Representation of Gender in the Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen in the Middle Ages

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Abstract
Hildegard de Bingen, a German nun, addresses in her writings and paintings, in the book *Scivias* (1152), ecclesiastical themes depicting possible power relations between the body and the construction and representation of gender in the Middle Ages. The works selected for analysis are the illuminations *The Prophetess*, *The One Who Is Enthroned*, and *Mother Church* (dated between 1098 and 1179). The studies of Joan Scott (1995) and Judith Butler (2015) are employed, focusing on the social construction of gender relations. To understand the sacred-historical context, research by Victoria Cirlot (2005) is utilized. Le Goff and Truong (2006) contribute to the historical context, along with the iconological method of the art historian E. Panofsky (2012). Therefore, through the analysis of the selected works, this research explores how the representation of gender is present in the medieval context and unfolds into sociocultural aspects in the bodies of women in contemporary times.

Palavras-chave: art; history; gender; 12th Century; Hildegard of Bingen.

The representation of gender in the writings and paintings of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) is a subject worthy of investigation in the visual arts, since her works reveal power relations between the constitution of the body and the construction of gender. The representation of gender stems from the constitution of women as a political category, due to the social tensions that the medieval context carried in its ideology. The focus of this research on the representation of gender is an attempt to search for traces of gender construction in the Middle Ages, based on three illuminations by Hildegard of Bingen: *The Prophetess, The Who is Enthroned, and Mother Church* (dated between 1098 and 1179).

Hildegard of Bingen lived in the 12th century, in the territory that came to be called Germany. She belonged to a spiritual elite within the Church and was considered a mystic for having visions, interpreting them, and transmitting them to the faithful. Revered since before

her death and already worshipped as a saint, it was only in 2012 that the Catholic Church canonised her, also giving her the title of Doctor of the Church for her knowledge and erudition.

During the Middle Ages, artistic production, especially paintings and illuminations, played an essential role in spreading the values and ideals of the Catholic Church. Authors such as Victoria Cirlot, Barbara Newman, Jacques Le Goff, Nicola Truong, Ieda Tucherman, Lieve Troch, Jean-Claude Schmitt, Joan Scott, among others, have shown that medieval illuminations, often found in religious and legal manuscripts, not only embellished the texts, but also served as didactic and normative instruments, shaping the worldview of society at the time. In addition to illustrating biblical passages and the lives of saints, these images also reinforced predefined social roles, including the standards of behaviour expected of women.

Through illuminations, it was possible to convey visual messages that taught feminine virtues, such as obedience, chastity, and devotion, outlining models of conduct that should be followed. Many of these images depicted women in cloistered contexts, such as nuns in prayer, or in domestic situations, emphasising their role within the private and family sphere. In addition, dress codes and gestures were also represented, serving as a means of standardising femininity and reinforcing the dichotomy between the virtuous woman and the one who deviated from the moral precepts of the time. The illuminations were not only artistic representations, but ideological and pedagogical devices that helped to consolidate and perpetuate gender conceptions, influencing how women were viewed and how they should behave in medieval society.

So, how does the representation of gender in Hildegard of Bingen's illuminations reflect and problematise the social tensions of the Middle Ages, especially in the symbolic construction of the female body? Hildegard of Bingen's illuminations not only reproduce medieval conceptions of the female body, but also highlight the social tensions of the time by reframing the presence and agency of women. The way the female body is represented in these manuscripts reveals both the limits imposed by Christian normativity and the possibilities for breaking with or reworking female roles in medieval culture. Because of this, the main question concerns the representation of gender in the three selected illuminations, in order to associate them with the production of thought in medieval society, understanding how Hildegard understood women, the gender attributed to them, and their representation.

The material selected for the investigation is the illuminations in the book *Scivias* written by Hildegard in 1152, which question the social, political, artistic, spiritual, and existential markers of the female body and the construction of gender in a period determined by the duality between body and soul. Thus, the research focused on the representation of gender in Hildegard of Bingen's illuminations in the Middle Ages, considering the medieval religious artist-subject and the medieval woman-subject.

In the section “Gender representation and its historical role in the construction of social relations,” we share some aspects of the historical scenario regarding the conception of female gender in the Middle Ages, focusing on the female subject. To address the formation of gender, we engaged in a dialogue with American author Joan Scott to think about gender in historiography, and Judith Butler, who addresses performative acts and the foundation of gender through cultural and political structures.

Next, in “Historical context of the medieval body: the female body and its representations,” based on the studies of authors Victoria Cirlot and Barbara Newman (2005), we examine the sacred-historical context of the life and artistic production of the painter and nun Hildegard of Bingen. Finally, in “Sacred-historical context of the life and artistic production of Hildegard of Bingen,” we analyse selected illuminations by Hildegard, focusing on the traces and what each illumination carries as evidence about gender representation.

The works chosen for analysis are The Prophetess, The One Who Is Enthroned, and Mother Church (both dated between 1098 and 1179), which are included in the book *Scivias* and constitute illuminations produced to illustrate the nun’s visions. This book also contains writings that describe the visions and some possible interpretations or associated meanings, which will aid in the analysis of the images. The method of analysis I use is the iconological method of art historian E. Panofsky, in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (2012), according to which the analysis of the image entails the interpretation of individual and collective sociocultural practices.

Therefore, we begin to unravel this investigation by addressing the historical construction of social relations through gender in the Middle Ages.

Gender representation and its historical role in the construction of social relations

Representation, according to Sandra Pesavento (2006), is associated with cultural bias, since “cultural values, translated into ideas [sic] and images, travel through time and space, in reconfigurations and transfigurations of meaning” (Pesavento, 2006, p. 47). In other words, cultural traits can move, taking on new meanings and reusing values. Thus, it is understood that cultural values, symbolised in ideas and images, transcend time and space.

This is how representations can convey teachings through their values; they are “[...] presentifications of an absence, where the representative and the represented maintain relationships of closeness and distance between them” (Pesavento, 2006, p. 49). It is another world inserted into reality, which may or may not be the representation of ideas about reality, as well as perceptions about the world that both qualify and influence the view of reality. Representations are always inspired by reality and the imaginary in accordance with the real. Thus,

> [...] The imaginary is composed of representations of the world of the lived, the visible, and the experienced, but also of the dreams, desires, and fears of each era, of the intangible and invisible, which nevertheless comes into existence and has real power for those who experience it (Pesavento, 2006, p. 50).

Therefore, we appropriate the world and create through it, with representation being a construct of thought that transcends reality, in which the experiences of the invisible throughout history are also captured. Thus, thinking about gender representation means understanding that gender, throughout history, has been signified and represented in different ways. According to Joan Scott (1995), the term "gender" is a way of pointing out the social constructions of ideas about the roles appropriate for women and men. It has no relation to human biology, but is used to segregate social relations between the sexes. Although a system of relationships may contain sex, gender does not directly define sexuality, nor is it designated by sex. The definition of gender, for Scott (1995), is established as a substance that, based on perceived differences, constitutes social relationships. Gender

> [...] has two parts and several subsets, which are interrelated but must be analytically differentiated. The core of the definition rests on an integral connection between two propositions: (1) gender is a constitutive element of social relations based on perceived differences between the sexes, and (2) gender is a primary way of giving meaning to power relations. Changes in the organization of social relations always correspond to changes in representations of power, but change is not unidirectional (Scott, 1995, p. 86).

It therefore implies cultural symbols that present symbolic representations, such as women who are examples to be followed – the Virgin Mary, in the Catholic Church tradition – and others, such as Eve – who should be seen as sinful and impure. These symbolic representations are constituent elements that can be observed in institutions such as the Church, School and Family.

According to Scott (1995), researchers have associated the use of gender with the organization of kinship, such as family and home. However, the labor market, education and the political system are central elements in the construction of gender, as they contribute to the maintenance and reproduction of inequalities between men and women. Similarly, the historical exclusion of women from various institutions, many of which have traditionally been male-dominated, reinforces barriers to their access and participation. In the political sphere, male predominance in positions of power highlights the inequality of opportunities and the persistence of structures that hinder female representation, perpetuating relations of domination and subordination based on gender.

Thus, "[...] gender is a primary way of giving meaning to power relations. It would be better to say: gender is a primary field within which, or through which, power is articulated" (Scott, 1995, p. 88). Gender is not the only factor that signifies power relations, but it has played a major role in determining oppression and violence, especially in Islamic and Judeo-Christian traditions.

For Judith Butler (2019), gender cannot be understood as a stable identity, but rather as something constituted over time, established through the repetition of certain acts. Genders[1] are composed of a sequential process involving bodily gestures and various actions that produce the fallacy of a body without memory. The author thinks of cultural and political structures as individual practices, understanding that the personal is political and that gender relations are constituted by individual historical acts. However, for Butler, the personal is dependent on socially divided structures; bodies are converted into genders through actions that are revised, renewed, and concretized over time. The individual is political, but for there to be transformation, it is necessary to change various processes, also formed by many individuals, to attribute meaning to something.

The author points to gender as a rehearsed script that persists despite people, but which is a structure that needs them to actualize and reproduce it as something real. In other words, individual relationships, such as those imposed by the family, also shape us through punishments that reflect pre-existing concepts, already active before we existed. According to Kaplisch-Zuber (2006), in order to understand femininity in the medieval period, it is strategic to understand the logic of medieval thought based on the hierarchy between men and women:

> In the Middle Ages, order was inconceivable without hierarchy. The construction of masculine/feminine respects this notion and strives to articulate between them the two principles of polarity and hierarchical superposition, that is, a binary and horizontal classification based on opposition, and a vertical interdependence between categories. This difficult combination results in a negative and inferior image of the feminine in its relationship with the masculine (Kaplisch-Zuber, 2006, p. 139).

This hierarchy is present in all social relations in the Middle Ages, between men and women, clergy and laity, suzerains and vassals, lords and serfs. It shows that in this hierarchy, women are always seen as inferior, fragile, and guilty of all sins, even those they did not commit. Therefore, in order to think about gender in the Middle Ages, understanding it as instituted by and in the body, it is necessary to draw on conceptions of the body in the medieval context and its demarcations.

Historical context of the medieval body: the female body and its representations

Women's bodies in the 21st century reflect historical issues that have long affected and classified them. If we are also the result of our cultural environment, of what we are taught and normalised, we must understand from which periods and places standards have come and

[1] Binary genders and the cisheterosexual contract are configurations presented as a natural aspect of bodies, separated into binary, cisgender sexes that relate to each other. The first justification for this is the human reproductive system, a form of disguise for the system of compulsory cisheterosexuality to impose its configurations through what is 'natural' and 'normal' to be followed.

remain in place, which are used and updated to frame bodies and their actions, especially the bodies of women and female-identified people.

We are born and taught in a particular culture, in which possibilities end up being limited by the context of where and with whom we grow up and have the most socialisation. Diana Taylor (2013, p. 128) tells us that "[...] cultural memory is, among other things, an act of imagination and interconnection. Memory is embodied and sensual, that is, invoked through the senses; it connects the deeply private with social practices." Memory functions in the present by bridging the past and the future. There is a connection between historical moments, which makes culture a product of this link between memory/remembrances and narratives.

It is possible to understand that culture can be transmitted and, based on these concepts, that the historical context of the medieval Western body, although very distant, bears a great resemblance to bodies today and still has repercussions in many processes of control and subordination. The body is unique and finite. It refers to presence and absence, as well as playing a leading role in the tradition of Western culture, which was built as a "realm of universal visibility: to see is to know, and the bet is that a pedagogy of the gaze is what builds our relationship with the world" (Tucherman, 2012, p. 13), since the West has bet on standardized visuality, attaching great importance to the visual in order to explore modes of self-regulation, systematization and persuasion.

The body has multiple functions in the dichotomy of the private and the social and its functioning is institutionalized. But to what extent can our bodies be our own and still be public? Being among people, presenting oneself, communicating, performing and still being who one really is? The dimension of the colonization of the imaginary has been where the body materializes in everyday life, in relation to the socio-cultural demands of each era.

For Le Goff (2006), the body, its place in the world, its existence in the imagination and in reality, as well as in everyday life, has undergone transformations in different societies. In each of them, even though there are fragments from other cultures and societies, there are different conceptions and distinct ways of conceiving it. In the medieval space, there is salvation for Christians only if there is bodily penance; one must despise the body and renounce its flesh, even though it is important to complete one's journey in the earthly world. Daily life in the Middle Ages

> [...] oscillates between Lent and Carnival, [...]. On one side, the thin, on the other, the fat. On one side, fasting and abstinence, on the other, banquets and gluttony. This oscillation probably has to do with the central place that the body occupies in the imagination and reality of the Middle Ages. (Le Goff; Truong, 2006, p. 35).

Lent symbolizes renunciation of the body and carnal desires, while Carnival is the exaltation of the body, in addition to some customs inherited from the Greeks and Romans, such as healthy bodies that do not need mutilation, exemplifying the preservation of the body. Just as

there is a dichotomy between these bodies, medieval imagery oscillates between renunciation and exaltation. The monastic reform of the 11th and early 12th centuries emphasized the repression of bodily pleasure, since the ascetic ideal, which encompasses abstinence from carnal pleasures and material comfort for spiritual improvement, conquered medieval society through Christianity and became the basis of monastic society. The great renunciation of the body takes place through the control of sexuality, the repulsion of blood and sperm – bodily fluids –, the banishment and condemnation of sexual acts with people of the same sex, as well as the control of laughter, gestures, makeup and disapproved clothing. Also accentuating this period was the demonization of the female body, understood as a source and temptation of sin, submissive and inferior due to the repugnance of blood.

It was a period of domination and power by the Catholic Church, which determined control and regulation over bodies and their behavior, generating policies of renunciation. Women were the most disadvantaged and persecuted, as the Church's assumption determined that "the human being is therefore divided: the upper part (reason and spirit) is on the male side, the lower part (the body, the flesh) on the female side" (Le Goff; Truong, 2006, p. 53). In other words, in the medieval Catholic context, women are on the side of sin. From the 12th century onwards, a system of bodily and sexual control was established, and "it is women who will pay the heaviest price for this" (Le Goff; Truong, 2006, p. 52).

This system of bodily and sexual control came about through a new interpretation of biblical texts, transforming original sin into sexual sin. Women's bodies suffered the consequences of the choices and changes made by theologians and the sexist and misogynistic restructuring that underpins sexual and gender differences in modernity. The discourse on women is distinct from that on men in the medieval period, given that it is men who speak about things, as well as who speak about women and decide for them. Because of this, the feeling towards women is one of contempt and fear, since every woman is similar to Eve, a sinner and guilty for all the sins of humanity. It is as if sex served only for procreation and should not be practiced without this purpose, in which women fulfilled their role as virgins who would become pregnant without practicing sin – sex for pleasure:

> The ideal of virginity was supreme for clergy, lay people, and women, above all. It is difficult to explain that even married women can lead a holy life, since they are involved in the practice of sex, as motherhood is one of their functions (Medeiros; Silva, 2013, p. 12).

The relationship between the holy woman and the whore generates a process of transmutation of the potentialities of that body in marriage, leading it solely to the role of caregiver for everyone except herself. Thus, pleasures, orgasms, and everything produced and related to women's bodies are not considered, being (still) kept under the yoke of the Church, first, and later by the power of the Modern State.

In this way, considering all these concepts and regulations about the medieval body, especially that of women in the hierarchy that marks the construction of gender, we now present the sacred-historical context of the life and artistic production of Hildegard of Bingen, and how all Christian ideology and its dissidents influence her life and works.

Sacred-historical context of the life and artistic production of Hildegard of Bingen

According to Jacques Le Goff and Nicolas Truong (2006), gender in the Middle Ages can be understood through relations of power, particularly through the predominant institution that exerted great influence in the twelfth century: the Catholic Church. It was this institution that determined and dictated behavioral norms and policies of renunciation concerning the body. Hildegard of Bingen lived in the twelfth century and experienced this entire context in which women were viewed negatively. Moreover, she belonged to the Catholic clergy and was therefore even more closely connected to both the Church and monastic society.

According to Barbara Newman (2015), Hildegard was born in 1098 in Bermersheim vor der Höhe, near Alzey, in present-day Germany, into a noble family. She enjoyed wealth and privileges, as well as relatively easy access to ecclesiastical and political power due to her family's influence. From a very young age she belonged to a spiritual and social elite; nevertheless, she remained deeply humble in her understanding of her place before God. She feared her mission and was slow to believe that she was worthy of the visions she received. She understood the human being as fragile and submissive, in contrast to God, who should be exalted for His superiority and greatness. According to Victoria Cirlot *in Hildegard von Bingen y la tradición de Occidente* (2005):

> From fragility (homo fragilis), from ashes (cinis cineris), and from decay (putredo putretudinis)—that is, from the creature's nothingness—the greatest is addressed, and it is from this place that the voice urges speech and writing, to speak and to write (dic et scribe) (Cirlot, 2005, p. 11, our translation)[2].

According to Cirlot (2005), Hildegard emphasized the fragility of the human being, describing it as "ash of ashes" and "rottenness of rottenness," highlighting its insignificance in comparison to God. Here there is a renunciation of the body and the flesh, as well as the subordination that was expected from those who feared and respected the superior Being. Furthermore, it is because of this that Hildegard, with the awareness she had of her time, was afraid of surpassing the limits and dogmas imposed by the Catholic Church, insofar as she perceived and described the poverty of her being.

[2] From fragility (*homo fragilis*), in the ashes (*cinis cineris*) and in rottenness (*putredo putretudinis*), that is, from the nothingness of the creature, one attends to the greatest, and from that place the voice urges speech and writing, to speak and to write (*dic et scribe*).

Newman (2015) states that, although she knew of her subordination, Hildegard knew that the Clergy of that period was unjust; therefore, she understood that the mission sent to her by God, a woman subordinated to the hierarchy of the Church, concerned the call to proclaim the justice of God, as well as to teach the divine scriptures to the faithful. Hildegard sought social justice, uniting religion, science, doctrine, charisma, and indignation. She preached in numerous monasteries and wrote books to propagate her teachings.

Being considered a mystic in the Middle Ages is a space of social affirmation through opinions, having a voice and being heard in religious life. According to Troch (2013), this classification of mystic is a stereotype created by men to refer to women who wanted to participate in theological discussions, treating as mystic all theology produced by women. Hildegard interpreted her visions through her literary and artistic productions, as many of her visions became works. She was a mystic who worked with mystery, the ineffable, and the unknown. Almost a millennium separates us from Hildegard; it has been nine hundred and twenty-three years since the date of her birth, yet her words and teachings are recognized to this day, as shown by the immense number of faithful and followers.

The book *Scivias* (1152) is a visionary work crossed by many questions, and one of them concerns being a woman and writing a book questioning the posture of the Clergy. “If Hildegard had been a male theologian, her *Scivias* would undoubtedly have been considered one of the most important medieval summae” (*Scivias*, 2015, p. 47). Although Hildegard is known by many people to this day, it is possible that she would be even more celebrated because of her courage and intelligence if it were not for the process of erasing the contributions made by women in the production and dissemination of knowledge.

Hildegard’s illuminations and the representation of gender

The analysis begins with the illuminations *A profetiza*, *Aquele que está entronizado* and *Mãe Igreja* (dated between 1098 and 1179), taking the writings and propositions of Panofsky (2007) regarding the analysis of works through iconology as a methodological strategy for critical analysis. Panofsky presents three phases of iconology, consisting of three objects of interpretation: a) the primary or natural subject (pre-iconographical description); b) the secondary or conventional subject (iconographical analysis); and c) intrinsic meaning (iconological interpretation).

In agreement with Angelita Marques Visalli and Pamela Wanessa Godoi (2016, p. 130), in addition to written or spoken language, the language constituted by images can bring us closer to symbolisms, pleasures, displeasures, metaphors, and references. There are provocations of meanings and feelings due to their symbolisms and significations, since they are produced by a person inserted in a society and in a historical period, bringing, consciously or not, social themes, as is the case with religious and spiritual subjects.

Visual language communicates and images "[...] are loaded with symbolic values, fulfill religious, political or ideological functions, lend themselves to pedagogical, liturgical and even magical uses. This means that they fully participate in the functioning and reproduction of present and past societies" (Schmitt, 2007, p. 11). It is an important historical source for understanding the past and the culture of a given period, since these symbolisms carry meanings that explain ways of living and thinking, as well as people's relationship with these images, considering that there were literate and non-literate cultures.

What is currently understood by image may be completely different from the notion of image and its importance for medieval society, since "in the culture of the medieval West, the Latin term *imago*, from which the word 'image' derives, presents a rich and varied semantic value. But, as is often the case, one should not be misled by phonetic similarities and etymological kinship" (Schmitt, 2007, p. 12). In medieval society, *imago* is, first of all, a fundamental part of Christian anthropology, since the human being, created by the Creator, is His image and likeness, just as "the world, nature, human institutions, moral life itself are thought of as reflections, images reflected by a great mirror (*speculum*)" (Schmitt, 2007, p. 13), insofar as they are images created while the Creator reflected Himself.

In this context, medieval art presents the idea of "presentification," developed by Jean-Claude Schmitt in *O corpo das imagens* (2007), reflecting on the presence of the immaterial—the representation of the divine—in these images. The image does not assume the place of the divine, but is a means through which the human being can approach and connect with the divine and the spiritual, since there, unlike representation, there is presentification and a portal to another reality. These paintings were related to Christian books, liturgical texts, and Latin copies of ancient literature. Visalli and Godoi (2016, p. 136) state that those who assembled the books were the people who copied the texts and drew or painted, known as scribes or copyists. These illuminations, besides being of great importance for the Catholic Church to guarantee its liturgy and doctrine, were produced by religious men. In a society in which the majority was illiterate, the Catholic Church held the domain of explaining the things of the world through access to writing and record.

From the production of images and all the histories that emerge from these processes, the three selected illuminations of Hildegard make it possible to problematize some aspects inherent to their making and to the teachings implied when it comes to the body of the woman, the female gender, its control and surveillance. Thus, studying representations of gender in paintings of the Late Middle Ages through the works of a nun and painter who lived geographically in what is now recognized as the territory of Germany makes it possible to discover and recognize unofficial narratives, other historical, political, cultural and artistic perspectives of that context, through the gaze of a woman, and not according to the masculinist desire that was predominant in the history of art of the Middle Ages and that still remains through hegemonic narratives.

Regarding the ways in which gender is portrayed in paintings of the Middle Ages, in this case specifically in the art of the German nun Hildegard de Bingen, the question arises as to what these images reveal about the construction of gender in the medieval period, considering that the medieval Catholic body attributed to women was constructed through structures that emanate relations of oppression, subjugation, and subalternization that persist to this day.

The Prophetess and *The One Who Is Enthroned*

The illumination *The Prophetess* (figure 1) opens the book *Scivias*, being the first illustration of Hildegard's visions. It is from this image that the entire course of the process of the visions begins to be narrated, as well as their own acceptance and that of the external community regarding the veracity of what was seen, reported, and drawn. According to the writings that explain her visions in *Scivias*, the nun states that this occurred in the year 1141, when a vibrant light opened in the sky that, like the Sun, warms everything, and soon made her understand the meaning of the scriptures of the Gospel, recalling her visions when she was a child, at five years of age. She affirms that she did not receive them in dreams or in a state of delirium, but rather when she was awake and in open places, as something difficult for the mortal mind and flesh to comprehend.

This illumination portrays the representation of a man together with a woman, whom I believe to be the monk Volmar and Hildegard at the moment she receives her visions. The monk is understood as someone who could justify the veracity of the information conveyed, acting as a witness to what was seen and heard, although without experiencing it in the same way as Hildegard. This male presence in the image is symbolic, considering that any action carried out by women had to be authorized by men; even some monasteries led by women could only make certain decisions with the final word of male monks.

Figure 1 – *The Prophetess*
(source: *Scivias*, 2015, p. 94)

The illumination represents precisely the moment in which Hildegard receives the vision, but in order to un-

derstand it better it is necessary to refer to the first vision that precedes *The Prophetess*, which is part of the First Book contained in *Scivias*, and is entitled *The One Who Is Enthroned*.

The image *The One Who Is Enthroned* (figure 2) is part of the first vision of the First Book, insofar as *Scivias* is divided into three parts. The first vision is entitled *God Enthroned Reveals Himself to Hildegard*, and the description made by Hildegard herself of what was seen is presented as follows:

> I saw a great iron-colored mountain and, enthroned upon it, someone of such immense glory that it dazzled my sight. On each of his sides there extended a gentle shadow, like a wing of admirable width and extent. Before him, at the foot of the mountain, there was an image full of eyes on all sides, in which, because of those eyes, I could not discern any human form. Before this image there was another: a child wearing a tunic of a soft color, but with white shoes, upon whose head such glory descended from the one who is enthroned upon that mountain that I could not look at its face. But from the one who sat enthroned upon that mountain sprang many living sparks, which flew very gently around the images. Likewise, I discerned on that mountain many small windows, in which human heads appeared, some of muted colors and others white (*Scivias*, 2015, p. 103).

In the book, the image precedes the description of the vision. The images translate into visuality what was written and seen by Hildegard. They are a way of allowing all people to have access to what was revealed to the nun through the message given by the One Who Was Enthroned. Since control over access to records and literacy was exclusive to the Clergy, visuality was configured as a pedagogical resource to catechize, teach, and reveal what was intended as a worldview and life experience.

The One Who was enthroned upon the mountain, with a loud and strong voice, said*:*

> O human, who are the fragile dust of the earth and the filth of filth! Cry out and proclaim the origin of pure salvation, until those people are established, those who, although they see the most intimate contents of the Scriptures, do not wish to recount

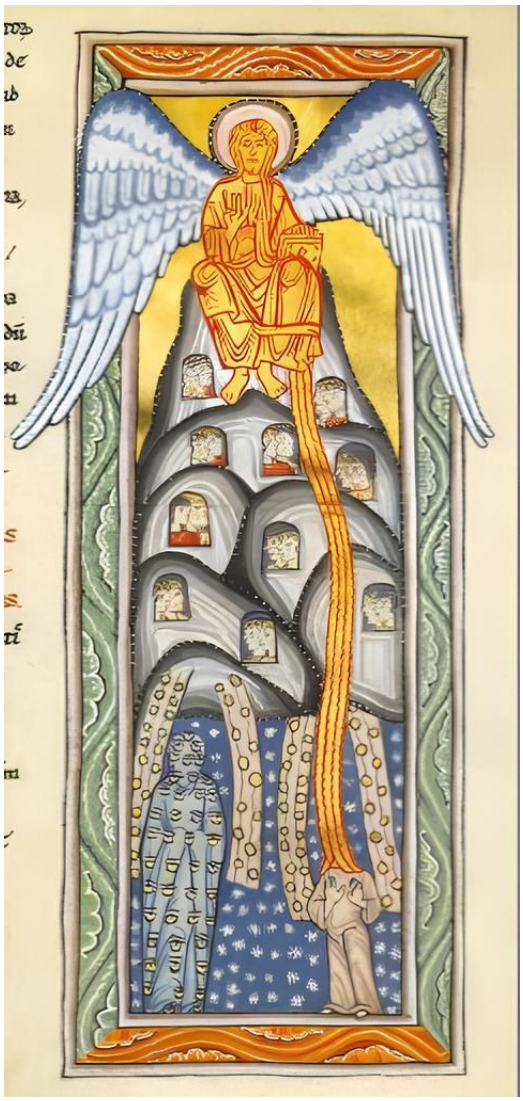

Figure 2 – *The One Who Is Enthroned* (1098-1179)
(source: *Scivias*, 2015, p. 101)

> or announce them, because they are pusillanimous and indolent in the service of the justice of God. Unseal for them the confinement of the mysteries that they, timid as they are, hide in a hidden and sterile field. Burst forth in a fountain of abundance and pour out mystical knowledge, until those who think that you are contemptible because of the Transgression of Eve are stirred by the flood of your irrigation. Indeed, you have received your profound insight not from human beings, but from the sublime and tremendous Judge in the heights, where that calm shines strongly with glorious light among those that shine (*Scivias*, 2015, p. 103–104).

Initially, it is possible to understand the place that the human being occupies before God, the role of Hildegard as a preacher, and the "mission" given to her. Hildegard prompts us to reflect on the laziness and indolence of the ecclesiastical members of the Catholic Church in the face of injustices that remained uncorrected, in addition to proposing a reflection on the mission given to her as a woman subordinated to the social structure of the time, since the Clergy was corrupt and materialistic. This direct contact with God, without earthly interference through the mediation of a man, is a point of extreme importance to be highlighted in Hildegard's narratives. This affirms the power and strength of women, considered mystical in magic and in the sacred, as well as the strategies surrounding relations of power and the popular success of their visions in occupying spaces of power within the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church.

For Hildegard, the mountain symbolizes the "strength and stability of the eternal kingdom of God" (*Scivias*, 2015, p. 104). Being indestructible and governed by the One Who Is Enthroned – The winged figure in the image – it would be the "glory so immense that it dazzles the sight" (*Scivias*, 2015, p. 104). It is also something that the human mind cannot comprehend, since its superiority and amplitude in comparison to earthly people are evident. The figure with eyes, in the lower left corner of the image, addresses the fear of the Lord, which consists of remaining in the presence of God, maintaining oneself as just and "exercising His zeal and stability among humans" (*Scivias*, 2015, p. 105). This idea may also be presented through the figure with eyes, through the symbolism of vigilance that constitutes it. This illumination, precisely because of the aspect of vigilance of the eyes over the body of a female figure, immediately led me to relate it to what I, as a woman of the twenty-first century, continue to experience today.

The image "of a child wearing a tunic of a soft color, with white shoes" (*Scivias*, 2015, p. 103), in the lower right corner, ends up symbolizing those who are poor in spirit. These people are the chosen ones for the kingdom of God, since they "love simplicity and sobriety of spirit, attributing their righteous works not to themselves, but to God" (*Scivias*, 2015, p. 105). It is because of this that the glory of the One Who Is Enthroned reaches her. In the image, this glory is represented by "living sparks" (*Scivias*, 2015, p. 103) that connect the figure in the tunic with the figure on the mountain, since, although distant, they are united: "La cabeza es la divinidad, y la imagen simboliza la verdadera y pura pobreza de espíritu, de la que Dios mismo es cabeza. El color pálido de su ropa significa la simplicidad de espíritu, la ausencia de toda pretensión"

(Cirlot, 2005, p. 68). Therefore, only those who love poverty of spirit and are willing to renounce achievements in their own name are guardians of the virtues that come from God.

The illumination is also composed of “many small windows, in which human heads appear, some of muted colors and others white” (*Scivias*, 2015, p. 103). These windows represent those who possess the highest knowledge of God but do not seek justice and purity; nevertheless, their actions cannot be hidden from the One Who Is Enthroned. Thus, in the book there is a relationship between these figures and the proverb of Solomon, since “a person weakens and impoverishes himself when he does not work for justice” (*Scivias*, 2015, p. 106). In this way, as mentioned earlier, Hildegard makes a strong critique of the administration of the Catholic Church, which, in that period, presented aspects beyond corruption, such as lust, vanity, disputes for power, and so on.

According to Victoria Cirlot (2005, p. 67), “Temor de Dios y Pobreza de Espíritu, pueden ser interpretadas como exteriorizaciones del interior de la propia visionária”. Thus, both the figure with eyes over her body – *fear of God* – expresses a self-vigilance in remaining on the divine path, and an external vigilance coming from the eyes of other people, represented by the figure in the tunic – *poor in spirit.*

The Mother Church

The illumination entitled *Mother Church* (figure 3) is included in the Second Book of *Scivias* and illustrates the Third Vision: *The Church, Bride of Christ and Mother of the Faithful*.

In this illumination, I chose to crop it and attach its parts close to Hildegard’s descriptions (figures 4, 5 and 6). The image attempts to remain faithful to the description, but it does not encompass everything that is reported by her. According to Hildegard, the third vision begins when she sees a great woman:

Figure 3 – *Mother Church* (source: *Scivias*, 2015, 241)

> [...] I saw the image of a woman as vast as a great city, with a marvelous crown on her head and arms from which a splendor hung like sleeves, shining from heaven to earth. Her womb was pierced like a net, with many openings, with an enormous multitude of people entering and leaving. She had neither legs nor feet, but remained balanced upon her womb before the altar that stood before the eyes of God, embracing it with her outstretched hands and contemplating, with penetrating gaze, the entire expanse of heaven. I could not perceive her clothing, except that she was adorned with great splendor and shone with lucid serenity, and on her chest there shone a red radiance like the dawn; and I heard a sound of all kinds of music singing about her: 'Like the dawn, magnificently shining' (*Scivias*, 2015, p. 243).
>
> And that image spreads its splendor like a garment, saying: 'I must conceive and give birth!' And suddenly, like lightning, a multitude of angels hastened to her, building stairways and seats within her for the people, through which the image was to be perfected (*Scivias*, 2015, p. 243).
>
> Then I saw black children moving in the air, near the ground, like fish in water, and they entered the womb of the image through the openings that pierced it. But she groaned, drawing them upward toward her head, and they came out through her mouth, while she remained untouched (*Scivias*, 2015, p. 243)

Figure 4 – Detail of the first part of *Mother Church* (source: *Scivias*)

Figura 5 – Detail of the fourth part of *Mother Church* (source: *Scivias*)

It is constitutive of the racialization of bodies and of structural racism, grounded in the processes of colonization, that the image places Black children as the result of all sin, evil, penance, and impurity, using them as an instrument of indoctrination, considering that only through the womb of Mother Church can one

reach splendor and glory, where everything is configured as clear and white. In addition to the Church financing imperialist and positivist enterprises grounded in evolutionism, treating other peoples and communities as “primitive,” this idea is also related to the crusades in the sixteenth century and colonial invasions, as well as to the processes of catechization of Indigenous/native peoples and the enslavement of the Black population. Understanding that racism was invented in the West as a discriminatory practice personalized in the phenotype of certain people as a justification for their exploitation, European countries invaded territories and practiced the enslavement of people in Africa and in the New World. The history of racism in the Western world is associated with the archaic forms of colonialism. However, in the period of the twelfth century, which precedes the great invasions carried out through maritime navigation, discrimination was, for the most part, associated with cultural factors and social conditions.

Despite this, according to Carlos Moore Wedderburn (2007, p. 22), “desde seu início, na Antiguidade, o racismo sempre foi uma realidade social e cultural pautada exclusivamente no fenótipo, antes de ser um fenômeno político e econômico pautado na biologia”. Therefore, even though in the twelfth century evidence of discrimination was largely related to inferior social conditions, such as the functions diffused at birth based on estate society – the Clergy should pray, the Nobility should wage war, and the Serf should work – and to the cultural hierarchy among social groups that enjoyed privileges, racism existed and “It is phenotype that serves as the line of demarcation between racial groups and as the point of reference around which ‘racial’ discriminations are organized.” (Wedderburn, 2007, p. 22). In other words, phenotype is responsible for nurturing the social imaginary rather than genes, existing even before the great invasions carried out through maritime navigation, and making it impossible to affirm that racism did not exist during the period in which Hildegard lived. The Church attempts to adapt to new times and has been modified over the years, but it is still responsible for the control of many bodies and forms of violence, as well as for the maintenance of racism and sexism historically constructed and financed.

It is also symbolic where the bodies enter and where they exit. The body, in the medieval period, was seen as the locus of sin and divided between the head – reason – and the rest – sin (the lower body). Thus, those sinful children enter and leave through the head, that is, they leave through and toward sanctity, transformed. It is possible to relate the image of the woman who “filters” this sin with the Virgin Mary, who gives birth to her son without approaching human sin or without sexual practice. There is also the symbolic relation of the woman as responsible for cleansing all sin and for caring for and producing something from her womb as a duty, the one who gestates and cares for all.

This mother remains intact when removing her children through her mouth due to her virginity and her intact body, in analogy with the Virgin Mary as the only woman – an example to

be followed by the others – to have her child without sin, since all the others, even if they followed the biblical commandments, should still be constantly punished, revealing the misogyny and the repulsion toward everything produced, whether materially or symbolically, by women's bodies. Here, the place assigned to women becomes clear: that of a receptacle and locus of the feminine, as a gender constituted in opposition to those – namely men – who are considered similar to the Creator.

Figure 6 – Detail of the second part of *Mother Church* (source: *Scivias*)

> And behold, that serene light, with the figure of a man within it, burning with a radiant fire, which I had seen in my previous vision, appeared to me again and stripped each of them of their dark skin and cast it far away; and clothed each of them with a garment of pure white and opened to them the serene light, saying to them one by one: 'Strip yourself of the old injustice, and clothe yourself with the new holiness' (*Scivias*, 2015, p. 244).

The woman is seen as the representation of the Church, since the Church has faithful followers and is the eternal mother of her children. In addition, just as the Virgin must resist errors and sins, the Church must resist pagans and heretics. In order to better understand what the image addresses, I present here two additional visions that reinforce what was stated by Hildegard. The book continues through the illuminations and the accounts of the visions. The fourth vision is entitled *The Confirmation*. In it, the nun visualizes an immense round tower behind the woman described in the previous illumination, demonstrating all the strength and power that the Church possessed. In other words, confirming what had previously been seen and associating the woman with the Church as the possessor of fortresses.

This woman seen as a fortress is still demanded in the experiences of contemporary women, considering that today many women have multiple work shifts, alternating their paid employment with domestic tasks beyond the eight-hour workday – that is, with their "obligations" taught since childhood and sustained by the social imaginary for centuries. In addition, compulsory motherhood may be the perfect opportunity for a woman, who assumes most of the responsibility for the child, to acquire a twenty-four-hour job without remuneration, being induced to perform it without complaint.

With these images and reflections, I will present a brief final consideration, interweaving some traces of medieval thought about gender, through the body of the woman, with certain conceptions and interventions that still persist over women's bodies in contemporary times.

Final considerations

According to Cassiano Jesus (2020), in the medieval period there were many bodies that did not matter, lives regarded as abominable and left on the margins. The construction of the feminine and the identities associated with it is directly linked to opposition to what is considered the normalization of the masculine. There is no universal and timeless model of masculine or feminine, but rather different experiences that vary according to time and culture.

In order to consider the diversity of women's corporealities in the medieval period, it is necessary to understand that these bodies are separated by many centuries. Therefore, some contemporary concepts and practices that involve the understanding of body and gender, although similar, are also distinct. Women's bodies in contemporary times are shaped by many issues, one of which is patriarchy associated with capitalism. Despite many achievements by women, through feminist, transfeminist, LGBTQIAPN+, and Black movements throughout history, there are still forms of violence that must be confronted, since they are grounded in an androcentric society in which behaviors, experiences, and thoughts associated with the masculine are considered the standard to be constantly naturalized.

The violence experienced by the diverse experiences of women, in addition to being physical, is also symbolic violence which, according to Bourdieu (2014), is an invisible form of violence in which the victims participate in the process passively, since

> [...] The concept of symbolic violence, one of the ways of exercising symbolic power, occurs in the case of genders from the moment the dominant (male) discourse is apprehended as natural in the process of women's socialization, who do not oppose the established structure, since domination is naturalized" (Silva, 2017, p. 20).

In Hildegard's works, this violence could be exemplified in the vigilance over the body that led to self-punishment, and in the present day this demand still persists, supported by a self-surveillance reflected in one's own body and in the bodies of other women, reinforcing a narrative of oppression that places them in a state of submission and subordinated to the ideals of men and hegemonic toxic masculinity. Invisible violence is the pillar of manipulations and, consequently, of the emotional dependence that results in abusive relationships. These abuses may occur in any social sphere, but romantic relationships and life experiences within heteronormative marriage demonstrate themselves to be a dangerous field of erasure and mortality for women, for many centuries.

"The dominant discourse begins in the process of women's socialization in early childhood, through toys designated for different genders" (Silva, 2017, p. 25). It is in the

experience of childhood that conduct and responses to the naturalization of gender begin to be shaped, through institutions such as the Church, the School, and the Family which, in the latter case, is the first space of a child's socialization, where a disciplining of bodies ends up occurring: clothing, hair, toys, and even colors. This process is similar to the illuminations, which were not merely artistic representations but ideological and pedagogical devices that helped consolidate and perpetuate conceptions of gender, influencing how women were perceived and how they were expected to behave in medieval society.

Institutions such as the School and the Church are also responsible for the social construction of the body. Fundamentalist groups – whether in the medieval period or in contemporary times – defend the maintenance of morality and good customs in the capture of what they perceive as the abnormality of bodies. According to João Paulo Baliscei (2020), the "gender ideology," a recent term invented by conservative groups,

> [...] understands that gender and the status of "normality" attributed to it are identity expressions considered natural to the subject and that correspond to the sex identified before or during birth. Thus, any subject—child, youth, adult, or elderly person—who manifests behaviors, desires, sexualities, and preferences different from those expected for their gender is considered "abnormal" and, most importantly, subject to correction (Baliscei, 2020, p. 242).

In this way, gender is imposed at birth, upon discovering the sex of the baby, and is thus socially constructed with duties and renunciations so that each body fits within the Western binary system of sex/gender. It can be observed that this way of operating with life and with desires and pleasures is present in Hildegard's writings, even though the concepts of gender and binary sexuality emerged much later, between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, demonstrating how systems of power are constantly updated and enter into ideological partnerships.

Beyond aesthetic pressure, the sociocultural and patriarchal changes that arose during the colonial period—where many practices were inherited from the Middle Ages—are fundamental for understanding the present scenario. Colonial invasions guided many experiments and studies that gave rise to the assumptions of Western science regarding sexuality and the body, its regulation and surveillance, without the morals and customs of medieval society being completely erased from the premises that shaped the etiquette rituals of the emerging modern society. Thus, colonization and colonialities have constructed much of what we understand today as body, gender, and sexuality, in collusion with the Catholic Church, through processes of catechization and through an active medieval imaginary, sponsored by absolutist monarchical regimes with the principal aim of mercantile and territorial expansion through the annihilation and cultural and social submission of the diversity of peoples.

Although women today possess rights that have been achieved and social advances obtained through many struggles, and can plan for a better life experience, violence has not

ceased. The rates and forms of aggression against women's bodies have increased, and these bodies are not homogeneous, since there is a diversity and multitude of women's bodies that suffer daily deprivations, erasures, and distinct forms of violence, with different layers of privileges and oppressions. Brazil records one case of femicide every six and a half hours, and as a consequence of COVID-19, in 2020 and 2021 the cases increased, due to the fact that women and girls spent more time with their aggressors.

Based on these conceptions and analyses, it is possible to perceive how textual, imagetic, and bodily technologies have produced the bodies and the subjective experiences of women. Just as biblical texts, illuminations, visions, and the writings of Hildegard are technologies of the medieval period, modern and now contemporary technologies are also ways of presenting life experiences and worldviews, grounded in the control of self-consumption as a new format for constituting "personality." The Media and the Church are examples of ideological apparatuses that, in conjunction with patriarchy, not only control and standardize bodies but also promote a devouring of the self and of its political, poetic, and creative potentials.

To conclude, I understand that patriarchy, media and, technologies, domestic violence, and femicide are the principal intersectional themes between the medieval period and the present in the experiences of the bodies of different women, even though the naming of oppressive practices has changed over the centuries. The illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen not only reproduce medieval conceptions of the female body but also reveal the social tensions of the period by resignifying the presence and agency of women. The way in which the female body is represented in these manuscripts reveals both the limits imposed by Christian normativity and the possibilities for rupture or re-elaboration of female roles in medieval culture. Both Hildegard's illuminations and social media contain explicit and implicit compulsory teachings about how to act, be, and behave.

Contemporary domestic violence, as well as in the medieval period, is the result of many factors, leading to the extermination of many women. How can violence against bodies and the different ways of becoming a woman be denaturalized? We believe in the search for answers in the histories and narratives of women themselves, especially those that are non-hegemonic and unofficial, so that the History called "official" does not perpetuate and repeat itself.

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