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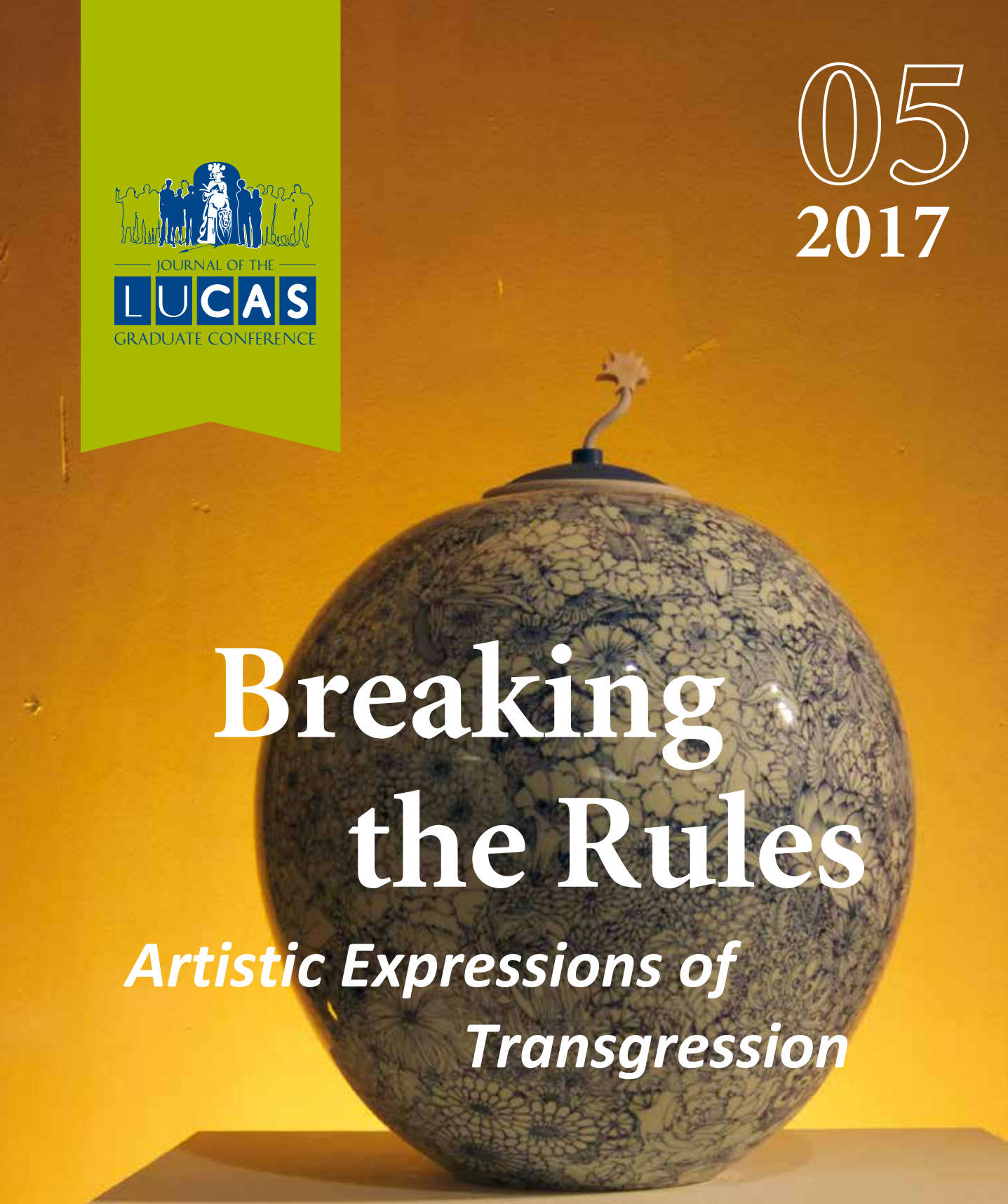

Breaking the Rules

Artistic Expressions of Transgression

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BREAKING IMAGES AND BREAKING THE GAZE ICONOCLASM IN LATE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN ITALY

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This article explores the ways people interacted with religious images in late medieval and early modern Italy. It considers why the eyes of anthropomorphic images were sometimes targeted by iconoclasts. Using the anthropological theory of Alfred Gell, among others, it demonstrates the potential for images to transcend their structure as 'representations' and be perceived or described as divine instantiations which could interact with supplicants.

Religious images in medieval Italy were frequently attributed an animacy that enabled them to transcend the confines of their material structure and directly interact with people. Medieval miracle stories abound with accounts of moving Madonnas and speaking images of the Christ Child. Many describe how images 'saw' the events which unfolded before their eyes, while others recount instances of defacement of the eyes of these images. This article will assess attitudes to the vivacity of images by discussing iconoclasts' targeting of the eyes. It will initially outline some accounts of eye destruction before exploring late medieval and modern theories on the gaze.

IMAGE EYE-GOUGING IN LATE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN ITALY

In his *Florentine Diary*, the fifteenth-century diarist Luca Landucci recounts the case of Bartolomeo de Cases, an Iberian Jew who defaced three Marian statues

in Florence just after the feast of the Assumption, including the statue of Mary and Christ at Orsanmichele:[1]

> E a dì 17 d'agosto 1493, intervene questo caso ch'un certo marrano, per dispetto de' Cristiani, ma più tosto per pazzia, andava per Firenze guastando figure di Nostra Donna, e in fra l'altre cose, quella ch'è nel pilastro d'Orto San Michele, di marmo, di fuori. Graffiò l'occhio al bambino e a Santo Nofri; gitto sterco nel viso a Nostra Donna. Per la qual cosa, e fanciugli gli coninciorono a dare co' sassi, e ancora vi posono le mani ancora uomini fatti, e infuriati, con gran pietre l'ammazzorono, e poi lo strascinorono con molto vituperio.[2]

The *Ricordanze* of Tribaldo de' Rossi offers a more detailed account of the events. De' Rossi writes that on 15 August 1493 a Jew (*marrano*) became involved in a fight with a group of Christian boys, one of whom he stabbed in the throat with a knife. He was arrested after the boys found the Jew sleeping in the Piazza della Signoria. The authorities had tortured him with eight pulls of the rope until he confessed to damaging the marble sculpture of the Virgin and Child at Orsanmichele by attacking the eyes of the Christ Child with a knife. The punishment meted out to him corresponded to the crime he had committed: as he had gouged out the eyes of a divine 'person', so too were his own eyes to be gouged. Tellingly, the punishment was to take place under the 'gaze' of the sculpture he had damaged, so that the holy image could literally 'see' retributive justice being carried out.[3]

A similar event occurred in 1486 in Lonigo, near Verona, where a Marian image was transfigured after purportedly being stabbed under her left eye. On 30 April of that year, two shoemakers travelling from Verona to Lonigo conspired along the way to rob and murder a third in their company. Having committed the crime, the pair entered a nearby church. Yet, as the thieves divided the spoils, they became aware that they were in the presence of a

1 Dana Katz, *The Jew in the Art of the Italian Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 99-118.

2 "On 17 August 1493 it happened that a certain Jew, in disrespect to Christians, but more through madness, went throughout Florence disfiguring images of Our Lady, including among others, the marble one outside in the pilaster of Orsanmichele. He scratched the eyes of the Baby and Saint Onophrius; he threw muck in the face of Our Lady. Because of this, the boys started to throw stones at him, and they were then joined by men, who, in their anger, killed him with big stones, who dragged him about with much malice" (trans. Aisling Reid). Luca Landucci, *Diario Fiorentino dal 1450 al 1516*, ed. Iodoco dal Badia (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1883), 66.

3 Katz, *The Jew in the Art of the Italian Renaissance*, 100-101.

divine gaze; a painting of the Madonna appeared to be watching their every move. Unnerved, they called the Virgin a whore and stabbed the image below her eye. The Madonna responded to the assault as if physically susceptible to the pain of injury and reached up to stem the blood which had begun to gush from the 'wound'. The shoemakers fled the scene, but were arrested and executed five days later.[4]

Various miracles were accredited to this Lonigo image, including the protection of people who had fallen from horses, the safeguarding of prisoners who suffered pulls of the *strappado*, and the curing of illness. Supplicants who had been worthy enough to receive help from the Madonna image began to commemorate her miraculous interventions by leaving wooden votive images (or *tavolette ex-voto*) around her shrine. The tablets generally depict the supplicant in a state of affliction, as, for example, a child bleeding with a pair of scissors, or the figure of the Madonna with hand raised to her hurt eye. The presence of the tablets demonstrates that the efficacy of the intervention was attributed not to the transcendent Madonna in heaven, but to her manifestation in the material image. Supplicants gave the image commemorative gifts so that she would literally see that they had been grateful; the tablets acknowledge that promises were kept by both participants in a devotional dialogue. Cumulatively, the tablets demonstrate the effectiveness and the divine agency of the image.

These types of medieval miracle stories make evident the importance of sensorial interaction with images in late medieval Italy. Christians habitually sought proximity and eye contact with representations of the divine believed capable of enacting miracles. In his compilation of the miraculous events attributed to a Marian fresco in Florence's Santissima Annunziata, for example, the writer Giovanni Angiolo Lottini recounts how in 1582 a cripple was healed by gazing upon holy images.[5] Lionardo da Massa, from Carrara, had been ill for twelve years; he had sought all kinds of medical help, but to no avail. Finally,

4 Frederika H. Jacobs, *Votive Panels and Popular Piety in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3-5.

5 Giovanni Angiolo Lottini, *Scelta d'alcuni Miracoli e Grazie della Santissima Nunziata di Firenze* (Florence: Landini, 1636), 150-53.

he was 'divinely inspired' to visit Florence and pray before the *Nunziata* image. After many days, he had managed to hobble the whole way from Carrara to Florence in time for the Festival of the Madonna, held on 8 September. During the festival he saw the 'Sacred Ornaments' on show and fixed his eyes on many images while asking them for grace. He then went to church, heard Mass and showed the Marian image his disability. At some point during his discourse with the image, he felt a breath in all his bones, flesh, and joints; suddenly his ills vanished and he was able to lift his arms. Lionardo rejoiced and left his crutches there as a testimony to the miracle that had occurred.[6] Another of Lottini's miracle stories describes how in 1577 a foreigner named Giovanni had his sight restored by praying to the *Nunziata* image ('si pose invocar la Nunziata'). He offered a *tavoletta* in gratitude and memory of the event.[7]

Both accounts provide an insight into the way people interacted with anthropomorphic religious images in early modern Italy. It was not enough for Lionardo da Massa to pray to the transcendent virgin, or even visit a Marian image in his hometown Carrara. He had to beseech the *Nunziata* image directly and make eye contact. So too, when the blind man Giovanni prayed, he prayed not to the Virgin, but to the *Nunziata* image itself. Divinity was therefore perceived to be inherent in the material image, rather than the sacred person it symbolized. The belief that icons could instantiate the divine is similarly evidenced by the attribution of certain capabilities to particular religious images. The Florentine Madonna of Impruneta was credited with controlling the weather, as was the Bolognese Madonna at San Luca. Both were processed from their suburban shrines and brought into the city in times of need, where they were greeted at the gates by dignitaries as actual people, rather than mere portraits. A fourteenth-century Florentine chronicler who had witnessed the procession of the Madonna of Impruneta attributed miraculous events not to the transcendent Virgin but to her image, commenting: "This blessed *tavola* made miracles in coming and leaving".[8]

6 "Da un celeste aviso, si pose in cuore di personalemente alla Nunziata di Firenze per se stesso andarne in voto; e quivi la Beata Madre de Dio pregare […] Lionardo adunque […] fatto provedimento all'anima sua di quell Tesoro, che dal Vicario di Cristo in quell Giubileo si dispensa e poscia una, et altra volta rimiratosi da lui la magnificenzia de' lumi, il decoro dell'uficiare, e la pompa de' Sacri Ornamenti, di che in quella Festività si fa mostra, e sopratutto alle tante Immagini, poste da chi impetrate le grazie aveva, tenendosi da lui fissi gli occhi, da quelle grandemnente venne commosso. Così mentre egli in un certo modo venia rapito da quelle considerazioni, e nella cappella udiva la Messa; col cuore mostrando sua calamità davanti all'Altare di Maria Vergine, ecco si sente in un punto discorrer come un fiato per tutte l'ossa, e per tutte le carni: il quale diffuso, e penetrante nelle giunture; quindi la debolezza, e la stupefazione disgombrava". Ibid., 152.

7 Ibid., 141-42.

8 Source taken from Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 63.

At this time, images of the divine were also believed to take offence at any misdemeanours they 'saw'. Toward the end of the fifteenth century, for example, the preacher Savonarola admonished Florentines who committed sins "in the eyes of the Virgin Mary" and warned women not to go to church dressed like prostitutes because "the Annunciation [image] doesn't want to see them dressed like that".[9] Accounts such as these demonstrate the perceived vitality of iconic representations; people interacted with images as living beings. As we have seen, the eyes of a holy statue were apparently worth the same as a living person's, and people stabbed representations of eyes to prevent them from 'seeing a crime'. But how are we to respond to such stories of active objects and seeing images? Is it enough to dismiss them as religious allegories or exempla of medieval credulity? Or, as scholars such as David Freedberg, Alfred Gell, and Megan Holmes have argued, is there a more complex notion of the agency of things at work in these accounts?

THEORIZING THE EYE: MODERN APPROACHES

The complexities of image agency have been researched by artist and theorist Barbara Bolt, whose *Art Beyond Representation* (2004) explores the ways in which images are sometimes perceived to transcend their structure as 'representations' to become 'presences'. Drawing partly on the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, who differentiated between the 'immediate object' that a person sees (an object as represented by its sign) and the 'dynamic object' (the object as it really is, beyond its appearance in the sign), Bolt demonstrates the inadequacies of semiotic approaches to visual images. She states that the 'dynamic object' operates as a pressure on, or pulse in, the seeable. The insistence of the dynamic object constitutes a key energy or force in the work of art. Thus, a picture is not just the coded immediate object, but also bears the pressure of the dynamic object. In this way, the dynamic object prevents the picture from being reduced to just a sign.[10]

9 Ibid., 69.

10 Barbara Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 175.

Bolt asserts that these dynamical relations demonstrate the ways images can exceed their limits as representations and become more than the medium that bears them. Accordingly, materialization involves "mutual reflection rather than a one-way causality".[11] Frameworks of these kinds clarify the ways in which medieval Christians interacted with their religious objects not simply as signs placed before their eyes to denote the divine, but as divine presences with agency of their own. Such ideas are apparent in the work of Caroline Walker Bynum, who remarks that medieval religious paraphernalia did not gesture toward a divinity located elsewhere, but drew attention to the divinity inherent in matter itself:

> The goal for the crafters of such things such as *pietas*, Books of Hours, and winged altarpieces was, I argue, not so much conjuring up or gesturing toward the unseen as manifesting power in the matter of the object […] Moreover, late medieval devotional images call attention to themselves not just as materials but as specific physical objects.[12]

Jane Bennett advocates a similar vitality of matter in her *Vibrant Matter* (2010), in which she argues that all 'things', including edibles, commodities, storms, and metals act as quasi-agents, with their own trajectories, potentialities, and tendencies. Adopting the terminology of Bruno Latour, Bennett conceives of the world as a collection of 'actants', which are sources of action that can be either human or nonhuman.[13] Images are therefore not signs to be deciphered, but social agents that generate action in their surroundings. The most sophisticated account of the agency of images is provided by the late Alfred Gell, whose work informs my own views on medieval image interaction and iconoclasm. Gell denies that art objects are 'sign-vehicles' that convey meaning.[14] Rather than attempt to interpret images as signs 'as if' they were texts, he proposes an alternative approach to the perception of imagery based on agency.[15] In line with Marilyn Strathern's assessment of gift economies, where "objects act as persons in relation to one another",[16] Gell suggests that

11 Ibid., 185.

12 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay in Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 28.

13 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.

14 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 5.

15 Ibid., 6.

16 Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 176.

material artefacts of all shapes and appearances can function as social agents between people. In the same way that a gift might be considered an extension of a person, or part of a 'distributed persona', so too material artefacts can abduct agency and become 'socially active'. Objects become endowed with a kind of 'personhood', as well as the behaviours and characteristics associated with human agency.[17]

Among the most pertinent examples of Gell's theory of distributed personhood at work in late medieval Italy are accounts of people's interactions with the Host. In his *Trecentonovelle*, the fourteenth-century writer Franco Sacchetti demonstrates the way in which religious objects might be conceptualized as literal, and even portable, manifestations of the divine. Novella 103 describes how a priest held the Host above his head to guide a group of people safely across the fast-flowing Sieve river. After reaching the other side of the bank, the group thanked the Eucharist itself that materialized God:

> Ser Diedato, voi avete molto da ringraziare il nostro Signore Jesu Cristo, il quale avete in mano, ché per certo noi vi vedemmo annegato, se non fosse stato il suo aiuto.[18]

In a similar vein, a fourteenth-century fresco known as the *Miracle of the Host Driving Away the Devil* in Orvieto Cathedral's Chapel of the Corporeal shows the Host as instantiated by a miniature figure of Christ. At the centre of the work a priest is shown standing behind an altar during the recitation of the Mass, his eyes looking upwards, and in his hands stands the Host transformed into the physical body of Christ. High in the Chapel's walls the idea is further iterated by two circular windows that frame the Crucifixion of Christ (Fig. 1). Filled with bright light, the windows resemble glowing Eucharists to metonymically demonstrate the distribution of divine personhood in the Host. By gazing on the Host, or even an image of the Host, supplicants could actually encounter divine personhood. In medieval Italy, religious objects and images

17 Megan Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 181.

18 "Sir Diedato, you must thank our Lord Jesus Christ, who you hold in your hand, for we would certainly have drowned [sic; a faithful translation would be: "we would have seen you drowned"]) had it not been for his help" (trans. Richard Trexler). Source taken from Trexler, *Public Life*, 56.

Fig. 1
The Chapel of the Corporal
Orvieto Cathedral, Orvieto, Italy
Photo: Steve Moses / CC BY 3.0

of various different kinds were inhered with a divine agency that enabled them to function as material deities.

Although Gell states that agency can be attributed to any material 'index', whatever its form or shape, he suggests that iconic, or anthropomorphic imagery serves to open 'routes of access' to an inwardness; holes are redolent of eyes which index an 'inner' mind and create a 'homunculus-effect':

> The 'internalist' theory of agency […] motivates the development of 'representational', if not 'realistic' religious images, because the inner versus outer, mind versus body contrast prompts the development of

> images with 'marked' characteristics of inwardness versus outwardness […] the indexical form of the mind/body contrast is, primordially spatial and concentric, the mind is 'internal' closed, surrounded by something (the body) that is non-mind.[19]

While it is interesting that Gell attributes awareness to images which feature eyes, his formulation nevertheless depends on an apparent division between mind and body. Megan Holmes takes issue with such separation in her *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence* (2013), where she states that the theory of the 'homunculus within the object' relies unproductively on an ahistorical mind-binary, which fails to differentiate the complex operations of the mind and soul.[20]

Gell's remarks on image vitality and its association with the eyes extends the thinking of David Freedberg, who notes that religious consecration rites frequently aim to bring an image to life through the opening of bodily orifices, especially the eyes.[21] Eyes function as indexes of liveliness in representations:

> Eyes […] provide the most immediate testimony of life in living beings; in images — where substance, at the first level, excludes the possibility of movement — they are even more powerfully capable of doing so […] Their presence enables the mental leap to an assumption of liveliness that may not, in the first instance, be predicated on similarity or on the skill of the artist or craftsman. Hence the perceived liveliness of images with eyes, or the acquisition of vitality by acts of completion involving the insertion of eyes.[22]

It is feasible that religious effigies with eyes which look back at the viewer are prone to animation not only because they are material distributions of a divine persona, but also because they demonstrate a vitality which animates the figure. Interaction and conversation depend on communication with the

19 Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, 132-33.

20 Holmes, *Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*, 181.

21 David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 84.

22 Ibid., 202.

eyes as much as the mouth; we believe we have a person's attention if they look at us while we speak. Seeing is a two-way process; the spectator of an anthropomorphic figure is simultaneously spectated by the image. Mutual gazing thus facilitates a direct communication between the heavenly and the human, which could potentially occur not only on the visual, but also on a non-optical level.

THEORIZING THE EYE: MEDIEVAL APPROACHES

Ideas similar to those of Gell and Freedberg are evident in the work of medieval authors. In his *Journey of the Mind to God*, the thirteenth-century theologian Bonaventure outlined an integrated sensorial framework comprising the body's 'outer corporeal' senses and an 'inner spiritual' sensorium. The internal senses envisaged by Bonaventure are perceptual acts engendered by the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. When active, these spiritual senses enable the Christian to discern the objects of spiritual perception latent in their surroundings:

> When [the soul] […] by faith believes in Christ as in the uncreated Word, Who is the Word and the brightness of the Father, recovers her spiritual hearing and sight, — her hearing to receive the words of Christ, and her sight to view the splendours of that Light. When the soul longs with hope to receive the inspired Word, she recovers, by her desire and affection, the spiritual sense of smell. When she embraces with love the Incarnate Word, in as much as she receives delight from Him and passes over Him in ecstatic love, she recovers her sense of taste and touch. Having recovered the spiritual senses, the soul now sees, hears, smells, tastes, and embraces her beloved.[23]

Internal apprehension of spiritual realties depends on their bodily perception in the external, material universe. The perceiver and the objects they perceive

23 Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, trans. Philotheus Boehner, OFM (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993),

are not therefore separate, but intertwined entities. In the second chapter of *The Journey of the Mind to God*, Bonaventure thus develops a theory of 'abstracted similitude', whereby external objects are discernible when their echoes resonate within the body. He suggests that sensible objects emanate likenesses of themselves in the medium through which they are perceived. The initial likeness then engenders another likeness within the sense organ, enabling the sense power to apprehend the sensible object:

> The senses are delighted in an object, perceived through the abstracted similitude, either by reason of its beauty as in sight, or by reason of its sweetness as in smell or hearing, or by reason of its wholesomeness as in taste and touch […] the species shares the character of form, power and activity, according to the relation it has to the source from which it emanates, to the medium through which it passes to the goal for which it aims.[24]

The Christian body does not passively witness, but abstracts from the surrounding world to directly interact with its emanations. Perception is therefore a multisensorial process. It is within this context that we might situate events in Bonaventure's *Life of Saint Francis*, which describes the animation of the San Damiano Crucifix. The work recounts how Saint Francis heard a cross in the Church of San Damiano speak to him while his eyes were fixed on its form:

> Prostrate before an image of the Crucified, he was filled with no little consolation as he prayed. While his tear-filled eyes were gazing at the Lord's cross, he heard with his bodily ears a voice coming from the cross, telling him three times: "Francis, go and repair my house, which as you see, is falling completely into ruin".[25]

24 Ibid., 12-13.

25 Bonaventure, "Life of Saint Francis", in *Bonaventure*, trans. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 191.

The account intimates the complexities of meditative practices in medieval Italy and the ways in which visual apprehension of an object could stimulate supplementary sensorial responses, in this case aural. Vision was not merely an optical process, but potentially a synesthetic act.

The non-optical qualities of vision were also demonstrated by the thirteenth-century theologian Peter of Limoges, whose Chapter 8 of *De oculo morali* equates the various functions of the eyes with each of the seven deadly sins. He warns the readership of the dangers of the 'licentious' looks enacted between men and women, which can affect both corporal and spiritual damage. The physical capacity of sight is outlined in the example of Holofernes, who was 'captured' by the eyes of Judith when he entered into her sight. The author draws analogy between the basilisk, whose look kills birds flying in the sky, and women who look at men and spiritually kill them. The phenomenon is explained in both extramissive and tactile terms: when a woman looks 'licentiously' at a man, the prurient fumes that emerge from her heart are emitted through her eyes. These then clash with the man's eyes and penetrate his heart with their 'corruption'. Women's fumes are conceptualized in terms of a 'venereal ray' (*ragio vene[re]o*) which spreads through the eyes like a sexually transmitted disease. The sexually transgressive properties of the female gaze are also made apparent in the author's description of menstruating women, who emit blood through their eyes to leave a mark in the mirror.[26] Visual contact is equated with tactile interactions.

The tactile quality of sight was a popular poetic conceit among the poets of the *dolce stil novo*. Poems of this style commonly express a spiritualized erotics enacted through the eyes; seeing became a somatic act of communication whereby beams emanating from a person's eyes would literally strike the body of the spectator. Ideas such as these are apparent in Petrarch's Sonnet 61 to his beloved Laura, where he recalls being 'struck' by eyes: "Benedetto sia 'l giorno e 'l mese et l'anno […] e 'l bel paese e 'l loco ov' io fui giunto / da' duo

26 Peter of Limoges, *Libro de l'Occhio Morale et Spirituale Vulgare*, trans. Fra Teofilo Romano (Florence: Rosso Giovanni, 1496).

27 "Blessed be the day and the month and the year [...] and [the beautiful town] and the place where I was struck [or wounded] by the two lovely eyes". *Petrarch, Petrarch's Lyric Poems: The Rime Sparse and Other Lyrics*, trans. Robert Durling (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 138-39.

begli occhi".[27] In his love poem which opens with the incipit "Io non pensava che lo cor giammai", the Florentine troubadour Guido Cavalcanti describes how his eyes were wounded by the sight of a lady, stating "Per gli occhi fere la sua claritate".[28] Calvalcanti's contemporary and friend, Dante, is even more explicit in his poetic use of extramissive thought. The eighteenth chapter of his *Vita Nuova*, a collection of verses on courtly love, details the appearance of the woman's 'eyebeams' and the effect they have on the body of the person observing her:

> De li occhi suoi, come ch'ella li mova,
> Escono spiritu d'amore inflammati,
> Che feron li occhi a qual che allor la guati,
> E passan sì che 'l cor ciascun retrova.[29]

Within this framework, vision had the potential to operate synaesthetically, through both sight and touch. Consequently, supplicants who gazed at an iconic representation of the divine could also receive divine 'eyebeams', which were believed to literally strike their bodies. As such, looking into the eyes of a religious image facilitated a direct corporeal interaction with the divine; mutual gazing was therefore also a form of mutual touching.

Joseph Koerner described how Protestant iconoclasts in Hildesheim hauled a Christ statue from the church into their drinking hall, where they ordered it to drink. When it did not respond, they taunted it in the same way the living Christ was taunted prior to his crucifixion.[30] Tellingly, the notorious sixteenth-century iconoclast Andreas Karlstadt confessed that he feared the religious images he destroyed.[31] Similarly, the people who scratched lines over the eyes of Luca Signorelli's demonic fresco known as *The Damned Cast into Hell* located in the cathedral of Orvieto probably sought to reduce the living agency of the image (Figs. 2 and 3). Eye defacement would also ensure that it could not affect its evil eye on parishioners or indeed the fresco of the suffering

28 "Her splendour struck in through my eyes" (trans. Simon West). Taken from Guido Cavalcanti, *The Selected Poetry of Guido Cavalcanti: A Critical English Edition*, ed. Simon West (Leicester: Troubadour Publishing, 2009), 24-25.

29 "And from her eyes, wherever she turns them, / loving spirits, like firing flames shoot out, / hitting the eyes of everyone in sight, / and hitting through until each one hits the heart" (trans. Stanley Appelbaum). Dante, *The New Life/ La Vita Nuova. A Dual Language Book*, ed. Stanley Appelbaum (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006), 53.

30 Joseph Leo Koerner, "The Icon as Iconoclash," in *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wards in Science, Religion and Art*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Karlsruhe: ZKM, 2002), 170.

31 Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 100.

woman it binds. Evidently, images could not only act on their audience, but also on other images.

Fig. 2
Luca Signorelli
The Damned Cast into Hell
1499-1502
Fresco
Chapel of San Brizio, Orvieto Cathedral, Orvieto, Italy

CONCLUSION

Anthropomorphic images with eyes that appear to gaze back at their audience cannot be read simply as signifiers of meaning, because they partake in an economy of agency. As is evidenced by the work of Alfred Gell and Marilyn Strathern, among others, personhood can be distributed by means of objects. In medieval Italy, the Eucharist instantiated God and religious images appropriated divine agency, enabling them to function as material deities. While all images can function as 'actants' generating action in their surroundings to function, the 'vital' quality of the image is more apparent in images with eyes, and people are consequently more likely to attribute to them a living agency. Images with eyes make explicit their communicative

potential: eyes are sites of interpersonal relations, and spectators are viewed to the same degree that they look. For medieval Christians, visual interaction with the divine via an anthropomorphic image could conceivably occur on the tactile level; the supplicant's body was believed to be literally touched by the eyes of the sacred. Religious images did not therefore simply 'represent', but 'presenced' the divine. Instances of eye defacement, like those discussed here, show that iconoclasts attributed human agency to the image. Hence, the image is perceived to be sensate and demonstrates living qualities such as bleeding or movement.

Iconoclasts target the eyes in order to cut the intersensorial communication between the image and themselves and also to 'kill' its perceived vitality. In this respect, iconoclasm depends on idolatry. Negation cannot occur where there is not an initial affirmation. Defacement aims to remove the vital agency from a work and turn it into a sign. Valentin Groebner demonstrates how living beings can be reduced to a sign through the violence inflicted on their faces. His exploration of medieval legal documents from Nuremburg reveals numerous prosecutions for nose cutting, which was usually meted out by the spouses of adulterers. Groebner describes how in 1506 a man who had impregnated a maid helped his wife revenge herself by holding the pregnant woman down while she attempted to cut her nose off. In this case, the wife sought to save face through the defacement of another. Medieval scholars associated the nose with a person's sexual activity, thus virginity was believed to be perceptible through the shape of the nose cartilage.[32] To cut off a person's nose was a means of encoding the face as a visible mark of sexual sin. In this respect, defacement transforms the living person into a moving symbol. So too, images whose eyes are removed have their living quality removed to become symbols of their violence. The iconoclast does not destroy the entire image as there would then be no signifier to testify the violence enacted.

32 Valentin Groebner, *Defaced: The Visual Culture of Violence in the Late Middle Ages*, trans. Pamela Selwyn (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 68-79.

The agency of images enabled medieval Christians to encounter the divine in their material surroundings: by praying before or kissing holy images supplicants could come face to face with God. People defaced images for various reasons, but all had in common an underlying belief that pictures are not inert symbols, but are rather partly 'alive'.

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