

Swiss Center for Affective Sciences

THE AFFECTIVE
SCIENCES AND
CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

SEMINAR SERIES

Friday,
March 22th
2013

10:00 - 11:30

CISA Conference
Room
(3rd Floor)
Rue des Batoirs, 7
Geneva

Back to Black: aesthetic emotion
from the end of paganism to Byzantium.

Aglae Pizzone
(CISA / UNIGE)

The debate on the holy images occupied no less than one century in Byzantine history (730-842 CE). One of the central concerns was to make sense of the powerful feelings stirred by the icons. What we would call “aesthetic emotion” was at the center stage of spiritual life. The champions of the holy images conceptualized aesthetic emotion by resorting to narratives that at first sight do not look holy at all. The most distinctive one revolves around the notion “of maternal impressions” and tells the story of a black baby born to white parents. These narratives were meant to explain in psycho-physiological terms the affective power of visuality, often felt as dangerously overwhelming and menacing. In order to understand how and why similar anecdotes, with their peculiar pagan flavor, were assimilated into the Byzantine worldview, one needs to go back to the Jewish roots of Christian thought. Stories belonging to the biblical and the apocalyptic tradition offered a suitable narrative framework to construe the power of the gaze and were flexible enough to be adapted to different (and often conflicting) contexts. While implying a well defined set of scientific beliefs, such myths served the purpose of explaining in narrative terms a phenomenon that the most recent research in neuroscience and philosophy of mind labels as embodied simulation. ■



FONDS NATIONAL SUISSE
SCHWEIZERISCHER NATIONALFONDS
FONDO NAZIONALE SVIZZERO
SWISS NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION



Affective Sciences
SWISS NATIONAL CENTER OF COMPETENCE IN RESEARCH

