The Many Voices of Saint Caterina of Pedemonte: an Interactive Fictional Story about the Life of a Holy Medieval Woman.

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Abstract:

Saint Caterina of Pedemonte is meant as an experiment in digital narrative. We are using words, sound, images, and an interactive interface to tell a large part of Saint Caterina’s fictional story. This project aspires to illustrate the many voices, which shape our perceptions of past events and people. In this case, we focused on mystic saints who use starvation as a way to illustrate their devotion. Saint Caterina is a conglomeration of women. Many medieval saints are used as elements of a rubric for Caterina, and their experiences give her shape and form. Caterina is neither entirely real, nor is she simply a figment of our imagination. The story of her life is comprised of the many voices that compete and compliment each other to form a cacophonous retelling of her life.

The multimedia component is an attempt to answer questions regarding the nature of interactive participation itself, and its role in unveiling storytelling narration in non-linear structure, addressing the notion of “remediation” as a way of challenging formulations of control, authority and transmission of knowledge.

Introduction:

Saint Caterina is meant as an experiment in digital narrative. We are using words, sound, images, and an interactive interface to tell a large part of Saint Caterina’s story. Ultimately, this project is an attempt to illustrate the many voices, which shape our perceptions of past events and people. Originally, we had decided to use a real, and extremely popular, female saint in place of Saint Caterina. After almost completing the entire written project with the “real” saint in mind, we realized that the richness of her
life was being diluted by our cursory account of her existence. Even including many
different voices that all attempt to illustrate different facets of her life, we felt as if we
were doing the saint an injustice by being just another voice that tries to subsume and
retell her voice instead of letting her experiences speak for themselves. The saint we had
chosen was so intellectualized in many different circles that it became hard to distinguish
our retelling of her story from the many that came before us. So, in light of these factors,
we created Saint Caterina (whom we decided is the patron saint of struggling graduate
students!). In this project, we focused on mystic saints who use starvation as a way to
illustrate their devotion. Saint Caterina is a conglomeration of women that we came
across in our numerous readings and google searches for mystic medieval women, as well
as our own imaginings. We have used elements of many medieval saints as a rubric for
Caterina, and their experiences give her shape and form. Caterina is neither entirely real,
nor is she simply a figment of our imagination. Ultimately, she is meant to be a fictional
saint that, we feel, still maintains true to the many women who have shaped her
existence.

**Competing Voices:**

*Images from the screen opening after the intro*
Saint Caterina is comprised of the many voices that compete and compliment each other to form a cacophonous retelling of her life.

The first voice the viewer encounters is that of the Catholic Church. While doing research for the Church’s voice, we visited many web pages and books that gave accounts of the lives of different saints. Modeled after a hagiographic retelling of a saint’s life, this story illustrates the miracles and church related happenings in the life of Caterina.

Screenshots from the section of the Church’s voice.

Iconographic images further demonstrate the hagiographic nature of this voice. It is nearly impossible to read the Church’s voice, as the words scroll on Saint Caterina’s body because of the distortion that occurs when the words pass through the image of Saint Caterina. One must listen to the narrative, much like listening to a sermon, instead of attempting to read the passage.

The second voice that the viewer encounters is the Academic voice. This voice is based on the scholarly research that we uncovered about anorexic mystic saints. Drawing
closely on scholarship by Rudolph Bell, we paint a picture of a saint who has been under the close scrutiny of academic scholarship. No longer under the guise of hagiography, “living on no food but the Blessed Sacrament” (first voice) loses its innocent demeanor in light of modern research into anorexia and saintly behavior. Although the research Bell and his contemporaries have completed on anorexia and saints is compelling, we must remember that it is only one voice of many that attempt to tell these saints stories.

The viewer is presented with a canonical portrait of a saint, and must manipulate the picture by lifting it with the mouse button to view a shadowy picture of an anorexic woman. It is only when the image is being manipulated by the viewer that one can hear the Academic voice.

The third voice that is illustrated in Saint Caterina is the Autobiographical voice. Many of the saints that we researched wrote or through an amanuensis produced a retelling of their life. In some cases, the saints were forced to write down their stories as penance. For these saints, autobiography becomes both a way to speak on their own and also a chance for the church to attempt to speak for them. This section is divided up into two parts, as we attempt to describe the process of writing as penance and begin to
introduce the voice that appears within the saint’s body. Writing is both a freeing tool and a punishment. The lack of vocal sound in both parts of this section illustrate the bind that is present between the church’s dictation of an autobiography and the saint’s true voice.

Screenshots from the two sections of the Autobiographical voice

In the first part of the Autobiographical voice, the viewer encounters a disorganized array of images. As she attempts to read the autobiography, the words become distorted until the viewer takes the cursor (appearing with the word “lick”) and licks the spiders from the screen, just as the first sentence of the autobiography stated: “They make me lick the spiders from the walls.” (Licking spiders was an actual punishment for one of the saints that we researched for this project.) The spider appear to move frantically throughout the screen to relate the energy that the women impart on their autobiographies. The viewer takes part in the autobiographical experience as well as retains an insight to the difficult nature of the autobiographical voice.

The second part of the Autobiographical voice, examines the mystic’s body in relation to her position in society and with the church. The viewer sees an image of
flesh-like links forming a wall that cannot be passed. No matter where the viewer points the cursor, the prison remains, illustrating how St. Caterina’s body became a prison. There is no interruption in viewing the text, in what we see one of the most personal narratives in the piece. After examining other mystic saint’s biographies, a common theme becomes how their bodies became their prisons. The body became the only autonomous voice that the mystic saint possessed because the church took all other means of expressing herself. The prison imagery is also very prevalent in saint’s autobiographies because it is the body that separates the human from the divine.

In the fourth Voice, the Mystic Voice, we attempt to forfeit words altogether and illustrate the corporeal nature of Saint Caterina’s visions. The visions for most of the mystic saints were not passive experiences, but were gut-wrenching times of both pain and joy combined. The body becomes a powerful metaphor to resist the church’s doctrines for Caterina.

The body is the one place the church cannot sanction worship. Surprisingly, in an internet search, we found a simple prayer for Saint Catherine of Siena called “Prayer of Saint Catherine of Siena to the Precious Blood of Jesus,” which illustrates remarkably the
powerful and visceral nature of the mystic’s vision. Four blocks with images of blood and the body are placed on the screen. Depending on the viewer’s choice of image, the prayer can be said in many different orders. Worship, especially with the mystic voice becomes a prayer, a direct communication with Christ. Because of the oratorical nature of prayers, one must listen to the prayer as they mouse over the images.

The last voice is perhaps the most visceral of all that have come before. The beating of a human heart appears on the page. A simple story is related to the viewer about Caterina exchanging her heart for Christ’s. The image of the heart takes Caterina back to her own body, and also brings the viewer and Catherine to a common point in the narrative. It seems the simplest and most direct image to portray the corporealness of the person Caterina.

The human heart becomes an image of the sacred heart, illustrating how a simple body-part becomes immortalized by society. Then, a narrative is read about the reacquisition of Caterina’s heart back into the church, literally explaining how the mystic’s voice and body are subsumed by the many different voices that describe her story. Caterina’s heart, which is the part of the body that fought so diligently against the
church’s dictations, becomes part of a church once again. As a relic, Caterina’s heart serves both as a reminder that her bodily voice lives on, and also the circular nature of the voice itself.

Finally, the Authorial voice is our attempt to bring in our voice as one of the many that construct saints such as Caterina. We have included, voice by voice, a narrative that explains in some sense the reasoning behind the images and text. Not only does the Authorial voice bring to the foreground once again that Saint Caterina is both a creation and conglomeration of voices and attitudes, it also reminds us that, as authors, we are not the final voice, it is the viewer who always get the final word.

**Interactivity:**

Utilizing interactivity to illustrate the different voices seems like a natural choice given the tremendous possibilities that a digital interface can provide. As we have illustrated in the previous chapter, every voice has intrinsic characteristics that are manifested through the direct participation of the viewer. Using the authoring software of Macromedia Director, we attempt to answer questions regarding the nature of interactive participation itself, and its role in unveiling storytelling narration.

Lev Manovic, when considering the myth of interactivity suggests:

when we use the concept of 'interactive media' exclusively in relation to computer-based media, there is the danger that we will interpret 'interaction' literally, equating it with physical interaction between a user and a media object (pressing a button, choosing a link, moving the body), at the expense of
psychological interaction. The psychological processes of filling-in, hypothesis formation, recall, and identification, which are required for us to comprehend any text or image at all, are mistakenly identified with an objectively existing structure of interactive links" (57).

As this argument indicates, in interactive media design, the emotional and metaphorical process of interaction are frequently undermined in favor of the literal translation that interaction is equal to activation of links, dismissing that often it is precisely the psychological and metaphorical factors that unfold any hermeneutical discovery.

Reflecting upon these considerations, we are particularly concerned about the appropriateness of the interaction in relation to the content of the narrative. In other words, we are interested in exploring interactive participation that not only reveals the various media (text, images, sound, etc.) but also works as meta-commentary, reinforcing the significance of the passage. The combination of text, images, and sound is fully integrated as a unity by the intentional or unintentional interactive mechanism, that not only activates the different components, but more importantly, creates a relationship between these components. The interaction draws mental and literal links, and also activates resonance and reminiscence that hold together separate parts. The particular and the discretionary inform the whole through the participatory intervention that activates correspondences encoded in the design.

As every single voice of the story possesses its own identity and spatial position that is altered in relation to the others voices, similarly, different media components in a
single screen possess a specific identity and discretion value that assumes different connotation when they are “remediated” through the interactive process.

In conclusion, it is emblematic in both the structure of the narrative and the structure of the design the assumption that deconstructed elements are considered portions of a stratified complexity resulted by the addition of the parts. This methodological approach is reminiscent of the property of “Modularity” described by Lev Manovich (The Language of New Media, 2001) in which it is underlined how the same structures operate on different scales.

Informing our methodological strategy is also the notion of “remediation” proposed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin:

What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media (15).

The “remediation” approach is not only applied to different media elements within the design, but also as a strategy of questioning arbitrary or unidirectional points of view expressed by the single voices. Single positions are “refashioned” by the idea of complexity implied in multi–prospective, interchangeable viewpoints expressed by the constitutive collage–like, multimedia structure of the project. In other words, we address remediation as a way of challenging authority.
Public and Private Discourse:

There is a distinct split between what is considered private and public, and who has control over public and private discourse. During the Middle Ages, the line between public and private discourse is firmly drawn through the presence of the church in people’s everyday lives. The church exerts its authority and exacts punishment, and most importantly dictates how information should be distributed and valued. The church, because of its all-pervasive reach into people’s daily lives is able to shape the public discourse through communion, daily masses, sermons, and especially confession.

In addition to distinguishing what information is kept private and public, the Church also determines who is able to carry on a public discourse. As Laurie A. Finke asserts in her essay “Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision:”

...men and women experience the limits of their bodies in quite different ways. Medieval Christianity construed man as spirit and woman as body. Like the body, woman is accident to man’s essence, despite claims of the spiritual equality of all believers (403).

Women are seen as a lesser byproduct of men’s spirituality, and thus are not afforded a place within the public sphere, much less a voice. Men, on the other hand, control the public discourse of the time, and decide what information is made public and what is kept private.

Because of the power the church wields in dictating who is able to speak, many women sought other means of communicating, mainly as mystics. Many women also
attempt to write autobiographies, but most use amanuenses to physically write their words on the page. Still more mystic saint’s autobiographies were written specifically to record their saintly deeds and not to reflect their lives as they actually lived them. Autobiography becomes a tool with many purposes, some directly in contest with the mystic telling her own story. In one particular case of Saint Veronica, her confessor, Padre Bastianelli orders her to write an autobiography as penance for her sins. In *Holy Anorexia*, Rudolph Bell retells Bastianelli’s reaction to Veronica autobiography in great detail:

> When he saw the result apparently he decided that such behavior and sentiments hardly were appropriate for a good nun, much less a putative saint, and he instructed her to terminate the narrative at once (71).

Writing becomes penitential to Saint Veronica, and when her confessors does not like what she writes, even though he has ordered her to do so, he takes her autobiographical voice away from her to try and control her own story.

Mysticism afforded many of these women a voice that was entirely their own. Mysticism is a sight of struggle for the women involved to attempt to obtain a voice within the church. As Laurie Finke notes, mysticism becomes a way to resist “the authoritative, monologic language of a powerful social institution” (404). Mysticism becomes a social tool to insert the female voice into the church’s lexicon. The mystic voice is able to traverse the private female sphere and enter the male public sphere. The mystic voice gives these women “possession of a public language,” where she has the opportunity to speak in both realms (Finke, 406).
Women who experienced mystic visions are identified “as a genuine religious figure” in the eyes of the church (Finke, 406). Many of these women are able to use their role as mystics to hold legitimate positions of power within the religious community. Saint Catherine of Siena sent many letters to Pope Urban VI and was summoned to Rome by Urban to help with reformation of the church. Saint Catherine ignores the sanctions of the men around her and reports directly to god in all her actions. As she states, “I must obey God not men” (Bell 42). As Rudolph Bell comments: “always she acted in every matter as she said her spiritual bridegroom Jesus Christ told her she should, and not as earthly men might order or advise” (23). As a mystic, Catherine is able to receive guidance directly from god, a power usually only afforded to priests.

Many more mystic women communed with god on a personal level instead of relying on priests to intercede on their behalf. One such example, Margery Kempe, illustrates the ways that mystic women found a voice within the public sphere. Margery not only maintains a voice within the public sphere, she openly criticizes priests and others who control public discourse. Instead of having priests intercede on her behalf as is customary when one speaks to God, Margery instructs priests as to what they must do to win God’s favor. Those who are supposed to be the closest to God, according to the church’s laws are the farthest from living a pious lifestyle, as Margery’s conversations with God illustrate:

My derworthy dowtyr, sey in the name of Jhesu that he hath synned in letthery, in dyspeyr, and in wordly goodys kepyng.” “A, greyows Lord, this is hard for me to
sey. He schal do me mech schame yyf I telle hym any lesyng.” “Drede the not but speke boldly in my name in the Name of Jhesu, for thei arn no leesyngys (Kempe, Ins 597-600).

With Margery’s position in society as a mystic comes the freeness to speak her mind within the public sphere, but Margery also realizes the ramifications if she tells “him any lesyng.” Not only is she performing the tasks that the church is supposed to accomplish, she is also able to create a separate space for her own spiritual discourse by questioning those who have control of the public space.

The Mystic Body and Voice:

Many mystics, Margery Kempe and Saint Catherine of Siena included, used their bodies as a medium to obtain a voice that was not sanctioned by the church. Mystical experiences were not women having conversations with god; they were experiences that affect the mystic in a very corporeal manner. Many monks and holy people participated in self-flagellation and wore instruments such as hair shirts to show their devotion to god, but even this show of physicality was always tempered by modesty and prudence to the person’s health. Most women mystics are shown through their radical relationship between their bodies and worship.

One such example of a mystic saint acting out her devotion to god in a physical manner is Saint Catherine of Siena’s seemingly anorexic behavior. Although it is presumptuous to attempt to define Saint Catherine in a medical sense, by looking at her biography, it is clear that the ways that she treated her body as a mystic were extreme to
say the least. Although a certain amount of fasting is expected in holy life of the time, Catherine is perhaps the most well known saint to have taken fasting to an extreme. Catherine’s confessor is one of the many individuals to write a biography of Catherine based on her confessions and conversations that he had with Catherine. It is clear in these writings that Catherine uses her body as a spiritual tool in order to worship: “‘Not only did she not need food, but she could not even eat without pain. If she forced herself to eat, her body suffered greatly, she could not digest and had to vomit” (Bell, 27).

Catherine sees her physical body as something that hinders her true spirit from worshipping god. Catherine calls her body “an anvil for thy beating,” and chooses to torture her physical body in order to obtain higher spiritual devotion (Bell, 50.)

In the case of Margery Kempe, Margery does not only tell priests when they have failed God, she also makes a name for herself due to her intense form of worshipping. The church’s structured environment creates a pseudo-public space where people may worship, but at the same time, their worship is confined by the church’s rules. Congregants during mass, are not really participants, but are watching the priest perform and communicate with God, while they remain bystanders to the action. During the mass, the priest communes with God, while the congregation, who in this case, forms the audience, watches, participating only minimally in certain places. Mass, therefore, is not a public space, but a pseudo-public space, in which none may fully participate but those that the church deems worthy. Margery attempts to create a shared public space within the church by breaking the one-sided discourse of mass by creating a more intense and physical kind of worship:
Than was hir sowle so delectably fed wyth the swet dalyawns of owr Lorde and so fulfilled of hys lofe that as a drunkyn man sche turyd hir fyrst on the o syde and sithyn on the other wyth gret wepyng and gret sobbyng, unmythy to kepyn hirsylfe in stabilnes for the unqwenchabyl fyer of lofe whech brent ful sor in hir sowle (Ins 2310-14).

Instead of remaining passive during the mass while the priest communes with God for the congregation, Margery communicates with God herself. Margery also ignores the rules of passivity during a mass and sobs and weeps at her love for God, creating a communal space of worship within the confines of the church. Margery continues to weep and cry at any mention of God or holiness, whether she is in a church or visiting a holy place.

Margery and Catherine use their entire bodies in their spirituality. During Margery’s passionate outcries, she inhabits the opposite of what the church’s rules decree. Catherine also goes against the advice of those around her and continues to fast for years at a time without much food other than what people can force her to ingest.

Both these women inhabit what Julia Kristeva calls “the abject.” In her book “Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,” Kristeva mentions that mystics “turned this abjection of self into the ultimate proof of humility before God, witness Elizabeth of Hungary who “though a great princess, delighted in nothing so much as in abasing herself” (5). By abusing and using their bodies in such ways, mystical women literally inhabit the abject in their worship. Kristeva goes on to comment:

The abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject,
weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than the abject (5).

These mystics multiply the original thought of abjection when they cannot identify with any of the church’s traditions. Because they cannot relate to what the church already inhabits, they must look within themselves to their own abjection and then embody this abjection. Without embodying her own culture’s abjections, the mystic woman would not be remembered today as the radical worshipper that she is.

**In Conclusion:**

It is our sincere hope that Saint Caterina can attempt to bring the private into the public by examining the many voices that create a mystic woman. From beginning at the specific and then attempting to grasp the general theory we feel is related to a piece such as this, we hope to gather a broader understanding of the piece in itself and in the greater intellectual community of which it is a part.
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