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Alicia Spencer-Hall, *Medieval Saints and Modern Screens: Divine Visions as Cinematic Experience*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017. 304 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, index. €95.00 (hb). ISBN 9789462982277; €94.99 (eb). ISBN 9789048532179.

Review by Lisa Bitel, University of Southern California.

Alicia Spencer-Hall's *Medieval Saints and Modern Screens* opens with a sweet anecdote about her childhood epiphany at a screening of *Beauty and the Beast*, when she was emotionally ravished by the make-believe world of Disney. Given her book's title, readers might expect that her cinematic vision would lead to a comparison of medieval visionary experience and modern spectatorship. Instead, Spencer-Hall offers a much more complex study of medieval visions through the lens of modern media studies. She uses multiple theories and disciplinary methods to argue that medieval hagiography was "media" in the same way that movies, digital games, Twitter, etc., are media in modern times. The experience of immersion in a movie and of reading stories of visionary saints are functionally the same, Spencer-Hall suggests and, what's more, reading them together can bring us revelations about both.

The medieval *vitae* in question are about women who lived in what is now Belgium during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The women of the Liège region are well known to medievalists. Many of us learned about Marie d'Oignies (d. 1213) and the so-called beguines from the works of Margot King and Walter Simons, among others.^[1] The Liègeoises shared property, work, and religious visions. Beginning with Marie, they became devotional models for other women and men through stories told about them. Jacques de Vitry, an ambitious canon and theologian who later became a cardinal, was Marie's biographer and confessor; he admired her so intensely that, after her death, he wore her finger bone in a little silver case hung around his neck.

Spencer-Hall rehearses both her source material and her theoretical method in a long introduction, where she sets up the basic premise of the book, that is, cinema theorists and historians of mysticism have often shared ideas and vocabulary without going so far as to compare profound visual experiences across the centuries. The book's four chapters then explicate medieval hagiography in light of modern visual media, beginning in chapter one with a comparison of the imaginative atemporality of early photography/cinema and medieval legends of the Liègeoises. In the second chapter, Spencer-Hall uses medieval theories of human sight and modern theories of embodied cinematic spectatorship to explicate the Liègeoises' mystical encounters with God, as well as medieval readers' haptic experiences of their written hagiography. In chapter three she shows how Jacques de Vitry purposely created a cult surrounding Marie d'Oignies, just as modern fans promote chosen celebrities. She argues further that the fifteenth-century visionary Margery Kempe imitated the famous Marie in order to become a similar celebrity; Spencer-Hall compares Margery to the self-fashioning Kim Kardashian, who in turn imitated Paris Hilton.

In the final chapter, Spencer-Hall moves to the virtual world of the online game *Second Life*. She argues that religiously motivated players of *Second Life* use their shared vision of alternative reality to engage in genderless, timeless, virtual communion; in the same way, imaginative readers and fans of the

Liègeois shared the women's ecstatic visions of heaven. The author concludes with a short treatment of Veronicas—icons of Jesus created by miracle rather than human hands. Just as the Veronica was printed with God's image and film is imprinted with human moments, so the visionaries served as the animated medium for God's mark made visible to other believers.

Spencer-Hall acknowledges the influences of historical context upon every unique set of viewers. In her assessment, experiences of modern visual technologies are not identical to medieval visionary experiences as mediated through written hagiography. They are "mystical-ish" rather than mystical, she writes (p. 16). Spencer-Hall wields "metaphor, analogy, and simile" (p. 60) with abandon, building an argument almost entirely of "similar" and "like." Ghosts and Jesus manifested in modern photographs are like God imaging himself upon the saints of the *vitae*. Christina Mirabilis is at once living woman and dead saint in her written story, in the same way as the Joker in Christopher Nolan's 2008 *Dark Knight* is at once a ubiquitous villain and the dead actor Heath Ledger: both Christina and the Joker constantly move between spirit and human worlds while audiences view their tales again and again. Sanctity, through such a lens, becomes timeless celebrity. Just as Margery Kempe used Marie d'Oignies to leverage her own fame, Spencer-Hall and colleagues are "acafans" (academic fans) of Margery Kempe, leveraging her current popularity in scholarship to spotlight the *vita* of Marie d'Oignies and their studies of it. In fact, all modern women, like medieval saintly visionaries, "are trapped in a socio-cultural text not of our own making, 'books of life' filed alongside the Liègeoise *vital*" (p. 254).

Spencer-Hall insists that she is neither collapsing medieval and modern religious experiences nor constructing parallel, identical historical experiences. She speaks of both cinema-goers and readers of hagiography as a "collective audience—an assembly of individuals who all see the divine film but with different viewing times and circumstances" (p. 42). The book's most enticing idea is that "The Middle Ages are in constant, oscillating contact with the modern period" (p. 253) and thus that modern scholars might get a glimpse of genuine medieval women through the peephole of media theory.

Yet the basis of Spencer-Hall's comparisons remains a matter of faith. If we believe that reading a second-hand account of a woman's epiphany is like going to the movies, then it is, for surely medieval ways of looking are buried deep within our present-day visual cultures. Other medieval luminaries could offer additional evidence for her argument. What, a reader might ask, would a similar analysis tell us about the better-documented case of Saint Clare of Assisi? Clare dreamed of finding her singular place in Christian creation by staring into the golden nipple of Saint Francis, which she had somehow sucked off his breast and then spat into her hand. She once lay confined to bed in her cell, yet heard an entire Mass taking place in a church far away. For her abilities, Clare became the patron saint of television.

Many readers might also wonder about modern religious visions. They still take place everywhere, all the time. Visionaries and their witnesses wield the latest technologies and media to substantiate and explain their ecstasies.[2] Could the integration of such cults and their media promoters into Spencer-Hall's argument have provided additional angles of vision here? Further, there is little here about religiously informed filmmaking (such as Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*) and pervasive religious themes in cinema, television, graphic novels, and anime. Spencer-Hall's detailed treatment of *The Dark Knight* suggests how the analysis of other religiously inflected media might have expanded the scope of the book—*Beauty and the Beast*, for example.

Even though its argument requires an investment of belief, *Medieval Saints and Modern Screens* sparkles with moments of provocation and insight. It offers hope that modern life and thought might one day yield a true vision of life in the past. I expect that Spencer-Hall's next book will truly dazzle us.

NOTES

[1] Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2001). Margot King, besides translating and analyzing

texts related to beguines, directed Peregrina Publishing from 1989-2004, which included the legends of the Liègeoises in its translation series *Matrologia Latina* (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1989-). Some of these texts can now be found on MonasticMatrix (<http://monasticmatrix.org>).

[2] Daniel Wojcik, "Polaroids from Heaven': Photography, Folk Religion, and the Miraculous Image Tradition at a Marian Apparition," *Journal of American Folklore* 109, no. 432 (Spring 1996): 129-148; Paolo Apolito, *The Internet and the Madonna: Religious Visionary Experience on the Web* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Lisa Bitel and Matt Gainer, *Our Lady of the Rock: Vision and Pilgrimage in the Mojave Desert* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

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