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Saint Francis and the Body as Image: An Anthropological Approach

This paper, although not a current research project of mine, illustrates issues in a debate that in Germany takes place under the heading “Bildwissenschaft.” Anthropology in Europe means historical and cultural anthropology in the Kantian sense. In my case, it serves as a method to explain images not by themselves but in relation to body and medium. Images need such media as canvas, print, or television to become visible. But they also need our bodies, bodies with a given size and an ever-changing range of perception. Images, in my view, always result from an interaction: a body interacts with artificial media, resulting in the transmission of images.

In 2000, I founded a research group of twenty-four pre- and post-doctoral fellows from seven disciplines, including historians and philosophers. Their common concern was images, not just as works of art, but images in texts and public media, both mental and physical. The participants of this Karlsruhe research group have since their foundation published three volumes of collected studies, one on the history and significance of technical images in the sciences and beyond, another on cross-cultural relations of pictorial practice and theory, including Asia, and, finally, a third volume on “Image and Body in the Middle Ages,” edited by the medievalists in the same group. When they asked me to contribute a short paper to the last volume, I initially declined, but when they showed me the cover of the book representing St. Francis of Assisi receiving the likeness of Christ as an image in his physical body, I was inspired to write the paper that follows.

A few days after the death of Saint Francis, who died in his hometown on the fourth of October 1226 at the age of about forty-two years, the Franciscan minister-general Elias spread the news in a circular letter that “an incredible miracle” had been discovered when Francis’ corpse had been examined. “Never before had one heard that such a miracle happened, except that of the Son of God, whose name is Christ.” Francis looked like “a Crucified Christ, because the five wounds which actually are those from the Crucifixion of Christ, appeared on his body.” Some forty years later, and after endless disputes that nearly disrupted the Franciscan Order, the Franciscan minister-general Bonaventure was commissioned to write a new biography, wherein he coined the following formula: “The true love of Christ turned him into this image” (in eundem imaginem transformatus), when the saint had “on his body the physical effigy (effigiam) of the Crucified Christ, but not the one, as artists have it in stone and wooden panels. Instead, it was written in his limbs of flesh and blood by the hands of the
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living God (in carne membris descripsit). The saint's body had turned into the image of the Son of God and had therefore crossed the barrier that separated all the other pictures of Christ from the original. The Son of God, who in turn had been born as a body image of the bodiless God, was re-embodied in a contemporary body, even though in a very specific likeness. Francis had traces of Christ's suffering on his body, the wounds of the cross' nails on his feet and hands as well as the wound of the lance that had been driven into Christ's side.

Bonaventure's text was a masterpiece from both a theological point of view and that of the religious order's political agenda. In the meantime there had been a lot of cause for confusion. The stigmata had first been discovered on the corpse, and the Franciscan minister-general Elias immediately made this known (he also could have kept silent). However, rumors had already spread among Franciscans. Two years before his death, St. Francis had stayed on the mountain known as La Verna during a forty-day-long fast in honor of the Archangel Michael. His fellow monk and confessor Leo, who accompanied him, noted on an autograph by the Saint, which is still preserved at Assisi, that Francis had written this text at La Verna "after he received the impression of Christ's stigmata (impresionem stigmatis) on his body." These two inconsistent versions, that of Elias and that of Leo, were carefully combined in the first official biography of the saint, which a beateguered Pope Gregory IX commissioned from the monk Thomas of Celano immediately after Francis' canonization in 1228. After this, Thomas wrote several more versions, but they did not put an end to the confusion with the Order and neither did they appease the worried Official Church. It was only with the text that the Order in the Paris Chapter of 1266 commissioned Bonaventure to write, that an official version of this incredible biography was finally established. All other texts about the saint that had been written up to then were not only forbidden but were destroyed throughout Europe (bonae Memoriae de sancto Franciscico olis factae deletares). There were some 1,500 monasteries in Europe around this time. The problem of the stigmata was surely of an explosive nature.

If the miracle was at all to be believed, the stigmata lent themselves to two explanations that in principle excluded one another, although the Order tried hard to link them. Either the saint had stood under the pressure of mimetis through an extraordinary act of imitation, which he managed to make visible on his body, or else he had received the stigmata from an external source by divine intervention and therefore in a passive way. Different meanings apply in each case. In the first case, his "excessive imagination" created empathy with the sufferings of Christ, to which all Christians were called. In the second case, however, a unique miracle had occurred that would exclude his fellow monks forever, although the desire for a union with the object of contemplation had been on the minds of many mystics who had not achieved this goal. The saint kept quiet about the condition of his body throughout his lifetime and even protected himself against curious eyes. He must have known that he had crossed a border that left everyone else behind.

As a result, Franciscan texts were at a loss to explain the unexplainable. The same problem applied to pictorial renderings, from which one expected clarity about the condition of Francis' body. The question no longer was whether to depict (or to neglect) the stigmata or whether to represent them red, bloody, or in black. Instead, the issue of representation had become an issue of the body as pictorial medium, as against panel painting or other pictorial media. A body on

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which Christ's wounds had been imprinted, a transformed and marked body, could no longer be regarded as a trivial matter: whenever the saint was to be represented. Rather, painters had to embrace the body's physical reality and individuality as an indispensable task, a new task at the time. They had to prove how Francis physically looked in his lifetime, instead of having him look like all the other saints in heaven. Another challenge facing the artists was the ambivalence, or dualism, in a body that simultaneously looked like Christ's body during the Passion, while still remaining a contemporary and living body. This dual perspective led to questions for which answers were still lacking. In tribal cultures, one would have dealt with a possessed body. Here, however, St. Francis was still himself while looking like someone else.

The body of Francis was the pictorial practice in that it forced the painters to render a body as a pictorial medium. But the visual arts of the time were not yet ready for the double and contradictory task of rendering a physical body lifelike and, at the same time, transforming it into an authentic representation of Christ. They had to deal with a "real picture" of St. Francis and, at the same time, with a picture of Christ that had surfaced in the body of the saint. As artificial media, painting and sculpture here had to compete with the body as a natural or living medium for representation, a medium superior to their art. The triangular constellation of image, body, and medium, which I use in my theory of image anthropology, here appears in an unusual and yet exemplary way.

The question of the body of Francis, in this instance, is a question of medium as well as image. In the case of this miracle, either a mental image emerged visibly on the body, or a human body had been chosen as the pictorial medium for a supernatural image. There are two ways in which our own bodies may be involved as medium: either as a medium for producing the mental images of imagination and memory, or as the focus of external images, when we perform or mask our bodies as pictures for whatever role: we are all, in that respect, voluntarily or involuntarily actors of ourselves. Usually, the one excludes the other. We can either abandon ourselves to inner images or make our body a visible picture, by means of posture, clothing, or facial expression. But in the case of St. Francis, external and internal are equated: the mental becoming visible.

The painters of the second generation solved this problem in a remarkable manner. The stigmata event had, until then, always been a narrative episode in Francis' life, but Giotto turned it into the official portrait of the saint. On his Pisan altarpiece in the Louvre (Fig. 1), as well as on the replica in the Foggy Art Museum in Cambridge (Fig. 2), the picture, instead of being a mere narrative, catches the moment in which Francis' body is changed. In the process of its becoming a picture, the saint's body, as in a double photographic exposure, reveals a picture of the suffering Christ. The angel of the vision, to whom I shall return, had already turned into a picture of Christ. Five ways of light indicated the transfer of the five wounds of Christ—who is represented in the six-winged angel—to the kneeling visionary. In this way, the representation visualizes picturing as incorporation. What Francis sees becomes part of his body. In this way the representation fills a gap still persisting in the texts on the miracle: it makes the visualization of an image (Bildver wandlung) a visible embodiment (Einköpierung).

By the temporal aspect, an essentially timeless religious image is also an image of a metamorphosis, which seems to take place in front of our eyes: the event and the picture become inseparable. But a sharp line was kept in the assimilation with Christ: Francis looked like Christ only because he embodied his sufferings. He received the wounds that Christ had suffered on the cross on his own body. Francis himself, while looking at a picture, turns into that at which he looks. Through this much-debated miracle, a picture has become or obtained a living body. The question of the image, through this event, which was on everybody's mind, became a question of body. As such, the iconography of the saint transformed an image into a
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(sermo Christi) (13:4) and, in another passage, also speaks of the “bulla” or God’s “seal,” which imprinted itself as a promise on his body (3:11).

The “long legend” (Legenda maior), beside which Bonaventure also wrote a short biography for use at the service hours, is interspersed with quotations from earlier texts that had been declared invalid in the meantime. The quotations from the Bible reach their highest density in the header about the “holy stigmata.” It was with the stigmata that the author secured his bold exegesis with theological portents and predictions, in the way the Old Testament was used as the mirror of the New Testament. By speaking of the “angel-like man,” he prepared us for the vision of the angel, who carried the picture of the crucified on him and would transfer it to St. Francis’ body. The vision, as the author explains, was no transgression and no attempt to sinful curiosity. Instead, it prepared Christ’s “faithful and wise servant,” Francis, for God’s will to choose him as his own simile (L.M. 13:1).

When the saint asked his brethren three times to open the Bible and to consult it like an oracle, they opened to the story of the Passion every time. Thus, he was prepared for his own death, which he wanted to suffer following Christ’s example (13:2). The meeting with the angel consciously arouses an association with the Mount of Olives, in which an angel, on the eve of the Passion, fortifies the fearful Jesus. Further on in the same chapter, the biblical association re-orientates itself in the direction of Mount Golgotha—and therefore toward the crucifixion. The vision did not happen by pure chance on the Feast of the Cross (Exaltation crucis), which the church celebrated on the 14th of September. The text then says that Francis “saw an angel, descending from heaven, a seraph with six wings gleaming like fire.” When coming closer, “the physical effigy (effigies) of a crucified man, whose hands and feet were stretched as a cross (in modern crucifix) and were fastened to a cross, appeared between the wings.”

11. Hans Belting, Die Mysterie der San Francisco in Assisi (Berlin, 1965), 86ff. and 54ff., as well as Blumen (as in note 5), 3ff.
13. Both versions can be found in the publication cited in note 4.
Here every word is carefully chosen; hence also the reference to the picture of a human carried by an angel (13-4).

Bonaventure's explanation of this event puts questions that the doubting reader will ask in the mouth of the saint. Francis was torn between joy and fright. With joy he saw himself "watched by Christ in the figure (saeclum speciosum) of a seraphic angel," but he was also filled with the pain of the suffering of Christ. The human "weakness of passion in this obscure vision did not match with the immortality of the seraphic spiritual being." The saint takes this as a hint that "the transformation into the likeness (similitudo) of the crucified Christ would not happen in himself through the martyrdom of the flesh, but by the fire of the mind."

At that stage, the author emphasizes the enormous imagination of the Saint, which alone could produce such an incredible image. But, already in the next sentence, he warns us to question the supernatural personification of Christ. The vision he describes as "inconsistent," "left in his heart (of Francis) not only a wonderful博览, but also impressed the wonderful likeness (effigies) of the sign (signum) in his flesh" (11.3). The die was cast with this formulation. The stigmata were transferred to this body from the outside, not entirely so, as we shall see. After this caution, Bonaventure begins to describe St. Francis carrying the nails of the cross, without hiding the fact that the affected parts of his body were bleeding. The wounds caused by the cross had, so to speak, become physical "signs," and as such they transformed this body into a picture of Christ.

The marks caused by the cross were indeed images of the wounds that Christ had suffered on the cross, but they still caused physical wounds on St. Francis. Every time the author talks about the body, he immediately applies it to pictures, and each time he speaks about pictures, he mentions the body. This ambivalence is a concerted program. Francis' wounds are images in two respects, because they are products of his imagination and appear on his body as representative. The author never cuts this knot between inside and outside imagery. The act of viewing and representing became one. Francis looked at the seraph's picture of Christ the same way he always looked at the painted crosses (Fig. 4), and while looking he became an image himself. There emerges a mirror-like situation between angel and human viewer, who both bear the picture of a third person on themselves. The bodiless angel bears the image of a body, and the human Francis the image of another body. So they both become pictorial media, although of an unexpected type. Picture and body had never before identified in such way in Christian culture.

Further on in the chapter dealing with the stigmata, Bonaventure collects every available eyewitness account, as well as reports of the dream that endowed the miracle with heavenly authority. While describing how the saint was converted (convertus), he also introduced an argument of his own in order to explain the miracle as the highest achievement in the practice of the sympathy of the gaze. In doing so, he turned to the dead saint and said directly to him, as if he wanted him to agree, that the "first vision you have experienced" already announced the miracle of La Vernia. In the small, decayed chapel of San Damiano on the outskirts of his home town, the young Francis had suddenly felt literally spoken to by the painted crucifix—the same cross still found in Assisi today (Fig. 4). He experienced the image as a "talking image," through which the Crucified Christ became alive. This image, as Bonaventure explains, "consumed him with the sword of a compassionate pain," which was, through the "voice on the cross," deemed worthy of an answer (11.10).

"Within the seven visions of Christ's cross" during Francis' lifetime, Bonaventure considered the miracle of La Vernia as the "peak of evangelical perfection" by which Francis became the perfect copy of Christ. He even brought the "secret book of revelations" into play, which announced the signs of the living God (7:12) to identify Francis with the prophecy of the Apocalypse. With emphatic certainty, the last paragraph of the same chapter states that at the end of the life "the sublime likeness (similitudo) of the seraphic angel and the humble image (signa effigies) of the crucified Christ were shown to you at the same time. It was the same image that lit you internally and that decorated you on the outside, like the other of the angel ascending to the sunset, that marked on you the signs of the living God" (11.10).

4.

Here it is possible to speak of an iconization of the body as well as of the incorporation of an image. Two complementary aspects catch the eye: the body turns into the medium for an image, and we do not see an image of the body, but an embodiment of an image. The saint's transformation does not merely depict a human body (if not the human in Jesus), but in a human condition depicts the Crucified in his Passion. There is an anthropocentric shift in the idea of "body," as it was later to be accepted in the Renaissance, although the theological idea still prevails.

St. Francis' body became a medium (for an image) through the miracle. As such, he is defined through an image, while still remaining a mortal body in flesh. The stigmata are expressions of the fight of death in a living body and turn him into a living icon. While the Crucifix
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represents the double nature of Life in Death, Francis represents in a mirror-image Death while still alive. The iconography of the crucified Christ had changed significantly in the arts of Francis’s lifetime. The suffering body had replaced the crowned victor over death. The saint of Assisi followed this iconography. The reciprocal relationship of picture and body is a topic in the saint’s biography. It starts in the moment of conversion, which happened in the ruined chapel of San Damiano. Here, the young patrician fell down in prayer “before the image (aust’ imaginem), when a voice, speaking to him from the cross, was heard from his bodily ears” (I. M. 2.1). In the respective scene in the fresco cycle at Assisi, a pendant cross, typical of its time and used to deepen the live effect, leans forward in such a way as if talking directly to the praying youth (Fig. 4). In the same cycle, a citizen of Assisi convinces himself of the authenticity of Christ’s wounds on St. Francis in the funeral ceremony. It is impossible not to see the physical (that of the cross above Francis) and the painted image (that of the cross above him), the body and the cross on the choir’s beam that bends towards the viewer. Bonaventure spoke of this encounter when he says that Francis “had the marks of the future glory on himself and indicated his own resurrection, after his holy flesh was imprinted by the image (effigie) of the passion of the Christ” (15.1). Effigie is usually a term used for a physical likeness, while image is the term for a representation, or in other words, for a painted likeness.

The narrative of the stigmata, which at Assisi immediately precedes the saint’s death, offers a new, ground-breaking iconography, which is linked to Giotto’s name (Fig. 5). The same iconography appears on the altarpiece at the Louvre, which Giotto signed (Fig. 1), as well as on the Fogg Art Museum panel (Fig. 2). Both versions depict the miracle as an ongoing event. The metamorphosis of the earthly body takes place, so to speak, in front of our eyes. The saint in the event turns into a picture. The ruined dwelling, in which he spent forty days, nestsles into the steep slopes of the mountain.

The new iconography is highlighted in two important changes that are inter-related. Instead of the beautiful angel’s head, which had been customary in most depictions of the vision, the crucified Christ appears between the wings of the seraph. The angel has turned into an image of Christ, who shows the wound on his naked torso. The visibility of the hands and feet of the crucified Christ (which on the altarpiece is expanded by the loincloth in the storm of the heavenly vision) reveals a new idea of the event. The second change consists in connecting by rays Christ’s five wounds with the same number of wounds on the saint’s body. White rays on the fresco at Assisi and golden ones on the Louvre panel disclose the manner of creating the stigmata. Rays had already been used before, but now they suddenly have a function. Like tracks or channels they transmit the wounds between the heavenly source and the earthly recipient, whose body thus mirrors the original.

With these changes, new questions raise. What was transferred here, real wounds or mere images of them? Did the wounds hurt when they touched a body of flesh and blood? The answers to these questions lie in the rays’ course, which transmit the angel’s likeness to the earthly body. They run mirror-like in Giotto’s early works in such a way that the left hand of Christ is connected with St. Francis’s right hand, and vice versa. Giotto corrects this concept only at the Bardi Chapel of Santa Croce at Florence, where he gives the mirror correspondence up for the benefit of a direct one-to-one correspondence of body to body (Fig. 5).

Such subtle differences reveal debates that, at that time, still continued to question the miracle. Contemporary texts set out to prove “that the stigmatisation, as a real event, was not a result of powerful imagination (vehemens imaginatio), but the outcome of a miracle which only could be performed by the power of God.” Such an explanation still follows Bonaventure’s line, but Chiara Frugoni, who was the first to investigate the rays, comes to another conclusion. Prior to Giotto’s Florentine version (Fig. 4), as she maintains, the Assisi type does not aim at a bodily transfer of wounds, but indicates a vision. “While the saint is painted as a body in the flesh, Christ-Seraph remains an immaterial and ethereal vision.” So Giotto may have indicated an inner “image of the saint, which he found reflected in the mirror in which he looked at himself.” In other words, he “was reflected in the picture which had been created by his ardent love.” The mimetic force in his look materialized in his physical body. Thus the mystic vision as a mirror experience would completely eliminate the distance between the Crucified Christ and the viewer.

15. Belting 2003 (as in note 10), 93ff. (The two natures on the cross).

16. Belting 1990 (as in note 8), 39fE.
16. Jostein Frøscher, Die Kirche San Francesco in Assisi und ihre Wandbilder, (Münich, 1961), PI. 145, and Blume (as in note 8), 138f, 37ff, and 64.
17. Frøscher (as in note 15), PI. 184, and Blume (as in note 6), Fig. 83.
19. Krüger (as in note 8), 173ff.
20. See note 18 with the citation.
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Bonaunvente speaks in fact about the ardor of imagination, but he quickly and somewhat desperately adds that physical likeness (effigies) of the Crucified, as a result of an unceasing meditation, imprinted itself into the saint's flesh. The two versions, which differ significantly from each other, may be two different readings of the same event. On the one hand, they emphasize the mirror experience of imagination and, on the other, a physical intervention from above. The contemporary debate, as expressed in Giotto's two variants, revolved around the body as picture. It is obvious that interpretations diverged. The body, to sum up, represents a pictorial medium in a double sense. It served, on the one hand, as a medium for mental images that finally surfaced on its skin. On the other hand, it carried a physical picture that was projected on it from Heaven. The iconization of the body, much as the incorporation of an image, is the same transformation in reverse direction. It involves image, body, and medium in changing configurations.

But the rays also have another reference, which I should like to add by way of speculation. In Giotto's times, the visual rays, which supplied the visual appearance (specieis) of everything we see in perception, caused a hot debate. The so-called "perspectivists" among scholastics, such as Roger Bacon, discussed visual rays as responsible for the transmutation of everything visible to the eye.22 Thus, did Giotto link a supernatural vision with the discussion of perception? Does the point-by-point transmission of the wounds transform the body of the saint into a giant eye? It is daring to connect the religious event with the optical theories of the day. St. Francis' rays do not link material surfaces with the eye's surface. But the debate on visual perception may have found a religious echo. I have recently studied the controversies around perception that arose from the translation of an Arab text by Alhazen, alias Ibn al-Haytam, which carried the Latin title Perspectiva. One controversy concerned the correspondence between points on an object seen with points in the eye of the spectator. Giotto certainly was well aware of the difference between objects as they are and as they appear (specieis). He did not invent the Renaissance perspective, but he introduced, in my view, the act of visual perception into his art. In this respect, visual rays would connect the visible world to the physical organ of vision that would "suffer" from the force of the incoming light. My speculation would be confirmed by the power of St. Francis' gaze, which at the same was a passive respondent of an image that impressed itself not only on his eye but on his whole body. The reciprocal symmetry between wounds of the subject seen and wounds of the one who is looking, connected as they were by rays in a corresponding number, invites us to give this speculation a certain looking. Roger Bacon's optical treatises in fact relate the working of God's power on the faithful with the direction on the central visual ray arriving in the eye without refraction.

But it is clear that, if my speculation has any value, it rests on the basic distinction between theology and art. Giotto's project was different from Bonaventure's task. He had to visualize an event and, to do so, he was on his own. Much as he had to follow the theological line, it would not solve his own problems as a painter. Iconography, in my view, is not just applied content and even less the transfer of pre-existing texts, but remained to a considerable extent the domain of the visual intelligence of the artists. Powerful artists were, and still remain, visionaries in their own right.


ERIC PALAZZO

Visions and Liturgical Experience in the Early Middle Ages

(for Herbert L. Kessler)

THE THEME of the conference at which this paper was presented focused on the phenomenon of visions in the Middle Ages, and as such it opened up numerous research avenues for the historian of the liturgy, as well as for the art historian who wished to extend his inquiry to materials normally investigated by liturgical historians. Recently, several important publications have contributed to our understanding of the history of visions and the visionary experience in medieval Christianity, particularly in the period between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries. There is no need to stress the importance of Peter Dintzlbacher's work on visionary literature or that of Barbara Newman's, which have proven to be seminal in many respects.1 In a recently published synthesis, this last author significantly outlined the principal historical, anthropological, and epistemological dimensions of visionary culture in the medieval West.2 Her work provides an ideal theoretical framework in which to carry out research on visions in the Middle Ages, as well as providing a synthetic bibliographic and historiographic overview.

In art history, many authors have investigated the complex relationships between medieval images and visions, and more generally, between images and dreams in the culture of the medieval West.3 One can refer here in particular to Jeffrey Hamburger's work on religious art produced in female monastic circles in the second half of the Middle Ages,4 or to some of Herbert Kessler's publications in which he clearly establishes and demonstrates the links that existed between the theology of images and visions.5 In art history, specific iconographic themes such as images and dreams,6 or the Mass of St. Gregory, have attracted the attention of scholars such as Carolyn Walker Bynum, who has recently provided fresh interpretations.7 Generally speaking, these art historical studies have emphasized the richness of women's visions in the context of female monastic circles in the second half of the Middle Ages.8 Hans Belting, for his part, has underlined

1. I should like to thank Marie-Pierre Gélin for translating this article. Among the important studies by Peter Dintzlbacher, see Vision and Visionarism in Monasticism (Stuttgart, 1984); B. Newman, God and the Goddess: Vision, Poetry and Belief in the Middle Ages (Philadelphia, 2001); Monologues, Vols. II, II, and III; "La visione e la sguarda nel Medio Evo," and "Vision and Vision in the Middle Ages," (1997-1998).
6. See also C. Hahn, "Virtu Dei: Changes in Medieval Visionary," in Pìnally Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Ockham Sew (Cambridge, 2002), 169-190 (I should like to thank Cynthia Hahn for giving me reference and for sharing her ideas on medieval visions with me).