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Aesthetics of Immersion: Collective

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the Sensory Navigation of the Sacred

[I]f collective life awakens religious thought on reaching a certain degree of intensity, it is because it brings out a state of effervescence which changes the conditions of psychic activity. Vital energies are over-extended, passions more active, sensations stronger; there are even some which are produced only at this moment. A man does not recognize himself; he feels himself transformed and consequently he transforms the environment (Durkheim [1912] 1976, 422).

1 Introduction

In this chapter I will examine the concept of aesthetics of immersion as a connective concept for the aesthetics of religion. With the term immersion I refer to typical feelings, emotions and bodily experiences of getting-drawn-into-something as they can occur in collective religious rituals or different forms of meditation. The aim of this study is to better understand the sensory side of collective ritual arousals as they were described by the famous sociologist Émile Durkheim (1976, 422) in terms of collective effervescence. Approaching the aesthetics of immersion is thus asking about the sensory perception implied when people empathetically and bodily dive, or get drawn into, a particular vibrant atmosphere. Immersion in more general terms can refer to the emotional arousal of a group, listening to music or the viewing of painted art. The aesthetics of immersion therefore asks how individuals consciously and subconsciously play with the dissolving of emotional and cognitive distances in certain situations. How does someone get drawn into a particular feeling or sensation through the special design of a room, the atmospheric use of light, the contemplation of a picture, watching a movie, playing a video game or participating in a rhythmic movement?

It is a fact that questions concerning the aesthetics of immersion have mostly been addressed in media studies and art history, focusing on immersive perception constrained and induced by space (Bieger 2007), virtual reality (Nechvatal 2009), playing video games (Jennett et al. 2008), or beholding art (Grau 2005). Sociological studies, however, have too often neglected the immersive character of collective rituals. The purpose of this article is, therefore, to broaden and sharpen the perspective of an aesthetics of immersion for the study of religions

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and to develop an analytical framework for investigating collective effervescence.

I will argue that the concept of immersion is 1) a crucial aspect for understanding (the emergence of) collective effervescence, and 2) comprises a twofold dynamic that includes a feeling of *getting-drawn-into* (affect) and a feeling of *letting-go* (control). This already indicates that immersion can count as a complex mechanism in the unfolding of collective dynamics of effervescent rituals. With this aesthetics of immersion approach I hope to make a contribution to a better understanding of specific states of arousal and ecstasy as they can be found in collective effervescence and immersive forms of meditation. In order to develop this approach, I will first discuss some of the existing attempts to sharpen Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence. Secondly, I will introduce the concept of embodied synchronisation in order to corroborate the physical and sensory foundations of collective effervescence. Finally, I will elaborate on the concept and character of immersion as an aesthetical approach to collective effervescence and develop an analytical framework based on the twofold nature of immersion. This framework will be briefly applied to the phenomenon of speaking in tongues (*glossolalia*) in order to exemplify the ambivalent character and different modes of immersion.

2 Collective Effervescence: Durkheim's Concept and Beyond

Whether it be a jumping crowd in a pop concert, a singing choir, or a dancing couple, it is always sensational and agitating when people interact with each other and when this mutual interaction unfolds some kind of dynamic quality that becomes detached from the individual and, at the same time, seems to at least partly control his or her behaviour. This is what Émile Durkheim termed, about one hundred years ago, collective effervescence. Since then sociologists and psychologists have made use of Durkheim's term to explain what is commonly referred to as irrational behaviours, such as the unfolding of aggression in hooligan groups or the state of trance and ecstasy of participants in a collective ritual. The attribution of effervescent states as something irrational derives from the impression that people who enter a group dynamic do not act according to their usual standards, but somehow seem to be out of control or to have lost themselves (or their ordinary behaviours).

Durkheim's theory of collective effervescence still plays a prominent role in sociological studies of all kinds, and particularly when it comes to questions concerning the emotional and social effects of collective rituals and group dynamics. Sociologists have been mostly interested in the functional outcomes of

collective arousals, such as group cohesion. What has attracted less attention, however, are the sensory and emotional foundations of collective arousals. Although the social functions of collective effervescence have been well explored in sociology, this cannot be said of the question how collective effervescence emerges in the first place. What is the material basis, what are the physiological, emotional and cognitive dispositions driving the dynamics of collective interactions that lead to collective effervescence? And how is this immersive moment of getting drawn into the social dynamic of the group perceived by the individual?

In “The Elementary Forms of Religious Life”, Durkheim (1976, 215, 353) used the example of corroboree festivals among Australian aboriginal cultures to describe a prototype of social collectivisation. In his theory, during the corroboree ritual participants fall into an enthusiastic and emotional state of arousal, and at the same time this collective arousal creates a new group identity, which becomes symbolised in an icon (totem of the clan), which again becomes incorporated by the individual through the ritual dance, often demonstrated by the acting of the dancer as the totem animal. For Durkheim, in this way societies and groups create a collective identity in which the sacred becomes demarcated from the mundane, the transcendent from the everyday (Durkheim 1976, 262, 302).

Important to his theory is his observation that such forms of collectivisation, and their integrative function for a society, can be found in all cultures including modern ones, and further, that such forms of collectivisation build a starting point for transcendental (group) experiences. In his basic distinction between the profane and the sacred, Durkheim emphasised collective rituals as a core mechanism for creating a feeling for the sacred and for a communality and cohesion of the group. Although the sentiment of communality and group cohesion can be found in many different collective gatherings and group activities, it seems religious communities especially make use of this social instrument, in order to periodically restore their identity. Whether or not Durkheim’s approach can sufficiently explain the social origins of religion cannot be discussed here, and this question refers to a long-standing and ongoing debate within the study of religions. For the sake of convenience, I understand forms of collective effervescence as a potential, but not inevitable, building block for the emergence or construction of things deemed sacred (Taves 2013).

The idea of effervescence—the term usually means the escape of gas in a liquid solution and the foaming effects of it—and the way Durkheim used it in his theory has inspired generations of scholars¹ in the study of religions and sociology. Some have fathomed the concept’s depth by bringing it into relation with

¹ For a comprehensive overview and discussion, see Buehler (2012). See also Pickering (1984).

other concepts such as Weber's charisma (Carlton-Ford 1992), Turner's liminality (Pickering 1984; Berger 2016) or the concept of emergence (Sawyer 2002). Others have applied it not only to religious events but also to all kinds of social collectivisations. Michel Maffesoli (1986), for example, describes all kinds of social interactions in which smaller or greater emotional arousals occur and which unfold a socially orgiastic, not-purpose-driven dynamic in terms of a collective effervescence. Yet, in the way Maffesoli uncovers collective effervescence in many different social encounters, the term is used too widely to be distinctive. In addition, Maffesoli, like Durkheim, is chiefly interested in the social function of collective arousals as social forms of integration and as mechanisms for social cohesion. This makes sense on a macro-level of analysis and for the question as to how societies work. What it fails to look at are the mechanisms on a micro-level, which lead to collective effervescence in the first place and to the individual experiences and sensations that precede and shape the emergence of collective effervescence. Durkheim's concept of effervescence starts from the assumption that the participants in a collective ritual somehow lose rational control over themselves and fall into an emotional state of uncontrolled or uncontrollable affective behaviour. He therefore points out:

But when a corroboli takes place, everything changes. Since the emotional and passional faculties of the primitive are only imperfectly placed under the control of his reason and will, he easily loses control of himself. Any event of some importance puts him quite outside himself. [...] There are at once transports of enthusiasm. In the contrary conditions, he is to be seen running here and there like a madman, giving himself up to all sorts of immoderate movements, crying, shrieking, rolling in the dust, throwing it in every direction, biting himself, brandishing his arms in a furious manner, etc. (Durkheim 1976, 215)

The ecstatic state of the individual seems to become decoupled from his or her cognitive control. Yet, Durkheim never saw such phenomena as pathological, as psychologists of his time did (Buehler 2012, 75). Rather, he discovered a social mechanism in collective effervescence that can be found in many social movements and group gatherings. In fact, for Durkheim emotional arousal just seems to happen as a result of people coming together. Unfortunately, he remained unclear about the concrete social arrangements, the mentalities, the sentiments, as well as collectively shared ideas, which precede the emergence of collective effervescence. What is cause, and what is effect?

A central question therefore is, what are the dispositions for collective effervescence, and how can they best be described? And how do individuals experience the moment of getting drawn into a collective dynamic—such as losing control over themselves or a high degree of apperception? There have been some efforts to look at this micro-level of collective effervescence in recent years; to

follow a few examples are discussed briefly. As will be shown, all of them attempt to approach the sensuous side of collective effervescence by making use of related concepts and terminology. After this brief review, I will proceed to my own attempt to investigate this question by taking a closer look at the concept of immersion.

Not only Durkheim, and later Maffesoli, but also other scholars, such as Georg Simmel, Marcel Mauss, Max Weber, Karl Mannheim, or Randall Collins, have highlighted the energetic transference of emotional enthusiasm from one individual to another and the effects it has on individuals of losing themselves in moments of collective effervescence. Sociologist Randall Collins (2004, xii), for instance, provides the following description: “Part of the collective effervescence of a highly focused, emotionally entrained interaction is apportioned to the individuals, who come away from the situation carrying the group-aroused emotion for a time in their bodies”. Yet, what Collins describes remains fuzzy for it does not explain how collective effervescence emerges from the perspective of the individual’s perception or the role of the senses in that process of emergence. A more promising attempt was developed by sociologists Leistner and Schmidt-Lux (2012) who investigated the conditions and constraints that are necessary for the emergence of collective effervescence, particularly as it emerges in forms of group-aroused ecstasy, such as in fan cultures. They argue that sociology today must take emotions more seriously in order to include the affective side of social collectivisations, which can be seen as the foundation of all kinds of social phenomena. For them, ecstasy provides a good opportunity to investigate social collectivisation as it demarcates extraordinary from ordinary events (2012, 317). Thus, they define ecstasy as a collectively induced emotional state in which emotions become so intense that they seem to carry away the individual’s behaviour and feelings. Leistner and Schmidt-Lux are aware of the fact that most sociologists would refer to Durkheim’s concept of effervescence in order to explain the functions of group ecstasy, yet they argue that Durkheim failed to explain how effervescence emerges. They further point out that according to Durkheim effervescence seems to emerge just by the fact of people gathering. By contrast, they argue that effervescence does not occur automatically, nor does it occur very often in societies, since the dispositions that lead to the emergence of effervescence have too many prerequisites (2012, 318). Based on their own image analysis of a photograph of fans standing in a stadium watching a game of soccer, they came to the understanding that individuals stand together and watch the game as a collective event, but they seem more or less enthusiastic about it and they do not yet form a collective body of ecstasy. According to their observations, the crucial moment in collective effervescence is the point of collectively letting loose (*kollektives Fallenlassen*). In consequence, they

raise three intriguing questions: 1) What are the frame conditions that lead toward and induce this moment of collectively letting loose? 2) What are the underlying dynamics that foster such a situation? and 3) When and how do people actually lose control over their bodies? Leistner and Schmidt-Lux find their answers in a combination of three instructive theories, proposed by Émile Durkheim, Randall Collins and Helmuth Plessner. I cannot unfold their complete argument here or go into the details of these three theories. But they draw our attention to the fact that a moment of collectively letting loose is conditioned by both frame conditions and situated conditions (Leistner and Schmidt-Lux 2012, 330).

Frame conditions are those that have already been described by Durkheim, such as the collective gathering of people, the spatial constraints of that gathering, and collectively performed practices such as rituals. Less attention has been given so far to what they call situated conditions. These include for instance attention or concentration on a common focus point. Gatherings of people do not necessarily lead to joint attention, even though the frame conditions might provide a dense atmosphere, for instance through the proximity of bodies in a stadium. It is the bundling of attention that boosts the likeliness of a collective effervescence. Accordingly, it could be argued that collective ecstasy is more likely in groups in which people already know each other and each other's attitudes, such as in religious rituals. As another situated condition, Leistner and Schmidt-Lux describe the internal precondition of being compassionate, which seems to be an emotional pulsation, or an alternation between observing and getting drawn into the event. For my own argument in favour of an aesthetics of immersion, this aspect is very compelling, as it demonstrates that collective effervescence oscillates between moments of control and letting go, as I will propose later in this chapter.

Another valuable approach to effervescence has been proposed by Arthur Buehler, who, in his article "The Twenty-first-century Study of Collective Effervescence", not only gives a valuable overview of recent approaches to Durkheim's concept, but also states that collective sentiments are measurable and that scholars have failed to do so; they "do not have the tools because they ignore transpersonal psychological and transpersonal anthropological methodologies when studying ritual phenomena" (Buehler 2012, 76). Buehler criticises Durkheim, and also later anthropologists, for being armchair-ethnologists who "apparently ha[ve] the superior perceptual ability to know what is really happening [during collective effervescence, S.S.] on the basis of (necessarily) flawed ethnographic data" (Buehler 2012, 78). And he continues: "Indeed, there is no evidence in *Elementary Forms* that collective effervescence brought about changes in the individual or in society" (Buehler 2012, 78). To give flesh to the bones of

Durkheim's theory, Buehler claims that collective effervescence is an altered state of consciousness and therefore can better be explained with insights from intense ethnographic fieldwork, including radical participation. He goes even further by contesting what he calls the scientific-materialist epistemology, what most anthropologists represent. "This so-called objectivity in doing research is intrinsic to the scientific-materialist paradigm—to the point that there is a 'taboo of subjectivity'" (Buehler 2012, 81). In order to better understand the effects of collective effervescence in terms of altered states of consciousness, Buehler claims: "To do fieldwork in a twenty-first-century context studying collective altered states of consciousness means using a methodology that produces kinds of subjective knowledge involving a change in the investigator's own state of consciousness" (Buehler 2012, 83).

Without opening up the old discussion of the insider-outsider problem here, I think on the one hand that Buehler raises an important point for the topic in question, but on the other hand I also think that we do not need to follow its radicalness. I totally agree that scholars in anthropology and in the study of religion should not be afraid of their research subjects. On the contrary, for researching contemporary religions one has to go where religion happens in real life in order to perceive for oneself how a religion is practiced in its everyday context. This is the only way to get drawn into the reality of the religious group, its rituals and sensations, and this is what participatory observation is all about. Yet, for Buehler (2012, 89) this is not enough: "The 'participant-observer' is a cognitive approach that necessarily treats the native as 'other' as it removes the anthropologist from the actual experience itself". I believe that it should be the personal decision of the scholar whether or not he/she joins religious rituals and is open for personal experiences. The crucial question is not so much that of intense participation, since this should happen anyway in the field, but the question is whether the scholar is able to take a distanced stance again after leaving the field, in order not to become an advocate of the religious tradition he or she is studying.

However, it is true that most writings on collective effervescence in recent decades were mainly theoretical, elaborating on Durkheim's idea and sociology. It is therefore necessary, first, to take more empirical examples into account in order to better understand how collective effervescence in a particular situation emerges and to describe the effects it has on the individual, and, second, to look for alternative concepts surrounding the perception and sensations involved in collective effervescence (such as altered states of consciousness) in order to enrich the sometimes ambiguous term effervescence.

These briefly discussed approaches to Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence have all highlighted the necessity of looking more closely at the micro-

levels of such phenomena, and have at the same time demonstrated that the crucial question for a better understanding of the dispositions and effects of collective effervescence is that of perception and sensation. In order to develop this idea further, I will now discuss what I call the material foundations of collective effervescence, namely the synchronising effects on the body and the mind as they occur in social interactions in general and in collective effervescence in particular. From there I will proceed to the idea of “aesthetics of immersion” as a connective concept in the study of religion.

3 Bodily Synchronisation and the Material Foundation of Collective Effervescence

So far, we have taken into account new approaches to collective effervescence mainly coming from sociology. As refreshing as they are by asking new questions concerning the collective sentiments and sensations underlying the emergence of collective arousals, they seem to stop their investigations where the physical body and the senses begin. However, the body and the senses have attracted new interest recently in sociology as well as in the study of religions. Whereas the body was long taken as a mere social artefact, newer approaches have started to highlight aspects of embodiment: meaning social, as well as physical or biological foundations of the lived body. Manuel Vásquez (2011, 149–171), for instance, has underlined the importance of taking processes of embodiment more seriously in the study of religions, and at the same time he holds social constructionism in check by emphasizing the material aspects of the body rather than understanding the body only as a social artefact. In his materialist approach to religion, he does not plead for a positivist or naturalist epistemology but rather for an integrative perspective that considers sociological, neuroscientific and phenomenological approaches to understanding religion in practice. Here, I follow this materialist perspective in order to investigate the embodied dispositions at work in collective effervescence.

In recent decades, new insights from the cognitive sciences have given a deeper understanding of how embodied and social cognition works, and just lately cognitive psychologists and anthropologists have (again) become interested in the bodily and social dynamics of social interactions in general and of synchronised behaviour and collective effervescence in particular. In consequence, I will demonstrate that some of these insights into bodily and cognitive synchronisations are a more comprehensive—yet not exclusive—approach to collective effervescence (Schüler 2012). It is this multifaceted examination of effer-

vescence, which instructs our understanding of the aesthetics of immersion as a connective concept in the study of religion.

The bodily effects of interactive behaviours and the unfolding bodily dynamics were first explored by Norman Triplett (1861–1934), one of the first scholars in social psychology, who found in 1898 that the sheer presence of other persons could enhance the physical powers of individuals (Triplett 1898; see also Davis, Huss, and Becker 2009). Triplett was able to show that cyclists became more effective and faster when they were cycling in a group-race rather than cycling alone against time. Psychological explanations usually argue that this effect results from competition. The cyclist wants to be faster than his or her competitors and, therefore, is able to release more physical power. In other words, the freed energy derives from his or her *will* to be faster. This explanation certainly contains some truth; yet, Norman Triplett added another important factor to explain his observations. In his theory, he holds “that the bodily presence of another rider is a stimulus to the racer in arousing the competitive instinct; that another can thus be the means of releasing or freeing nervous energy for him that he cannot of himself release; and, further, that the sight of movement in that other by perhaps suggesting a higher rate of speed, is also an inspiration to greater effort” (Triplett 1898, 516). Triplett points out two important factors here: 1) the bodily presence of others, and 2) the perception of movement of others. Both factors not only enhance the conscious will of the racer, but also seem to influence his behaviour on a subconscious level. The body seems to be responsive to the presence of others in such a way that this presence changes the whole autonomic nervous system. Émile Durkheim also took notice of Triplett’s experiment and referred to it to support his idea of collective effervescence.

Like Triplett with his cyclists, we can argue that the term effervescence in addition to being a social phenomenon also implies cognitive, physiological and emotional dimensions of mutual perceptions. The presence of, and interaction with, another person seem to bring changes in the perception and the behaviour of an individual, resulting in a shared state of mind and a sensory connection between the two. Even Durkheim took notice of these mutual relations and the joint dynamic that occurs in groups: “When they are once come together, a sort of electricity is formed by their collecting which quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation. Every sentiment expressed finds a place without resistance in all the minds, which are very open to outside impressions; each re-echoes the others, and is re-echoed by the others” (1976, 216–217). People connect to each other almost unconsciously as they get drawn into perception-action loops that can also be described as mutual synchronisations. In order to outline the idea of synchronisation, I will now turn to some newer in-

sights from the social neurosciences, which throw light on the bodily and neural causes and effects in social dynamics.

Some recent experiments on bodily and cognitive synchronisation have focused on rhythmic behaviours, such as playing music or dancing, and their cognitive and social effects on the individual. One study “has discovered synchronous brain oscillations in duetting musicians, indicating a direct neural basis for interpersonally coordinated actions” (Sänger, Müller, and Lindenberger 2012). Another study demonstrates that tumultuous applause can transform itself into waves of synchronised clapping (Neda et al. 2000). This synchronised clapping is not the result of an external stimulus, such as someone clapping in front of the audience and thereby functioning as a metronome. Instead, the synchronisation appears and disappears in short waves and somehow seems to be autonomous or self-organising. In fact, the synchronised clapping results from collectively reducing the clapping speed, which leads to better physiological coordination and action-perception loops that form particular patterns of interaction. Both studies demonstrate that the emerging synchronicity of joint interactions takes place on a neural and on a bodily level.

Other experiments have shown that rhythmic and especially synchronic behaviours enhance social cooperation. In one experiment, Reddish, Fischer and Bulbulia (2013, 1) “compared a condition in which group synchrony was produced through shared intentionality to conditions in which synchrony or asynchrony were created as a by-product of hearing the same or different rhythmic beats. We found that synchrony combined with shared intentionality produced the greatest level of cooperation”. In their experiment, psychologists Scott S. Wiltermuth and Chip Heath (2009, 1) even demonstrated “that positive emotions need not be generated for synchrony to foster cooperation”. This shows the strong effect synchronising movements have on the perception and affective behaviours of individuals. Accordingly, these findings support Durkheim’s observations that collective rituals increase group cohesion and communality.

In a broad sense, synchronisation can therefore best be understood as the way our brains and bodies effectively form *embodied interactions*. In modern cognitive sciences the term *embodiment* marks a new understanding of cognition. While cognition was understood as a solely mental operation for quite some time, recent approaches in embodied and social cognition emphasise that the emergence of cognition is always preceded by physical interaction. Highlighting this paradigmatic shift, cognitive psychologist Raymond Gibbs (2006, 13) has pointed out: “Our bodies, and our felt experiences of our bodies in action, finally take center stage in the empirical study of perception, cognition, and language and in cognitive science’s theoretical accounts of human behavior”.

For understanding cognition as *embodied cognition* we have to consider the body as the place where perception and action coincide. Italian neurobiologist Vittorio Gallese (2007) states that we should be wary of proposing strict dichotomies between action and perception. The elements that connect action and perception Gallese calls mirror neurons, and explains them thus: When one watches someone cry, laugh, or get punched, one can almost feel the same sadness, joy, or pain that person experiences. The reason is that by watching bodily or emotional expressions mirror-neurons are activated that trigger similar somatic and cognitive states in the brain and body of the observer. Most of the human ability for empathy is based on the function of mirror-neurons.

Raymond Gibbs (2006, 35) also emphasises a strong “connection between the mental representation of posture, the movement of one’s own body, and the perception of posture and movement of other bodies”. While watching others performing actions with their bodies, the same body images and body movements tend to arise in the observer, triggering similar mental representations and meanings. As the action of one person can become a stimulus for the actions of another person, this can also explain why collective rituals can enhance the emergence of action-perception loops that drive the synchronisation of bodies, emotions, and (religious) representations. In other words, the perception-action loops create a collective dynamic which on the one hand becomes an autonomous force that drives the bodily movements of the ritual participants, and on the other hand, influences the sensual perception of the participants to the extent that they cannot fully distinguish between their own actions and the actions of others. Anthropologist Maurice Bloch (Bloch 2002, 142) has described this phenomenon as follows: “One enters a ritual mode of communication by radical modifications of ordinary behavior [...] One often synchronises one’s bodily and linguistic movements with those of others. This is so to the extent that one is not sure whether it is oneself or another inside oneself who is acting and using one’s voice and one’s body”.

I therefore argue that it is the emerging dynamics of synchronising bodies that control the body (Schüler 2012). This can also help us to better understand phenomena such as glossolalia or spirit possession: the individual embodies the collective arousal in such a way that the emerging dynamics coordinate his or her body movements. Accordingly, it is the inter-subjective coordination and synchronisation of bodies in movement that constitute the basis for emerging feelings and representations of the sacred. Just as in the wordless coordination of the movements of a dancing couple, synchronicity in ritual interaction shapes the embodied experience of the ritual participants.

Finally, I would contend that the performance of collective effervescence itself produces and represents its own aesthetic of synchronisation. It *produces* an

aesthetic of synchronisation by means of changing the sensual perception of the people who become part of a collective event (I have referred to this as a body-schema of collective effervescence; Schüler 2012). This way, we can also argue with Catherine Bell (2006, 538) that the ritual is a function of the body and not the other way around. Furthermore, it *represents* an aesthetic, in that bodily synchronisation shapes certain social and cultural formations, structures and images such as dancing couples or parades, which most people perceive as something ‘nice to look at’.

In sum, the phenomenon of synchronisation can be found from micro-levels of neural activity to macro-levels of social and cultural formations. Synchronic behaviour seems to happen naturally wherever individuals gather in groups and start to interact through their bodies. In fact, human beings are the only living species that is able to move synchronously to rhythmic music. Sociologist Robert Bellah (2006, 161) has pointed out for instance that “This ability to ‘keep together in time’ is probably one of several biological developments that have evolved synchronously with the development of culture, but one of great importance for the ritual roots of society”.

Taking the idea of an aesthetic of synchronisation into account, we can conclude that synchronisation works in two ways: 1) in nature and culture we can find aesthetic formations that emerge from synchronisation (school of fish, flocks of birds, collective rituals, parades); and 2) there are particular cultural achievements that enhance the effects of synchronisation and thus produce aesthetic forms such as music, dance, sports, public holidays, and of course religious rituals. In addition, these aesthetics of synchronisation mediate particular meanings and representations, and support social features such as power, cohesion or belonging. However, I have argued that for an understanding of these social functions and representations of collective effervescence, it is important to take into account the bodies in interaction and the emerging dynamics that drive this interaction. These aspects of embodied cognition and synchronised behaviour provide a sound epistemology for investigating the nature of immersion and to develop a framework for its analysis.

4 Immersion as Affect and Control: The Sensory Navigation of the Sacred (in Glossolalia)

We have now examined different sociological and anthropological attempts to go beyond Durkheim’s concept of collective effervescence, and some insights developed in the cognitive sciences toward understanding the synchronising effects of embodied and social cognition. I understand both perspectives as a way of fram-

ing an aesthetics-of-immersion approach to collective effervescence. The crucial question is how immersion in collective arousals can best be described and explained in terms of the interplay of different social, physical, sensory, emotional and cognitive conditions. In this section I will argue that an aesthetic approach to immersion must connect all these perspectives to find a way of describing the ambivalent dynamics at work in moments of immersion. In this final section I will therefore, first, highlight the aspects of affect and control as the central poles of the ambivalent character of immersion, and, second, unfold these two aspects into four modes of ritual immersion in order to incorporate the intertwined conditions at work. In addition, I will tie these considerations to the empirical example of collective charismatic worship, and especially to the phenomenon of glossolalia or speaking in tongues as it can be found in the tradition of charismatic Christianity and Pentecostalism.

In media studies and art history immersion is often described as a convergence between external and internal representations, a reduction of the difference between the object observed and the perceiving subject, just as one gets drawn into a painting or loses oneself in the painting (Grabbe 2012). Even though this is a convincing description of immersion in the context of viewing art, or drawn into virtual reality, it fails to describe the manifold factors at work in immersion in the context of religious rituals, and especially in the context of collective effervescence. The divergent feelings of ‘being-drawn-into-something’ and ‘letting-yourself-go’ as they can be observed, for instance, in fan culture, already indicate that immersion as understood here always involves two sides, namely affective as well as controlling aspects, and their merging and convergence.

In more general terms affect usually refers to an occurring emotion or temper with a special quality of feeling or sensing to it, which can cause particular behaviours. To smile can therefore be an affect of having sympathy for someone. Yet, the smile can be automatic and unconscious, just like rubescence can be the affect of shame. In a ritual condition affective behaviours thus start from a certain affirmative attitude or temper someone holds towards the ritual. The feeling of ‘being-drawn-into-something’ can be understood as the (socially learned and expected, and therefore embodied) affect of this “emotional entrainment” (Collins 2004, xii). However, the ritual participant is not a machine that automatically falls into arousal and entrancement after entering the ritual mode. Rather he or she tunes in to the ritual atmosphere and thereby gives way for the feeling of ‘being-drawn-into-something’ while at the same time being able to control the moment of ‘letting-yourself-go’. In order to elaborate this observation, I will briefly turn to the empirical example of glossolalia.

The phenomenon of glossolalia or speaking in tongues has always been a fascinating object of research to anthropologists, psychologists, theologians and scholars in the field of religious studies (Goodman 1972; Richardson 1973; Mills 1986; DeShane 2003; Cartledge 2006).² For some reason, glossolalia has attracted less attention among sociologists (Poloma 2006, 148–149), even though it involves collective effervescence. Scholars who have focused on the ritual aspect of glossolalia have highlighted the emergence of *communitas* through the moments of *liminality* in charismatic worship (Albrecht 1999). As far as I know, glossolalia has yet not been investigated as an outcome of collective effervescence and as a form of immersion.

However, with the increasing popularity of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity around the globe, glossolalia has taken on different forms and became an identity marker of many churches and parishes. With reference to the Pentecost story in the New Testament (Acts 2:4–11), when the Holy Spirit came upon the Disciples of Christ, many charismatic Christians today believe that they receive the powers of the Holy Ghost, which causes pneumatic manifestations such as speaking in foreign or unknown languages (tongues), ecstatic bodily shaking, and even falling on the ground and trembling in the Spirit. Accordingly, glossolalia is sometimes described as a form of ecstasy or as a form of possession. It usually occurs in vivid and charismatic forms of worship, accompanied by lively or contemplative music, and under the influence of passionate preaching, praying and singing. Different techniques have been developed to support the emergence of glossolalia, such as the laying on of hands by people praying for the one who wants to receive the Spirit (sometimes professional prayer teams), or creating wind with a cloth to simulate the coming of the Holy Spirit.

In academic research, glossolalia is often described as a form of trance or possession, and depicted as solely unconscious and affective behaviour. Certainly, extreme cases of glossolalia, in which someone receives the Holy Ghost and starts shaking and rolling their eyes, easily catch the attention of researchers. Yet, not all forms of glossolalia must lead to such extreme behaviours. In fact, many long-time practitioners of glossolalia can consciously use it as a prayer technique or switch between normal prayer words and glossolalia. They may pray silently, burst out with glossolalia suddenly, and moments later fall back into their silent prayers again. Others may become deeply immersed in a state of glossolalia while remaining fully conscious. And even those who show such

² It should be mentioned that much research on glossolalia is done by scholars who are also practitioners (DeShane 2003; Cartledge 2006). This provides support for the recommendation made by Buehler (2012), mentioned above, that anthropologists studying altered states of consciousness should have personal experience of the phenomenon they are studying.

extreme pneumatic reactions as rolling on the ground can have moments of conscious control. Glossolalia can thus take on different forms that are subject to the ambivalent character of immersion—oscillating between affect and control.

Taking this into account, I will now briefly sketch out four idiosyncratic modes of ritual immersion, which furthermore can be developed into correlating ideal types of the affective and controlling aspects of immersion. Describing them as ideal types already indicates that these aspects are usually merged and intertwined in ritual activities. Consequentially, this should be understood as an attempt both to differentiate between different factors at work in the perception of immersion and to illustrate their merging aspects. First of all, and in order to unfold these aspects, it is important to differentiate four basic modes or levels of ritual immersion, namely the ritual form, the ritual body, the ritual emotion, and the ritual mind. Within each mode of ritual immersion we now can develop the ideal types of affect and control: 1.) Exaltation and contemplation for the ritual form, 2.) Imagination and concentration for the ritual mind, 3.) Expansion and suspension for the ritual body, and 3.) Floating and navigating for the ritual emotions (see also Table 1).

Table 1

Modes of Ritual Immersion	Ideal Types of Immersion	
	Affect	Control
Ritual Form	Exaltation	Contemplation
Ritual Mind	Imagination	Concentration
Ritual Body	Expansion	Suspension
Ritual Emotion	Floating	Navigating

4.1 Ritual Form: Exaltation and Contemplation

Contemplation and exaltation describe two typical and widespread forms of immersion in religious rituals. Contemplation is being focused with your mind and body on sensory perception, such as listening to music or bowing down in front of an altar (or being focused on your own mind, as in meditation). Contemplation techniques can also cause a deprivation of all senses. In a contemplative state of mind one sinks into oneself, rests in oneself, and often feelings of being united with the world or of losing physical boundaries between oneself and the world are reported. In this way, contemplation (of something) and dep-

rivation of the senses can stimulate a feeling of immersion. Exaltation, on the contrary, is to be ecstatic and enthusiastic about something, it is a rapture of sensual impressions such as music, light, or a charismatic crowd. Exaltation is often described as getting lifted up with a sense of delight. This is often the case in charismatic worship or arousing rituals. Contemplation and exaltation much depend on ritual conditions and both can cause a feeling of inebriation and therefore seem to have similar effects on the emergence of immersion. However, these ritual forms must not exclude one another but can include both aspects of immersion at once. In the case of charismatic worships phases of contemplation and exaltation often alternate, and glossolalia can occur in both states, even though with different emotional and bodily expressions.

4.2 Ritual Mind: Imagination and Concentration

For conceptual purposes, and in order to distinguish the immersive character of the ritual mind, we need to differentiate between online and offline cognition. The distinction between offline and online cognition is commonly used in cognitive sciences to describe mental processes that happen in exchange with a social environment in the here and now (online), or as more internal mental processes which imagine a what-if scenario (offline), and which can be more or less conscious in decision making (Niedenthal et al. 2005; Schilbach 2014).

Concentration is thus paying attention to a particular situation. It is being cognitively online, absorbing information such as the content and meaning of a sermon or a song. Strong concentration on cognitive information is an important step for synchronising with the ritual group. As mentioned earlier (Leistner and Schmidt-Lux 2012), in order to experience collective effervescence, the group must share a common perspective, and needs to focus its attention and act as a unit. Closely related to this kind of intellectual concentration is the act of imagination (offline cognition). Imagination is a more creative way of thinking as compared to mere concentration (Traut and Wilke 2015). With imaginations we go beyond perception of the provided content and let ourselves go with our own ideas, memories, fantasies, and associations. Both concentration and imagination can happen simultaneously or can merge in effervescent arousal (as well as in a state of deep meditation). Whereas in meditations often one goal is to let imaginaries pass the mind and not to hold on to them (in order to keep concentrated), in collective rituals one dives into the imaginary and anticipations, and dwells on the collective arousals and representations. In the case of glossolalia we can also find both aspects of the immersive mind. On the one hand ritual participants often pay attention and concentrate on the religious message and pray-

ers of the pastor and this way become a collective unit with shared intentions and imaginaries. On the other hand, during times of worship and prayers, participants can let themselves go and this way become drawn into their imaginations (of the Holy Spirit). During glossolalia aspects of concentration (control) and imagination (affect) can both be present at the same time.

4.3 Ritual Body: Expansion and Suspension

Suspension and expansion both refer to physical rather than cognitive aspects of immersion, even though the embodied cognition approach presented above indicates that body and mind cannot be fully separated. Whereas expansion on a bodily level usually refers to collective rituals, suspension seems to be the ideal type of immersion in ritual meditation. Yet, we can also find a bodily perception of expansion in the ritual form of meditation, when the meditating person perceives his or her body expanding into space or even dissolving. In addition, we can find moments of suspension or bodily abeyance in collective rituals. Leistner and Schmidt-Lux (2012) also distinguish between suspension and expansion in their article on effervescence in fan cultures. They describe the alternating phases of a soccer game in which the fans more or less passively watch the game and then—in the next moment—passionately join in the arousing emotions when something exciting happens on the playing field. Suspension is thus being passively present in a crowd, a way to temporise one's movements, a sort of “wait and see what happens next” attitude, but always in anticipation of the next (bodily) agitation and passionate arousal. Expansion is active bodily participation, the passionate communion and the emotional arousal expressed through body movements. Like the observations made during a soccer game, in collective religious rituals such as charismatic worship, moments of physical passiveness alternate with moments of physical excitation. These bodily conditions often correlate with floating and navigating emotions, as will be described below.

4.4 Ritual Emotion: Floating and Navigating

The metaphors of floating and navigation represent an attempt to describe another relation between online and offline cognition. Floating can therefore be understood as mental absorption or immersion in a state of mind and bodily perception in which one drifts away from the actual happenings (offline cognition). A floating mind often goes along with bodily delight, a weightless feeling. Day-

dreaming is a good example, which demonstrates that it is more than just thinking about something else (like what to buy for dinner) while sitting in the classroom. The emotion of floating can occur during both contemplation and exaltation (also often described as trance) and therefore represents a crucial moment of immersion in effervescence. In meditations a floating feeling can correlate with the perception of a dissolving body. In collective rituals floating can emerge as an affect of collective emotional arousal and intersubjectivity.

However, moments of immersion do not solely work in terms of trance or a floating feeling, but can also converge with moments of online cognition, where navigation of one's behaviour is possible. The metaphor of navigation can be understood as a way of observing one's own perceptions and behaviours while being more or less able to control and direct them. In the case of trance in religious rituals, for instance, there are always moments when the person in trance seems to be awake and conscious of his or her behaviours and decisions, while at the same time behaving almost out of control. Moments of offline and online cognition thus merge during immersive feelings and constitute two intriguing aspects of immersion. As already mentioned above, for glossolalia we can often observe these two ambivalent aspects, for instance, when a practitioner is deeply immersed in speaking tongues but at the same time seems to be conscious and aware of what he or she is doing.

These brief descriptions of four modes of ritual immersion are an attempt to differentiate the sensory forms and conditions at work in the phenomenon of immersion. They demonstrate the twofold dynamics of affect and control that constitute the aesthetical perception of immersion. On the one hand, affective behaviour plays a central role in everyday practice as it coordinates our movements and thinking in an economical way. Routines can maintain affective behaviours in such a way that these behaviours more or less become subconscious. On the other hand, controlling our movements and thinking gives us confidence in what we do and it makes us rational in our decisions. Collective rituals have often been described as a loss of control and rationality. The aesthetics of immersion approach is an attempt to demonstrate that for the emergence of collective effervescence both affect and control play a vital role and can converge in such a way that affective and controlling behaviours seem to merge or at least unfold their own dynamics of immersion. Finally, by making use of Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence as a socially constructed (and bodily and sensory induced) demarcation between the profane and the sacred, we can argue that the aesthetics of immersion approach offers a contribution to describing how the collective sacred is navigated through the individual's sensory perceptions of affect and control in moments of immersion.

5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have introduced and developed the concept of aesthetics of immersion in order to gain new insights into how collective effervescence works on the micro-level of individual perception rather than on the macro-level of a society. As has been shown, research in the social sciences has already suggested to take a closer look at the individual and interactive mechanisms involved in the emergence of collective arousals. By introducing the concept of embodied synchronisation, I have attempted to explain such interactive mechanisms using new insights from the cognitive sciences and neurosciences. In terms of epistemology, I have advocated to make a connection between social approaches and cognitive and embodied approaches to explain and describe forms of collective synchronisation and to support a material and aesthetic perspective on effervescence in order to enrich the one-sided sociological perspective that has dominated scientific discourses for so long.

With its focus on perception, the aesthetics of religion approach prepares the way for developing a basic concept of aesthetics of immersion. This concept, briefly outlined, already has the potential to describe the mechanisms at work in the emergence of collective effervescence. Finally, I have shown how the concept of immersion can be applied to the context of glossolalia. While glossolalia is often treated as a form of possession, I have argued that the immersive character of glossolalia is a twofold process of affect and control in which the ritual practitioner navigates the emergence and embodiment of sacred manifestations, as well as the dynamics of collective effervescence. Certainly this discussion of the concept of aesthetics of immersion is only a starting point for future research, and not a full-fledged theory. Nevertheless, I hope that I have been able to synchronise my thoughts with those of my readers.

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