

Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen, Henning Laugerud & Laura Katrine Skinnebach (eds.): *The Saturated Sensorium: Principles of Perception and Mediation in the Middle Ages*. Århus: Aarhus University Press, 2015. 321 pp.

REVIEWED BY MARIA H. OEN

Opening with a highly pertinent cover illustration which shows the kneeling St. Bernard of Clairvaux receiving milk from the Virgin's naked breast, the anthology *The Saturated Sensorium* seeks to demonstrate the central, yet paradoxical role assigned to the physical senses and material media in the quest for experience and knowledge of the spiritual and transcendent God in the Middle Ages. At a seminar in 2009, a group of Scandinavian scholars from various disciplines such as art history, archaeology, philology, church history, literature and media studies convened to discuss sense relations and media in the Middle Ages. The result is the present book containing an introductory chapter followed by ten essays.

In the introduction, written by Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen, the overall program of the book is stated explicitly, namely to show, by means of examples the authors consider to be representative, that the Middle Ages should be understood as “an age of *intermedia*” (p. 11) when “various classes of media inform and include each other while various types of sense experience permeate and saturate each other” (p. 10). Jørgensen sets out with great enthusiasm to convince his readers that sensory experiences in this period were complex and always compound; that the senses were always directed towards the holy, i.e. the spiritual God, and—despite the transcendental character of this aim—the divine was indeed experienced in and through a number of mixed material and sensory media. In Chapter 1, also written by Jørgensen, the paradoxical affirmation that the spiritual God was sensed through material media is addressed further as the author sets out to define a paradigm of perception in the Middle Ages, namely what he calls the *hagiosensorium*. Following much recent research, the author sees the dogma of the Incarnation and the sacrament of the Eucharist as central clues for understanding the relation between the spiritual God and the sensory world. Jørgensen suggests that there was a medieval tendency to see all elements in the created world as potential carriers of divine presence, and he argues that this propensity is also central to understanding the medieval human sensorium. According to the model of the *hagiosensorium*, the senses in the Middle Ages, were

“fundamentally structured and formed by the urge to identify and apprehend the signs of God’s presence in this world” (p. 28). Thus, just like the Eucharist was understood to contain the real presence of Christ, so the image of Christ was perceived in a manner analogous to the sacrament. As a consequence, “the sensual world is experienced as a locus for the inherent nearness of sanctity in select hotspots distinguished by their sensory quality” (p. 29). Such “hotspots” are understood as places of worship as well as objects like relics, paintings and a range of other media studied through the present volume. With his concept of hagio-sensorium, Jørgensen is, however, not interested only in explaining the “sensing of the sacred” in matter, but also in “holy perception”. Based on his notion that the human senses were constantly invited to search for the sacred in this world, Jørgensen suggests that also the senses themselves were affected, or sanctified, by the holy objects. To demonstrate exactly how the hagio-sensorium worked, the author presents a number of different objects and sources, produced, used or written in highly different contexts and at different times during the Middle Ages. Jørgensen’s chapter on the hagio-sensorium remains a point of reference for the other authors throughout the anthology.

In Chapter 2 Kristin Bliksrud Aavitsland takes a closer look at what she calls “the medieval paradox of perception”, namely that God is the ultimate aim for all sensory perception, but, because of the Fall of Man, the senses are corrupted and God can only be experienced in an incomplete manner. The author gives a deft overview of reflections on the human senses in different sources, including a fourteenth-century French treatise on hunting, and she explores further the significance of the Incarnation and the Eucharist for the mediation of Christ. She then demonstrates convincingly how the iconography and the handling of the material in Scandinavian Romanesque golden altar frontals expresses materially and visually the medieval paradox of sensing and mediating the divine.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the importance of sensuality in the spirituality of Bernard of Clairvaux. Here, Brian Patrick McGuire argues that despite the extreme asceticism of his earlier years, Bernard later put great value on human bonding and the physical presence of others. McGuire further suggests that not only Bernard himself, but also the image of him produced in the Cistercian context, dissolved the traditional opposition between asceticism as the only way towards God and engagement with the sensual world as a distraction.

In Chapter 4 Jørgen Bruhn explores what he defines as non-religious narrative literature and finds that, although the senses as discussed here are not directed towards God according to Jørgensen’s notion of the hagio-sensorium, the limitations of the senses that Aavitsland has defined from a theological perspective are equally funda-

mental when it comes to representing emotions and visual impressions in courtly literature.

In Chapter 5 Sigurd Kværndrup looks at the connection between whimsical motifs from medieval popular ballads and church paintings in late medieval Denmark and Sweden. Kværndrup compellingly argues for the connection between the ballads and the murals he studies, but it is not clear how his employment of the concept of “remediation” as an analytical tool aids the investigation. To state that parts of an oral culture is “remediated” into images does not help the author to answer the intriguing question he poses, namely why we find these parallels in the first place. Neither is the suggestion that “new classes and the mendicant orders had a strong influence on the decoration of the churches” (p. 148) a persuasive explanation.

In Chapter 6 Laura Katrine Skinnebach takes four prayer books from late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Denmark as points of departure for an interesting study of the role of the body and the physical senses in devotional practice. In order to shed light on her material and present her interesting argument, namely that “physical and mental actions and exercises were ordered in a way so that body and soul became mutually constitutive in the devotional process” (p. 174), Skinnebach discusses contemporary theoretical and theological approaches to the senses, notably vision, and introduces Franciscan and Dominican manuals on prayer.

Chapter 7 presents an exploration of the ceremony of *mandatum* (the washing of the feet). Based on descriptions in textual sources, Nils Holger Petersen explains how the ritual appears to have been performed and how it developed, and he demonstrates that it grew into a more complex ceremony involving several media, including the singing of antiphons and psalms. Petersen’s interesting and meticulous consideration of his sources also brings him to a highly relevant consideration of what we can and cannot learn from such sources when it comes to the ritual’s performance and, notably, how people perceived or sensed during these rituals, as well as a discussion of the use of modern analytical terms which have little or no connection to the vocabulary of the period.

Chapter 8, written by Mads Dengsø Jessen and Tim Flohr Sørensen, deals with the church environment in southern Scandinavia from the eleventh to the thirteenth century. The authors, who embrace an approach based on phenomenology and cognitive studies, state that they wish to explore the bodily experience of the churchgoers, but the presentation of the churches and various rituals is very generalising. For instance, in their treatment of Latin liturgy, the authors state that “the ritual semantics of most of the mass are nonsense, literally, for the vast majority of the congregation in the medieval church” (p. 219). Whether or not the authors actually intended to

write “linguistic semantics” or in fact mean “ritual” the claim is not substantiated. The authors also leave out the vernacular sermon entirely from their discussion.

In Chapter 9 Jette Linaa explores consumption in the Middle Ages. She analyses two distinct modes of consumption, the Eucharist and the secular banquet, and her overall claim is that “the paradigmatic model of perception constituted by the integration of senses and media was the same both inside and outside the physical boundaries of the church, leading to the construction of one world of perception to be expressed in real and ritual meals across the medieval world” (p. 226). Her treatment of this topic appears to be somewhat generalising.

In the last chapter of the volume, Henning Laugerud looks at medieval notions of memory. Based on a comparison of the motif of the “Tree of Life” as it is articulated in Bonaventure’s treatise *Lignum vitae* and its depiction in a painting by Taddeo Gaddi in the Franciscan church Santa Croce in Florence, Laugerud focuses on the interaction of memory and the senses. He also includes a pertinent discussion of Bonaventure’s extremely influential contemporary, Thomas Aquinas, and his approach to the physical senses in the quest for knowledge of God.

The chapters constituting this volume are highly variable. Some base their analysis on primary sources which have a direct relevance to their topics, whereas others operate in a sphere of secondary literature and of sources that range far and wide in time and space. In many chapters there is also a tendency to such a high level of abstraction that the actual claims are sometimes hidden from view. Also, many of the contributors deliver universalizing claims about perceptions of the senses in the Middle Ages at large which easily become reductive. None of the authors addresses the dramatic development in perceptions of the epistemological value of the bodily senses in the Latin high Middle Ages. This evolution had everything to do with the changing devotional culture in the later Middle Ages so often connected to the Franciscans, as well as the explosion of material manifestations of the sacred as discussed by Caroline W. Bynum in her *Christian Materiality* (2011), to which several of the authors of the present volume refer.⁹⁹ There was indeed a discourse on sense perception in Latin and Greek Christendom alike, and from late Antiquity through late medieval vernacular traditions, that remained largely constant, namely the metaphorical, exegetical one, where hearts have ears and books are chewed. The desire to identify universal features would perhaps have been more pertinent to this tradition.

⁹⁹ Here I refer to Beryl Smalley’s classic *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 3 edn. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), and especially her observations regarding the impact of the interest in nature and the literal meaning of Scripture in the High Middle Ages. For Bynum, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011).

Despite these limitations, this anthology has some real strengths. It is largely coherent in the sense that there are many cross references and a unified conceptual framework. Several of the chapters are convincing with regard to the sources under study. *The Saturated Sensorium* is generously illustrated with colour plates and each chapter is introduced by a useful short abstract facing the chapter heading. The bibliography has some minor problems. It does not distinguish between primary sources and secondary literature. Surnames of origin (e.g. de Bruyne, van Dijk, van Engen) are listed according to preposition, and some titles contain misspellings. Finally, it seems that the editors have chosen to have only English translations of sources in the text, but the original is regrettably lacking in most cases in the notes.

Maria H. Oen, Ph.D. Art history, teaches medieval art history at Stockholm University, Dept., of Culture and Aesthetics, and is currently a Visiting Researcher at the Warburg Institute, School of Advanced Study, University of London.
