

Title:	The Bloomsbury Handbook of the Cultural and Cognitive Aesthetics of Religion
Editors:	Anne Koch & Katharina Wilkens
Year:	2020
Publisher:	Bloomsbury Academic; Auflage: 1
City:	London/New York
Number of Pages:	376
Price:	£ 117.00
ISBN:	978-1-35006-671-7
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Starting with the aesthetics of the book itself (see Katharina Wilken's article on text-related practices or *text acts* contained in it, on pp. 155-164), it presents itself as quite heavy, with thin and sharp pages. One has to be careful not to cut open ones fingertips. But the choice of paper is worth this risk of a slightly painful sensation (or *nociception*, as I now have learned it is called – see Koch, p. 28). Colorful images decorate the articles, elegantly complementing their contents with their own, non-verbal information. Still, they also illustrate the fact that the knowledge I might gain from perceiving the images, from seeing and understanding them, is pre-formed by the knowledge I have gained before – by reading the captions, for instance, which are more detailed than usual, and by other information. The sheer beauty of the sky lanterns of the cover image – whether I somewhere learned to see them as beautiful, or whether I was born with some cognitive predispositions forcing me to find them appealing – is now clouded by my knowledge of the apes caused to die by such sky lanterns in Krefeld, Germany, just some days ago. This *knowledge* alters my *perception* and the dramaturgical *use* of this image as a device for capturing *attention* – which brings us right to central points this volume is about to make. Knowledge, perception, use of devices, attention – all of these concepts are nexuses as well as fields of contention between humanities, natural/life sciences, and psychology.

Three beautiful images selected by Brigitte Luchesi to illustrate her article on *Cult Images*, pp. 210, 212 & 217, show human people in the lost profile, seen from the left, applying different ritual substances with their right hand to deities in different forms of images: once as a temple relief, once as a poster and once in a domestic shrine. Aesthetically, the similarity of the view's

angle enables the viewer's gaze to parallel the worshipper's gaze, envisaging the respective deity. Due to personal communication with the author before reading this article, I know that this aesthetic decision is foremost due to the legal difficulty in publishing faces of private persons. Nevertheless, it is still a powerful act of knowledge formation (cf. the article of Grieser and Borelli, pp. 33-46 of this volume).

In her foreword, Birgit Meyer praises the volume for fulfilling several important tasks, which I will take as the standards against which I will judge the contributions. I therefore ask:

- A) Do the entries of this handbook provide “a systematic account on the aesthetics of religion as a new, interdisciplinary, and international study field” (p. xvi)?
- B) Are emic (native or indigenous) terms and distinctions, regarding sensation and perception, taken into account (ibid. f.)? Are the theoretical concepts grounded in “carefully crafted case studies” (p. xvii)?
- C) Are these “transcended” by well-informed, up-to date and non-reductive connective theories, integrating current “insights of medical psychology” and the “cognitive study of religion” (ibid.) with cultural approaches? Is this integration performed carefully, sceptically and critically? Is the mind-body dualism they strive to overcome really deconstructed and replaced instead of merely being reversed or obscured by “a facile lip-service paid to embodiment and the like” (p. xvi.)?
- D) Does the volume as a whole provide us with a “specialized vocabulary” (introduction, p. 2) for doing aesthetic studies of religion?
- E) How can I apply these terms and methods in my PhD Project?¹
- F) In particular, which insights into the study of religious emotions can I draw from this read?
- G) Does the volume move readers “out of their carefully guarded comfort zones” and break “new ground for scholarship” (p. xvii)?

To be sure, the last demand is a bit unfair, for such promises are a conventional part of academic rhetoric (for such “Aesthetics of Science and Politics, cf. Binder, p. 265 of this volume) and not necessarily expected to be fulfilled – not unlike the “intriguing”, “fascinating” and “awe-struck” emotions often proclaimed after hearing a talk, but not necessarily expected to be really felt. But still, in their introduction, Anne Koch and Katharina Wilkens even “warn” us how

¹ I am a PhD student using what I regard as an aesthetic approach to religion in my study of a current, central Himalayan goddess. Thus, I will also ask about how I might apply these terms and methods in my PhD Project, and to what extent I can use this volume as a “handbook” or manual (E). Moreover, both my research and my long interest in conferences and publications on the aesthetics of religion have guided me in regarding emotions and their aesthetic stimulation and regulation, which I call dramaturgy, as a central aspect within these fields (F).

connecting cognitive and cultural approaches “might change the reader’s perspective of things” (p. 1). Thus, a short note about the fulfilled or unfulfilled promise of a “wow“ (cf. Hermann & Lokshina, pp. 193 ff.), evoked by this volume, might be justified. For the editors see it as a “duty of responsible scholarship to address power relations” (p.8), I will also check the chapters for

H) political implications.

A) A systematic account of the Aesthetics of Religion?

The Aesthetics of Religion, as represented by the Handbook, aims at analysing “the way in which religion constructs, stimulates, disciplines, inhibits, etc. the senses” (Johnston, p. 21). Therefore, it asks “how images, sounds, gestures, material culture, movements, and the expansion or reduction of sensory stimuli socialize, channel, and form religious identities, experiences, and knowledge cultures, and create social effervescence and social bonds” (Wilke, p. 107). Internally, the Handbook is organized in four parts on the Approach (I), Analytical categories (II), Strategies of Aesthetic formation (III) and Aestheticscapes (IV). These parts are rather vaguely defined; most of the chapters could as well have been put in another of these sections, which is, to be fair, rather the norm in edited Volumes. Still, it makes it harder to use this book as a “handbook”; a glossary with short definitions of the most important critical terms would be helpful for more ready reference. Concepts like *embodied cognition* or *extended mind*, which are new to me – by name, not exactly by their ideas – are scattered throughout the articles. There is deliberately no “chapter on each of the ‘five senses’” (p. 7), which is good for deconstructing this notion, but other superordinate categories might have been found. In a such a definite and comprehensive systematic account on religion and the senses, chapters, for instance, on South Asian *rasa* theory and references to Susanne Langer’s work on *Feeling and Form* might have been a valuable addition.

B) Grounded in Emic terms and Case Studies?

“Religious traditions have developed an impressive variety of theories on sensual perception, the materiality of the world and the functioning of the human body” (p. 9).

Accordingly, the volume takes manifold native terms on perception and sensation into account. Luchesi’s classification of Hindu *cult images* are directly derived from religious practice (pp. 208-211). Likewise, Guggenmos (p. 223) differentiates three sorts of smells according to their

occurrence and description in Chinese Buddhist hagiographies. The reader finds short summaries of Aztec concepts of consciousness (p. 233), South Asian genres of music and related cosmologies (p. 113), or conflict hierarchies and devaluations of specific senses in the Christian Reformation and Counter-reformation (Yelle, pp. 245-250).

Part IV on *Aestheticscapes* more explicitly presents ethnographic and historical examples, but many of the other entries also keep close to the authors' research fields. Abstract and (allegedly) universal concepts are illustrated with well selected examples, for instance, the Ignatian exercises as an example for the concrete practice of *Imagination* (Traut & Wahl, pp. 61-72), making intentional use of different senses successively. While *aestheticscapes* is a term I came across several times lately, I find it aesthetically less appealing than *sensescapes* (see Mohr, pp. 137 ff.), which – as far as I understood – does not differ substantially regarding the term's denotation or connotations.

C) Integration

As far as I can tell, being not acquainted with the current debates and states of the art in Neuropsychology, Physiology, and Cognitive Sciences, the authors draw on these disciplines in an impressively well-informed and careful way. The chapter on *Absorption*, for instance, offers a solid comparative study, based on intense fieldwork and emic views as well as on neuropsychological methods and concepts (p. 87 ff.). In this extensive study, Luhrmann “compared the answers people gave to the absorption scale [Tellegen & Atkinson 1974] to the answers they gave to the questions [...] about their spiritual experience”. The correlations² she thus detected among Pentecostal Christians, who engage in practices like glossolalia, fitted well to her earlier ethnographic study on contemporary English Occultists.

Most of the contributors are very aware of the dangers emerging when “scientific results are presented as ahistorical objective facts based on standardized, quantitative instrumental practices” (Borelli&Grieser, p. 38). Borelli and Grieser, for example, work on how such facts are presented and thereby not only illustrated, but molded by the use of images which partly stem from religious history. This raises new, and even surprising, doubts about the notion of scientific knowledge as independent from (religiously preformed) habits of perceiving and world making. Thus successfully dissolving the “modern opposition between objective, rational science and subjective, intuitive religion”, they aim to not only go beyond a dualism, but even

² “Those who [sic!] with high absorption scores were much more likely to report that they experienced God as if God really is a person – someone they could talk to easily, who talked back, with whom one could laugh, at whom one could get angry” (p. 93).

a meta-dualism of dualisms, namely the “dichotomy of opposition or complementarity” (ibid.). Another dualism successfully deconstructed is the “secular/religious binary” (Binder, p. 265). Binder demonstrates how the notion that “the body, the senses, figuration, and material media are intrinsic to processes of intellectual reasoning and knowledge” (ibid.) can be applied – and verified – in an ethnographic study, without using methods from life sciences.

Understanding *Imagination* as a cognitive ability, of which religious rituals and narrations make use to support “suspension of disbelief” and “counterfactual thinking” (p. 64), Traut and Wahl make use of concepts from cognitive science. Still, they do not uncritically apply them. Departing from the understanding of Johannsen and Kirsch (pp. 143-153), they decide to use the term in a sense of situative “mode-switching instead of [...] a non-stop active cultural and epistemological imagination as in prediction theory of mind” (64).

Some of the new insights of “embodied, embedded, enactive, extended, and affective (4EA) cognitive science” (Hermann & Lokshina, p. 196) seem to me, as an outsider, quite banal. It might be useful for studying religious imaginations and imagined sensescapes to know that “*embodied simulation theories* suggest that language activates a mental simulation of the verbalized perceptions” (Traut & Wahl, p. 67) – but, maybe, it does not come in too handy in any empirical research. To apply such an insight – however this might be done – requires knowledge about the current discourses within these scientific fields and the extent to which a notion usually taken for granted is actually proven or debated. Without this knowledge, it is hard to judge – and, having read the Handbook, it still is – whether the notion of knowledge being embodied is as uncontroversial as it sounds, or else, what the Aztecs’ “knowledge stored in their bodies and minds” (Laack, p. 238) is supposed to mean.

My own recent and previous engagement with the theory of metaphor by Johnson & Lakoff (1980) makes me suspect that there is much more to it. This work is referred to as the source for embodied cognition theory (Borelli & Grieser, p. 37; Laack, p. 230), whereas I have so far read it less as a neurological than philosophical and linguistic study of terms for abstract notions based on concepts of bodily experience, like the spatial directions, physical properties, or body parts.³ In general, “the study of figurative language and narrative forms are central to aesthetics of religion research” (Kreinath, p. 50). Usually, this means staying in the realms of literature studies and philosophy, but it might also point to the physiological basics of cognition studied

³ Typischerweise konzeptualisieren alltagssprachliche Metaphern „das Nichtphysische in Begriffen des Physischen [...], das unscharf Konturierte in Begriffen des schärfer Konturierten“ (Johnson, Mark; Lakoff, George (engl. Orig. 1980): *Leben in Metaphern*. Heidelberg: Carl-Auer-Systeme, 1998, S. 72; vgl. auch S. 28ff.).

by Johnson & Lakoff. Such a cognitive *metaphorology of religion*⁴ would be a good companion to an *aesthetics of religion* – at least, if I believe with Anne Koch that such a study “must recognize that aesthetic taste, aesthetic judgement, and epistemic knowledge are body-based because they involve basic cognitive, semiotic, and semantic categories that are shaped during developmental acquisition in a practical-sensorial environment” (Koch, p. 27). By opening up in such a way for life science approaches and terms, scholars of religion can learn not to “neglect sensorial loops [...] like pain, sexual stimulus, temperature, humidity” (introduction, p. 7) and others.

Should we thus aim at “overcoming the focus on social theories” (*Introduction*, p. 2) while studying religion? This is where I – and several of the authors in this volume – do not agree. As Peter Bräunlein warns, a cognitivist notion of (religious) humans as “intelligent apes that are highly emotional, easily spooked” (Bräunlein, p. 274⁵) tends towards “overgeneralization and reductive simplification” (p. 275). Conversely, other authors explicitly aim to “reduce” the manifold “tasks” of cognition, action, emotion and imagination to “one unifying principle: a universal prediction-error minimization mechanism [...], i.e., the constant attempt to maximize predictive efficacy” (Johansson & Kirsch, p. 145). This *reduction* (usually a pejorative term in the Humanities) is here even hailed as “the strength and beauty of the PP framework” (*ibid.*). This framework, abbreviated for “Predictive Processing” (see pp. 144 & 77), is only one of a dizzying number of terms and concepts introduced in the volume.

D) Vocabulary

Especially the chapters about *Imagination* (Traut & Wahl, pp. 61-72), *Sensory Strategies* (Mohr, pp. 129-142) and *Epistemology* (Koch, pp. 23-32) provide the reader with an overwhelming array of analytical terms, distinctions and definitions.

- A distinction between “perception (Ger. *Wahrnehmung*) and sensation (Ger. *Empfindung*)” (Koch & Wilkens, p. 9, italics i.o.) is not consequentially drawn within the articles. Perhaps such a distinction between physical and cognitive processes, between abilities given by nature or by nurture, would not fit with the intention of going beyond the universalist vs.

⁴ An aesthetics of knowledge, for instance, engages with metaphors like “bringing light into darkness” (Borelli & Grieser, p. 37) – so it might gain a lot from some reference to Blumenbergs extensive study of this aesthetic/visual metaphor throughout the history of philosophy (*Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie*, 1960).

⁵ This is a quote from Geerts, Armin (2013): *Origins of Religion, Cognition and Culture*, p. 19.

constructivist schism that tears apart academic approaches on aesthetics, religion, or emotion.⁶

- *Absorption* is “inner sense cultivation” (Luhmann, p. 85), the “capacity to focus in on the mind’s object – what humans imagine or see around them – and to allow that focus to increase while diminishing one’s attention to myriad everyday distractions that accompany the management of normal life” (p. 92). Here, the central point is that this capacity demands *talent* and/or *training* (p. 93).
- *Cross modal perception/ Intermodality*, the cognitive “binding” or “congruence” (p.25) of different senses, has previously often been referred to as *synaesthesia*. Because this term risks confusion of cultural uses and literary tropes with the psychological syndromes,⁷ a more technical name for this basic condition of sensation might be useful.
- The already intermodal sensations about the world and the body (*extero/interoception*, pp. 28, 133) afford 2nd and 3rd order concepts and cognitions, namely, *body scheme* (p. 28) and *body knowledge* (p. 29).
- *Habituation* is a process constitutive for learning, socialization, and acculturation. In religion, habituation is effected by intentional or implicit “strategies proved by long periods of trial and error: how to select and design ‘good locations’ for ritual or meditation, how to imagine gods and spirits, and how to transgress the borders of everyday aesthetics by religious means” (Mohr, p. 130).
- *Imagination* is defined by Traut and Wahl (pp. 61ff.) in a way specific to the study of religion: it is “the human mind’s faculty that enables us to decouple from present reality” (p. 63). Imagination enables the emergence of “virtual realities” (p. 66), which imitates perception and tends to manifest itself in non-virtual, perceptible ways: “it is narrated, written down, acted out in theatrical ways and materialized in the form of pictures, objects, or whole aesthetic panoramas” (62). They distinguish “sensual”, “performative-bodily” and “linguistic” modes of imagination (p.67f.), and, furthermore, introduce “styles” and “technologies” of imagination (ibid.).

Terms like *imagination* and *body knowledge* are not only elaborated on in respective chapters, but picked up throughout the volume (for instance by Pabst von Ohain, p. 253).

⁶ An overview on Cultural Relativist, Life Sciences and integrative approaches on emotion is given by Plamper, Jan (2015; Ger. orig. 2012): *The History of Emotion. An Introduction*. Oxford: University Press.

⁷ Cf. https://www.pure.ed.ac.uk/ws/files/12435588/Defining_synaesthesia.pdf

E) How to write a PhD with an Aesthetics of Religion approach

As I am writing about the aesthetic and emotional involvement of non-human beings in rituals, I started my reading with the chapter on *Aesthetics of Spirits* (Bräunlein, pp. 273-282) and, indeed, was rewarded by a thorough review of recent ethnographic studies which are useful to know. *Imagination* emerged from my reading as a key term to deal with otherworldly beings in an agnostic fashion. *Ritual* (Sørensen, pp. 73-84), on the other hand, is here defined in a cognitivist way, which I do not completely agree with. Still, I benefit from knowing and dealing with this approach: How applicable – and politically correct – is an “ethological definition of ritualization”, focusing on “features such as stipulation, repetition, iteration, stereotypy, goal demonition, extreme focus on detail, and anxiety about purity” (p. 77)? My observations fit well to most of these features, but still, they seem to me too reductionist to apply them in fieldwork, as they strip rituals of their complex and often ambiguous local interpretations. *Aniconicity and Aniconism* (Actor, pp. 97-106) are helpful terms for conceptualizing the continuity between “embodiments” and “symbols/icons” of divine beings. The Hindu goddess I do my research on can, for instance, take several bodies or forms (*svarūp*) simultaneously: as a *niśān*, a bamboo “token” or “symbol”, she is carried around and “danced” (*nacānā*) by human carriers a Goddess, while she is herself “dancing” the bodies of possessed persons.

I work with extensive film material and use editing and montage as a method – thus, I do not only analyse how “sensescapes and sensory displays” are “constructed” (Mohr, p. 137) in rituals, but I also (re-)construct sensory displays of rituals myself. Engaged in a second-order display, as a second-order dramaturg of the ritual, my “own practices of filmmaking also become the subject of reflection. How to represent religion and capture the ‘wow’ without ourselves producing a ‘religious’ film?” (Hermann and Lokshina, p. 195).

Although the Volume is no recipe on how to write my PhD, the chapters on *Imagination* and *Sensory Strategies* alone provided me with enough terms and classifications to fill many pages of the analysis of my film material. Furthermore, this Volume has massively enriched my analytical toolset concerning religious emotionality and dramaturgy. As I focus my research on emotional aspects of the Goddess Nainī in her interaction with (and imagination by) her human kin, I am most thankful for this.

F) Affect and Emotion – the “prediscursive”

What is an “atmosphere of gravity”, built up and used to increase sincerity/seriousness of motivation (pp. 65-66)? Do rituals build up a “virtual reality”, characterized by “emotional

tangibility” (whatever that means) and “emotionally labelled sensory experience” (p. 66)? Do religious techniques, devices and designs engage universal psychophysiological dispositions, for instance “making use of bodily resistance toward dead and stinking objects and creating an unpleasant emotion” (p. 261)?

For answering such questions on the reality of atmospheres or on the universality of basic emotions, the Handbook provides inspiring, up-to-date and heterogeneous analytic tools. For studying religious dramaturgies, it is worthwhile to be aware of the “filtering mechanisms” (Mohr, p. 131) of *attention*, motivated by exogenous and endogenous stimuli, controlled in “hierarchies of media that are privileged, restricted, or even banned (such as dance)” (Borelli & Grieser, p. 41) and even becoming measurable in “somatic modes of attention” as “bio-chemical processes” (Kreinath, p. 49). Dramaturgic means are not only directing ritual action, but also the narration of stories, which is also performative: it engages an audience by utilizing its scenery (for instance, a fire in the night).

But not only the rituals, narrations and films analyzed, but also the study and didactics of religion employ dramatic means. Learning is long recognized to be more effective “if students are emotionally involved” (p. 286). Of course, such insights should be taken into account while *Teaching Aesthetics of Religion* (pp. 285-294). This final, collaborative chapter of the volume is very innovative and inspiring and as polyphonous as the volume as a whole. Among others learning targets, “intensive personal experiences” and “deep emotions” (p. 288) are mentioned – here, the question arises whether such goals are adequate for academic settings. Isn’t it too dangerous to play with such things? Teaching students of religions might even aim at guiding them to “cultivate inner self-awareness and outer compassion” (p. 287), to better perceive the own emotions, those of others, and social inequalities (p. 292) – however this might fit with the academic norms of non-normativity.

G) The Wow

Does the *Handbook* advance the “deconstruction of religion” (Introduction, p. 2)? It does, insofar as a critical reconsideration and re-sensualization of its alleged opposites, namely science and secularism, also helps to erase clichéd notions of “religion” itself. Especially the article of Stefan Binder on South Indian Secularism shatters what one might expect by pointing to various ironies of this movement. Its mythical narratives about an “atheist, materialist, rationalist, or proto-communist” Dravidian prehistory (p. 267), its rhetorically “fluent rejection of religious fluency” (270) and the ritualism of anti-ritualists are another instance of an

aesthetics of a seemingly anti-aesthetic movement (p. 264; cf. Yelle, pp. 241ff.). Moreover, in differing considerably from the more familiar progress-oriented or Communist narratives of secularism, this study exposes these as no less mythical than the religious narratives they oppose. Likewise, the reader learns to see in Neuroscience and its popularization an aesthetical dialectic of “a process of demystification of the brain, eliminating the soul through scientific research, and a process of re-mystification by aestheticizing the organ” (Borelli & Grieser, p. 43). The authors draw connections between, on the one hand, religious iconographies of body parts “connected to the divine by means of sparks or beams”, and, on the other hand, scientific visualizations of “the brain”, whose “basic features are a characteristic neon-blue color, with sparks, beams, and an effect of glowing from within” (ibid.).

Does the *Handbook* “open new ways of discovering formerly unnoticed qualities of religion” (Kreinath, p. 48)? Conceiving of *imagination* as the capability to abstract or decouple from perceived reality bears a huge innovative potential for any study of religious processes of “going beyond” (lat. *transcendere*) or “carrying something beyond” (old Gr. *metaphorein*) the familiar world and meanings. Such processes are constitutive for whatever is called “religion” or a religious “symbol”⁸. Thinking of religion as imagination, as well as foci on attention or non-human personhood – for instance, of spirits (Bräunlein, pp. 273-282) or of texts (Wilkins, p. 155) – are all not quite new, but, in this volume, affirmed and revalued by interdisciplinary exchange with more experimentally oriented sciences.

Not only that, the contributors to the *Handbook* discover these “religious” qualities even outside religion, as “enchanted matter” (Johnston, p. 190) in the art of Andy Goldsworthy, or as “transcorporeality” (Klassen, p. 172) in a not specifically religious comic. Here, sensual habits are transcended by means of the medium, when, for instance, a noise or a smell is drawn (p. 166), or by means of narrative and imagination, when the perception of the world as mediated by the comic goes beyond human sensuality and brings “the feeling of a plant – green, swampy, mucky – into our own embodiment” (p. 172). One is invited to think about “music as invisible religion” and provided with emic perspectives expressing this same view (Wilke, p. 116), or to regard a scientific urge “to find hidden symmetries in nature” (Borelli & Grieser, p. 40) as semi-religious, rooted in “traditional aesthetic modes linking harmony, beauty, and the (hidden) divine” (ibid.).

⁸ According to Susanne Langer, a “symbol is any device whereby we are enabled to make an abstraction” (Langer, Susanne (1953): *Feeling and Form*. New York: Scribner, p. xi).

H) Politics

Especially part III about *aesthetic strategies* makes it clear how inseparable aesthetics are from politics – and vice versa. Two images of a National Socialist cult location near Bückeberg – once in use during the Reichserntedankfest 1937 and once in a future plan of a subversive memorial – powerfully illustrate an article on “sensory strategies” like sensual enhancing and deprivation (Mohr, p. 131). The fascist ritual makes strategic use of sensational habits and dispositions to create conformity, even uniformity, of a human “mass”. Thus, it provides a strong example of how such dramaturgic means of “activating” and “filtering” sensations (ibid.) connect religious, political and hybrid performances. Provokingly, this enables a comparison between Nazi festivals, evangelical mega-churches and Spanish fire-walking events (p. 136). Such an examination of “the aesthetics of political regimes” (p. 265) in the tradition of the Frankfurt school is fruitful not only for social and political sciences, but also for the study of religion. In turn, an aesthetics of religion can enrich scholars’ engagement with the history of political ideas – the concept of “idea” itself pointing not only to abstract concepts, but to images and imaginations. Aesthetic approaches shed, for example, new light on who Indian Atheists are, if not “a ‘Westernized’ product of European colonialism” (Binder, p. 267).

Studying the abovementioned performance of conformity as an *aesthetic regime* or *ideology* (Borelli & Grieser, p. 37 ff.) enhances the critical potential of an engaged study of religion, asking questions with a strong political resonance:

“How in the context of religious practice are the senses stimulated, governed and disciplined? How are religious experiences, emotions and attitudes created, memorized and normalized? How do religious perceptual orders interact with those of a larger culture?”⁹

Aesthetic regimes can take different forms and shapes and give different forms and shapes, for instance, to gender. As early as 1792, Mary Woolstonecraft observed how „the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness“¹⁰. Given this long history of analyzing how aesthetic ideologies control gender, one wonders why this handbook does not make more mention of these

⁹ Grieser, Alexandra; Johnston, Jay (2017): *What is an Aesthetics of Religion? From the Senses to Meaning – and Back again*. In: Grieser, Alexandra; Johnston, Jay (ed.): *Aesthetics of Religion. A Connective Concept*. Berlin/Boston, pp. 1-49, p. 2.

¹⁰ Woolstonecraft, Mary, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792, p. 6 (https://books.google.de/books?id=qhcFAAAAQAAJ&pg=PA15&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false).

discourses. There is only one entry on *Gendered Performativity* (pp. 175-183) by Shaireen Rasheed, who problematizes disembodied notions of agency and empowerment of women in “dichotomizing dominant/resistant discourses” (p. 181), which are unable to perceive how very empowered and active women can use their agency to “support a patriarchal and Islamic agenda” (182). However, it remains unclear what makes her approach “aesthetical”, and, thus, I feel quite uncomfortable about her suggestion that scholars of religion should “move away from a liberal, rights-based discourse to an aesthetics of religion framework” (p. 181). Words like “agency”, “creativity” and “empowerment” have too positive connotations to leave them uncommented, as Rasheed does, speaking about “creatively deployed violence” in “kidnappings and forcible closing of immoral businesses” and “the almost Maoist ‘re-education’ and subsequent release of alleged prostitutes” (p. 180) – instances which I do not want to study outside a liberal, rights-based academic discourse.

An *Aesthetics of knowledge* (pp. 33-46) also implies aesthetics of power. This holds true, for example, when Native Australian “practices of land ownership” are based on “a thoroughly different aesthetic mode of mathematical knowledge” (p. 39). In this sense, Annette Wilke’s work on South Indian cultures of *Sonality* (pp. 107-116) is itself also highly political, leading her to conclude that “the term ‘Hinduism’, which has often been criticized as an orientalist and essentialist construction, can be retained” (p. 115).

Recommendation

The wide range of approaches gathered in this volume makes it indispensable for studying how exactly the much-evoked forces and agencies of sensuality, matter and affect actually affect bodies. It has been often and repeatedly claimed that objects have agency, that religion might be seen as a flow of affective powers through bodies (see, for instance, Donovan O. Schaefer’s book on *Religious Affects*) – but the question remains open what that would exactly mean. In all their polyphony and discontinuity, the contributions to this volume give much-needed answers to such questions, gained from philological and ethnographic as well as from neuroscientific studies. Filling a lot of gaps, many new questions rise, and the insights into the diverse methods and processes of data collection are useful for ongoing and upcoming studies within the still emerging field of the Aesthetics of Religion.