, the peasant character often represented vulgarity and scandalous behavior in Nuremberg Fastnachtspiele (64). In a broader context, the peasant figure was used to parody courtly and chivalric ideas of the higher classes, simultaneously mocking aristocratic traditions and offering a satire of the “uncouth manners and obscene sexual conduct” commonly attributed to peasants (63). Moxey concludes that members of the upper class must have seen these woodcuts with peasant imagery as confirmation of the superiority both of their class and of their identity within it (66), which would also explain why such images were popular with this audience (Pettegree 122).

Thus, leading up to the Reformation, the peasant figured as a standard character in literature and drama (Moxey 63) and embodied in popular mind, if not always in a religious sense, ignorance, lowness, and a basic uncouthness. The woodcuts in Sebastian Brant’s satire Das Narrenschiff is a prime example of this motif. However, this began to change iconographically as seen in broadsheets of the early evangelical Reformation. Although the foolish peasant trope didn’t disappear entirely, the implied audience became part of the image—that is, the noble peasant figures as the right-hand of Luther, God’s chosen. In such broadsheet imagery, the peasant was no longer a fool, but “a symbol of the common man or the personification of the audience at which the reformed message was directed” (Moxey 58). Examples, as Moxey examines in the chapter “Festive Peasants and Social Order,” include
the frontispiece to the anonymous pamphlet “Karsthans” (“John Hoe”). This woodcut comprises image of a peasant with a hoe over his shoulder, standing in the foreground with boldness to face animal-faced and humanoid adversaries (see fig. 15). As Herbert Zschelletzschky notes, this peasant with the flail, soon after the appearance of the “Karsthans” tract, was dubbed Flegelhans, Flegel being the word for a flail farming implement of peasants (236).

One further example is the woodcut from undated broadsheet Luther and the Artisans (see fig. 11), occasionally referred to as The Complaint of the Godless against Luther illustrated by Hans Sebald Beham with a text from the prolific evangelical supporter, Hans

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23 Hans is the typical, common name for any man, much like English’s John. The Karst was a tool, a hoe, used by peasants in farming. This translation provided by Moxey (58, 59).
24 The title differentiation may be due to Scribner’s desire to reflect even more strongly his observed first shift—no longer do those whose worldly livelihoods are threatened by Luther’s ideas connote godlessness and rejection of the true religion, they are now essentially godless. It is for this reason I prefer to refer to the work as Luther and the Artisans.
Sachs. The peasant in this specific broadsheet is the leader of a retinue in support of Luther. Here, the peasant, no longer portrayed as a base fool, is instead portrayed as the capable leader and authoritative supporter of Luther’s ideas. This relationship and moreover the presence of the peasant retinue at all are not also included in the text. The peasant was not only addressed by the message, but was included as a figural actor (with potency!) in the battle for the true religion.

Scholarly interpretation of the actual potency of this peasant figure in igniting revolution is conflicted. Zschelletzschky reads these small details as an empowerment of the peasants, knowing that Luther would offer them ideas with his Reformation that they would later take to support the Bauernkrieg (Peasants’ War) in 1525, merely two years after this broadsheet was produced (232-245). Zschelletzschky examines the image of the peasant as one purposefully designed by the artists, disillusioned and in disagreement with religion in general, to incite the peasants to war. Moxey and most other recent scholars, however, dismiss this claim, citing the writings and imagery of pro-Reformation Hans Sachs, which generally created a tradition supporting the organization of society. From that, “it is clear that Lutheran social teaching was intimately associated with the preservation of the social order and that it cannot be regarded as responsible for developing a recognition of the social value of the peasant class” (Moxey 61). Yet, I would add it is important to emphasize that the empowered peasant disappears from broadsheets after the conclusion of the Peasants’ War: “The defeat of the revolutionary wing of the Reformation, along with Lutheran hostility to the radical social demands of the peasant movement, ensured that the image of the peasant vanished from popular literature” (59). This belies that at least the illustrators and commissioners of images believed these images had some effect on the audience.
This new self-understanding of the peasant as politically significant—and potentially feared—features largely in another broadsheet, this one from 1523 (see fig. 12). At the time, many interpreted a falling comet as an omen of the possibility that the lower orders rising up against the higher, and this image illustrates what it could look like (Scribner, “For the Sake” 126). In the foreground, the pope is attacked by mercenary soldiers (Landesknechte).

To the left, the potential revolutionary power of the peasant is translated to its most extreme: he attacks a knight with a flail. In a similar image, this from 1524, a peasant armed with a sword is shown attacking das Haus des Weysen (the house of the wise man) (Scribner, “For the Sake” 194). Both of these examples illustrate that the empowered peasant was understood in the years leading up to the Peasants’ War to be a potentially dangerous and powerful figure. Although there is probably no way to say conclusively whether the images incited the peasants to revolt, it seems clear that at least contemporaries at the time were afraid to open the possibility for inspiration by including this image.

By examining the theological and artistic trends of the time, as well as the specific structural characteristics of broadsheet imagery, I have argued that the woodcut was an ambivalent bearer of information, not yet under complete influence of print culture, and therefore part of a dynamic system of visual experience. In woodcuts, old images were hollowed out and recombined to create new meanings and the observer was asked to follow along and draw conclusions. But these conclusions were not exclusively restricted to doctrine, to the divine power of the represented person, or to exclusive relationships. The images of the early
evangelical Reformation required a new form of interaction that was unpredictable since the observer, the common man, was directly addressed and invited to react. His inclusion in the image extends this invitation for reaction to a palpable level. The effects of reproducibility, that is, the separation orthodoxy in place and ritual, further made room for a certain unorthodox possibility for rebelliousness. While it seems very doubtful that such broadsheet images incited rebellion, they certainly opened the door to it.
CONCLUSION

The printing press made the typographical man, but it also fundamentally changed the way humans view and interact with imagery and the way they understood themselves and the world around them. This study showed the importance of considering the image of the broadsheet as its own text that highlights an often-overlooked shift in media brought about by print technology, a shift that is markedly distinct from the shift in typographical communication. The printing press made the proliferation of broadsheet imagery possible, which led to a change in the consumption of imagery and the interaction of the reader with such texts. Because of the wider availability and resulting higher affordability of images and text, private interaction with text and image was more prevalent than ever. This shift in the interaction with imagery began with the private ownership of devotional items even in the fifteenth century, but the broadsheet accelerated it. In addition, the printing press made possible the almost exactly reproducible image. Reproducibility allowed for the severing of ties between the image its previous ritualistic function, not only concretely but also abstractly. That is, the broadsheet image was consumed outside of church walls and in a manner outside of doctrinal control. These images offer stark examples of the importance of the medium to the conveyance of the message: Separated from the ritual, the reproduced image demanded a new mode of interaction that tended away from the tradition of the sacred-made-present and toward individual, unorthodox reaction.

The overall argument of this study examined only the reproducible broadsheet woodcut, which was part of a wider constellation of changing media after the advent of the printing press. To more completely understand all aspects of this change in communication, the medium of the reproducible “text,” which includes images, pamphlets, books, songs, and other miscellaneous publications, should be analyzed in greater depth within the system of other strictly oral media,
such as sermons, songs, storytelling and festivals. Broadsheet images were chosen for this study because they allow us to understand such wider changes in communicational media and their semiotic and ultimately social effects. An in-depth analysis of the function of these different texts in light of the shift exhibited in broadsheet imagery would most likely confirm the overall findings of this study—that interaction with information was steadily shifting away from orthodoxy, away from the holy-made-present as a ground for authenticity and importance. With this focus on charting the wider shift in media, scholars can place importance on the effect of the reproducible text as abstract medium. They can then circumvent the tendency in the field toward making strict conclusions on establishing precise meaning or interpretation of such texts. This latter goal has been adopted by most iconographical analyses of texts from this period and is not unworthy of study. But it fails on two counts: one, strict definitions often require speculation or inaccurate assumption since the original interpreters and consumers can’t and didn’t confirm the findings; and two, focusing on such details often leads scholars to deemphasize or gloss over the broader shifts in media consumption, which offer us more accurate and observable conclusions about communication and social interaction and understanding in sixteenth-century Europe.

Although this study did not address it, it would be fruitful to begin drawing connections between the effects of the reproducible, polysemic image during the Reformation and its continuing development into the following centuries. In Chapter 3 of this study, I discussed how reproducibility and changes in content of broadsheet images shifted the context away from orthodoxy and thus made room for rebellious responses in real life. Much scholarship has established that the individualistic, subjective reactions to information this shift implies did not take full hold until the eighteenth century. Mikhail Bakhtin touches on this in his idea of the
“interior infinite of the individual,” which could diverge from orthodoxy and made modern subjectivism possible:

The interior infinite of the individual (as developed in Romanticism) was unknown to the medieval and the Renaissance grotesque; the discovery made by the Romanticists was made possible by their use of the grotesque method and of its power to liberate from dogmatism, completeness, and limitation. The interior infinite could not have been found in the closed and finished world, with its distinct fixed boundaries dividing all phenomena and values. (Bakhtin 44)

I contend, however, that we see some of the earliest tendencies toward this movement away from orthodoxy and toward the interior infinite in the early sixteenth century. The reproducible broadsheet separated the image text from its original location, from its identity as a unique object within a fixed orthodox ritual. Transported from sacred space to secular space, the image text could not be read in the same way. There was room for ambiguity and for the viewer to draw different conclusions. While I will not develop this idea further in this study, images and their changing role in social life continuing after the Reformation may certainly offer highly interesting conclusions about the development of the social importance of the individual.

The conclusions in this study bear great import also to contemporary society. As McLuhan argued, the printing press contributed essentially to the dominance of typographical communication and this greatly affected the sensibilities and basic self-understanding of the human race over many subsequent generations. This study attempted to add to McLuhan’s argument the importance of images as texts, and how the printing press fundamentally changed how humans interacted and communicated through imagery. In the age of mobile Internet and three-dimensional printing, the image is almost infinitely reproducible and distributed on a
massive, global scale. The Internet now streams into personal devices such as phones, gaming systems, tablets, and personal organizers, enabling each user to pull up and access information in the blink of an eye. While literacy is high and the written word our main means of communicating critical thought, images still play an ever increasing role in our society. Social networking software, constant media coverage, and file sharing sites enable us to share images almost instantaneously and discuss them with others around the globe. Easy proliferation also means some images are inadvertently or inauspiciously shared, or they are targeted and blocked by uneasy governments. However, along with this, photo editing software has made us wary of trusting images as their sacred authenticity can now easily be tampered with. The function of photos as bearers of undeniable truth is under attack.

These more recent changes all seem to follow the trajectory sparked with the invention of the printing press: Interaction depends now less on the aura of the image, as it can be questioned, or the orthodox setting and function of it, since images are now available everywhere an Internet signal reaches. This mass reproducibility and wide proliferation of images, as in the sixteenth century, thus allows images in general to move away from orthodox interactions in specific places of viewing. They also entice rebelliousness. For example, now everyone with an iPhone can be a journalist and individually author and transmit authoritative material. The consumer reacts, but in a much more unpredictable way. A simultaneous global and highly individualistic reaction is created—the individual’s response is ambiguous and his or her own, but is also part of a wider globalized reaction, only possible through massive distribution.

As in the sixteenth century, there have also been a wide range of reactionary counter movements against the effects of this mass media change in imagery—government and media censorship to control information or funnel it through certain sources, bandwidth limits to restrict
format types, and parental controls to block perceived insidious content, to name a few. Much as in the sixteenth century, these movements see the destruction or rejection of images as possible counter measures to the possibility of ambiguous, rebellious and unorthodox interaction. The effects of the reproducible image on society’s values and human self-understanding changed because the medium could not be contained by simple censorship. Censorship measures in the sixteenth century, like today, were only variably effective and affected often only the specific content of the message. Despite the fact that certain threatening messages were destroyed or censored by concerned officials, the evangelical Reformation was directly made possible by the slow-changing effects of the printing press— the wide distribution of the reproducible text and the subsequent shift away from ritual and the importance of the original. Much in the same way, the content of the numerous messages we receive affects contemporary human communication and self-understanding only in small part. Much more influential and critical to social studies than the concrete message is the technological possibility for instantaneous information at our fingertips and the effects of these advances. Such technological possibility means political, cultural, and religious reformations, that is, splits from orthodoxy incited by the possibility for rebelliousness and questioning of the authenticity of information, occur now on an almost daily basis, even if they are small Twitter revolutions or massive government upheavals. As we continue to cope with such power and volumes of information, scholars can use this understanding of a wider shift in medium and communication begun in the sixteenth century to better understand the effects on our current society.
WORKS CITED


