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## 6.2 Incarnate Word

### Incarnate Word: Verbal Image, Body Image, and the Rhetorical Authority of Saint Catherine of Siena

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*Enculturation* 6.2 (2009): <http://enculturation.gmu.edu/6.2/fleckenstein>

They left the house and fearlessly preached my message by proclaiming the teaching of the Word, my only-begotten Son. . . . It did not worry them to go before the tyrants of the world to proclaim the truth to them for the glory and praise of my name.

St. Catherine, *Dialogue* 136

“Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence” (1 Timothy 2:11-12). So writes Paul in his first epistle to Timothy, articulating a role for women that hearkens back to Eve’s original sin. Eve was deceived by words, and, in the grip of that transgression, she uses her voice, her body, to persuade Adam to a like sin. Thus, the command from Paul is to subdue a woman’s voice as a means of subduing her body. Fourteenth-century mystic Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), however, disrupted this dictate, choosing to follow God’s instructions to mirror the holy disciples and fearlessly preach his message (*Dialogue* 136). Political activist, itinerant preacher, and advisor to popes, Catherine acquired religious power by crafting a multifaceted image event involving verbal images and body image. In this essay, I dissect the image event that undergirds this medieval mystic’s religious authority, arguing that she came to power by crafting a visual spectacle out of image-carrying words and her own body.

An image event is a visual performance, scripted or spontaneous, that carries persuasive power. It encompasses visual, linguistic, technological, and phenomenological (i.e., experiential) elements. Generally associated with the twentieth-century rise of mass media, especially television, image events are also important to persuasion throughout Western history. Catherine illustrates this. By means of her intricate interweaving of verbal image and body image, Catherine created a powerful medieval image event, highlighting the degree to which women, even those barred from discursive and nondiscursive expression, have consistently challenged a culture’s dominant visual and linguistic conventions to carve out spaces for rhetorical authority and thereby effect change in the world. I deliberately refer to Catherine’s image event rather than image *events* to emphasize that the saint’s entire body of work—her visual discourse across all her writing and preaching, her service to the poor, and her physical acts of penance—combine to shape an image event of her life. Catherine *is* the image event, the nexus point at which visual discourse, image, technology of production and circulation, and experience merge.

To illustrate the confluence of image event and rhetorical authority, I begin with the dominant way of seeing that characterized the culture within which Catherine was immersed. Catherine derived rhetorical authority from the fusion of verbal image and body image, text and life, because of the way of seeing dominant during the Middle Ages. Any image event is nested within a culture’s prevailing mode of perception, and the mode of perception that organized medieval life and knowledge was identification. With identification as my visual context, I then turn to Catherine’s use of visual discourse in her religious writing, particularly the *Dialogue*, a mystical conversation between God and Catherine. Through rich images of the body, she creates a visual discourse that challenges the textual conventions of a patriarchal, misogynistic age. Next, I address Catherine’s use of physical display. Her vivid visual discourse was insufficient in and of itself to garner her power. Catherine authorized her textual images of the body by ruthlessly disciplining and displaying her own physical body, using her bodily austerities to endow her verbal images with mystical power. Enacted within the visual regime of identification, visual discourse fused with body to become words made flesh, enabling Catherine to become her own image event and, in that becoming, to acquire the power to persuade the papacy.

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## The Medieval Regime of Identification

And if anyone should ask me what this soul is, I would say: She is another me, made so by the union of love.

Dialogue 181

Canonized in 1461, proclaimed a Patroness of Italy in 1939, and elected in 1970 as the first woman Doctor of the Catholic Church, Catherine gained and wielded the influence that she did via two related dynamics: she defied the patriarchal conventions of the Middle Ages that dictated her silence and her invisibility by subverting the language conventions of the age, and she authorized that subversion through the systematic disciplining of her body. She literally lived her words, becoming, like the Christ she worships, “incarnate Word” (54). Born in 1347 to a well-to-do dyer in Siena, Italy, Catherine experienced her first vision at the age of 6, became a Dominican tertiary at 18, self-cloistering herself in her home and initially “devoting her life to asceticism, penance, and contemplation” (Lagorio 184). Then, another vision at 21 resulted in Catherine’s decision to abandon her self-imposed isolation to embrace an unprecedented life of preaching and service. From this point until her death at 33, Catherine “combined the highest reaches of the mystical life with active participation in the world, as a teacher, reformer, counselor, and apostle” (184). She took on unorthodox roles many of her contemporaries perceived as “scandalous” for a non-cleric and especially for a woman (Noffke, “Catherine” 7; Fatula 2). Through her written work and her service, she became a “spiritual advisor, peacemaker, and admonitory counselor to secular and ecclesiastical rulers and . . . a leader in the *santo passaggio* cause,” the effort to return the papal seat to Rome from France (Lagorio 184). During this time and in pursuit of her spiritual goals, Catherine authored over 382 letters, 26 prayers, and the *Dialogue*, a rich and deceptively straightforward colloquy between her soul and God, which she called simply *Il Libro*, *The Book* (185). Finally, in the last years of her life, Catherine undertook the reform of the Dominicans, “to stem the corruption in the Church and in the secular world” (185), a process that continues to this day.

Acting in the world by creating a visual discourse rich with embodied imagery and by embodying that discourse in her own life, Catherine became an image event. However, that authorization of verbal imagery through body imagery was only possible because of the scopic regime of identification governing the Middle Ages. Any image event occurs within the context of a visual (as well as a discursive) epistemology. To see requires more than physiology, more than light entering through the pupil and hitting an array of cones and rods. It also requires what Martin Jay calls a “scopic regime:” the tacit cultural rules of differing times, places, and people that enable a community to see some things and not others. A scopic regime consists of visual conventions, such as see-er/object relationship, image/word relationships, and object/space relationships, that determine *how* and *what* we see. As Jay explains, the boundaries between the physiological and the cultural components of vision are permeable, entangling vision and visibility, defined as “the distinct manifestations of visual experience in all its possible modes” (*Downcast Eyes* 9). Thus, a particular regime functions as a lens or screen that selects some aspects of reality for perception by deflecting others (Burke 45). Two characteristics of scopic regimes are central to my argument: its sociality and its linkage to cultural change. First, the construction of and reliance on a scopic regime confirms and solidifies an individual’s membership in a particular community. To speak in “outlandish way,” i.e., contrary to the conventions of a “land,” is to court ostracism and charges of insanity. To see that which no one else sees is also to court the same marginalization. An individual’s way of speaking *and* way of seeing must adhere to the conventions of the community. No less than language, “[v]ision is a social practice, and it needs to be understood as such” (Levin 14). A scopic regime highlights the social and cultural aspects of vision. A specific way of seeing, like a specific discourse formation, is objectified and legitimated through the institutionalization of social structures, including architecture, city design, social rites, rituals, myths, and roles serving to define and unify a community. Second, a scopic regime reveals the reciprocity between changes in cultures and changes in scopic regimes. For example, the rediscovery and codification of perspective in the sixteenth century, which constitutes a perceptual shift, is coupled with cultural reorganization. Minute or radical changes in institutionalized social structures—architecture, social rites, role, and so forth—reflect (and were caused by) this change in the prevailing mode of perception.

Both aspects of a scopic regime implicate image events because how one sees is inextricably drawn from what one sees. Without a doubt, image events occur within all scopic regimes. However, the constitution of an image event, the power accorded to that image event, and the experience of the image event are reciprocally tied

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to particular scopic regimes. This complex relationship accounts for the historical fluidity of image events. Like cultures, image events shift in tandem with scopic regimes. For example, when Guy Debord proposed his concept of image-object in the mid-twentieth century, he was responding to a Western culture just beginning to feel the effects of its own mass mediation, especially as shaped by television. This mass mediation was coupled with a ratcheting up of consumerist habits in a post-World War II feeding frenzy. These two influences intertwined with myriad supportive elements to foster a way of seeing that Debord calls spectacle, and it is within the context of spectacle as a scopic regime that Debord's image event gains its identity. As Debord explains, spectacle is "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (12), a social relationship inextricable from modern conditions of production. Spectacle is a "visible negation of life—and as a negation of life that has invented a visual form for itself" (14). Bound by passivity and tied to the failure of the moment, image events within the context of spectacle subordinate the word, undermining in the process agency and civic engagement. But scopic regimes change, and as that happens image events change. Thus, on the cusp of the twenty-first century, with the pressure of new technologies, new economies, new subcultures, and new cultural visions, the regime of spectacle is challenged by the regime of performance. The intense interactivity of new media technologies and the growing influence of such phenomena as wikis, community digital fiction, and World Wide Web role-playing games have fostered the evolution of a performative way of seeing. Image events within that scopic regime differ radically from events in spectacle. Within the regime of performance, the see-er is an active, agentive participant in the image event, constructing and construing meaning out of images (Stafford). The different experience of the image event along with the different constitution and distribution of the image event is reciprocally linked to the new scopic regime.

Central to my argument concerning Catherine of Siena is that the scopic regime within which her image event is nested is markedly different from the scopic regimes that permeate Western twentieth and twenty-first century cultures. As various scholars have pointed out, the way of seeing dominating the Middle Ages was a participatory way of seeing that merged viewer and object so that knowing *about* was inseparable from identifying *with*. It was perception as identification. Owen Barfield notes:

The background picture then was of man as a microcosm within the macrocosm. It is clear that he did not feel himself isolated by his skin from the world outside of him to quite the same extent that we do. He was integrated or mortised into it, each different part of him being united to a different part of it by some invisible thread. In his relation to his environment, the man of the middle ages was rather less like an island, rather more like an embryo, than we are. (78)

Key to this embryonic way of seeing was the power of analogical thinking. According to French philosopher Michèle Le Dœuff, the Middle Ages were characterized by metaphorical or analogical thinking: thinking through and with images wherein the similarities between objects were conceived in terms of metaphor—my love *is* a red, red, rose—rather than in terms of similes—my love is *like* a red, red rose. Within this visual epistemology, metaphor is not merely a trope. It is reality. Thus, eating the meat of walnuts, which bore an uncannily similarity to the physical appearance of the human brain, was believed to increase intellectual acumen. Shaped by this highly engaged, highly imagistic way of knowing, people during the Middle Ages developed a horizon of expectations that predisposed them to see aspects of reality that confirmed their belief in the interrelation of physical, spiritual, and emotional realities as well as the interrelation of the individual with the universal. They were immersed in seeing and knowing as identification.

Perhaps the most quotidian example of this scopic regime is the Catholic concept of the Eucharist, which weds the Holy Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), the Incarnation (God made man through Christ), and humanity. As God tells Catherine in the *Dialogue*, union with God through Christ is more intimate than the union between human body and human soul. When the believer is one with God through Christ, the soul shares "the very being of this Word [Christ]," shares the "vital sap of vine [God]" (61). And a vehicle of that union was Holy Communion (205-12). According to the tenets of Catholicism, worshippers during Holy Communion experience a literal consubstantiation with the blood and body of Christ and, through Christ, with God and heaven. At the heart of this mystery is identification: God joined with man through Christ; man joins with God through the consumption of Christ's body and blood. Catherine repeatedly highlights this fusion, and, for her, Christ is the ultimate image of the promise of identification. He is the "union of divine nature with human"; through Christ "God was made

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human and humanity was made God" (50). What results from the regime of identification in this context is a material world that is co-present with a spiritual world, a material world that can be (perhaps even should be) one with the spiritual. As God tells Catherine, "I am to them a peaceful sea with which the soul becomes so united that her spirit knows no movement but in me" (147).

A scopic regime, however, involves more than images, more than selecting and deflecting stimuli to evoke one image and not another. A scopic regime also involves a particular relationship between image and word, and this image-word relationship in identification is crucial to the constitution (and the influence) of Catherine's image event. Ways of seeing and ways of speaking are reciprocal. For instance, the regime of spectacle that Debord theorizes subordinates word to image, suffocating rhetorical agency. The regime of performance relies on a dialectical relationship between word and image. The regime of identification, however, is characterized by reflection: word and image mirror each other. Word and image are the other. Nowhere is this more clearly evident than in phenomenon of the "textual mirror" where visual and verbal experiences merge.

Mirror metaphors were central to the religious thought and vocabulary of the Middle Ages. During these centuries, the mirror was a model of transformation. A unique textual phenomenon of medieval politics was the "mirror of princes" or "mirror for princes," which were didactic conduct manuals setting forth ideal behavior for rulers in a range of situations. Word and deed fuse in these texts, for the words provide verbal images that the ruler's deeds were to manifest in corporeal form. The ultimate model, the most authoritative textual mirror, was the Bible, the "unstained mirror" of Proverbs 27:7 that was intended to educate man by providing a sanctified image for man to reflect. Augustine reinforces the authority of the Bible as the unstained mirror. By its shine, he avers, man will know who he is (i.e., his besmirched state) and who he can be (i.e., his transformed state). Bible as textual mirror, then, embraced two elements: the actual act of physical reflection (seeing in the mirror who one actually is) and the act of self-reflection (seeing how one can become the image in the mirror) (Melchior-Bonnet 109). Thus, Paul's words to Timothy with which I opened this essay provide a textual mirror, an unstained mirror, a model of silent, subjected women that women were to use as reflection and self-reflection.

Within this visual context, Catherine came to power, and she did so through her creation of a unique image event that derived its authority from the scopic regime within which it was lodged as well as from the nature of the image event itself. Through the regime of identification, Catherine fuses two phenomena—the textual image of embodiment and the physiological act of embodiment that mirrors that textual image. By reflecting—and reinforcing—embodied textual images with her own body, Catherine sculpts a spiritually and politically potent image event. Catherine's *Dialogue* thus becomes a textual mirror, one that alters the image of what women can be and should be by providing verbal images of women's experiences that can be actualized in corporeal form. "*In the gentle mirror of God,*" Catherine says in ecstasy, "*she [the soul] sees her own dignity. . .she is the image of God*" (48, italics in original). God tells the soul: "I had made you in my image; now I took your images by assuming a human form" (46). As Catherine reveals, in becoming the image of God, a woman can become God and as God speak with the voice of God.

### **Verbal Imagery: The Body in the Text**

I want them not only to receive the milk of tenderness that I poured out before their souls, but so to attach themselves to the breast of my Truth [Christ] that they may receive meat as well as milk.

Dialogue 132

The scopic regime of identification provides the background, the frame, for Catherine's multifaceted image event. The next aspect of her image event I explore is textual: the visual discourse Catherine creates challenges the textual conventions of a patriarchal, misogynistic age. I begin with the textual because it is through her discourse—her letters, her prayers, her itinerant preaching, and the *Dialogue*—that Catherine influenced laity and prelates. Characteristic of her writing is her reliance on verbal imagery. Thus, understanding the intricacy of Catherine's image event and its resultant persuasive power requires approaching her mystical language as image. I focus exclusively on the *Dialogue*, her longest and most significant mystical text, because it presents a densely textured illustration of Catherine's reliance on verbal images. Two patterns highlight the unconventionality of Catherine's iconoclastic verbal images: the imagistic logic of embodiment by which the *Dialogue* coheres and specific corporeal images of birth and motherhood that establish women's bodies as a site

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of grace and dignity.

Catherine imagistically subverts patriarchal authority through her reliance on embodied metaphors throughout the *Dialogue*. Also known as the *Book of Divine Doctrine* or *Book of Divine Providence*, the *Dialogue* is a result of an ecstatic vision that Catherine experienced over a five-day span. She dictated her vision in part to her secretaries and refined that performance through her own writing. The *Dialogue* consists of 10 sections and 167 chapters, all of which recount Catherine's mystical conversation with God. It begins with four petitions: Catherine's pleas to enlarge her own self-knowledge, which is the first step to love and redemption; to reform of the Holy Church; to offer mercy to the undeserving world; and to extend divine providence. The *Dialogue* does not address these petitions linearly; instead, it addresses them in layers, with responses to one petition folding back repeating key ideas and key images as another petition is addressed. What becomes evident through this layering is the subtle logic of identification that organizes the spiritual colloquy through levels of embodiment.

The first unconventional aspect of Catherine's visual discourse is its reliance on the multilayering of body-oriented relationships. The *Dialogue* is organized not according to an enthymemic or hypotactic logic but to the logic of analogy, central to the regime of identification. This layering operates on three reinforcing levels: the mutuality of soul and world, soul and God through embodied prayer, and soul and Christ.

Perhaps the most prevalent embodied relationship organizing the *Dialogue* concerns the mutuality of soul and world. Revelations in the *Dialogue* circle back repeatedly to the necessity of the soul's immersion in the world, in the soul being a part of the body of the world. For Catherine, the soul *is* the world. This relationship becomes a theme that unites diverse sections of the *Dialogue*. According to Suzanne Noffke, for Catherine "all grace comes through material things and events" (*Dialogue* 37n15). The soul is embodied through its participation in and with the world. No hermitage or no cloistered life dedicated to isolated acts of penance is the goal of the soul. Instead, God counsels the soul to submerge herself in the virtues which are done by means of the body. As the whole body responds to one injured part, so must the whole body of the believer respond to the injured bodies of the poor and ill. Like vessel and water, the body and the world combine into one. Acts of penance alone are not pleasing to him, God says. Rather, he calls to the soul to render to God what is due God and then to render to neighbors the debt of love, counseling and helping them according to their needs. Thus, the soul is to be engrossed with and in the body of the world. The soul is called to be a "living word" of justice and peace through such service to the body of the world.

In addition to its identification with the world, the soul almost paradoxically is called to identify with the spirit of God through the medium of continual and constant prayer. Therefore, the second relationship of embodiment that organizes various sections of the *Dialogue* is the mutuality of soul and God. The soul *is* God, and for Catherine, this mystical submersion in God is effected through highly embodied prayer. As God tells Catherine, prayer is part of the body, like the beat of the heart, as common and quotidian as breathing in and out. It is not merely ritualistic words spoken at the appropriate times throughout the day and night. Instead, prayer consists of the voluntary vocalization of word rituals at assigned times *and* of a continuous, internal, and interiorized conversation with God—part body, part spirit—that joins the body and soul with the spirit of God. Thus, Catherine is urged to enflesh, not merely speak, prayer because the body is a prayer, and the soul becomes one with God through this embodied prayer.

Finally, the third relationship of embodiment that weaves together the *Dialogue* is the soul's immersion in the body of Christ—the feet, the heart, and the mouth of Christ—in a spiritual-physical union. A central image of the *Dialogue*, which Catherine elaborates in the longest single section, is that of Christ as a literal bridge across which believers cross to God. The bridge consists of three steps analogous to three steps of faith: first the feet of Christ, then the heart of Christ, and finally the mouth of Christ (64-160). The mouth is the final spiritual step because it through the human mouth that the believer consumes the blood and body of Christ to become one with Christ and through Christ God. God tells the soul that she will find completeness in the incarnate Word. Individual metaphors of love, as in a mad romantic love in which God and soul crave one another and consummate that

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craving through union in the amorous Word, in Christ, are vividly prevalent, underscoring the wedding of soul and God through the physical-spiritual intermediary of the beloved Word.

The relationships of embodiment, resting on the analogic epistemology of the regime of identification, serve as the logic by which the *Dialogue* and Catherine's spiritual message cohere. By using and disseminating a discourse rich with layered embodied relationships, Catherine operates within the regime of identification to create a "textual mirror" that reflects back to women, as well as to church fathers, a "positive bodiliness," one that celebrates the "religious possibilities of bodiliness" (Jantzen 215). Catherine further reinforces this unconventional logic through what Noffke calls her "marvelously effective and largely original imagery" ("Introduction" 8): specific images rich with the physical senses of bodies, such as "the taste of truth" and the "hunger and desire" for God's honor and salvation permeate the text. For Catherine the physical is the spiritual. Thus, sinners on the road to redemption "vomit out the filth of their sins" (31), a physical as well as a spiritual act. The fruits of grace received from God include light, the dog/worm of conscience, the perfume of virtue, and true colors of the world. The unrepentant have by their own choosing "encrusted their hearts in a diamond rock that can never be shattered except by blood" (31).

Such images are powerful in part because of their ability to evoke the experiences of both men and women, giving credence to the argument that the *Dialogue* wielded the power it did among prelates and laity, men and women, because of the remarkable androgyny of her imagery and her representation of her soul (Forbes 124; Scott 45). A culminating image in the last section of the *Dialogue* highlights this: "Now that soul had seen the truth and the excellence of obedience with the eye of her understanding, and had known it by the light of most holy faith; she had heard it with feeling and tasted it with anguished longing in her will as she gazed into the divine majesty" (363-64). This eye of understanding (an image Catherine uses profusely), the sound of feeling and the taste of anguish are applicable to both men and women. However, that sense of androgyny is only part of the story, for Catherine's overt reliance on physiological imagery that pertains exclusively to women provides a means for women to identify with her ecclesiastical message and with spiritual authority. Two types of such verbal images are particularly illustrative of this: one set involves birth and the other motherhood.

Birth imagery infuses the *Dialogue* implicitly and explicitly, serving as a second means by which Catherine uses visual discourse to contravene the patriarchal conventions of her age. Cruelty is born; sinners conceive a liking for sin, which is an offspring of pride. Sin gives "birth to hurtful words" (34-35), while "[v]irtue, once conceived, just comes to birth" and bears "fruit" for the soul's neighbors (35). In addition, God urges the soul to offer him "constant prayer for the Church and for every creature, giving birth to virtue through your neighbors" (159). The soul "both tastes and gives birth to charity in the person of her neighbor" (137). While isolated birth imagery erupts throughout the *Dialogue*, more extended birth imagery carries crucial elements of Catherine's belief system, especially her belief in the necessity of an active life, her belief in the inseparability of the body of the world from the body of the soul.

Catherine did not advocate, nor, after her twenty-first year, did she follow, a cloistered life. Rather a repeated motif throughout the *Dialogue* (and manifested in her life) was the obligation to act in life, not retreat from life. As God tells Catherine more than once, "I am one who is pleased by few words and many works" (42; see also 94). The body must be a site of service to God; it must love and exalt God by acting like Christ so that the soul becomes in that act Christ. Birth images carry this key tenet throughout the *Dialogue*. Consider, for instance, God's words to Catherine:

If a woman has conceived a child but never brings it to birth for people to see, her husband will consider himself childless. Just so, I am the spouse of the soul, and unless she gives birth to the virtue she has conceived [by showing it] in her charity to her neighbors in their general and individual needs in the ways I have described, then I insist that she has never in truth even conceived virtue within her. (45)

A contemplative life, one spent in mental and verbal prayer, is not sufficient for a godly life. Faith must give birth to charity to one's neighbor. God has impregnated the soul, but the soul must give birth to virtue or else God remains childless. Catherine reprises this image later, reinforcing the same message: "Just as a woman

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bears a living child and presents it living to her husband, so they [believers who have undergone holy baptism] would have presented me, the soul's spouse, with living virtues" (94). Throughout the mystical dialogue, then, Catherine communicates essential ecclesiastical points by garbing those tenets in the bodies of women. What is particularly important about such a message is not the novelty of the message. Catherine's theology was conventional, not unconventional. What is important is that her conventional theology is couched in images with which women could identify themselves as Godly and Christ-like. Through this identification, then, women were called to the active life and to a spiritual life. They, too, are called to give birth to virtue, to act in the world politically and spiritually.

A second set of complex embodied images involves mothering, linking women's corporeality, disdained by the church because of Eve's sin, with spiritual growth. For instance, God tells Catherine that humility is charity's governess and wetnurse (40; 328): "she nurtures the virtue of obedience with the very same smile" (328). God and Christ are also by turns wetnurse and governess. As God reminds Catherine, "My son was your wetnurse" (52) and the soul "seeks to draw to herself the milk of my [God's] tenderness from the breasts of the teaching of Christ crucified" (134). The believer experiences an emotional union with [God's] divine nature in which she tastes milk, just as an infant when quieted rests on its mother's breast, takes her nipple, and drinks milk through her flesh. This is how the soul who has reached this final stage rests on the breast of my divine charity and takes into the mouth of her holy desire the flesh of Christ crucified. (179)

The importance of this particular image is two-fold. First, Christ and God take on feminine attributes, which means that God and Christ are not only women-like, but they are also women. This emphasizes the spiritual value of feminine embodiment. Female corporeality is rescued from the "dung heap" of Adam and associated instead with the highest glory. Second, female corporeality is the sustenance by which spirituality—charity, humility, obedience, and love—flourishes; thus, the Godly virtues are taken in with (even as) mother's milk, endowing milk and mothers with honor and dignity in this world as well in the next.

This layering of embodied imagery, especially embodied images that honor the physical nature of women, manifests the importance of a female body that is in and of the world, a body that is cocooned in the spirit of God through continuous, enfleshed prayer, and a body that is fused with the blood and flesh of Christ, enamored of the Word of God made Flesh just as God is enamored of his human creation. Deliberate reliance and focus on the very phenomenon that Church fathers scorned—female corporeality—unites grace with physical embodiment. By depending on an organizational logic of embodied relationships and embodied images within a visual regime of identification, Catherine validates the disdained body of women. Articulating her spiritual message in these terms, Catherine at the same time validates the disdained voice of women. "Cry out as if you have a million voices," Catherine writes in a letter to a prelate, "for it is silence which kills the world" (qtd. in Fatula 5). However, neither letters nor the *Dialogue* would have been heeded without the Church acknowledging Catherine's holy status during her life. Her writings are themselves authorized by the persuasive power of Catherine's own physical choices. Her textual body is certified by her physical body. Rather than word being made flesh, flesh in Catherine is made word.

### **Body Image: The Body as Text**

Just as a mirror reflects a person's face, just so, the fruit of their labors will be reflected in their bodies.

Dialogue 86

Catherine's unconventional textual imagery highlights the degree to which women, even those barred from discursive and nondiscursive expression, have consistently challenged a culture's dominant conventions to carve out spaces for rhetorical authority. The success of that challenge, however, the authority to speak through such visual discourse, derives from Catherine's visual life: her bodily penances and her ruthless use of her body in service to her "neighbors." Because the text is a mirror, the duty of the true believer is to reflect the image of Godliness lurking within that mirror and in that reflection become Godly: "You will all be made like him [Christ] in joy and gladness," God promises. "[E]ye for eye, hand for hand, your whole bodies will be made like the body of the Word my son" (85). Thus, the positive images of female embodiment linked to a spiritual life constitute a mirror that women in the Middle Ages could reflect and thereby validate their spiritual worth and further their own spiritual growth. Catherine illustrates the power of such a reflection through her decisions concerning her own physical existence. She sought to mirror physically the textual body of the *Dialogue*, thereby rendering her

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unconventional corporeal imagery holy. She created a symmetry between textual image and physiological image wherein, as God counsels the soul, the fruits of labor are reflected in her body (86). The image event that she crafts, then, unites textual signifier with the corporeal signified. Initially, that image event is an expression and enactment of her faith; then, it becomes the means by which her words are authorized in public sphere.

The physical mirroring of two images of embodiment from the *Dialogue*, images of birth and images of motherhood, as well as the three layers of embodiment—immersion in the world, immersion in God through prayer, and immersion in Christ—illustrates the ways in which Catherine, a virgin, became her own image event. To begin, Catherine immerses herself in Christ and through that fusion gives birth to virtues. The vehicle of immersion is food, or, in Catherine's case, denial of food. God tells Catherine in the *Dialogue*, "I am their [believers'] table, my Son is their food" (140), a pronouncement that Catherine takes literally to heart by seeing food as ingress into God. Food for Catherine was intricately interwoven with food from God and for God. During her early self-cloistering, Catherine practiced ritual starvation, eating only raw vegetables and a little bread. This severe fasting in her early years resulted in continued difficulties with eating throughout her entire life. It also mirrors God's words in the *Dialogue*: "The food souls feed on IS souls," God tells Catherine, and saving souls is the means by which the "soul grows fat" (140). Souls, not food, nourish souls. Therefore, the faithful should feed on souls, not food. Just as important, food for Catherine is a means of incorporating with Christ, particularly the wine and bread of the eucharist. Raymond of Capua, her confidante and biographer, claims that toward the end of her life Catherine relied almost solely on the eucharist for sustenance, consuming and becoming the body and blood of Christ. Therefore, she mirrors in her own bodily practices God words in the *Dialogue*: "When it [table of heart and spirit] is set, she [soul] finds there the food of the gentle loving Word—the sign of my honor and your salvation, for which my only begotten Son's body was opened up to give you himself as food" (177). The physiological body and the textual body align and in so doing the physiological body grants authority to the textual body. As Grace Jantzen notes, it was when women mystics fasted and became "one with Christ in the food of the eucharist that their spirituality could be taken seriously" (214).

Once fused with Christ, and carrying the mark of that fusion with the waning physical substance of her own flesh, Catherine becomes a bride of Christ and thus is able to give birth to the virtues that God commands. She steadfastly seeks to deliver herself from her selfish will so that she might labor to deliver God's spiritual virtues, and her strategies for eradicating her selfish will, especially during her self-cloistered years, marked her body. Noffke claims that Catherine made relentless ascetical demands on her body, including sleep deprivation and frequent self-flagellation ("Catherine"). Both actions, like that of ritual starvation, were visible on the body, layering Catherine's corporeal existence upon the spiritual life of the *Dialogue*. In addition, by engaging in such practices, Catherine does in fact give birth to Godly virtues, particularly that of penance, both for her own sinfulness and for that of the world. In the *Dialogue*, Catherine asks God to punish her for the sins of her neighbors, to grant her the right to suffer for the world. And suffer she does to the extent that she eventually bore the marks of the stigmata (although she asked God to hide those marks) as well as the marks of her own physical self-discipline (Raymond). The visual discourse of the *Dialogue*, then, fused with the physiological discourse of the body to create and authorize a powerful image event out of Catherine's life.

The second way in which Catherine mirrors the embodied imagery and logic of the *Dialogue* is by becoming a wetnurse to her neighbors and immersing herself in the body of the world. Following a vision at 21, Catherine abandoned her self-cloistering and used her body ruthlessly to serve the poor and plague victims in Siena. She used her shriven body to sustain the life of her neighbors, in the process putting on public display that shriven body. God tells Catherine that penance is not an end in itself. As birth leads to motherhood, so does the virtue of penance lead to service in the likeness of Christ. Christ dictated that the faithful love their neighbors. God dictates that the Catherine love and serve her neighbors, telling her repeatedly that deeds not words are pleasing to him. Catherine heeds these words by immersing herself in the world. She abandons the contemplative solitude of her teenage years to use her body mercilessly to serve the world. Deeds are a living prayer, God tells Catherine, and so she unites herself to God through the prayer of her actions. It is this early service, especially

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her devotion to plague victims in Siena between her twenty-first and twenty-third years that brought her to the attention of the head of the Dominican order who assigned Raymond of Capua to her as confessor and advisor. Then, it was Raymond who urged her to become further involved in the crises confronting the church, drawing her more fully into her itinerant ministry whose mission, in accordance with Jesus, was the healing of the world and the church through one's physical involvement with both world and church.

Neither letters nor the *Dialogue* would have been heeded without the Church acknowledging Catherine's status as a holy woman during her life. Catherine achieved this sanctified status, first, via ritual starvation to the extent that she relied almost solely on the eucharist for sustenance, consuming and becoming the body and blood of Christ. Through this self-abnegation, Catherine created a specific kind of body. Second, Catherine acquired religious authority by displaying the effects of that self-abnegation through her public accessibility. Indefatigably working with the poor, Catherine functioned as a physical presence, a visual event, in the community. Catherine authorized the textual imagery of the *Dialogue* through her bodily austerities *and* the visual display of that corporeal presence. She validated her rhetorical subversions with a body image made visible.

Both her construction of a body image based on systematic self-denial and her reliance on a visual discourse of the body intertwine with a scopic regime of identification in which observer, observed, and text merge to create a powerful and persuasive image event. This image event provided Catherine with an influence that defied the New Testament dictates silencing women. This image event offered women in the late Middle Ages a transformative image to mirror, an identity that was voiced, proactive, and physically present in the world. "Her writings mirror her person, and what we know of her life supports her writings. They are inseparable," Noffke attests ("Catherine" 2). This radical breaking of the textual mirror that Paul presents to women—the image of the silent woman, the abject woman—highlights the degree to which women have consistently challenged a culture's dominant conventions to teach, preach, and exercise authority in the world.

### **Death into Life: The Body and the Text in the Image Event**

[The broken host] is just as when a mirror is broken, and yet the image one sees reflected in it remains unbroken. So when this host is divided, I am not divided but remain completely in each piece, wholly God, wholly human.

Dialogue 207

I began my exploration of Catherine by focusing on the scopic regime prevailing during the Middle Age: the regime of identification. With this as a frame, I then analyzed the composition of Catherine's image event, from the unconventional embodied logic and images that permeate the *Dialogue* to the way in which Catherine authorizes those verbal images through the spectacle of her own bodily austerities and service. Now I come to the last facet of the complex image event Catherine fashions of her life. The extent to which Catherine's image event in and of her life succeeded in garnering her secular and ecclesiastical authority is highlighted by the continuation of that image event after her death through the wide-spread circulation of her physical image in religious painting and the identification of her spiritual message with those images. Image, text, body, and persuasive power cohere in the believer's experience of Catherine as image event.

As Chiara Frugoni observes, "The circulation of portraits of Saint Catherine helped spread her ideas, which were accepted despite the fact that she was a woman" (418). Frugoni explains that during the Middle Ages, mystical visions, physical images, and textual descriptions enjoyed a reciprocal influence: "Mystical exaltation was fueled by visions, basically composed of [mental] images, which in their turn provided the expressions with which to describe otherwise indescribable experiences" (387). Catherine reveals this feedback loop between visual and linguistic expression in the corporeal images she devised. In addition, though, "Image and description made up a language, a linguistic vehicle common to the 'biography' of a mystic—that is, the way of life proposed as a model of perfection by the writer—and its readership" (387). In other words, image and word fuse in a way of life, a conduct book for living life. Again, Catherine reveals this through her alignment of her body and her textual image in her austerities and her indefatigable charities. Finally, "mystic visions often formed the core of new iconographies" (390); visions intertwined with word and with life offer new graphic representations that then, in turn, become nexus points for believers. And so images of Catherine become an extension of Catherine-as-image-event, bearing within them the fusion of body and text, life and message, that characterized the visual discourse of the *Dialogue* and the lived life of St. Catherine.

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My exploration of St. Catherine reveals new ways of looking at image events and women's rhetorical authority in the Middle Ages. First, it emphasizes the necessity of looking at image events historically. With the unprecedented proliferation and circulations of images in the West in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, interest in the visual nature of both Western culture and the rhetoric of that culture has intensified. Image event is typically perceived as initiating in the twentieth century, a phenomenon of mass mediation. But, as Catherine reveals, image events exist throughout history, which means that the current manifestations of image events are tangled with their own history. Comprehending the ambient visual-rhetorical culture requires piecing together a historical quilt of visual-rhetorical moments, exploring the transaction among languages, cultures, technologies of production and circulation, and experiences throughout different times and places. My examination of Catherine's authority in connection with the image event she orchestrates begins that historical piecework. Catherine offers a fruitful case study of a complex visual-rhetorical transaction in Western history by highlighting the way in which imagistic language, a particular kind of discourse, is inextricable from, even constitutes in and of itself, an image event. She also reveals the necessary reciprocity between verbal image and physical image in an age when the body was sole means of producing and circulating language and images.

Second, this exploration of Catherine emphasizes the necessity of contextualizing an image event within the visual epistemology that serves to unite community and culture in a particular way of seeing and knowing. To understand the impact of the image event Catherine creates via her mystical texts and her body requires understanding the dominant visual epistemology within which any image event is lodged. Image events are composed, experienced, and endowed with power because of the dominant way of seeing that organizes life and knowledge within a single place and time. To examine an image event outside of that context elides the historicity of its evocation and hides important aspects of its constitution, circulation, and reception. This project, then, begins the process of interweaving scopic regime with a complex, multifaceted image event.

Third, this exploration of image event within the context of Catherine's life and work adds to our understanding of the complicated transaction among women, language, imagery, and power. With only a rudimentary education, Catherine was a powerful voice in an era when the fear of women's voices was linked to fear of women's original sin. Catherine's image event highlights the degree to which women, even those barred from discursive and nondiscursive expression, have consistently challenged a culture's dominant conventions to carve out spaces for rhetorical agency and act in the world. To comprehend Catherine's ecclesiastical authority in an era when women had no authority beyond the home, we need to attend not only to her words but also to the images—textual, physiological, and graphic—that she welded into a powerful image event. Thus, this leads us to ask how women in other eras, other places, might have subverted patriarchal and misogynistic power by crafting images, texts, and bodies into transformative image events.

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