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**Suzannah Biernoff**, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*. Basingstoke, Hampshire, and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002. x + 248 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-333-96120-X.

Review by Megan Cassidy-Welch, University of Melbourne.

Suzannah Biernoff's compelling and scholarly book offers new insights into the complex discourses of medieval ways of seeing and the premodern body. Focussing mainly on the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, Biernoff hopes to show that a historical approach to medieval vision reveals that "looking is a cultural practice as well as a physiological process; and that vision is always mediated by discourses about vision" (p. 4). However, Biernoff goes further than this, positing a relationship between the act of seeing and the physicality, or carnality, of what she describes as the encounter between the viewer and the viewed object/subject. Biernoff joins art historians such as Michael Camille and Jeffrey Hamburger in writing cultural histories of medieval images and vision, and her book, with some exceptions, adds much to current interest in the medieval body and the flesh.

Part one, entitled "Carnal Vision," is divided into two chapters: "Flesh" and "The Eye of the Flesh." Biernoff almost immediately situates her reading of the distinction between "the body" and "flesh" in the context of historiographical debates on dualism and in particular in the context of Caroline Walker Bynum's series of works on the material and imagined body during the high Middle Ages.[1] The argument made by Biernoff here is that although Bynum is right to insist on a multivalent medieval body, it does not necessarily follow that medieval commentators neatly chose as single alternatives either binary or tripartite models of perception. Biernoff cites the example of St. Augustine, whose many writings (including *De Trinitate*) articulate a more fluid and polymorphous modelling of body and spirit than we might expect. In particular, Augustine seems to distinguish between body and flesh in clearly gendered ways, on occasion associating woman with body, which "signifies receptive matter (either passive or desiring), but also the potential for completion and perfection within a well-ordered whole" (p. 34), and on other occasions equating woman with flesh or the corrupting and disorderly aspects of post-lapsarian corporeality. Only a few pages at the end of this chapter are spent on that medieval devotee of Augustine, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, whose sermon *De Conversione* provides Biernoff with an opportunity to argue for Bernard's antipathy toward the sinful flesh. This may have been refined somewhat, with recourse perhaps to some Cistercian scholarship on the Bernardine body. As Michael Casey and others have argued, Bernard did not always revile the flesh as a source of sin but rather resented it as a site which required constant tending.[2]

The second chapter begins to tease out some of the arguments raised in the first. Biernoff argues that "the carnal vision extends the appetite and attributes of the flesh beyond the boundaries of individual bodies" (p. 41), returning to the original sin as the main exemplar. The point here is that looking is not always an act of observation and that the fleshly gaze is a "vehicle of desire" (p. 59). Biernoff supports this general statement with recourse to commentaries by Peter Abelard and Gerald of Wales, while a longer exposition on the desiring gaze is premised on the gendered meanings of sight found in texts as

diverse as the twelfth-century French romance *Eneas*, the *Chateau d'amour* of Robert Grosseteste, and the *Ancrene Wisse*.

Part two, "Perspectiva," includes two chapters, one on "Scientific Vision" and the other on "The Optical Body." Here Biernoff delves into the world of thirteenth-century optics in order to reconcile the seemingly contradictory implications of Aristotelian and Augustinian readings of knowledge and its quest as, respectively, part of the natural world and as part of the world beyond the flesh. A lucid and interesting exposition is given of the work of Robert Grosseteste, whose interest in the science of optics was grounded in a philosophical understanding of theology and science "as indivisible parts of a single system" (p. 69). Grosseteste's science of optics is, as Biernoff points out, often cited as a precursor to a rational, geometrically defined epistemology of vision and visual order. The work of Roger Bacon refined the science of perception and its relationship to the acquisition of knowledge in attempting to reconcile the corporeal aspects of sight with its spiritual and intellectual aspects. Biernoff argues that Bacon did not necessarily succeed in this reconciliation but that his interest in the differences between scientific and theological ways of seeing provide us with not only insights into a medieval desire for epistemological certainty but also with a more nuanced view of "the idea of a Western scientific perspective."

The second part of the section deals more specifically with the relationship between a science of optics and the notion of carnal vision elucidated in the first chapters of the book. Biernoff finds that Roger Bacon does not separate the psychical and physical aspect of sight; nor does he think of the act of seeing as one which necessarily involves distance or detachment between the eye and the perceptual object. For Bacon, the eye itself is both a material, fixed organ *and* an "animate power of projection" (p. 92). This means, in Biernoff's view, that although modern psychoanalytic readings of ocularity might raise some valid theoretical issues, medieval understandings of what the eye projected and received was more complex. Specifically, sight was fleshly and imagined, active and passive, generative and reflective. The medieval science of optics which historians have long asserted as the beginning of a natural trajectory toward modern vision must, says Biernoff, be rethought in terms of the corporeal, carnal, and gendered range of meanings attached to the loci of sight.

The third section of the book, "Redemption," is divided into chapters entitled "The Custody of the Eyes" and "Ocular Communion." Here Biernoff is concerned to establish a relationship between vision and redemption. Returning to St. Bernard's sermon *De conversione*, Biernoff argues that both the metaphor and material reality of claustral enclosure were articulated by St. Bernard in terms of vision. Enclosure for St. Bernard was a form of "sanctified blindness" (p. 116) which was necessary in order for a Christian to transcend materiality altogether and enter the realm of the spiritual. Ideas of memory are important here, and although Biernoff is rather too reliant on the work of Janet Coleman, some interesting points are raised about monastic spiritual discipline. I would like to have seen a little more on the specifically Cistercian context of St. Bernard's writing, especially in relation to memory but also in relation to Cistercian understandings of physical and material space.

Biernoff's concentration on the repression of bodily sight is carried through to a discussion of sublimation and mystical transcendence in relation to the body of Christ and the gaze of communion. In this final chapter, Biernoff tackles the visibility of images of Christ's body from the thirteenth century and questions the doctrine of *imitatio Christi* in the contexts of seeing and embodiment. In this chapter, a little more specific historical context would have added depth to the general points: as is, Biernoff ranges from discussions of early-thirteenth century Franciscans to fourteenth-century women mystics in an interesting but slightly frustrating fashion. The discussion of the Man of Sorrows is more effective, arguing for a devotional relationship between embodied object and viewer that rests on mutuality: a sort of communion. The remainder of the chapter explores the corporeality of Christ and penetrative visions of redemption.

A couple of general points may be made about this original and sometimes difficult book. First, a focus on the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is certainly justified in keeping the parameters of the enquiry in check. Yet I do wonder what sort of historical comparisons might be borne out if Biernoff had moved away from a “twelfth-century renaissance” approach to the bulk of the material. The concluding section of the book admits that the thirteenth century was a time of transition in terms of discourses on seeing. Perhaps the inclusion of more of this material in its specific historical context may have borne out that compelling point. Second, in many ways this book is a very intellectual history of the body and vision. The main sources are the great mystics and the scholastics, while the images which are included throughout are not, aside from the Man of Sorrows, given as much attention. One of the questions in the introduction to the book is to what extent we can infer from these sources a more widespread or universal set of discourses around sight and embodiment. I am not sure that Biernoff has cast her net widely enough to be able to answer that question. Nonetheless, this is a meticulous and intellectually fascinating reading of the material. Biernoff weds contemporary critical theory and medieval texts with care and to good effect. This is a book which should make us rethink our assumptions relating to the medieval body and ways of seeing.

#### NOTES

[1] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992); Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

[2] Michael Casey, *A Thirst for God: Spiritual Desire in Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons on the Song of Songs*. Cistercian Studies Series, no. 77 (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1988).

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