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What is an *Aesthetics of Religion*? From the Senses to Meaning—and Back Again

1 Introduction

In recent years, investigating the role of the body and the senses in religion has constituted a most dynamic field in the Academic Study of Religion/s.¹ What is now a fast-growing area of research, publishing and teaching was in deficit for a long period of time. Its development not only added topics and themes to the research agenda, but it has also initiated reconsiderations of the theoretical foundations of Religious Studies in general. The present volume contributes to this broader development by introducing the Aesthetics of Religion as a framework for studying religion as a sensory and mediated practice. In close theoretical relation with approaches such as Sensory Studies,² Material Religion,³ the Anthropology of the Senses⁴ and the Cognitive Science of Religion (CRS)⁵, an

1 When using “religion” and “religions”, we are referring to terms theorised in the Study of Religion/s as operative tools rather than denoting unchallenged entities.

By *religions*, we mean the relatively stable communicative systems and practices which are fluent yet identifiable as traditions with specific institutions, organisational forms, practices, interpretive patterns and culturally differing relations to other societal subsystems such as juridical regulation, politics or education. Religions in their diversity are not separate units, but rather emerged and developed in exchange and mutual demarcation.

By *religion*, we refer to a more general term which has been derived from Western religious and scholarly discourse, a category which allows us to speak about a vast variety of practices, media and institutions across cultures. Moreover, it allows us to speak about influences not obviously related to religions; in a Weberian sense, societies are influenced by religious traditions in many, and often unexpected ways, for instance regarding concepts of personhood, being “on offer” in popular culture, or contributing to the emergence of economic structures. The terms are subject to ongoing theory work to which this volume aims to contribute. However, we decided not to use the /slash version throughout the text, but rather as a reminder that the more general term only exists on the basis of the concrete empirical practices we conceptualise as religious.

2 Sensory Studies have been established by Constance Classen and David Howes as a culture-historical project (Classen 1993, 1998; Howes 2005; Classen and Howes 2014; <http://www.centreforsensorystudies.org/>). Also other areas in anthropology, for instance ethno-medicine and ritual studies added to the focus on the cultural diversity of sense perception.

3 The best insight into the breadth of this field is provided by the journal *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief*. The journal covers not only material studies in the more specific sense, but also aesthetics, visual culture and theoretical debate about embodiment, etc.

4 For an assessment of the phases and strands of this approach: Michaels and Wulf (2014).

Aesthetics of Religion⁶ focuses on understanding the *interplay* between sensory, cognitive and socio-cultural aspects of world-construction, and the role of religion within this dynamic.

The Aesthetics of Religion framework has been developing since the 1990s. It takes as its starting point the Greek term *aisthesis*: an epistemological concept that denoted *sensory perception*, but also referred to the larger process of how human beings make sense of their environment and of themselves through their senses. Building upon a critical revision of aesthetic history during the 1980s and '90s, the recent understanding of aesthetics has changed from a normative philosophy of art and beauty into an analytic concept for the study of culture. In this introduction, we will outline this revised understanding of aesthetics, and the reasons why scholars consider it as providing a pool of descriptive terms, analytical concepts and systematic questions that allow us to understand better how religions in their variety become “effective” on the levels of intellect, emotions, intuition and sensation. We then discuss what has been achieved by applying aesthetic concepts in the Study of Religion to date, differentiating between a repertoire of *religious aesthetics* to be investigated, and an *aesthetics of religion* as providing a platform for theorising religion in light of the perception of time, space and self. As we are introducing a perspective ‘in the making’, we also outline some of the potentials and opportunities which can be further developed. Before this, however, we begin by reflecting on some of the reasons why—throughout the history of the Academic Study of Religion—the aspect of matter and form, perception and sensation has long been neglected.

The aesthetic approach we are suggesting asks, How in the context of religious practice are the senses stimulated, governed and disciplined? How are religious experiences emotions and attitudes created, memorised and normalised? How do religious perceptual orders interact with those of a larger culture? Focusing on the process *aisthesis*, and how humans understand their world through the senses is not an overall critique directed against text and belief, or questions of meaning. On the contrary, sensing, perceiving and meaning making are viewed as a continuum that we distinguish for analytical purposes, and not in order to make ontological statements.

However, to be able to go beyond a symbolic understanding of aesthetic forms, theories specific to the sensory and bodily aspects of recognition are

⁵ CSR has been launched mainly by psychologists aiming to explain religion by applying knowledge about the human mind and how it has developed in universal evolutionary terms. Meanwhile, good overviews are available, for instance in Taves (2015).

⁶ We will elaborate on the development of the concept below; for an overview see Grieser (2015b).

needed, without transposing text hermeneutics and semiotics onto the realm of the sensual. Herein lies the opportunity and the challenge of an aesthetic approach. Just as the new ‘science of images’ (visual culture; *Bildwissenschaft*) has scrutinised different modes of seeing and the specific nature of visual media, the aesthetics of religion strives to unfold this for the whole spectrum of the senses, for instance of religion/s being heard and felt, as tactile or kinaesthetic phenomena, as architecture or as soundscapes within a society.

Stating that religion/s need to be acknowledged as rooted in both bio-somatic and cultural-historical grounds, it is necessary to undermine simplistic ideas about the senses providing the “raw material” for an intellect “refining” meaning. What André Leroi-Gourhan already pointed out in 1964, in his study about the relationship between thinking in images and in language, is also valid for the relationship between perception and meaning: it should be investigated as “one of coordination, not of subordination” (Leroi-Gourhan [1964] 1993, 195). We perceive this as a two-way dynamic: sensation and perception are as much “naturally” and “culturally” shaped, and they actively select information according to human needs as thinking and reasoning do. We will show further in section 3 why scholars think that aesthetics as a framework and intellectual tradition provides debates and concepts that help to better understand these modes of coordination implicit to religious ways of perceiving and interpreting the world. However, prior to that the next section articulates the dominant intellectual background that both ‘silenced’ such an approach and held the seeds for its emergence.

2 Background: Reasons for the Disembodied Study of Religion

When directing attention to the engagement of the body and the senses in all things religious, it is rather obvious that religion/s are as much felt, sensed and experienced as they are thought and believed. However, as our “letter-pic” image on the first page demonstrates, sensory practices are not merely *expressions* of beliefs and doctrines; rather, religion/s *consist* of sensory practice and, as it is shown in the picture, this includes reading and writing as much as dancing and singing, feeling pain as well as comfort or building and inhabiting architecture. Religious bodies—the walking pilgrim, the bowing worshipper, smelling the presence of the gods—are cultivated in ritual routines and extraordinary practices; practices are symbolised (e. g., St. Jacob’s shell on the picture), communities identify with the symbols which support perceptions of the “own” and the “other” (the Cross and the Star and Crescent; senses provide metaphors,

for instance, when the sense of seeing is turned into the all-seeing eye of Horus; time is structured religiously, even for non-believers: daily, weekly, yearly, cosmically); and space is divided into heavens and hells, holy and unholy places, virtual and real; religions are sanctifying media (e.g., holy scriptures and sacred dance), but they are also dependent on, and trapped in, how (secular) media depict them and influence how they are perceived. Religions are involved in how people sense their body, value their money and appreciate or repudiate theatre or music. Even the most spiritual practice requires a body to experience the disembodied, and what is called spirituality today has maybe never been so strongly related to the well-being of the physical body (e.g., meditation, mindfulness, Yoga). It is a far-reaching question that emerges from these observations—among scholars as well as in western popular perception—namely why the idea has been so successful that being religious is mainly a matter of belief and doctrines, or of an inwardly felt personal and individual emotion? We contend that the answer to this question is inevitably related to the reasons why *aesthetic* knowledge and theories of perception are only now being applied to understand how religion/s contribute to the ways humans relate to, and create, their worlds.

Most scholars responding to these questions are critically engaging with the legacy of the Academic Study of Religion, putting into a broader perspective its disciplinary history and viewing it as entangled with religious history and with the normalised western epistemological practice of dividing human faculties into binary dichotomies, such as body and mind, matter and spirit, emotion and reason, nature and culture.⁷ Early modern rationalist philosophy and the Cartesian separation between body and mind have been identified as crucial moments of this history. However, excluding sensory knowledge from the canon of objects to be taken seriously is part of a much longer history, and it includes philosophical, political and theological discourses. Concepts of “worldly matter” and “sacred spirit” had their influence on western culture, be it as polemics against a “carnal Israel”, a ritualistic paganism, or set in analogy with gendered constructions of women as passive nature and men as active culture, and non-European cultures being classified according to their body-centeredness contrasted with standards of rationality.

⁷ This perspective of a History of the Study of Religion as *Problemggeschichte* (history of problems), interacting with and responding to Religious History has been offered by Hans G. Kippenberg (2002) and by Volkhard Krech (2002). This project needed to be complemented by the analysis of why the material and sensory aspects of religion/s have long been neglected, pointed out by Asad (1993), Brunotte (forthcoming), Gladigow (1988), Meyer and Verrips (2008), and Vásquez (2011).

Examining the modern history of studying religion c.1800, however, three aspects can be identified as significant in order to understand the neglect of the body and the senses in the study of religion: *text-centrism*, an *anti-ritualist* attitude and a *representationalist*, or *expressionist* understanding of aesthetic forms. In contrast to the more sociological and phenomenological French traditions⁸ and the more anthropological British tradition⁹ of the Academic Study of Religion, the influential Dutch, Scandinavian and German tradition entirely relied on philology, philosophy and theological history of religion. Text-centrism, as a consequence of these disciplinary roots, developed for both practical and ideological reasons. In the 19th century, religions other than the well-known traditions came from all over the colonialized world, and they came to European scholars mainly as texts. Philologist and founding father of a “science of religion”, Friedrich Max Mueller, and his project of “The Sacred Books of the East” (1879–1910) stand for the effort of translating and recognising the diversity of religious traditions world-wide, yet also for the limited understanding and the adaptation of these traditions to the norms of monotheist religions relying on a Holy Scripture. The philosophical and theological tradition conceptualised the generic concept of religion according to this framework and hence regarded language, scripture and sacred books as the medium of revelation, and therefore the privileged medium in religious terms. For scholars trained as theologians, historians and philologists, exegesis and the normative content of the text were the main features of analysis, other media than texts were discredited as folk religion, or put into evolutionary patterns of expressing the ways supposedly ‘uncivilised’ people would express their beliefs.

Besides these practical reasons for the preference of texts for text-trained scholars, the mostly Protestant background of many of the founding figures in the Study of Religion laid grounds not only for an intellectual approach *to* religion/s, but also a preference *for* intellectual forms of religion. Using an expression from Martin Luther’s reformation theology, founders of early History of Religion made clear, that “languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit is contained”.¹⁰ The theology of the word, and the word only, and the critique of ritualistic “magical” practice against Catholicism had turned into a cultural-Protestant attitude that paradoxically fostered both the possibility of investigating religion in academic ways and the privilege given to rationalism, an-

⁸ Marcel Mauss (1979) and his investigation of “body techniques” is as important as Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962).

⁹ Most influential here: Mary Douglas and her understanding of the body as “natural symbol” (Douglas 1970).

¹⁰ See Gladigow (1988, 37) for quotations.

iconism, critical attitudes towards rituals and a purist understanding of religion as text and belief.

The other aspect of what has been called the Protestant bias of the Study of Religion's heritage came to be influential in the form of Schleiermacher's romantic re-definition of religion as a singular and aesthetically defined "religious experience"¹¹—taken up by Rudolf Otto's influential concept of "The Holy" (1917) where he rejects any physiological, social scientific or psychological discipline as adequate to grasp the original quality of religion as an interiorized, subjective and overwhelming "experience".¹² The success of this decontextualizing approach hampered the recognition of the sensuous aspects of religion, and the development of methods with which to study them. What makes this influence even clearer is the representational model underlying the symbolic understanding of religion, regarding objects, practices and form as a "vessel" for content or carrier of 'the' meaning. Two prominent examples show that this approach did not ignore material objects and aesthetic forms, but integrated them into the superiority of the spiritual "experience". Rudolf Otto's collection of religious artefacts in the Marburg *Religionskundliche Sammlung* present the appreciation Otto had for religious matters (Bräunlein 2005)—but they were presented as expression of the generalising romantic concept of "experience" which enabled cultural difference to be considered as a variety of the essential pre-defined model of a religious experience in the singular. In addition, the impressive book on "The Holy in Art" (van der Leeuw [1957] 1963) bears witness to a fascination with sensuous and artistic expression, but it approaches the problem of how to appreciate the spiritual potential of art without putting theology under pressure, and thus presents a theology of music, dance and poetry rather than a way to study the relationship between religion and the arts.

While this conceptualisation of religion as a disembodied, undisputable "irrational" and *sui generis* mode of experience was not shared by the neighbour disciplines Anthropology or Sociology, it has often been widely underestimated just how successful this romantic concept of religion had been culturally. We would go so far to speculate that this model of religion developed as perfectly compatible with the secularism of a Western European provenience: an eminent-

¹¹ For the impact of Schleiermacher's context far beyond the German context see Korsch (2011).

¹² Otto's "famous page 8" where he polemicizes against an understanding of religion from the angle of "emotions of adolescence" (*Pubertäts-gefühle*), "discomforts of indigestion" (*Verdauungs-stockungen*), "or, say, social feelings" (*Sozial-gefühle*) has often been interpreted as a pledge for the phenomenological concept of religion as an experience *sui generis*; but it has rarely been mentioned that this includes a clear methodological exclusion of empirical, that is sociological, psychological or physiological explanations of religion/s (Otto [1917] 1923, 8).

ly private attitude, based on convictions or spiritual experiences which are expected to be kept invisible to the outside, the non-private world. Many of today's conflicts about mosques and veils, and much of the surprise about a rising prominence of religious forms in public, need to be understood in this context: the rejection of and the urge for religion/s being visible, tangible and demonstrating a public commitment can be seen as two sides of the same coin.

As important as it is to be critically aware of the Protestant bias in the early Study of Religion, confining this history to a narrative of repression and neglect would not tell the whole story. Its other parts are a fascination with the body, especially the naked, erotic and the painful body, which presents, on the one hand, the reversed side of the suppressed, but on the other hand the romanticised body as medium for reaching/depicting a state of lost naturalness, freedom from the repressions of culture and intellectualised life. We should also not overlook that the Cartesian divide has been developed on the backdrop of a Catholic worldview; that some of the most important theories of media and their "presence" are developed with reference to Catholic concepts;¹³ and that the idealisation of the sensorium as a "natural" and "immediate" access to reality is part of movements as diverse as irrationalism, a phenomenological tradition that claims ahistorical relations with reality, and also supports notions such as the "noble savage" and the motto "back to nature" that build on Rousseau's critique of civilisation.

Facing these diverse aspects, and while there is leeway to make up for considering the body and the senses in the Study of Religion, a reflective history also should be aware of the "reasons of the body boom" (Koch 2011) in academic approaches. In a first wave, in the early 20th century, philosophers of culture such as Georg Simmel, Helmut Plessner or Henri Bergson focused on perception as a critical response to the positivistic rationalism of the natural sciences around 1900 (Riou 2014). A second wave during the 1980s was related to the "cultural turn" in the Humanities (see Bachmann-Medick 2016) and to critical work in the area of feminist philosophy, post-colonial studies and new ways of integrating sensing and imagining into history.¹⁴ Authors such as Dietmar Kamper and Christoph Wulf still expected a desensitisation and a "dwindling of the senses" (*Das Schwinden der Sinne*, 1982) as a response to the upcoming digital media, but at the same time diagnosed a rising interest in the body especially in relation to

¹³ A prominent example is the important work of Bruno Latour. Especially in the light of his latest books (Latour 2013a, 2013b), it becomes clear that Latour's media theory cannot be understood without recognising his references to Catholic features in his philosophising.

¹⁴ The journal *Paragrana*, for instance, which can be seen as representative of the influential tradition of Historical Anthropology, features with a special issue on *Aisthesis* in 1995.

the formation of new forms of religion and spirituality (Kamper and Wulf 1981, 1987).

Today, what had been part of a subversive discourse has entered the mainstream, and scholars working on the materiality and the sensory aspects of culture are responding to a situation of extremes. Processes of mediatisation and aestheticisation in industrialised societies have intensified in a way unknown to date; working bodies are increasingly replaced by robots, and become objects of enhancement and perfectionising; the work of the senses is understood in a way that they can be technically “replaced” and stimulated by virtual worlds; and the nexus between media, body and technology has created the paradoxical situation of simultaneous desensitisation and overstimulation of the senses through computer gaming and permanent connection to online-worlds.¹⁵ In contrast to high-tech and transhumanist visions of enhancing sensory experience, the majority of human beings are occupied with caring for the basic needs of their bodies, for food, safety and shelter. Religions are not separated from these developments, and they respond to, and shape these situations in diverse ways. Confining them to systems of belief and doctrine misses a large part of their impact and intensity.

3 Why Aesthetics? The Term’s Heritage and Its Revision as a Connective Concept

Aesthetics is an ambiguous term, and it is used in a variety of ways. Mostly understood as a philosophy of aesthetic judgments or as a specific quality of art, people also call things or behaviours aesthetic that are elegant and pleasant, and distinct from practical, political or everyday life. The term, however, is derived from the Greek *aisthesis* which denotes the process of knowledge gained by sensory perception, in opposition to *noesis*, knowledge gained through intellectual capacities. In these two different understandings, we can see already a gap between a normative strand of aesthetics, on the one hand, asking about what is, or should be seen as beautiful; and on the other hand, an analytical strand of aesthetics, asking how we can understand how human beings make sense of reality through their senses.

¹⁵ Research suggests that teenagers’ skills of “reading emotions” in other people’s faces decreases considerably through the constant engagement with electronic devices (Uhls et al. 2014). For the “aestheticisation of the social” throughout commercial media, art and politics Maase (2008); Hieber and Moebius (2014) and Reckwitz et al. (2015).

3.1 Greek roots

This tension between a normative and an analytical interest can also be recognised in the historical situations upon which the modern concept of aesthetics is founded. It reaches back to the fifth and sixth centuries BCE and to the Greek investigation of human knowledge. Most prominently, it features in the work of Aristotle (384–322 BCE) who, against the Platonic distrust of appearances and aesthetic forms, developed *aisthesis* as an interface between sensation and conscious intellectual knowledge (mainly in his work on psychology, *De Anima*, in *De sensu*, and in *Metaphysics*). From this early stage, the tension between the normative and the analytical quality of aesthetics is present. While Aristotle is interested in explaining formative processes and perception through the relations between matter and form,¹⁶ the Platonic tradition relates the sensory to the experience of beauty, and the beautiful to the sphere of morality (the Good) and metaphysics (the True). This unity has been hugely influential in European culture, for the understanding of art being tied to morality, as well as for concepts of the ugly or monstrosity as synonymous with evil. Even practices such as bodily disfigurement as punishment, e.g., marking the thief as an evildoer by mutilating the completeness of their body, can be understood to be based upon this aesthetic trinity.

3.2 Complementing Enlightenment Rationalism

The modern aesthetic project reaches back to German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's work *Aesthetica* (1750–1758) and its reception through Immanuel Kant. Baumgarten defined aesthetics as a “science of sensitive cognition” (*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*, paragraph 1), and both philosophers aimed at a theory of sensuous knowledge (*sinnliche Erkenntnis*) that would complement and clarify theories of rational knowledge (*rationale Erkenntnis*). Both

¹⁶ Without delving into the complexities of Aristotelian philosophy, it should be noted that his model of explaining life—*hylomorphism*, that is “matter-formism”—initiated a tradition that allowed for a relational dynamic between matter and form; with this model, an alternative is offered to concepts of matter and spirit, or mind. Even if anchored in a metaphysical concept of the soul, the focus of the Aristotelian concepts lies on explaining movement and change, including the physicality of matter, the dynamics of form/formation, an agent involved and a purpose, distinct from the agent (Shields 2016, paragraph 2). This question, before Aristotelian philosophy underwent Christian interpretation, formulated the basic question of any materialist approach: how to distinguish dead and live matter.

philosophers also developed an elaborate language that enabled the discussion of qualities of perception, and the theorisation of intersubjectivity (Martin 2011).

In current critique, Kant is mostly viewed as responsible for the separation of art from political and social interests. It is sometimes forgotten, it seems, that Kant elaborated on both the normative and the analytical side of the aesthetic. Firstly, thinking art as “disinterested” also aimed to liberate art from the constraints of theology and morality, and this move towards subjectivation had simultaneously been a step towards the autonomy, and what we see today as the radical freedom, of art. Secondly, Kant’s work on art as disinterested pleasure is based on his concept of a transcendental aesthetics: the acknowledgement that knowledge does not rely on the participation of an ideal world or a divine reality, but has to be conceptualised under the condition of the perceptual limits of human existence. From this perspective, Kant’s theory of the sublime, for instance, still reads as extremely interesting. The affect, he states in contrast to Burke’s theory of the sublime, is not dependent on the *object* causing awe and wonder. Rather, the fact that a phenomenon is too vast or too small to be grasped by the human *sensorium* causes an overwhelming confusion—which is compensated by the experience that one can cope with the vastness by applying concepts (*Begriffe*) that allow understanding and the subject to feel enthusiastic about this mastering of dimensions that eluded the human senses.

Kant even reflects on the impact of media extensions—the invention of the microscope and the telescope—and how these impact on the experience of the changed range of perceptions. We do not want to deny that the legacy of Kant’s rationalism and idealism is a problem when developing a theory of the sensuous today. However, with this discussion we want to illustrate that contextualising aesthetic theories and the questions they respond too, uncovers a specific tradition of thought, concepts and questions that pertain to the overarching question we are interested in: How does sensory perception go together with religious ways of perceiving the world?

3.3 Turning *Aisthesis* into Aesthetics: The Metaphysical Project

The historical point that transformed the project of *aisthesis* into aesthetics as part of modern metaphysics has to be marked by Georg Friedrich Hegel’s *Vorlesungen ueber die Aesthetik* (“Lectures on Aesthetics”, 1835), in which he assigned to art a place in his teleological idealism. Also significant is the reception of Kant’s theory of the sublime through romantic theorists and poets who spiritualised the “aesthetic experience” and made it the crystal point of a renewed form of religion (Vietta and Kemper 2008). We cannot elaborate on the reasons

why confining *aisthesis* to art and beauty has been so successful, and why the discourse on beauty has been so critical for the 18th and 19th century of European thinking (that is another volume!). However, the emergence of aesthetics marks a turning point that has been denoted as the “aesthetic revolution” (Vietta 2008)—a reflective turn to the subject, to an objective understanding of the senses, to empiricism and the birth of “objective” knowledge. Post-romantic aesthetics, however, no longer allow for a re-enchantment of the subjective experience of the world.

3.4 Post-idealist Aesthetics: From Culture Critique to the Study of Culture

From the 1990s on, scholars such as Wolfgang Iser (1987, 2014), Terry Eagleton (1990), and Gernot Böhme (2001) have critically revised the dominant understanding of aesthetics as art. They draw on post-modernist positions and criticise the ideological use of aesthetics to exclude the political aspects of form, and the exclusion of the sensory from the creation of democratic societies. This 1990s critique comes with strong culture-critical overtones, seeing in aesthetics a remedy of an over-mediatised and over-aestheticised capitalist society. These theorists stand in the tradition of earlier critics from the Frankfurt School and Marxist intellectuals (Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Georg Lukacs) who referred to aesthetic arguments in their analysis of fascism, and in their critique of capitalism dominating all spheres of culture. Parallel to these culture-critical, philosophical investigations of the aesthetic as a major element of modernisation processes developed, and a move in the more analytical direction took place with what has been called social aesthetics, or everyday aesthetics (for an overview, see Saito 2015).

Sociological thinkers and theorists of modernity in particular have highlighted that the aesthetic approach allows us to understand how class, group identity and power structures are linked to aesthetic practices. The key word delivered by Pierre Bourdieu is *habitus* (Distinctions [1979] 1984), and it resonates with today's research on self-stylisation and embodied social behaviour. Jacques Rancière focussed on the “distribution of the sensible” (2010), making clear that the aesthetics with which we are surrounded organise us, corroborate or critique the sensory regimes we live by. A third strand of politico-aesthetic analysis, “social aesthetics” (Featherstone 1992; Lash 1993) and “everyday aesthetics” (Mandoki 2007), is related to theories of modernity. It is stated that aestheticisation should be taken into account as significant, because rational enlightenment ideas of modernisation processes underestimate the role of intuitive and imaginary factors, likes and distastes and the self-fashioning of reflexive modern sub-

jects. Movies such as *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show* thematised the life in a reflexive mode, but also the vision of living in a world of ‘made up’ (virtual) sensations—and these are celebrated as overcoming the human condition in visions of transhumanism. Among several scholars, Michel Foucault has offered theoretical frameworks through which to investigate the ambivalence, and the dilemma of the aesthetic reflexivity of modernity: the technologies of the self are at the same time an authoritative pressure, and a matter of choice and emancipation. The structures of power are internalised in the way subjects perceive themselves and the desire to set themselves in scene/culture in order to be perceived cannot be entirely escaped.

Another far-reaching approach that binds together modern subjectivities, their socio-historical conditions, and an aesthetic perspective has been offered by Andreas Reckwitz and his team (2006). Reckwitz’ work is relevant for an Aesthetics of Religion in several ways. We will focus here on the crucial question: how, after all, the aesthetic can be demarcated? On the one hand, the author joins the critique of the separation of sensory perception from rationality, and for his discipline (the sociology of culture) he clearly criticises that the ubiquity of the aesthetic has not been recognised, because Max Weber’s rationalisation paradigm was understood in a way that the normativity of a rationalised society left no space for self-referential play and pleasure. Reckwitz shows in his book *The Making of Creativity* (forthcoming translation of *Die Erfindung der Kreativität*, 2012) that the implementation of rationalisation processes was dependent on aestheticisation, and that the opposition between aesthetics and rationality was a necessary part of the new social praxis. Yet, Reckwitz attempts to demarcate the aesthetic in order to provide a distinctive category. He does not oppose the aesthetic to rationality, but to a certain type of rationality that was named *Zweckrationalität* by Weber (goal – or purpose-oriented – rationality).

The aesthetic is defined as auto-referential versus instrumental; as playful and creative versus following rules and orders; and as engaging affectively versus neutrally with the environment. In contrast to the problematic category of aesthetic experience, Reckwitz’ proposal allows one to touch upon a quality that has long been avoided: to address a specific experience as a desired and looked-for religious experience, without essentialising it or making it a universal. However, Reckwitz develops a contradiction with his demarcation of the aesthetic. How, we need to ask, would we describe the aesthetic quality of exactly the consequences of modern rationalisation? The metaphor Weber found for the ambivalent experience of modernity—the steel-hard shell (*stahlhartes Gehäuse*)—could not have made clearer its aesthetic quality. This demonstrates that we need different understandings of the aesthetic, just as we have learned to distinguish different modes of knowledge as well as different types of reason (Gloy

1999). In the same way as Reckwitz refers to an aesthetics of creativity, we can speak about an aesthetics of resistance (Weiss [1975–1981] 2005), or an aesthetics of violence which are all related to social practice and their aesthetic dimensions.

3.5 Analytical Aesthetics: Embodiment, Enactivism and Aesthetics Beyond Art

Two other recent developments are related to the changes in the understanding of sensory perception in psychological terms, and the opportunities provided by methods related to new scientific imagery. They are important in order to understand the dynamics fuelled by innovations in natural scientific theories of perception. The first development was that of empirical or neuro-aesthetics (e.g., Luring 2014) which investigate the neuro-physiological and cognitive-psychological conditions of art and the features of responding to art. These approaches are related to evolutionary theories of the emergence and logics of art as a pan-human activity, but also to the patterns of aesthetic preferences—for instance in the perception of faces, its axial symmetry or its averageness—and their functions (Rusch and Voland 2013; Huston et al. 2015). While neuro-aesthetics and evolutionary theories of art provide valuable knowledge about universal features of perceptual preferences and judgements, for instance, being based on symmetry, the protagonists of the first generation of neuro-aesthetics were mostly occupied with the search for correlations with experiences of beauty (Semir Zekri, Ramachandran) making far-reaching claims based on concepts of art and beauty deeply rooted in the idealist tradition of 18th century aesthetics.¹⁷ More recent projects have started to interrelate knowledge from both natural and the cultural studies and, for instance, investigate the status of “being moved”, or the experience of disgust beyond questions of positive or negative judgements, but rather concerned with their functionality, and an intent to theorise the link between sensations and emotions in evolutionary *and* socio-cultural terms, “after Darwin” (Menninghaus 2003, 2011; Menninghaus et al 2015).

These developments have great applicability in connection with the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) offering such concepts¹⁸ as minimal counter-intuitiveness, on the basis of how memorable features are (of a narrative, an image, a figure); a cognitive anthropology focuses on the concept of agency, causality and

¹⁷ On what can be, and should be expected from neuro-aesthetics—and what not—see Hirstein (2012) for an affirmative, and Hyman (2010) for a critical position.

¹⁸ Concise and informative one in Taves (2015).

figurative imaginations (seeing “Faces in the Cloud”, Guthrie 1993); and the distinction between repetitive and innovative, creative cognitive mechanisms (McCauley and Lawson 2002). As with empirical and evolutionary aesthetics, these patterns describe aspects of the practices and activities we call religion very well and shed new light on how we look at religious efficacy and universality. Especially when related to social scientific paradigms, such as Durkheim’s concept of *effervescence*, CRS perspectives provide a good basis for discussing the body-culture nexus (Schueler 2012).

The second recent development features in the psychology of perception. As psychology’s main paradigms have come to be dominated by neuro-scientific concepts over the last decade, perception and cognition have also been researched from this angle. Results being partly corroborated, and partly corrected by insights into the plasticity of brain functions, and the necessity to consider brain functions as part of a brain-body unity. A first impulse to understand perception as an active organising principle rather than delivering just “raw material” for intellectual capacities came from Gestalt psychology. It provided a foundation for capturing the interrelation between visual and conceptual “figuration” of reality. Particularly the work of Rudolf Arnheim explicitly aimed at studying “visual perception as a cognitive activity—a reversal, one might say, of the historical development that led in the philosophy of the 18th century from aisthesis to aesthetics, from sensory experience in general to the arts in particular” (Arnheim 1969, v).

This topic—the relation between language, image perception and cognition—continued to produce models important in cognitive linguistics (such as *conceptual blending*; Turner and Fauconnier 2002) and for Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) conceptual metaphor theory (elaborated into a spatial theory of religion by Knott 2005). As a result of these developments—experimental knowledge about cognition and the senses and philosophical critiques—perception was no longer understood as a passive act, represented through the metaphor of mirroring an outward fixed reality (Rorty 1979), or processing a computer “input” into an intelligible “output”; rather, perception came to be seen as an active, constructive process that can be re- and deconstructed in relation to the cultural mechanism in which it is embedded.

Interestingly, the development of a “Philosophy in the Flesh” (Lakoff 1999), and of theories focusing explicitly on a somatic understanding of the aesthetic (Shusterman 1989, 2012) rediscover this potential in a moment when art has given up on aesthetics, rejecting its normative claim which anthropologist Alfred Gell has denoted aesthetics as the theology of art (Gell 1998; Elkins and Montgomery 2013). Philosopher Mark Johnson, who had earlier linked his embodiment theory to an *Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (2007), provided a clarifi-

cation of the relation between the two understandings of aesthetics. The focus of traditional aesthetics, Johnson writes, such as aesthetic judgment, beauty, and art “should be seen as exemplary, intensified instances of the basic aesthetic contours and processes of human meaning-making. In other words, aesthetics is not merely a matter of aesthetic experience and art, but extends further to encompass all of the processes by which we enact meaning through perception, feeling, imagination, and bodily movement” (Johnson 2015, 24). However, it has also been shown that those developments in art that questioned meaning and representation, or rejected it in their work entirely, had much to offer for an understanding of diverse “ways of worldmaking” (Goodman 1978).

This broad spectrum of concepts and debates demonstrates that aesthetics cannot be confined to either a philosophy of art, or a theory of perception and sensory knowledge. It is the entire intellectual tradition of aesthetics, including its necessary critiques, that shed light on the affective, somatic and sensory aspects of human engagement with their environment. Especially projects such as Alfonsina Scarinzi’s “Aesthetics and the Embodied Mind” (2015) that radicalise interactionist models of thinking through the senses, make clear that aesthetics provides a vibrant forum for the old question regarding how we can account for the role of the senses in human knowledge. An “enactive aesthetics” challenges the presumptions of, and offers an advantage for, the Study of Religion. It enables the analysis of sensory practices *within* religious traditions (for instance, how a religious body is created, how distinctions and norms are persuasively imagined, implemented and embodied, or experiences of “other worlds” are trained by specific engagements of the senses) and it facilitates the analysis of how perceiving and meaning-making is influenced *by* religious cultivation and judgment of the senses, independent of whether people see themselves as adherents, or not. Failing to study these aspects means missing the opportunity to understand the “efficacy” of religion/s that is rooted in layers beyond and below propositional meaning.

4 Religious Aesthetics, or an Aesthetics of Religion?

To begin with, we emphasise that we do not see religious aesthetics as essentially different from any other engagement of the senses; rather, it is seen as building upon the same evolutionary, cognitive, emotional and perceptual capacities as other cultural practices. No ahistorical *homo religiosus* is evoked by referring to moods and experiences being evoked in religious traditions, and no privileged access to other worlds is claimed. Also, the many publications on theological aesthetics ask other types of questions than those taken up by an Aesthetics

of Religion approach. When speaking about *religious aesthetics*, we refer to the repertoire of practices—ways of seeing or listening, cultivating the body, implementing embodied values and imaginations—and the repertoire of products that developed in the context of religious traditions—images, architecture, texts and dances, and the institutions that teach, traditionalise and evaluate them. An Aesthetics of Religion, however, denotes the theoretical background, the systematic questions and the methodology which are essential for developing an academic approach. Further below, we explain in more detail in what sense we think one can speak about a distinct religious aesthetics without evoking an essentialist model of religion/s; for now it should be emphasised that such distinctions are meant as models used to describe historical transformations, for instance when religious and scientific aesthetics start to overlap, or when an aesthetics of sports is merged with religious practice.

Centring on perception and the senses in the Study of Religion/s did not develop overnight, and all scholarly work being done in this field can be seen as responding to the critical revision of the discipline’s foundational concepts and its problematic legacies taking place since the 1980s and after the “cultural turn”.¹⁹ In 1990, for instance, in the journal *Visible Religion*,²⁰ Hans G. Kippenberg programmatically asked for an inventory of religious image practices and representational forms that would compare to the impressive achievements of text hermeneutics, allowing to take into account visual and figurative religious media with the same expertise and scrutiny as it was developed through the tradition of Biblical Studies and philology. What has been taken up by the new *Bildwissenschaft* since (visual studies, visual culture), is now being done for the other senses—smell, touch, hearing, proprioception, and the sense of time and space.

The revised concept of aesthetics has been taken up in the Study of Religion in different ways and by scholars of different backgrounds and different motivations. As a concept in ritual studies, Williams and Boyd (2006) discuss the links between the anthropology of art and aesthetics. Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrips (2008) convincingly argue for the recognition of form when studying religion, and for considering the whole range of experiences, including the aesthetic forms considered as blasphemy and the efficacy of the an-aesthetic. In her work Meyer was confronted with a lack of methods and theories adequate to what she encountered as the bodily-engaged practice of Pentecostal Christians.

¹⁹ For the understanding of the “cultural turn”, see Bachmann-Medick (2016)

²⁰ For a discussion why this journal’s innovative programme, which anticipated the core questions of contemporary visual and material culture applied to religious history, could not be established beyond 1982–1990, see Uehlinger (2006).

This lack, she stated, resulted from an anti-ritualist attitude especially prominent in the anthropology of Christianity. While Meyer's concepts are mainly based on a theory of religion as mediation and on the materiality of religious practice, they contributed to the applicability of aesthetic analyses of styles and "sensational forms" which create a sense of presence and modes of persuasion based on the experience of the divine (Meyer 2010, 2013). In this view, aesthetics is presented as a key term of a material approach to religion (Prohl 2015.).

S. Brent Plate (2012) introduced the suggestive metaphor of the "skin of religion" and identifies the aesthetic with the multi-functional, permeable contact zone between individual and society. The skin, it is proposed, is not only surface and outside border, as aesthetic forms are for religious traditions; it is also the inside contact holding the structures together. This view allows analysis of the interactions between objects and religious practice beyond representation. In a comparable way, David Morgan suggests technologies of embodiment as core concepts of a programme to study the material culture of religion/s (Morgan 2015, 5).

Other colleagues specifically worked out concepts of a process of aestheticisation (Svašek 2007; Johnston 2008) and theorised specific fields in the study of religion from an aesthetic point of view, such as esoteric traditions that are characterised by the reflective reference to philosophical and scientific discourses (Johnston 2008). In a recent cross-disciplinary collection, Sally Promey (2014) introduces interdisciplinary research on religion under the title *Sensational Religion*; binding together visual studies, a materiality approach and sensory perception. The volume does not draw on aesthetics or perceptual theories *per se*, perhaps because aesthetics would be identified with the arts. The articles, however, expand on aesthetic repertoire that brilliantly unfold how religion, and the impact of religion/s on the environment they are embedded in, can be explained.

A comprehensive concept of an Aesthetics of Religion has developed in the German-speaking tradition of the Academic Study of Religion. In an initial article, Hubert Cancik and Hubert Mohr offered a programmatic outline of *Religion-saesthetik* being introduced "[...] in order to describe systematically and pervade theoretically what is perceivable in religions, how religion activates, governs and restricts the body and the sensorium" (Cancik and Mohr 1988, 121). The programme draws on different sources, for instance the French *École des Annales*, the concept of a history of mentalities and the experiment of integrating an *imaginaire* into history writing; also Historical Anthropology underlies the emphasis on the historicity of aesthetic forms in this programme. While linking up very closely to a semiotic understanding of religion as communicative systems with

assignable functions and achievements,²¹ the article argued for linking meaning to sensation, perception and the materiality of sign production. Religious communication should be observed in all its media and spheres of senses: dance, music, images, architecture and landscape design, but also in under-exposed media such as fragrance, rhythm, touch, or the senses of movement and proprioception.

A strong emphasis is placed on relating body practice to cultural codes and habits, and to systemise codified, and codifying forms across history and cultures. It seems important to mention that this programmatic outline has been developed in the first handbook for a basic terminology in the Study of Religion (*Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*), and hence was part of embedding the Study of Religion within the larger study of culture, presenting the Aesthetics of Religion side by side with “sub-disciplines” and their history such as the Sociology of Religion, or the Psychology of Religion. The idea to specialise in approaches rather than in regions or religions stands behind the systematic construct of an Aesthetics of Religion. The concept was taken up as conference theme (Lanwerd 2003; Koch 2004), a dictionary on “everyday religion and its mediation” was conceptualised on the basis of the aesthetic approach (*Metzler Lexikon Religion*, Auffarth, Bernard, and Mohr 2000; revised and without introduction in English edition: Stuckrad 2005); more introductions can be found in articles focusing on “perception” (Mohr 2005), or on the creation of “perceptual spaces” (*Wahrnehmungsraeume*, Mohn 2010); furthermore, in publications inspired by the concept (Wilke and Moebus 2011), and in the recently published “Vocabulary for the Study of Religion” (Grieser 2015b). The concept was institutionalised in a working group in 2007, affiliated to the German association for the Study of Religion and has since regularly engaged in collaborative publications, of which this volume is one.

Although different in background and approach, these examples share the basic interest in approaching religion through sensory perception and an aim to relate physiological aspects to mechanisms of the cultivation of the senses and to “semiotic ideologies” (Keane 2006). As such they understand religious traditions as an active part of stimulating and disciplining habits of perception within a larger culture. Perception is seen as an active process of filtering and distributing attention; religions are seen as providing such “filters” and, thus, contribute to organising what is possible to perceive, feel, and think in a society.

²¹ In this concept of “religion as communication” diverse traditions converge, coming from backgrounds as different as system theory (Niklas Luhmann and Talcott Parsons), semiotics (Charles Sanders Peirce and Umberto Eco) and transcultural cybernetics (Horst Reimann).

From this point of view, an aesthetic analysis can address individual as well as collective aspects of perceptual orders. Repetitive practices and exceptional, intense experiences in relation with narratives and doctrines shape a religious *panorama of perception* that bind individual believers into a community. Across a wide variety of local forms, religious traditions can be distinguished by their *aesthetic profiles*. Without knowing much about religions, we can “sense” and identify a Buddhist or an Islamic aesthetic because religions distinguish themselves through clothes, colours, hairstyles, buildings and artefacts. These ensembles change over time and are subject to reinterpretation and adaptation (if we think, for instance, of couture Islam, the merging of orthodox and pop cultural styles of dressing or hairstyle; see Nieuwkerk et al. 2016). They reach beyond representing or symbolising religious beliefs and doctrines, because they cultivate perceptual habits that build identity within the group, and determine the mutual perception between groups and within the larger society.

The aesthetic analysis of culture also includes that normative determinations of what is beautiful and what is ugly; what is kitsch and what is worth being recorded depends on the taste of the practitioners, and not purely on normative aesthetic judgements. Aesthetic studies explicitly pay attention to the “reverse side of the expected”: the use of the ugly and the monstrous, or the use of transgression, the limits of pain or disgust in liminal experiences is also addressed. This includes the non-spectacular, the an-aesthetic, the white wall of the Protestant church. Such modes are how religions “becomes effective” through aesthetic means and are named as strategies of stimulation, or deprivation of the senses by Mohr (2005). Such “work on terms”, and the aim to provide analytic categories and a descriptive vocabulary marks the difference between a collection on religious aesthetics, and Aesthetics of Religion as an approach that goes beyond addressing the body and the senses in the context of religions. The research network on Aesthetics of Religion dedicated two collaborative publications to such theorisation of terms. The first special issue elaborated on *museality* from different perspectives, interlacing aspects concrete social practice of exhibiting religion, as discourse, as matrix of knowledge production and as perceptual order of relating to religion and culture (Kugele and Wilkens 2011). The second publication explored theories of imagination, and how imaginative practices are deployed in religious traditions and can be seen as the backbone of creating religious embodied realities (Traut and Wilkens 2014). In the present volume, authors expand on the terms and concepts they find useful for their cases; many of them—disfiguration, viscerality, the Hieratic—provide the basis for a list of keywords to be further elaborated.

5 Potentials of the Approach

We contend that an aesthetics of religion approach offers four innovations: (1) it takes into account new objectives and topics as well as new aspects of well-known topics (heuristic potential); (2) it offers options to describe and explain historical and political effects of religion (descriptive and explanatory potential); (3) it offers new ways of comparing religious traditions throughout history and regions (comparative potential); and (4) it allows reflexive analysis on the variety of aesthetic theories, including religious, artistic and academic ones, and their embeddedness in the religious history and the ideologies of their time, for instance that certain senses are religiously privileged or rejected, or that imagination is devalued in both religious and academic traditions (reflexive potential).

5.1 Heuristics



Taking perception as its focus and the issue of how human beings relate indirectly, metaphorically and through media to reality, new fields and sources can be explored, as has recently been done with regard to touch and odours. However, traditional fields can be approached in innovative ways. Instead of focusing on the content of texts and the hermeneutics at play, and aesthetic history of reading would include the body practice of reading (posture, aloud or silent, alone or with others, felt as a duty or as pleasure), the design and usage of texts as objects, and the way the cultural technique of reading becomes metaphors that creates new realities such as the “decoding of genes” and the reading of the code of humanity.

Developing aesthetic analysis as a repertoire of methods, a specifically trained attention is required, and results from conscious and unconscious training processes, as well as skills of collecting data and producing “thick descriptions” of sensory practices, settings and regimes. Scholars investigating the physiology and aesthetic forms of religious practice encounter two major challenges. The first is how to (re-)present the data which are not textual media. This question touches upon discussions of central concern to anthropologists for a long time. Being aware that considering music or movement is more challenging than dwelling in the seemingly same medium (text), strategies have been developed that apply innovative ways of using film and images, integrating notification techniques for dance, music or sound, finding new ways of measuring excitement, or detecting responses to the affordance of religious-aesthetic arrangements. Also, expertise requires further development, and for example, skills in notation developed (for music, for example, Laack 2008) or developing terminology and modes of analysis to appreciate performances for which one previously had no categories. Innovative forms of representation, however, do not prevent scholarly work from finding verbal ways of thinking through and reconstructing the observed and analysed; discussions from the 1980s (writing-culture debate) provide the background for rethinking the role of analytical language and qualities of academic knowledge, including the comparative difference it would make to reproduce the observed. However, the discussion sometimes tends to forget that thinking about a dance does not need to be danced, and studying religions/s does not require one to re-enact them.

In this respect, providing a descriptive language is seen as a valuable way of gaining both a closeness to religion as aesthetic practice (acknowledging the intensity and the qualities of aesthetic effects), and a position of distance, going beyond reproduction and appreciation of aesthetic forms and providing a systematic frame for comparing and analysing the single case in light of more general questions. It is an explicit goal to contribute to the “work on terms” in the study of religion that enables scholars to analytically engage with aesthetic phenomena, for example, terms such as synchronicity, extended cognition, or imagination, museality (which have been elaborated on in collaborative publications of the working group as previously noted).

The second challenge is how to interpret different modes of data if we, for instance, address physiological data and patterns of interpretation, narratives and texts as Koch and Meissner (2011) do in their pilot study, or we address extended cognition such as the “sixth sense” (Johnston 2016), or from the kinaesthetic (Mohr in this volume). As we have pointed out above, an “enactive aesthetics” as well as the discourse on bio-cultural models of religion is meant to offer a framework for this challenge. It is not the aim to find a universal solution; rather,

it is seen as a great potential to make explicit the basis on which diverse modes of data are interpreted and what modes of knowledge are connected and in what ways. It is here that Vásquez' (2011) rejection of positivist naturalism and his "non-reductive materialism" needs to be extended; that Koch makes use of psycho-somatic models in order to explain spiritual healing; and that Johnston discusses adequate epistemologies that neither try to prove, nor to explain away phenomena relevant to people.

An example of how a familiar topic develops differently from the angle of an Aesthetics of Religion approach could be a sensory history of religious reading, considering that also using texts can be differentiated according to the various layers of bodily and sensorial engagement with texts. Another field develops when integrating art, again, into the aesthetic approach. If art is seen as one specific (and important) field subsumed under the heading of *aisthesis*, the relationship between religion and art turns out to be manifold:

- Art *in* religion, which is an important traditional field in aesthetic approaches to religion, and reaches beyond classical iconography (Lanwerd 2002; Belting 2011). Music, visual art, architecture, or drama within religion create multi-dimensional interrelations between the expressive, doctrinal, and perceptive spheres, and religion has fostered elaborated artistic traditions.
- Art *as* religion, a constellation which is based on art becoming an autonomous sphere during modernisation, and therewith also becoming a medium of transferring religious claims to discourses on beauty and the sublime, especially in European and American Romanticism.
- Art *in relation* to religion, either criticising religion explicitly or claiming the aestheticist position that art is not committed to morals or truth. This becomes apparent in the notion of blasphemy or in value conflicts that may result in violent responses to each other.

5.2 History and Politics



It is for two reasons that we would like to highlight the aspects of the historicity and the political character of the aesthetic. First, when we speak about perception as a somatic-sensory process, readers might be inclined to understand the “natural body” to work beyond history and relations of power. Second, when speaking about an aesthetic history of religion, we mean different aspects. A history of religion can be approached by investigating sensory practices and aesthetic forms; religious contributions to the perceptual order of a larger culture can be studied; and the ideologies about what is the aesthetic, for instance the notion of art as being separated from everyday life and the politics of power, can be analysed as being themselves dependent on the history of classes and milieus within Western societies of the modern period.

An aesthetic history of religion, and the religious-historical character of aesthetic forms make a difference in comparison to a conventional history of events (*Ereignisgeschichte*) or of concepts and ideas (*Ideengeschichte*). Taking as an example one of the most “sustainable” concepts in the history of religion, the soul; it is obvious that the focus would shift from texts and ideas to visualisations, practices such as contemplation, or healing techniques that relate touch or singing to the wellbeing of the soul. Guiding questions are what imaginative and emotional practices are performed: Which technologies of the self would be deployed? How does the soul relate to intuitive and sensory knowledge of the self and reality? Culturally different concepts can be compared on a broader basis than ideas, and the aesthetic practices and forms can be studied as a means of keeping concepts stable by adapting to new circumstances.²²

²² For an aesthetic history that covers both, the history of the senses and a history through the

Works that have made this difference in approaching religious history have been presented, and we can only mention examples of the different aspects. Schneider, Wald-Fuhrmann and Watzka (2015) approach the *Aesthetics of the Spirits* by combining a historical analysis of concepts with the emerging differentiation between early modern science, religion and art. Marvin Döbler (2013) weaves together a sensory analysis of St. Bernhard's theory and practice of mysticism with its critical reflection by scholars of religion being rooted in the anti-ritual attitude of Protestant historiography. Another example of how an aesthetic concept can shed new light on, for example, the history of Christian mission in China, has been presented by Rambelli and Reinders (2012). The concepts they used, iconoclasm as practice and idolatry as ideological instrument, uncovered an unexpectedly complex—and violent—history of alliances between Protestants, Catholics, adherents of folk religion and Daoist philosophers. A final work to mention that approaches religious history through aesthetic practice concentrated on physical objects is Brent Plate's *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects* (2014); it demonstrates how the individual use of objects is embedded in the social and historical orders of sensing and imagining and how perception and material objects have to be understood as inevitably intertwined in their power to manage religion's dynamics of stability and change throughout history.

Mark Smith's (2007a) discussion of the problems and opportunities of a *sensory history* is interesting to us at this point. In his argument for radically historicising the senses and sensing, he outlines clearly that it cannot be the purpose to "re-enact" history on the basis of a universally shared human sensorium; nor should an immediate or privileged access to the past (or to different cultures, for that matter) be claimed through imagining how people in the past may have sensed their world. Smith makes this clear by addressing the question how to represent these imaginations if not in language and description, and using the example of the lemon sample: even if we could add to an article about the taste of lemon in early US-American history a sample of prepared

lens of aesthetic forms, several concepts are important and yet to be explored. Constance Classen's 6 volume project *A Cultural History of the Senses* (2014) covers time periods from 500 BCE; Robert Jütte's *History of the Senses* (2004) focuses on the interrelation between senses and media; Mark Smith (2007a, 2007b) reflects on historiographical issues. Going further back in the tradition of sensory history writing the impulse of writing a body history that undermines the paradigm of semiotics and content should certainly be included, see Duden (1990) and Feher (1989). In the same realm, the history of mentality and the exploration of the *imaginaire* in the tradition of the *Annales* School still offer the opportunity to pursue both a material history of "Things" (Meyer and Houtmann 2012) and a history of imaginaries related and relying on them (Patlagean 1978).

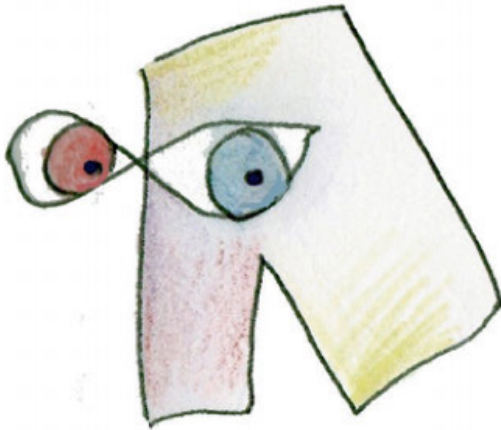
paper with a liquid tasting like lemon—we cannot simulate the taste of something which people were not used to at all, saw as utterly exotic, and had different experiences of, because they were not used to sweetened or strongly flavoured food at all. The other convincing argument presented is that the limits of imagining the sensed past are reached very quickly when being asked to simulate the nose of a slave-holder whose racism manifested in the conviction and perception that different skin colours have a specific odour. The specificity of whose senses are being discussed and how do they relate to class, gender, location, etc.—these are the questions that a sensory history can help to unpack and would result in the production of a more diversified history than a history of ideas and events can deliver.

It is telling, however, that Smith does not spend one word on the role of religion in his outline of a sensory history, and we may speculate that his view of religion might be confined to cognitive ideologies and beliefs being separated from the perceptual orders and the sensory regimes. Here, more conversation would make clear that an aesthetic understanding of religion needs to be included. Especially for the history of the US, religion plays a significant role on all levels of sensory history: for the definition, the use, the value and the hierarchies of the senses; sensory practices and ideals of dealing with the body; and the repertoire of aesthetic forms accompanying the conquering of the land, for instance romantic notions of wilderness, nature and freedom (Feldt 2012). *Vice versa*, the specific development of religiosity in the USA cannot be understood fully without the aesthetic history of its landscape and its new and old inhabitants. What we wanted to show here is that both an aesthetic history of religion, and a religious studies approach to sensory history have much to offer within the broader movement of extending history to aesthetic forms beyond representationalism.

In regard to the political character of the aesthetic, we have shown that especially the development in social aesthetics has made clear that there is no neutral, or unpolitical order of perception within a society. In a Foucauldian sense, practices and orders of the self are always embedded in the power structure of regulations and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. On this very basic level it can be said that it is the perceptual orders in the first place that determine what is possible to feel, think and believe within a society, and that what we perceive as real is politically established. In addition to the fundamentally political character of perceptual orders, extreme examples demonstrate that ideologies are not confined to conscious thought and semiotic mechanisms. As mentioned above, racist regimes manifest in a reality that is “naturalised” by a perception of differences that is anchored in sensing and feeling the otherness of the other. The slaveholder’s nose creates the reality of an ideological regime, and the alleged naturalness of the smell corroborates the manifestation as real. Another

extreme example can be found in the ways that totalitarian systems discipline and glorify the strong body, and succeed in creating a *Volkskoerper* (the people as one body). As outlined in Barck and Faber's (1999) volume, these ideologies do not merely express themselves in their aesthetic forms, they are rather manifesting as an emotional and perceptual reality; considering the *Aesthetic of the Political*—as their title says—also requires to consider *The Political of the Aesthetic*. At the other end of a political aesthetics, recent work on old and new forms of protest demonstrates the power of criticising and undermining dominant orders by body performance and aesthetic actions (Werbner et al. 2014).

5.3 Comparison



The notion of Comparative Religion has been under sustained critique in recent years, firstly because of the problematic concept of World Religions in which ‘religions’ are compared to each other as fixed units deprived of context, and secondly, because of the romantic and phenomenological heritage that neglects cultural difference by their representational model, seeing different traditions as mere expressions of the same (monotheistic) model. Comparing, however, is part and parcel of the Academic Study of Religion, and instead of giving up on the method, the point is rather to pay greater attention to what and how we compare. Against this backdrop, aesthetic analysis offers parameters of comparison—not “religions”, but aesthetic schemas and forms being analysed, considering how they encounter, and how they change.

This can be done diachronically and synchronically (Schlieter 2000); for a single tradition, e.g., when migrants bring their religion and re-establish it in

new forms (Svašek 2012), or when a history of the senses allows us to rethink which sense is dominating a cultural practice and their ideologies: sight (*darśan*; see Eck 2007), or sound (Wilke and Moebus 2011). Comparing different traditions, or religious encounters, can gain, for instance, from comparing the practice and the role of applying pain in rituals (Bräunlein 2010). Especially those formations which provide transitional categories, such as *subtle bodies*, allow for comparing a broad range of phenomena and cultures (Johnson and Samuel 2013).

As a third example, identifying religious aesthetic patterns helps to describe transfer processes between religious and other societal domains, such as politics, science, art, healing systems, and pop culture. For instance, what David Chidester (1986) has called “theologies of light” can be found in political staging of charismatic leaders, and in popular science as well (Grieser 2015a).

5.4 Reflexivity



Aesthetics deployed as analytical concepts are not confined to academic thinking. The senses and how to (not) use them are theorised by religious authors as well, and it is reflected upon how faculties of thought, emotion, and imagination are to be judged. Buddhism, for instance, knows elaborate normative and analytical notions about how to train and to evaluate thoughts and emotions, and the “work” of the senses. Thus, the aesthetic approach allows us to disentangle, and to be aware of the mutual influences between concepts of the soul, of *ratio* and *emotio* in academic and in religious theories of the aesthetic.

A second aspect of engaging with an aesthetic approach is that it is in itself a critical endeavour, and most scholars involved put effort in re-reading the theories we are working with in respect of how they deal with the sensuous; consider Meyer and Verrips (2008) for the Protestant foundation of the discipline; Gladi-gow (1998) for the phenomenological rejection of the senses; Asad (1993, 2003) for the role of the body in both formations of the religious and the secular. They look for different options when referring to “classical thinkers” that allow for a positive theory including sensory and bodily aspects of religion such as Aby Warburg or Jane Harrison (Brunotte 2013); and they critically engage with contemporary theoretical developments, for instance in a *tour de force* of assessing possible candidates for a “non-reductive materialist” theory by Vásquez (2011), aiming at establishing a “non-reductive materialism” as foundation of an “ecological-aesthetic” approach. Others delve into aesthetic traditions that oscillate between art criticism and intellectual history, making analytical use of concepts, for example, S. Brent Plate reads Walter Benjamin (2005) in a creative way.

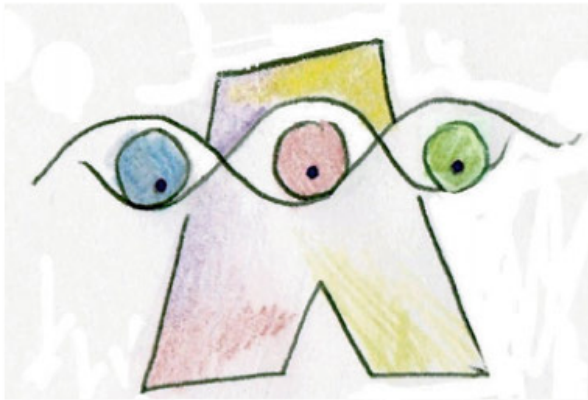
Such reflections on the methodology and epistemology of the Study of Religion inevitably leads to the question whether there is, or will be a specific aesthetic theory of religion. An introduction is certainly not the place to propose and discuss such theory. Moreover, just as a Sociology of Religion would not be reducible to one theory or one method, an aesthetic approach provides an informed and shared analytical framework for *theorising* rather than a single theory of religions and perception. According to Stausberg (2009), a theory of religion/s should be able to respond to questions about the specificity of what we determine as religion/s; their origins, or beginnings; about assignable functions and about the structure of religion/s. These aspects provide the framework for the programmatic discussions in this volume and future theorising, including:

- Religion/s are seen as being rooted in both, universal conditions developed in evolutionary processes and in culturally contingent and changeable circumstances; for such bio-cultural understanding, diverse modes of knowledge need to be drawn together
- Religion/s are understood as modes of organising the way humans relate to reality; while humans are not seen as essentially different from other species, they face a few specific conditions, for instance that they are not only able to, but that they need to imagine beyond the situation they are situated in. Orders of perception, therefore, need to provide solutions for spheres which cannot be experienced, but can be imagined (time, being dead, wishing something that is *not*); the link between imagination, perception and bodily practice is a strong framework for theorising religion.

- The religious subject we study is conceptualised as an aesthetic subject whose decision-making is not confined to rational choice and conscious weighing of advantages and disadvantages, but rather includes preferences and styles, pleasure and boredom, satisfaction and the distribution of attention as modes that govern behaviour. If we integrate recent research on the plasticity of the brain and the perceptual system, it becomes clear that, for example, conversions cannot be studied as a change of belief systems only; rather, with a concept of aesthetic subjectivity at hand, it can be studied how not only the interpretive framework is changing, but also the perceptual orders, the intuitive reactions, and about why people might laugh or cry. The concept of an aesthetic subjectivity also challenges how we approach the relationship of ourselves as researchers and the religious agents we study. Rationalist positions that advise to suspend matters of taste, sensations, and emotions are questioned, and it is suggested that these aspects should be trained as a means of research and for academic purposes.
- Considering the religious subject as an aesthetic subject challenges the dominance of semiotics in interpreting the body and agency. The relationship between aesthetics and semiotics requires further discussion, and an enactive aesthetics might allow for acknowledging a sensory knowledge without instantly marking the body as a carrier of meaning, and without opposing sensory to abstract knowledge and meaning-making. As Margaret Wilson puts it, “the embodied cognition literature has sometimes taken a very strong stance that cognition is fundamentally and directly bound to the body in its immediate physical environment. Instead, I argue here, that the value of the embodied cognition approach is not to deny the existence of abstract and de-contextualised thought, but to explain how it grew out of previously existing sensorimotor abilities” (Wilson 2008, 375).
- Another point of discussion is the extent to which the revised understanding of aesthetics is applicable cross-culturally and how it relates to religious aesthetic theories or indigenous conceptualisation of the senses, as well as how to address them. This includes examining how scholars and practitioners negotiate between the belief in phenomena (including experience, perception, etc.) as universal or culturally specific.
- A critical conversation with theories of material agency (both old and new) is relevant, in particular the claims that an agency of things helps to de-centre the modern focus on the human subject. The point is to further discuss the status of matter and materiality in relation to perception and formative processes. Distinguishing ontological from epistemological concepts, for instance, is important when matter is discussed as the basis of a new monism.

- Especially for the Study of Religion, agency can be a helpful category; however, excluding notions of form, formation, or perception does not make sense—it is not the object that acts religiously, but the object’s affordance relates to the specific sensorium of human beings. Yet, embodiment approaches and actor-network theory put human beings and their relations with the environment in perspective. Margaret Wilson’s concept of “re-tooling”, for instance, provides us with a model that explains the dynamics of humans being agents as well as patients of the culture they live in at the same time (Wilson 2010).

5.5 Connectivity



In the title of this volume, we qualify aesthetics as a *Connective Concept* because we think aesthetics provides connectivity on two levels: first, rather than opposing historical, sensory or interpretive approaches, it allows us to analyse the components of *aisthesis*—sensing, perceiving and sense making—in their relationality. On a second level, it connects the modes of academic knowledge we need to provide such analysis. This second aspect, though, refers to the larger problem of the fragmentation of knowledge, and to the problematic aspect of specialisation in the production and dissemination of knowledge. It also refers to a long debate about the inner organisation of the Academic Study of Religion, its status as a discipline and its place in a de-differentiating landscape of academic knowledge. Aesthetics, as an approach which thinks through the relationship between religion/s and perception, in a way is comparable to the perspective of, for example, a Sociology of Religion that thinks through the relationship between religion/s and society. As much as a Sociology of Religion is complemented by, say, an economic perspective, an Aesthetics of Religion enhances the understanding of building communities and identities by addressing the per-

ceptual aspects of these processes. Thus, connectivity as a term may emphasise that relating diverse epistemological cultures should create a quality of knowledge which does justice to the complexity of religions as they influence and interact with possibly every other sphere of culture. Connections are enabled by allowing scholars to recognise a broader range of sources, media and data; by offering a link between perception and the history of aesthetic forms, and between individual practice and cultural ideologies; by enabling scholars to question dualist notions of body and mind, or spirit and matter; and by paving the way to critically engage diverse academic knowledge cultures—not least the polarised debate on cognition and culture. Many colleagues are in search of ways to go beyond disciplinary borders and to link different modes of knowledge to each other. Using actor-network models (Morgan 2012) or “building block approaches” (Taves 2010) to organise the academic operations of analysing and synthesising, of “assembling and disassembling” (Taves 2015, 6); proposing a “bio-cultural theory of religion” (Geertz 2010; Geertz and Jensen 2010) or laying the grounds for an epistemology of the body (Koch 2015), these are but a few examples of approaches which strive to a) produce synthetic knowledge from different academic knowledge cultures, and b) mutually advance knowledge production by developing shared questions, providing models and correct each other’s assumptions.

Considering this a need for collaborative organisation of specialised knowledge, we chose the metaphor of connectivity for characterising the Aesthetics of Religion. Why this? Being at home in mathematics, computer sciences or network theories of knowledge and learning (Downes 2012), connectivity is attractive, because there are three things it does *not* suggest: it does not claim to subsume everything under one umbrella, as the word “integrative” might suggest; it does not link only two sides, as a “bridging concept” would; and it does not evoke the notion of a closed and unified whole as some “holistic theories” might. What connectivity does provide us with is a way of modelling complex processes that are not confined to a one-way causality, but are rather based on mutual responses and feedback loops, which result in learning systems. In models of brain activities, for example, connectivity is used to describe how circuits and paths are constantly re-connected in ways needed for the task to be performed—a flexible yet organised way of distributing work. The second aspect of connectivity is that it is a meta-category that does not only ask what data or knowledge we need, but also what kind of connections are important, and how we should make the connection between the different modes of knowledge and interpretation.

Connectivism, in consequence, is the name of a theory that describes how people know and learn using network processes. In this sense, the metaphor offers a concept of a non-linear learning process which allows one to be aware of possible connections, but without expecting that one contributor uses or over-

sees all of them. More concretely, if an Aesthetics of Religion provides us with the possibility to theorise the field of our studies through the diverse dimensions of *aisthesis*, bringing together the diverse expertise from within the Study of Religion and across the relevant disciplines is crucial. Exchanging this expertise does not make us specialists of the other disciplines—we remain experts for religious ways of approaching and creating reality; neither lumping together different ways of knowing, nor accepting a scientific naturalist causality as the only way of “explaining religion” can be the goal. Connecting expertise about religious ways of perceiving the world means to learn *from* other disciplines, but also to *add to* their expertise; it is an interdisciplinary undertaking. The question for an Aesthetics of Religion is, therefore, not only how to appropriate the fast growing knowledge about perception and cognition, simultaneously important is the question, where does the expertise of the cultural and historical Study of Religion lie? As we perceive it, in the cognitive and evolutionary study of religion/s, and also in the areas of sensory history or art studies expertise on religion/s is needed—in terms of historicising concepts of religion/s, embedding them in the cultural and comparative context and, importantly, monitoring and reflecting on the ideological and religious background of many an assumption used in natural scientific concepts in the study of “religion”. Much would be gained for the study of a field as vast as religion/s if we took the time to think about how we organise, accept and exchange our expertise in order to connect specialised knowledge without being overstrained by an impossible research agenda. The structure of an aesthetic approach follows, in this respect, Max Weber’s insight that “It is not the ‘actual’ interconnections of ‘things’ but the conceptual interconnections of problems which define the scope of the various sciences” (Weber 1949, 68).

6 Structure and Contributions

When looking through the table of contents, it might strike the reader that this volume is not arranged around a single period of history, a specific religion or a special region. Indeed, the chapters cover eras from Antiquity to the contemporary; disciplinary backgrounds from archaeology to ethology and literature studies; and regions from India across Europe to the Americas. This is no accidental diversity—it is exactly what we wished for the volume and the conference presentations and discussions it encapsulates. The wide-ranging topics of analysis are characteristic of an aesthetic approach in which it is the systematic questions, the methodological challenges and the epistemological reflection which provide the common foundation that links the individual chapters. According

to the potential of an aesthetic approach (outlined above), we divided the contributions in four sections; it should be emphasised, however, that these divisions are not hard boundaries, and many contributions contain aspects of the other sections, as well. While focusing on one aspect, all authors show that empirical data is linked to the historicity of aesthetic forms; in many cases, their specific analysis helps to illuminate other case-studies. We also encouraged all authors to contribute to the necessary “work on terms” and to a programmatic perspective.

The chapters have been divided into four sections: *Fields and Topics*, *History and Politics*, *Comparison and Transfer*, and *Concepts and Theories*. A fifth section contains short essays by scholars who were invited to reflect—from their own point of view—on the connectivity of an Aesthetics of Religion. In this way we aim to integrate into this volume work forms employed at conferences in which colleagues were invited to act as “observers” who would provide feedback to the Working Group from their specific expertise and experience. This provided a meta-perspective and a fresh view on points that would have otherwise been overlooked. We are especially grateful to those colleagues who engaged creatively in this somewhat playful open form, most of them without having previously been part of joint events.

In the chapters of the first section, *Fields and Topics*, the reader encounters religious aesthetic forms and media that seem familiar, those usually associated with traditional approaches: texts, ritual objects, film. However, more traditional approaches mainly inquire about the content of these texts, their meaning and what we can learn about beliefs and ideas expressed therein. Through an aesthetic lens, the authors in this volume ask a different range of questions. They manage to unfold the multifaceted efficacy of text, stone and film that reaches beyond issues content and meaning (although these issues are not ignored). Investigating the ritual and social aesthetics of “petromorphic gods” in a Hindu context, Mikael Aktor demonstrates that it is not a single theoretical key but rather the interpretive combination of theories which allows one to understand how stones connect religious knowledge, performative action and the repertoire of used forms. Aktor demonstrates that neither anthropomorphic perceptions nor the agency of the stone material alone make up the ritual aesthetics in which the stones are involved. Rather, applying concepts from landscape phenomenology and cognitive theories including the role of material objects in cognitive technologies, and the structure of the human mind, Aktor unravels how the sensory and synaesthetic qualities have made these stones ritually important. In this weaving together of different aspects, Aktor illustrates the way in which an aesthetic approach forms a connective pathway within religious studies scholarship.

Another “double aspect” of aesthetics is addressed by John Hamilton and Almut-Barbara Renger, who explore German Expressionist literature between 1910 and 1925. They show that the striking combination of vitalism and scepticism, which many of the Expressionist authors inherit from Friedrich Nietzsche, complicates any naïve concept of a “re-enchanted modernity” as a regaining of un-reflected belief. These authors at the same time apply and critically thematise the undermining power of the aesthetic. Only through the mutual differentiation of art and religion as autonomous realms, a new form of de-differentiation—art deploying the purported force and efficacy of a religiously coded aesthetics—can come to the fore. It is still underestimated how important this transformation, so clearly identified by Hamilton and Renger herein, has been for understanding the varieties of modern religion.

A combination of reflective genres and their religious utilisation is presented by Adrian Herrmann who explores a “discourse of sobriety” produced by charismatic Christians. His case study addresses the 2012 documentary movie *Fathers of Light* and its audience reception ritualised in film screenings as worship in the USA and the UK. Herrmann discusses the debates within documentary studies about the nature of representation, audio-visual claims to the ‘Real’, and the production of visual evidence. It is an interesting twist when religious groups are using a medium that claims to represent reality in order to convincingly represent the supernatural. Drawing on an understanding of religion as a mediated practice, Herrmann examines the aesthetics of documentaries by facing the difficulties of reception research and takes a “turn to the audience”. His chapter asks questions about the presentation of ‘truth’ and aesthetic styles that are implicitly read as ‘truthful’. The aesthetics analysis provided connects changing perspectives about the production, presentation and reception of media products as shaping forms of religion in the 21st century.

Laura Feldt’s chapter investigates parts of the classical religious narrative of Exodus 7–11 from the Hebrew Bible. One might think that Biblical literature has experienced enough analysis of form through the long and proficient traditions of rhetorical and exegetical analysis. However, form analysis in most cases serves a hermeneutical purpose. How can we access the *meaning* of the transmitted texts, what can we learn about concepts, ideas and theologies, and how can we bridge the historical gap of meaning making—these are the guiding questions for most historians of religion who look for information *about* religion rather than for modes of how the texts might have been used, felt or imagined. An analysis of form, theorised through the lens of cognitive narratology, leads to diverse modes of reception, and—more precisely—suggests that theological content does not exclude other reasons for the use of metaphors, suspense and other “literary-aesthetic devices”. Feldt provides a pioneering shift when addressing the “effi-

cacy” of religious texts, and how they engage their audiences by stimulating varying responses, senses and emotions: she makes evident what an aesthetic reading looks like when analysis is not subordinated to content. The important question—what do we deploy our analysis for?—offers an opportunity to bridge historical gaps by emphasising that texts and religions stimulate varying responses, senses and emotions, and are unlikely to be separated from entertainment, fascination and the sensational.

In section II, *History and Politics*, authors engage with aesthetic forms and the way they create meaning, experiences and worldviews that change throughout history. These range from the representation and cultural self-awareness of history in societies, including individual perception of biographies and fates, as well as consideration of how we as scholars are “doing history”, and history of religion in particular. It is the historicity of the aesthetic as well as the aesthetic dimension of the historical which changes the way historical transformations can be described. The authors make clear that aesthetic forms do not only concern representations of ideas and theologies; rather, religious change goes along with implementing new ways of seeing, recognising and imagining. These changing perceptual habits are political in the sense that they determine what is considered true, that they include and exclude what is accepted as knowledge, represent from a certain perspective and involve the making of individual and collective identity by authenticating claims and demarcations.

Niklaus Largier opens this section by conceiving of prayer as a production of *aisthesis* and guided perception. Focusing on Theresa of Avila’s *Vida*, and built on his wider investigation of medieval and early modern Christianity, Largier makes use of the rhetorical concept of *figuration—disfiguration—transfiguration* in order to show how “the invention and the rhetoric of the inner or spiritual senses allows for the creation of a space of ‘experience’, ‘exploration’ and ‘amplification’ of the emotional as well as of the sensory life of the soul”. This investigation demonstrates a way in which the historical gap that hampers studying sensory practices can be bridged. It binds together and analyses the reading of scriptures as bodily practice; rhetorical techniques and material media. Largier argues that habitualised perceptions and experiences, created by figural networks that produce sensual and affective cognition below the level of hermeneutics, form a “material theology” which complements conceptual understanding and become an integral part of Christianity’s aesthetic repertoire. The political aspect Largier highlights towards the end of his chapter consists of the impact such Catholic “aesthetic ideology” has had in the larger culture and also in academic theories, for example media theories.

Such repertoires, as it is shown in the next chapter, are not confined to religious traditions, but also find their way into the history of academic approaches

and the appreciation or rejection of theories—gender politics are a topic that accompanies a sensory history of academia. Ulrike Brunotte, in her intellectual biography of classicist Jane E. Harrison, gives an excellent example of how the aesthetic perspective can be applied not only to religious historical material, but also to trace a different history of the Study of Religion and their “classical thinkers”. Utilising a concept of an “aesthetics of performativity”, Brunotte carves out the terms and the sources by which Harrison resisted rituals and material and bodily expressions being dominated by text, doctrines and beliefs. A pioneer of a performative approach to religion, Harrison convincingly demonstrated that simplistic dichotomies such as subject and object, spirit and matter, or form and formlessness/matter prove inadequate as methodological and theoretical concepts for a culture-historical study of religion.

Politics can be understood in different ways as demonstrated by Christoph Auffarth’s close analysis of a period of massive change in Bremen, one of the Northern-German city centres of the Reformation. By looking at iconographic programmes that draw on caricature, on virtues and new symbolism, he argues that, firstly, religious change does not primarily come as ideas or doctrines in everyday life experience; rather, religious transformation develops as a change of the aesthetics in the public sphere (if we may use this term for this era). Analysing image programmes and architectural developments within the urban space, Auffarth, secondly, shows how the concept of the anti-iconic prominent in reformation theology had to negotiate ways to be visually present. “Learning a new religion”, as another point made in Auffarth’s approach, goes together with learning a new symbolism that is only in part explained and accounted for as theological content. Rather, the implementation of a new political and religious imaginary literally framed the perception within the city’s everyday life and was not only confined to adherents and believers.

A much longer period is covered by Hubert Mohr’s tracing of an aesthetic form, “the Hieratic”. His chapter closely investigates one of the strategies constituting an aesthetic construction of the sacred. Based on his ground-breaking work on religion and movement, Mohr introduces “standing, not moving” as a pattern that is both grounded in basic behaviour of humans as animals, and in the cultural variations which develop as derivation from primary functions. This view—drawing from knowledge about anthropological universals, and investigating principles of cultural formations and formalisations of such behaviour—characterises Mohr’s approach and stimulates the development of a descriptive vocabulary for religious aesthetics. In its programmatic dimension, a concept such as the Hieratic suggests the possibility of identifying a repertoire of religious aesthetic forms and strategies. Rooted in cognitive, kinaesthetic and behavioural studies, as well as in historical anthropology, a new type of

comparison across religions and cultures is enabled by such basal forms—while fully embracing the cultural differences and the complexity which emerge from the historical layers and the political situations in which these forms exert power and implement ideologies. Mohr teaches us why hieratic standing is used in the exercise of power as well as in political protest.

Mohr's concept of a comparative repertoire of religious-aesthetic strategies makes for a fitting transition to section III, *Comparison and Transfer*. This section focuses on how observation of the usage, distribution and normative valuation of particular senses and aesthetic forms enables the comparison of religious traditions beyond doctrines and categories such as world religions. Moreover, these chapters investigate processes of differentiation and of transfer between religion and other symbolic systems, such as art, science, or politics.

The first contribution opens with an investigation of “migrating” aesthetic form, a stunningly stereotypical visualisation of the human brain. Since new image technologies have opened up possibilities to observe the “brain at work”, the neurosciences have moved to the centre of attention as a new leading science (*Leitwissenschaft*) and as a provider of new technologies of the self in a Foucauldian sense. Alexandra Grieser analyses this aesthetic configuration at the interface between religious and scientific aesthetics on the backdrop of different approaches which link the perceptual qualities of the “blue brains” and “loose heads” to questions of collective imagination, as well as to concrete practices in the sphere of healing, education and entertainment. Grieser highlights the historicity of aesthetic forms, positioning the “blue brains” in a long tradition of imagining human capacities as located within and transcending the body. In this context the aestheticisation of the brain can be understood as an example of the shifting configurations of the religious and the secular within modern genres of knowledge production. Grieser introduces an *aesthetics of knowledge* as a comparative approach which assumes that all modes of knowledge are bound to aesthetic forms and considers how the formation of knowledge is organised in contemporary “knowledge societies”.

A different mode of comparison is addressed by Jens Kreinath who directs his attention to inter-religious relations unfolding at Southern Turkish pilgrimage sites. In particular, he examines the concept of *mimesis* as a key term for aesthetic analysis. Reaching beyond explanatory models of representation and repetition, Kreinath discusses how perceptual qualities and the “doing together” of ritual is often more important than engaging with concepts of dialogue or contradicting theologies. It is demonstrated how rituals of saint veneration can be much more successfully conceived of as mimetic acts, and understood in the modes of becoming efficacious through aesthetic modes and solutions that balance the similarities and differences at play. It is important to note that *mimesis*

here goes beyond mere simulation, or copying behaviour; rather the term bears the opportunity to interlink the evolution-based mimetic skill of human beings with the way mimetic action came to frame, design and formalise social action.

Just as Jens Kreinath bases his reflections on contemporary fieldwork data, Maruška Svašek rethinks her long-term investigation of how people—in this case, middle class families in Chennai, India—refer to “materialisations of Hindu Gods” in diverse ways. ‘Comparison’ here refers to an understanding that the engagement with emotionally and cognitively valuable objects is not able to be grasped by neat categories and fixations. Whether these objects are conceived of as gods, as works of art or as ‘Indian heritage’ is a fluid process, and can change depending upon their location and spatial arrangement. By applying the perspective of *aestheticisation*, as developed in the framework of an ethno-aesthetics (Svašek 2007), a dynamic process is conceptualised whereby artefacts and images come to be interpreted and experienced by individuals and groups of people as specifically significant, valuable and powerful objects framed by local, national, or trans-national politics.

Also commencing her study in India, Annette Wilke demonstrates that religion does not only migrate as ideas or beliefs. Her chapter “Moving Religion by Sound” builds on a detailed study of the high validity of sound in Sanskrit Hinduism through the ages (Wilke and Moebus 2011). Focusing on the concept of the “Sonic Absolute” (*Nada Brahman*), embodied in sound and modal music, Wilke traces an entangled religious-aesthetic history between India and Germany. *Nada Brahman* acquired the aura of a hoary past in India and beyond, but was in fact “invented” by the musicologist Sarngadeva in the 13th century, and re-invented in modern Europe by the Jazz historian and New Age supporter Joachim Ernst Berendt. Against any naïve idea of an “original” being transmitted to “the West”, the analysis of Berendt’s representation of Indian music and its impact on the rising of “spirituality” in Europe’s 1980s binds together a study of religion perspective with Indology, Cultural Anthropology, sociological theories of individualisation and contemporary religion, media theory through a framework of aesthetic analysis.

The chapters of section IV, *Concepts and Theories*, comprise critical discussions about analytical concepts and tools employed to develop a theoretical and methodological framework for an aesthetic perspective. Sensory and bodily interactions cannot be fully comprehended with the methods of text hermeneutics or semiotics. Therefore, these chapters engage in discussion of concepts such as materiality, aesthetic subjectivity, the phenomenon of effervescence and a quality of the “visceral” in order to develop components for theory building and models for understanding the connectivity between the different modes of experience.

Jay Johnston's chapter, focuses on the perception and articulation of the relations between subjects and objects, inclusive of concepts of animate matter. Tracing conceptual precedents of New Materialism's 'vital matter' in western Esoteric traditions, Johnston argues that such interpretations of materiality invoke a multi-sensory aesthetics that is necessarily tied to nebulous agency, invisible dynamics and the cultivation of specific types of extra-sensory perception. This chapter plays in this realm of invisible religious aesthetics exploring their potential contribution as a connective category of experience, with specific reference to 'sacred' landscape and contemporary art created within it.

In "Aesthetics of Immersion: Collective Effervescence, Bodily Synchronisation and the Sensory Navigation of the Sacred", Sebastian Schüler introduces the concept of "aesthetics of immersion" in order to better understand some of the foundational processes involved in the emergence of collective effervescence as observed in religious rituals. This chapter both investigates a revision of Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence and considers new insights from the cognitive sciences which have given a deeper understanding to how embodied and social cognition works, especially pertaining to synchronized behaviour. Schüler presents 'immersion' as a distinct concept pertaining to an aesthetic approach to religion.

Bodies and subjectivities of a less ethereal nature are the concern of Anne Koch's chapter "The Governance of Aesthetic Subjects through Body Knowledge and Affect Economies", which draws together insights from cultural and cognitive studies to challenge normative prescriptions of the rational subject. In order to take into greater account the role of the irrational, situational and embodied agencies and factors, this chapter employs the concepts of "body knowledge" and "affect economies" in the analysis of the aesthetic dimensions of subjectivity. That is, Koch proposes that an "aesthetic subject" is created via the interplay of cognition, emotion and the social environment. Analysing the aesthetic dimension of subjects is the stepping-stone for understanding bio-political regulation. Koch analyses "spiritual dance" in public spaces to demonstrate how political and religious subjectivities are created in mutual dependence, and considers what this means in terms of ethical and political modes of expression.

In "Religion in the Flesh: Non-Reductive Materialism and the Aesthetics of Religion" Manuel A. Vásquez explores the "aesthetics of persuasion" (Meyer 2010) of transnational Brazilian Neo-Pentecostal churches—the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and the Reborn in Christ Church. In this chapter, he develops the distinctive argument that the success of these churches is built upon a "pneumatic materialism", a dynamic and non-dualistic spirit-matter nexus, which is highly portable through global electronic media and popular cultural and highly "glocalizable": deployed in local settings where it enables embodied

personal experience of the divine. The concept of *pneumatic viscerality* encompasses multi-sensorial experiences that have the power to sacralise the self in its entirety and is considered alongside eschatological monumentality understood as an aesthetic mark of Pentecostalism's efficaciousness.

For the final fifth section, *In Conversation*, we invited colleagues to reflect on, and critically discuss what we have termed the *connectivity* of aesthetics. The section includes contributions from a number of different perspectives; however, it is not designed as an instrumentalist application of the aesthetics of religion approach to other academic disciplines. Rather, the intent was more creative; it grew out of an aim to include discussions that did not automatically take up a position of presenting a summary or overview of its contents, but rather explored the connections between the diverse fields. Therefore, responses in this section may be knowingly partial, exploratory, provide vignettes to demonstrate the advantages and limitations of this approach, focus on issues deemed 'troubling' or inspiring. We hope these essays both capture the dynamism and potential of the aesthetics of religion approach, without closing of its range of affects, and provide a wealth of directions into which its debates may range.

Fred Cummins highlights that in the cognitive sciences new approaches focused on embodiment and enactment aim to disband the all-too-familiar idea of the mind as being "located" only in the brain. That we are "seeing with our legs" is a starting point to suggest interferential points between recent cognitive studies and an aesthetics of religion approach. In his piece on "Consumer Culture and the Sensory Remodelling of Religion", Francois Gauthier investigates the links between aesthetics, sociology and an economic approach in his analysis of new forms of transnational event-religion. This demonstrates that the plausibility of religious change under the conditions of capitalism needs to be understood in terms of changing aesthetic orders rather than in terms of the production of new theologies or systems of beliefs.

Anthropologist Frank Heidemann focuses on the elusive yet important qualities which create "atmospheres", and through atmospheres create shared experiences. He discusses the classical question about the role of the researcher's own experience, and how it may help to consider the social character of the aesthetic. Heidemann argues that linking this question to proprioception—the conscious and unconscious perception of the embodied self—is seminal if one wants to understand how the power of the social is created.

Robert Yelle puts his finger on open questions about the relationship between an aesthetics and a semiotics of religion by highlighting the historicity of *aesthesis* and *semiosis* in particular. This leads him not only to compare the development of both and outline challenges that lie ahead for an aesthetics of religion; he also sees an aesthetic approach as necessary for complementing the-

ories of humanity that emphasise the rational and exclude the aesthetic dimensions of existence. Yelle focuses on the role of Protestantism in the process of the repression of the aesthetic, and he highlights the opportunity to account for the process of repression in order to gain a better understanding of modernity.

In the final essay, S. Brent Plate takes us on a journey to a changing landscape in early 19th century USA, when the Erie Canal was built in upstate New York. He discusses this technological endeavour in terms of a *psychogeography*, and how it changes the perceptions and imaginations of American nature and culture. Plate considers this in the light of Alexander Baumgarten's distinction between natural and artificial aesthetics. It is an example of relating diverse areas of knowledge to each other as Plate is bringing Baumgarten's concepts in to conversation with contemporary theories of technology and art. This conversation allows him to unfold the multi-dimensional aesthetic history of religion, connected with technology and art.

Considering the diverse chapters of this volume collectively it is apparent that the authors view aesthetics as an opportunity to address different aspects of understanding religion that have usually not been related to each other. It might be worth enquiring about the status of an Aesthetics of Religion within the larger Academic Study of Religion, and the Study of Culture, as well. Around 1900, when Sociology was yet to be invented, founding figures such as Max Weber and Émile Durkheim were driven by the central question of what the forces were that hold a society in transition together. They were convinced that studying religion would provide them with an intense view into the laboratory of modernisation, and with a magnifying glass that helps to find answers to this question. Today, scholars across disciplines are driven by the central question of how humans perceive and construct their reality. An Aesthetics of Religion, we suggest, can help to integrate modernity's blind spot for "religion" in this crucial endeavour, and can also assist in finding new and forgotten pathways that link the two questions together.

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