ON BODIES AND IMAGES IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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RESUMO

O Simpósio Internacional "O Corpo através da Imagem", celebrado em Coimbra em Outubro de 2013, dirigiu-se ao estudo da representação do corpo ao longo da história a partir de um ponto de vista multidisciplinar. Respondendo aos desafios científicos do Simpósio, o objetivo deste trabalho foi estabelecer um quadro teórico, geral e abrangente sobre o corpo na Idade Média. Os determinantes do corpo, os seus usos e funções e a sua representação na imagem medieval são as principais questões abordadas neste estudo.

Palavras-chave: Corpo, Imagem, Imagem-Objecto, Idade Média

ABSTRACT

The International Symposium "O Corpo através da imagem", held in Coimbra in October 2013, addressed the study of body representation throughout History from a multidisciplinary viewpoint. Responding to the Symposium's scientific challenges, the objective of this paper was to establish a theoretical, general, and global framework on the body in the Middle Ages. The determinants of the body, its uses and functions and its depiction in the medieval image are thus the main issues approached in this study.

Keywords: Body, Image, Image-Object, Middle Ages

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1. INTRODUCTION

The symposium "O Corpo através da imagem", held in Coimbra in October 2013, was dedicated to a multidisciplinary analysis of the body image throughout the history of the western world. The objective of this study was to approach the body in a historical period, the Middle Ages, and build up a general theoretical framework of the session devoted to the medieval period, after which studies and approaches on more specific aspects on the body and its representation in medieval image were presented.

It is virtually impossible to tackle in depth all those aspects related to the body and its image in medieval culture; that is why my paper will be limited to specific remarks on the method for addressing the study of the body image in the Middle Ages. In this sense, the methodological basis for this approach will be the definition, description and analysis of the body made by several disciplines –Semiotics, Anthropology, Socioloy and Image Theory.

In the first place and as a starting point I shall use Semiotics (Magli 1987), which holds that human body does not possess only one body but each person is plural in its bodies –biological, anatomic, anthropologic, historical.

In the second place, I am taking as a fundamental reference the idea from the Anthropology and Sociology according to which a body has completely different uses and functions in the various cultures and societies in which it lives and dies, since, as Marcel Mauss suggested a few decades ago, a body is a cultural product and each society imposes upon its individuals how to use their bodies specifically (Mauss, 1935).

The third methodological approach comes from the Image Theory, which pays attention both to the role played by the body in relation with its image and to the role played by the image in the depiction of the human body.

2. MEDIEVAL BODIES

Taking the semiotic and anthropological analyses pointed above as a reference and applying them to the body study in the Middle Ages, we can suggest the existence of several kinds of medieval bodies and of various factors which conditioned the use of bodies in this historical time.

2.1. The biological body

The first of them is related to the "biological body" to which P. Magli refers. In this sense, it is necessary to bear in mind that man's life expectancy in the Middle Ages was about thirty-five years. Roughly old people are considered to be an exception. Some texts quite often that a person or a personage is old when they are hardly forty-five years old. For example, on studying the death of the French kings, J. Le Goff y N. Truong indicate that those who died when they were over fifty or fifty-five years old were exceptional (Le Goff & Truong, 2003). To it a lot of important factors must be added: tough conditions of life, wars, lack of sanitary facilities, etc. –all of them are factors that implied the appearance, development and rapid spread of diseases. Leprosy, for example, spread in Europe from the 7th century and was a major sanitary problem in the Middle Ages (Bériac, 1988).

Death was thus something occurring every day. Medieval man felt that death was something familiar and close –quite different from what present-day society thinks: quite often death is something people almost never talk about. Suffice it to say, for instance, that there are taboo topics related to death in our society –euthanasia and suicide, for example. The Middle Ages, on the contrary, used to take in and interact with death and the funerary world in a more dynamic, fluent, and natural way. It was the "Tamed Death" (Ariès, 1975, 1977, 1983). Yet this does not mean that death was more peaceful, as there was a great fear among people of meeting a sudden and hasty death, which entailed the risk of their dying in a state of mortal sin, so increasing the possibilities of their being condemned to hell (Le Goff & Truong, 2003). But something is true: the presence of death and of the dead was engrossing and ubiquitous in medieval man's daily life,

in his more immediate environment, and in his imagery. As J.-C. Schmitt has indicated, in the Middle Ages "the dead were in the centre of life in the same way as the churchyard was in the middle of the village" (Schmitt, 1988). Accordingly, a great turning point was the great epidemic plague which scoured Europe during the latter half of the 14th century –the Black Death. It decimated the population and, no doubt, had an effect on the idea that medieval people had about death. The natural relation they had with death and the funerary world was progressively giving way to the surging of a certain fascination about death, which we see reflected in various manifestations – literature and iconography among them.

2.2. The social body

The second of the facts that conditioned human body is related to the kind of society and culture of this period, that is, we stand in front of the "social body". Medieval civilization developed a kind of hierarchical and pyramidal society out of the establishment of a political economic and institutional specific system –feudalism (Bloch, 1939; Ganshof, 1982 reed; Sánchez-Albornoz, 1993; Baschet, 2006). That conditioned the evolution of the western world community and imposed upon individuals some certain uses of their bodies.

Thus, each social group should utilise their bodies according to some specific purposes: the classes at the top of the social pyramid were expected to use their bodies to govern that pyramid correctly; the religious estate was expected to use theirs to pray and seek society's moral good; while common people, which occupied the base of the pyramid, were expected to use their bodies to sustain society. The body itself was used metaphorically to explain the functioning, dynamics and hierarchy of medieval civilization. Inhering some general ideas that were rooted in Platonic philosophy and the Helenistic and Late Roman world, medieval civilisation established a symbolic comparison of the human body to explain its dynamics and social structures. This political use of the body as a metaphor commenced to be institutionalised in Carolingian times,

and came to be important in the Gregorian Reform; it reached its summit in the 12th century, in John of Salisbury's writings, as is demonstrated in the well-known passage of his *Policraticus*, which made a metaphoric comparison of social, political, and institutional reality taking the human body as its basis (Le Goff, 1989; Klapisch-Zuber, 1993).

On the other hand, feudalism imposed the establishment of a patronage and vassalage system between the various social groups, from the top to the base of the pyramid. This relationship had a pivotal consequence for the body, as it became the sole protagonist of the acts most relevant to the community. We can accordingly remark its role in the so called symbolic rite of vassalage –a ceremony at which lords and vassals showed their compromise and link for life (Althoff, 1997; Buc, 2000; Carré, 1992; Le Goff, 1977; Keller, 1993; Koziol, 1992; Rusell Major, 1987).

2.3. The religious body

In relation to medieval man's beliefs, lifestyles and anthropological experiences, we can speak of a "religious body", which, on approaching the analysis of the body in Medieval West becomes a primordial study object. The three main great religions which lived next to each other in the Medieval West –Christianity, Judaism, and Islam– had a particular, specific and very different view of the human body, various ways of interacting with and using it, as well as of looking at the bodies of the other religions they lived with (Martínez Gázquez & Tolau, 2013).

Regarding Christianity, the predominant religion in Medieval Western Europe, the biblical story of God's creation of Adam, first moulded and then animated, marks the starting point of the importance the body had in Christian beliefs but it also shows another fact: how the Church tried and, in fact, succeeded on many occasions to impose an energetic control in every aspect related to the acts and interactions of the human body in the medieval period. Yet, as J.-C. Schmitt has stated, medieval Christianity never knew

how to solve the contradiction between two of its deep demands: on the one hand, the desire of rejecting the body so as to better tend towards God, assimilate spiritual and immaterial things; on the other, the necessity to imagine what is visible and, consequently, to place things in space and time, to imagine places, forms, volumes and bodies precisely where they should not exist (Schmitt, 1988, pp. 63-69).

This dichotomy in Christianity gave rise to a great veneration of the body but, at the same time, to the fact that, throughout the Middle Ages, it was highlighted that, in a rough and violent way, the body should be chastised.

As for the bodies that were venerated, these were mainly and in a hierarchical order, those of Christ, the Virgin, the saints and the martyrs of the Christian doctrine. A product and direct consequence of that veneration was the appearance and development of the relic phenomenon in all the Medieval West, becoming one of the major axes of the medieval "religious body" (Bozoky, & Helvetius, 1999). Relics were set into hierarchies according to the rank of the personages they belonged to; depending on their importance: those of Christ, the Virgin and the rest of the saints –from those who were most important to those who were the least. There were other hierarchies, too, in accordance with their entirety; isolated members; corporal remnants, like hairs, blood or milk teeth; natural secretions, like milk; miraculous secretions, like oil emanating from holy bodies; and, finally, contact relics, basically clothes and personal objects.

However, as indicated above, the body was also strongly chastised in medieval times. The French historian Michel Foucault (1975) maintains that nothing is more material and corporal than the exercise of power, as power uses people's repression through punishments that appropriate the accused's body. This procedure has been used in all societies, cultures and historical times as a "pedagogy of fear". Therefore, medieval society was one of the epochs in history when body punishment and repression

became something more habitual. And Christian doctrine, reflected in the Holy Writ descriptions, was one of the sources in which medieval power found moral justification to inflict corporal punishments. Thus, hangings, the stake, beheadings, flagellations, mutilations, and dismemberments were habitual practices. Clear parallels of them can be found in biblical passages, like when Malchus' ear is cut off by Peter in the passage of Christ's arrest, and in the punishments described in purgatory and hell.

2.4. The gestural body: *gestus* **vs** *gesticulatio*

Speaking about the body is speaking about the expression forms of that body. The human being is an entity which thinks and feels, and those thoughts, feelings and emotions are expressed, communicated and transmitted through the fundamental means of communication: verbal vocal communication, that is, the spoken word; verbal non-vocal communication, that is, the written word; and finally non-verbal communication, which comprises body activities –facial and gestural (Kendon ed., 1981).

In a differentiated way with respect to other epochs, gestural language reached ample development in the medieval period, in such a way that it has been defined as the civilisation of gestures (Díaz-Corralejo, 2004; Le Goff, 1997; Reyerson, 2002; Schmitt, 1990). Gestures, postures, attitudes and facial expressions were some of the body resources of non-verbal communication through which medieval man expressed himself and manifested ideas, thoughts and emotions.

However, there existed in medieval mentality a sort of dichotomy about gestures, influenced by the ambivalent Christian vision of the body. On the one hand, the body was synonymous with sin and consequently gestures, as the extension of that body, had a clearly negative value. Yet, it could also be a symbol of virtue and, therefore, those gestures related to virtue had a positive value and contributed to salvation, which the medieval man longed for. Thus, at this

time there were two different nuances which defined each of both concepts. In the first place, the term *gestus* was associated with the positive concept of gestures. Out of its diminutive form, *gesticulus*, we find another two terms, *gesticularius* and, above all, *gesticulatio*. They were used in the contexts in which gestures gained a negative or pejorative connotation (Díaz-Corralejo, 2004; Le Goff & Truong, 2003; Sánchez-Ameijeiras, 2003; Schmitt, 1981).

Gestus would, therefore, be the gesture made by medieval man in acts and ceremonies considered useful and positive from a social and religious viewpoint. It is, for example, the vassalage ritual, which has been referred to above. This ritual generally consisted of three phases: homage –it included a verbal compromise according to which the vassal expressed his will to become the lord's man. It was sealed when the vassal placed his joined hands between the hands of the lord, who closed his. The second phase of this rite consisted of a fidelity compromise and was carried out through the exchange of a kiss between the vassal and the lord and it was called *osculum*; and by an oath, generally on the Bible or on relics. Finally, the ritual ended with the fief investiture, made through the handing of a symbolic object by the lord to the vassal. All these gestures, according to medieval mentality, had a positive meaning since they showed the vassal's dependency on, fidelity to and confidence in, the lord.

Gesticulatio, however, was a kind of gestural behaviour made by mimes, pantomimes and baffoons, that is, the lowest classes of medieval society, in which, according to the Church's proclamations, sin, vices and the lowest instincts of human beings were embodied. Among such proclamations, for example, was laughter, which was strongly condemned by Christian doctrine, basically in the early medieval centuries.

3. MEDIEVAL IMAGES

When approaching the study of the image of the body in the Middle Ages we must also consider the definition and concept of image (Debray, 1992; Schmitt, 1996). It

is a term widely used in the History of Art over decades, above all in the History of Medieval Art, as in principle it implies a solution to avoid the use of more problematic terms, like "art", "work of art", "idol" or "representation" –all of them controversial concepts when dealing with medieval figurative production.

Yet, the term "image" also brings up serious problems as far as its definition and meaning are concerned. About this it is interesting to point out that the English language distinguishes in terms between two important concepts –image, on the one hand, that is, an inner representation; and picture, on the other, the outer or material representation. This distinction does not exist in other languages, like French (Image), German (Bild), Italian (Immagine), Spanish (Imagen) or Portuguese (Imagem), in which both mental representations and their embodiment are described with the same term. In all these languages the term image can refer to a vision, an idea or a thought, as well as to a scene painted on a wall or in a manuscript (Krüger & Nova eds., 2000).

To solve these linguistic and conceptual problems, several solutions have been suggested. Some time ago J. Baschet proposed the use of the notion "image-object" (Baschet, 1996, 2008, 2010). Thus, two terms which in themselves have a great semantic load are converted into two poles of the same terminological axis. These two poles do not loose their own identity and conceptual independence thanks to the use of a link, but its strategic union succeeds in joining, under the same expression, several concepts connected with medieval figurative production. So the idea "image-object" enables medievalists to deal with their research from several perspectives: its materiality, its thingness (what in French historiography is named 'choséité', Bonne, 1999), the various contexts in which it is inscribed and located, and the set of spatial, temporal and ritual factors associated to its functioning.

The execution of global, ample, and deep studies is advisable on analysing figurative productions from any culture and society,

but it becomes indispensable in the ambit of the studies about the Middle Ages, since, unlike other epochs in history, there is virtually no medieval image which is pure representation. We always find images associated to objects and places, live and active images immersed in situations and contexts –which has led J.-C. Schmitt (2002) to speak of medieval images as "images-body". Consequently, when trying to deal with the studying of image in medieval times, it is indispensable to analyse its uses and functions (Didi-Hubermans, 1996), its performance, efficiency, and power (Freedberg, 1989; Wirth, 1989; 2009; Dierkens, Bartholeyns, & Golsenne eds., 2010). Ultimately, it is about analysing image in relation with the ideas of action, reaction, and interaction in a precise medium and context –the rules complied with, the intention and purpose they were carried out with; the use or uses they were put to, the role they played. But, besides all that, it is necessary to treat these aspects both at the moment when they were created and afterwards, in the development of its own history, that is, their uses and functions – whether mutable or immutable– in time.

4. THE BODY AND THE IMAGE-OBJECT

Regarding the relationship between the human body and the medieval image, I shall refer to the role played by the body in the process of the appearance and creation of images-body, that is, the role of the body as a motivating agent.

According to several scholars, the body played a definitive role in the creation of the first pictures by humans (Belting, 2002, 2005; Baudrillac, 1976; Gombrich, 1966). From early on they started to use physical images in very precise conditions, situations and rituals where the body was playing the main character. To show it properly, let us focus on one of the most important of them –the cult of the dead. In Baudrillard's terms, a "symbolic exchange" between a dead body and a living image might be understood, joining in three kinds of agents: the image of the dead, in the place of the missing body; the artificial body of the image, that is, the medium; and finally the

looking body of the living. The three of them interacted in creating iconic presence.

In this sense, the Middle Ages is one of the historical periods in which the body has played a decisive role as an agent motivating the appearance of images-object in the context of the cult of the dead and funerary culture. As suggested above, death was a phenomenon especially near and familiar to medieval man. This phenomenon was gradually going up throughout all the period, so that we may speak of the development of a real macabre culture in the autumn of the Middle Ages. Works like Jorge Manrique's *Coplas a la muerte de su padre* and Francesco Petrarca's *I trionfi* attest clearly to it in the literary environment; and they run parallel to the appearance, creation and production of innumerable images-object in the visual field.

All of the medieval bodies we referred to - biological, religious, social and gestural ones - originated the appearance of material images related to the funerary world and the cult of the dead throughout the medieval period and to the macabre culture which evolved in the final medieval centuries. Therefore, it is necessary to specify that the latter, the macabre culture, was not rooted exclusively in the Holy Writ or in any other kind of writings of the Christian tradition. It was introduced in sacred places: inside churchyards and cemeteries, inside churches, as well as in all kinds of media linked to the profane world; but, according to J. Wirth (2013a), in a global way, medieval macabre culture should not be defined only as a Christian, or non-Christian, or anti-Christian theme. It is rooted in everyday living experiences of medieval civilization along with medieval man's worries, anxieties and fears.

Let us see some situations in which the body became an agent motivating images-object in relation with a funerary context. In the first place, a dead body originated the appearance of several types of visual representation: a skeleton, a body wrapped in skin, and the expression of decaying and decomposing corpses. On the one

hand, we find images of clothed bodies showing a serene and sweet appearance, as can be seen on the reliefs of tombstones which present the dead joining their hands together and with closed eyes as already participating eternal life. On the other hand, we also find images which show the dead in physical decomposing process, like, for instance, in the cadaver monument of Guillaume de Harcigny, formerly at the Franciscan Church and now at the Musée de Laon (Église des Cordeliers); the tomb of Archbishop Henry Chichele in Canterbury Cathedral (Fig. 1): or the one for Cardinal Lagrange in the Musée do Petit Palais in Avignon, who looks like a dried and mummified corpse. Finally, the dead body as a skeleton caused the graphic personification of the concept of death as a human figure which, in the autumn of the Middle Ages, played an essential role in the creation of iconographic themes like the Dance of Death.

which, according to Baudrillac, would be "the looking body of the living".

On the other side, the so called religious body gave rise, among other aspects, to the phenomenon of relics and the veneration of the bodies, or parts of them, of Christ, the Virgin, and Christian saints and martyrs. But, likewise, we may suggest that this phenomenon gave also rise to the fact that certain images became proper relics themselves. Thus, the appearance of images-relic was originated in Byzantium, from where it spread to the Medieval West. Here the first two manifestations were known as the Volto Santo and Veronica (Kessler & Wolf dir., 1998). The Volto Santo was a wood crucifix preserved in the cathedral of Lucca, in Italy, which, according to a medieval legend, had been carved by Nichodemus, one of the personages involved in bringing Christ down from the Cross. Nichodemus would have been aided by an angel. This

Fig.1 - Tomb of Archbishop Henry Chichele. Canterbury Cathedral

Besides, the dead body originated the development of acts, ceremonies and cults both liturgical and popular: funereal cortèges, burial ceremonies, laments for the death of a loved one. All of them were transferred to the visual field, and a number of images were created that graphically recreated the real experiences of the living bodies in relation with the dead bodies,

legend was widely accepted in the 12th-century medieval world. This is why copies of this work started to be produced in great number for the use of pilgrims who rushed to venerate the relic. Veronica, on its turn, had a different origin. From the second century the Vatican preserved a veil which had been used to wipe Christ's bloodstained face. By the end of the 12th century, it had come to be considered that

this veil contained the impression of Christ's face. From 1216 it began to be carried in procession once a year and was venerated by the pilgrims who came to it to pray, for which they received indulgences.

Through the funerary context just examined we can then see the importance of the body as an agent motivating and generating images. Let us see now some considerations about how that body was depicted in medieval images.

5. THE BODY IN THE IMAGE-OBJECT

Some remarks can be made when trying to establish how the body was represented in the medieval image-object. In this sense, one of the first issues to be noted is that, unlike what can be appreciated at first sight, medieval images do not reject showing the naked body (Clarck, 1956; Borzello, 2012; Wirth, 2013b). This peculiarity is in clear relation with the practices and customs themselves of this period's society, which considered nakedness as something natural. Throughout the medieval period it was, for instance, a common practice for people to bathe themselves naked, both in private houses and in public baths, if we consider regulations like that in the Charter of Teruel, in Spain, which penalised clothes stealing in public baths, except if the crime victim was, according to the text, a "proven whore" (Rodrigo Estevan & Val Naval, 2008). Christianity in general and the Catholic Church in particular accepted nakedness as something logical and natural. The theological debate held throughout the medieval period on whether resurrected bodies were clothed or naked is well known in this context. The most logical theological solution was nakedness, since after the Last Judgement the chosen ones will be free of original sin; and as being clothed is a consequence of Adam and Eve's sin, there will be no need to show people dressed (Le Goff & Truong, 2003).

This natural acceptance of nakedness, both in daily life and in Christian doctrine during the medieval period, had an immediate consequence in medieval imagery. There was no objection to the representation of

nakedness in those themes where it was considered necessary: the narrative of Adam and Eve, the narrative of Noah's drunkenness, the baptism of Christ, the Crucifixion, the martyrdom of saints, the resurrection of the dead, and the penalties of hell.

Furthermore, medieval imagery did not dodge either the blunt and realistic representation of the sick, marginalised or punished body. In relation with this, for example, it can even be remarked that both the chastising and punishing practices which were carried out in real life and those described in the Holy Writ were utterly surpassed. As J. Baschet (1993) points out,

Fig.2 - *Femme aux Serpents*. Church of the Abbey of St. Pierre in Moissac. South Portal

the abundant repertoire of earthly justice was summoned and really surpassed by medieval sadistic imagery. The image of the naked woman whose genitals are bitten by snakes to allude to the punishment for one of the seven deadly sins, lust, represented on the south portal of the French abbey of St. Peter in Moissac (Fig. 2), or the face, whose mouth is widely open, of Malchus on the image that illustrates the Biblical passage when St. Peter cuts off his ear in the wall pictures of the Aragonese church of St Julian and St. Basilissa in Bagüés (Fig. 3), are some

in the medieval epoch by placing the body in society (Schmitt, 2006; Boucher, 1965). Clothing was linked to the representation of people's social status, to the valorisation of the body, and to the distribution of individuals by gender and age (Wirth, 2003c). Because of that, the presence of the clothed body in medieval imagery was associated to showing people's social class.

Finally, in relation with the representation of the "gestural body" in medieval image-object, several aspects can be considered.
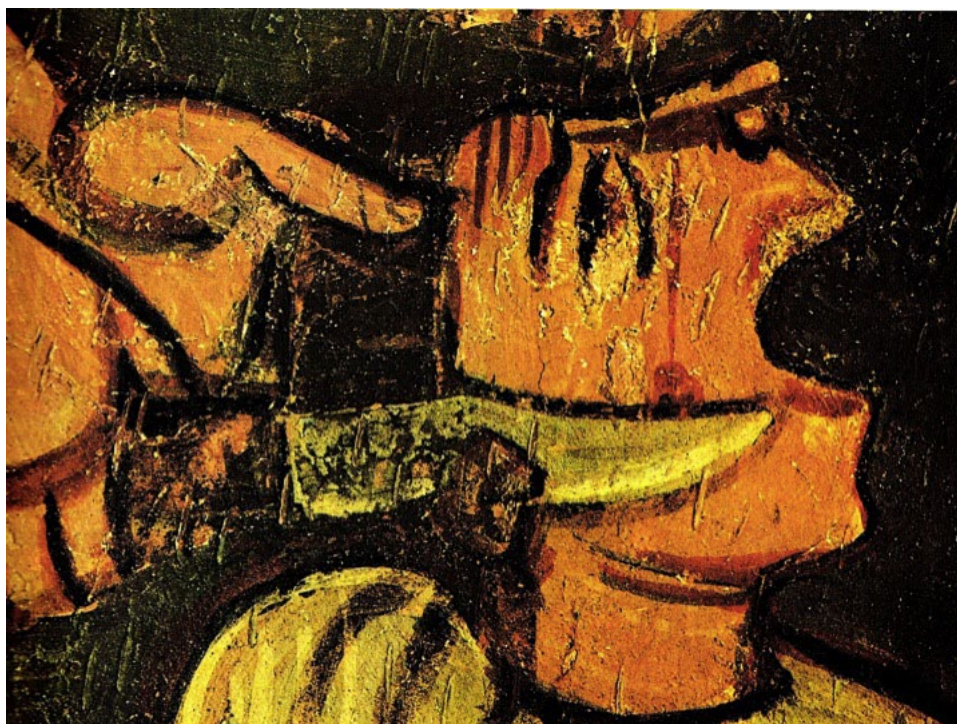

Fig.3 - *St. Peter cuts off Malchus ear*. Wall paintings from the church of St Julian and St. Basilissa in Bagüés (Aragón). Today preserved in Jaca, Diocesan Museum

of the best examples of a harshly chastised body in medieval imagery.

In the third place, regarding the representation of the "social body", we must remark that medieval imagery always showed the human body immersed in a visual prioritized universe and it did it by using several resources –the space distribution of bodies in the same image, the size of some bodies in regard with others, and through a clearly distinctive element, clothing. Like in other times, clothing played an essential role

As already said above, in the medieval period orality and gesturality were the two major vehicles through which man expressed, communicated and transmitted his messages. Spoken and gesture languages were both linked to the body as a living medium and were one of the most important meeting points between body and soul. In the case of gestures, they came to play an important paper in the visual representations of medieval culture. Gestures were the outward (foris) physical expression of the inward (intus) soul and they

were in the center of human representations in medieval times (Schmitt, 1989, 2006). They were one of the most useful "body techniques" when turning images, ideas and emotions into pictures; they linked images and pictures, internal and external representations, the so-called mental and physical images (Belting, 2005).

Yet, it is necessary to clarify a significant fact. By default, medieval image has a static character, whereas gestures generally imply movement; that is why in principle we find an apparent contradiction between gesture and image. Unlike what happens in other manifestations in which gestures also play an important role, for example in oratory or on stage, or unlike what happens in other periods of the history of art, medieval visual images are mute and motionless. They are made up of precise elements which appear to perception in a global and simultaneous way; they do not impose either a reading order or any arbitrary ideas. All the figurative elements are motionless, even if the arrangement of their members suggests movement. Due to it, any succession, duration, time, and speed reading that is made is the result of an interpretation based on a code. Thus, medieval image encodes visual gestural language, so that the viewer must see in a fleeting glimpse the successive instants in which a gesture is developed on stage or in oratory and must take into account the rest of the components of that image for its correct understanding.

6. CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, there are several kinds of body and, therefore, the approaches we can make to them when we address the medieval period are also many. All of them show the ambivalent and dual relationship, at the same time paradoxical and contradictory, that the medieval man maintained with his body. Perhaps we could speak of a paradoxical kind of Middle Ages in general, but on approaching the study of the body those contradictions seem to be more evident.

The body, on the other side, played a definitive role as a motivating agent of

images, which, at least in the Middle Ages, we have to understand as images-object with a precise use, function and performance. Therefore, the major concern was not to depict realistically and truthfully the anatomical body, but depicting it to undertake a particular performance.

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