Senses, Cognition, & Body in Medieval Devotional Practices (Padua, 2-7 Jun 24)

University of Padua, Jun 5–07, 2024

Davide Tramarin

"The Senses, Cognition, and the Body in Medieval Devotional Practices".
2nd International Multidisciplinary Conference of the Series 'Experiencing the Sacred'

Starting with the 12th century, the upsurge of interest in Christ's humanity and the more intense focus on his corporeal nature fostered more individualized and embodied approaches to spirituality, as emphasized by Caroline Walker Bynum. The human body of the believers themselves became a focal point, as a tool through which individuals could aspire to connect with the divine. Mary Carruthers and Michelle Karnes have illustrated that the incorporation of Aristotelian theories into Christian thought by theologians such as Thomas Aquinas played a crucial role in shaping these changing paradigms. They provided a new framework for understanding the moral and spiritual interpretations of the senses, the body and cognitive processes. This intellectual shift created innovative avenues for communicating complex spiritual concepts through somatic experiences, making the divine more accessible and even tangible. Over the centuries, the dissemination of these ideas among the laity through sermons, as noted by Giuseppe Ledda, and devotional literature such as the Meditationes Vitae Christi, led to the creation of a widespread culture of sensation. As a result, the integration of sensory and bodily experiences into religious practices became a shared cultural phenomenon, shaping the way people perceived and interacted with their faith.

To better grasp the relations between the senses, the body and the mind we propose to incorporate recent developments in the field of cognitive sciences. The intersection between cognitive sciences and medieval studies is a very recent and still rare occurrence (Blud & Dresvina, 2010), yet it holds promise. For the purpose of the present conference, we are interested in the fact that in cognitive sciences, the dynamics of interaction among mind, body, and material world are now deemed crucial to understand mental states and processes. Cognition is indeed understood to be embodied (it does not depend solely on the brain but is also influenced by the body) and embedded, meaning it is inextricably linked to its social and material environment. This interpretative framework proves particularly useful in analyzing medieval religious practices, where material items, environments, and individual experiences were inextricably connected.
The interdisciplinary focus of this conference, integrating sensory studies, material culture studies, cognitive studies, and historical research, provides a rich platform for understanding the profound changes in religion during the medieval period. By exploring somatised spiritual experiences, the conference aims to shed new light on the intricate ways in which the senses, cognition, and the body were engaged in devotional practices, emphasizing the multisensory nature of medieval spirituality.

This conference is organised by the ERC research project SenSArt – The Sensous Appeal of the Holy. Sensory Agency of Sacred Art and Somatised Spiritual Experiences in Medieval Europe (12th-15th century), Grant Agreement nr. 950248, PI Zuleika Murat, Università degli Studi di Padova.

Organising Committee:
Zuleika Murat (Associate Professor, Università degli Studi di Padova)
Pieter Boonstra (Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, Università degli Studi di Padova)
Micol Long (Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, Università degli Studi di Padova)
Davide Tramarin (Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, Università degli Studi di Padova)

To attend online, please register at:
https://forms.gle/peW9Eqav6D7jZWq19

PROGRAMME:

5 June - Palazzo Bo, Aula Nievo

9.15 Session I - Images and Theories
chaired by Pieter Boonstra, Università di Padova

Jeffrey F. Hamburger, Harvard University: The Birth of God in the Soul in a Newly Discovered Devotional Drawing from St. Walburg in Eichstätt

Simon Breitenmoser, Universität Zürich: The Body as a Diagram. Cognition in the Ars memorandi per figuras Evangelistarum

Luca Defendi, Università di Padova: Il corpo come strumento esegetico: il De statu interioris hominis di Riccardo di San Vittore

Discussion

11.15 Session II - Performing the Sacred
chaired by Francesca Manzari, Sapienza Università di Roma

Federica Toniolo, Università di Padova: Il corpo miniato tra esperienza devozionale e trascendenza

Cristiano Zanetti, California Institute of Technology - Caltech, Pasadena: Automata and Late Medieval Devotion: The Blurred Boundary between Spectacle and Ritual

Jill Stevenson, Marymount Manhattan College: Sensing the Sacred Void

Discussion

14.15 Session III - Medieval Cognition, Modern Science
chaired by Kathleen Neal, Monash University

Zuleika Murat, Università di Padova: Visualizing Sound: Late Medieval Paintings as Multimedia

Annette Kern-Stähler, Universität Bern: Second-hand Sensation – Approaching Medieval Devotion through Contemporary Neuroscience

Micol Long, Università di Padova: Embedded and Enacted Devotion: An Inquiry into the Cognitive Implications of Medieval Religious Practices (12th-13th century)

Discussion

16.15 Session IV - Embodied Teaching
chaired by Micol Long, Università di Padova

Pieter Boonstra, Università di Padova: Seeing the Word in the Flesh: The Physicality of Late Medieval Preaching

Maxime Kamin, Université Catholique de Louvain - UCLouvain: Gymnastics for the Pious Souls: Sport and the Experience of Sacred in the Jeu de la paulme moralisé

Discussion

17.30 Keynote Lecture - Michelle Karnes, University of Notre Dame: Images, Imagery, and Medieval Devotion

6 June - Palazzo Bo, Archivio Antico

9.30 Session V - Wearing the Sacred
chaired by Chiara Ponchia, Università di Padova

Valentina Baradel, Università di Padova: Crowning the Mind: A Sensorial Approach to French Mitres (13th-15th century)

Melanie N. Reiter, Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main: Sacred Space and Jewelry. The Cognitive Function of Triptych-Pendants in the Middle Ages

Discussion

11.00 Session VI - The Dead Amidst the Living
chaired by Fabio Massaccesi, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna

Christien Schrover, Universiteit Utrecht: Dying Bodies, Suffering Bodies: The Depiction of the Suffering Body in the Beaune Altarpiece

Davide Tramarin, Università di Padova: Living among the Dead in German Cathedrals

Lucía Rodríguez Navarro, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid: Reflections, Senses and Apprehension of Time in San Isidoro of León

Discussion

14.00 Session VII - Multisensorial Interactions
chaired by Zuleika Murat, Università di Padova

Kathryn M. Rudy, University of St Andrews: Tactile Devotion: The Role of Touch in Medieval Prayer-book Interactions

Marina Vidas, Kongernes Samling, Copenhagen: Multisensorial Experiences of Painted Devotional Images from Tuscany, 1330-1420

Hila Manor, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem: Smelling, Seeing, Touching: Entanglements of Bodies, Senses, and Objects in the Ritual of Havdalah

Teresa Martinez Martinez, Università di Padova: Appealing to the Body. Deciphering the Sensuous Iconography of the Romanesque Capitals in Santiago el Viejo (Zamora, Iberian Peninsula).
Coffee Break

16.45 Session VIII - Bodily and Spiritual Health
chaired by Constant Mews, Monash University

Eleonora Lombardo, Università di Padova: “Honora medicum”. Medicine for the Body, Medicine for the Soul in 13th- and 14th-century Sermons of Saint Luke

Nancy Turner, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles: Sight and the Healing Efficacies of Painting Materials as Affective Pharmaka in Medieval Devotional Manuscripts

Zuzanna Sarnecka, Universität Bern: “For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return”. Spiritual Potential of Dust in Ceramics

Discussion

7 June - Palazzo Bo, Aula Nievo

9.00 Session IX - Transcending Reality
chaired by Ludovica Galeazzo, Università di Padova

Blair Apgar, Elon University: Beyond the Physical: Understanding Virtual Pilgrimage in Virtual Reality

Lieke Smits, Universiteit Antwerpen: A Letter from Heaven: Late Medieval Devotion as Augmented Reality Experience

Ingrid Falque, Université Catholique de Louvain - UCLouvain – FNRS: Imagination, Cognition and Meditation in Geert Grote’s “De quattuor generibus meditabilium”

Discussion

11.00 Session X - Realising Devotion
chaired by Jason Crow, Monash University

Orsolya Mednyanszky, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles: Visualization in the “Vita Christi Manuscripts”: Towards a New Approach of Late Medieval Devotional Art

Vittorio Frighetto, Università di Padova: Carved Sensations: Body, Cognition, and Meditation in

Netherlandish Representations of “Christ Sitting on the Cold Stone”

Marika Räsänen, University of Turku, Finland: From the Body to “aromatum apotheca” – Fragrance as a Relic
Discussion

12.45 Conclusions

Reference:
CONF: Senses, Cognition, & Body in Medieval Devotional Practices (Padua, 2-7 Jun 24). In: ArtHist.net, May 23, 2024 (accessed Oct 14, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/41924>.