
This collection of essays by the art historian and scholar of religious visual culture David Morgan represents another well-presented installment of an ongoing project. For many years, Morgan has worked toward developing a cultural-anthropological approach to the study of religious art, first, by broadening the subject matter ‘downward’ to encompass religious visual culture, and second, by integrating it into the study of material culture, emphasizing the role of images as objects. With this volume, Morgan emphasizes a third dimension inspired by phenomenological approaches in anthropology: sensory engagement with images. In so doing, he construes vision as action and the act of seeing as embedded in other cultural practices that together constitute the performance of the sacred. This argument is familiar from his previous works, however, here Morgan focuses more on the embodied nature of vision, the complex of sensorimotor input, cognitive processing, and emotional arousal from which pious acts of seeing cannot be analytically isolated. He makes very clear, however, that the human biological organism is deeply imprinted by society and is careful not to make his turn toward the body (and the potentially universal capacities it contains) one that ignores the forces of collective life. Building on Talal Asad’s and Robert Orsi’s calls for viewing the religious as a set of (power) relationships, Morgan always places seeing bodies in social fields, engaging with objects and with other people, who together generate an emotive flow between them, or “visceral connections,” which he interprets (following Émile Durkheim) as the social source of an experience of the sacred, ranging broadly from mystical visions of the Baroque era to performing the pledge of allegiance to the American flag.

The book’s eight essays are grouped into two parts. Part one is dedicated to exploring the relations between “culture’s two bodies” (the bodily organism and society) as it manifests in historical shifts in practices of seeing. In the first essay, Morgan expands the conventional notion of ‘embodiment’ to include participation in the social body. Furthermore, he develops a theory of vision centered on the ‘gaze,’ which he defines as a “way of seeing.” Only toward the end of the book does Morgan make the connection between the embodied and at the same time socialized nature of visual routines and Marcel Mauss’ seminal text on the “techniques of the body,” but this spirit is present throughout. Modes of seeing, being seen, as well as internalizing the power relations and social control that being seen entails are theorized in contrast to Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault as “re-embodiment,” the self-objectification fundamental to the formation of all social bonds. The gaze is not always only about shaming and disciplining the body,
but also about connecting with others and forging a community; vision can be
guided by the emotions of desire, sorrow, and devotion as well. The reader
acquainted with Morgan’s previous work will find much familiar territory covered
in the rest of the first half of the book, with excellent analysis of the social dynam-
ics of the visual field and the capacity of images to co-create worlds and commu-
nity identity.

The second part focuses on the interplay of vision with the other outward
senses, the inner senses of imagination and dreams, and with feelings. In my view,
the chapters that most effectively argue for the “embodied eye” are those linking
vision with the outward senses. The essay on the devotion to the Sacred Heart of
Jesus explores the way images invite and promise tactile engagement (or not) and
thus awaken desire (or not). Morgan analyzes how the ‘power of the image’ is grad-
ually reined in, which corresponds to broader theological currents. Jesuit promot-
ers of the cult could draw on Aristotelian theories of the soul to legitimate images
of Jesus holding his actual heart in his hand, offering it to the viewer as the physical
seat of his emotions, his love for them. Critics, however, objected to this dismem-
bering and by the nineteenth century, the standard image of the Sacred Heart
showed it planted firmly on Jesus’ chest. This change shifted the focus to Jesus’
etire person and to his countenance, engaging the viewer in a sympathetic gaze as
friend or father, rather than offering a material part of his body in an erotic gesture
deriving from the cult’s origins in Baroque mysticism. The literalism of the earlier
image is thus converted to metaphor, and finally, in images of the twentieth cen-
tury, to symbol, when Jesus’ gesture toward his chest is one toward himself, as the
heart has been completely removed from sight and thus from potential tangibility,
from “interactive appeal.” Morgan makes a convincing argument for the Jesuit-
Jansenist debate over the Sacred Heart devotion being rooted in differing material
and bodily practices, an important complement to studies on the shifts in secular
theories of the soul, the heart, and the mind, which are taking place at the same
time.

Hearing and seeing are discussed together in the penultimate chapter, in which
Morgan elaborates on a compelling argument touched on in earlier works: sup-
pression of any given form of mediation—for example, of the image in icono-
clasm—is counterbalanced by the augmentation of an alternative form whose
effectiveness is enhanced by that suppression. The term Morgan proposes for
analyzing such interdependencies of the senses in embodying the encounter
with the divine is “sublation”: cancelling certain aspects of bodily experience
while preserving them, pushing them to the background, making them only appar-
ently absent. With examples from Protestant imagery and the ritual practices
of listening to a sermon, prayer, and singing, Morgan shows how important the
body is for Protestants, in spite of their claims to the contrary. It is the self-effacing