



September 2021

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Recommended Citation

Okey, Stephen (2021) "Medieval Saints and Modern Screens: Divine Visions as Cinematic Experience," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol25/iss2/8>

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Medieval Saints and Modern Screens: Divine Visions as Cinematic Experience

Abstract

This is a book review of Alicia Spencer-Hall, *Medieval Saints and Modern Screens: Divine Visions as Cinematic Experience* (Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

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Spencer-Hall, Alicia, *Medieval Saints and Modern Screens: Divine Visions as Cinematic Experience* (Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

Around 2009, the “famous for being famous” reality tv-star Kim Kardashian became a viral sensation for videos of her “ugly crying.” Compilations of such crying scenes briefly became popular on YouTube, while various still images became widely shared memes online. In one of many effectively deployed examples through her insightful and creative book, Alicia Spencer-Hall draws on the “ugly crying” of Kim Kardashian as a way into the story of late medieval mystic Margery Kempe. Stories of Kempe’s life include examples of her own nonstop tears, which were apparently sufficiently annoying that a mob gathered outside her home to stop her (174). The parallel between Kempe and Kardashian goes deeper than tears: Spencer-Hall looks at the subject of Kempe’s relative fame and her efforts to “sutur[e] together numerous female saintly identities” in an effort to communicate her own sanctity. Spencer-Hall builds on this comparison to argue that contemporary celebrity culture provides a helpful window into thinking about Margery Kempe, both in her own time among her medieval “fans” and today, considering her relative popularity among academic researchers. Throughout this volume, Spencer-Hall uses contemporary film and media studies as a tool for thinking critically through the stories of medieval visionary women, like Margery Kempe. It is an effort that Spencer-Hall succeeds admirably at.

Spencer-Hall’s core argument is that “medieval mystical episodes are made intelligible to modern audiences through reference to...the language, form, and lived experience of cinema” (11). The book is organized around four types of cinematic media: photography, film, celebrities, and three-dimensional online environments. Through each of these media, she also examines deeper conceptual questions, such as the perception of time, the link between visual and haptic mediation, the deliberate construction of fame and of sanctity, and different modes of immersing oneself in a

narrative. Within each chapter, she engages with particular films, television series, celebrities, and digital technologies while always using those to look back at the lives of particular medieval visionary women. She focuses mostly on the “Holy Women of Liege,” a collection of *vitae* (lives) from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that narrate the sanctity and mystical visions of a variety of cloistered women.

Through each of her four main chapters, Spencer-Hall effectively uses her various conceptual frames to bring together methods of film and media studies, significant philosophical and religious questions, and excellent examples from popular culture that help to bring light to these visionary women. Noting the tensions that often existed between these holy women and male clerical authorities, she draws a parallel between these tensions and those that exist between “lay” content creators in the media today and the “clerical” elites who have historically had control over media production and distribution. In this analysis, the Liegeoises are “developers of a new kind of religious content for popular consumption, their *vitae* are pop-cultural devotional media” (51). This move provides an accessible model for thinking about the role of women mystics in the medieval era, while also drawing attention to the power and gender dynamics at play.

Part of what is effective in Spencer-Hall’s use of film and media concepts to evaluate these medieval figures is her success at highlighting the important parallels, given that the specific technologies in question that drive so much of media studies did not exist at the time. So in considering photography, what is the right parallel? What in the medieval Christian tradition is comparable to virtual reality? For example, in the first chapter’s engagement with the medium of photography, she highlights how photographing something plays with our understanding of time. On the one hand, a photograph or video captures a moment that is forever past and cannot be retrieved, while on the other it renders that moment into something that is timeless and unchanging.

Understood in this light, Spencer-Hall draws helpful parallels between the capture of a photograph and moments of mystical ecstasy experienced by some of the Liegeoises. For example, she discusses the *vita* of Beatrice of Nazareth, who embraces Christ in an ecstasy just like “soft wax, pressed with a seal, displays the seal’s character in itself” (74). This “impression” is then itself impressed in the *vita*, which further instructs its readers to let the image of Beatrice be impressed upon themselves. While the language of photography was not available to Beatrice or her biographer, the sense of capturing this moment of ecstasy and the visual dimensions of how it links Beatrice to Christ, and then in theory the reader to Christ through Beatrice, build on Spencer-Hall’s consideration of photography and time.

The second chapter will perhaps be of most interest to scholars of religion and film. Here, Spencer-Hall focuses on the “gaze” as understood in the medieval era and how this shaped the production and reception of narratives of divine visions. She notes that the dominant theories about sight at the time saw the eyes and the objects as both emitting beams, meaning that the act of sight was simultaneously an act of touch. She draws this insight into more contemporary questions, using Vivian Carol Sobchack’s idea of “cinesthesia” to highlight the multi-sensory experience of viewing (and feeling) a film. Spencer-Hall applies this concept to Juliana of Mont-Cornillon, who experiences the pain of Christ’s crucifixion in her visions. While Christ’s passion is thus the “film” she watches and experiences, God is compared to the “cinema projector, the projectionist, *and* the light emitted from the cinema projector” (122). Stretching the analogy further, Spencer-Hall describes the saint as the screen on which the film is projected, and the *vita* of the saint as a reproduction thereof; she does not, however, go so far as to describe the *vita* as like a DVD, although this seems a reasonable inference.

Spencer-Hall's creative and analytical talents are most fully on display in the third chapter, "The Xtian Factor." Her argument in this chapter is that celebrity studies provide an insightful frame for thinking about fame and "the construction of sanctity" in the medieval *vitae* she's analyzing (147). She notes the distinction (but not separation) between the "celebrity" and the real person behind that celebrity, and then compares this to the real holiness of a particular saintly figure and the hagiographic media generated about that person. Spencer-Hall's purpose is not to question the authenticity of a particular person's sanctity, but rather to highlight the role that others play in the public and mediated construction of that sanctity and of the social capital that can provide to those associated with the saintly figure.

In one of her two main examples in the chapter, she draws a surprising but fascinating parallel between the relationships of Liegeoise Marie of Oignies, her hagiographer Jacques de Vitry, and his admirer Thomas of Cantimpré, and then the relationships of singer and reality-TV star Jessica Simpson, her hairdresser Ken Pavés, and his (unnamed) hairdresser. Spencer-Hall's point in this comparison is that Pavés, whose entire and brief experience of fame was dependent upon his relationship with Simpson, is strikingly similar to the fame of Jacques de Vitry, who depends on Marie for his own success. De Vitry's subsequent ecclesiastical career is quite successful, ultimately leading to his appointment as a cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church, while the *vita* that he assembled about Marie of Oignies after her death was widely disseminated throughout Europe (150-151). While Spencer-Hall notes that she is not the first to see celebrity studies as a tool for thinking about hagiography (or vice versa), she is particularly effective at applying this frame.¹

¹ A similar and much more sustained example can be found in Gezim Alpion, *Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?* (London: Routledge, 2006).

One of the challenges of working with analyses of religion and popular culture is the question of whether the material one is analyzing will have continuing relevance or will be more of a time capsule. This is always a difficult judgment to render, especially in the short term. One section of Spencer-Hall's book that leans more towards the time capsule side of the balance is the fourth chapter, "My Avatar, My Soul: When Mystics Log On." Here, she looks at the role of "visionary scripts" (193) in aiding those who sought to meditate on the life of Christ or other scriptural events. Spencer-Hall uses this idea to pivot to virtual reality and the concept of digital avatars. Central to this analysis are extended considerations of two popular culture artifacts, the virtual reality platform *Second Life* (started in 2003) and the film *Avatar* (2009). Both of these were common in religious and theological analyses in the late 2000's and early 2010's.² While *Avatar* was at one point the highest grossing film of all time, it has largely faded from popular consciousness. *Second Life* was never particularly well-known, peaking at around one million active users in the early 2010s but declining in the years since. These brief flares of significance do not detract from Spencer-Hall's analysis itself, which makes a provocative case for how virtual reality might serve as a window for thinking about mystical experience.

Through this work, Spencer-Hall takes on a similar project to that of Kathryn M. Rudy, whose *Virtual Pilgrimages in the Convent* looks at the various spiritual exercises that religious women undertook in order to do a religious pilgrimage without leaving their cloister.³ Rudy

² For example, both Heidi Campbell and Rachel Wagner have significant sections on *Second Life*, while Jana Bennett deals extensively with *Avatar* in her chapter on theological anthropology. See Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Rachel Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality* (New York: Routledge, 2011); and Jana Marguerite Bennett, *Aquinas on the Web?: Doing Theology in an Internet Age* (London: T&T Clark, 2012).

³ Kathryn M. Rudy, *Virtual Pilgrimages in the Convent: Imagining Jerusalem in the Late Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011).

highlights their use of extant pilgrim accounts, the development of contemplative scripts, and even the arrangement of physical spaces within the convent in order to create a “virtual” participation in pilgrimage. Rudy notes that these women had such a desire for authenticity that they would seek out accurate measurements of distances between sites in Rome or Jerusalem, and then use these to map out a comparable walk in their own homes. Both Rudy and Spencer-Hall look critically and charitably at the lives of medieval holy women and at how texts were an essential part of mediating what was absent. Spencer-Hall’s approach differs significantly precisely in its attention to contemporary media studies, but the parallels are strong, especially in her consideration of both the visual and the haptic in her second chapter.

The four conceptual frames that Spencer-Hall works with through the text are not only helpful for their serious engagement with media studies, but also with how they critically and insightfully engage the work of religious studies. Spencer-Hall’s conclusion takes the Catholic tradition’s story of Veronica, whose offer of a cloth to the cross-carrying Christ on the way to Calvary becomes an icon, as a way to re-emphasize the intertwined character of these two disciplines. The Liegeoises are described as Veronicas, as icons of Christ, who exist in a tension of presence and absence, both revealing the divine through their stories and disappearing into themselves as what they reveal takes precedence. They become “animated relics” (251) whose narratives and function can be more fully understood through the tools of film studies.

Spencer-Hall’s text is a perceptive interdisciplinary work that would be of benefit to scholars of religion and film both. Although it is likely that some of the contemporary examples will age better than others, the critical and analytical work that brings them together with the *vitae* is astute and top notch. While the volume initially came with a steep price that would surely have limited its reach to academic libraries, it is now open access and thus available for free.