

VISUAL CULTURE OF RELIGION



THE UNREPRESENTABLE

AH10220

SPECIAL TOPICS IN ART HISTORY AND VISUAL CULTURE

Visual Culture of Religion (Primer): The Unrepresentable

Introduction

This Special Topic focuses on four fundamental concepts of religion: death, the after-life, spirits, and God. In many religions and sects, these concepts are inseparable: death is the gateway to the after-life; and the after-life (or invisible world of the spirit) is the domain of the souls of the dead, spirit entities (such as angels and demons), and God (who is spirit). All four concepts are matters of faith, since not everyone believes in them, and not everyone who believes has had a direct and certifiable experience of them. Many believers in the supernatural assert that the spiritual realm (being immaterial,) lies outside of scope of empirical inquiry and, therefore, cannot be disproved by this means. Scientific materialists, for their part, contend that these concepts are entirely bogus precisely because their existence cannot be substantiated by experimentation or observation. Historically, there has been a middle ground of opinion too. Some believers have argued that the souls of the departed, along with good and evil spirits, assume objective reality or visible form and, therefore, are accessible to inquiry and provide proof of supernatural realities. Some scientists, for their part, rather than reject claims regarding, for example, near-death experiences, sightings of angels and ghosts, and visionary encounters with God, have endeavoured to explain them in psychological and physical, rather than supernatural, terms.

Unlike science, art history and the study of visual culture have made little contribution to an understanding of supernatural or paranormal phenomena. This is surprising, given the range of visual material relating to this subject. For example: while the fate of the individual consciousness at death is unperceivable, our response to dying, death, and the dead is very visible, manifest in a variety of

preparative and commemorative artefacts; collectively, ghosts, angels, demons, and fairies have a substantial visual heritage; and while the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic religions consider God is invisible, Christian art is replete with material and visionary images depicting the deity. Thus, whether one is convinced by or sceptical of any or all of the claims made for supernatural images, they comprise a body of material for worthy of study.

Description

Through a series of related inter-active lectures and seminars, this Special Topic examines the visual culture of the supernatural within art historical, historical, social, theological, and literary contexts from the medieval period to the present day, concentrating on the Judaeo-Christian tradition. It addresses the status of apparitions as visual culture and the problems encountered in their study, and how the imagination and representation of the invisible world of the spirit has developed in the relationship to media, visual language, ideas, and other descriptive genre. In these ways, the topic serves as a primer to the concepts, theories, and methodologies associated with the study of the Visual Culture of Religion in general.

Aims

The topic aims to:

- introduce and study imagery and artefacts associated with several related manifestations of supernatural or spiritual phenomena within a specified time-frame and tradition
- contextualise the study within a broad visual, religious, scientific, and literary framework
- thereby, introduce key ideas, approaches, divergent opinions, and techniques to studying the visual culture of religion

Learning Outcomes

On completing the topic the student should be able to:

- demonstrate a general comprehension of the relationship of different types of imagery depicting supernatural or spiritual phenomena one to another and to the broader history of art, visual culture, and cultural ideas
- apply a limited number of methods to the study of specific images and artefacts in an informed and critical manner

Syllabus

The syllabus will be chosen from the following:

1. Death Art: Preparation, Process, and Commemoration
2. Dead or Alive?: Perceptions, Delusions, and Descriptions of Ghosts

3. Demons and Fairies: The Iconography of Alterity
4. *Deus Pictura*: The Iconoclast Controversy
5. Defacing Deity: The Iconography of Profanity
6. 'Agony in the Garden': The Visions of Evan Roberts

Bibliography

Many of these books are rare and available only at the National Library of Wales:

R. N. Ashley, *The Complete Book of Devils and Demons* (London: Robson Books, 1997).

Richard Baxter, *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits, Fully Evinced by Unquestionable Histories of Apparitions and Witchcrafts* (London: T. Parkhurst, 1691).

Augustine Calmet, *The Phantom World: The Philosophy of Spirits, Apparitions, Etc.* (London: Richard Bentley, 1850).

Claire Fanger, *Conjuring Spirits: Texts and Traditions of Medieval Ritual Magic*, Magic in History Series (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999).

John Ferriar, *Toward a Theory of Apparitions* (London: Warrington, 1813).

R. C. Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead: A Cultural History of Ghosts* (London: Junction Books, 1982).

Bernard Gittleson, *Intangible Evidence* (London: Simon & Shuster, 1987).

Rosemary E. Guiley, *The Encyclopaedia of Ghosts and Spirits* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2000).

Peter Haining, *Ghosts: The Illustrated History* (London: Treasure Press, 1987).

Edward Langton, *Supernatural: Spirits, Angels, and Demons, From The Middle Ages to The Present Time* (London: Rider & Co., 1934)

Andrew Mackenzie, *Apparitions and Ghosts: A Modern Study* (London: Arthur Barker Ltd, 1971).

David Robinson, *Beautiful Death: The Art of The Cemetery* (New York/London: Penguin Studio, 1996).

Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

Montague Summers, *Witchcraft and Black Magic* (London: Arrow Books, 1974).

Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973).