Review: Alicia Spencer-Hall, *Medieval Saints and Modern Screens: Divine Visions as Cinematic Experience* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017).
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Three pages into *Medieval Saints and Modern Screens*, we are greeted with a dissection of the sensory processes involved in the interaction between a reader and a book:

> 'Even in the most superficially two-dimensional interaction between reader and book, for instance, we find the visual (the words on the page), the haptic (turning the page), the imaginative and intellectual (processing the words' meaning), and even the olfactory (the smell of the book).' (p. 13).

Arguing that sensual engagement is a fundamental quality of hagiographic literature, the book goes on, with each soft crackle of the printed page, to make a compelling case for text as a visual, tactile and cinematic medium. Noting that studies have for some time been likening the narratives of female saints to screenplays, films, and even pornography, Spencer-Hall takes this argument to the next level. *Medieval Saints* is an innovative exploration of the themes, topics and desires expressed in medieval saints' *vitae* and in modern visual cultures. Claiming that 'mysticism, or at least a desire for mysticism […] continues to exist in and as cinema' (p. 12), it offers a striking interrogation of the thirteenth-century Latin biographies of the holy woman of Liège.

The introduction 'Ecstatic Cinema, Cinematic Ecstasy' provides a welcome history of the religious women of thirteenth-century Brabant-Liège. This covers the socio-economic factors leading to the growth of non-monastic female spiritual communities as well as their relationship to the male, clerical powers which advised, and ultimately defined them through writing *vitae* of certain exemplary women. The problems caused by our own scholarly projections upon this comparatively under-studied area – most particularly the propensity to group holy women under the homogenising label 'beguine' – become an important focus here. Spencer-Hall also stakes out alternative ways of theorising the relationship between subject and object, gaze and agency, arguing for the possibility of a mutual, *agape*-ic gaze. This kind of exchange, she finds, is as present in the modern cinema-goer's gaze at a screen as it is in medieval visionaries encountering God. While discussions of mutuality in spectatorship and performance are also currently emerging in early drama criticism, this theorization successfully challenges Mulvey's often-reproduced yet under-challenged theories of cinematic spectatorship as always inherently objectifying. Shared elements between hagiographic and cinematic processes and genres support Spencer-Hall's challenge. These include the repetition of recognisable themes, tropes, events and patterns; the inter-textual and inter-visual incorporation of prior texts and images; claims of authenticity and the imitation of reality; the role of both as popular cultural sources and the possibility for transcendence offered by both medieval female mysticism and modern cinematic and digital cultures.

Drawing parallels between the ways in which the 'truth claims' of photography, film and saint biography are destabilised by their own authorial construction, the first chapter interrogates how both the photograph and the saint's life appear to operate outside linear

time. This proves a useful way to explain medieval conceptions of earthly time and eternal sacred time. Temporal and a-temporal forms, Spencer-Hall argues, intersect in the visions of Margaret of Ypres, Ida of Léau, Juliana of Mont-Cornillon and Elisabeth of Spalbeek, all of whom interact with figures from the biblical past. The apparent ability of film, with its ability to preserve, repeat and rewind events is then linked to the deaths and resuscitations of Christina *Mirabilis* through a striking discussion of Nolan's 2008 film *The Dark Knight*. Spencer-Hall reads Heath Ledger's Joker and Christina as purgatorial bodies existing between presence and absence. Through a series of close readings of the *vitae* of Lutgard of Aywières and Alice of Schaerbeek, Spencer-Hall highlights the ways percussive textual elements and repetition similarly work to temporally dislocate their audiences. This constitutes a refreshing development of theoretical approaches which have until now chiefly examined religious temporality in relation to figures as St Augustine, whose works explicitly address theologies of time.

The second chapter engages with current discussions concerning medieval optics, embodied spectatorship and the power dynamics at play in theories of intromission and extromission. Its primary focus is the concept of sight as mutual touch; particularly when the 'object' gazed upon by the saint is God. Providing a useful overview of medieval vision, including Bacon's model of synthesis and its origin in Arab scientist Alhazen's work *Kitab al-manaziŕ*, Spencer-Hall highlights how much this differs from the modern ocular-centric view of the active, objectifying 'male gaze'. Engaging with theories of embodied cinematic spectatorship, she considers how Beatrice of Nazareth, Juliana of Mont-Cornillon and Margaret of Ypres achieve spiritual, synesthetic and often viscerally physical fusion, with the objects of their visions.   As modern DNA research shows that manuscripts retain traces of all who touch them (including parchment makers, scribes, readers and the animal whose skin bears the text) Spencer-Hall makes a compelling case for the academic textual gaze as equally subject to the embodied synthesis of touch. This provides an interesting development of arguments concerning the medieval body-as-vellum, and will no doubt provide fertile ground for the newest work emerging on the queer qualities of manuscripts.[1]

Chapter three focuses on the relationship between hagiographer and saint via modern processes of 'celebrification'. Focusing on Jacques of Vitry and Marie of Oignes, this highlights how the hagiographer manipulated Marie's *vita* to produce 'an A-list holy icon' (p. 147). Examining Marie as a textual product enables Spencer-Hall to consider the functions that product was designed to perform – in this case, as Crusade propaganda, as a model of holy behaviour for other laywomen and as a means of advancing Jacques' own ecclesiastical career. The discussion of the utility of saint's lives as legitimising models for other women is one of the most exciting aspects of this book. Margery Kempe's attempt to mirror the events, actions, tropes and tears of her own life with those of Marie are analysed alongside the auto-celebrification processes employed by 'reality' stars such as Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian-West. The discussion of Kempe and Kardashian-West's 'ugly crying' hints at transtemporal and misogynist resistance towards women 'taking up space' with their emotions. Meanwhile, the popular disgust engendered by both women's manufacturing of their own divine/secular fame produces a striking insight into why both have tended to generate a range of emotive responses in their popular and academic audiences.

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[1] See the forthcoming essays contained in Roberta Magnani and Diane Watt, ed., 'Queer Manuscripts', *postmedieval* 9.3 (2018).

Throughout, Spencer-Hall calls attention to the textual and physical labour involved in saint/star-creation. Towards the chapter's close, she reveals the mechanics of her own academic process, reminding us that, although Kempe failed in her bid for holy auto-celebritization, she still holds currency as an academic celebrity. If we are to continue with the theme of utility, it would be fair to suggest that this chapter is likely to be highly useful to teachers of medieval devotional culture and of Kempe due to its perceptive use of current celebrity culture to examine the complex processes involved in saint-formation.[2] Yet it also provokes a larger discussion of academic critical processes by identifying how academics themselves act as fannish agents of celebrification.

The final chapter considers the collapsed times inherent in medieval visionaries' access to 'the communion of saints' via the lens of online virtual spaces. Through a series of interviews with Christians who practice their faith online in the virtual environment *Second Life* (SL), Spencer-Hall examines the experiences of saints who were able to 'log in' to the spiritual realm and even, like Elisabeth of Spalbeek and Marie of Lille, encounter one another there. This provides a welcome re-examination of the immersiveness of medieval devotional practices; in particular, the individual's desire to insert themselves into major events from the Bible. This is particularly resonant in the discussion of a virtual crucifixion, which encourages its users to undergo a virtual form of *imitatio Christi*. A useful resource might be found here by those working on liturgical drama as well as later lay religious performances, which likewise encouraged participants and audiences to immerse themselves in biblical chronologies.

The parallels between modern and medieval forms of media experience were a little less cohesive here than in some of the earlier chapters. This was partly because the more accessible online community environments do not as comfortably align with what the monograph's prior discussion of Kempe had convincingly demonstrated was the highly exclusive, barely accessible position of hagiographically-sanctioned female visionary. Nevertheless, the chapter's analysis of the collapse between avatar and individual, creator and reader and between audience and performance calls for a thorough reconsideration of the kinds of terminology we use to describe hagiographical, textual and performance production forms. The subversive potential of the virtual is never far away; particularly when medieval spiritual and modern online environments are used to bypass (male) clerical gatekeeping of the Eucharist.

Medieval studies, and more recently, medievalism, have long considered themselves among the most interdisciplinary fields. This work, however, manages to reach something beyond that. Probing the interconnections between medieval women and their biographers as well as between texts, times, celebrities and media, *Medieval Saints* constitutes a rare example of someone working outside medievalism producing an important and insightful comparative reading of medieval and modern popular and spiritual cultures.

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[2] There is of course, some irony in that, given time, these memory and significance of these reality stars will be usurped by other figures.

Medieval Saints produces a robust response to decades of neglect of hagiographical sources. Through her trans-temporal, transmedia study, Spencer-Hall repeatedly demonstrates how much the narratives of holy women might contribute to a number of studies outside the direct field hagiography, including lay theology; the theorisation of vision and time; discussions of medieval self-creation; textual production and performance studies. While the lives of these women have frequently been marginalised in scholarship Spencer-Hall powerfully demonstrates their immediacy and relevance for our current times.

One of the most introducing approaches adopted by Spencer-Hall is the critical decision to reflect on the process of constructing her own argument, including which texts the book privileges and excises, which forms of visual and textual encounter are interrogated, and how the author's own perspective has shaped the work. By exposing the (wo)man behind the curtain, the monograph makes important progress in the movement away from the misleading pretence of practising subjectivity in historical criticism; recognising that all historical approaches are informed by the values, perspectives, bodies, and even pop-cultural backgrounds of the historian. While *Medieval Saints and Modern Screens* provides a solid argument for cinematic and saintly encounters as forms of bodily transcendence, the academic body remains something we cannot honestly claim to transcend.

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