DIZZYING VISIONS.
ST. TERESA OF JESUS AND THE EMBODIED VISUAL IMAGE

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With the loss of bodily control come more powerful ways of seeing – or so it is suggested by a remarkable engraving [Fig. 1] produced in Rome by the French printmaker François Spierre in the 1660’s. The Spanish Carmelite reformer and writer Teresa of Jesus (1515–1582) is shown in a pose that recalls her many accounts of struggling with her physicality as she entered a visionary state: body twisting around while seated, head rolling back, arm outstretched as if loosing all sense of her surroundings. It is telling that unlike most images of mystics, St. Teresa does not look directly at the vision itself, a frenzied scene of death and destruction played out for the viewer behind her. A still discernible contour to the right of the saint suggests that her pose was altered and that initially she faced the scene of massacre. Now she spins backwards and upwards, pulled towards a glow of white light that gently filters through the dark clouds. The white light does nothing to dispel the strong shadow cast over St. Teresa’s eyes by the surmounting cloud, indicating that whatever its effects, these do not pertain to the sense of sight.

As her reflective writings indicate, St. Teresa sought to disassociate visionary experience from the physical act of seeing, and for this very reason she offers remarkable accounts of alternative ways of seeing. To quote some typical examples:

The kind of vision about which your Reverence asked me is as follows. She sees nothing, either inwardly or outwardly, for the vision is not imaginary. Yet without seeing anything, the soul understands what it is, and it is pictured to her more clearly than if she were to see it, save that no exact picture is presented to her. It is as if a person were to feel that another is close beside her; and though, because of the darkness, he cannot be seen, she knows for certain that he is there [...] .¹

Fig. 1. François Spierre, St. Teresa’s Vision of the 40 Jesuit Martyrs, engraving, ca. 1660.