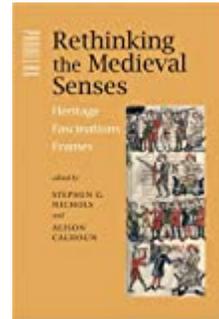




Stephen G. Nichols, Andreas Kablitz, Alison Calhoun, eds. *Rethinking the Medieval Senses: Heritage / Fascinations / Frames*. Parallax: Re-visions of Culture and Society Series. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. 344 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-8736-9; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-8737-6.



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Medievalists and the Medieval Sensorium

Once again, I fell into the reviewer's reverie. Asked to review this anthology, I immediately started to imagine the volume in question—ideally, it would be a collection neatly divided into five chapters, each one devoted to one sense. The introduction would trace how the five-part epistemology of sensual perception rose to prominence in ancient times, and the collection would close with reflections on synaesthesia, and come equipped with an exhaustive bibliography.

Rethinking the Medieval Senses is not the comprehensive encyclopedia of the senses my vision projected. What is more, its contributors make an excellent case about why an exhaustive treatment of the subject during the Middle Ages is indeed inadvisable, if not outright impossible. In his introduction to the volume, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht speaks of the senses as a “stubbornly centrifugal topic” in medieval literature and culture (p. 2). The richness of the theme comes to life in this interdisciplinary collection, divided mainly between chapters devoted to mapping the epistemology of the senses and those analyzing literary discourses.

In “Seeing God: Augustine, Sensation, and the Mind's Eye,” Eugen Vance explores St. Augustine's reflections on the soul as the place where sensual perceptions register; according to this model, the senses stimulate cognitive powers of a higher order—resulting in an upward trajectory of sensory refinement that ultimately enables humans' quest for spiritual enlightenment. The “common” or “inner sense” belongs to these faculties. Following Aristotle's lead, Arabic, Hebrew, and Christian philosophy consistently viewed this sense (although with considerable variation) as an intermediary between sensation and rational thought (as argued by Daniel Heller-Roazen in “Common Sense: Greek, Arabic, Latin”). That medievalists should refrain from superimposing contemporary concepts of the body on pre-modern cultural concepts is a caution driven home by Heather Webb's “Cardiosensory Impulses in Late Medieval Spirituality.” Webb shows how scenarios of sin and salvation were thought to play out on the battleground of the body with its apertures, blockages, circuits, and perceptive hierarchies, at the center of which stood not the brain but the heart.

In sum, both ancient and medieval philosophers subscribed to the Aristotelian notion that “without sensory perception there is no thought” (as shown by Gregor Vogt-Spira in “Senses, Imagination, and Literature: Some Epistemological Considerations,” p. 51). What this insight can do for our understanding of medieval literature and culture becomes apparent in Vogt-Spira’s thought-provoking piece: being able to model the senses as generative organs accorded literary texts the ability to evoke fully what was sensorily absent. It is this medieval concept of literature’s actuality that a post-Saussurian literary criticism steeped in theories of signification and representation has obfuscated.

Not accidentally therefore, the senses haunted much of medieval literature. Marina Brownlee (in “The Critical Sense: Some Spanish Examples”) and Michel Zink (in “The Place of the Senses”) illuminate the sensibilities manifest in literary texts in fourteenth-century Spain and medieval France, analyzing circuits “of perception and cognition” (p. 77) as well as their occasional breakdown in times of crisis. In “Perception, Cognition, Volition in the ‘Arcipreste de Talavera,’” Joachim Köppler expounds what he terms the “hysterical” (p. 122) presence of the senses in medieval culture; after all, their cognitive profile could never be reconciled with their dangerous receptivity to stimulation from the outside: “What develops under the pressure of a rigorous doctrine of original sin is a kind of license for *representing* the sinful” (p. 133). Yet the philosophical-theological valorization of the spiritual over the material—an interpretive dynamic set into motion for the Christian world by St. Paul—had profound effects on social relations. As a result, the status of Jews in the Christian world became precarious, especially since the tension between the spirit and the flesh unleashed Christian anxieties about “Judaizers” in their midst, according to David Nirenberg in his “Christian Sovereignty and Jewish Flesh.” The question about which sense ought to take precedence, the sense of hearing (as in the Old Testament) or the sense of seeing (as in much of ancient philosophy) was never settled, so Rainer Warning—a contest made productive in Italian love songs by Dante and Petrarch (as Warning argues in “Seeing and Hearing in Ancient and Medieval Epiphany”). Through the lens of the mystery plays as staged by medieval communities, Andreas Kablitz unearths a Christian sense of time in which narrations of a Biblical past and notions of a liturgical present coincide to instantiate the timeless truth of salvation (in “Representations and Participation: Remarks on Medieval French Drama”). If we follow Jan-Dirk Müller in “Blinding Sight: Observations

on German Epics of the Thirteenth Century,” courtly literature escaped a religiously motivated condemnation of sight; it is from within the courtly logic that Konrad von Würzburg (d. 1287) demonstrates the dangers of courtly radiance as blinding those exposed to its lure. The dialectic between who is visible and who cannot be seen is explored in Hildegard Elisabeth Keller’s “Binded Avengers.” Her wide-ranging contribution, “‘The Pupil of Your Eye’: Vision, Language, and Poetry in Thirteenth-Century Paris,” reflects on visual asymmetries in courtly narratives and law codes. Not least due to the influence of Arab philosophers, the analysis of vision and seeing attracted tremendous attention in the works of Robert Grosseteste and Roger Bacon—thirteenth-century scholars who explored “how we think with images in much the same way as with language” (p. 304).

As this anthology makes abundantly clear, the epistemology of the senses circumscribes a vibrant forum of intellectual engagement in medieval thought. In these discussions, Platonism and Aristotelianism were not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, theorizing and imagining the senses provided ample opportunity to combine and conjecture as well as to push intellectual and representational boundaries. The topic’s permeability for a variety of fields, concerns, or representational strategies turned—and this is my second point—the topic into a vantage point from which one can productively access the cultural tensions or “hidden energies,” if not paradoxes, of the medieval period—one of the volume’s explicit goals.

A greater awareness of the frictions and synergies between the various contributions as well as extended commentaries or conversations would have complicated the picture further (along the lines of Gabrielle Spiegel’s piece, “Paradoxes of the Senses” and Gumbrecht’s introduction). As things stand, disciplinary predilections remain part of the book’s landscape: some scholars move smoothly from the medieval to the modern, while keeping period considerations firmly intact. Others assume familiarity with key texts in their area of study. Some quotations are given without translations. Furthermore, the focus on the various senses is uneven; not surprisingly, sight emerges as the primary sense while others are barely touched upon. Social historians will wish for a contribution daring to take the intricate philosophy of the senses or its literary reflections into the messiness of experiential categories and everyday perceptions. Potential intersections between the four senses of scripture and the five senses are mentioned only in passing. Other readers will certainly add additional topics to this wish list of desiderata. What is more, the re-visionist

project alluded to in the volume's title lacks in precision. How the notion of an intensely sensual medieval period has cohabited with the asceticism ascribed to the same period—two visions of the Middle Ages mentioned in the introduction—remains to be explored. Johan Huizinga, Norbert Elias, and Robert JÄ½tte, to name but a few crit-

ics who have added fragments to animating a history of the senses, are missing from the discussion altogether. These reservations notwithstanding, *Rethinking the Medieval Senses* commends itself for its breaking of new and immensely readable ground. I highly recommend it, if only as a path to succumbing to the dream for more.

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