

Keywords: Representation, Possession and Ecstasy

Alessandro Arcangeli
(Università di Verona, Italia)

To introduce a theme on which, on a variety of aspects of historical Iberian spirituality, and beyond, the essays here collected will offer many insights, I would like to propose some reflections on three keywords –representation, possession and ecstasy– in the hope that they may help to add some common ground and opportunities for debate on top of the shared scholarly traditions to which current research belongs.

To begin with, *representation* is a notion with many facets:

- the iconographical side (also central in the “Heteropías coréuticas” project led by Licia Buttà);
- the theatrical one, the object of more than one contribution to the present journal issue;
- it has also been a crucial category in the tradition and methodological reflection of cultural history –and it is from this perspective that I am going to make a few points here.

When, back in 1983, Stephen Greenblatt and Svetlana Alpers inaugurated the extremely influential Californian-based journal *Representations*, their editorial contained in clear and compact prose a number of key features implied by the choice of the term:

- firstly, the object of enquiry is at the same time cultural and social, two sides of the coin that are presented as inseparable;
- secondly, representations are by their nature a collective experience, a dimension that is remarked via clear distancing from a tradition of art history centred on the creativity of individuals;
- thirdly, the interaction between the image and the world it represents is two-way, including, on one side “the way societies, institutions, and structures of power represent themselves in language, art, and ceremonial”, on the other how they “are themselves shaped by these representations;”
- lastly, the enterprise of studying such a phenomenon can only succeed if fully interdisciplinary.¹

The first point has proved particularly crucial since cultural history has been regularly accused to ignore the real world, but leading historians like Roger Chartier have amply shown that representations and practices go hand in hand and it would be pointless to examine them in isolation.² He took the opportunity to expose this, among other occasions, in an article on the *Annales*, which also received a response by Carlo Ginzburg; both historians explored, inter alia, the historical meaning of the word, which had a particular connection with the exposition at funerals of the effigies of rulers (Chartier; Ginzburg 1991). I had the chance to discuss this category elsewhere; a valid exposition can be found in a 2010 article by Javier Gil, in homage to Peter Burke (Arcangeli; Gil).

Naturally much else on the relationship between representation and the world could be found both in art and in literary theory, only to point at two of the most obviously relevant academic discourses. I can just remind that the last chapter of David Freedberg’s *The Power of Images* is entitled “Representation and Reality,” and presents, among its hypotheses, the suggestion that from the end of the seventeenth century we came to

¹ Cf. the Editor’s Statement of *Representations* (University of California).

² A 2012 lecture that summarizes his take on “The Meaning of Representation” is available on *Books & Ideas* (Collège de France): <https://booksandideas.net/The-Meaning-of-Representation.html>.

“seeing pictures and sculptures differently from the way we see the world around us” (Freedberg, 429-441, at 436).

Let us move to say something of the other two terms, which belong to slightly different discourses and refer to a more specific family of phenomena, though one whose definition is far from being uncontroversial. Without addressing specifically the subject of dreams and visions, which has anyway obvious connections, some relevant insights have been produced within the vast scholarly output on witchcraft and related experiences. A book as Stuart Clark’s *Vanities of the Eye*, which has questioned the narrative of the triumph of sight in the age of the Gutenberg galaxy by unveiling the trouble much of contemporary culture had with vision, does not devote particular attention to *possession* (Clark 2007). The theme is amply present, however, in the same author’s previous, substantial *Thinking with Demons*, where its psychopathology, interpretation, cultural modelling and eschatology are explored within the context of his major work on the dualist mental map which he claims not only allowed for belief in the reality of witchcraft, but rather made it compulsory. The subject emerges in the final chapters of part 3 of the volume, devoted to history; and history appears to represent a meaningful dimension in the interpretation of the phenomenon of possession by early modern religious people and literati, who understood it as having presented different characteristics at different points in time, and ultimately understood it in some relation to the Last Judgment (Clark 1997, 389-434).

Still within the dominion of the scholarly literature on historical witchcraft, the last chapter of *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, edited by Brian Levack and published in 2013, is devoted to “Demonic Possession, Exorcism, and Witchcraft.” The author, Sarah Ferber, is a known specialist with particular expertise on early modern France (see also Ferber 2004). The chapter provides an overall discussion of the emerging of the paradigm of possession in this particular period, and develops, among other points, the very particular role that the medieval holy woman played as a model for the possessed –something that seems particularly relevant to mention in our current context (Ferber 2013).

Over the past twenty years, some innovative work on the history of the body (with the category of embodiment in particular) and of religious experience has cast new light on the historical occurrence of possession and ecstasy. Since this is not the place and time for a comprehensive review, a couple of key references may help identifying the emerging interpretive perspectives and the research object they have contributed to shape. I will mention in particular two books, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* by Nancy Caciola, published in 2003 as the reworking of a doctoral dissertation she had defended in 1994, and *Believe Not Every Spirit: Possession, Mysticism, and Discernment in Early Modern Catholicism* by Moshe Sluhovsky, which came out a couple of years later. That the discernment features prominently in both titles confirms the already mentioned thin threshold between divine and demonic possession; or, to put it provocatively with Sluhovsky, that “divine and demonic possessions were two facets of the same religious experience, namely, embodied encounters with the supernatural” (Sluhovsky, 17). Caciola (2003) –a scholar who had also published in *Past & Present* a remarkable study of revenants in medieval culture (Caciola 1996)– emphasised the complexity of the reception of spirit possession both within the communities in which they happened and for ecclesiastical authorities. In terms consistent with the studies of *mulieres religiosae* collected here, Caciola –as a reviewer put it – “makes important observations about many aspects of spirit possession, but her central focus is on gender. In most cases, possessed people were women, and she traces the complex ways in which categories of gender, conceptions of physiology, and possession were intertwined in medieval thought. Since, ultimately, spirit possession

involved the disruption of individual identity, women were more prone because they were held to have less firmly established identities than men. Also physically, because the female body was held to be imperfectly formed and more porous than the male body, and because possession was believed to involve the physical penetration of foreign spirits into the body, women were more susceptible to both divine and demonic possession than were men” (Bayley 2004). Or, to quote another critic, she exposed “masculinist anxieties about the necessity of ‘border control’ for women’s bodies,” which also “could infiltrate into women’s religious expression” (Layher 2004).

In a field in which various other scholars have produced significant work, Sluhovsky has authored another classic, which brings the analysis forward to the early modern period. The structure and a distinctive approach of the book is its parallel consideration of three distinct albeit intertwining realities: possession, mysticism and the charismatic grace of discernment. While the emphasis on gender remains, a development he maps along the seventeenth century is an increasing spiritualisation, in the sense that the location of the possessing spirit was more often identified as inhabiting the soul rather than the body. What most disturbed early modern critics of the phenomena was passivity, a central element of female spirituality that by emptying the faculties could lead to the infusion of divine love, but left also the door unguarded to the intrusion of the devil. According to Sluhovsky, the practice of discernment ultimately moved to predominantly distinguish between true and feigned religious experiences (rather than between divine and demonic spirits), ending up focussing on the victims’ personalities.

Taken together, the two volumes contribute to open inspiring research perspectives. By covering two adjacent periods, they complement each other while also leaving some room for conversation and diverging emphasis. As Caciola’s review of Sluhovsky reveals, for instance, his presentation of demonic possession and exorcism as frequent and unremarkable occurrences during the period help underscoring the ubiquity of the supernatural, and “exorcisms must often have provided a diversion for crowds of spectators in an age when entertainment and public action were largely overlapping categories” (Caciola 2008); nevertheless, the reviewer wonders if the author has gone too far in normalising the phenomenon, running the risk to underestimate the trauma of the experience.

The fact that in the thirteenth century female mysticism was regarded among the Church’s most effective instruments in the fight against heresy, whereas by the end of the Middle Ages it was more likely to be mistrusted, is analysed by Dyan Elliott, in *Proving Woman* (Elliott 2004), in connection with the spread of the inquisitional procedure and its emphasis on both sacramental and judicial confession, thus showing the heuristic advantages of studying sanctity and heresy together. Considering that the same author is also a specialist in the history of sexuality, it makes sense that her subsequent *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell* (Elliott 2012) explored, over a longer time span, the development of bridal mysticism, which witnessed a progressive somatisation of female spirituality and included ecstatic consummations and phantom pregnancies, as well as potentially concerning intimacy with confessors.

Given the various aspects and layers of interpretation (first of all, in their own time) that all these phenomena allow, the contexts in which they have been set and studied by a variety of scholars are multiple, and comprise, for example, mental disorders, which have been investigated in the interaction between different cultural groups and by reconsidering the boundaries between the mental, the social and the physical order (Katajala-Peltomaa and Niiranen).

To finish with our keywords, *ecstasy* presents obvious overlapping with possession but also a broader semantic coverage. It too is connected with the history of witchcraft, if

we solely remember that *Ecstasies* is the title of the English translation of Carlo Ginzburg's *Storia notturna* (Ginzburg 1989). On the other hand, that was a book in which the Italian historian put forward his bolder claim for a connection of witchcraft with shamanism –an approach that has led to some controversy.³ If we look at the definition provided by the current edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* we can easily identify the main characteristics of a religious experience as rooted in its Greek etymology (“to stand outside of or transcend [oneself]”) and displaying a fairly standard set of stages (purgation, purification, illumination and unification). The subject has been studied by much comparative research on the world's religions; however, a recent volume (McDaniel) complains about its marginalization as a freak reality not regarded as deserving serious academic scrutiny. According to the author, current mainstream religious studies focus on difference and conflict while denying any interest for similarities across cultures and, as well as trivialising ecstatic states, they criminalise and pathologise them.

Overall, the phenomena in question continue to offer cultural history a stimulating challenge for interpretation, which has been recently faced as best in the perspective of the study of lived religion and may be considered as part of an agenda of history of experience, capable to merge the consideration of emotions and senses (Boddice and Smith).⁴

³ See also now, on the somewhat related problem of the historical plausibility of lycanthropy, the discussion between Ginzburg and Bruce Lincoln, who calls for a much more contextualised interpretation of the Livonian trials' documentation, and John Gallagher's recent revisiting of the debate in the *London Review of Books*: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v44/n07/john-gallagher/where-wolf>.

⁴ [Lived religion](#) is in fact the topic of one of the research groups in which the Academy of Finland Centre of Excellence in the History of Experiences ([HEX](#)) at Tampere University is articulated. It is understood “as a performance of faith and religion, which may include the subconscious and the unintentional. It enables an analysis of one of the mechanisms that connect individuals to society and personal experiences to structures of social reality.” The group is co-directed by Raisa Maria Toivo and Sari Katajala-Peltomaa, who also coedited a recent volume in the HEX book series c/o Palgrave (Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo), available on open access.

Works Cited

- Arcangeli, Alessandro. "Fare storia di rappresentazioni." In Daniela Carpi & Sidia Fiorato eds. *Iconologia del potere. Rappresentazione della sovranità nel Rinascimento*. Verona: Ombre Corte, 2011. 33-44.
- Bailey, Michael D. [Review of Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*.] *American Historical Review* 109 (2004): 964-965.
- Boddice, Rob & Mark Smith. *Emotion, Sense, Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- Caciola, Nancy. "Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture." *Past & Present* 152/1 (1996): 3-45.
- . *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003.
- . [Review of Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit*.] *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 3/2 (2008): 227-230.
- Chartier, Roger. "Le monde comme représentation." *Annales ESC* 44/6 (1989): 1505-1520. Trans. "The World as Representation." In Jacques Revel & Lynn Hunt eds. *Histories: French Constructions of the Past*. New York: New Press, 1995. 544-558.
- Clark, Stuart. *Thinking with Demons. The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- . *Vanities of the Eye. Vision in Early Modern European Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Elliott, Dyan. *Proving Woman. Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004.
- . *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200-1500*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
- Ferber, Sarah. *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern France*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- . "Demonic Possession, Exorcism, and Witchcraft." In Brian Levack ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 575-592.
- Freedberg, David. *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Gallagher, John. "[Where wolf?](#)". *London Review of Books* 44/7 (2022).
- Gil, Javier. "Sobre los límites de la representación." *Arbor* 186/743 (2010): 461-465.
- Ginzburg, Carlo. *Storia notturna*. Turin: Einaudi, 1989. Trans. as *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*. London: Hutchinson Radius, 1990.
- . "Représentation: le mot, l'idée, la chose." *Annales ESC* 46/6 (1991): 1219-1234. Trans. as "Representation: The Word, the Idea, the Thing." In his *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. 63-78.
- Ginzburg, Carlo & Bruce Lincoln. *Old Thiess, a Livonian Werewolf. A Classic Case in Comparative Perspective*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020.
- Katajala-Peltomaa, Sari & Susanna Niiranen eds. *Mental (Dis)Order in Later Medieval Europe*. Leiden: Brill, 2014.
- Katajala-Peltomaa, Sari & Raisa Maria Toivo eds. [Histories of Experience in the World of Lived Religions](#). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.
- Layher, William. [Review of Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*.] *Renaissance Quarterly* 57 (2004): 1460-1462.
- McDaniel, June. *Lost Ecstasy: Its Decline and Transformation in Religion*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Sluhovsky, Moshe. *Believe Not Every Spirit: Possession, Mysticism, and Discernment in Early Modern Catholicism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.