

Simone Heidbrink, Nadja Miczek (Eds.)

# Aesthetics



## and the Dimensions of the Senses

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**Simone Heidbrink / Nadja Miczek**

**Introduction to the Special Issue: Religions on the Internet –  
Aesthetics and the Dimensions of the Senses**

1-11

**Louise Connelly**

**Virtual Buddhism: An Analysis of Aesthetics in Relation to  
Religious Practice within Second Life**

12-34

**Gregory Grieve**

**Virtually Embodying the Field: Silent Online Meditation,  
Immersion, and the Cardean Ethnographic Method**

35-62

**Tim Hutchings**

**The Politics of Familiarity: Visual, Liturgical and  
Organisational Conformity in the Online Church**

63-86

**Anna Piela**

**Challenging Stereotypes: Muslim Women's Photographic Self-  
Representations on the Internet**

87-110

**Paul Teusner**

**Imaging Religious Identity: Intertextual Play among  
Postmodern Christian Bloggers**

111-130

**Theo Zijderfeld**

**The Transformation of the Prayer Wall**

131-147

**Christopher Helland**

**(Virtually) been there, (Virtually) done that: Examining the  
Online Religious Practices of the Hindu Tradition:  
Introduction.**

148-150

**Phyllis K. Herman**

**Seeing the Divine through Windows: Online Puja and Virtual  
Religious Experience**

151-178

**Nicole Karapanagiotis**

**Vaishnava Cyber-Pūjā: Problems of Purity and Novel Ritual  
Solutions**

179-195

**Heinz Scheifinger**

**Hindu Embodiment and the Internet**

196-219

**INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE**  
**RELIGIONS ON THE INTERNET –**  
**AESTHETICS AND THE DIMENSIONS OF THE SENSES**

SIMONE HEIDBRINK, NADJA MICZEK

Within the last twenty years, the Internet has become an indispensable tool of everyday life. As a matter of course, we are looking up each and every content we come across. Using an Internet search machine (“*to google*”) has even become a generally accepted new term and a self-evident social and cultural practice of the postmodern world of today. The Web has penetrated nearly every aspect of our social and cultural life. Thus it is no wonder, that also in the domain of religion modern digital communication technology is on the advance. For the academic study of religion, looking at religious websites has therefore become a normal and within the scientific community widely accepted practice of research. Even though it serves no analytical goal, it is still impressive to state, that when searching for the term “religion” in a webcrawler, it comes up with a vast amount of hits (e.g. about 200 million in a Google search on October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2010). The sources for research on religions and religious practices online are as manifold as the Internet itself. Especially during the last years with its rapid technological developments applications like online social networks or virtual 3D worlds have been gaining more and more popularity also for religious actors. When analysing religions on the Internet many academic researchers have until today drawn their attention mainly on questions like: if we look at religious web content, what are we actually seeing? And how can we interpret this? May I limit my analysis to the textual components? Or should I include pictures, music etc.? Do I have to include background colour, navigation etc, in my analysis?

In an attempt to rethink these questions much has been written about these matters from different academic perspectives during the last years.<sup>1</sup> Even in disciplines with a traditionally pronounced focus on philological work (e.g. Religious Studies in Germany) there seems to grow a mutual consent that the Internet as a media compound must not be reduced to the textual contents. But overlooking many contemporary studies on religions and rituals on the Internet we nevertheless cannot help but notice a certain bias on referring mostly to *visual* aspects of Internet content. Other senses like hearing or touching are at the best mentioned briefly, but an elaborated analysis and considerations about their interconnectivity and their link to the visual dimension are mostly missing. Noticing this gap in recent research we decided to set up a special issue of this Online Journal which is dedicated to aesthetics and the sensual dimensions of religions on the Internet. Both foci are interconnected and interdependent but each of them is also a topic which is discussed in large diversity within the scientific community. So, to introduce both of them for their use in

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<sup>1</sup> For the area of religious studies, pioneering publication were among others: Hoover & Schofield Clarke 2002; Dawson & Cowan 2004 and Campbell 2005.

this special issue (which might nevertheless differ from author to author) it seems to be necessary to at least say a few words about their historical contexts within academic usage and refer to some contemporary approaches of handling these topics within the disciplines of cultural studies.

The origins of modern ‘aesthetics’ as a topic of academic research can be foremost traced back to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century when the notion came up mainly within European philosophical circles.<sup>2</sup> Most prominent for introducing the term ‘aesthetics’ is the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. In his opus magnum (1750) “*Aesthetica*” he defined the subject as follows:

Aesthetics (the theory of the liberal arts, lower gnoseology, the art of thinking beautifully, the art of the analog of reason) is the science of sensitive cognition.<sup>3</sup>

Since Baumgarten a long tradition of reflecting and rethinking the subject of aesthetics has developed especially within the disciplines of Philosophy and Art History, hosting such prominent authors like Kant, Hegel, or later on Adorno and others. This is not the place to introduce each of them with their individual reflections on the subject.<sup>4</sup> But by looking on the historical contexts we can notice two important ideas strengthen within the discourse: first, that the subject of ‘aesthetics’ is profoundly linked to arts, and second that one main goal of the academic study of ‘aesthetics’ is to consider the production and perception of beauty within to the so called fine arts.

With the upcoming ‘postmodern’ critics since the 1960s and the diverse ‘cultural turns’ fundamentally criticising former theoretical and analytical approaches in the disciplines of Humanities and Social and Cultural Studies, also the notion of ‘aesthetics’ has started to undergo several changes. It is not any longer the idea of ‘beauty’ which is in the focus of attention but scholars seek more and more to undergo the dominant philosophical debates and follow instead a much older notion of aesthetics – *aisthesis* – most prominently discussed by Aristotle. Besides considerations on aesthetics focussing on arts and beauty, Aristotle reflects on the role of perception in the process of knowledge production. Additionally – and that seems to be a very modern idea – he stated that perception is connected to processes of interpretation.<sup>5</sup> Many contemporary scholars, especially from cultural studies consider themselves as walking in the footprints of Aristotle but are trying to take recourse to postmodern thinkers like Foucault, Bourdieu or Butler to widen the notion of aesthetics. Sensory perception, embodiment and the communication and mediation of aesthetic components are only few foci to name here which are recently getting more and more in the centre of scholarly attention. At the same time an essentialist notion of ‘the aesthetic’ mostly based on the idea of beauty is more and more critically reflected and often replaced by a notion of aesthetics that is understood as discursive process of negotiations and ascriptions. These more recent discussions are at large also characterized by their attempts

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<sup>2</sup> For an historical overview see Guyer 2004, 15-44.

<sup>3</sup> Baumgarten (1750 § 1). Cited in a translation form Guyer 2004, 15.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview see for example Cazeaux 2000.

<sup>5</sup> See Bernhard 2008, 21. In detail Welsch 1987.

to look for ‘aesthetics’ also in research fields besides the fine arts. Actors within different social, political, cultural or religious fields receive, communicate, negotiate and develop the notion of aesthetics in close connection to their possibilities of perception, certain interpretation patterns and – probably most important – to their sensual and bodily dimensions.

There are today several discussions from different disciplines especially focussing on sensual and bodily aspects which to some extent cross over seamlessly to discussions on ‘aesthetics’. Most prominent is probably the ‘visual culture debate’ and – in Religious Studies – the debate on ‘Material Religion’. In the former disciplines like literature, anthropology, or media studies mostly led the discussions about the role and interpretation of visual objects and subjects (!) in certain cultural, social or political contexts. Visibility and visual subjects are thereby seen in a complex relationship which is shaped by modes of perception as well as different modes of power. As Nicholas Mirzoeff states:

For visual culture, visibility is not so simple. Its object of study is precisely the entities that come into being at the points of intersection of visibility with social power.<sup>6</sup>

With its interest in the mechanisms of production, ways of perception, and discursive negotiations of visual culture the subject exceeds the boundaries of classical Studies of arts and aesthetics and allows a critical reflection on the relationships with – for example – narrative modes (T.W. Mitchell) or cultural topics (M. Bal) or bodily and other sensual perceptions (J. Butler).

In Religious Studies the aspect of visuality entered the discussion by an approach introduced by the Art Historian and researcher of religion David Morgan<sup>7</sup>. With ‘Material Religion’ he introduced a concept which seems to be a quite promising option to incorporate and give room to the non-textual contents and utterances of religion into the research as to “consider religion through the lens of its material forms and their use in religious practice”<sup>8</sup>. In this approach, visual aspects are only one component within an analytical and theoretical frame that wants to stress the material, sensual, bodily, aesthetic and media-related factors when researching religion – in contrast to a scholarly focus which for long has drawn its attention primary from textual components only.

Religion is not considered a merely abstract engagement in doctrine or dogma, nor a rote recitation of creeds and mantras. In other words, religion is not regarded as something one does with speech or reason alone, but with the body and the spaces it inhabits. Religion is about the sensual effects of walking,

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<sup>6</sup> Mirzoeff 2002, 10.

<sup>7</sup> For further information see David Morgan's homepage: <http://faculty.valpo.edu/dmorgan/>. Retrieved 05 November 2010. For further informations on his theoretical and methodical approach see Morgan 2005.

<sup>8</sup> See: Morgan et al. 2005, . 4.

eating, meditating, making pilgrimage, and performing even the most mundane of ritual acts. Religion is what people do with material things and places, and how these structure and color experience and one's sense of oneself and others.<sup>9</sup>

And from the perspective of a scholar of religion on the Internet, we can add: Religion and religious practice can also be found in what (and how) people surf the web, play online games etc. In fact, many activities quoted above can also be conducted in an online setting even though 'material religion' cannot be found in the literal sense. As a matter of fact, "materiality" within the virtual realm of the Internet from the perspective of many actors is not considered as contradictory but is regarded as given fact. Why else – to quote only one example – would users (so-called "residents") of Second Life who marry within this virtual 3D world spend so much time and money on the setting up of the site of the wedding, the wedding dress and the organization of a wedding party<sup>10</sup>? Surely not, if it was only considered as "bits and bytes", as being "merely virtual and thus not real"! It can be rightly assumed, that it is the need to supply the wants of the senses beyond the domain of the ration that led to these kinds of actions. And to – in the most individual sense – create an area of beauty that for the actors involved in the wedding stresses and enforces the significance of the ritual which is often charged with religious meaning.

What we find, if we look at the diverse and manifold area of religion online, is in fact a multimedial and thus multisensual virtual environment which might imply its own notion of "aesthetics". And we must not forget the connections to these sensual dimensions that refer to and rely on the (offline) bodies of religious practitioners. Religions and rituals on the Internet might most probably provoke emotional and/or other physical reactions. Furthermore, in transfer processes between the offline and online realm there might be a redefinition of what seems to be an 'appropriate' design for religious settings. And we as researchers have to meet the concerns of notions of the actors and take their statements seriously. This means, that we have not only to include the aesthetical and sensual dimension in our research setting and our methodical and analytical approaches to online content, but also to give these expressions of religion the same space and consideration as we address to words and texts.

The key paradigm for the approach of religious aesthetics is that the "sense" of religions emerges not solely from the interpretive, cognitive functions of the religions but rather that the senses should be more present in scientific considerations as a warrant for sense.<sup>11</sup>

The dimension of sensual experience has especially been debated in terms of the ritual use of the Internet, as ritual is one of the "Gesamtkunstwerke, whereby aesthetic arrangement plays a pivotal role"<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> See: Morgan et al. 2005, : 4.

<sup>10</sup> See: Radde-Antweiler 2010.

<sup>11</sup> See: Prohl 2010, 238.

<sup>12</sup> Braungart 1996, quoted in Prohl 2010, 237.

Cognitive and sensory carriers of meaning merge in religious practice. They give rise to intellectual and sensory cognition and induce effects and transformations that are experienced and regarded by religious actors as changes caused by their religious practice. Effects vary from a subjectively perceived improvement of general well-being to a sensuously experienced transcendence. (...) It is the entirety of the experiences that constitutes the “sense” of a religious activity from the viewpoint of a religious actor.<sup>13</sup>

From the early ages of religious online content, especially before the so-called Web 2.0 applications simplified the implementation of multimedia, these discussions have moved the practitioner of all different kinds of religious backgrounds and affiliations. As early as 1997 the Christian Orthodox priest Father John Missing posted an “Online ritual invitation and instruction”<sup>14</sup> to the English Usenet, propagating the establishment of a ritual space of “ALL spiritual traditions” merely by the use of written language.<sup>15</sup> Due to the limitations of the media at that time, the sensual dimensions beyond the written word could not be addressed. And since the rituals took place in a chatroom and were not recorded, it is not conveyed, if single practitioners decorated their computer desk in the physical realm with candles or did other activities to address the senses. Concerning the possibility to construct a sensual experience of an online ritual merely by use of a chat room a practitioner of Pagan online worship who called him/herself “Walking Stick” stated:

You can't share your drumming or your dancing with these people, you can't hold hands or use vocal intonations, they can't see the candles you light or smell the incense you burn ... or can they? Is it possible, in any meaningful sense of the word, to cast a circle and raise energy by use of computer and modem? I submit that it is.<sup>16</sup>

However the realization of the idea of addressing the senses took some more time and technical progress. When in September 2004, the “Church of Fools”<sup>17</sup> went online, an important step towards multisensual online worship had been gone. The project which was set up by the editors of the Christian Internet magazine “Ship of Fools”<sup>18</sup> and financially and ideally aided by the Anglican Church and Methodist Church of Great Britain was technically realized as self-contained multi-user environment, resembling a traditional church building and was originally limited to a three-month experiment. For the initiators it mainly served as an experiment “to find out if online church is a viable way to ‘do church.’”<sup>19</sup> This question however, was

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<sup>13</sup> See: Prohl 2010, 238.

<sup>14</sup> See: <http://www.ibiblio.org/london/agriculture/forums/sustag2/msg00045.html>. Retrieved on October 28, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> See: Helland 2005, 1-16.

<sup>16</sup> See: Walking Stick: *The Care and Feeding of Online Rituals*. Retrieved from *The Pagan Library*, [http://www.paganlibrary.com/rituals\\_spells/care\\_feeding\\_of\\_online\\_ritual.php](http://www.paganlibrary.com/rituals_spells/care_feeding_of_online_ritual.php). Retrieved on October 28, 2010,.

<sup>17</sup> See Church of Fools, <http://churchoffools.com/>, Retrieved on November, 05, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> See Ship of Fools, <http://www.ship-of-fools.com/>. Retrieved on November 05, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> See: Jenkins 2008, 100.

positively answered by many of the virtual ‘churchgoers’ who could enter the church by use of a graphical representation, a so-called ‘avatar’. The project was so immensely successful and the services so overcrowded, that the initial plan to conduct one service per week had to be abandoned in favor of several services per day. Even though the opportunity of sensual experience was limited to a small choice of audio recordings, some avatar movements and gestures which were creatively implemented into the liturgy of the service, attending visitors report quite strong sensual responses. Simon Jenkins, one of the initiators of the “Church of Fools” project, recalls the comment of a BBC journalist who attended the first service:

When Bishop Chartres announces the Lord’s Prayer, everyone in the church starts typing it, some in traditional form, some modern, some in French, some in Latin. Although it feels slightly daft, suddenly any notion that this is a game is gone. These people are praying together, and that is as real as if they were standing in the same room.<sup>20</sup>

Other sensual impressions have been reported, e.g. concerning the liturgical use of the gestures or the experience of having to enter the church as a ‘ghost’ (which refers to a shadowy figure only visible on the computer screen of the user in question when the permitted number of visitors had been exceeded).<sup>21</sup> This clearly shows that for lots of visitors the “Church of Fools” had been an integral and holistic experience.

Examples like these, where religious actors testified their sensual experiences of online worship can be found all over the web. If we take these statements seriously, we have to decisively contradict one of the founding fathers of the modern Internet, Tim Berners-Lee who is alleged to have said that:

Web users ultimately want to get at data quickly and easily. They don’t care as much about attractive sites and pretty design.<sup>22</sup>

Quite the opposite seems to be true and we have to take account of this fact, when researching religion and religious practice on the Internet.

Even if the need of the significance of sensual agency and its responses are mainly undebated, the question remains how to deal with it. In the special issue of this journal with its focus on “aesthetics and the dimensions of the senses” a multitude of approaches are presented. What we will not try to do with this issue, however, is to try a universally valid definition of aesthetics, as the term is debated and its usage greatly varies within the different academic disciplines.

The different notions on ‘aesthetics’ and the importance of sensual / bodily perceptions are also reflected in the articles presented in this issue which is divided into two main sections: The first section of the issue

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<sup>20</sup> See: Jenkins 2008, 109.

<sup>21</sup> See: Jenkins 2008, 110.

<sup>22</sup> See: [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Tim\\_Berners-Lee](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Tim_Berners-Lee). Retrieved on November 05, 2010.



hosts articles that focuses explicitly on the topic of ‘aesthetics and the sensual dimensions’. The authors emphasise visual or bodily aspects, consider the importance of other sensual perceptions and analyse how the construction of certain ‘religious aesthetics’ is done by religious actors. Without intention there has been a focusing especially on three religious traditions which all have a widespread presence on the Internet: Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. In the second section the issue hosts three articles in which the authors analyse different aspects of Online pujas. It is introduced by Christopher Helland who was part of the AAR panel in 2009 where the papers originate from. Although the articles do not focus explicitly on aesthetics and the sensual dimensions, many aspects concerning Hindu religious practice online and its dependences to the offline realm involve questions concerning the sensual perception, embodiment or other notions of aesthetics. Both sections of the issue will now be introduced briefly.

The first part starts with two articles on Buddhism. In the papers of **Louise Connelly** and **Gregory Grieve**, both explore the field of virtual Buddhism in the virtual 3D environment of Second Life. Connelly asks in her article *“Virtual Buddhism: An Analysis of Aesthetics in Relation to Religious Practice within Second Life”* what senses – besides seeing and hearing – are addressed in this online context. She introduces the concept of “imitation-touch” to get an analytic tool that enables her to describe the interactions the avatars are able to conduct with virtual material religious objects. By using “an eclectic mix” of aesthetic components which involve visual, auditive and tactile (imagined) elements the religious actors develop a form of “universal Buddhism”. By seeing and perceiving through an ‘ideal recipient’ Connelly analytically depicts the richness of ‘aesthetics’ in the context of virtual Buddhism.

Gregory Grieve focuses in his article also on virtual Buddhism in Second Life but draws his attention to another field. In *“Virtually Embodying the Field: Silent Online Buddhist Meditation, Immersion, and the Cardean Ethnographic Method”* his main interest is on questioning embodiment in cyberspace. He describes virtual embodiment as “the subjectification that occurs to a body lived in cyberspace.”. Especially on behalf of online Buddhist rituals in Second Life he traces the possibilities of perception through avatars and asks for consequences for the ritual practices of the religious actors. In sum Grieve characterises virtual bodies as cultural signs which are only one part of the discursive construction of bodies in general.

With the following article from **Anna Piela** we are then leaving the area of Buddhism and enter the field of Islam. In her article *“Challenging stereotypes: Muslim women’s photographic self-representations on the Internet”* the author primarily focuses on the analysis of visual representations on the Internet. By regarding 42 self-portraits of Muslim women on Online photo-sharing communities she shows how religious actors on the Internet question common pictures of Muslim women connected with the idea of ‘threat’ or ‘victim’ as they have become dominant especially in media-related negotiations.

Her article is followed by three papers all dealing with topics from a Christian realm. **Tim Hutchings** asks in his article *“The Politics of Familiarity: Visual, Liturgical and Organisational Conformity in the Online Church”* how a notion of familiarity is produced by Christian actors in different online scenarios. He

especially focuses on visual, liturgical and organisational aspects to show that aesthetics components along with others frame online experience and create an atmosphere in which “authenticity” can be demonstrated, change is encouraged and online experience is “grounded”.

Even though **Paul Teusner** is researching weblogs that – per definition – rely heavily on texts, in his article “*Imaging religions identity: Intertextual Play among Postmodern Christian bloggers*” the importance of “visual text”, namely still videos, images, colour schemes, etc. for the construction of religious identity in online communication and interaction. Applying the example of the “blogosphere” of Australians who are involved in the so-called “Emerging Church” movement he shows the elaborate ways, how these bloggers implore intertextual elements to explore a way of expressing their individual understanding of postmodern Christianity by creating their own aesthetic framework without employ traditional Christian symbology.

The first section of this issue then ends with an article on “*The Transformation of the Prayer Wall*”. Herein the author **Theo Zijderveld** deals with the phenomenon of online prayers as ritualized action in a mediatized context and also as essential part of Christian online community. Looking at the development of the prayer wall hosted by the online community tangle.com he traces how the technical transformation of the application (from Flash to an interactive social media application) has changed the aesthetical experience of praying online. He states, that the facts that on the one hand the prayer – even though addressed to god – is in many cases visible for others and on the other hand online prayers can be supplemented by visual and auditory elements have become new forms of religious ritual practice in the media age of today.

The second part of this issue starts with a brief *introduction* from **Christopher Helland**, titled “*(Virtually) been there, (Virtually) done that: Examining the Online Religious Practices of the Hindu Tradition*”. As participant of the AAR<sup>23</sup> panel on “*Online Puja and Darshan: Cyber Sites and Sights*” which was held on the 2009 conference in Montréal he contextualises the following three articles by **Phyllis K. Herman** (“*Seeing the Divine through Windows: Online Puja and Virtual Religious Experience*”), **Nicole Karapanagiotis** (“*Vaishnava Cyber-Puja: Problems of Purity and Novel Ritual Solutions*”) and **Heinz Scheifinger** (“*Hindu embodiment and the Internet*”) which all focus on different aspects of Online pujas.

With the articles presented in this special issue, we hope to contribute and give some impulse to the still ongoing discussion on the different theoretical, methodical and methodological approaches to “aesthetics and the dimension of the senses” in the context of religion and religious practice online.

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<sup>23</sup> For further information on the AAR and its annual meetings see: <http://www.aarweb.org/>. Retrieved on November 05, 2010.

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