

**Medieval Sight-Seeing:**  
*The Role of Optics in the Religious Practices of  
Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*

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The significance of sight during the “Enlightenment” has certainly not gone without scholarly mention. David Michael Levin writes that since the eighteenth century, “our Western culture has been dominated by an ocularcentric paradigm, a vision-generated, vision-centered interpretation of knowledge, truth, and reality.”<sup>1</sup> This understanding is fairly representative of the approach taken by historians and scholars of the senses. Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, David Howes, R. Murray Shafer, and Constance Classen have each been influential in maintaining and shaping this historical narrative of a “great divide” between the sensory cultures of pre-modern and post-Enlightenment Europe.<sup>2</sup> Mark Smith has observed the impact of this shift on language and epistemology, suggesting that our academic quests for scholarly ‘perspective’ and ‘focus’ have their roots in this “elevation of the eye” that occurred during Western civilization’s transition into early modernism.<sup>3</sup>

The factors most commonly cited for influencing a shift towards ocularcentrism are themselves “visible landmarks”<sup>4</sup>: technological innovations and inventions that altered, extended, or transformed human sight, as well as stylistic changes in the visual arts. The printing press is usually identified as the primary culprit, because of the way it transformed the common experience of language, human communication, and the making and receiving of knowledge

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1 Mark M. Smith, *Sensory History*, New York: Berg, 2007, 21-22.

2 Smith, *Sensory History*, 8-11.

3 Smith, *Sensory History*, 19-22.

4 Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, 2-3.

from an aural experience to a visual one. Other technologies like the telescope, the microscope, and eyeglasses made visual observation increasingly more reliable. And the increasing ubiquity of perspective paintings is also understood to have been a galvanizing force, since it allowed the eye to “see” in new ways.<sup>5</sup>

Across this great divide lies the Middle Ages—that “unseen ‘other’ of modern ocularcentrism.”<sup>6</sup> Cast as the counterpoint to “reason’s illuminating rays,” medieval Europe has often been interpreted by post-Enlightenment scholars as primitive, anti-ocular, and for all intents and purposes, in the “dark.” Art historians Samuel Edgerton and Ernst Gombrich speak of medieval perceptual consciousness as “infantile,” saying that pre-modern art is similar to “the imagery of the blind and the insane.”<sup>7</sup> Contance Classen contrasts the literate Europeans of the 16<sup>th</sup> century with pre-moderns, who he claims emphasized “non-visual means of accessing the divine, such as smelling odors...and tasting the body and blood of Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

And yet, a more careful examination of the role of sight in the religious practices of the late Middle Ages raises questions about this antiocular-to-ocularcentric narrative. In fact, there is an abundance of evidence that sight was also primary in both intellectual and popular segments of medieval culture, though it was understood and experienced in markedly different ways. The increase in the production of religious images around 1200, as well as the increasing adornment of Gothic churches during this time, is a testament to the predominance of vision as a “structuring element of devotional practices, both private and cultic.”<sup>9</sup> Several theologians held to the preeminence of sight, arguing that it was the primary and most perfect sense. Thomas

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5 Smith, *Sensory History*, 8-11.

6 Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 1-2.

7 Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 8.

8 Smith, *Sensory History*, New York: Berg, 2007, 25.

9 Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 2-3.

Aquinas argued that it is “chiefly by sight” that humans “gather intelligible truth from all things,”<sup>10</sup> and Meister Eckhart wrote similarly on the primacy of sight:

The eye is like heaven, it receives heaven in itself. The ear does not do that: it does not hear it, nor does the tongue taste it....therefore the eye receives the impression of light because it has the property of heaven. 11

Moreover, those who took part in the intellectual debates leading up to the Enlightenment were not always so keen on promoting the sense of sight. Tensions, paradoxes, and debates surrounding the physiological, psychological, social, and spiritual implications of sight existed in *both* the late medieval and the early modern periods. The Reformers, for example, encouraged parishioners to trust their powers of observation when it came to the Eucharist, but not when it came to seeing apparitions. New technologies that supposedly ‘elevated’ the role of sight by making the formerly invisible visible simultaneously raised questions on the popular level about the reliability of observations made by the unaided human eye.<sup>12</sup> Even Descartes wrote in 1641 that all of the senses – including vision – were fallible.<sup>13</sup>

The early modern period certainly encompassed a shift in the way that people related to *all* of their senses—and to vision in particular. However, it is important to re-contextualize that shift in order to retire outdated narratives of progress that divide history all too neatly into “light” and “dark” ages. Such misleading categories inhibit our appreciation of the rich legacy left by medieval thought, as well as the complexity of the transformation that took place in European culture during the late medieval and early modern periods relating to the senses and the material world. As Suzannah Biernoff writes, “only by moving away from a dialectical model of

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10 Roland Recht, *Believing & Seeing: The Art of Gothic Cathedrals*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 101.

11 Recht, *Believing and Seeing*, 105.

12 Smith, *Sensory History*, 33.

13 In *Meditations*, cited in Smith, *Sensory History*, 33.

historical change is it possible to account for the complexity of medieval visuality.”<sup>14</sup> Towards that end, this paper seeks to offer a more nuanced evaluation of the role of sight in the popular religious cultures of late Medieval Europe, in order to better identify the constellation of trends that characterized changes in the early modern understanding of sight.

### ***Perspectiva: Medieval Optics* 101**

Intellectual interest in optics was revived in Western Christendom in the thirteenth century, when Latin translations of Arab treatises on the anatomy and physiology of the eye became available, which included the optics of Euclid and Ptolemy.<sup>15</sup> That same century, the full range of Aristotle’s works also became available in Latin. The widespread availability of these texts provoked much lively debate among the scholastics regarding the senses and how they worked.<sup>16</sup> Many of those who participated in this debate were friars of the Franciscan order<sup>17</sup> including Robert Grosseteste (1235-1253), Roger Bacon (1214-1292), John Pecham (1235-1292), and Polish scholar Witelo (1235-1275).<sup>18</sup>

Medieval optics, or *perspectiva* as it was then called, was an integrated discipline that comprised the mathematics and physics of light, the anatomy and physiology of the eye, the relationship between vision and cognition, and the theological significance of optical science.<sup>19</sup> Since light was understood to be the source of spiritual enlightenment as well as physical illumination, the study of optics was understood to have profound theological significance.

*Perspectiva* was therefore more than just an object of study; it offered ways of seeing and

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<sup>14</sup> Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Recht, *Believing and Seeing*, 101.

<sup>16</sup> C.M. Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Both Ronald Recht and Suzannah Biernoff have highlighted the important role of visual witness and embodied identification in the evangelical program of St. Francis. See Recht, *Believing and Seeing*, 100-101 and Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 136..

<sup>18</sup> Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 68.

<sup>19</sup> Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 68.

knowing that were vital for understanding the essential nature of material reality as well as the divine truth of God.<sup>20</sup>

Fundamental to the discourse surrounding sight in the Middle Ages is the medieval understanding of *species*, which was more than just a term for the classification of a genus type. Within the medieval framework of material reality, the metaphysical conceptualization of intelligible *species* presupposed a “causal interaction between bodily events and mental events.”<sup>21</sup> *Species* were understood as forms or “essences” that radiated from everything in the material world, which were capable of causing both mental impressions and physical effects.<sup>22</sup> According to Grosseteste, seeing occurred when the eye received the *species* emitted by an object.<sup>23</sup> In an effort to establish the concept of perceptual certitude, Roger Bacon took this concept further, theorizing that *species* actually multiplied themselves across space as *corporeal* entities.<sup>24</sup> These multiplications of an object’s essence had no material dimension of their own, but it was believed that they colonized the matter in the mediating spaces between object and an eye, so that the *species* were “bodied forth,” and brought into the eye as *material* images (and therefore reliable reproductions) of their objects’ essential substances.<sup>25</sup>

Biernoff writes, “Bacon’s theory of multiplication of *species* through a corporeal medium ensures perceptual certitude because the external object, its *species*, and the mental representation of the object are ontologically continuous.” In other words, for Bacon, seeing an object entailed a very *real* kind of contact with it, something akin to touching but perhaps even

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<sup>20</sup> Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England*, 150.

<sup>21</sup> Spruit, Leen, *Species Intelligibilis: Classical Roots and Medieval Discussions v. 1: From Perception to Knowledge*, New York: E.J. Brill, 1994.

<sup>22</sup> Catherine Wilson, “Discoveries of Vision in Seventeenth-Century Metaphysics,” *Sights of Vision: The Discursive Construction of Sight in the History of Philosophy*, David Michael Levin, ed., Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997, 120.

<sup>23</sup> Recht, *Believing and Seeing*, 104.

<sup>24</sup> Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 74, emphasis mine.

<sup>25</sup> Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 89.

deeper, since touch can only really affect the surface. Seeing, by contrast, was understood to create deep impressions of the object's inner form in the recipient's mind. People were thus capable of being impacted by *species* (that is to say, the essences of all of the persons and objects around them) through the sense of sight in a very profound way, both for good and for ill.<sup>26</sup> Because sight carried with it a *material* imprint of an object's inner essence or form, what one saw became part of them in a much more literally interior way. As Biernoff writes, in the medieval understanding, "our perceptions are neither entirely our own, nor independent, nor indifferent to us. They are born of the intercourse between self and world."<sup>27</sup>

It is important to realize that this "intercourse" between one's eyes and the outer world was never merely passive, since one's eyes were also always emitting *species* of their own. For Grosseteste as well as for Bacon, sight was both passive and active: "the eye is altered by its objects (intromission), but also the channel for a radiant power of vision (extramission)."<sup>28</sup> Sight was therefore just as much an extension of the soul outward as it was a reception of the world inward. Biernoff writes that the eye was "simultaneously receptive, passive, vulnerable to sensations; and active, roaming, grasping, or piercing its objects."<sup>29</sup> A popular fifteenth century devotional text entitled *The doctrine of the hert*, which was copied from a thirteenth century text variously attributed to Hugh of St. Cher or Gerard of Liege, similarly describes the five bodily senses as "gates" through which the soul goes out, and through which outward things come in.<sup>30</sup>

Bacon used the term *passio* to denote the kind of "transmutation" that was understood to have occurred in sight: viewers received impressions of the objects they viewed in a way that was similar to the imprint of a seal in wax, with the metaphorical caveat that it alters "all of the

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26 Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 74.

27 Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 100.

28 Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 73.

29 Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 3.

30 Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England*, 13.

wax and not just its surface.”<sup>31</sup> This wax-seal metaphor was copied repeatedly throughout medieval texts to describe the psychological exchange that was thought to occur through “ocular intercourse” with objects both animate and inanimate.<sup>32</sup> Meister Eckhart similarly offered the following lesson:

When my eye is open, it is an eye: when it is shut, it is still the same eye; and the wood is neither more nor less, by reason of my seeing it. Now mark me well: suppose my eye, being one and single in itself, falls on the wood with vision, then though each thing stays as it is, yet in the very act of seeing they are so much at one that we can really say “eye-wood,” and the wood *is* my eye. Now if the wood were free from matter and wholly immaterial as my eyesight is, then we could truly say that in the act of seeing, the wood and my eye were of one essence.”<sup>33</sup>

Biernoff suggests that even nowadays when we speak of being “moved” by something, we are using a figure of speech derived from this principle that seeing *is* feeling, and that “to perceive or to sense is to be materially altered,” not in terms of place, but in terms of actualizing the potentiality of matter.<sup>34</sup>

Of course, not all medieval scholars agreed with Roger Bacon and his contemporaries on the idea that sight was a two-way process that entailed a kind of direct contact between the seen and the seer.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the idea was widespread and part of the shared cultural heritage of Europeans in the Middle Ages.<sup>36</sup> Overall, it is clear that sight held enormous metaphysical and psychological power for medieval Europeans, the likes of which have not been understood on a popular level since the Enlightenment. Sight had the potential to carry the soul and the carnal flesh of human beings beyond the boundaries of their own bodies and into an intersubjective

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<sup>31</sup> Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 139.

<sup>32</sup> This metaphor was used in particular to describe one’s relationship to religious images. See Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 96.

<sup>33</sup> Recht, *Believing and Seeing*, 105.

<sup>34</sup> Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 97-98.

<sup>35</sup> In the fourteenth century, Walter Burley outlined six different existing opinions about the way that sight functioned. William of Ockham and Peter Olivi both devised theories of sight that did not rely on the concept of *species* at all, see Woolgar, *The Senses*, 20-22.

<sup>36</sup> Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England*, 13.

dimension, where they could interact with, and even enter into the bodies of others.<sup>37</sup> Let us now turn to an examination of some of the negative and positive implications of this belief, as it manifested in the popular religious expressions of pre-modern Europe.

### **Negative Seeing: Apparitions and the Evil Eye**

Sight was understood to have very real moral consequences in the Middle Ages, both positive and negative. On the negative side of this was the understanding that the “spirit and mind could be poisoned if the eyes were allowed to see profane or evil things.”<sup>38</sup> As gateways into the soul, the eyes were vulnerable, and taking ‘custody’ of them was considered a standard protective measure. Infants were especially vulnerable. For this reason, certain authorities believed that infants should be kept in the dark and not exposed to strong light directly after birth.<sup>39</sup> Similar to this is the fourteenth century belief that it was dangerous to look directly at fire or light after an encounter with a ghost.<sup>40</sup>

The sexual connotations of “ocular intercourse” were also explicit, and the consequences of looking when one shouldn’t were well rehearsed in courtly society.<sup>41</sup> Particularly in the context of courtly love, exposing one’s eyes to another’s gaze was considered “an open invitation to ocular penetration.”<sup>42</sup> This is perhaps one reason that the author of *Jacob’s Well* advises readers to avoid such unseemly behavior as “twinkling,” and “looking and staring about.”<sup>43</sup> Of course, it is also important to remember that because sight was a two-way process, the negative powers of sight could go either way. Fourteenth-century Bishop of Lisieux, Nicole

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<sup>37</sup> Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 41.

<sup>38</sup> Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 24.

<sup>39</sup> Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England*, 184.

<sup>40</sup> Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England*, 152-153.

<sup>41</sup> Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 137.

<sup>42</sup> Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 53..

<sup>43</sup> Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England*, 177.



Oresme, expressed concerns that a person's "imagination may be so intense and deformed" that they could "contaminate the surrounding air and bodies" through their eyes. 44

Perhaps the most pervasive belief associated with a pre-modern understanding of sight is the notion of the "evil eye": that is, the idea that an individual has the power to cause actual physical, psychological, or spiritual harm to another person by looking at them. Ocular *fascination*, as it was called, was particularly associated with envy and malice. Beautiful women, attractive children, and healthy animals were considered to be at greatest risk.<sup>45</sup> The evil eye could be held responsible for any number of unexplained misfortunes, including cows that wouldn't give milk, trees that wouldn't grow fruit, sudden illnesses, and symptoms like loss of appetite, excessive yawning, hiccups, vomiting, fever, and impotence. 46

Belief in the evil eye was widespread, and shared among intellectual and popular segments of the culture. Scholarship devoted to the phenomenon can be dated back to classical antiquity.<sup>47</sup> Thomas Aquinas believed that Paul's use of the verb *fascinavit* in the Vulgate translation of Galatians 3:1 "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you?" [*O insensati Galatae, quis vos fascinavit?*"] was a reference to the evil eye and proof of its power. Aquinas therefore warned that children were especially liable to damage from the evil eye, because of their "tender and most impressionable body."<sup>48</sup> Both Roger Bacon and Antonio of Categana agreed that children must be protected on account of their tenderness and moistness.

Protection from the evil eye could be sought through a number of means, including amulets, charms, counter-magic, and capturing the fascinator. However, one of the most powerful forms of protection against the evil eye involved another kind of seeing: contemplation

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44 Edward S. Gifford, *The Evil Eye: Studies in the Folklore of Vision*, New York: MacMillan Co., 1958, 11.

45 Gifford, *The Evil Eye: Studies*, 20.

46 Gifford, *The Evil Eye: Studies*, 9.

47 Alan Dundes, "Wet and Dry, the Evil Eye," *The Evil Eye: A Folklore Casebook*, Alan Dundes, ed., New York: Garland Publishing, 1981, 259.

48 Gifford, *The Evil Eye: Studies*, 12.

of the image of St. Nicholas was thought to offer immunity from all enchantments for the rest of the day, especially the evil eye. Thus, St. Nicholas was often “painted in a conspicuous position in the churches of the Middle Ages.”<sup>49</sup> It is this power of images to which we will now turn.

### **Positive Seeing: Images, Relics, and Ocular Communion**

Alongside the intellectual and theological debates surrounding optics in the thirteenth century, there was a veritable explosion in the production of religious art.<sup>50</sup> This shift coincided with the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, which pushed for increasing education in the Christian faith and participation in religious practices among the laity. In addition to the massive proliferation of dedicated devotional icons, prayer books containing devotional images for personal use gained currency, as did portable Gothic ivories.<sup>51</sup> While accounts of miraculous icons had been relatively unknown in the West prior to the twelfth century, <sup>52</sup> according to Margaret Miles, by the fourteenth century, “visionary conversions – often involving a specific crucifix or painting – outnumbered those brought about by oral or scriptural revelation.”<sup>53</sup>

Extra-liturgical festivals and dramatic re-enactments of Biblical tales also gained popularity. Popes took up the title “vicar of Christ,” and many theologians suggested that by looking at the pope, they were able to see the essence of Christ himself.<sup>54</sup> Relics functioned in a similar way: seeing relics was considered the equivalent of looking at (and thus exchanging transformational “essence” or *species* with) the saints.<sup>55</sup> These developments all reflect an

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49 Gifford, *The Evil Eye: Studies*, 83.

50 Recht, *Believing and Seeing*, 100-101.

51 Herbert L. Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art*, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2004, 154.

52 Leslie Brubaker, “Introduction: The Sacred Image,” *The Sacred Image: East and West*, Robert Ousterhout & Leslie Brubaker, eds., Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995, 11.

53 Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 136.

54 Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England*, 148.

55 Recht, *Believing and Seeing*, 82.

overall “need to see” that accompanied lay religious participation.<sup>56</sup> “Liturgy was performance,” writes Woolgar, “and sight *was* participation.”<sup>57</sup> From the turn of the thirteenth century onward, it is clear that “visual experience of the sacred played an increasingly central role in both private devotions and communal religious life.”<sup>58</sup>

To be sure, these developments did not arise without some pushback. Tensions around the use of images in worship have long been a part of the Christian conversation, and in the 1370s, John Wycliffe argued that spirituality was incompatible with the indulgence of the senses.<sup>59</sup> A century earlier, Durand of Saint-Pourcain had maintained that artificial images could only reproduce the accidents of appearance, *not* the substance.<sup>60</sup> The influential Benedictine abbot Bernard of Clairvaux was notoriously harsh towards gazing at religious images, denouncing the practice as a kind of “ocular lust.” He forbade images in monastic churches, allowing them only in secular churches on account of the fact that they could serve as “books to the laity.”<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the notion that images could attract and teach the uneducated was the most common defense employed against medieval iconoclasm.

For most medieval Christian commentators, though, the true value of images was in their “capacity to initiate a process of meditation.”<sup>62</sup> It was believed that, in order to see an object as it was meant to be seen, “the eye must make itself like and similar to the object.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, to *see* was to participate in a two-way meditative exchange that could lead a person to become increasingly likened to the object of their gaze. Images were not intended to stand alone, at a detached distance from the observer in a subject-object relationship. In fact, it was widely

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<sup>56</sup> Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 131.

<sup>57</sup> Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England*, 180, emphasis mine.

<sup>58</sup> Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 131.

<sup>59</sup> Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 161-162.

<sup>60</sup> Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art*, 167.

<sup>61</sup> Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art*, 126-127.

<sup>62</sup> Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art*, 167.

<sup>63</sup> Recht, *Believing and Seeing*, 99-100.

understood that images *required* a viewer in order to achieve compositional and psychological closure.<sup>64</sup> Images were expected to reciprocate, and if possible to generate, the believer's mood.<sup>65</sup> Relics and images could even be 'punished' for repeated ineffectiveness.<sup>66</sup> Of course, ideally the viewer did not worship the image *itself*, but instead one hoped to assimilate himself or herself to the person depicted in the image. The effect of such a gaze could be amplified through prolonged contemplation, or by having great numbers of people look at the same thing. <sup>67</sup>

Probably the most important liturgical example of devotional visual reciprocity was the elevation of the Host during the Mass. This practice was virtually unheard of before the end of the twelfth century, and it seems to have come about by popular demand. Since the Lateran Council had declared that it was both necessary and sufficient for all Christians to receive communion annually, it became common practice for most people to take communion only once a year, at Easter. During the remainder of the year, the congregation participated in a kind of "ocular communion," by *seeing* the miraculously transformed bread and wine as often as possible. This spiritual practice of viewing communion came to serve as a substitute for tasting Christ.<sup>68</sup> The practice of raising the consecrated Host for all to see was eventually aesthetically aided with the ringing of bells, candles for better lighting, curtain backdrops, and the construction of extravagant altarpieces.<sup>69</sup> By the fourteenth century, it had become common to display the Host in a monstrance, typically with a rock crystal setting for the bread.<sup>70</sup>

This practice of ocular communion raised concerns for some theologians and clergy at the time. The first documented mention of anyone elevating the Host was by Eudes of Sully, the

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64 Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 145.

65 Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 147.

66 Brubaker, "Introduction: The Sacred Image," 12.

67 Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England*,.

68 Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*, 140-141.

69 Recht, *Believing and Seeing*, 72.

70 Recht, *Believing and Seeing*, 72.

Bishop of Paris from 1196 to 1201, who cautioned in a synodal statute that the bread should be kept “close to the breast” until the words “This is My Body” have been spoken, in order to avoid causing the congregation to inadvertently commit idolatry.<sup>71</sup> By the mid-thirteenth century, theologians began to express worry that congregations would become satisfied with merely seeing the Host, rather than actually receiving it. Indeed, it had apparently become common for people to hurry from one church to the next, in order to see Christ’s body multiple times a day. Guillaume Durand complained that many people ran to mass only upon hearing the elevation bells, and left after seeing the body.<sup>72</sup>

Still, Bishop Quivil of Exeter defended the practice, saying that it made the miracle of Christ come alive for the faithful. The Host is raised, he explained, “so that it can be contemplated by all surrounding believers, [and] by this, the devotion of believers is excited, and an increase in their faith is affected.”<sup>73</sup> Alexander of Hales likewise argued that because the nourishment dispensed by the Eucharist was *spiritual*, so it was that the least material of our senses—sight—sufficed to receive it.<sup>74</sup> Yet, he also published a work in 1220, clarifying the difference between the two different kinds of “eating,” emphasizing that while “eating by taste” was sacramental, “eating by sight” was not.<sup>75</sup>

We cannot know the extent to which the scholarly debates surrounding *species* and sight contributed to the common conception of sight during the Middle Ages, or influenced popular beliefs about the evil eye, apparitions, religious images, and ocular communion. It is clear, however, that the intellectual and popular cultures of the late Middle Ages reflected a paradigm in which “seeing” was more than just believing; it was *becoming*. This was especially powerful

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71 Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 143.

72 Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 143.

73 Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 142.

74 Recht, *Believing and Seeing*, 71.

75 Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 143.

in the case of the Eucharist, since the *species* of the Eucharist were not what they seemed to be: what *looked* like bread and wine in accidents was *actually* the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in substance. Thus, by seeing the host, one was exchanging a gaze with the essence of the sacrificed Savior himself, and receiving His deep inward “touch” through the physical and affective proximity that placed the layperson in direct communion with the Divine.

### Reformation Lenses

Having analyzed the role of sight within the religious context of the late Middle Ages, I would like to now turn towards a brief examination of the Protestant Reformation, and how the questions raised by the Reformers unwittingly contributed to an overall breakdown in perceptual certainty which had already begun. George Hakewill (1578-1649), a Calvinist, quite tellingly accused the Roman religion of depending entirely too much on “eye-service:”

...in the magnificke and pompous fabric, and furniture of their Churches and attiring of their Priests; in gazing upon their dumb ceremonies...in beholding the daily elevation of their Idol in the masse (for the greatest part heare nothing) and lastly in fixing their eyes upon pictures, and images.<sup>76</sup>

Hakewill, like most of the Reformers, argued that true religion regards sight as a hindrance to the more serious business of praying and listening to sermons.

In his 1615 treatise, *The vanitie of the eie*, Hakewill raises serious questions about the fallibility of human sight, particularly pertaining to apparitions. Such arguments, of course, were not entirely new. From the thirteenth century onward, there were signs of theological uncertainty about the genuineness of apparitions.<sup>77</sup> Critics of the idea of *species* from the fourteenth century found that the theory was especially inadequate when it came to instances where appearances did

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<sup>76</sup> Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 27.

<sup>77</sup> Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 206.

not seem to match up with reality: delusions, dreams, optical illusions, hallucinations, and the manipulations of demons.<sup>78</sup>

Yet, even as the medieval understanding of vision was beginning to break down, one problem still remained: how to explain the fact that many people, seemingly in their right minds, continued to report visions of apparitions. Increasingly, apparitions were understood to be illusions that were created by demons. Catholics like Pierre Le Loyer continued to defend the notion that spectres may not always be illusions, and that sometimes they might be genuine ghosts with a will to appear.<sup>79</sup> But for Protestants, who had rejected the notion of purgatory and therefore the theological possibility of ghostly apparitions, the matter was more straightforward. While some Protestants continued to pay lip service to the notion that an apparition could theoretically be an angel of God, all apparitions came to be classified as essentially demonic. <sup>80</sup>

Meanwhile, a growing number of people were beginning to assume a materialist position that classified apparitions as the result of either human deception or human error. Together, the Reformers and the materialists placed all visions under a kind of intense, scrutinizing gaze that created a general distrust of visual experience. Popular reports of visual apparitions were more routinely dismissed as either real appearances containing false contents, or imaginary experiences altogether.<sup>81</sup> Technologies like the microscope and telescope only seemed to cast further doubt on the visual accounts made by the unaided eyes of commoners.

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<sup>78</sup> Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 18.

<sup>79</sup> Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 214.

<sup>80</sup> Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 217.

<sup>81</sup> Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 290-210.

Protestant opinions regarding devotional images entailed an even further denigration of the medieval eye. Particularly suspicious were images that had been accused of weeping, bleeding, or performing some other miracle. For Calvin, *all* images of Christ and the saints should be discredited, since he believed that images were “not only defects, but lies,” incapable of representing historical truth.<sup>82</sup> Everywhere Protestants warned of the dangers of sight, and the deception of things seen. Even the perspective paintings of the Renaissance were said to create illusions of realism through visually deceptive means. For many Reformers, the human imagination itself came under attack as idolatrous, precisely on account of its proclivity towards mental imaging. While Stuart Clark acknowledges that, to be fair, “Protestant writers did not intend, by their attacks, to destroy the credibility of vision itself,” nevertheless, he contends that “the effect was to compromise the reliance normally placed on the sense of sight in the religious sphere.”<sup>83</sup>

Interestingly, there was one aspect of the religious sphere in which the Reformers sang a different tune. Catholics had always taught that when it came to the Eucharist, one should *not* trust what one sees, but when it came to exposing the “deceit” of the Mass, the Reformers were quick to defend the credibility of observation, encouraging people to believe what they plainly saw with their own eyes.<sup>84</sup> Thomas Cranmer expressed this line of reasoning when he wrote that “to say that what our senses take for bread and wine is not so, is to reduce holy communion to an ‘illusion’ like the deceptions of a stage play or the tricks of a crooked apothecary.”<sup>85</sup> In other words, if one’s eyes say that there is only bread and wine, then, at least in this instance, one should trust one’s eyes.

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<sup>82</sup> Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 164.

<sup>83</sup> Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 183.

<sup>84</sup> Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 187.

<sup>85</sup> Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 188.



It is fascinating that within this context of change, belief in the evil eye persisted throughout the Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, and even into twentieth-century Italy, where it increasingly came to be looked upon as an involuntary birth defect. One comical example of this includes Pope Pius IX (1792-1878), a stout, kindly man who was extremely popular in the early years of his pontificate, but who was yet believed by universal opinion to have been endowed with the evil eye, through no fault of his own.

### **Concluding Insights**

The purpose of this brief study of sight in the late Middle Ages and the early Reformation has been to highlight some of the paradoxes associated with an “ocularcentric” view of the modern era, and the idea that Western civilization progressed towards an elevation of sight over and above other senses during the early modern period. While sight was certainly primary during the Enlightenment, and remains so in our current cultural context, it would seem that sight was also preeminent in pre-modern Europe, albeit in a different way. This suggests that the roots of ocularcentrism in the West go back much further than the Enlightenment, perhaps even as early as classical Antiquity.

While early modernism did entail a major shift when it came to the senses, the nature of that change was not one in which sight *became* primary, but rather that a *particular* way of seeing came to dominate and ultimately replace the old ways of thinking about seeing in relation to human cognition and mental imaging. This process did not result from any one particular invention such as the printing press, the telescope, or the advent of perspective paintings, but instead seems to have taken shape gradually over a period of several centuries that included debates and developments throughout the intellectual history of Western Europe.

Medieval European seeing combined physical, psychological, social, and spiritual experiences into one wholly integrated and subjective reality. It was an experience of seeing that emphasized intimacy and reciprocity.<sup>86</sup> It was embodied, transcendent, absorbing, and seems to have been marked by a lack of clear differentiation between mental and sensory perceptions. Early modern Europeans traded in this sense of intimacy and reciprocity for an experience of distance and objectivity. In the words of Mark Smith, the modern Western eye became “cold, clean, objective, thoroughly Cartesian, and geometric. It offered the illusion of order,” but only “because it went no further than the surface.”<sup>87</sup>

Thus, perhaps vision was not so much “exalted” during the Enlightenment, but rather it was made into the handmaiden of rationalist science. Ways of seeing that interfered with the development of an objectifying, scientific gaze were challenged, suppressed, and ultimately relegated to the “dark” ages. “Since the Enlightenment,” writes Woolgar, the operation of our senses has been reduced to “a narrow and analytical process of physiology, biology, and electrochemistry, with an ever increasing precision of definition of what we might reasonably expect a sense to do.”<sup>88</sup> My hope is that this study and others like it will help us to recognize—and when appropriate, to draw upon—older ways of seeing that can open us up to new layers of intimacy in our religious experiences, as well as new insights for interpreting past practices and experiences.

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<sup>86</sup> Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 87.

<sup>87</sup> Smith, *Sensory History*, 23.

<sup>88</sup> Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England*, 2.