Aesthetics of the Secular

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INTRODUCTION: THE AESTHETIC PRODUCTION OF BEING "OTHER-THAN-RELIGIOUS"

This essay explores how an aesthetics of religion approach offers a way to study hitherto neglected aspects of "lived secularity" in the specific sense of claims to and practices of being "other-than-religious." As a first step, the essay briefly reviews why a focus on aesthetics is crucial to enlarge the methodological setup of scholarship on the secular beyond normative accounts of secularity as based on disembodied reason. After engaging with the existing literature on the aesthetics of non-religion, the final section demonstrates the potential of this approach in a case study of organized atheism in South India. It engages lived secularity as an aestheticscape by exploring a specific historical imaginary of "Indian Atheism" in relation to material culture, rhetorical practices, emotional habitus, and representational economies.

   Since the 2000s, questions related to the secular have become a major theme across disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. As a variety of academic disciplines with divergent research agendas and methodologies have been involved in this project of re-appraising the relationship between the religious and the secular, the research field is highly diversified and no consensus exists about definitions of even its most central categories. While several authors have attempted to produce taxonomical clarity for terms like secularism, secularity, secularization, or the post-secular (Casanova 1994; Taylor 2007; Lee 2015), the disciplinary perspectives and actual themes of existing scholarship are too diverse to allow for a single, authoritative vocabulary. This essay limits itself to the secular as it appears in an emerging field in religious studies, sociology, and anthropology that deals with people, discourses, and practices that are marked or consider themselves as different from and often opposed to religion: atheism, secular humanism, rationalism, disbelief, religious indifference, etc. (Bullivant and Lee 2012; Quack 2014; Blanes and Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2015). In approaching the secular as other-than-religion, the intention is not to postulate an essential difference between the religious and the secular; rather, the aim is to explore the means by which certain groups of people constitute themselves and their ways of living as an aestheticscape that is other-than-religious.

RESEARCHING THE SECULAR: FROM SECULAR IDEOLOGY TO AN AESTHETICS OF LIVED SECULARITY

The "Absence" of Secular Aesthetics

It is not coincidental that the turn toward aesthetic approaches to religion is more or less contemporaneous with a renewed interest in the secular in the wake of deconstructions of the modernist secularization paradigm. A common theme in both developments has been the critique of a tendency to construe religions primarily as disembodied, intellectual, and textual phenomena concerned above all with questions of meaning and belief. The aesthetic and material turns in religious studies have retraced the origins of this truncated understanding of religion to a specifically modern episteme and semiotic ideology of "disembedding" (Giddens 1991: 21–9). Within this framework, the secular has been identified as the "ontology" (Asad 2003: 21) and conceptual grammar which undergirds the "moral narrative of modernity" (Keane 2013b: 159) telling of the liberation and purification of human reason and agency from supposedly superstitious entanglements with material, bodily, affective, or social constrictions (see also Latour 1993; Connolly 1999). While the critical scholarship on the secular/modern remaking of religion has been immensely productive in uncovering the hitherto neglected aesthetic dimensions of lived religions, it has tended to equate the secular with its normative accounts of disembodied reason. As a consequence, scholarship on the secular has dealt with aesthetics predominantly as a question of how secular/modern epistemologies, legal structures, and forms of governance have misconstrued, ignored, or regulated the aesthetics of religion. In other words, it has been unable to address the materiality and embodied nature of secularity as anything other than a contradiction of the secular's own normative insistence on disembeddedness, universality, and autonomy from the material, bodily, social, etc. Within this methodological setup, to describe the embodied and material dimensions of the secular is to describe what it is not—or what it claims not to be. However, explicit disavowals of aesthetics, or projects of anaesthetics (see Yelle, Chapter 22, this volume), within certain secular discourses do not foreclose the analysis of the aesthetic forms and strategies through which such disavowals are put forth and made sensible.

This replicates a problem well known from the study of religions, where the concept of religion was based to a large extent on the discourse of religious professionals and "lived" or "popular" forms of religiosity were measured by the extent to which they conformed to theological normativity. This is more than a mere analogy, since theology—especially in its Protestant variant—is routinely identified as the major driving force of (secular) modernity (Keane 2007). By equating the secular with its normative self-representation, the study of secularity has been circumscribed by a conceptual grid reconstructed almost entirely on the basis of early modern European intellectual history. This Eurocentric bias presents a serious methodological problem for studying secularity outside the ambit of European languages or narratives of European diffusion. This has prevented existing research on issues of religious critique, doubt, skepticism, or withdrawal in area studies from being integrated into a systematic comparative and postcolonial perspective on the secular (for the situation in African Studies see Engelke 2015b). Here, a focus on aesthetics can offer a way forward beyond normative accounts and European conceptual history.

Aesthetics of Science and Politics

Since the secular has been closely linked to rationality, the intellect, and science, it falls squarely within the central epistemological concern of an aesthetic approach as developed in this volume, which shows how the body, the senses, figuration, and material media are intrinsic to processes of intellectual reasoning and knowledge. Here, an aesthetics of the secular overlaps with an aesthetics of science, which analyzes how scientific claims to objectivity and rationality are not only represented but also constructed through rhetorical strategies, sensorial engagements, material assemblages, assumptions about the body and the senses, as well as aesthetic judgments inherent to culturally shaped and historically changing epistemologies (Borrelli and Grieser 2017). It is important to note, however, that the science/religion binary is historically related to but cannot be collapsed into the secular/religious binary, as aesthetic forms associated with religious traditions may very well be employed in scientific practices and vice versa (Grieser 2017).

Another core area of boundary work with regard to the secular besides science is of course the relationship between the state and religion, which is the subject of debates on political secularism (Calhoun et al. 2011) and the post-secular (Braidotti et al. 2014). While recent debates have tended to focus on how secular states condition or suppress aesthetic dimensions of religions, an earlier stream of scholarship in the tradition of the Frankfurt School has examined the aesthetics of political regimes themselves. Critical theory has focused especially on how the confluence of changing technological and media environments in a capitalist "culture industry" is linked with projects of totalitarian politics (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 94). Beyond descriptive collections of tropes and themes associated with specific historical regimes, this research has approached political and social formations of fascism and socialism as fundamentally aesthetic projects, grounded in what Walter Benjamin called the "aestheticizing of politics" (2008: 42). While this implied a critical perspective on the reduction of politics to aesthetics—as opposed to democratic or parliamentarian process—more recent perspectives stress the inherently aesthetic character of politics (Rancière 2004).

A phenomenon like "socialist realism," for example, is of particular interest for an aesthetics of the secular, as it was understood less as a classificatory category of style or genre than an artistic-political program and aesthetic method meant to construct and usher in the communist future of Real Socialism—rather than merely representing it (Gutkin 1999; Cai Xiang 2016). It is, however, precisely on the basis of such aspects of "applied aesthetics" that fascism and socialism have been interpreted as pseudo, political, civil, or secular religions, thus raising again the question of what exactly is secular about their aesthetics other than the rejection of historical religions. Anja Kirsch (2017) shows that such interpretations are grounded in normative concepts of "good" and "bad" religion and proposes instead to focus on formal aesthetic criteria, in her case narratological structures, which may occur in both secular and religious contexts of world making without therefore being themselves either religious or secular. Aesthetic dimensions of socialism, and other phenomena perceived as secular, can thus come under analysis in comparison to religion and further our analytical understanding of the aesthetic efficacy of the secular/religious binary. Thus, potentially normative concepts like political or civil religion can be reappraised for their analytical value with regard to the larger project of an aesthetics of religion *and* the secular (Koch 2017b).

Is There a Secular Body?

One of the first attempts to explicitly tackle the task of bringing together the aesthetic turn and the secular turn within scholarship on religion is Charles Hirschkind's essay on the "secular body" in the sense of "a particular configuration of the human sensorium—of sensibilities, affects, embodied dispositions—specific to secular subjects" (2011: 633). Hirschkind addresses the problem that the mere absence of religion would inflate the category of the secular to an extent where it loses its analytical specificity. His solution is a turn toward genealogy and narrative, as he proposes to conceptualize a secular sensorium as those bodily and sensorial dispositions which contribute to instituting and legitimizing "the secularist narrative of the progressive replacement of religious error by secular reason" (ibid.: 641); following Talal Asad, he calls this the "triumphalist narrative of secularism" (ibid.). An important area of research takes this line of inquiry as a starting point to explore secular sensibilities with regard to bodily practices like veiling (Amir-Moazami 2016), or gender and sexuality (Cady and Fessenden 2013; Wiering 2017).

While this solution is elegant, the secular remains here fundamentally marked by traces of absence, insomuch as "every secular practice is accompanied by a religious shadow, as it were" and, therefore, "will always be subject to a certain indeterminacy or instability" (Hirschkind 2011: 643). Based on a case study of North American immortalism, i.e., techno-scientific attempts at prolonging human life through cryonics, biogerontology, and artificial intelligence, anthropologist Abou Farman (2013) emphasizes the historicity of the secular and thus argues that the secular can emancipate itself from a relational dependence on the religious. Farman shows that materialist or rationalist worldviews, their initially oppositional stance toward religion notwithstanding, have by now established their own "traditions" (ibid.: 738), which generate identifiably secular bodies and notions of personhood at the nexus of institutional, legal, and technological discourses. Similarly, sociologists and anthropologists have described how self-declared non-religious people in contemporary Britain engage with ethical questions of pleasure (Engelke 2015a), the troubling presence of material objects (Engelke 2015c), or "banal" everyday practices of dress and food (Lee 2015: 70–105). Materialist, humanist, or rationalist worldviews emerge here as frameworks for secular ways of living that refuse to be defined solely in negative relation to religion. In simplified terms, these studies do not ask how the secular/religious binary has been created or enforced through various state apparatuses but what happens once it has been put in place and is actively appropriated by people in their everyday lives. As the following case study illustrates, such a pragmatic approach makes room for collecting empirical narratives and aesthetics beyond those of triumphalism, pseudo-religion, or anaesthetics—and hence room for more complex and plural genealogies as well.

Case Study: Organized Atheism in South India

In this case study, based on ethnographic research on an atheist movement in the two mainly Telugu-speaking states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana (Binder 2017), I explore a specific narrative of Indian atheism prevalent in South India. I mainly focus on how this narrative and its social imaginary relates to practices of materialization and verbal articulation in order to illustrate an aesthetic approach to what it "feels like" to be secular in a given place and time. Despite some doctrinal differences and the absence of an overarching institutional structure, the members of this movement recognize a shared goal of their secular activism: the reconstruction of a moral, just, and rational society through the eradication of "mental slavery" (*bhāvadāsyam*) manifesting itself most

directly—though not exclusively—in religious beliefs and practices. While some members of the movement prefer to label themselves as humanists or rationalists, I refer to this larger movement as capitalized Atheism due to the centrality of the term "atheism" and its Telugu equivalent "*nāstikatvam*" for its history (see the section "From Narrative to Material Culture" below).

Another Narrative of Secularism

Due to Orientalist and anti-colonial ideas about an essentially religious nature of Indian civilization (King 1999), Atheists today see themselves regularly confronted with allegations that their worldview is a "Westernized" product of European colonialism and thus foreign to Indian culture and history. While the colonial history of Indian Atheism and the influence of European rationalist and imperial discourses is well documented (Quack 2012), its pre-colonial roots are highly contested and difficult to historically reconstruct (Quack and Binder 2018). It is those ancient and pre-historical roots of Indian Atheism that are of crucial significance to contemporary Atheists, who try to establish their "indigeneity" primarily in two ways: first, by harking back to materialist, empiricist, and skeptical schools within classical Indian philosophy (Gokhale 2015); and second, through recourse to the so-called Aryan migration theory (Bryant and Patton 2005). Based on linguistic evidence gathered by European Orientalists in collaboration with South Indian pundits (Trautmann 2006), the Aryan migration theory posits that the origin of Hindu civilization dates back to the second millennium BCE, when so-called Aryan migrants from Central Asia brought Vedic culture and religion to India and encountered there an indigenous Dravidian civilization. Most contemporary Atheists, especially those speaking Dravidian languages of the South, link themselves and their worldview genealogically to this presumed indigenous Indian culture, which they tend to describe as atheist, materialist, rationalist, or proto-communist (Pandian 2007). In Atheist iterations of this theory, Aryans do not figure as migrants but as violent invaders, who willfully and strategically destroyed the original Atheist culture of the subcontinent by importing not only Vedic religion but religion as such—what Atheists call mental slavery.

It is crucial to retain that for many Atheists in India, the "triumphalist" narrative of secular dominance mentioned above is spliced with, at times superseded by, a narrative of decadence, destruction, and corruption. There are moreover concrete historical agents, namely Aryan invaders, who make this narrative of secular decadence tellable as an intentional, strategic, and political process rather than a "natural" devolution. From the perspective of an aesthetics of the secular, what is at stake are the sensorial, material, and affective[1] aspects which transform this spliced narrative from a mere "story" to a potent "imaginary" that conditions what it feels like to be an Atheist in South India (see Johannsen and Kirsch, Chapter 13, this volume).

From Narrative to Material Culture

To refer to Atheist retellings of the Aryan migration theory as an "imaginary" is not a comment on its historical facticity but stresses the role of imagination in structuring the perceptions of those who seek to practically realize that theory by living Atheist lives in the present (Traut and Wilke 2015b). Since one of the core features of this imaginary is the willful destruction of Atheist culture and its material remains, it conditions how contemporary Atheists can experience the absence of "traditional" forms of Atheist material culture, rituals, or social institutions. It allows them to reconfigure "absence" not

as lack but as the source for atheist acts of heroism and resilience, which consist in either reinventing Atheist traditions or bravely facing their absence by developing the strength to do without them; after all, most Atheists claim that it is precisely the inability to let go of "tradition" which leads to mental slavery. A substantial part of Atheist activism therefore consists of re-materializing Atheism by, first of all, writing down and narrating its history of destruction, secondly, by re-interpreting and thus re-appropriating certain parts of Indian cultural history—like folklore, art forms, moral principles, or philosophical insights—as purloined achievements of original Atheism (for a famous example see Ramasami 1972) and, finally, by re-inventing Atheist culture in the form of songs, plays, or commemorative festivals. Atheists have also constructed physical structures, ranging from educational institutions, to venues for Atheist gatherings, to commemorative sculptures of past and present Atheist luminaries. Such material structures scaffold concrete "spaces of imagination" (Hermann et al. 2015), where the history of Atheism can be narrated and manifested in a present community. An aesthetics of the secular would have to inquire into the concrete history of the visual and narrative figurations at play in these attempts at cultural reconstruction in order to carve out an "aesthetic ideology" (Grieser 2017: 261–5) specific to Indian Atheism.

Another common form of Atheist activism consists in the re-enactment of alleged supernatural miracles performed by religious practitioners, like the spontaneous materialization of objects or certain forms of bodily mortification, and their subsequent exposure as "mere" conjuring tricks. Jacob Copeman and Johannes Quack have described such performances as an instance of secular material culture based on a semiotic "retooling of sacred objects for non-religious purposes" (2015: 42). In a similar way, Atheist practices of and discourses around body and organ donation become sites for pedagogic realizations of public materialism, where the utilitarian "gift" of one's own (dead) body for the sake of medical science becomes not only the authenticating climax of an Atheist biography but also a heroic act of civic virtue and enlightenment (Copeman and Reddy 2012). Besides actual material culture and things, the imaginary of Atheist destruction and heroic resilience may also be *enacted* in and through the aesthetics of speech.

A crucial site for this enactment is the ongoing controversy around the name of the movement as well as individual professions of Atheism. As mentioned above, there is no commonly agreed upon label for the movement, with atheism (*nāstikatvam*), rationalism (*hētuvādam*), and humanism (*mānavavādam*) being the most widely discussed alternatives. Beyond the diversity of arguments for one or the other option, their common thread is a concern with the public efficacy of labels. The bone of contention is the term atheism and its standard Telugu translation: *nāstikatvam*. While atheism/*nāstikatvam* is considered a taken-for-granted philosophical foundation, it is not necessarily considered appropriate as a public label. Both terms have historically been used as exonyms and invectives for ideological adversaries and have therefore accumulated a powerful negative affective charge—to the point where they may evoke suspicion, contempt, or even fear. Some within the Atheist movement argue that this negative affective charge will prove detrimental to the overall aim of the movement, because it alienates "ordinary people" and thus prevents the movement from making its socially transformative message heard. Others, however, contend that the power of those negative affects even among Atheists testifies to the continuing legacy of Aryan invasion, whose prime strategy of cultural warfare was to slander their opponents as atheists/*nāstikulu*. Hence, to reappropriate and revalue that name is tantamount to heroically liberating oneself and others from mental slavery. Some of my interlocutors have reported intense anxiety and severe social or

familial repercussions surrounding their open self-identification as atheists/*nāstikulu*, yet they have also described feelings of pride and heroism as well as forms of recognition and praise by peers once they had taken that step.

The debate around labels also extends to the realm of personal names, where especially committed Atheist activists change or modify their or their children's names by including surnames with references to Atheism, or by removing all elements that may evoke caste or religion. Copeman has analyzed such "secular onomastic experimentation" (2015: para. 6) as speech acts "designed to iteratively produce a particular kind of intersubjective sensibility" (ibid.: para. 34). Thus, what is at stake here are not merely issues of terminology, definition, or individuals' dis-/beliefs but the way in which names, or rather sociocultural categories, are able to encode and evoke an "emotional habitus" (Trawick 1990: 154). Margaret Trawick coined this term to describe how the literal and figurative use of kinship categories can mobilize and manipulate a repertoire of emotions as well as their appropriate expression or suppression. Such repertoires are acquired through processes of socialization and manifested, rehearsed, and negotiated through cultural imaginaries transmitted in folklore, pop culture, or formal and informal educational systems. Furthermore, the effects to which and by whom a given imaginary can be mobilized and appropriated in contemporary India are conditioned by its colonial and postcolonial political history. An important task for an aesthetics of the secular is thus to describe and analyze the production, reproduction, and transformation of such emotional habitus as well as their sensorial deployment and manipulation. Though a crucial aspect of Atheist activism appears to consist of toppling the affective implications of historically and culturally entrenched social categories, that activism has to work on and with existing emotional habitus to get its message across and make its "secular mark."

Atheist Propagation as an Aesthetics of Persuasion

Insofar as onomastic experimentations or practices of naming are speech acts intending some sort of individual or social transformation, they are part of the main modus of Atheist activism: written and oratorical propagation. Atheists in India are known for giving speeches, to the point where some critics complain that they do nothing but talk. They are moreover frequently accused of being arrogant, haughty, or condescending, as they relish in ridiculing religious scriptures and beliefs. Critics sometimes attribute this simply to a psychological personality trait of arrogance that Atheists are supposed to share. I propose instead to analyze it as an aesthetically produced affect and a counterpart to the affect of heroism involved in naming oneself an atheist and facing the absence of material culture. I focus here on the way it is produced in oratorical speech and historically conditioned by aesthetic criteria and rhetorical devices like fluency, hyperliteralism, or decorum.

A common way to praise gifted and influential orators among Atheists is to say that their oratory is "like a stream" (*pravāhamlāgā*); speakers are lauded if they are capable of spontaneously commanding knowledge about as vast an array of topics as possible. They should be able to speak continuously without having to search for words or arguments and, if possible, with a substantial number of verbatim citations from various sources—preferably in a classical language like Sanskrit. Success or failure of Atheist speech acts is thus intimately connected to an aesthetic criterion of fluency, which can override questions of content or message: orators may be considered right, even bright, but nonetheless judged incapable of persuading others due to their lacking skills of rhetorical delivery.

The art of memorization is fundamental to this form of fluent, stream-like speech and has a long history in South Asian pedagogy. Most famous in this regard are traditions of Vedic recitation (Knipe 2015), which link forms of contemporary Atheist speech to a larger aesthetic dimension of sonality in South Asian and especially Hindu culture (see Wilke, Chapter 10, this volume).

Atheist propagation has an ambivalent relationship to this sonal tradition, as Atheists never fail to reject it as stale rote learning and mindless production of sound. It is important to note, however, that the fluent rejection of religious fluency is not just an argument about denotational content (or the lack thereof) but has itself an aesthetic form. Despite the great value placed on oratorical mastery in Indian culture and especially politics, scholarship of South Asian rhetoric beyond ritual speech in religious contexts is scarce (for an exception regarding Tamil oratory see Bate 2009). Even in its most informal settings, Atheist oratory usually involves some sort of stage or dais which produces a frontal visual relationship between orator and audience and tends to corporeally immobilize the latter into seated positions, which can be physically demanding since oratorical events may stretch over a few days with individual speeches lasting up to several hours. Propagational events may occur indoors as well as outdoors, which further modulates the focus on the stage through different degrees of perceptual distraction or "noise" (e.g., largely unconscious humming of fans or air-conditioning in closed rooms versus the visual, olfactory, and aural sensescapes of an urban outdoor setting).

Speeches tend to be amplified, often irrespective of the actual acoustic requirements for audibility in a given venue; in fact, excessive volume, overmodulation, or audio feedback frequently impede audibility. A comprehensive analysis of Atheist oratory thus requires not only a historically sensitive and comparative contextualization of aesthetic properties like gestural repertoires, forms of staging, practices of rhetoric pedagogy, or "hearing cultures" (Erlmann 2004) but also an investigation into the cognitive, perceptual, and physiological affordances and effects of material environments and technological infrastructures (architecture, seating arrangements, ambient sound, amplification, lighting, etc.).

In the following discussion I focus on a specific rhetorical strategy of "hyperliteralism" (Richman 1993: 190), where religious scriptures are interpreted in an extremely literal fashion so as to expose—or create—inconsistencies and absurd conclusions. This rhetorical-cum-hermeneutic strategy has historical antecedents in inter-religious polemics (Hudson 1995) and is inseparable from a larger shift from scribal to print culture in colonial India. Hyperliteral rhetoric has been enabled by printed texts because an increasingly literate public could access scriptural material that had hitherto been restricted to and at times jealously guarded by circles of specialized readers/reciters trained in particular hermeneutic and exegetical technologies (Narayana Rao 2001). Hence, Atheist "arrogance" is not merely a psychological trait based on an alleged conceit of intellectual superiority, but an affect that is aesthetically produced as Atheists literally "arrogate" the *social power* that comes with the right to rhetorically appropriate, manipulate, and reproduce (religious) knowledge as printed and thus publicly accessible "text." As Bernard Bate (2009) has shown for the case of Tamil oratory, modern technologies like print and language ideologies based on denotation have therefore not simply replaced existing notions of poetic efficacy. One example is the Sanskrit poetological concept of "decorum" (*aucitya*), which grounds the efficacy of literary and ethical discourse in a careful balancing of content, form, and performative and social context (Chari 1990: 231–7; Prasad 2012: 168–77). Despite an emphatic commitment to the denotational dimensions of language, it is within the confines of historically entrenched and often implicit aesthetic criteria like

FIGURE 24.1: Atheist orator delivering a speech at the annual conference of FIRA (Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations) in Brahmapur, 2014. © Photograph by author.

decorum that Atheist orators deploy strategies like fluency or hyperliteralism in order to produce secular difference within changing media environments. As Atheist rhetoric is firmly grounded in print culture and the physical co-presence of audiences, the expansion of satellite television and digital media since the early 2000s present entirely new challenges for both secular and non-secular oratorical aesthetics. In other words, the efficacy of Atheist verbal propagation is not exhausted by the intellectual or logical persuasiveness of arguments but also depends on the historically conditioned ways in which Atheists manage to produce secular difference by aesthetic means.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A COMPARATIVE AND POSTCOLONIAL APPROACH TO SECULAR DIFFERENCE

The chapter proposed to approach the aesthetics of the secular by examining phenomena that are understood or declare themselves to be different from and possibly antagonistic

toward religion. This is indeed meant as a starting point and an alternative to outright dismissals of such a project on the basis of a reduction of the secular to its ideological self-representation as disembodied reason. The chapter's aim was to demonstrate that a focus on aesthetic themes may function as a heuristic that enables us to expand scholarship on the secular beyond the immediate ambit of the conceptual grid and genealogy of the secular/religious binary. The example of Indian Atheism sketched how a civilizational imaginary of Indian Atheism conditions the ways in which forms of and attitudes about material culture and rhetorically produced affects are constructed, enacted, and contested within larger, historically shaped representational economies. Instead of circumscribing a priori what secularity refers to, for instance by postulating a singular secularist narrative of triumphal antagonism toward religion, an aesthetic approach attends to the historical and cultural plasticity of secularity as an aestheticscape, i.e., as a form of producing aesthetically mediated secular difference in specific social settings. The surplus of this approach consists of conceptualizing secular difference as a question of *aesthetic efficacies* rather than (only) conceptual *classification* or semiotic *ideology*. Such an aesthetically grounded comparative approach to the secular can feed back into the analytical apparatus of the larger project of an aesthetics of religion; not by juxtaposing substantialist notions of secular and religious aesthetics but by making our analytical categories (see second section) and conceptualizations of aesthetic strategies (see third section) sensitive to yet another dimension of differentiation: secular difference.

RECOMMENDED READING

Asad, Talal (2003), *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford: Stanford University Press. Remains one of the most complex analyses of the secular and a solid foundation for exploring more explicitly aesthetic approaches.

Copeman, Jacob and Johannes Quack (2015), "Godless People and Dead Bodies: Materiality and the Morality of Atheist Materialism," *Social Analysis*, 59 (2): 40–61. One of the few contributions to aesthetic scholarship on explicitly irreligious people outside of Europe, North America, and former Communist regimes.

Hirschkind, Charles (2011), "Is There a Secular Body?," *Cultural Anthropology*, 26 (4): 633–47. Kicked off the emerging debate about aesthetic approaches to the secular by exploring the topic of a secular body and sensorium within an "Asadian" framework.