

The Senses in the Writings of Hildegard of Bingen.

A Contribution to the History of the Senses

By María José Ortúzar Escudero

The above mentioned book deals with the influence of the cultural environment on sense perception as well as with the meaning of sense perception in a specific historical setting. To comprehend this influence, I focus on the relationship between the knowledge of the five senses and their operation, the norms for their correct employment, and also how the senses are actually employed in practice. I investigate this relationship in the work and life of the 12th century visionary Hildegard of Bingen.

The first part of the book concentrates on Hildegard's cultural background. Chapter One examines the charters and the annals of the monastery of Disibodenberg, where she lived for over 35 years, and the writings relevant to Jutta of Sponheim, Hildegard's *magistra*. These documents give insight into the organization of everyday life, its transformations and the prevalent ideals of piety and womanhood within the convent. In the Chapter Two I analyse how the senses are portrayed in the texts that were most significant in Hildegard's religious formation, Saint Benedict's *Rule* and the Psalter. The *Rule* defines the behaviour expected of monks and nuns, and therefore also the proper employment of the senses. The Psalter is considered an ideal source for understanding the role the senses play in the communication between human beings and God. Chapter Three addresses the conception of the senses in pre-medieval and medieval writings possibly known to Hildegard. This conception includes the working of the five senses, the correlation between the senses and the organs, the hierarchy of the senses and the distinction between spiritual and bodily senses. The place of the senses is further explored with regard to distinctive developments of the 12th century, such as the re-discovery of the 'macrocosm/microcosm' theme, the emphasis on the humanity of Christ in theology and piety, the idea of labour and action (*operatio*) as basic human traits, and the gradual consolidation of the sacramental doctrine. In this chapter I also distinguish particular thematic contexts in which the senses are likely to be discussed. This allows for the recognition of 'sense patterns' and iterative sense metaphors.

These three chapters reveal a strong correlation between the five (bodily) senses and action. Disquisitions on the five senses concentrate on the activity of the senses and their organs, and not on what is perceived by the senses. Normative texts like the *Rule of Benedict* and the *Life of Jutta* attend also to possible bodily actions, even though they aim at the shaping of the soul. However, if the (spiritual) senses are considered in their ability to experience the divine, the emphasis is on sensation. Hence, these texts are grounded on two different views of human existence. The first view is active and focuses on the relationship between *homo* and the world; the second is passive and centres on the bond between *homo* and God. This distinction is often not explicit, so that the spiritual senses are not always discernible from the bodily ones. This indistinctness rests upon the History of Salvation and the doctrine of the sacraments: The incarnated Christ took on human flesh (and its senses) and could then be perceived by the human senses. The Trinitarian God, and especially the Son, is still present and perceivable in the sacraments and its elements.

The second part of the book offers an analysis of the senses in Hildegard's first visionary work, *Sciuias*, composed between 1141 and 1151, and in her letter collection (*Epistolarium*), specifically the correspondence from 1146/7 to 1155. In both writings, the senses recurrently work as compositional and rhetorical elements; they are constitutive of Hildegard's *ars dictandi*. Her expositions on the senses and the operation of their organs, on the distinction between inner and outer senses, and also her application of typical 'sense metaphors', all demonstrate how deeply the Rupertsberg *magistra* was indebted to the monastic and canonical traditions. Her originality when dealing with traditional subjects is

most evident in her ‘sense associations’: Hildegard consistently uses sense organs, as well as nouns and adjectives relating to the senses, for describing God (Father), Christ, Lucifer, and their communication with human beings.

The senses also characterize human actions, particularly the sins. She resorts to sensations to illustrate essential Christian subjects such as the sacraments, the difference between the monastic and the clerical way of life, and the Church itself. In addition, the letters shed light on her position as a *persona publica*: Not only does she present herself as a recipient of the Godhead, but her correspondents, too, recognize her divine gift and describe it through sensations.

Hildegard’s use of sense expressions has at first glance a didactical function: As the reader (or hearer) associates God, Lucifer, and human actions with specific senses or sense organs, the reader (or hearer) relates these with his or her own body. This association makes it easier to comprehend and retain the actions of the various key figures in the History of Salvation as well as the actual human condition. A closer look at these ‘sense patterns’, however, reveals the differences between the agents in the History of Salvation: While the visionary describes God and the devil in their actions, Christ is characterized as substance (for instance, as food or as fragrance). In contrast to God the Father and Lucifer, Christ is directly knowable through the senses. This characterization of the divine reflects an understanding of experience, for which there is no strict difference between the ideas about the Son of God – as described, for instance, in the Gospel – and the sensory knowledge of His presence, as in the Eucharist. The line between abstractions and sensations is blurred: the senses, which operate in this world, explain and justify human acts towards God. In this manner, everyday sensations can be employed to comprehend and even to experience the divine. Experience itself comprehends both realms, worldly and divine.

Against this background it is possible to understand Hildegard’s self-image: Expressions that relate especially to the senses of sight and hearing shape her relationship to the Godhead and assert her claim as a visionary. She has direct knowledge of God’s message, which is felt passively. This authorizes her to act as an instrument of His will and communicate – to ‘speak’ – His message to all of humanity. Hildegard’s mission is accomplished initially through the use of the senses as composition principles. At the same time, the use of the senses turns her message into a possible experience that could be felt by her audience. The ways towards God – the good works, the sacraments, and the faith – are thus indicated by means of sense metaphors.

The return of humanity to God is moreover the nucleus of her self-manifestation as a prophetess. What she sees and hears stands as a testimony of God’s work in the ongoing History of Salvation, but also as a testimony of her own life. Her vocation is prophecy, just as Jutta’s was the self-affliction of her body. To fulfil her role as prophet, she seeks and builds her own space, the cloister Rupertsberg. Her vocation is accomplished when she acquires a larger audience for her message – and for this purpose the use of the senses is crucial.

Ideas and norms concerning the senses, as they were internalized and embodied by Hildegard, thus constitute a valid approach to studying the contemporary experience and interpretation of the world, including the understanding of what is ‘real’. On this account, the present book aims to shed light on the behaviour and behavioural patterns in the 12th century and also to make a contribution to the history of the senses.

This synopsis is derived from a recently published book:

María José Ortúzar Escudero: *Die Sinne in den Schriften Hildegards von Bingen. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Sinneswahrnehmung*, Hiersemann Verlag: Stuttgart, 2016.

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*Neuerscheinung in der Reihe «Monographien zur Geschichte des Mittelalters»
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Die Kategorien Sehen, Hören, Riechen, Schmecken und Tasten sind seit etwa dreißig Jahren Gegenstand der historischen Analyse. Das vorliegende Buch bietet einen originären Zugang zu den vielfältigen Aspekten und unterschiedlichen methodischen Vorgehensweisen der «Sinnesgeschichte». Dabei wird das Verhältnis zwischen Sinnesvorstellungen, -normen und dem daraus resultierenden Verhalten im Hinblick auf alle fünf Sinne dargestellt. Aufgezeigt wird dies anhand der Werke der herausragenden Visionärin Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179).

Der erste Teil der Arbeit konzentriert sich auf Hildegards historisches Umfeld. Ein erstes Augenmerk gilt der Gestaltung des Lebens im Kloster Disibodenberg sowie den Frömmigkeitsformen, die die Lebensbeschreibung von Hildegards «Meisterin» Jutta von Sponheim vermittelt. Die Analyse der Regula Benedikts und des Psalters, der wichtigsten Textgrundlage für Hildegards Lebensführung, gewährt einen Einblick in die Rolle der Sinne für die Formierung des Verhaltens und für die Beziehung zwischen Mensch und Gott. Zudem werden die unterschiedlichen Auffassungen von «Sinnen» in den dafür maßgeblichen Werken der Kirchenväter sowie früh- und hochmittelalterlicher Autoren vorgestellt. Sie berücksichtigen vor allem die Sinneslehre, die Wahrnehmung des Göttlichen und die Folgen für die Sinnesvorstellungen von verschiedenen geistigen Entwicklungen, die der «Renaissance» des 12. Jahrhunderts eigen sind. In diesem

Teil werden zudem im Zentrum stehende «Sinnesmetaphern» und «Sinnesmuster» erörtert.

Der zweite Teil des Buches beschreibt den Gebrauch der Sinne in Hildegards Schriften: Gegenstand der Untersuchung sind das Visionenbuch *Scivias* (geschrieben zwischen 1141–1151) und die bis 1155 datierten Briefe des Epistolarium. Die Analyse beider Werke geht folgenden Fragestellungen nach: Welche Rolle spielen die Sinne für die Komposition der genannten Texte? Welche Bedeutung besitzen sie für die Selbsteinschätzung Hildegards als Visionärin und für ihre Tätigkeit als Prophetin? Gibt es eine hildegardische «Sinneslehre»? Welche heilsgeschichtlichen Personen und Sachverhalte werden mit Rekurs auf die Sinne geschildert? Wird Hildegard von ihren Adressaten mit Sinnesmetaphern charakterisiert? Inwiefern sind diese für ihre Stellung als persona publica bedeutsam?

Derart werden die von Hildegard verinnerlichten Vorstellungen und Normen hinsichtlich der Sinne ermittelt. Dies lässt eine Annäherung an die zeitgenössische Weltdeutung und Welterfahrung zu. Das vorliegende Werk erschließt somit wesentliche Erkenntnisse über die Vorstellungen und Verhaltensweisen der Menschen im 12. Jahrhundert und leistet einen integralen Beitrag zur Geschichte der Sinneswahrnehmung.

Das Buch enthält zudem zwei Tabellen, die Hildegards Briefe nach Datum und Handschriften ordnen, eine englische Zusammenfassung sowie ein Orts- und Personenregister.

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