

Stigmatised. The wounds of Christ in the 19th and 20th centuries

Kristof Smeyers, PhD researcher at Ruusbroec Institute, University of Antwerp

kristof.smeyers@uantwerpen.be

The 19th century is known as the ‘golden age’ of stigmata: so far more than 300 cases have been identified across seven European countries in our ERC-funded project ‘Between saints and celebrities. The devotion and promotion of stigmatics in Europe’, more than 250 of them women. The re-emergence of the holy wounds on bodies all over Europe was everywhere marginalised by institutions, both secular and religious. But simultaneously, the people allegedly suffering the stigmata were often elevated to local fame and unofficial sanctity: they became ‘living saints’, venerated by their communities and promoted as modern celebrities. The stigmata were approached by contemporaries as metaphors, as symbols, signs, *and* symptoms; making bodies part of a religious iconography.

Their meaning was, however, not so clear-cut. Partly, that is a consequence of the aesthetic variations of stigmata: they could be a faithful *imitatio Christi*, or were elaborate drawings or words, or were instead invisible. A popular comparison of the body on which the stigmata were manifested, was that of the blank page, with the wounds as a sensory, mystical language open for interpretation. They were marginalised as signs of fraud or lunacy, interpreted as divine or satanic intervention, and even appropriated as ‘anti-modern’ or ‘anti-Catholic’. In this paper I want to give an overview of the shifts in meaning of these ‘saintly markings’ and their place in the ‘corporeal turn’ as alternative tattoos, comparing stigmata, for example, with tattoos as part of a ‘cultural outfit’. This overview will enrich debates on the multiplicity of bodily markings, not only as ‘objects of knowledge’ but also beyond discourse studies, as a *lived* phenomenon.

Roger Cooter, ‘The traffic in Victorian bodies: medicine, literature, and history’, *Victorian Studies* (2003), 513-527.

M. Pagliarini, “‘And the Word was made flesh’: divining the female body in nineteenth-century American and Catholic culture’, *Religion and American Culture: a Journal of Interpretation*, 17 (2007), 213-245.

Herbert Thurston, *The physical phenomena of mysticism* (London, 1952).

Tine Van Osselaer, ‘Stigmatic women in modern Europe. An exploratory note on gender, corporeality and Catholic culture’, 269-289.