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Anna-Katharina Höpflinger and
Alexander Darius Ornella (eds.)

“I Sing the Body Electric”

SCHÜREN

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JRFM

JOURNAL FOR RELIGION, FILM AND MEDIA

JRFM is a peer-reviewed, open-access, online publication. It offers a platform for scholarly research in the broad field of religion and media, with a particular interest in audiovisual and interactive forms of communication. It engages with the challenges arising from the dynamic development of media technologies and their interaction with religion.

JRFM publishes peer-reviewed articles in English that focus on visual and audiovisual media, feature film, documentary, advertising, interactive internet-based media and other forms of communication in their interdependencies with contemporary or historical forms of religion. It critically reflects on theories and methods, studies on intermediality, phenomenological and comparative approaches to media and religion across different cultures and periods. The main focus lies on contemporary phenomena, but diachronic analysis of the interaction between religion, film and media is also promoted as an essential facet of study.

JRFM is edited by a network of international film, media and religion experts from different countries and with professional experience in research, teaching and publishing in an interdisciplinary setting, linking perspectives from the study of religion and theology, film, media, visual and cultural studies, and sociology. It emerges from the cooperation between different institutions in Europe, particularly the University of Graz and the University of Zurich, and is published in cooperation with Schüren publishing house, Marburg (Germany). It is an online, open-access publication with print-on-demand as an option. It appears twice a year in May and November and encompasses generally 4-6 articles.

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Contents

<i>Alexander D. Ornella and Anna-Katharina Höpflinger</i>	
“I Sing the Body Electric”	9
Editorial	
<i>Stefan Lorenz Sorgner</i>	
The Pedigree of Dualistic and Non-Dualistic Media	15
Grasping Extramedial Meanings	
<i>Johanna Stiebert</i>	
The Body and Voice of God in the Hebrew Bible	23
<i>Claudia Setzer</i>	
“This Voice Has Come for Your Sake”	35
Seeing and Hearing in John’s Gospel	
<i>Florian Heesch</i>	
Voicing the Technological Body	49
Some Musicological Reflections on Combinations of Voice and Technology in Popular Music	
Open Session	
<i>Milja Radovic</i>	
Activist Citizenship, Film and Peacebuilding: Acts and Transformative Practices	73
<i>Elham Manea</i>	
Images of the Muslim Woman and the Construction of Muslim Identity	91
The Essentialist Paradigm	

Book Reviews

Christian Wessely

Elijah Siegler, Coen. Framing Religion in Amoral Order
Baylor University Press, 2016

113

Theresia Heimerl

Matthew Rindge, Profane Parables. Film and the American Dream
Baylor University Press, 2016

121

Calls for Papers

Comics and Animated Cartoons

127

Using Media in Religious Studies

129

Strategies of Representing Religion in Scholarly Approaches

“I Sing the Body Electric”

Editorial

The natural perfect and varied attitudes... the bent
head, the curved neck, the counting:
Such-like I love... I loosen myself and pass freely...
and am at the mother's breast with the little child,
And swim with the swimmer, and wrestle with wrestlers,
and march in line with the firemen, and pause and
listen and count. [...]
I do not ask any more delight... I swim in it as in a sea.
There is something in staying close to men and women
and looking on them and in the contact and odor of
them, that pleases the soul well,
All things please the soul, but these please the soul well.

—Walt Whitman, “I Sing the Body Electric”, 1855¹

In his controversial poem “I Sing the Body Electric”, Walt Whitman glorified the human body in all its forms. The world according to Whitman is physical and sensual. Bodies are our fundamental way of being – being in the here and now, being in time and space. Bodies we have and bodies we are are as much sensed, felt, experienced, seen, or heard as they are material objects.² As bodies, we are in space, and through our bodies, their processes, their practices, their skills, we leave traces in space and time and extend ourselves in space. Bodies that extend and reach out and communicate through voice, as well as how voice materialises the immaterial, was the topic of a colloquium, “I Sing the Body Electric”, held at the University of Hull, United Kingdom, in 2014, which in turn inspired the following special issue of the Journal for Religion, Film and Media (JRFM).

Following on from the colloquium’s inspiration, this JRFM issue is dedicated to the interrelation between religion, body, technology, and voice and its analysis from an interdisciplinary perspective using approaches from musicology, philosophy, and religious studies. The underlying idea of this issue – and thus a common thread throughout the articles it contains – is that the body and being embodied are fundamental modes of our existence. We rely, as Walt Whitman expressed poetically, on the body to interact with each other and our environment through material practices, sensu-

1 Whitman 2010, 225–227.

2 See Ornella/Knauss/Höpflinger 2014.

al interactions, corporal language, or sensations. These material bodily interactions often give rise, however, to phenomena that are ephemeral and are thus perceived as immaterial or even as transcending the body. Yet, these ephemeral or immaterial practices and phenomena must be seen as rooted in the body and bodily practices, or, in other words, they always return to the body.

Our voice is a prime example for such an immaterial yet deeply embodied phenomenon. As bodies, we often communicate with our voice – or the lack thereof. Although ephemeral and “immaterial”, voice relies on the body and the materiality and weight of air. Voice extends the body; it represents a human being outside his/her body, for example by being recorded on a storage device. As embodied beings, we can use technology to extend the reach of our voice beyond time and space. The technological extension of the voice can therefore be seen as an extension of the body and, following Marshall McLuhan, as a bodily medium.³ Technology does more, however: it separates voice from bodily organs and bodily practices of production, and in doing so it replaces the body; it takes the body’s place; it becomes – in a way – disembodied. This separation raises anthropological questions: Which anthropological ideas are informed by such a separation of body and voice? Is a voice without a human body still part of a person? How does it influence anthropological concepts if the original producer of the voice is technology rather than a human body?

We can illustrate these complex questions with the recent French science fiction film *LUCY* (Luc Besson, FR 2014). *Lucy*, a young woman played by Scarlett Johansson, gains supernatural cognitive and physical abilities through strong bodily contact with a nootropic drug, which was implanted into her abdomen. At the end of the film she transforms herself into a supercomputer (fig. 1, 2) and saves all her vast knowledge on a memory stick. *Lucy* becomes disembodied and disappears into a spacetime continuum. Besides her clothes and the memory stick, only her voice remains. The last



Fig. 1: At the end of the film, *Lucy* transforms herself into a black supercomputer. *LUCY* (Luc Besson, Fr 2014), 1:26:00.

3 McLuhan 1964.



Fig. 2: Only her clothes, a memory stick and her voice remain. LUCY (Luc Besson, Fr 2014), 1:26:45.

shot of the film shows an overhead perspective; we hear Lucy's voice: "La vie nous a été donnée il y a un milliard d'années. Maintenant, vous savez quoi en faire" (Life was given to us a billion years ago. Now you know what to do with it).

Another example is the science fiction film HER (Spike Jonze, USA 2013), again with actor Scarlett Johansson. In HER we never get to see Johansson; we only hear her voice coming out of a computer, a mobile phone, or headphones. Her is disembodied, yet, because of her voice and the way she talks, she has a strong bodily presence, a bodily presence we cannot see on a visual level but nonetheless see, feel, hear, and experience with our other senses.

In both films, the main themes of our special issue are interrelated. In LUCY, through a bodily intervention via a drug, the protagonist becomes a supernatural being. While in the first stage of this transformation she uses technology as a tool for communication and as proof of her superhuman capabilities, in the end she merges with technology (the supercomputer) and transcends her physical existence, leaving behind only



Fig. 3: Lucy's answer to the question „Where is she?“ on a mobile phone. LUCY (Luc Besson, Fr 2014), 1:27:52.

her knowledge and her voice (fig. 3). As a transcendental being Lucy is technology and voice – the biblical reference of the latter is very clear here. On the visual level of the film, this religious connection is made through the reception of religious images such as Michelangelo’s fresco *The Creation of Adam*. In *HER*, Her enjoys a strong bodily presence despite her bodily absence; in fact, we could argue that Her’s body is not absent at all, but is embodied because of her voice.

As both films illustrate, the interrelation of body, voice, anthropological thoughts, and technology can integrate questions regarding religion. Belief is a bodily and sensual phenomenon: as David Morgan argues, the religious person “says he believes, but what he really does is feel, smell, hear, and see”.⁴ On different levels religion is therefore also intertwined with technologies and techniques of body and voice. In fact, we can argue that religion is technology and that religion is technological practice. Religious practices rely on material and technological practices to induce visions and sounds of the divine, as the film *Lucy* illustrates. For example, in the Hebrew Bible, the voice of God is often thought of as rumbling like thunder. The rumbling of thunder can be a natural phenomenon, but it can also be produced through cultural or artificial means. The bodily aspect of voice is also a key idea in Christianity. Incarnation or, better, becoming incarnate, the becoming body of the Word of God, Jesus, has performative qualities: not only does the Word become body, but through the Word all things (and bodies) were made.

Religious imagination also expresses the intersection of humans, bodies, technology, and transcendental realms, often with the help of technology and in metaphors of sound and voice. “To sing is to pray twice” is an old saying suggesting that singing expresses bodily joy or sorrow. Religious practices and spiritual feelings often resonate with and emerge out of bodily sensations and experiences. Most importantly, however, technologies of voice and technology of bodily pain often mark transcendent spaces in religious imaginations and artwork, as Jörg Berns proposes in his book on heavenly and hellish technologies.⁵

We therefore argue that voice, even though ephemeral, ties us back to our material bodily existence. Yet, voice also stands for our longing for otherworldly realms, for our longing to leave behind and come back. It is questions like these, questions of the *conditio humana*, questions of embodiment, technology, and the transcendent, that the articles in this issue tackle.

In addition to more focused papers that have taken their inspiration from the “I Sing the Body Electric” colloquium, this journal also features two “open session” contributions. With their focus on the formation of expectations about the body and social coexistence through medial communication such as newspapers or film, they, too, are related to the overarching theme of this special issue.

4 Morgan 2010, 5.

5 Berns 2007.

In “The Pedigree of Dualistic and Non-Dualistic Media: Grasping Extramedial Meanings Pedigree of Dualistic and Non-Dualistic Media”, Stefan Sorgner starts with the observation that human reasoning often makes stark distinctions between the material and the immaterial and that these distinctions often come with moral ideas and ascriptions of good and evil. In his discussion, he locates the roots of these dualities and of dualistic thinking in the philosophy, arts, and architecture of antiquity, in particular ancient Greece. He identifies the birth of ancient Greek drama with its theatre buildings and its separation of actors and audience as one source that paved the way for dualistic thinking. As such, Sorgner shows how media and artistic practices, including the roles they introduce, their material objects, and the architectural practices and spaces they give rise to, shape our thinking about the world.

In her article “The Body and Voice of God in the Hebrew Bible”, Johanna Stiebert explores the bodiliness of God in biblical scripture. Drawing on a rich variety of scriptural sources, she focuses on how the ephemerality of God’s voice can be seen as a form of divine embodiment. Stiebert thus offers us an exegetical reading of bodily and anthropomorphic images the Hebrew Bible uses to refer to God, God’s kingship, and God’s relationship to God’s people. She shows that the biblical authors use the divine voice as a medium that expresses and communicates ideas of divine power and reflects God and God’s likeness.

Claudia Setzer’s article “ ‘This Voice Has Come for Your Sake’: Seeing and Hearing in John’s Gospel” offers a fascinating approach to reading transhumanism in light of John’s gospel or, in other words, to reading John’s gospel through a transhumanist perspective. Her article is grounded in a detailed exegesis of John and his treatment of our human experience of our finite bodies. She particularly focuses on the role the human senses play in John’s thinking. The ability to hear God’s voice is not only an act of faith but also closely related to the ability to “see” God, as Setzer argues. John’s emphasis on the senses offers Setzer a link to transhumanism. She argues that our sense of self, our self-hood, “is bound to voice” and links this recognition to transhumanist ideas of enhancement. Aware of the ethical issues that come with transhumanism, Setzer invites us to think about John’s emphasis on human senses and the implications of the enhancement of our senses for self-hood in a transhumanist context.

In his article “Voicing the Technological Body: Some Musicological Reflections on Combinations of Voice and Technology in Popular Music”, Florian Heesch looks, at the combination of voice and technology in popular music from a musicological perspective. He starts with the observation that recorded popular music is characterised by the (important) presence of a voice, but also by the simultaneous absence of a human body. He then looks at microphones, which can intensify this presence of the voice in a new way, and technological apparatuses such as the vocoder that can significantly

change the human voice into something “unnatural” – or even supernatural. Based on these observations, Heesch asks what implications such technological changes in popular culture might have for anthropological questions: Is a vocoderized recorded voice still “human” and how do such popular cultural processes transform the idea of the human?

Milja Radovic explores “film as a socio-political and artistic-transformative cultural practice” in her article “Activist Citizenship, Film and Peacebuilding: Acts and Transformative Practices”. Looking at films by Serbian director Srđan Golubovic (CIRCLES [2013]) and Saudi Arabian director Haifaa al-Mansour (WADJDA [2013]), she argues that the medium of film itself and the practice of film making can be forms of social activism. Both explore Otherness and question political practice from within rather than as a Western hegemonic imposition. Religion is present in the article (and the films) largely on an implicit level, in identity negotiations, as symbolic fragments. But it is this very lack of religion that makes these films, as Radovic argues, very religious.

In her article “Images of the Muslim Woman and the Construction of Muslim Identity: The Essentialist Paradigm”, Elham Manea critically engages the argument, that a Muslim woman who chooses to wear the veil is exercising her religious freedom and that the veil can function – at least in the West – as form of female empowerment. She further argues that the notion that the veil does not conceal, but reveal authentic religious identity, is also a construction of the Muslim Woman that hides actual Muslim women and their experiences. Most importantly, Manea suggests that any discussion around the veil and female empowerment or oppression must take into account the role that fundamentalist Islam plays “in mainstreaming the idea that the veil is part of Islamic religious identity and in constructing the Muslim Woman and that it is her obligation and/or right to wear the veil”.

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The Pedigree of Dualistic and Non-Dualistic Media

Grasping Extramedial Meanings

ABSTRACT

The article provides suggestions concerning the cultural relevance and embeddedness of dualist and non-dualist media and demonstrates that the presence or absence of certain types of media has extra-medial relevance that can contain ethical, political, and social meanings. When I am talking about these kinds of dualities I am referring to distinctions like the one between good and evil, mind and body, culture and nature, the material and the immaterial or the organic and the inorganic. The contemporary examples I mention paradigmatically represent the phenomenon in question. However, several other artists, composers and designers are central figures, too, e.g. Patricia Piccinini, Eduardo Kac, Stelarc.

KEYWORDS

media, music, theatre, opera, transhumanism, dualism, non-dualism, ethics, posthumanism, ontology

BIOGRAPHY

Professor Dr. Stefan Lorenz Sorgner teaches philosophy at John Cabot University in Rome and is director and co-founder of the Beyond Humanism Network, Fellow at the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies (IEET) and Research Fellow at the Ewha Institute for the Humanities at Ewha Womans University in Seoul. He is author and editor of more than 10 books, e.g. “Menschenwürde nach Nietzsche” (WBG 2010). Furthermore, he is in great demand as a speaker in all parts of the world (e.g. TEDx; World Humanities Forum) and a regular contact person of national and international journalists and media representatives. (e.g. Die Zeit).

I became fascinated by questions concerning duality and non-duality during my teenage years, when I started to realise how widespread categorical dual distinctions are and that they can be found in various fields and strata of culture and life. When I talk about these kinds of dualities, I am referring to distinctions like those between good and evil, mind and body, culture and nature, the material and the immaterial, and the

organic and the inorganic. These examples are an arbitrary selection; others could be mentioned too. One might wonder what is the problem with these distinctions, for we use them every day and it is at least not immediately clear why employing them might be problematic.

The first problems I recognised, while still a teenager, were related to the distinction between the immaterial mind and the material body. If human beings consist of two such radically separate substances, how is it possible for mind and body to interact? If two substances do not have anything in common, then any kind of interaction seems highly unlikely.¹ I next recognised evaluations of the two substances: the immaterial world was usually related to the good, stability, and unity; the material world was connected with evil, change, and plurality.²

This conceptualisation of the world understands as good something that is universally valid. The good that stands for the qualities connected with the good life can be described and is valid for all human beings, as anthropologically all human beings are identical. All possess an immaterial soul that separates them categorically from all other solely natural beings, like apes, dolphins, and elephants.

This way of thinking can still be found in many social contexts, most legal constitutions, and sundry moral laws. Only human beings have dignity or personhood. All solely natural beings like animals are things and hence belong to the same category as stones and plants. This position also applies to German Basic Law. Animals are not seen as things, but legally they are to be treated like things. Only human beings possess dignity. This distinction of human beings implies the categorical duality previously mentioned and is a characteristic of Platonic, Stoic, Christian, and Kantian thinking. It also accompanies paternalistic structures and the violent treatment of monsters, and we all are monsters in one way or the other.³

Furthermore, only one concept of the good is supposed to be valid for all human beings. The characteristics of what has been recognised as the good, however, have varied in history. For Plato the cardinal virtues were seen as sole good, and for Aristotle it was a combination of virtues, the good of the body and external virtues. For Stoic thinkers, being virtuous was sufficient for living a good life, and if one possesses one virtue, one immediately possesses all virtues and turns into a moral saint. For Christian thinkers the virtues of love, faith, and hope became relevant, and contemporary Christian philosophers tend to stress that love is all that is needed for living a good life (love and do what you want) – Michael Sandel and Gianni Vattimo are prime examples of this position.⁴

What seems problematic with this point of view is that it does not sufficiently consider that we are all psychophysiological, with radically different drives, wishes, and

1 Sorgner 2007, 46.

2 Sorgner 2010, 193–211.

3 Sorgner 2013, 135–159.

4 See Eissa/Sorgner 2011.

desires. We are all monsters, and it is good for us to live in our monstrous ways. Having realised this, I regard it as important to accept that it is highly likely that any non-formal account of the good will be implausible.⁵

In light of the aforementioned examples of dualistic conceptualisations of the world, which seem highly problematic, I realised that we find analogous dualities in various aspects of our way of grasping the world. More though, it seemed to me that cultural processes usually occur in parallel events. Philosophers conceptualise the world in a dualistic manner and a similar process occurs in ethics or in the media. Is it always the case that historically a certain group, a discipline comes first? I do not know. Nietzsche suggested that music is a discipline in which the processes in question occur rather later than in other fields and disciplines. (Nietzsche, 1967-77, 450-452 = KSA MA, 2, 450-454.) Such may be the case, but to my mind the processes do not seem to follow such given paradigms. Change seems to me more chaotic. Sometimes music comes last within the organic process of a culture, but in other circumstances it might come first. This question, however, would need to be discussed separately.

Having reflected upon duality and non-duality for a long time, only recently I managed to connect two insights that I had had for some time but had not seen as connected, on the birth of dualistic thinking and on the dualistic media.

In early August 2013, just before attending the World Congress of Philosophy in Athens, Jaime del Val, to whom I will return below, and I were on the island of Aegina and decided to attend a performance of *The Cyclops* by Euripides, which was being performed in the theatre at Epidaurus. *The Cyclops* is the only complete satyr play to have survived. During the performance, the dualities that had come about during the birth of Ancient Greek drama suddenly became clear, as I was confronted with the architectural prerequisites that had accompanied the institutionalisation of drama during the sixth century BCE.

Originally, there had been no theatre buildings, no stage, and no spectators separated from the stage. Before the institutionalisation of tragedy, there had been only groups of human beings singing and dancing together, without a rigid dualistic spatial separation of actors and audience. Various categorical dualities were introduced only later, during the birth of tragedy.

First, there was the spatial separation between audience and actors. The audience had to remain seated within certain linear and circular fields, which were separated from but also directed towards the circle, or stage, on which the actors were to fulfil their tasks. Secondly, a further distinction was introduced, namely the distinction between chorus and protagonists: on the one hand, there was the chorus, and the task of the chorus was to sing and dance together; on the other hand, there were the individual actors, whose task was to recite their roles. Hence, the duality of audience and actors was amplified with the introduction of the duality of protagonists and

5 Sorgner 2016.

chorus. Thirdly, a dualistic theatre architecture was created, which was responsible for enforcing these dualistic structures. All of these dualities were absent from the festivities that had taken place before the invention and institutionalisation of the theatre, which began with the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens in the sixth century BCE.⁶

I am not suggesting that the establishment of this theatre was the sole event that established dualistic media. It seems plausible to claim, however, that this event was a vital stepping stone for the emergence of dualistic media. Jaime del Val has successfully demonstrated in some of his writings and presentations how this kind of duality was transforming over the further history of the media, but at the same time he has also shown how visual art kept its dualistic directedness or foundational structure.⁷

The same can be noted in the realm of philosophy. Dualistic thinking in the Western tradition was strongly influenced by Plato's thinking of the fifth century BCE. Before Plato, dualistic conceptions could be found in Zoroaster's thought, of the first half of the second millennium BCE, but Plato was key to the introduction of dualistic categories into Western cultural tradition.

In Plato's view, there is a dualism involving the realm of forms and the material world. Even though he introduced a dualism with the distinction between human beings who possess rational souls and animals who do not have such souls, the separation was not yet as rigid as it became later on, for Plato also stressed that there are several types of souls – vegetative, sensitive, and rational. The soul or psyche is responsible for self-movement and hence for life. Consequently, Plato had good reason to attribute souls to plants and animals, as both are capable of directed self-movement. Still, only human beings have a rational soul, and a rational soul is necessary for having the option of entering the realm of forms and grasping the forms, and also for using language and for communicating via language with one another.

The second significant step for the development of dualistic ways of thinking occurred with the Stoics. Stoic philosophy holds that a unified *logos* encloses immaterial human souls, and for the Stoics animals did not have such souls. The main difference from Plato on the issue of duality is that in Plato's case the fact that human beings possess a rational soul is not connected to the evaluation that all human beings ought to be treated equally well. According to Plato social rank depends on the type of metal one has in one's soul, which might be gold, silver, or iron. Stoic philosophers introduced the notion of *humanitas*, which was linked to the equal evaluation of all human beings. This notion was transformed by Cicero into the concept of dignity, which all human beings were supposed to have equally because they possess a rational soul and belong to the human species. Although clearly human beings differ with respect to their talents and capacities, it came to be acknowledged that all human beings ought to be treated well solely because they are members of the human species. Stoic

6 MacDonald/Walton 2011.

7 Jaime del Val's talk "Relational & Multi-Dimensional Perception" demonstrates in a descriptive manner central stepping stones in the history of perception: <https://vimeo.com/88375539>, 14.4.2016.

philosophers and Cicero did not develop an egalitarian society in the modern sense, but this changed evaluation of human beings did have practical implications for the treatment of slaves in their own society.

The third central step in dualistic thinking took place with Descartes. Where ancient thinkers within the Platonic tradition had acknowledged that there are a variety of different souls, Descartes put dualism on an even more solid footing by distinguishing between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, with only human beings participating in both. Animals and all other solely natural objects belong only to the realm of *res extensa*.

Such thinking was developed further within Kantianism, in which the same ontological distinction as in Descartes' philosophy can be found. Kant focussed more, however, on the ethical relevance and implications and developed a complex ethics and political philosophy that is still the core of German Basic Law. As a result, it is legally forbidden to treat another person as solely a means, which presupposes a radically dualistic distinction between objects and subjects. Furthermore, this influence is the reason for German Basic Law's claim that only human beings possess dignity and that animals and all other solely natural entities are to be treated as things. This separation also presupposes the highly problematic categorically dualistic ontological separation we found in Descartes' philosophy.

After Kant, Nietzsche moved beyond the dualistic history of Western philosophy. All the consequences of his approach have not yet been grasped by many scholars, thinkers, and philosophers today, but together with Nietzsche, Wagner, Darwin, and Jung initiated the cultural move towards a non-dualistic way of thinking. Consequently, it is possible to assert that with these cultural movements humanism has come or is coming to an end. Here I take humanism as a worldview founded upon the affirmation of categorical dualities. In light of the plausibility of these reflections on the development of dualistic thinking, I can stress that the development of Plato's philosophy has most probably been the corner stone of Western culture as a dualistic culture. Peter Sloterdijk, who identifies the beginnings of humanism with the age of Stoic philosophy, and Ihab Hassan, who stresses the close connections of the beginnings of the Enlightenment with the beginnings of humanism, are surely right in claiming that strong versions of dualisms can be found in the philosophies of the Stoics and of Descartes,⁸ but we should not overlook the central importance of Plato's philosophy for this development.

Given that there are cultural movements beyond dualities, it seems appropriate to stress that we are moving beyond humanism into a posthuman age. We have also been able to recognise that an important dualistic media had been created about one hundred years before the dualistic way of thinking was developed in the field of philosophical reflection. Given that dualism had come in the media before it emerged in philosophy, we can speculate that the media artists ought to have been first to rec-

8 See Sloterdijk 2009 and Hassan 1977.

ognise the violence, dangers, and implausibilities connected to dualistic approaches. Was this the case? Dadaism, stochastic music as developed by Iannis Xenakis, and postdramatic theatre provide three examples of arts in which non-dualistic elements can be found. In the discussion that follows, I present four examples of how non-dualistic media can occur and in what respect they can be deemed non-dualistic media. I consider here media artists Kevin Warwick, Dale Herigstad, Neil Harbisson, and Jaime del Val, using the term “media artist” in a rather loose sense, for Kevin Warwick, for example, is more of a pioneer of engineering or an inventor. However, the devices I deal with are striking examples of moving beyond dualistic media.

I mention Warwick’s work because it is dissolving the categorical dualities of mind and body and of the organic body and inorganic things. One of his many inventions can reveal to us a possible direction in which many developments might move. Warwick developed a brain-computer interface by means of which his nervous system was connected via a computer to the Internet while he was in New York. The signals he was sending out were transported via the Internet to a mechanical arm in his laboratory at the University of Reading, in the United Kingdom. He was able to move this arm so that it could touch or grab another thing, and the sensors in the fingertips of the mechanical arm sent the sensory input back via a computer and the Internet to Warwick’s brain and nervous system as he sat in a room in Columbia University in New York, where he was able to feel his mechanical fingertips touching an object at the University of Reading. He did not first try this experiment on animals, but took the risk of establishing this feedback mechanism using his own brain. The success of the experiment provides us with grounds to suggest that the former rigid categorical separation of mind and body or of organic and inorganic no longer holds.

Dale Herigstad is a media designer (e.g. the Spielberg movie “Minority Report”) and inventor and a four-time Emmy winner. When we met recently at a TEDx event in Rome and discussed our most recent projects, it was evident that although Herigstad and I come from completely different fields, our work is moving in similar directions. Herigstad spoke to me of the long-dominant dualist concepts in media and described moving beyond dualistic media in his own work on three-dimensional media. He has recently developed a mobile phone app that makes it possible to move the content of a computer screen into a 3-D space and simultaneously watch television. Currently 3-D television and 3-D spectacles are required. This development is only one step away from his ultimate goal, namely glasses that can be placed in front of your eyes without your eyes able to see their limits, placing you in a 3-D world in which you can move around and gain experiences. When you turn around you will be able to see what lies behind and around you, so you will have the visual impression of being in a different zone. This vision goes far beyond the traditional media setup, where the spectator is placed in front of a television or a computer screen with a clear separation between user and screen, which are therefore in a permanent dualistic relationship. A further

step would be to use contact lenses instead of glasses or even devices implanted into the eyes to engage 3-D computer applications.

Human eyeborg Neil Harbisson is a colour-blind artist who, with the help of an engineer, developed a device that enables him to hear colours. Technology has thus given him synaesthesia, a capacity quite a few artists appear to have possessed, including Wassily Kandinsky, Vladimir Nabokov, Franz Liszt, Olivier Messiaen, and Alexander Scriabin. Harbisson creates his compositions from his new way of experiencing colour and sound.

Last but not least is pangender cyborg Jaime del Val, whose most recent meta-body project seems one of the most promising ways of moving beyond dualist media. Here I wish to refer briefly to one of his metaformances, available on YouTube and therefore easily accessed. Del Val developed a device that consists of several cameras placed on different parts of his body. A projector in front of his chest and loudspeakers on his back allow transmission of the altered and amplified sounds he makes. Of the many philosophically challenging aspects related to this metaformance, I will refer here to three specifically.

First, the non-duality of ontology is revealed as part of this metaformance. The Christian and Kantian traditions categorically distinguished between objects and subjects. This distinction is dissolved through this metaformance. The cameras portray small aspects of his body. For example, an unusual perspective on his thumb, a post-anatomical perspective, is projected onto the walls around him. However, one is affected by whatever surrounds one, and therefore the first small perspectives become amplified, with any slow movement becoming faster, and this projection feeds back onto del Val. He interacts with himself, for he moves and via the projections of his movements, he alters his future movements. Permanent interaction results in a process of amorphous becoming. This metaformance is a strong criticism of the rigid subject and object distinction of dualistic ontologies.

Secondly, the cameras' perspectives are, as noted, unusual, for they do not divide up the body into traditional anatomical parts. Thereby the contingency of anatomical classification is revealed, for it is possible to classify the body in many different modes. Hence, the post-anatomical perspectives that are part of this metaformance break down encrusted linguistic structures, revealing the contingency of categories and, thereby, opening new fields of becoming.

Thirdly, the post-anatomical perspectives, supported by sounds presented by del Val's metabody, challenge the traditional dualistic conception of sexual relationships. Dualistic concepts of sexuality reduce sexual relationships to the genitals, classified in binary fashion. The post-anatomical perspectives and corresponding sounds make evident that sexuality can be present in an unusual way of perceiving an ear, shoulder, or leg, or in the way we approach a foot, or in being confronted with a new sound,

such a scream or a shout. The enormous multiplicity of possible relationships can be grasped as sexual and connected to intense feelings of gratification. Hence, this meta-performance also enables us to move beyond a binary concept of sex towards metalsex. These brief descriptions of movements beyond dualistic media are only brief hints of how the death of dualist media can be understood.

The four media artist-scientists represent not only four movements from dualist media towards non-dualist media but also different varieties of these developments. In stressing ontological non-duality, ethical plurality, and perspectivism within his artistic works, Jaime del Val represents a metahumanist version. With their projects including a strong affirmation of the use of technologies, Kevin Warwick and Neil Harbisson are more closely connected to transhumanism. In light of his emphasis on non-duality in his digital media projects, Dale Herigstad is most closely connected to posthumanism. Thus, the various creators discussed here represent a broad survey of what it can mean to transcend dualist, humanist art.

My principal goal for this article was to provide suggestions concerning the cultural relevance and embeddedness of dualist and non-dualist media and to demonstrate that the presence or absence of certain types of media has extramedial relevance that can contain ethical, political, and social meanings. The processes to which I have referred are neither final nor completed. I have sought merely to suggest ways we might grasp the extramedial meanings of dualist and non-dualist media.

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The Body and Voice of God in the Hebrew Bible

ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of the voice of God in the Hebrew Bible and in early Jewish interpretations such as the Targumim. In contrast to the question as to whether God has a body, which is enmeshed in theological debates concerning anthropomorphism and idolatry, the notion that God has a voice is less controversial but evidences some diachronic development.

KEYWORDS

body of God, voice of God, Torah, Targumim, Talmud, anthropomorphic

BIOGRAPHY

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In Judaism and Christianity, which both hold the Hebrew Bible canonical, the question as to whether God has a body is more sensitive and more contested than the question as to whether God has a voice.¹ The theological consensus now tends to be that God is incorporeal, and yet the most straightforward interpretation of numerous Hebrew Bible passages is that God is conceived of in bodily, anthropomorphic terms – though often there also exist attendant possibilities of ambiguity and ambivalence. The familiar divine statement “let us make humankind *in our image, according to our likeness*” (*b^etšalmēnû kidmûtēnû*; Gen. 1:26), for example, seems to envisage – particularly in

1 A version of this paper was presented at “I Sing the Body Electric”, an interdisciplinary day conference held at the University of Hull, UK, on 3 June 2014 to explore body and voice from musicological, technological, and religious studies perspectives. The envisaged readership is eclectic and not always specialised in Biblical Studies. Hence, I transliterate and translate all biblical Hebrew. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own. The primary purpose of this paper is to provide a general and diachronic overview of the topic.

the case of the first term, “image” (*tselem*) – a physical form, not least because in the Hebrew Bible *tselem* most often pertains to concrete hewn images, including idols. This association is very clear at 1 Samuel 6:11, where the people are instructed to make (from *śh*, a verb pertaining to crafting and shaping) models of mice and tumours², as well as at Numbers 33:52, with its reference to molten images (cf. 2 Kings 11:18; 2 Chron. 23:17), and also in the Aramaic account of Daniel 3:1, where a cognate (*ts^elēm*) refers to Nebuchadnezzar’s golden idol. In two occurrences at least, however, the physicality of *tselem* is undermined: in Psalms 39:73 and 73:204 the noun pertains to elusiveness, possibly to a semblance or phantom. If *tselem* refers more widely to either a seeming form (i.e. a phantom) or to a more inclusive, not-only-physical form or image, this could indeed complicate matters for interpreting Genesis 1:26–27. At Genesis 5:3 “likeness” (*d^emût*) and “image” (*tselem*) again occur together: here Adam fathers a son, Seth, in his likeness (*bidmûtô*) and according to his image (*k^etsalmô*). The most straightforward interpretation again pertains to resemblance,⁵ including (though perhaps not exclusively) physical resemblance.

Ambivalence is also in evidence elsewhere. In Exodus 33:11 God speaks to Moses “face to face” (*pānîm ‘el-pānîm*), as would a man with his associate or friend. Descending like a pillar of cloud (33:9), God also agrees to reveal to Moses “[my] goodness” (*tûbî*; 33:19), concealing God’s face, which no human can see and live (33:20), while permitting “[my] glory” (*kebôdî*) to pass by Moses, while covering him with “the palm of his [lit. my] hand” (*kappî*; 22:22), to reveal “his [lit. my] back” (*‘achôrây*; 33:23). So, here God is described in terms of power, in abstract terms (God’s *goodness*, God’s *glory*), and in non-anthropomorphic terms (as a pillar of cloud), but also in terms of having body parts, namely a face, a hand, and a back, the last of which is visually apprehended by Moses.⁶

In the light of this singling out of Moses for special treatment and divine protection, lest he see more than is humanly manageable, rather astonishing is the statement some chapters earlier, in succinct and direct terms, that Moses and Aaron, Na-

- 2 The verb *śh* occurs elsewhere, too, with *tselem*: Ezek. 7:20 (of making abominable images), Ezek. 16:17 (of making male images) and Amos 5:26 (of making images of astral deities). In all cases the images appear to be concrete and three-dimensional. It is not clear whether all are anthropomorphic.
- 3 In English bibles the reference is Ps. 39:6. The expression here is *‘ak-b^ttselem yithallek -îś*, which might be translated along the lines of “surely a man goes about in apparent form” (NRSV translates *betselem* “like a shadow” – “in shadow” would be closer). The idea that *tselem* refers here to something shadowy and non-solid is strengthened by its being in parallel with the abstract noun *hebel* (“nothingness”).
- 4 The Hebrew is *kach‘lôm mēhāqîts ‘dōnāy bā‘îr tsalmām tîbzeḥ*, “like a dream on awaking, O Lord, in the city their phantoms you despise.” The Hebrew is not straightforward but the clear reference to a dream indicates that *tselem* probably refers here to something illusory (cf. NRSV, “They are like a dream when one awakes; on awaking you despise their phantoms”).
- 5 At Ezek. 23:14 the whoring *Oholibah* is described as looking upon men carved into a wall, which is qualified with “depictions of Chaldeans” (*tsalmē kaśdîm*). Again, *tselem* refers here to something concrete and visible.
- 6 A comprehensive investigation of God’s body and body parts is to be found in a recent monograph by Andreas Wagner (2010).

dab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel “saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God” (Exod. 24:10–11, NRSV).

The prophet Isaiah is anxious when he sees the Lord, sitting on a throne, his flowing garments filling the temple (Isa. 6:1). Reflecting the Torah⁷ tradition from Exodus 33 just referred to, Isaiah appears to fear for his life, having set eyes on the deity. Ezekiel, another of the prophets, gives a much longer, though rather tongue-tied, account of his theophany. Following an elaborate description of moving creatures and a chariot throne, Ezekiel hesitates when he reaches the figure on the throne. He refers to “the likeness of a throne” above which was what “seemed like a human likeness” (*d^emût k^emar’eh ’adâm*; Ezek. 1:26).⁸ Dazzled by the being’s loins and the blaze and firelight around them, Ezekiel is able to conclude only with the convoluted, “This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD” (Ezek. 1:28, NRSV). The effect of the theophany is powerful – Ezekiel falls on his face. What emerges from all these Hebrew Bible examples is that God looks like *something*: God can be seen. Moreover, although seeing God is sometimes dangerous and dazzling and overpowering, even possibly deadly, God seems to have human features: hands and a back and a face; God sits on a throne.

Elsewhere, quite markedly different from these examples, such anthropomorphism is not in evidence. In the first creation story the description is of God’s wind, breath, or spirit (*rû^ech*),⁹ hovering or sweeping over the primordial waters (Gen. 1:2). In Exodus 3 the messenger of God (v. 2), or God, appears in the flame of a bush that seems to be blazing yet is not consumed. Reflecting on this disembodied vision Deuteronomy 4 is most emphatic of all: “YHWH¹⁰ spoke to you from the midst of the fire sound of words” (*qôl d^ebārîm*). You heard but form (*t^emûnâ*) there was not – only a voice (or, a sound, *qôl*). ... Be very mindful of yourselves, because you did not see any form (*t^emûnâ*) on the day YHWH spoke to you in Horeb from the midst of the fire, lest you be corrupted and make for yourselves an idol (*pesel*) in the form of any image (*t^emûnat kol-sâmel*)” (Deut. 4:12, 15–16).¹¹ Here the notion of divine corporeal-

7 “Torah” refers to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Pentateuch.

8 Here once more is the noun *d^emût*, used of both divine (Gen. 1:26) and human (Gen. 5:3) likeness. In this verse it pertains very definitely to visual experience.

9 In his commentary Ephraim Speiser comments that the Hebrew word “means primarily ‘wind, breeze,’ secondarily ‘breath,’ and thus ultimately ‘spirit.’ But the last connotation is more concrete than abstract” (Speiser 2007, 5). Again, this complicates whether what is described is more disembodied and abstract or more physical and concrete.

10 “YHWH” is a transliteration of the consonants of the primary divine name of the God of the Hebrew Bible. In English bibles it tends to be rendered “the LORD”.

11 A similar expression *pesel hassemel* (“the idol of an image”, cf. NRSV “the carved image of an idol”) occurs at 2 Chron. 33:7, also in a context of disapproved idolatry. Deuteronomy 4:16–18 elaborates that such an idol can be anthropomorphic or theriomorphic. Wagner specifies that *pesel* refers to a plastic, three-dimensional hewn form or idol; see Wagner 2010, 26.

ity is linked to idolatry. Idolatry is a much-condemned major transgression¹² – hence, conceiving God in corporeal terms is acutely problematic. This passage from Deuteronomy, however, is almost singular in the explicitness of its emphasis on divine formlessness; just a chapter later, where YHWH is speaking face-to-face with Moses (Deut. 5:4), form is again implied. The dominant depiction of the Hebrew Bible, therefore, is of divine corporeality, but the situation is far from univocal. God is imagined with a body, moreover a humanlike one, in many passages; elsewhere God's formlessness is suggested and occasionally forcefully asserted.

Over time, it seems, divine corporeality becomes increasingly veiled and obscured. According to source critics,¹³ indications of this shift exist already within the Hebrew Bible. A direct expression such as “the form of YHWH he [Moses] looks upon” (*ût^emunat^e YHWH yabbîṭ*, Num. 12:8)¹⁴ is attributed to an earlier source. Comparable but less direct expressions derive from a later time and different source and reflect subsequent sensibilities, as in Exodus 16:7, which has in place of “you shall see YHWH” the buffered expression “and you shall see *the glory of YHWH*” (*ûr^eṭem 'et-kebôḏ YHWH*; see also Exod. 16:10). Intertextually such an approach might be said to be self-fulfilling,¹⁵ but this tendency indeed becomes increasingly pronounced extratextually over time, as clearly evident when we compare the Hebrew Bible with subsequent Jewish writings.

One of the arguments of classical source criticism is that the earliest source (J) typically uses divine anthropomorphism – God walking in the garden (Gen. 3:8) or inhaling the scent of sacrifice (Gen. 8:21); a later source (E) characteristically recruits intermediaries – the angel (rather than God) who calls from heaven (Gen. 22:11); and the latest source (P) depicts God as remote and non-anthropomorphic – as the apparently formless wind, or breath (*rû^ach*), hovering above the waters (Gen. 1:2). The

12 In the Babylonian Talmud idolatry is one of three exceptional sins (alongside certain acts of sexual immorality and murder) (Sanhedrin 74a). Giving up one's life is preferable to committing any of these sins.

13 Source criticism proposes that all or parts of the Hebrew Bible (e.g. the Torah) are composite bodies of text, combining sources that were once independent. The most famous example is the Documentary Hypothesis associated above all with Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), which argues that the Torah shows traces of at least four once discrete sources (J, E, D and P – the Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly sources), alongside major editing processes. Each of J, E, D, and P is associated with characteristic vocabulary, as well as with a distinctive historical setting, theology, and ethnographic bias. Source criticism has its detractors and is not relevant to many forms of so-called higher criticism, such as literary criticism, which works with a final version of the biblical text. None the less, source criticism remains influential, and while which texts are allocated to which sources is widely debated, its basic tenets are very widely accepted.

14 Numbers 12 is using the very word for the divine form (*t^emunâ*) that is used in the aforementioned refutation of such in Deut. 4. Source-critically speaking, Num. 12 would be from an earlier source and Deut. 4 from a later source (presumably the D-source).

15 In the absence of proof for the arguments of source criticism (i.e. of discrete, once independent sources), it too often becomes a case of deciding criteria and then allocating textual units to particular times and sources on the basis of these. Hence, divine anthropomorphism is routinely assigned to the earliest (J) source and divine abstraction to the latest (P) source, suggesting a linearity of development for which there is little evidence. In fact, even in unambiguously later texts, as we will see, anthropomorphism sometimes persists.

distinctions, however, are seldom quite so neat. As noted, Exodus 33 mixes strongly anthropomorphic with non-corporeal imagery, and Genesis 22 (the attempted sacrifice of Isaac) has both God speaking directly to Abraham (vv. 1–2) and the intervention of God’s angel (vv. 11–12). The steps of progression over time are therefore not as clearly signposted or as linear as source criticism sometimes suggests – again the result is polyphonic.

Let me next turn to the Targumim, Aramaic interpretive, or paraphrastic, and sometimes flexibly expansive “translations” of parts of what we now call the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Torah and the Nevi’im.¹⁶ In the Targumim the arguably later intra-Hebrew Bible concealment of divine anthropomorphism is clearly in evidence. The Targumim appear to have served in the first instance (probably from the century before the emergence of the Jesus Movement, i.e. from the last century BCE) as orally delivered explanations in the vernacular Aramaic, following recital of the canonical Hebrew text. From the first century CE these explanations were written down, with Targum Onqelos (of the Torah) and Targum Jonathan (of the Nevi’im) gaining some degree of authority.

One very striking feature of the Targumim tradition is the eschewing of divine anthropomorphism.¹⁷ Targum Onqelos thus routinely refers to God’s presence (*shek-inâ*), instead of to God directly. Even more commonplace is reference to God’s word (*mēmra*), the creative or the directive spoken word of God as God manifests his power in the world. The tendency in the Targumim is to dilute or mitigate, even eliminate, anthropomorphism and directness and to move from physical to abstract imagery, even where the original intention is likely to have been metaphorical all along. Hence, Deuteronomy 30:6 says (clearly metaphorically) “YHWH your God circumcises your heart”, but Targum Onqelos has (the considerably less visceral) “the Lord your God will remove the foolishness of your heart”.¹⁸ Where Numbers 12:8 (cited above) has “the form of YHWH he [Moses] looks upon”, Targum Onqelos has the more distanced “he beholds the likeness of the glory of the Lord”.¹⁹ Where Exodus 15:3 has “YHWH is a man of war”, Targum Onqelos has “the Lord is the lord of victory in battles”. In place of “face to face”, Targum Onqelos has “word with word”. Parts of the divine body, too, are reinterpreted with more coyness – while, curiously, “hand” seems to remain

16 In the Jewish ordering of the Hebrew Bible, Nevi’im (Prophets) forms the second major literary division following Torah.

17 For a full and accessible discussion, which also provides an abundance of linguistic information, see Schochet 1966. Analogously, first-century Jewish philosopher Philo (c.20 BCE to c.50 CE), who explicitly merged Judaism with Greek philosophy, renders Hebrew Bible anthropomorphisms in allegorical terms. Philo speaks of Jews shunning the notion that God has actual human form but explains such depiction in terms of human limitation, because we cannot conceive anything apart from ourselves, see *On the Sacrifices of Abel and Cain* 29.95–96.

18 Schochet 1966, 11. See also Targum 2016.

19 For a very full examination, with Aramaic text, see Drazin 1998.

“hand” in most cases, God’s “arm” routinely becomes “strength” and God’s “mouth” routinely becomes “word”.²⁰

Dwelling briefly on the hand of God – which, as just noted, tends to remain “hand” in the Targumim, whereas “arm”, “mouth”, and other divine body parts tend to be “translated” into non-corporeal entities – it is interesting that while pictorial depictions of God in Jewish art are still unorthodox,²¹ visual depictions of the hand of God are found repeatedly. The most notable are the five examples from the mid-third century Dura Europos synagogue of Syria, the only ancient synagogue with a comprehensive extant decorative scheme.²² In these lively paintings, the hand of God motif is used repeatedly to represent divine intervention or divine approval, including in representations of Moses and the burning bush and the divine intervention at the attempted sacrifice of Isaac (fig. 1a and 1b). That such depiction may have been a more



Fig. 1a (left): The Tora niche of the Dura Europos Synagogue.

Fig. 1b (above): Detail – the hand of God prevents Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. Stähli 1988, 73.

20 For examples, see Schochet 1966, 17–21.

21 Even in Christian art pictorial images of God become commonplace only in the Renaissance. The depiction of God as an old bearded man is particularly familiar from the paintings of Michelangelo and Paolo Veronese, for instance. In Jewish and Israeli art God tends to be depicted in abstract terms, as is seen clearly in a 2006 exhibition held at The Israel Museum, Jerusalem (see http://www.imj.org.il/exhibitions/2006/divine_image/panoramaE.html) and also in Weisner-Ferguson/Sorek 2006.

22 Images of the synagogue’s art are widely available online. For a comprehensive and illustrated account of the historical significance of Dura Europos, see Chi/Heath 2011.

widespread Jewish convention, persisting for hundreds of years, might be confirmed by the Beth Alpha synagogue mosaics (cf. fig. 2), located near Beit Shean in northern Israel, which date to the sixth century CE.²³ The existence of these Jewish pictorial images from disparate times and settings may dispel too narrow an interpretation of historical prohibition of visual images of God, for it appears that there has existed some scope within Judaism to depict divine action pictorially and anthropomorphically.



Fig. 2: Bet Alpha Synagogue – the hand of God prevents Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. Stähli 1988, 63.

As Jewish tradition developed through the centuries and into the medieval period, influential sages like Maimonides (1135–1204) would re-emphasize a notion so clearly indicated in the interpretation of the Targumim: any suggestion of God’s body or human appearance is to be regarded as purely allegorical. The third of Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles, a distillation of essential Jewish beliefs as drawn from Torah, stresses Jewish belief in God’s non-corporeality and that God is unaffected by any physical occurrences, including movement, rest, or dwelling.²⁴

Alongside this discomfort with divine corporeality, pronounced emphasis on the voice of God and its authority remains central in this later period. The voice of God is already powerfully present in the Hebrew Bible. Its accentuated prominence in the Targumim is indicated by the common substitution of “the Lord” or “YHWH” with *mēmra*, “the (divine) word”. In the rabbinical writings of the Tosefta, Mishnah, and

23 Again the hand of God appears here in a visual representation of the attempted sacrifice of Isaac. The *manus dei* (“hand of God”) or *dextera domini* (“right hand of God”) was also a prominent motif in pre-Renaissance Christian visual art.

24 For a full discussion of the Thirteen Principles and the complex history of their interpretation, see Shapiro 2004.

Talmud, moreover, this emphasis is reconfirmed by the prominence of the expression *bat qôl*, literally “daughter of a voice”. God, over time, thus becomes less visible and increasingly more auditory.

Let me make this clearer. Ostensibly, the voice of God seems less controversial than the body of God – without, however, explaining how a voice exists in the absence of a body. God’s voice throughout the Hebrew Bible is resoundingly prominent. In Genesis 1 God is rather active – he creates, hovers, sees, separates, calls, makes, sets, and blesses – but above all he *says*, and his speaking brings into being. Psalm 33, referring back to the events of this majestic chapter, intones, “by the word of YHWH heavens were made ... because he spoke, and it was so” (vv. 6, 9). Psalm 29 is almost entirely about the voice (*qôl*) of YHWH, which is over the waters (v. 3); it is powerful and full of majesty (v. 4); it breaks the cedars (v. 5) and flashes forth fire (v. 7), shakes the wilderness (v. 8) and causes either the oaks to whirl or the deer to calve (v. 9) (the Hebrew is difficult and ambiguous). Elsewhere, memorably, God’s voice calls from the burning bush (Exod. 3:4) and booms from Job’s whirlwind (Job 38). God’s prophets, while sometimes called seers, who report visions, also receive God’s messages aurally, frequently stating “so says YHWH” (*kôh ’amar YHWH*), which punctuates, for instance, the first chapter of Amos (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 13), or “hear the word of YHWH” (*shim’û d’bar-YHWH*, e.g. Isa. 1:10; cf. “the word of YHWH came to me”, e.g. Jer. 1:11, 13). Moreover, the Torah and *Nevi’im* express particular disgust at false gods, or idols, with bodies of stone and wood “that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell” (Deut. 4:28) – that is, they have a body but no life and no speech (cf. Deut. 29:17; Hab. 2:19). It is ambivalent and contested whether God *has* a form or body, but unambiguous that God has a powerful voice.

The human voice has the capacity to be imbued by the divine. When called to prophesy Isaiah has his guilt removed and is rendered fit for duty by a live coal from the altar touched to his mouth (Isa. 6:6–7). The hand of God touches the prophet Jeremiah’s mouth (Jer. 1:9) and the prophet Ezekiel is raised to his feet by God’s voice (Ezek. 2:2) and is given a scroll to consume (Ezek. 3:1–3). All become channels for God’s words.²⁵ In Proverbs God’s mouth imparts knowledge and understanding (Prov. 2:6) and wise teachers pass it on with their words (Prov. 4:10; 7:1). Much of didactic material in the Hebrew Bible is concerned with proper speech and with controlling speech, notably in the book of Proverbs. The wise have judicious speech (Prov. 16:23), and pleasant words are like honeycomb, healing for the body (Prov. 16:24). Rash words are harmful (Prov. 12:18). Those who guard their mouths preserve their lives (Prov. 13:3), and those who spare words are judicious (Prov. 17:27) – plus, my favourite, to be heeded by academics in particular, “even fools keeping mum are considered wise; in closing their lips, they are deemed intelligent” (Prov. 17:28).

25 Moses’ shining face (Exod. 34:29–35) transmits something of God in a visual and striking way. The transmission of God’s *word* is depicted more regularly with reference to prophecy.

The Thanksgiving Hymns²⁶ even suggest that there is within the human voice something of the divine. The Hymns state,

It is you who creates breath for the tongue and you know its words; you establish the fruits of the lips before they exist. You set words on the line and the movement of breath from the lips you measure. You bring forth sounds according to their mysteries, and the movements of breath from the lips according to its metre, so that they may tell of your glory and recount your wonders in all your works of truth and in all your righteous judgments; and so that your name be praised by the mouth of all, and so that they may know you according to their understanding and bless you forever (col. IX, ll. 25ff in Vermes; Unit 5 of 9:1–10:4 in Harkins).²⁷

This extrabiblical passage unequivocally expresses that the human voice is envisaged as a divine creation, a tool for teaching about God, and a vehicle to praise God.

The voice of God then, less controversially²⁸ than the divine form, emerges from the Hebrew Bible as manifesting divine power. While in the Hebrew Bible the dominant impression is that the divine voice is not separate from a divine body, the corporeality of God is undermined by some few passages in the Hebrew Bible, notably Deuteronomy 4. This tendency to emphasise voice and mitigate divine form – with the striking exception of the hand – emerges clearly in later literature, post-dating the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Targumim and also the rabbinical writings. In Proverbs and in the Thanksgiving Hymns from Qumran, the human voice rather than the human form reflects God, or maybe God’s likeness, which in Genesis 1 and 5 seems more straightforwardly to pertain to the physical likeness of God and of humans.

Let me conclude with a delightful story from the Talmud, featuring the “daughter of a voice” (a literal translation of *bat qôl*), an expression that appears very frequently in post–Hebrew Bible Jewish writing. The expression can refer to a “sound” or “resonance” more generally but is used widely in rabbinic writing to refer to a heavenly or divine voice, proclaiming God’s judgment or will – either to individuals or to groups

26 The Thanksgiving Hymns, or *Hodayot*, were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls near the site of Qumran. They have some similarity with the biblical Psalms. Their date of composition is difficult to establish. Geza Vermes proposes that the collection “attained its final shape during the last pre-Christian century”, but individual compositions may be considerably older. See Vermes 1997, 244.

27 Adapted from the translations of Vermes 1997, 255, and Harkins 2013, 2039–2040. Harkins points out that here “the hymnist describes the primordial origins of speech and thus praise. These lines presume a scenario like that found in Ps. 19:2–5, which describes the divine creation of speech” (Harkins 2013, 2039).

28 There may, however, be scope for controversy here too. Hence, in Boyarin 2004, Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin argues in a chapter entitled “The Crucifixion of the Memra: How the Logos Became Christian” that the notion of division of the godhead, which came to be associated with Christian logos-theology, had its counterpart in Judaism with Torah or Memra having some degree of autonomous divine status. Boyarin argues that logos-theology was “a living current within non-Christian Judaic circles from before the Christian era until well into late antiquity, when the Palestinian Targums were produced” and that only a “complex process of splitting ... ultimately gave rise to Judaism and Christianity” (131–132). The potential theological problem here is the suggestion that in Judaism there may have existed the notion of divine power that is also to some extent distinct and separate from God.

of people, sometimes whole nations. While the expression does not mean echo, it seems to pertain mostly to a smaller voice, even a murmur, and sometimes to a muffled sound coming from the netherworld. According to the Tosefta,²⁹ following the death of the final prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel but the *bat qôl* was still heard occasionally (Sotah viii.2). The suggestion is that not only a prophet but also his generation has to be worthy to receive the voice of God, or of God's holy spirit, but the smaller *bat qôl* persisted beyond the period of prophecy into the rabbinical period, issuing pronouncements of the divine will. *Bat qôl* is a lesser gift but it is not less reliable.

One story recorded in both Talmuds³⁰ recounts a rabbinical argument about the purity or otherwise of a new oven. After Rabbi Eliezer has called up a series of miracles to prove the oven's purity but has still failed to persuade the other rabbis, the *bat qôl* (coming from heaven and accepted as divine) decrees that the view of Rabbi Eliezer is correct and should be adopted. At this point Rabbi Joshua points to the Torah passage at Deuteronomy 30:12,³¹ which states that divine commandments are present (by implication, here on earth) and need not, therefore, be retrieved with great difficulty from heaven. He goes on to declare that because the Torah is not in heaven, there is no cause to pay heed to the *bat qôl*. In other words, the *bat qôl* has been relegated below the authority of Torah in legal decisions: God may speak out loud, but God is overruled by his Torah (see Babylonian Talmud, *Nezikin*, *Baba Metzia* 59b).

The postscript to this story is that another rabbi, Rabbi Nathan, a mystic who from time to time met with Elijah the prophet, God's messenger, who had been taken up to heaven, asked Elijah, "and what did God do next?" – that is, after that moment when Rabbi Joshua pushed divine pronouncement out of the ruling. Elijah replies that God laughed with mirth, because God's children had defeated God. In other words, God gave the Torah and along with it the capacity to interpret it, and even God cannot interfere in that process. God's voice can be heard and is correct – but it cannot overrule. Such a concession to human activities of interpretation and exchange is rather heartening and affirming in any analysis (such as this one) of the multifarious depictions of the body and voice of God.

29 Tosefta (meaning "supplement" or "addition") is a compilation of Jewish oral law, in many respects a supplement to the Mishnah (the written down Jewish oral law). The Tosefta uses the same orders, or divisions (*sedarim*) as the Mishnah.

30 The Talmud is a wide-ranging record of rabbinical discussions on Mishnah. There are two Talmudic traditions: *Yerushalmi* (the Jerusalem Talmud) and *Bavli* (the Babylonian Talmud).

31 This passage is also of interest on the topic of voice. Here divine commandment is said to be near (rather than far and inaccessible). It is called "the word" (*haddâbâr*) and is located in the mouth and heart (Deut. 30:11–14).

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“This Voice Has Come for Your Sake”

Seeing and Hearing in John’s Gospel

ABSTRACT

The gospel of John confronts the problems of human finitude and separation from God and others. Its theological innovations push at the boundaries of time and space, invoking the senses as vehicles for healing separation. The act of hearing is particularly significant and draws on biblical and rabbinic concepts. Perception, couched in the sense organs, is the source of understanding God. Philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Henri Bergson consider the role of sense-perception in understanding the self in relation. Transhumanism promotes the extension of sense-capabilities of hearing and seeing. Enhancement of the senses allows greater capacity for the self to develop, reduces alienation, and provides the possibility, in secular terms, of what John promised in religious terms, “more abundant life” (John 10:10).

KEYWORDS

Gospel of John, voice, hearing, senses, incarnation, Deleuze, Bergson, transhumanism, disability, enhancement

BIOGRAPHY

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More than any other gospel author, John engages the problem of being human – subject to physical limitations and a short lifespan and marked by separateness. A sense of human longing haunts John’s gospel, longing for loved ones, for community, for knowledge of God. We hear a longing for those who leave us that echoes the feeling of a child left by its parent. Jesus predicting his death says, “Little children ... where I am going, you cannot come” (13:33; see also 7:33–34, NRSV used throughout). At the Last Supper Peter protests, “Lord, why can I not follow you now?” (13:37). Similarly, Thomas says, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (14:5). Jesus recognises their feeling of abandonment, as he promises, “I will not leave you orphaned” (14:18).

Jesus himself weeps at the grave of Lazarus and looks for his friend, saying, “where have you laid him?” (11:34–35). In the same way, Mary Magdalene runs frantically and then cries alone near Jesus’ empty tomb, “they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him” (20:13). I recall the anguish of people searching for their missing relatives after 9/11, echoing the same painful question, “Where is my loved one now?”

John articulates the longing to feel at home in one’s world and at ease in community. Despite Jesus’ coming into the world, the world does not know him (1:10), nor will it welcome his disciples, as he warns them, “If the world hates you, know that it hated me before it hated you” (15:18). John’s gospel exhibits a sense of alienation that pits heaven against the world, a place of darkness, sin, and ignorance that is ruled by Satan. Jesus fears his followers will be adrift and vulnerable after his death, in the world but not of it, so prays to the Father to keep them from the evil one (17:11–15). Relations with the local Jewish community are at an impasse such that John sees himself and fellow believers as no longer welcome there.¹ Notably, the individuals with whom Jesus successfully interacts and who understand his identity are models of difference, people marginalised by their ethnicity, gender, and disability—the Samaritan woman, Mary of Bethany, Mary Magdalene, and the man blind from birth.

Finally, the gospel bespeaks the longing to know and understand God, but no one has ever seen God (1:18), no one comes to the Father except by the Son (14:6). No one has seen the Father or heard his voice (6:46), except the one from God. Not everyone can hear God’s voice (5:37; 8:47; 12:29) or see him (5:37) or his works (10:25). God does not listen to sinners (9:31). Some cannot know God (7:28; 8:19). The overall effect of these statements is that, minus intervention by the Son, a veil exists between the ordinary human and God.

Yet the gospel raises the hope “that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (10:10). Craig Koester shows that John addresses the fundamental problems of separation that flow from being human, experiencing the limits of our finite bodies. He

1 The debate over *birkat ha minim* continues. Three references to being put out of the synagogue (9:22; 12:42; 16:2) suggest some kind of alienation. See the classic article by Reuven Kimelman, Kimelman 1981, and a more recent revival of the idea by Joel Marcus, Marcus 2009.

observes that every symbol for Jesus relates to a corresponding human problem. If Jesus is the light of the world, people are blind or in darkness. If he gives living water, people must be thirsty. If people are separate from God, he is the Way.²

John offers three innovative theological responses to humanity's problems that push at the normal boundaries of physical bodies in time and space. First, in the incarnation, Jesus, the vehicle for knowledge of God, takes on a human body. Second, John's "realised eschatology" sees the community as already living in the new, glorious reality, while simultaneously looking towards the future for final redemption. Third, the gospel promises that after Jesus returns to heaven, the Paraclete, or Advocate, will come, remaining with the community as the continuing non-corporeal presence of Jesus.

To express his relatively sophisticated theology, the author takes a route through the body and the senses. Despite the gospel's reputation as "the spiritual gospel"³ and its undeniable cosmic dualism that denigrates this world, matter, and flesh (1:13), it is sensuous, materialist, and body-oriented. The incarnation, usually expressed along the lines "the Word (Logos) became flesh and dwelt among us" (1:14), is more literally translated as "the Logos became flesh and pitched a tent among us". The word "dwelt" or "tented among us" (*eskēnōsen hēmin*) is an obvious reference to the tent, or tabernacle in the Hebrew Bible, the portable sanctuary that Israel carried through the desert after the Exodus. As it was the physical manifestation of God's presence with the people in exile, so John implies that Jesus is the physical presence of that same God who lives among his followers.

The gospel invokes all the senses, both metaphorically and literally.⁴ Martha fears the smell of death at Lazarus' tomb (11:39), but later the aroma of perfume fills the air when her sister Mary anoints Jesus' feet (12:3). Jesus heals by spitting, kneading mud, and daubing it on the blind man's eyes (9:6). He invites Thomas to touch his wounds in order to believe it is he (20:27), but shakes off Mary Magdalene in the garden, saying, "do not hold on to me" (20:17). Jesus insists that only the one who feeds on his flesh and drinks his blood has eternal life and shares his being (6:53–58). Three times John uses the word *trōgein*, "feed on", a word that originally applied to animals eating plants, meaning "to gnaw, nibble, or munch". Robert Kysar expresses the startling nature of John's assumption that "the ultimate reality of the Universe – God – is to be experienced through a grasp of the mundane sensory experiences of life".⁵

The most frequent sense reference is to sight, a virtual equivalent to understanding in John. Forms of the verbs "to see" appear roughly one hundred times in the

2 Koester 2006, 408.

3 Clement of Alexandria is cited by Eusebius as defending the gospel's place in the canon, "John, perceiving the external facts had been made plain in the gospel, being urged by his friends and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual gospel" (Ecclesiastical History 6.14.5–7).

4 See Lee 2010. Dorothy Lee argues that the sense imagery flows from the importance of the incarnation and functions to aid human imagination.

5 Kysar 2007, 105–106.

gospel. In about half the cases, they mean “to see with the eyes”, and in half they mean “to know” or “to understand”, while in six places they mean both kinds of seeing. Jesus is called a “light” eleven times in the gospel. Hating evil and doing good equals coming to the light (3:20–21). Many statements show Jesus as the mirror of the Father; seeing him is seeing the Father (5:19, 6:40; 14:7; 14:9). Knowing the Father comes from seeing Jesus: “If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him” (14:7) and, to Philip, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9). Belief in the resurrection is the result of seeing. The Beloved Disciple sees the empty tomb and believes (20:8). Mary Magdalene and other disciples express their belief as “we have seen the Lord” (20:18, 25).

The symbols of light and darkness pervade stories that are juxtaposed in chapters one and four. Nicodemus, the Jewish teacher, comes to Jesus by night, but fails to understand. The Samaritan woman, by contrast, meets him in broad daylight and comes to understand him in stages, beginning with “I see that you are a prophet” (4:19). Potent symbolism appears in the story of the healing of the blind man, which plays on images of real and metaphorical blindness. Jesus’ claim “I am the light of the world” (9:5) introduces the story. The verb “to see” in the sense of “to know” appears seven times in this story (e.g. “we know that this is our son” [9:20] or “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see” [9:25]). As Jesus heals the man blind from birth, the man grows in knowledge of Jesus’ identity, proclaiming him a prophet, his healer, the one whom God listens to, then, finally, the Son of Man. The Pharisees/Jews, by contrast, sink lower in understanding as the story progresses. Jesus proclaims, “I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who do see may become blind” (9:39). The Pharisees ask if they are blind and the punchline of the story is “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘we see,’ your sin remains” (9:41).

The seven miracles of Jesus in John are called not miracles, but “signs” to provoke belief.⁶ In the Hebrew Bible, signs and wonders are God’s manifestations of God’s power. The gospel makes clear that seeing signs reveals Jesus’ identity as the man from God and brings viewers to belief. After the changing of the water to wine at Cana, it reports, “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (2:11). When Jesus tells the disciples that Lazarus is dead, he adds, “for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe” (11:15), namely as a result of seeing Jesus’ forthcoming miracle of raising Lazarus back to life. The editor mentions other signs not written in the gospel,⁷ but “these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:31).

6 Chapter twenty-one is considered a later addition to the gospel, but it contains a sign in 21:14.

7 The possibility of a “signs source”, a collection of Jesus’ miracles known to the author, was first articulated by Rudolf Bultmann and developed by Robert Fortna and others, but it has not produced consensus.

But all is not simple with signs. First, they are not always effective, because some people who have seen many of Jesus' signs do not believe in him (12:37). Furthermore, another strain in the gospel prefers faith that does not come from seeing signs: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (20:29). John knows such dramatic miracles do bring people to faith, but such signs-based faith is temporary and inadequate, a "beginner's faith", Kysar suggests, like training wheels on a bicycle.⁸ Koester goes further, saying John thinks signs-faith is not true faith at all.⁹ In either case, the final editor seems to prefer those who believe without signs, which naturally would include his own community, living at the end of the first century and not eyewitnesses to Jesus' life.

John shows no such ambivalence about the sense of hearing. Hearing, like seeing, is a symbol for understanding and recognition, but the author never suggests believers should "grow out of it". One probable reason is that hearing is a more traditional metaphor, with deep roots in the Hebrew Bible. At Sinai, Israel heard the voice of God and agreed, "We will do and hear" (Exod. 24:7; author's translation). God says he will come to Moses in thick cloud (obscuring vision) "that the people may hear when I speak with you, and so trust you ever after" (Exod. 19:9). Israel's fundamental statement of identity is Deuteronomy 6:4, the *Shema*, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone."¹⁰ Later, the rabbis develop the idea of the *bat kol*, literally "the daughter of the voice", God's voice which comes out of heaven to speak to people.¹¹ Similarly, the *memra* (lit. "word" in Aramaic) represents God through speech in the Targumim, the earliest translations and commentaries on the Bible, and in rabbinic and apocryphal works. Along with the more capacious idea of the *Schehina*, God's emanation that appears in biblical, rabbinic, and mystical literature, these evocations of God's voice reassure believers of access and communication with God even after the end of revelation and prophecy.

The second, perhaps more important reason that John does not discount the sense of hearing, is that it is precisely the way that his community comes to faith. Living sixty to seventy years after Jesus, they are not eyewitnesses to his ministry. Hearing the words and deeds of Jesus proclaimed by teachers is how they "see" Jesus and God. Their guarantor is the eyewitness called the Beloved Disciple, now dead, whose testimony is the bedrock of the gospel. The Beloved Disciple saw the signs, but the community hears the report of the signs. Were hearing an unreliable medium, their basis for belief would be threatened.

8 Kysar 2007, 99.

9 Koester 2003, 139.

10 Note also that Israel's status as chosen is contingent on seeing and hearing, Exod. 19:4-5, "you have seen what I did to the Egyptians ... if you obey [lit. really hear] my voice ... you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples". Failing to hear God's voice and obey the commandments brings down curses in Deut. 28:15. In Proverbs, Wisdom is personified as a woman who calls out to hearers.

11 See b.Yoma 9b, which says that after the death of the last prophet, God communicated through a *bat kol*.

The gospel begins with the image of Jesus as the hypostasised Word or Logos in chapter one. John the Baptist is “the voice of one crying in the wilderness” (1:23), announcing the coming Messiah. The Baptist later compares himself to the best man at a wedding, who stands aside and rejoices to hear the voice of the bridegroom (3:29). Numerous examples in John show “hearing the voice” or “hearing the word” as equivalent to true knowledge of Jesus and God. While some cannot hear his voice (5:37), for those who can hear, coming to faith via hearing is authentic faith.

In John’s distinctive realised eschatology, hearing confers life in the present and the future: “anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me *has* eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but *has passed* from death to life ... the hour is coming and *is now* here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God” (5:24–25). In an extended metaphor of the sheep passing through the door of the sheepfold, the sheep know the shepherd because they know his voice, and he calls them by name (10:26–28).

When Jesus asks the Father to glorify his own name, the Father’s voice from heaven booms out, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd hears it, and some say it thundered, perhaps reminiscent of God’s voice at Sinai. Jesus says to them “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out” (12:30–31). So in the imminent cosmic crisis, the Voice is God’s way of identifying his own. Right before his death, Jesus says to Pilate, “everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” (18:37).

By contrast, in an increasingly acrimonious exchange with Jews (who had believed in him) (8:31–47), Jesus tells them they cannot “know”, that is, understand, what he says because they cannot hear his words (v. 43) because they do not belong to God: “Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God” (v. 47).

Seeing and hearing can act in concert (12:44–50; 19:35), as in the crucial scene where Mary Magdalene meets Jesus in the garden after the resurrection (20:11–18). Although Peter and the Beloved Disciple saw the empty tomb and the discarded burial cloths, the first to actually meet the risen Jesus is Mary Magdalene. After Peter and the Beloved Disciple see the empty tomb, they depart, while she stays and using multiple senses, sees, hears, and, extrapolating from verse seventeen, seemingly touches the risen Jesus. She has remained, crying in the garden and telling angels at the tomb, “they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him”. She turns around and seeing Jesus does not recognise him, literally, “she turned around and saw (*theōrei*) Jesus standing there, but did not know (*ēdei*, from the verb *eidō*, “to see”) that it was Jesus” (20:14). She saw, but she did not see. He speaks, saying, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” She still does not recognise him, thinks he is the gardener, and asks if he knows where Jesus’ body is. Only when he says her name, “Mary” (*Mariam*), does she recognise him. It is as if by speaking her name, he opens her eyes, as he opened the eyes of the blind man to see

his true identity. She calls him “My rabbi” and must have embraced him, because he says, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.” Many have tried to explain this odd statement, but Raymond Brown is right, I think, in saying that the point is that the relationship to the earthly, bodily Jesus is over.¹² They cannot simply go back to the way things were.

Mary’s recognition comes by a combination of seeing, hearing, and touching. Another, parallel encounter appears a few verses later, when Jesus appears to the disciples in hiding (20:19–21). He speaks to them, then shows them his wounds. Only when they have both heard and seen do the disciples get it: “Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.” Interestingly, Thomas, who is not there with them, demands to see and touch Jesus: “unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe” (20:25). But he is chided for his demand when, eight days later, Jesus seems to dare him, saying, “put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe” (20:27). Thomas never does so, and as with Mary Magdalene, knowing Jesus by touch is problematic.

This chapter, which most agree is the final chapter from the evangelist, embraces all the normal ambivalence about knowing by way of the senses. There is running, crying, seeing, hearing, embracing, resisting embrace, fear, doubt, and joy. It begins in literal, predawn darkness, as a grieving Mary Magdalene approaches. It moves towards real and figurative light, as the day ends with all but Thomas believing because they have seen the Lord. Finally Jesus confers the Spirit on the disciples by “breathing on them”, a physical act that echoes the God who breathed life into Adam in Genesis. Sense experience allows us to apprehend truth and know the other, but it is imperfect. The characters show a range of human emotions, frustration at bodily limits, the partial and gradual quality of knowing the other, and the impossibility of holding on to the other.

Yet the text promises knowledge that reaches beyond the finite self and softens boundaries based in time, space, difference, and identity. The Father and Son are bound up with one another, folding in believers. Jesus prays that those who believe in him “may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ... I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one” (17:20–23). The Paraclete is the bodiless extension of Jesus that accompanies the community after his departure. Realised eschatology claims that believers live in two kinds of time and already live in a rarefied state, taking part in eternal life (16:21–23; 17:21–23).

John invites us to think about the problems of being human. First, he speaks to the problem of human longing and desire to heal separation. Second, he suggests

12 Brown 1970, 1013–1014. See also D’Angelo 1990, who cites a parallel in the Apocalypse of Moses, where Adam is in the process of returning to life and tells Eve, “don’t keep touching me”. D’Angelo suggests a concept in which death is undone by stages and the process of return to physical life is fraught with danger and impurity.

that separation is partly the result of the limitations of being human, subject to death, distance, and difference. All human knowing is partial. Third, he thinks that the bodily experiences via the senses are sources of true knowledge. Last, sensory recognition is dynamic, operating in time and relationship.

John's world is not our world, but John invites us to think about the place of the body, and especially the senses, in expanding human possibility. John exhibits a qualified dualism that maintains flesh and spirit as distinct categories (3:6; 6:3) yet brings them together via perception. Although the pain of separation can only be answered by recognising another, non-corporeal reality, he shows perception and understanding are couched in the sense organs. Bodies of believers are vehicles of perception.

Contemporary philosophers approach these issues with tools of post-Enlightenment philosophy. A well-known essay by Gilles Deleuze, "What Can a Body Do?", restates a question posed by Spinoza that understands the body in terms of its capacities to be affected and to act, not in terms of essences.¹³ John might put it as "what can a body hear or see?" Like John, both philosophers (Spinoza and Deleuze) reject a total mind-body split – what happens in one happens in the other. A body is the sum of its capacities, a combination of affects (perhaps similar to my word "longings") and relations. Objects themselves can create affects and begin the process of relating to the object. In John's gospel, one has to ask, why does not everyone see who Jesus really is, why cannot everyone hear his voice? Nicodemus hears his words but goes away confused. Some of the Jews had technically believed in him but could not stomach his words. So they possess different capacities to be affected. This implies a certain determinism that some simply cannot apprehend the truth because of their limitations. Intention or will cannot solve anything. If our wills dominated, we would all be perfectly thin, fit, and accomplished.

Although Deleuze hardly sees the world as a Johannine dual cosmos, he describes the larger reality as a mix and flow of forces that act on people. People participate in the wash of events, both acted upon and acting, according to their different capacities to receive and respond. Consider the dynamic dance in John's image "that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ... I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one" (17:20–23).

Deleuze was influenced by Henri Bergson, who probes the relation of body and spirit. His insight suggests that the act of perception is the meeting place of body and spirit (or mind). In *Matter and Memory*, he says, "this book affirms the reality of spirit and the reality of matter, and tries to determine the relation of the one to the other by the study of a definite example, that of memory".¹⁴ For Bergson, perception is the place where body and soul,¹⁵ matter and consciousness, meet. The body

13 Deleuze 1992, 217–234.

14 Bergson 1988, 9.

15 Bergson uses the terms "spirit", "soul", and "mind" somewhat interchangeably. His "l'esprit" is translated as "mind". In the ancient world *pneuma*, *psyche*, and *nous* had more specific meanings.

presents functioning eyes, ears, and all the senses that make perception possible. We understand that seeing and hearing involve physical changes in matter, vibrating eardrums, stimulation of the optic nerve and the like. Yet we have all failed to hear or see something because we are concentrating on something else. Or we can hear without understanding, say a foreign language or a musical instrument from another culture. Within perception there are elements like attention and recognition that are not about matter. So another contribution to perception comes via the mind or spirit, which uses memory to makes sense of images coming in. Bergson notes,

we can understand that spirit can rest upon matter and, consequently, unite with it in the act of pure perception, yet nevertheless be radically distinct from it. It is distinct from matter in that it is, even then, *memory*, that is to say, a synthesis of past and present with a view to the future, in that it contracts the moments of this matter in order to use them and to manifest itself by actions which are the final aim of its union with the body.¹⁶

A recent article on memory by Michael Specter addresses the malleable nature of perception and the role of memory.¹⁷ He notes,

Neurons are programmed by our DNA, and they rarely change. On the other hand, synapses, the small gaps between neurons turn out to be highly mutable. Synaptic networks grow as we learn, often sprouting entirely new branches, based on the way that chemical messengers called neurotransmitters pass between neurons. ‘The growth and maintenance of new synaptic terminals make memory persist’ [Eric] Kandel wrote in his book *In Search of Memory: The Emergence of a New Science of Mind* (2006).

Perceptual capabilities then develop over time, as a result of experience, creating changes in the organism itself, which then affects its response to future events.

Bergson seems to say one can slip from one reality to the other via perception. The error that many make, he says, is looking for that union of body and spirit in space, when we should look for the union in time. Time allows for changes in degrees, development, “growing intensity of life”, “ever-greater latitude of the activity of the living being”, the “independence of the living being in regard to matter”. One can step back from the flow, use the memory to select and organise, and influence the future. He says if you incorrectly think of body and soul in terms of space, “it is like two railway lines that cut each other at a right angle. If one thinks in terms of time, the rails come together in a curve, so that we pass insensibly from the one to the other.”¹⁸

While we cannot ignore the complexity of these issues, nor the gulf that separates an ancient writer from twentieth-century philosophers, Deleuze and Bergson present several ideas that help us think about the gospel. First, the self is a coming together of capacities for understanding. Second, perception is an event that unifies the body and

16 Bergson 1988, 220.

17 Specter 2014.

18 Bergson 1988, 222.

soul. Third, memory is created by events that act upon the self and helps make sense of subsequent events. Fourth, these events take place within a wash of events, so one's capacity to grow in understanding is a function of time. Last, there are no rigid borders between body and soul, between past, present, and future. John also speaks of slipping from the corporeal to the spiritual via perception and memory. No one can see the Father except via the Son. No one has seen God, he tells us over and over, God is not corporeal, not visible to the eye. But, "whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say 'Show us the Father?'" (14:9) and "whoever sees me sees him who sent me" (12:45). So you *have* seen the Father. You have entered into the spiritual by way of your bodily perception of Jesus in the form of flesh. You have slipped across the curved railway line. This creates a permanent effect. Memory further allows the report of these experiences to pass to subsequent generations.

John's three innovative theological ideas assert that body and spirit interact in time and memory. The incarnation concept, for example, asserts that within the flux of the temporally unfolding universe, at one point the same abstract Logos that was present at creation coalesces and takes on human flesh and form. By passing from the non-corporeal to corporeal, he becomes a vehicle for others to experience the non-corporeal, a porous membrane between heaven and earth. Similarly, realised eschatology asks readers to understand themselves as living within two kinds of time, the normal, mundane time that moves in one direction and the eternal, glorified existence beyond regular time. Hearers are to understand that they have *already* passed from death to life. Finally, the idea of the Paraclete, the advocate or counsellor, says that the physical Jesus must go away in order for this spiritual presence to come to the community: "If I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you" (16:7). The corporeal must cede to the incorporeal, but an identity remains, dwelling with the earthly community. These three innovations from John exhibit a nuanced expression of relations between body, spirit, and temporality that moves far beyond earlier gospels.

These thinkers, ancient and modern, articulate the crucial importance of perception in bridging body and spirit and healing the pain of human separation. Today, transhumanism uses the language of biology to talk about extending the body's perceptual possibilities. Enhancement of senses via technology, especially the senses of hearing and speaking, creates new ways to reach beyond the finite self. Disability Studies was a bellwether in recognising the "contingency of the body". Nancy Eiesland showed that for the disabled, technology like wheelchairs or braces was part of the experience of embodiment, allowing a fuller flourishing of the self.¹⁹ Andy Clark says that through incorporation and restructuring, our best tools become us, that the self of embodied agency is a "soft self".²⁰ He notes that we need a fuller under-

19 Eiesland 1994.

20 Clark 2013, 124.

standing of human beings as they take in the world, as adaptable and given to neural plasticity. His example of a person running to catch a fly ball shows that sensing is not a simple interaction but “opening a channel” to the world, where information keeps flowing in and the person keeps adapting to it.²¹

Voice and hearing, so essential to the biblical worldview, are apt symbols of the human condition of contingency. Voice reveals age, illness, and mortality. If one speaks to elderly or sick people on the phone, their voices reveal their condition. A person near death often cannot speak. A large part of our grief at the loss of a loved one is our inability to hear that person’s voice.

Our selfhood is bound to voice. This article began during a period when I was recovering my voice after a long viral illness. My experience had been severely diminished by the weakness of my voice, affecting daily relationships, expression of emotions, participation in my communities, and potentially, my livelihood as a professor. Without my voice I could not be my real self. For good reason the metaphor of “finding one’s voice” appears in feminism, the arts, and psychology, implying an expression of the true and vibrant self.

Enhancement of hearing and speaking can go small, as individuals use constantly improving wireless technology to replace or improve hearing, speech-generating devices to replace voices that have been lost, or amplifiers to improve audibility. All such enhancements require a period of incorporation until, as Clark notes, “our best tools and technologies literally become us”.²² Anyone who sees using progressive lenses can likely remember the first day wearing them, when simply walking down stairs was difficult.

Enhancing the voice can go large via communications technology, and social media can help bridge the gulf of place and time, even language. Consider the little question at top of the computer screen “Want me to translate?” or Skype, which reduces separation by making it possible to see and hear loved ones and enter into their daily lives. When enhancement goes large, social media allows one to hear large numbers of voices and ideas and to present oneself to the world. One can invent oneself on social media, raise money for charity, campaign for a candidate, publish an essay, advertise one’s skills, and more.

Transhumanism looks to enlarge on both scales. This movement to enhance human life via science and technology ranges from improving health, perception, and cognition to uploading the brain of an individual as a way of surviving death and even, according to Ray Kurzweil, resurrecting a loved one.²³ While some, like Hans

21 Clark 2013, 115.

22 Clark 2013, 124.

23 In an interview, Kurzweil predicted that by extracting DNA from his father’s grave, adding memories of him from Kurzweil and others, information one day will be coordinated to reconstruct the man, Kushner 2009, 61.

Moravec,²⁴ have visualised complete freedom from the body, most thinkers seem to be in the camp that individual humans will remain a “mixed reality” of physical body and technological enhancement.

We can easily see the potential ethical problems with enhanced uses of technology to extend human functioning on both small and large scales. Totalitarian regimes might seek to create superhumans. Definitions of “normal” may be too restrictive, as for example, when the use of cochlear implants is understood by some in the deaf community as assuming their culture is deficient. Benefits of enhancement are likely to be distributed unequally. Distortion can be a problem when we “go large” if we consider the de-individuation that occurs and breaks down inhibitions. Efficiency of communication technology means that hate, racism, and anti-Semitism can reach a mass audience.²⁵ Online bullying has driven some to despair. We also face the problem of simple overload, which reduces meaning. Jaron Lanier suggests that “the hive turns against personhood” and “small brains may have saved humanity from an earlier outbreak of meaninglessness”.²⁶

We cannot, however, reject the body-machine future because most of us already *are* a mixed reality of body and technology. Who would give up their eyeglasses or hearing aids? Who would reject a pacemaker that gives many more years of life? Who would (or could) step out of the global network without losing opportunities to know and see others? Eiesland shows that technology allows the disabled more agency and interaction with the world, thus withholding it is unethical. But this truth applies to all of us, because we are all limited by our bodily capacities.

Transhumanists profess a range of worldviews, including atheist, humanist, and religious. The gospel author was profoundly religious, familiar with God’s promises in the Hebrew Bible, which he believed were fulfilled in Jesus. John’s gospel illuminates the role of the senses in answering the human longing to end separation. Body and spirit are part of an open, fluctuating reality, as a certain porousness exists between heaven and earth, present and future, human and divine. His understanding sets the senses to work to expand human possibility. As we continue to enhance our senses via technology, perhaps we will “have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

24 Moravec 1997.

25 See Foxman/Wolf 2013.

26 Lanier 2011, 53; 174.

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Voicing the Technological Body

Some Musicological Reflections on Combinations of Voice and Technology in Popular Music

ABSTRACT

The article deals with interrelations of voice, body and technology in popular music from a musicological perspective. It is an attempt to outline a systematic approach to the history of music technology with regard to aesthetic aspects, taking the identity of the singing subject as a main point of departure for a hermeneutic reading of popular song. Although the argumentation is based largely on musicological research, it is also inspired by the notion of presentness as developed by theologian and media scholar Walter Ong.

The variety of the relationships between voice, body, and technology with regard to musical representations of identity, in particular gender and race, is systematized alongside the following categories: (1) the “absence of the body,” that starts with the establishment of phonography; (2) “amplified presence,” as a signifier for uses of the microphone to enhance low sounds in certain manners; and (3) “hybridity,” including vocal identities that blend human body sounds and technological processing, whereby special focus is laid on uses of the vocoder and similar technologies.

KEYWORDS

recorded popular song, gender in music, hybrid identities, race in music, presence/absence, disembodied voices

BIOGRAPHY

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The singing voice, it seems, is more connected to the human body than is any other musical sound. It is produced with body movements only, mainly inside the body, and as a result of using many smaller and larger body parts, including physical cavities, the voice is characteristic of the individual person and his or her body. Roland Barthes expressed that relationship vividly in his path-breaking essay “The Grain of the Voice”, in which he stated that perceiving the “grain”, which is “the body in the voice as it sings”, is “to listen to my relation with the body of the man or woman singing or playing and that relation is erotic”.¹ However, it would be misleading to think of today’s human voices as a resort of “natural” or even “primordial” sounds. On the contrary, speech and singing, like any other bodily action, interact constantly with the culture we live in, including its notions and knowledge about vocal identities (for instance, how male and female voices sound) and the versatile and inescapable interactions with technology (for instance, in telephone conversations or in listening to radio, television, or online video clips). Most of the musical voices we listen to today arrive in our ears not directly from other bodies but from technological devices like speakers or headphones, and in many cases these sounds are not only transmitted but also transformed by technology.

The musical voice as a hybrid of bodily and technological sounds is in particular connected to the history and culture of Euro-American popular music. Popular music as a mass-culture phenomenon is based on the development of sound recording and distribution through the gramophone around 1900; the younger phenomenon of popular music as youth culture, the occurrence of “pop” with an emphatic meaning, was facilitated by the development and marketing of relatively affordable devices like the transistor radio and lighter variants of the turntable.² Young people were enabled to listen to their musical idols, even if they could not afford to attend their concerts. As listening to radio programmes, records, and, later, video clips became a crucial part of popular music culture, people became used to listening to electronically transmitted and transformed voices. This technological hybridity of the musical voice can be described as no less than the standard in popular music.

Still, one of the basic questions raised by listening to popular song is directed at the singing subject. Whose voice is it? The musicologist Allan Moore emphasises that the identity of the singer is generally the aspect with which people are principally concerned as they listen to a track and therefore “the central aspect of the interpretive process”³; put another way, that very identity plays a key role in any hermeneutic approach to recorded popular song. It is important to note that Moore approaches the identity of the singer carefully, by introducing the concept of persona, an “artificial construction that may, or may not, be identical with the person(ality) of the singer”,

1 Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice”, in Barthes 1977, 182.

2 For a detailed overview of these large socio-musical developments see e.g. Middleton 1990, chapter entitled “Forces and relations of production (I)”; Wicke 2001.

3 Moore 2012, 178.

whereby he refers to previous concepts of performance in popular music developed by Simon Frith and Philip Auslander.⁴ While these authors refer to concepts of dramatic performance, Suzanne Cusick, another musicologist, follows Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which implies that identities are never fixed but are constituted by perpetual performances.⁵ Cusick, too, focuses on audible aspects of performances, by asking how gender and sexual identities can be analysed in vocal sounds. However, like Moore, she focuses on sounds produced by the body. The question remains as to the extent to which the regular hybridity of technologically transformed voices affects our readings of popular tracks.

I think it worth looking at what we can learn by combining a hermeneutic approach to identities in recorded popular song with insights from the history of technology in music production. A variety of technological practices influence what we perceive as a musical voice – from the sheer practice of phonography via the use of microphones and amplifiers to more complex vocal transformations that result from the use of vocoders and similar machines. Important strands of these technological developments have already been studied and interpreted, in part even with regard to questions of musical identity and in part in combination with aesthetic analysis. Scholars like Susan McClary and Alexander Weheliye have emphasised the relevance of technology with regard to vocal representations of gender and race respectively.⁶ These aspects of identity, both very significant for constructions of popular musical personae, are stereotypically associated with certain vocal sounds as well as with certain uses of technology. Moreover, as can be concluded from McClary's and Weheliye's analyses, hybrid sounds of bodily and technologically produced voices may potentially challenge culturally established dichotomies like male/female or black/white. Such voices may thus be listened to as audible examples of the performativity of identity. What has rarely been attempted, however, is a systematic overview of diverse combinations of voice and technology in popular song with regard to constructions of identity as well as their musically aesthetic aspects. Miriama Young's book *Singing the Body Electric: The Human Voice and Sound Technology*, the most recent and most comprehensive study within the field, addresses some central aspects of this research question, naturally giving them much more space than a single article can provide.⁷ Although Young's insights are highly interesting for the present article, she is less concerned with popular music or with aspects of gendered or ethnic identity.

In the following, I will provide a necessarily short overview of voice-technology combinations in popular song with regard to musical representations of identity. Gender identities, for instance, have been delineated in many different ways in music through gendered participation in different musical practices – for example, in Euro-

4 Moore 2012, 178; see also Frith 1998; Auslander 2009.

5 Cusick 1999.

6 McClary 2002; Weheliye 2002.

7 Young 2015.

American culture women have been accepted as singers rather than as users of technology.⁸ However, my main concern here is with representations of identity in music, following hermeneutic approaches to musical aesthetics like those of Moore and McClary.⁹ I am looking for possible readings of technologically and bodily produced sounds as utterances from certain – or rather, uncertain – subjects whose identities can be constructed within the hermeneutic process.¹⁰ A focus is directed at the relationship between the body and central historical developments in the technology of music production.

Although this study clearly addresses a musicological question and adopts a musicological perspective, it benefits from the concept of presence as developed by theologian and media scholar Walter Ong. Ong theorises sound, vocal sound especially, in its relationship to the experience of other subjects in a way that can be fruitful for a hermeneutic approach to the identity of the singer. In this regard, presence is the crucial factor: “Sound, bound to the present time by the fact that it exists only at the instant when it is going out of existence, advertises presentness. It heightens presence in the sense of the existential relationship of person to person.”¹¹ What is interesting for the purpose of this essay is the notion that vocal sound implies the presence of another subject, a concept that seems to be in sync with Moore’s observation on the general importance of the singer’s identity for song interpretation. Interestingly, Ong stresses the relevance of vocal presence even for recorded voices: “Even the voice of one dead, played from a recording, envelops us with his presence as no picture can.”¹²

Jonathan Sterne is certainly right when he criticises Ong’s writings on sound as based on universal assumptions for audible experience and on a rather simplistic dualism of audible and visual cultures.¹³ However, I consider the concept of presence helpful for an approach to vocal identities. The point is not to essentialise sound in general and the body as producer of vocal sounds in particular as universal or natural qualities. Presence is interesting because it helps to categorise relationships of body and technology that manifest themselves in certain representations of identity in music, and hence also in individually aesthetic ways. I will argue for different types

8 Cf. Dibben 2002, 121.

9 Regarding gender, Dibben (2002, 121) distinguishes representations in music from other musical constructions of gender identity, like the “typing of musical performance and composition”, “musical taste”, and “remembering and collecting”.

10 It is less important here to decide whether we should talk about representations or performances of identity. Butler’s concept of performativity has been interpreted as more flexible than the concept of representation that is connected to the rather fixed idea of an image (cf. von Hoff 2005). However, performance is so closely connected to the body that it would be rather confusing to subsume all technological transformations of bodily produced voice sounds as well. I prefer to denote the audible hybrid song as a representation of a more or less hybrid identity.

11 Ong 1981, 101; like Young 2015, 20. I think Ong is still relevant for the discussion of sound and voice, even though there are also more recent studies on presence; see for instance the overview Ernst/ Paul 2013.

12 Ong 1981, 101.

13 Sterne 2003, 16–19.

of presence and for presence as an aesthetic category. To that extent, my use of the term “presence” extends that of Ong.

In the following I will argue that the historic development of recorded popular song includes relationships between body and technology that can be described alongside concepts of presence, absence, and hybridity. These concepts will prepare the ground for systematic categories of phenomena of voicing technological bodies in the history of popular music: (1) absence of the body: recorded voices, (2) amplified presence: microphonic bodies, and (3) hybrid identities: vocoders and other technologies of vocal transformation. In my view, this classification extends beyond the too-familiar borders between, for example, rock and pop, pop and popular music, even popular and classical music. I approach that field through observations on select pieces from the history of popular music, from early twentieth-century schlager to today’s pop music by Lady Gaga. The approach via examples illustrates genre-crossing and, furthermore, allows me to include close readings (with a focus on the recent example of Lady Gaga) that can shed light on how a hermeneutic approach to such phenomena might work.

ABSENCE OF THE BODY: RECORDED VOICES

Strictly speaking, the history of the absence of the singing body in music due to technology starts with the transcription of song. Although that aspect is too complex to be dealt with comprehensively in this article, it is important to keep in mind that scholars and music publishers were already collecting traditional songs such as African American spirituals in the nineteenth century. In those early years the perceived melodies were transcribed by the use of musical notation, producing a visual representation of voices in the absence of singers. In the case of the spiritual, the technological appropriation of absent black bodies by white audiences is directly connected to the marginalisation of African Americans in American culture and society.¹⁴ This aspect has heavily influenced the history of globalised popular music and will therefore occur again later in this article.

With the emergence of sound-recording technologies at the end of the nineteenth century, it became possible to listen to “disembodied voice[s]”,¹⁵ the voices of absent singers. Two different sound technologies, both developed in the United States, competed for the first place in a now-globalised industrial world: Thomas Alva Edison’s phonograph and Emile Berliner’s gramophone.¹⁶ Contemporary commentators on the phonograph expressed their fascination with listening to the voices of absent people. For instance, Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, a member of the elite public for Edison’s product presentations in Germany in 1889, commented vividly on the

14 Cf. Weheliye 2002, 28.

15 Laing 1991, 7.

16 Cf. Gauß 2009; Osborne 2014.

recorded voice of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck: “The phonograph enables a man who has been resting in his grave for a long time to lift his voice once again and salute the present age.”¹⁷ Because Bismarck was still alive at the time, von Moltke’s comment was clearly a vision for the future, and, indeed, it was soon possible to hear recorded voices of absent (dead) bodies. Similarly, in his history of the vinyl record Richard Osborne argues that “sound recording promises immortality ... it is a form of cryogenics, preserving life in order to reanimate it at another time”.¹⁸ Ong’s statement on the presence of dead bodies in recordings of their voices clearly resonates with these observations.

Finally, it was not the phonograph but the gramophone that won the competition between the two recording technologies. Its success was due in part to some technological advantages but above all to Berliner’s strategy of commercialising his apparatus not for communication purposes, as Edison had in mind, but for entertainment, which included the recording and distribution of music. In the German context, the schlager genre profited heavily from the new technology. When the gramophone became increasingly popular in bourgeois homes in the late 1920s, some schlager even reflected that new popularity, for instance, “Ich hab zu Haus ein Grammophon” (“I’ve got a gramophone at home”), sung by Max Kuttner (1883–1953), which included the following chorus:¹⁹

Ich hab’ zu Haus’ ein Gra, ein Gra, ein Grammophon,
das macht so schön Trara, Trara, Sie wissen schon.
Man steckt die Nadel rein,
gleich fängt es an zu schrei’n.
Die größte Sensation,
das ist mein Grammophon.

I’ve got a gramophone at home,
that nicely says trara, you know.
As soon as you put the needle in
it starts to scream.
My gramophone
is the greatest sensation.

Like many other pieces from urban cabaret culture, “Ich hab zu Haus ein Grammophon” combines the depiction of new technology – a technology that is so new that its owner rather stammers its name – with erotic allusions. In this case, the phrase “Man steckt die Nadel rein” (“you put the needle in”) offers associations with phallic

17 “Der Phonograph ermöglicht, dass ein Mann, der schon lange im Grabe ruht, noch einmal seine Stimme erhebt und die Gegenwart begrüßt”, cited in Gauß 2013, 31, English translation F.H.

18 Osborne 2014, 22.

19 Kuttner, Max, Ich hab zu Haus ein Grammophon, Schlager Medaillons 4, Membran Music 2004, English translation F.H.

sexual intercourse, the more so as the verses are about stereotypical “boy meets girl” situations. Although this reading may seem bawdy, it picks up on a genre-typical combination of technology and eroticism that can similarly be heard in another schlager recorded by Kuttner, “Die schöne Adrienne hat eine Hochantenne” (“The beautiful Adrienna has an elevated antenna”). Even the blurring of traditional gender differences, sometimes heavily transgressive, became part of schlager culture. As Anno Mungen has demonstrated, gramophone recordings of the 1920s could emphasise the queer practices of cabaret artists like Kuttner or Paul O’Montis precisely because of the technological disembodiment of the voice.²⁰ The absence of the singing body from a gramophone recording emphasised the possibly unclear identification of the singer’s gender and sexuality.

The next important step in the history of recorded music was certainly primarily economic, namely the emergence since the 1950s of affordable music technology like transistor radios and of “teenagers” as a new youthful group of buyers. The evolution of post-war youth culture, with rock’n’roll as one of its main characteristic practices, is strongly linked to the distribution and use of affordable music technology. As early as the 1920s, recordings had offered the opportunity to listen to stars of the time, like Enrico Caruso, to a relatively large group of people, even though they could not afford tickets to a live concert. Only after the Second World War, however, did recorded music become a mass media product, when it was transmitted to and consumed by a large new and young market via radio and cheap vinyl.²¹ Moreover, rock music created a new type of star singer, like Elvis Presley, who embodied youth for a large youthful audience.²²

From the second half of the twentieth century onwards, the most common way of listening to popular song was via recordings or airwave transmission, and more recently also via digital channels. Disembodied, technologically transmitted voices have become the regular vocal sound in Euro-American popular music. The star system, an important part of that musical culture, is based on the technologically constituted presence of mostly absent idealised bodies. Youth is a part of the bodily performances of youth culture and belongs to the technological presence of star bodies. It is a component of audible star images that become mediums of memory over time: we can still listen to Elvis’s youthful voice. Even as a later generation we can perceive the audible markers of a now historic youth culture.

As the example from the 1920s has shown, the phonographic disembodiment of voices led to artistic challenges to supposedly fixed gender and sexual identities at an early stage of technological development. It has often been observed that the urban popular culture of the 1920s already included many progressive elements in aesthetic as well as political terms. Evidently that period also saw a potential for challenging

20 Mungen 2012, 169–180.

21 Cf. Frith 1981.

22 Cf. Shumway 2015.

heterosexual gender norms through recorded popular song, thus introducing a kind of musical queerness *avant la lettre*.

AMPLIFIED PRESENCE: MICROPHONIC BODIES

Technology does not only deliver vocal sounds into times and places where the singing body is absent; it may also enhance or amplify the presence of the body in the here and now. From a chronological perspective this has been a later step in the technological development: early sound recordings were produced by the mechanical transformation of the vocal sounds into “tracks” on wax cylinders or records. Musicians, vocalists as well as instrumentalists, had to adapt their performances to the very special conditions of the studio; “natural” singing was not possible because the position and movements of the body were strictly limited.²³ Only with the development of the electric microphone did a more natural singing become possible. The microphone allowed the recording of relatively low sounds, sounds that we usually only hear when our ear is close to the singer’s mouth. Thus, microphone technology not only improves the conditions for the presence of a voicing body, but even offers opportunities to enhance that presence. This effect can be used in popular song in various ways, all of which affect the identity behind the vocal sound. Here I will discuss three distinct representative strategies for amplifying the bodily presence, each related to certain musical styles and their respective cultural contexts.

The first strategy for amplified presence is the singing style called “crooning”, which developed in the 1920s with the emergence of electric microphones and radio broadcasting in the United States. As Knut Holtsträter emphasises in his study on crooners, for the first time in the history of singing a speaking voice could be used as solo voice together with orchestral accompaniment.²⁴ The impression of intimacy results from the combination of a certain style of singing into the microphone with a strategy that is both lyrical and performative: the singing is close to talking at a low level of loudness; singing very close to the microphone creates an electroacoustic effect of giving greater prominence to the lower frequencies; the crooners used to address their audiences more directly in both their singing and their lyrics. Interestingly for the perspective of identity, the image of the crooner is primarily associated with male singers like Bing Crosby (1903–1977), Frank Sinatra (1915–1998), and Sammy Davis Jr. (1925–1990); Sinatra in particular embodied the stereotypical male crooner of the 1950s and 1960s. Nevertheless, many other singers, including female singers such as Billie Holiday (1915–1957) and Sarah Vaughan (1924–1990), made use of the crooning style.²⁵ From the broad variety of examples I choose here Sinatra’s version

23 Cf. Gauß 2009, 164–191.

24 Holtsträter 2011, 151.

25 Cf. Hähnel 2015; Hähnel gives detailed analysis of the style of early crooners before Sinatra.

of “Someone to Watch Over Me”.²⁶ The highly intimate effect can be heard in a comparison with other recordings of the same ballad, such as that by female jazz singer Lee Wiley (1908–1975).²⁷ Even though Wiley’s voice also sounds intimately present on the recording and she too sings some quite aspirate tones, Sinatra makes significantly more use of the effect created by letting the microphone lift the lower frequencies of his voice (as in the characteristic low beginning of the song’s rising melody) and allows his voice to tend much more towards speaking and rather noise-like sounds.

A second strategy that involves using the microphone to amplify presence can be found in the diverse practices of beatboxing and vocal percussion. In this case, a person imitates percussion instruments and thus, one could say, imitates technology, but the most present effect of this method is a product of technological amplification. Trained vocalists are capable of naturalistically imitating sound from acoustic or electronic percussion or from drumming by producing percussive sounds with their mouths, sometimes in combination with hand slaps on body parts. In the early days of hip hop, beatboxing was practised without amplification. When combined with microphone technology, however, percussive sounds produced with the mouth can be amplified such that listeners can imagine having their ears intimately close to the mouth of the musician. For instance, it is interesting to listen to the contribution of well-known beatboxer Rahzel on Björk’s album *Medúlla* (2004), a contribution produced exclusively with human voices, combined, of course, with production technology. Rahzel often combines percussive sounds, produced with breath, lips, and tongue, with low, sliding bass lines, often sung with the mouth shut – mostly relatively soft sounds that can be perceived as present, clear, and voluminous. On the track “The Pleasure is All Mine”, Rahzel’s soft electronic-style beatbox is combined with, among others, breath sounds by Björk, generating audible representatives of intimacy made directly present by amplification.²⁸

Coming from a different style, the African American a cappella group Take VI uses voice and body percussion in addition to their multivocal arrangements. On their album *So Much 2 Say*, Take VI emphasise their use of vocal percussion with ostentation as well as with a self-ironic twist on the track “I L-O-V-E U” by introducing it with a minimal spoken track called “Human Body”: here, a ludicrous-sounding speaker announces that “all the sounds on this next song including the drums were made by the human voice or some other part of ... the human body”.²⁹

For a third strategy of microphonic presence, I refer to a vocal style that has become common in extreme metal genres like death metal or in hardcore or hybrid

26 Frank Sinatra, Axel Stordahl Orchestra, “Someone to Watch Over Me”, in *’S Wonderful: The Songs of George Gershwin, His 51 Finest (1925–1951)* (Retrospective, 2011).

27 Lee Wiley, Eddie Condon and his Band, “Someone to Watch Over Me”, in *Romantic Standards: The Great American Love Songs* (Varese Sarabande, n.d.).

28 See also the documentary in Björk, *Medúlla* special, The Archive DVD Series (2-Disc Set) (Wellhart/One Little Indian, 2004–2005).

29 Take 6, *So Much 2 Say* (Reprise Records, 1990).

forms like metal core, a style that is often called “growling”. This vocal practice involves producing a low, growl- or grunt-like sound without a distinct pitch by vibration of the so-called “false chords”, situated in the larynx above the vocal chords, which are used for “normal” singing.³⁰ Britta Görtz (b. 1977), vocalist of the German thrash metal band Crippler and experienced growler, demonstrated her style of growling during two courses I gave at Hanover University of Music, Drama and Media in 2011 and 2012. By involving students who lacked any experience in that style, she vividly showed that a basic form of growling could easily be experienced by coughing and then holding the low sound by a longer breath. Extensive training is necessary to make that sound a musical expression, not to mention avoiding damaging the larynx. In practice, growlers blend different more noise-oriented forms of vocal expression, or simply “screaming” according to the term used by Melissa Cross, who as a professionally trained singer has specialised in training metal and hardcore vocalists.³¹ Certain forms of screaming can be loud (as in the everyday notion of screaming), but sophisticated screamers also use a style that is acoustically relatively low but conceived as loud because of the microphonic amplification. Amplification is necessary not least in order to compete with the other instruments in a regular metal or hardcore band, namely electric guitars and drums. Although growling is common in certain rather subcultural genres, outsiders who are not familiar with these styles regularly do not associate them with human singing. It is possible to associate these vocal sounds with animalistic utterances, with for instance the “growl” of a bear or a dog – hence the term – or even with fictive non-human beings such as monsters, perhaps as a result of sound clichés established in the history of horror movies. Monstrous associations fit with the topics of many death metal lyrics.³² Because of its low pitch, growling is more readily associated with male voices than with female voices, and the stereotypical association has therefore persisted up to recently, reinforced by the absence of female growlers in the death metal scene. The voices of female growlers such as vocalist Görtz are often misread as male voices, at least by outside listeners. Görtz’s vocal style can be heard exemplarily on the track “New Shadow” from Crippler’s album *Antagonist* (2012).³³ The characteristic sound of growling and of similar vocal styles is regularly produced with the body proper, that is, without technology, but its loudness and consequently its association with angry expression or with animalistic or monstrous utterances are results of electronic amplification.

30 There is still extensive research to be done on that vocal style. My description is based on information given by vocalists like Angela Gossow (see note 22) and Britta Görtz in personal interviews and vocal workshops, furthermore on Cross (2005/2007). For a recent overview of different vocal styles that are used in heavy metal see Mesikä/Ribaldini 2015; Mesikä and Ribaldini, who use the term “grunt” rather than the term “growl”, point out that even though some authors have tried to differentiate between growl and grunt, “it is not possible to summarize one and only grunt technique at the moment” (389).

31 Cross 2005/2007.

32 See Heesch 2011 and Heesch 2012.

33 Crippler, *Antagonist* (Crippler, 2012).

All three described constructions of microphonic bodies have in common the electronic amplification of relatively soft vocal sounds. The presence of body sounds is enhanced by technology. By amplifying characteristic vocal sounds each style generates characteristic vocal identities. Crooning is mainly about intimacy, be it more erotic or more melancholic, with mostly male singers who are soft but masculine. Beatboxing and vocal percussion present the vocally produced sounds of drum kits or drum machines. In contrast to crooning, this type of amplified presence communicates an encounter not with another person but with a kind of human machine or instrument. Growling, too, implies alienation from the human in the human voice, but in this case the non-human part resembles not a machine but rather some kind of monster.

All three types of amplified presence are based on certain uses of the microphone, employed to amplify and record relatively soft bodily produced sounds. It makes us perceive vocal sounds in an intimate way, as if our ears are very close to the mouth of the vocalist. Hence the microphone is for sound what the microscope is for sight: both increase what is rather “small”, zooming in to bring it close to our sensual organs. Sometimes, vocalists handle the microphone in a certain way, holding it close to the mouth, touching it, or cupping it with one or two hands to produce certain effects, for example. Altogether, the microphone is more than a technology that makes an absent body present, for it may even enhance that presence.

At the same time, the types of microphonic bodies discussed here do not necessarily depend on other technological transformations via electronic effect, even though in practice it is quite common to make use of reverb, delay, or compression, for example. The combination of bodily produced sound with such technologies will be discussed in the following category.

WHO OR WHAT IS SINGING? HYBRIDITY

The debate over the difference between recorded sound and its source emerged along with the early gramophone. That difference became even more obvious with the development of modern studio technique. Peter Wicke saw the recording of Buddy Holly’s song “Words of Love” as a milestone in this development. Norman Petty recorded Holly in 1957 in Clovis, New Mexico, using multitrack recording to allow the singer to perform a second voice in addition to his own first voice. Wicke noted the significance for the media culture of the twentieth century of this new phenomenon, whereby one voice could be heard twice simultaneously on a record: “As a synthesis of human sound production and machine-made mutations this product epitomizes the bodiless sound of the media age.”³⁴ Recording popular music changed from documentation of something that could also be performed live to music production. Re-

34 “Das Produkt ist als Synthese aus menschlicher Lauterzeugung und maschinellen Mutationen der Inbegriff für den körperlos gewordenen Klang des Medienzeitalters”, Wicke 2011, 70, translation F. H.; see also Wicke 2001.

cord labels such as Motown Record Corporation, the first African American record company, founded by Berry Gordy (b. 1929) in Detroit in 1959, strived to establish an idiosyncratic sound.³⁵ The Motown Sound became a kind of auditive trademark and was associated with artists like The Marvelettes, Marvin Gaye, and the early Stevie Wonder.

The development of the studio means that what we hear in recordings of popular music is regularly not, or at least not only, a human voice but a sound that results from a combination of bodily and technological practices. This observation raises questions about authenticity: for instance, as concerns playback, whether the singer we are watching on the stage is able to sing this without the large apparatus in front of and behind her or him. In extreme cases we may listen to a singing voice while watching a non-singing body, as in the case of Milli Vanilli, a pop duo whose Grammy Award for their debut album was withdrawn in 1990 because they did not sing themselves.³⁶

Indeed, the identity of the singer in recorded popular song, crucial according to Moore for any hermeneutic approach, seems to be only partially a bodily defined identity. It makes sense to describe that vocal identity generally as, in Wicke's words, "a synthesis of human sound production and machine-made mutations". Wicke is right in calling that sound "bodiless", in as much as it is recorded and hence characterised by the absence of the body I described in the first category. However, even a highly processed studio recording of a human voice still includes bodily produced elements of sound. The technologically transmitted sound makes the absent body present, even if we would see (or hear) that presence as an audible illusion. Thus, the sound of recorded popular song is not absolutely bodiless, but a hybrid of human body sounds and technological processing. The vocal identity, then, is less the pure result of human performance than a hybrid of human and technology.

Donna Haraway theorised such hybrids early as cyborgs.³⁷ A cyborg, according to Haraway, "is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction".³⁸ Haraway considers the cyborg a challenge to common dualistic views of human beings, hence its potential to overcome stereotypes of race, gender, and totalitarian politics in general. Therefore, Haraway's concept can be regarded as one possible strategy of what later has been called queerness, although it has been criticised for its rather utopian view and lack of censure of the dangerous aspects and militaristic and totalitarian concepts of cyborgs.³⁹ Still, it is revealing to study the subversive potential of cyborg-like hybrids, as long as one keeps in mind that hybridity does not include subversion per se.

35 In 1959, the company was founded as Tamla Records; the renaming as Motown followed in 1961, cf. Bowman 2015.

36 See the complex discussion on that example of questioned authenticity in Auslander 2008.

37 Haraway 2010.

38 Haraway 2010, 2190.

39 Cf. Leibetseder 2010, 229–250.

As we have seen, recorded popular song can be heard as representing hybrid singer identities in general, but certain technologies of sound processing enforce the hybridity more blatantly than others. Machines like the vocoder or the talk box basically function by combining vocal and instrumental sounds. These technologies make the mixture of voice and machine so obviously audible that it would hardly be possible to miss the hybridising effect. I will therefore discuss the category of hybridity by focusing on these special technologies. Although they were originally developed as hardware machines, certain software was generated around 2000 that can produce similar sound effects. In terms of technology, I will therefore also take some software into consideration.

The vocoder, its name a contraction of “voice coder”, was invented by Homer W. Dudley (1896–1987) and developed in the Bell Labs, the research section of the U.S. telephone company AT&T, during the 1930s.⁴⁰ Its original purpose was to reduce the bandwidth of telephone signals by filtering the relatively slow frequencies of verbal articulation out of the transmitted vocal signal and synthesising a new vocal signal from the reduced frequency band and an unvoiced signal at the receiving end. In the Second World War and during the Cold War, vocoder technology was used for transmitting coded voice messages overseas. Since its first public demonstrations in 1936, the vocoder has been used with reference to music, by transforming singing voices. Pioneer of electronic music Wendy Carlos (b. 1939) introduced vocoderised singing to a larger public in her soundtrack for Stanley Kubrick’s movie *A Clockwork Orange* (1972). Like Carlos, the German band Kraftwerk, known as pioneering for its considered use of electronics in popular music, employed the vocoder, a machine with no original musical-related purpose, years before vocoders were commercially produced by music technology companies. The members of Kraftwerk dealt with early research on vocoder technology in the electronic music studios in Cologne, in particular the activities of radio engineer and information theorist Werner Meyer-Eppler (1913–1960), who had played Dudley’s early vocoder demonstrations for a German public. According to Tompkins, Dudley “had a power line humming as ‘the voice of electricity,’ lighting houses and claiming to be power itself”,⁴¹ an idea Kraftwerk included in a track on their album *Radio-Aktivität* (Radio-Activity, 1975). “Die Stimme der Energie” (“The Voice of Energy”) largely consists of the following text, spoken by a voice that is modulated into a monotonous “robot voice” by a vocoder:⁴²

Hier spricht die Stimme der Energie.
Ich bin ein riesiger elektrischer Generator.

40 Cf. Tompkins 2011. To Tompkins the art of storytelling seems to be as important as delivering information, and more important than giving precise indications of his sources as measured by academic norms. Nevertheless, his book contains reliable information, heavily relevant to the history of the vocoder.

41 Tompkins 2011, 48.

42 Kraftwerk, “Die Stimme der Energie”, in *Radio-Aktivität* (Klingklang 1975, CD-reissue EMI).

Ich liefere Ihnen Licht und Kraft
und ermögliche es Ihnen,
Sprache, Musik und Bild durch den Äther auszusenden und zu empfangen.
Ich bin Ihr Diener und Ihr Herr zugleich.
Deshalb hütet mich gut,
mich, den Genius der Energie.

This is the voice of energy.
I am a giant electric generator.
I provide you with light and power
and the possibility
to send and receive words, music and pictures via airwaves.
I am your servant and your master at the same time.
This is why you should care for me,
me, the genius of energy.

The vocoder principle in Carlos's and Kraftwerk's music was basically reproduced in the vocoder machines that could subsequently be purchased to make musical effects: a vocal signal is filtered and combined with another sound source – usually not a power line but a musical instrument like keyboard or guitar. Thus, the voice becomes the modulator, the instrument becomes the carrier of the sound. In addition to the rather technical process of production, the vocoder affects our perception of the singing voice enormously. The “bodiless sound” that Wicke ascribes to studio-produced music since the introduction of multitrack recording in general is also a principal characteristic of vocoderised singing, although it can be even more explicitly bodiless, for we may hear singing instruments or voices that seem to sound from strange non-human or at least only partially human beings. Thus, recorded music with vocoderised voices points our minds to the relationship between the subject's body and the machine, or, as Kay Dickinson states in her study on vocoders and female identity: “vocoder tracks vividly highlight the inextricable bond between subjectivity and mechanisation. They propose a dichotomy between the vocoded voice and the more ‘organic’ one.”⁴³

When it comes to identity, the crucial question is, who uses technologies like the vocoder to modify his or her voice into a hybrid sound of body and machine? When we look critically at how voices in popular music are constructed in line with racist stereotypes, it is easy to observe that African American voices heard in genres like blues, gospel, rhythm and blues, and soul are often conceived as sounding particularly natural or human.⁴⁴ However, a closer look at African American culture reveals that the stereotypical association with “humanity” is unfounded. As Kodwo Eshun has shown

43 Dickinson 2001, 336.

44 As Allan Moore has shown, early rock musicians, particularly in the United Kingdom, held an image of the African American blues as closely connected to a romanticised picture of “natural” African culture; see Moore 2001, 71–75.

in his seminal study on the development of African American music from jazz to hip hop and house, African American musical culture characteristically has made particular use of technology.⁴⁵ With regard to technologically transformed voices, Alexander Weheliye emphasises that in African American culture the notion of humanity rather draws a blank because of the long experience of slavery, discrimination, and marginalisation, which implies a lack of being regarded humanely.⁴⁶ In fact, not only hip hop and house artists, who may represent particularly technological ways of music production, but also rhythm and blues artists make extensive use of technological voices and were already doing so in the context of the Motown Sound phenomenon. Widening Eshun's gaze, Weheliye pays particular attention to human-machine voices in rhythm and blues, including an exemplary analysis of the ballad "Computer Love" by the band Zapp, a track that according to Weheliye contributed to "the reemergence of the vocoder in R&B" after the early 1980s, when the popularity of the vocoder had first peaked.⁴⁷ "Computer Love" (1985) alludes to Kraftwerk's earlier track with the same name (in German: "Computerliebe") in *Computerwelt* (Computer World, 1981). However, in contrast to Kraftwerk, Zapp not only emphasises the machine-like sound of the voice but also underlines the "human" aspect by combining a "vocoderised voice" (that of Roger Troutman) with two "ordinarily" produced voices, one male (Charlie Wilson) and one female (Shelley Murdock).⁴⁸

In one technical aspect Weheliye might be wrong, for according to Tompkins, Zapp's frontman Roger Troutman (1951–1999) used not a vocoder but a talk box. This device directs an acoustic signal, usually that of an instrument, via a tube into the mouth of a musician, who can make the instrumental sound "sing" by articulating without even using his or her own larynx. Thus, the blending of instrumental and bodily sounds happens within the body or, more precisely, in the mouth; from here the mixed sound can be amplified via microphone. Troutman's virtuosic use of the talk box has often been attributed to the vocoder: according to Tompkins, "Roger Troutman is the most famous vocoderer to never use a vocoder. Talk Boxes and vocoders are confused more than bad for good."⁴⁹ Yet, whatever machine Troutman used, it still seems to have incited a new popularity for the vocoder. Whatever the case, Weheliye's observations on the extensive use of technologically transformed voices in African American music remain true. The hegemonic stereotype of the natural "human" black voice is clearly challenged by tracks like "Computer Love".

That stereotype is obviously hegemonic, because it is based on a dichotomy: on one side there is the association of the allegedly natural/bodily voice with black and/or female singers; on the other side we find technology and hence machine-made voices

45 Eshun 1998.

46 Weheliye 2002.

47 Weheliye 2002, 35.

48 Weheliye 2002, 35–36.

49 Tompkins 2011, 138.

as the alleged realm of white Euro-American men. As Weheliye shows, argumentation is necessary to reveal the hegemonic nature and the implied oversimplification of that dichotomy. Listening to the music can help deconstruct such stereotypes because it leads to audible encounters with unexpected identities, for instance African American and female singers.

Indeed, the vocoder (and also the talk box) shares a gender bias with many other technologies in Euro-American culture. At least in the first period of its musical history, the vocoder was used more often by men than by women, although not exclusively, as the early example of Wendy Carlos indicates. Laurie Anderson's track "O Superman", which originated in avant-garde performance but reached number two in the UK single charts in 1981, stages a gender-critical reflection of android identity via the vocoder. In Susan McClary's seminal study on gender in music, Anderson serves as a crucial example for how delineations of gender are challenged: as McClary points out, "When Anderson involves herself with electronics, she confuses ... habits of thought grounded in gender difference."⁵⁰ As critical as Anderson's example was, it has long been a rather singular deviation from the stereotypically masculine association with the vocoder technology. That stereotype was fractured more extensively in the late 1990s. Kay Dickinson dates this shift to 1998, the year after Cher had her late number one hit with "Believe": since then, the vocoder effect has been adapted by a range of other female artists and has been heard many times in chart hits.⁵¹

Again, as in the case of Troutman's contribution to the vocoder's popularity in black music, the technical contribution will likely be debated. Cher recorded her vocals for "Believe" without a vocoder, although she had reportedly brought up the idea of applying a telephone-like sound to her voice. The instrument-like steps in certain passages of her singing are a product of an effect applied to the record track subsequently by sound engineer Mark Taylor. During an interview in 1999 for *Sound on Sound*, a journal for recording technology, Taylor stated that he had intended to apply a vocoder effect, but when the then classical vocoder Korg VC 10 did not produce the desired effect, a Digitech Talker vocoder pedal was used.⁵² Consequently, Taylor talks about the passages that include the stepping effect as the "vocoded sections". The technical protest against that account would suggest that this effect was generated not with a vocoder but with Auto-tune, a software programme for pitch correction in song recording that was published in 1997. According to the online re-edition of the *Sound on Sound* article, it seems established as fact that "the (now) highly recognisable tonal mangling" in "Believe" was produced with Auto-tune.⁵³ It would be

50 McClary 2002, 138. McClary's detailed analysis of "O Superman" focuses on the lyrics and harmonic structure rather than on the use of the vocoder. For a recent discussion of the reception of the piece in scholarship and further analytical insights, see Eckenroth 2014, 21–24.

51 Dickinson 2001.

52 Sillitoe/ Bell 1999. Dickinson 2001 quotes indirectly from that article, too, but without reference.

53 Sillitoe/ Bell 1999, "historical footnote" by the editors.

interesting to investigate further discursive strategies to establish which electronic devices were actually used in recording, for instance with regard to the instructions for generating the “infamous ‘Cher effect’” with Auto-tune in the software manual by manufacturer Antares.⁵⁴

This effect was popularised by Cher’s “Believe”. One may wonder whether Dickinson, who, following Taylor’s report, calls it a vocoder effect, remains right in arguing that Cher helped challenge the masculine connotations of the vocoder technology. I think her main argument is still relevant inasmuch as many later singers, females as well as males, successfully used similar effects in popular songs. What is important here is that several technologies, including the vocoder, the talk box, and Auto-tune, can be deemed to generate blatantly hybridised (wo-)man-machine-voices. Although they function differently, their effects of hybridity sound relatively similar, and therefore they can easily be confused.

I conclude this section with a recent example of female use of the vocoder, namely with Lady Gaga’s track “Aura” on her album *Artpop*.⁵⁵ It is certainly interesting to consider Lady Gaga’s work with regard to discussions of feminism in current popular culture; her music is more than interesting enough to justify a closer look. “Aura” is of particular interest in the context of this article not only because it includes parts with a hybrid voice, but also because it includes direct interplay between an instrument and the hybridised voice as well as lyrics that reflect questions of identity. In the introduction of the track we hear a pattern of strummed chords on an acoustic guitar and Gaga’s technologically alienated voice. At some point the guitar plays an ornamental melodic line, first falling then ascending, that is repeated several times in multiple layers by Gaga’s voice, which, at the end, rhythmically repeats the same tone, whereby that rhythm and articulation are obviously machine-made in the way that they imitate the sound of the (even electronically modified) guitar line. The eponymous repeated “aura”, too, is clearly intelligible but at the same time electronically distorted. The lyrics portray from a first-person perspective a self-confident woman who addresses some “lover”. Interestingly, Gaga’s voice sounds most clear and “natural” (which, in contrast to the verses, also is a product of her singing style) when she asks her lover, “Do you wanna see me naked? ... Do you wanna see the girl behind the curtain, behind the aura?” Her “aura”, her (self-)image, is in a not-too-blunt way connected to the more electronic sounds of the accompaniment and to hybrid vocal parts similar to the “Believe” or Auto-tune style. Even at the end, the word “aura” is heard in a technological sound again, and finally, with the typical science-fiction movie effect of a “robot voice”, the word “artpop” is heard, quoting the title of the album. Although

54 Antares Audio Technologies, Auto-Tune 5: Pitch Correcting Plug-in, Owner’s Manual (2006), 17, online on Antares’s website, accessed 28 January 2016. Since version 7 the unmistakably pejorative attribute “infamous” has been deleted from the manual in favour of a rather canonising narrative of Cher’s pioneering role in the history of the software.

55 Lady Gaga, *Artpop* (Streamline Records, 2013).

other passages may be generated with Auto-tune or similar effects, the final robotic sound clearly resembles a typical vocoder effect.

Certainly, “Aura” is a typical pop track even in carrying different readings. Nevertheless, I think, this short look at Lady Gaga’s use of hybrid vocals can be read in consort with Jack Halberstam’s model of “Gaga feminism” as a strategy of using up-to-date popular styles and technology and at the same time playing, in ways that may seem crazy, with aesthetic modes of identity.⁵⁶ While Halberstam focuses on Lady Gaga’s visual strategies and obviously considers her musical output less relevant, we have seen that the latter offers interesting insights on challenging notions of identity, certainly even more than can be explored within the scope of this article.

As this exemplary overview of strategies for using the body and technology for the creation of popular musical voices has shown, all these aesthetic practices raise questions about fictional and real identities. Popular musicians tend to make use of the most up-to-date technology even for transforming voices or creating new voices. This does not necessary result in new or never-heard-before sounds – pop is mostly not interested in the strategies of musical avant-garde. However, the links between the use of technology and aspects of identity are also novel territory. In this regard, many of these popular hybrids of bodily and technological voices connect to very current discussions about who we are and why and how we use both our bodies and our technology.

CONCLUSION

This article started from the observation that since the advent of phonography in Euro-American culture, singing voices have mostly been listened to in technologically transformed and transmitted ways. Recorded popular song is certainly highly relevant for the perception of music, for how people experienced and still experience the singing voice in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The presentness of sound, according to Ong, highlights the importance of the encounter with the singing subject for hermeneutic approaches to recorded popular song. Listening to song raises the question of the identity behind the voice. In my example-based overview of the technological and musical history of popular-song recording, I have developed three systematic categories for describing the variety of the relationships between voice, body, and technology with regard to musical representations of identity.

First, as a basic effect of phonography we hear the voices of absent bodies. While we experience that recorded sound as a presence, the identity of the vocal subject is directly bound not to a body in the here-and-now but to bodily produced sounds in the there-and-then, which implies an uncertainty about the present identity of the singer. He or she may have gone through more or less dramatic changes in the mean-

56 Halberstam 2012.

time, from aging to dying, although we still perceive the presence of, for example, a young pop star. Moreover, we may even be unsure about the singer's gender and/or sexuality, as the experiments in the context of schlager recordings from as early as the 1920s illustrate. Some cases, like Max Kuttner's gramophone schlager, reveal how popular culture even reflects its medial and technological conditions.

Secondly, more than just a recording tool, the microphone can even be used as an amplifier of the vocal presence. Comparable to the microscope in the visual world, the microphone enhances something that can otherwise hardly be perceived. It moves even soft sounds closer to our ears, closer than we ever could get to the mouth of the singer or the vocal percussionist or beatboxer. Thereby, the music can include quite different affections, from emotions of romance (crooning) to anger and aggression (growling). The singer's identity is represented in that enhanced way through the microscopic microphone. At least in the moment of listening, there is no way to encounter the singing body more distantly.

Thirdly, at its core every recorded voice is a hybrid of bodily and technologically produced sounds. Maybe the general presentness of sound makes us tend to ignore the technological part of the recorded voices in favour of a more or less illusionary encounter with another body. However, machines like the vocoder or the talk box or software effects like the "Cher-effect" in Auto-tune blatantly expose the hybridity of recorded voices. Although cyborg sounds may sometimes even reveal "robotic" qualities, they generally offer a wide range of musically represented hybrid identities. This kind of hybridity does not necessarily challenge stereotypical dichotomies in the fields of race and gender, but it has the potential to do so, as the use of cyborg voices by African American musicians and female singers shows. The example of Lady Gaga reveals that her queer-feminist concept is manifest not only in her visual aesthetic, which has been qualified as "Gaga feminism" by Halberstam, but also in her hybrid vocal sounds.

It should be obvious that these three categories are not absolutely distinct from each other; they may intermingle in many different ways. Within the scope of this article I have attempted to show that it is most interesting to study the relationships of body and technology in close readings of musical examples. Certainly, other examples from the multifaceted world of recorded popular song would produce different observations, and it will be interesting to study how the use of microphonic identities and hybrid voices changes in light of recent developments in Internet technology and mobile devices. That, however, will be another story.

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Open Session

Activist Citizenship, Film and Peacebuilding: Acts and Transformative Practices

ABSTRACT

In this article I explore film as a socio-political and artistic-transformative cultural practice through which acts and activism are performed. I am interested in how film embeds acts of peacebuilding and how this scene of imagery/imaginary is transformed by those acts, with the filmmakers transformed into activist citizens whose activism questions ideologies that surround them. I argue that acts of citizenship and activism, as a creative practice, do not solely involve the analysis of how activism has been represented in films, but also the understanding of what is beyond these representations and narratives. I look at a) how film auteurs emerge as activists through the narratives and the created scenes¹ in film; b) how these acts consequently represent the “answerability to Others”² and c) the link between (cinematic) performativity and activism.

KEYWORDS

acts, activism, film, religion, transformative practices

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Milja Radovic works within the interdisciplinary field of theology, media and culture, and her research has spanned across the fields of transnational cinema, religion, ideology, citizenship, activism, nationalism, conflict and peace-building. She has most recently collaborated on three projects: CITSEE Project (The Europeanisation of Citizenship in the Successor States of the Former Yugoslavia), School of Law, University of Edinburgh; Peacebuilding through Media Arts, and Religion and Ethics in the Making of War and Peace projects. Milja is the author of the book: *Transnational Cinema and Ideology: representing religion, identity and cultural myths* (Routledge, July, 2014). Her current work focuses on radicality of freedom through acts of citizenship, otherness, and the issue of radicalization.

1 Engin 2008, 38.

2 Ibid., 19.

In this article I explore film as a socio-political and artistic-transformative cultural practice through which acts and activism are performed. I am interested in how film embeds acts of peacebuilding and how this scene of imagery/imaginary is transformed by those acts, with the filmmakers transformed into activist citizens whose activism questions ideologies that surround them. I approach the notion of acts from an ontological perspective and activism as an extension of acts. Furthermore, I claim that a specific form of activism expressed through film is directly related to peacebuilding processes.

For filmmakers the issue of how an individual act impacts society can be a matter of both peacemaking and religion in a wider sense. Although the films I discuss here do not address religion explicitly, they have religious motifs and symbols embedded in their narratives. Religion is rather implicitly depicted and is primarily related to the questions Who is my neighbour? and Who is the Other in society? Religion also has a significant role in shaping the socio-political context and cultural milieu in which these filmmakers work: in the Balkans it has had a crucial part in defining the “Other”, while in Saudi Arabia it is part of a societal codex and norms that determine the rights of citizens.

I argue that acts of citizenship and activism, as creative practice, do not solely merit a deconstruction of how activism has been represented in films, for they also require a deeper understanding of what is beyond these representations and narratives. In that respect, I explore activism as a creative act of the filmmaker.

My main research questions concern how acts of citizenship and activism are constructed and practised through film and how these acts consequently impact peacebuilding. To answer these questions I explore the cinematic narratives that encapsulate “acts of citizenship”³: I look at (a) how auteurs emerge as activists through the narratives and created scenes⁴, (b) how these acts consequently represent “answerability to Others”⁵ and (c) how performativity⁶, activism, and peacebuilding are linked. I consider acts and activism beyond their institutional meaning: I understand activism as an “extension of acts” or concretised acts, “deeds” that carry out certain praxis and practices of peacebuilding. These practices inevitably become political by being subjected to diverse interpretations.

The ability to act and to express one’s thoughts or opinions is basic to human nature and freedom. Denial of such rights represents the denial of the being, and of humanity itself, and reminds us of Hannah Arendt’s definition of totalitarianism as a system made and enabled by, Engin Isin writes, “a figure of a human being who could

3 See Isin/Nielsen 2008.

4 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 38.

5 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 19.

6 Isin 2012, 134.

not act”.⁷ For Arendt, freedom meant the ability to act,⁸ and the negation of this capacity to act⁹ within totalitarian regimes is an attempt to deprive a human being of its existential and ontological meaning. The negation of freedom to act, or “zero liberty” through “totalitarian methods of domination”,¹⁰ has been depicted in films such as Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *SALÒ OR THE 120 DAYS OF SODOM* (1975), perhaps one of the most controversial films made on this subject. Since “totalitarianism renders this capacity to act into isolation”,¹¹ disobedience becomes an act of citizenship, where subjects become citizens by escaping from this isolation. This disobedience, however, should be distinguished from the deliberate refusal to act within an oppressive totalitarian regime, where citizens chose the right “not to act” in the sense that they do not want to participate in the existing order of things.

There is a long historical relationship between activism and the arts. The very act of creation is inherent in human nature. Director Andrei Tarkovsky described the act of creativity as an unconscious act similar to confession, as an ability that we share with God.¹² The arts have always had a political dimension and through the arts both conflict and peace have been communicated and the figure of the activist citizen and non-citizen rethought. In the past decade activism increasingly has also been performed through social media (cyber-activism or “hacktivism”¹³) by whistleblowers and now well-known figures such as Julian Assange and Edward Snowden. It has also been expressed within collective movements such as the Occupy movement, which embraces a moral quest for the transformation of existing systems because “debt ceases to be a threat to active citizenship but a condition of it”.¹⁴ Activism re-creates the socio-political conscience of citizens and the figure of the citizen itself. Activism can be individual or collective and can take place locally or globally, and often it is a shared experience in which citizens are “claiming the rights that they do not have”,¹⁵ inevitably involving a distortion of the totalitarian order. Activism is also a novel creation whose final effects and consequences are yet to be realised. Equally, in film activism is a construction of something new. Although films do not always provide explicit political solutions, filmmakers often propose an alternative vision of society in which existing concepts and understandings of justice and rights are seen as corrupt and morally wrong.

When speaking about activist citizenship and film, we ought to acknowledge the significant number of international film festivals across the globe that communicate

7 Isin 2012, 114.

8 Isin 2012, 116.

9 Isin 2012, 116

10 See Arendt 1961.

11 Isin 2012, 114.

12 Paraphrased; see further Gianvito 2006, 160.

13 Yang 2009.

14 Bretherton 2011, 367.

15 Isin/Saward 2013, 42.

different issues related to all sorts of rights. These festivals are “driven by intentionality, be it to increase awareness, to expose, to warn, to prevent and sometimes change the course of events”.¹⁶ Their goal is to mobilise, and by means of communication they “generate *sui generis* activism”.¹⁷ In other words, human rights festivals are defined not only thematically but also by their mission.¹⁸ At such festivals and seminars the general audience has the opportunity not only to see films but also to participate, through forums and debates.¹⁹

A large number of films of different genres depict the struggle of a citizen (or non-citizen) in society, with themes such as belonging, otherness, and transborder identity running through their cinematic narratives.

I claim that a number of films that focus on human rights could not be categorised as expressing activism but rather as products of *active* citizenship for, broadly speaking, they are limited to operating within the existing hegemonic ideology and do not want to transform this ideological context. The problem, especially when it comes to what are perceived as “problematic” areas of the world – conflict and postconflict areas – is that often the narratives have been dramatised by “outsiders”. This outsider’s gaze is often understood as a “superior gaze”²⁰ and has been deployed especially in “global”, or popular Hollywood, cinema, where “the universality of human rights” has frequently masked forms of exclusion,²¹ in a way that paradoxically allowed “freedom of others” to become “freedom from others”.

In order to avoid framing this discussion with different ideological definitions of activism, I have chosen to focus on creative and autonomous acts of filmmakers as an expression of their personal exploration of the topics of peace and otherness. The explorations of the filmmakers construct something new, something that is not necessarily intended to be political but that becomes subversive through the creative practice of film. Here is precisely the reason why in this article I focus on filmmakers (Haifaa al-Mansour and Srdan Golubovic) whose films represent a form of personal exploration of freedom (in not just a political but also an ontological sense), otherness, conflict, and peace. This article presents part of my current wider research on transnational cinema and activism, but here I consider only two films, in order to be able to provide in-depth analysis of the films and consequently of the wider topics at hand.

I have chosen to examine *CIRCLES* (Srdan Golubovic, SRB/D/F/SVN/HR 2013) because this film is a story about citizenship: it explores the issue of membership in a

16 Iordanova 2012, 13.

17 See Iordanova 2012, 14.

18 Grassilli 2012, 37.

19 In the 1950s the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar showed that “film education and activism ... as an art form was inextricably interwoven in the post-War period”, Zimmermann 2012, 175.

20 The “outsiders’ gaze” often deploys a stereotyped and ideological view on a specific area of crises or the issues related to that area. See also Zizek 2005.

21 See Radovic 2014.

political community that at the time was determined by ethnic and religious identity and belonging, and finally it asks, at a very personal level, Who is my neighbour? Set in the midst of the Yugoslav conflict of the 1990s, the film is not simply a historical reconstruction but rather a reflective piece on human belonging, as well as an exploration of how identity is constructed not by ethnicity but through a good deed, surpassing the category of otherness. In *WADJDA* (Haifaa al-Mansour, SA/D 2013), Haifaa al-Mansour uses film in a similar way, as a performative space that she occupies as both filmmaker and the Other simultaneously, and additionally as a reflection of freedom and what it means to be the Other – in this case a woman in Saudi Arabian society. Al-Mansour does not create conflict but uses film as her own space in which she becomes an equal citizen, creator, actor, and person.

ON ACTS AND ACTIVISM

Isin's distinction between act, action, and actor is pertinent for my reading of film as a scene through which a filmmaker becomes an actor and activist. For Isin, "act" has an ontological meaning, in the sense that act has "virtual existence that can be actualized under certain conditions".²² Drawing upon Martin Heidegger, Isin discusses the act as "the call of conscience" that "discloses my potentiality- as-being".²³ Being ontological, the *call* therefore "comes from and is directed towards the being that I am".²⁴ The caller to act is our own being, concerned over its own "thrownness",²⁵ and so "our own being is called forth to its potentialities".²⁶ In other words, acts precede morality in the sense that they are the very expression of the ontological questions of who I am and how the notion of the Other is inseparably intertwined with one's own Being, which through the Other relates to Self and through the love for the Other becomes Self, that is a person in the fullest sense of the word.

Act can be defined both as *dynamis* (δυναμις), internal power, the potentiality of a being, and as *energeia* (ενεργεια), an active state of being.²⁷ Perhaps this distinction between and interrelation of *dynamis* and *energeia* could also be understood as the capacity of a human being to become a person in the fullest sense.²⁸ We can say that through the act the nature of being is manifested.

22 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 25.

23 Isin here draws upon Heidegger and Bakhtin. Also, conscience should be understood here "beyond its everyday meaning of guilt as debt", Isin/Nielsen 2008, 32.

24 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 32.

25 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 32.

26 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 32.

27 Aristotle distinguished the concepts of *dynamis* and *energeia*. While *dynamis* stood for potency and capability – a reality capable of changing – "reaching the fullness of being it can become", *energeia* was for Aristotle "the completely realized dimension of a reality". See Richardson/Bowden 1983, 3.

28 Zizioulas 1985, 58.

Citizenship inevitably involves all sorts of acts, because the “ways of being constitute the existential conditions of possibility of acts”,²⁹ which, however, do not necessarily produce an action. Isin argues that acts cannot be reduced to calculability, that they are not inherently positive or negative, and that acts produce qualities not as causes but only as their effects.³⁰

Action is the actualisation of an act. As a deed in space and time, action is praxis (πραξις). Action also represents a quality of acts, an effect of the act, and as such it is interpretative. Being ontological, acts do not necessarily originate in the name of anything; it is frequently our interpretation of the quality of action that gives meaning to the acts.

The actor is crucial, for the actor carries out the action, and, according to Isin, the actor “is constituted by the act itself and produced through the scene”.³¹ Furthermore “subjects, constituted by acts, become activist citizens through the scenes created”.³² Film is a particularly interesting site for this investigation because it is “a scene of a scene” by the very fact that it is reproducing reality. If “a performative utterance produces the event of which it speaks”, it is this event, as Isin points out, that “transforms a performative utterance into an act”.³³ This link between act and performativity is crucial for understanding the correlation between acts, activism, and peacebuilding in film.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that acts are always related to the Other; in fact “acts are ways of being with Others”.³⁴ Isin makes the distinction here between, on one hand, answerability as an ontological orientation towards the Other and, on the other hand, responsibility as ontic, or calculable, orientation towards others.³⁵ It is doubtless that being-with-Others is the existential way of being.³⁶ The substance of being does not exist without a mode of existence.³⁷ This mode, through which a person exercises absolute freedom, is the mode of being-with-Others.

As I have noted, although not every act is intended to be political, it becomes so through interpretation of our action that carries out the quality of our relation to the Other. Approaching activist citizenship on an interdisciplinary basis, Isin argues, implies a shift from the institution of citizenship to acts of citizenship – to an investigation of “collective or individual deeds that rupture socio-historical patterns”.³⁸ As these deeds do not need to be grounded in law, “activist citizens that acts produce

29 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 2.

30 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 37–38.

31 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 34.

32 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 38.

33 Isin 2012, 126.

34 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 19.

35 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 31.

36 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 34.

37 Zizioulas 1985, 41.

38 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 2.

are not a priori recognized in law”³⁹ On the contrary, as we will see in the film analysis, such “activist citizens” will often question the laws, and through these acts “citizens, strangers, outsiders and aliens emerge not as subjects already defined, but as ways of being with others”⁴⁰ In this sense we can argue that activism produces a sort of κρισις, a crisis⁴¹ that creates “a sense of the possible and of a citizenship that is yet to come”⁴² In that respect activism is unpredictable and creative but also visionary: it proposes what is to be, instead of participating in what it is. Activism implies exploration of “new social relations and practices, through which new forms of personhood and politics are being created”⁴³ It is this creative exploration by filmmakers, which might seem to be “rupture in the order of things”⁴⁴ that brings in the moral quality, as an expression of freedom in the ontological sense.⁴⁵ Their creative acts are not operating within totalitarian ideologies but are trying to escape the existing ideological constructs.

PEACEBUILDING

“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.”

– Matthew 5:9

As I have discussed, through transformative-artistic practices citizens and non-citizens claim the right to break the ties with the “existing social structures ... which are seen as corrupt”⁴⁶ and to rebuild more just and peaceful societies. Paradoxically, violent means can be required to achieve that peace, but often the acts of individuals can be performed in non-violent ways, and I focus particularly on the “ripple effect” of non-violent acts and on what we can define as “good deeds”. Peacebuilding, particularly in postconflict areas, involves having a “voice” and “being heard”. John Paul Lederach argues that “voice is the essence of being a person”,⁴⁷ as such a voice both represents the aforementioned answerability to Others and Self and is an expression of being, both inward and outward.⁴⁸

39 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 38.

40 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 41.

41 κρισις has been defined as judgment (human or divine), justice, the concept of determining the correctness of a matter; negatively, punishment, condemnation; see Mounce, William B., Greek Dictionary, <https://billmounce.com/greek-dictionary/krisis> [accessed 28 April 2016].

42 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 4.

43 Nugent 2012, 281.

44 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 43.

45 Ontological freedom liberates from ideologies and oppressive systems that often impose identitarian politics and “othering” as a cultural model.

46 Nugent 2012, 281.

47 See Lederach 2005.

48 It is important to bear in mind that a voice can serve ideological purposes. Albert Hirschman argued that the greater the possibility of having a voice, the greater the chance of loyalty, and in this sense, having a “voice” is important as it serves as an alternative to “exit”. See Hirschman 1970, 36.

Peacebuilding involves a number of different acts, such as the act of forgiveness or the act of repentance, that have transformative potential and power. Peacebuilding therefore is intertwined with transformative practices that are embedded in these acts. All these acts that are pertinent to peacebuilding have moral and ethical value, but they can also be considered “beyond ethics”,⁴⁹ and as such carry an ontological and even religious quality. When “love for thy neighbour” (the foreign, alienated Other) is enacted, it is not “love out of obligation” but love “because of ontological affinity”.⁵⁰ Here is the religious aspect of love, for when love “is not preceded by any ethical must” but is ontological,⁵¹ it becomes an expression of a mode of existence – of being with the Other. In going beyond being just a “voice of the oppressed”, the creative acts of the filmmakers are also transformative acts of peacebuilding.

ACTS OF PEACEBUILDING AND ACTIVISM THROUGH FILM

Looking at activist citizenship through film means looking at both acts and performativity. Films re-create events that happened or could have taken place in real life. Often, when it is based on a true event, film represents what I call “a scene of a scene”, a re-created event through which actors are (re)created and acts realised. How does this happen? How does film encapsulate an act of citizenship, and does film simultaneously represent a product that is an act of citizenship?

CIRCLES (KRUGOVI, Srdan Golubovic, 2013)

One film that captures an act of citizenship is *CIRCLES* (Krugovi, 2013; Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian, German and French co-production), made by Serbian director Srdan Golubovic. Golubovic was inspired by the real-life story of Srdjan Aleksic, a Bosnian Serb from the town of Trebinje in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Before the war, Srdjan had been an actor in the local theatre and a sportsman. As war escalated in the 1990s, Srdjan was recruited by the army of Republika Srpska. In 1993, a group of his fellow Serbian soldiers in the city centre of Trebinje attacked his neighbour Alen Glavovic because they identified him as a Bosniak and not a Serb. Srdjan stood up against the soldiers, so they turned against him. The citizens of Trebinje observed the event without taking any action. Glavovic was saved, but Srdjan died from his injuries; he had protected his neighbour, the foreign Other, who was attacked precisely because of his ethnicity and religious affiliation.

The story of Srdjan Aleksic inspired the director, who wanted to explore in his film the meaning of a good act and the performance of a human deed that in the given circumstances could only have a fatal outcome. The film depicts this real-life event in

49 If the highest value is existence, then ethics stems from that value. Zizioulas 1985, 12.

50 Zizioulas 1985, 8.

51 Zizioulas 1985, 11.

a non-linear way, for it does not focus on the event itself or on the political aspects of the story, but looks instead at the effects of the tragic event on the characters. Golubovic's non-linear approach, combined with cold colours and slow, measured takes, typically of lone individuals or deserted landscapes, enabled a focus on the character's individual plight, for by breaking with the temporal dimensions of human interaction, Golubovic was able to explore the divide between "myself" and "the Other". The aesthetic forces active spectatorship by generating a pensive mood that in addition to serving as a point for reflection – for filmmaker and spectator alike – enriches the borderless space of *CIRCLES* by revealing a paradox: characters and ideas are products of human belonging and time, but the film's aesthetic employs an extratemporal unidentifiable "space" precisely to subvert the imposed identitarian ideologies that led to the conflict. This story, the director has said, moved him on a personal level and inspired him to explore the ripple effect of Srdjan's act, "a heroic deed" that was not calculable, not even political we might say, because Srdjan had only moments to decide how to act. Although this act was not premeditated or intended to be political, as an act of self-sacrifice it inevitably became so. By protecting his neighbour's life Srdjan became a symbol of the activist citizen, and his deed has relevance and importance in the present day.

This, however, is not what intrigued the director, who was drawn instead to the questions of what it means to be human and whether a good deed has meaning and significance in reality. Through his film, Golubovic explores not only the "circles" of turmoil and the regret of each character engaged in this tragic event, but also "circles as a ripple effect" of a good deed and its effect on others.

Golubovic also explores the theme of forgiveness. He is interested in the possibility of restoring peace on two levels: peace within and peace with one's neighbour. By depicting the main characters from behind, the director visualises through camera shots the burden that all the characters carry; equally the camera records the same scene from different perspectives in order to provide clarity.⁵² The difficult process of forgiveness and reconciliation in which the meaning and effect of Srdjan's act is questioned is embodied in his father's "Sisyphus work",⁵³ which takes place after Srdjan's murder. The father is rebuilding a church on a hill, carrying it stone-by-stone from one site to another. The site of the church becomes a symbolic expression of the father's own struggle to understand his son's act and of his ability to reconcile with and forgive his son's murderers.

52 Paraphrased; see "Circles by Srdan Golubovic", Empty Kingdom, <http://www.emptykingdom.com/featured/circles-krugovi-%E2%95%B3-srdan-golubovic/> [accessed 28 April 2016].

53 Srdan Golubovic: *Moja lična pobjeda*, *VREME* 1155, 21 February 2013 / *KULTURA* <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1099587&print=yes> [accessed 28 April 2016].

For the director, the creation of this film was not political work but the reconstruction of a “high moral and human deed”.⁵⁴ The ripple effect of Srdjan’s deed has been reflected through the director’s own quest and search for answers on goodness, neutrality, action, and the giving of one’s life for one’s neighbour. Golubovic’s film does not simply describe a scene in which an act happened at a certain point in time; it creates a new scene through which the director investigates the meanings of human acts. According to Golubovic, “The main question is if there is sense in being a human being and a hero. The film is hard but offers catharsis and an affirmative reply: yes, there is sense in being a human being.”⁵⁵ The question that the director explores is also an answer: acts have a ripple effect, which runs counter to Arendt’s view that “when the actions ceases, the meaning ceases”.⁵⁶

The figure of the activist citizen has been constituted here in two ways: through a real-life event and through the film. By giving his own life for the Other, Srdjan becomes an activist citizen and a political figure, non-deliberately perhaps, by disrupting the practices of a conflicted society. His act surpasses the friend-enemy distinction⁵⁷ typical of the oppressive nationalist-religious ideology of the time, and of identitarian ideologies of the present. Srdjan’s deed that inspired the director is one that shifted the existing practices of political communities divided by ethnicity and religious belonging. The film functions in a similar way: it shifts the practice of the “feel good” film or mere political-historical reconstruction by putting before the audience the question, What can I do? The director asks, Who is my neighbour? and Does it mean anything to give one’s life for another? Golubovic’s film thus becomes political, even if it is not intended to be.

In this way film becomes a medium for carrying out the transformative and visionary practices of (re)creation and for testifying what citizenship should be. The director focuses on the universal right of every human being to live as a free person, and the peacebuilding dimension comes as an effect of the original deed. Peacebuilding as an act is not possible without an act of forgiveness and without responsibility for Others, who are in this process transformed from alienated Other into a neighbour. The film is itself a personal exploration of existential questions by the director, a creative act that was an effect of Srdjan Aleksic’s real-life heroic deed. Both are authentic acts that break normative boundaries and established divisions, and both are visionary, for they surpass the immediate socio-political context.

54 “Golubovic’s ‘Krugovi’ Scoops Sundance Award”, *Balkan Insight*, 29 January 2013, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/golubovic-wins-special-sundance-award> [accessed 28 April 2016].

55 “Golubovic’s ‘Krugovi’ Scoops Sundance Award”, *Balkan Insight*, 29 January 2013, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/golubovic-wins-special-sundance-award> [accessed 28 April 2016].

56 Isin 2012, 117.

57 Bretherton 2011.

WADJDA (Haifaa al-Mansour, SA/D 2013)

WADJDA is well known as the first film by the first female director from a country where cinemas are officially banned. In Saudi Arabia women have been segregated and are prohibited from mixing with men, from driving, and from riding bikes. The rules are often regulated by the religious police, who take action against those who violate the laws of the country. Instead of debating the numerous issues related to the position of women in Islam and in Saudi society, director Haifaa al-Mansour chose to concentrate on a simple story about a girl and a bike. For al-Mansour “bicycles represent a lot, such as freedom of movement for one”.⁵⁸ The bicycle here becomes a symbol of transformation, life, and ultimately freedom, as in Vittorio De Sica’s *BICYCLE THIEVES* (1948).⁵⁹ The film combines an urbanised *cinéma vérité* style with the editing conventions of classical Hollywood cinema, which when united with subject matter and socio-political symbolic undertones reveals the real complexity of al-Mansour’s aesthetic. The aesthetic subtly brings together elements of realism and naturalism, with characters represented true to their natural circumstances. Life is depicted with little distortion, yet at the same time al-Mansour subtly focuses on the individual’s social and political role in society, transforming seemingly insignificant elements of society (a bicycle) in order to question wider elements of reality and the human condition. This is one of the crucial elements in what I define as activist transformative practice in cinema.

Wadjda (fig. 1) is a ten-year-old girl who wants to have a bicycle to compete with her neighbour and friend Abudallah, with whom she is not supposed to play because



Fig 1: Wadjda decides to participate in a Qur’an-reading competition so she can buy a bike (WADJDA, Haifaa al-Mansour, SA/D 2013)

58 Harrod 2013.

59 McGill 2013.

she is entering adolescence. Her mother, who is at the same time faced with a difficult emotional situation in her marriage, is initially opposed to her daughter's having a bicycle, and Wadjda therefore decides to enter a Qur'an-reading competition to raise the money she needs to buy a bicycle (fig.2).



Fig 2: After winning the competition, Wadjda announces her plans to buy a bike. She gets told of and the prize money is withheld (WADJDA, Haifaa al-Mansour, SA/D 2013)

She is faced with a strict teacher whose hypocrisy she rejects. At the same time her mother realises that her husband, Wadjda's father, will have to marry another woman who will give him an heir because Wadjda, as a girl, does not count on the family tree, which is symbolically displayed in their living room. When her husband marries another woman, Wadjda's mother embraces her daughter's "rebellious" and authentic spirit and buys her a bicycle (fig. 3).

Al-Mansour chooses a subtle way to reveal the oppression and restrictions that women face on a daily basis, from an early age, because of their gender. The film shows the world from the perspective of a child, a young girl, as a world that although restricted is full of changes and possibilities, which allows al-Mansour to bring more energy to the subject at hand than would be contained in a simple statement about oppressed women. Looking out from within, from the local perspective, and through the eyes of a young girl, she provides a picture of a world that is yet to come. Behind the main story about a child who wants a bicycle, the film shows "non-kind actions as a result of society's pressure", such as the story of Wadjda's mother, whose relationship with her husband is distorted because "the pressure and the culture itself does not allow that kind of love to grow ... Because it allows polygamy, for example",⁶⁰

60 Lapin 2013.



Fig 3: Wadjda's dream finally came true (WADJDA, Haifaa al-Mansour, SA/D 2013)

and who asks another woman to fulfil what seems to be one of her main duties, to provide a male heir for the family. In many ways, al-Mansour's film "calls the laws into question",⁶¹ in terms of the right of women not just to perform usual tasks as do men, such as work or drive, but also to live as equals, freed from their exclusion and segregation. However, al-Mansour does not victimise women of Saudi society,⁶² but instead cleverly reveals that patriarchal rules are often backed by women themselves: through the character of the strict schoolteacher, she shows that women can be the ones who (re)enforce these rules and support them. In a similar manner, she does not question Islam per se; Islam is not necessarily in conflict with the feminist perspective on gender equality and freedom, as we can see in the scenes when Wadjda prays with her mother.⁶³

The girl, Wadjda, is resisting the pressure of a male-dominant, patriarchal society from within, by pushing at boundaries in order to change established norms and patriarchal rules on a micro level, just as al-Mansour is doing with her film. The first female director from Saudi Arabia, al-Mansour had to study abroad because the country does not have an academic programme in film studies. She managed to get approval for the filming of WADJDA, but as it was being shot she had to direct parts of the film from a van, to avoid possible protests for breaking the law and mixing with men in a public space. She also followed censorship guidance and did not shoot scenes showing a woman and a man sitting together on a sofa for instance.

61 Isin/Nielsen 2008.

62 See Shabi 2013.

63 See Shabi 2013.

In her own words, al-Mansour wanted to be “respectful”, but at the same time she wanted to tell the story from inside and make it close to a Saudi Arabian audience.⁶⁴ She is aware that change is needed, and she is pushing for those changes with optimism, like the character in her film. Her personal views on liberties are that women should not be marginalised and that their body and gender should not be used as a site of ideology.⁶⁵

What is interesting about WADJDA is precisely this process of film creation and the ways that al-Mansour chose to deal with her subject. For the director, the creation of the film was both an exploration and an expression of an act. Through her film, al-Mansour wanted to find a voice of her own: “I was trying to find my voice; I was trying to find a space that I could inhabit as a person and express my opinions.”⁶⁶

Furthermore, while Wadjda, a girl and therefore a second-class citizen, transforms into an actor, precisely through this process of creating a scene al-Mansour becomes an actor who claims rights and at the same time offers the possibility of a new society in which women are not marginalised because of their gender. The fact that the case is made subtly and that the film won over the Saudi Arabian committee that nominated WADJDA for Oscar entry shows that claiming rights and peacemaking can be, and are, part of the transformative practise of activist citizenship, perhaps because the film embraced the local perspective and claimed rights from that very same position. Wadjda and her creator al-Mansour show that marginalised voices as subjects who turn into activists can subvert ideologies without creating physical conflict. The director’s search for her voice turned into an act of claiming rights that do not exist, which is activism. Coincidentally or not, in April 2013 Saudi Arabia lifted the ban on women riding bicycles. Al-Mansour evokes the need for recognition of women’s rights, a quest specific to the context from which she speaks, but she also reminds the audience of women’s ultimate worth as human beings, which has a universal dimension. This quest for recognition of full humanity in the marginalised Other is ontological.

CONCLUSION – CONSTITUTING THE FIGURE OF AN ACTIVIST CITIZEN

The films discussed in this article (1) explore acts, activism, and the concepts of peace and reconciliation, (2) claim the right to act, and (3) are an expression of an artistic director’s autonomous act. In so doing, I argue, films capture and express activism. I further argue that the films are creative scenes through which filmmakers emerge as those who act. Through film – in the “scene” and in new subjects – actors are

64 Liston 2013.

65 Zoomin TV, 2012, First female Saudi Arabian director Haifaa Al Mansour provokes with Wadjda, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umTezaSioKA> [accessed 28 April 2016].

66 Lapin, Andrew, Wadjda director Haifaa Al Mansour, September 2013, <http://thedissolve.com/features/interview/168-wadjda-director-haifaa-al-mansour/> [accessed 28 April 2016].

constructed. These actors are defined and constituted by their authentic acts of creation. Their creation represents the aforementioned answerability to Others and to own-being.

I argue that acts have a ripple effect: as described in CIRCLES, an act by Srdjan Aleksić, for instance, represents what Isin calls “an act with performative force”,⁶⁷ showing that an act “cannot be reduced to the moment of its performance” but “must include its subsequent interpretation and description”.⁶⁸ Isin argues that acts are performative descriptions,⁶⁹ and therefore acts are inevitably subjected to interpretation, also because “all mental phenomena are ontologically subjective”.⁷⁰ The films do not represent a mere descriptive statement; I argue that their power is in the aforementioned “performative utterance” (which through the scene is transformed into an act). Performativity is directly linked with transformative practices and activism in film: the transformative practice of film is a result of the director’s creative performative act, which brings acts and activism into focus not just thematically (as a denial of rights) but also through the creative process of the filmmaker. Performative force communicates the issues at hand non-violently, which is pertinent for sustaining peace. The directors transform acts of violence and “non-kind actions” by focussing on non-violent acts such as the act of forgiveness. *WADJDA* represents a non-violent quest for recognition of ultimate worth. The peacebuilding dimension of films is a product of individual creative acts that surpass existing ideological divisions.

In that respect, films are not just interpretations of the acts and deeds of activism; they are novel creations, produced in specific conditions and societies in which different ideologies prevail and where these acts are not fully accepted. Film discloses the filmmaker to be a claimant of rights who breaks with the ideological discourse of a society, in itself a subversive act, even if not intentional. Through film demands are made for new ways, practices, and ethics. Embedded in the narrative of the film is the quest for recognition of the equality and humanity of those with different rights. This quest is purposive for both the subject – the one who creates – and the environment in which the creator creates. The transformative dimension of film works on two levels: through answerability to Others and through a personal act by the filmmaker that embodies their quest for a just society, which transforms them into the activists.

Peacebuilding is not necessarily intentional (although broadly speaking it can be) but is rather a purpose of creative activism, whose “outcome is not predictable”.⁷¹ Peacebuilding is an ongoing process that continues in space and time and has an ethical and moral quality because it reveals how subjects are engaging and relating to Others. But if we take peacebuilding as an outcome of activism with moral quality, how

67 Isin 2012, 134.

68 Isin 2012, 135.

69 For more detailed discussion see Isin 2012, 126.

70 Searle 1995, 12.

71 Isin 2012, 129.

are we to measure it, and whose morality does it represent? We need to remember that when it comes to “othering”, the foreign Other does not need to be morally evil but has to be different so that some kind of conflict is possible.⁷² Both films discussed here search in different ways for the alternatives to the practices of “othering”.

WAJDJA and CIRCLES come from very different socio-political and religious contexts. Neither film deals with religion per se, but both nonetheless include religious elements and symbolism to illustrate the characters’ quest for their own identities. This lack of what is usually perceived as “religious” in films is precisely what makes these films strongly religious – in other words, the implicit presence of religion works very well, allowing both filmmaker and audience to explore existential questions related to otherness and freedom and also to religious belonging.

In exploring the meaning of the Other, the films move beyond the usual political representations of the issue by imposing ontological questions – who is my neighbour and who am I? In WAJDJA and CIRCLES, the relationship to the Other is demonstrated as “being-with-the-Other”, not only by moving beyond the othering of one’s neighbour and imposed ethnic and gender differences, but also by recognising the equal human being in the Other, who precisely because of this equality cannot be denied the same right to act. The right to act is seen as an existential right: it is the right to live freely, liberated from religious, ethnic, and gender-based exclusion. This right is the right to ontological freedom, and in that sense, even unintentionally, the filmmakers impose moral law as normative, by demonstrating that it is “not my enemy who defines me”⁷³ but my neighbour – and how I relate to the foreign, marginalised Other.

The films explore this universal aspect of Otherness in both ontological and ontic senses, and their claim for equal rights in circumstances in which divisions are still part of the social and political reality disrupts existing political practices. The concepts of activist citizenship and, consequently, peacebuilding have been re-created and reconstructed through the scene of film, through a creative and authentic practice, and activism therefore has been constructed in film not only by depicting the issues at hand but also by the very process of creation.

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72 Bretherton 2011, 368; “Enemy can be economic competitor, which is de-politization of public life” (369).

73 Bretherton 2011, 369.

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Images of the Muslim Woman and the Construction of Muslim Identity

The Essentialist Paradigm

ABSTRACT

This article argues that much of the postmodern discourse on the Muslim woman and her veil is symptomatic of what I call the “essentialist paradigm”. The world is seen through the prism of a group’s religious/cultural identity and eventually constructs a Muslim identity – and with it an image of the Muslim Woman. The image of the oppressed veiled Muslim Woman and the treatment of a piece of cloth as synonymous with her whole identity and being are products of this paradigm of thought. Using an interdisciplinary approach that combines discourse analysis and a case study of the construction of the British Muslim community, this article argues that the essentialist paradigm ignores the context of its subject matter with all its accompanying power structures, political and social factors, and the roles played by both the state and fundamentalist Islam in constructing a Muslim identity and with it the Muslim Woman and her dress code.

KEYWORDS

veil, Islam, group identity, essentialist paradigm, Muslim Woman, British Muslim community

BIOGRAPHY

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THREE IMAGES

First image: A woman in a burqa,¹ a convert to Islam; she is the Women’s Representative of the Islamic Central Council of Switzerland. She is participating in a 2013 podium

1 The burqa is a full-body cloak worn by some Muslim women that covers the face as well. Wearing the burqa is a custom imported from Najd, a region in Saudi Arabia and the power base of Salafi Islam.

discussion in *Arena*, a Swiss political talkshow, and argues that her burqa is an expression of “free choice” (fig. 1). She says that the face of a woman, unlike the face of a man, is a source of temptation and that was a long process for her to come to this realisation, but in the end she chose to follow God’s will. The core of her argument runs, “This is my religion and I am exercising my right to freedom of religion.”²



Fig. 1: Screenshot from *Arena*, a Swiss political talk show, 28 September 2013, © Elham Manea.

Second image: A poster from 2009 of a woman in a burqa; only the woman’s eyes are visible. She is positioned among seven minarets, designed to look like rockets, standing on the Swiss flag. In the lower part of the poster a short sentence looms: “Yes to the prohibition of minarets” (fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Campaign against the construction of minarets in Switzerland, autumn 2009
© Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, Neggio.

² *Arena* 2013.

Third image: A female protester is savagely beaten by Egyptian military forces (fig. 3). The woman was wearing a black *abaya*³ but ironically is known only as “the woman in the blue bra”. The clip of the “blue bra incident” on 17 December 2011 shows a limp woman being dragged by her arms along the street with her *abaya* ripped open, exposing her naked torso and blue bra. Military forces surround her, many wielding batons; guards hit her, and one stomps on her.⁴



Fig. 3: The “blue bra” female protester beaten by Egyptian police during clashes in Cairo’s Tahrir Square on 17 December 2011 © Reuters.

The woman in *Arena* is articulating Salafism, a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam that argues that the face of a woman is a source of temptation and should be covered to protect men and society. That position is considered extreme in the Islamic world(s) and is not shared by the majority of Islamic legal interpretations. Within Muslim countries it is highly contested and deemed a fringe belief by many. On 2 April 2010, for example, the Mufti of Al Azhar, the highest religious authority in Sunni Islam, stated in a programme on Al Arabiya TV that wearing the burqa is a “custom, not a religious requirement” and the product of a “lone opinion” in Islamic jurisprudence.⁵ The poster, propagated by far-right and xenophobic Swiss political forces, uses the burqa as a visual symbol for a threat endangering Switzerland, with the image of the

3 Abaya or cloak is a black loose over-garment, essentially a robe-like dress, worn by some women especially in the Arabian Peninsula.

4 Coleman 2011.

5 Al Arabiya TV 2010.

woman employed to represent everything that contradicts Swiss values. The clip of the woman in the blue bra ironically introduces the agency of a woman who took to the streets while covered to protest the actions of the army and hence became the subject of the brutal force of a police state. At the heart of all three images is the body of the Muslim woman, covered or stripped, as a field of religious, political, and ideological battle. Islamists treat her body and its mandatory coverage as a symbol of a strict Islamist social order imposed on all who live under their control. European xenophobic forces see in her Burka a threat of Islamisation that must be stopped. The authoritarian Arab state uses the exposure of her body as an instrument of intimidation intended to stop her from practising her political rights.

In the three pictures there is an *image*, utilised to represent religion and gender; a *woman*, who defies these representations and develops a space of resistance that challenges the religious, authoritarian, and xenophobic symbolisation of her body; a *context* that is conspicuously absent from the narratives and representations of the Muslim woman in all of these images; and most significantly a *constructed Muslim identity* that encapsulates the Muslim Woman, hiding her humanity, personality, and diversity – this constructed image that is exploited by different actors for different purposes.

I look at visibility, normativity, and gender through a contextual prism within the indispensable concept of universality. Both normativity and visibility are shaped by context. In Saudi Arabia a woman walking without covering her whole body, including her hair and face, would stand out as both odd and foreign, and, most importantly, would be perceived as promiscuous and threatening to public morality. She might be arrested and flogged as a result. Yet, this same woman would not draw attention if she walked in the streets of Berne or Zurich, where her appearance – wearing jeans, skirt, or dress, and with her hair and face uncovered – are considered “normal”. We visualise through our prisms of meanings, concepts, and norms of acceptability. But these prisms tend to vary over time, for they are not immune to modification or change.

Likewise, gender roles are often constructed through their social context: a woman’s role in family, her treatment as a child and later as a woman, and her function within society are all shaped by her familial, social, religious, cultural, economic, and political contexts. That said, while her roles, and her worth or lack of worth, vary from one context to another, every woman is born with inalienable and universal value and rights that are irrespective of context: she is born equal in dignity and rights. The tension between the worth attributed to a woman by her context and her worth as a human being gave birth to the universal women’s rights discourse. I use the term “woman” here as an example for gender, which encompasses women, men, and transsexuals.

THE ESSENTIALIST PARADIGM

Remarkably, when some social scientists engage in intellectual discourse on the Muslim Woman, on her body (covered or not) and on the veil (headscarf or burqa), they often neutralise the context as if it were of no consequence and homogenise the woman's identities, seeing only her religious identity as valid, authentic, and relevant. They seem to see only the veil, not the person wearing the veil. They, too, have constructed an encapsulated image of the Muslim Woman that hides her individual humanity and personality.

Each of the political and social actors mentioned in the three images above – Islamist fundamentalists, Western far-right xenophobic forces, and the authoritarian state – has political motives for engaging in a discourse that is both ahistorical and decontextualised. Similarly, such social scientists seem to be engaged in a discourse driven by ideology rather than context or history. They talk in terms of abstract concepts such as freedom of religion and constitutional law and treat the Muslim Woman as an oppressed member of a minority who needs to be defended and protected from the vilification and demonisation of her religious identity. One established approach to this subject has been described by Pascale Fournier as “left legalism”, defined by Janet Halley and Wendy Brown as “endeavours in which the left [seeks] to mobilize the implicit promise of the liberal state that it will attempt to make justice happen by means of law”.⁶ Here justice means the Muslim Woman's right to wear a veil, specifically the burqa.

Building on Fournier's classification, this intellectual engagement with legalism and the discourse it generates has a number of aspirations. First, it seems to give voice and agency to Muslim women through freedom of religion and the defence of freely chosen beliefs. Natasha Bakht's chapter entitled “Veiled Objections: Facing Public Opposition to the Niqab” provides samples of this type of discourse. Bakht writes that many Muslim women literally “wear” their religious convictions for all to see,⁷ an idea echoed by Jen'nan Ghazal Read and John P. Bartkowski, who note, “These veiled respondents find comfort in the cultural and ethnic distinctiveness that the veil affords them . . . [linking] them to the broader community (*ummah*) of Islamic believers and Muslim women”.⁸ The headscarf can express an active interest in Islamic scripture, as a gesture that reaffirms a commitment to Islamic morality and identity within a modern social context and must not necessarily be seen as a manifestation of passive submission to the Islamic community.⁹ For others yet, the veil is a reminder of acceptable forms of behaviour for men and women.¹⁰ The veil can be seen, Bakht concludes,

6 Halley and Brown, quoted in Fournier 2013, 690.

7 Bakht 2012, 81–82.

8 Read and Bartkowski, quoted in Bakht 2012, 81.

9 Göle 1996, 4; Wiles 2007, 720.

10 Yildiz Atasoy, referenced in Bakht 2012, 82.

as a “display of faith and modesty or something more akin to a political statement related to emancipation from the West”.¹¹

Secondly, this intellectual engagement combines forms of political multiculturalism that justify robust conceptions of religious accommodation. Bruce Ryder’s chapter “The Canadian Conception of Equal Religious Citizenship” is an example of this type of discourse. Arguing for greater religious accommodation Ryder contends,

The rights to positive accommodation of religious practices [in Canada] which sound so fine in the law books are, of course, not always easily achieved on the ground. Whatever their rights on paper, in a variety of social contexts religious persons have to struggle for comprehension, and then for recognition, and then for accommodation of their religious beliefs and practices. This struggle is particularly challenging for religious minorities whose traditions and practices are often poorly understood. Discourses of the alien, dangerous “other” can quickly fill the gaps left by incomprehension or ignorance.¹²

A third dimension of this discourse portrays the veil as synonymous with identity, and proposes, therefore, that proscribing the veil is a form of oppression. Natan Sharansky’s book *Defending Identity* (2009) falls within this subcategory. Sharansky argues that “expressions of religious identity have very different meanings in different contexts. To some women, the veil is not only a religious obligation but a manifestation of their own culture and an expression of who they are. To deny them the right to wear it becomes a form of repression.”¹³ Hence, according to Sharansky, a law banning the veil (a headscarf in this case) means that Muslims are “coerced to act one way while thinking and feeling another”.¹⁴

Fourth, this intellectual discourse considers the whole debate about the veil (headscarf) to be a constructed discourse used as a pretext to impose a hegemonic secular and/or imperial Western agenda. Judith Butler’s article “Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time” (2008) is an example of this type of discourse. According to Butler,

The debate on whether girls should be prohibited from wearing the veil in public schools seemed to bring this paradox into relief. The ideas of the secular were invoked to consolidate ignorant and hateful views of Islamic religious practice (i.e. the veil is nothing other than the communication of the idea that women are inferior to men, or the veil communicates an alliance with “fundamentalism”), at which point laïcité becomes a way not of negotiating or permitting cultural difference, but a way of consolidating a set of cultural presumptions that effect the exclusion and abjection of cultural difference.¹⁵

11 Bakht 2012, 82.

12 Ryder 2008, 88.

13 Sharansky 2009, 115.

14 Sharansky 2009, 114.

15 Butler 2008, 13.

In my opinion, this type of intellectual discourse on the veil of the Muslim Woman is symptomatic of a paradigm of thought that has dominated postcolonial, postmodern discourses for far too long. In my forthcoming book *Women and Shari'a Law: The Impact of Legal Pluralism in the UK*,¹⁶ I term this approach an “essentialist paradigm”, noting that its advocates insist on treating people as members of homogeneous groups, essentialising their cultures and religions, underestimating the consequences of their academic discourse on human rights, and discarding voices of people from these very cultures as “not authentic enough”.¹⁷

Four features characterise the essentialist paradigm:

1. It combines multiculturalism as a political process with a policy of soft legal pluralism, dividing people along cultural, religious, and ethnic lines, treating them differently on account of their “cultural differences” and in the process setting them apart and placing them in parallel legal enclaves.
2. It perceives rights from the perspective of the group: the group has rights, not the individuals within it. It insists that each group has a collective identity and culture, an essential identity and culture, which should be protected and perpetuated even if doing so violates the rights of individuals within the group.
3. It is dominated by a cultural relativist approach to rights (in both its forms, as strong and soft cultural relativism) and argues that rights and other social practices, values, and moral norms are culturally determined.¹⁸
4. It is haunted by the white man’s/woman’s burden caused by a strong sense of shame and guilt for the Western colonial and imperial past and by a paternalistic desire to protect minorities or people from former colonies.

The essentialist paradigm is a mindset that perceives the other – whether a member of a minority group, as in this case, or an entire Third World country – as the oppressed and understands human rights as tools imposed by the Western oppressor. It considers those who fight for universal human rights in their own societies as not authentic representatives of their countries and in the process ignores or justifies dire human rights violations committed in the name of the rights of groups or cultural and religious rights.

I identified this paradigm of thought during my research into calls to introduce Islamic law in Western legal systems. Because proponents of soft legal pluralism have used Britain as a positive model,¹⁹ it was imperative to research the British case. I approached Islamic sharia councils and Muslim arbitration tribunals in various British

¹⁶ Manea, forthcoming 2016.

¹⁷ The study is based on field research by the author in the United Kingdom (36 interviews conducted in 2013) and makes use of the results of previous field research by the author in Syria, Kuwait, and Yemen (71 interviews between 2006 and 2008). In addition, discourse and content analyses have been used to deconstruct the postmodern discourse on group rights.

¹⁸ Donnelly 1984, 401.

¹⁹ Bowen 2012; Williams 2008; Yilmaz 2005; Kemper/Reinkowski 2005.

cities and met their leading sheiks, including the only woman on any of these panels. I also interviewed experts and lawyers, as well as activists in civil society and women's rights groups, especially from within the Muslim communities, and also politicians who are calling for reform of this legal "model".²⁰ The more I looked into the subject, the clearer it became that the issue is not merely a matter of a group of scholars supporting a specific legal system. Their discourse represents a paradigm of thought that sees the world through the prism of a group's religious and cultural identity and thus constructs Muslim identity as a group identity that shapes every aspect of the lives of the members of this religious community, including the Muslim Woman.

The image of the oppressed, veiled Muslim Woman and the treatment of a piece of cloth as synonymous with her whole identity are products of the essentialist paradigm of thought and its fixation with group identity. From this perspective, the construction of Muslim identity and the construction of the Muslim Woman are two sides of the same coin. As the notion of group identity and the collective rights of a group has proved so important, in the following section I critically discuss this notion, focusing on the ideas of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, who in my opinion has strongly influenced the essentialist discourse.

GROUP IDENTITY AND RIGHTS

Charles Taylor, the father of legal pluralism, famously espoused group identity and group rights.²¹ His concept of a politics of recognition, introduced in the edited volume *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (1994), has permeated much of the thinking within the essentialist paradigm. He refers to the politics of multiculturalism in terms of demands for recognition of minority or subaltern groups.

The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, with recognition often *misrecognition*. A person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirrors a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm and can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.²²

Taylor tends to see identity and with it culture and society as static, as a whole that has inherent, given traits. For Taylor, identity is "who we are, where we are coming from, and thus the background against which our tastes and desires and opinions and aspirations make sense".²³ In his paradigm, identity does not exist in a vacuum. It is very much intertwined with "authenticity", as he terms it: "There is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way and not in imi-

20 Manea, forthcoming 2016.

21 This section is based on Manea, forthcoming 2016, chapters 2–3.

22 Taylor 1994, 25, emphasis in the original.

23 Taylor 1994, 30.

tation of anyone else's life".²⁴ This "notion gives importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life; I miss what being human is for me."²⁵ This notion of authentic identity has given rise to what Taylor calls the "politics of difference", in which distinctions are the basis of differential treatment: "The aim is to cherish distinctness, not just now but forever. After all, if we are concerned with identity, then what is more legitimate than one's aspiration that it never be lost?"²⁶ Cherishing distinctions requires introducing policies involving "collective goals" designed for "cultural survival".²⁷ Taylor insists that a society with strong collective goals can still be liberal if it is "also capable of respecting diversity, especially when dealing with those who do not share its common goals; and provided it can offer adequate safeguards for fundamental rights".²⁸ Fundamental rights aside, Taylor considers it quite possible that the rights of individuals will be restricted if the state focuses on safeguarding its collective goals; he also acknowledges that the pursuit of the collective end will probably involve treating insiders and outsiders differently.

Taylor's concept of identity is not concerned with identity at the individual level. He focuses on the collective identity of a cultural group. This cultural group may be aboriginal bands or French Canadians, especially Quebeckers. It could also be a group designated by its gender, for example women. It could be a religious group, like the Muslims. His main motivation in describing the politics of recognition and hence difference is fear of "imposing" a hegemonic culture on the culture of a minority. His aim is to protect minority rights. From this perspective his aim is certainly noble. The problem lies in Taylor's attempt to ensure that the collective identity of a cultural group can survive. Here he falls into an essentialist trap: focusing on the authentic identity of a cultural group assumes that it has fundamental, unchangeable traits. This assumption ignores the fact that cultures do change, that they are not static. What we considered to be part of our cultural norms and identity yesterday may look quite abhorrent today. In addition, minority groups are not homogenous, as Taylor assumes. They do not represent one cultural block with similar, standardised features. Often members of minority groups have a complex set of identities that they express differently in different settings. Taylor also ignores the power structures within minority groups, which further complicate matters, especially when some members claim to be representatives of a cultural group and assume the right to define what this group's authentic identity is, and what it is not.

Taylor tries to protect certain rights for particular groups, but his efforts create a mess. When we propagate the concept of a group's rights, we also justify the violation of human rights within minority groups as an expression of different cultural

24 Taylor 1994, 30.

25 Taylor 1994, 33, emphasis in the original.

26 Taylor 1994, 40.

27 Taylor 1994, 61.

28 Taylor 1994, 61.

concepts of rights and justice. Women's rights have been violated with impunity on these very grounds.

Let me explain. Culture does change. Consider the fact that between 1877 and the mid-1960s, the Jim Crow caste system was quite acceptable in the South in the United States. The system treated blacks as a degenerate caste and second-class citizens; it excluded them from public transport and public facilities, from serving on juries and from entering certain jobs and neighbourhoods. And it severely regulated social interactions between the races. During that period it was quite normal to have separate hospitals, prisons, schools, churches, cemeteries, and public accommodations for blacks and whites. These laws and policies were sustained by a whole range of religious, educational, and "scientific" discourses. A mainstream Christian interpretation at the time taught that "whites were the Chosen people, blacks were cursed to be servants, and God supported racial segregation".²⁹ At every educational level, scientists (craniologists, eugenicists, phrenologists and social Darwinists) bolstered the belief that blacks were innately inferior to whites, intellectually and culturally. The media did their share by routinely referring to blacks as "niggers, coons, and darkies", and by reinforcing "anti-black stereotypes".³⁰ At the time both blacks and whites were governed by cultural norms on how they should interact. For instance, a black male could not offer his hand to a white male, as such a gesture implied social equality. Under no circumstance was a black male to offer to light the cigarette of a white woman, an act that implied an intimacy that might be punished by lynching.³¹

Fifty years ago, that culture of racial discrimination was acceptable in parts of the United States. Many white people considered the Jim Crow caste system to be, in Taylor's words, "who we are, where we are coming from"; as such, it was "the background against which our tastes and desires and opinions and aspirations make sense".³² When others began to demand changes in these laws – and thus in this element of the way of life in the South – white people perceived these demands as tantamount to imposing an "imitation of anyone else's life" and corrupting a "certain way of being human that is my way".³³

I know I am being provocative here. But if we are to take Taylor's argument about authenticity, identity, and culture at face value, white people in the Southern states were, and perhaps still are, born racist. That was the "way they are". Racism and a belief in their superiority over blacks was "inherent in the way they give meaning to their lives" and as such we should cherish their "distinctness, not just now but forever". After all, "that was their culture".³⁴ Does this mean we should aspire to

29 Pilgrim 2014.

30 Pilgrim 2014.

31 Pilgrim 2014.

32 Taylor 1994, 30.

33 Taylor 1994, 30.

34 Taylor 1994, 30.

the survival of racism and white supremacy? How horrible would this argument have sounded? But this expectation is hardly true, right? People are not born racists. They are made racists. They are made racists by a whole range of institutions, including religion, science, the media, and education. These institutions and their discourses supported and maintained the Jim Crow system of racial discrimination. I mentioned these institutions deliberately, because cultures do not function in a void. They may be sustained or altered depending on the contexts in which they are operating and the systems that maintain them. Therefore, it was no coincidence that once men and women, black and white, from the South as well as the North, started to tackle and oppose the intellectual foundations of discrimination, the culture of the caste system began to fall apart and with it the norms that sustained it.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF MUSLIM IDENTITY: THE BRITISH CASE

What holds true for the “hegemonic” culture applies also to the “minority” culture: neither functions in a void or remains unchanged.³⁵ Each can be sustained or altered by the context it is operating within and the systems that maintain it. This idea is evident in my research as I show how and why perceptions of Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities in the United Kingdom changed. From the 1950s to the 1970s their members were seen as representatives of diverse South Asian nations, but since the 1980s they have been perceived as faceless members of the Muslim community.³⁶ Moreover, a minority group is not homogenous. It does not represent one cultural block with similar and standardised features and traits. Diversity within a minority group is expressed in different forms, on an individual level as well as the group level.

Consider the example of a young woman I met in London in January 2013 during a meeting with members of a small LGBT Muslim support group called *Imaan*, which means “faith” in Arabic.³⁷ I will call her Leila. She is British, of South Asian heritage, an atheist and a lesbian. Leila wears a headscarf because of community pressure in her neighbourhood in Birmingham. She does not want to wear it, but she lives in a closed community where breaking the imposed rules would bring harm to her and her family; hence, wearing the headscarf allows her to sidestep that risk. However, wearing the headscarf immediately puts her into a religious box. Her appearance as a woman with a headscarf transforms her from a *woman* into a *Muslim Woman*, and a Muslim Woman is usually a *religious person*. But Leila is an atheist. The larger society

35 This part is based on Manea, forthcoming 2016: chapter 2.

36 Manea, forthcoming 2016.

37 Imaan supports the efforts of LGBT Muslim people and their families and friends to address questions of sexual orientation within Islam. It provides a safe space and support network where people can deal with issues of common concern through sharing individual experiences and institutional resources. For more information see their website, <http://www.imaan.org.uk/about/about.htm>.

is unable to see this part of her. If she wears the veil, then she must be a believer. It goes without saying that her belief, or rather her lack thereof, is a secret she keeps to herself within her community. On top of that, she is a lesbian. Her sexual orientation is another secret that she has to guard, lest it become known and cause a scandal with dire consequences. Leila does not fit within any of the cultural or ethnic categories to which she might automatically be assigned, neither within her community, which imposes its values on its members, nor within the larger society, which sees her in terms of a garment that covers her hair. She is a complex person with various identities, yet all we see as we look at her is a religious identity that she does not believe in. On an individual level, then, an ethnic or a religious category often cannot describe a person for two reasons: (1) each person has various identities, and (2) being associated with a religious group does not automatically make one religious or part of that group.

Moreover, on a group level, a minority is not homogenous. Consider the Muslim community (singular) in Britain. In the 1960s its members formed what were termed “South Asian communities” (plural). They included waves of migrants from Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. Within these national groupings, they were still seen as diverse, with different religious denominations and linguistic, regional, and ethnic backgrounds. At that time, as many interviewees told me, one would have been hard pressed to find a woman wearing a veil, let alone a burqa. The members of these communities identified themselves by their nationalities and sometimes by regional origins, such as being from Mirpur, a district and one of the largest cities in Pakistan’s Kashmir region. They may have practised their religion, but doing so did not frame their interaction with the world. It was not the mantle in which they wrapped themselves. Their religion was not the identity they stressed. From the 1970s, an intellectual shift took place, paving the way for the construction of the Muslim identity (singular).³⁸

On one hand, as Kenan Malik, a left-leaning Indian-born English thinker, notes, the left helped to introduce the politics of difference and group rights. The old radical left, Malik tells us, slowly lost its faith in secular universalism and Enlightenment ideas of rationalism and humanism and instead began talking about multiculturalism and group rights, decrying these Enlightenment ideas as “Eurocentric”, part of the Euro-American project imposed on other people. For decades, the left had argued that everyone should be equal whatever their racial, ethnic, religious, or cultural differences; now the left pushed the idea that different people should be treated differently precisely because of such differences.³⁹

On the other hand, the British state played a crucial part in translating this ideological shift into reality, by introducing multicultural policies at the local and national levels. Urban riots and unrest during the 1970s and 1980s raised concerns about how to

38 This part is adapted from Manea, forthcoming 2016, chapter 3.

39 Malik 2009, xix; Malik 2013, 19.

engage “ethnic minority communities” in the political process. The deliberations led to the sanctioning of a multiracial, multicultural approach that recognised different ethnic communities and needs in society.

What followed were policies that emphasised the importance of “different cultural backgrounds in determining people’s identity” and the necessity to “engage with community groups on this basis”.⁴⁰ A shift was occurring in the public space, moving away from the “liberal tradition of dealing with people in a ‘colour-blind’ way” and towards “differential treatment according to their cultural identities”.⁴¹ Equality would now require cultural recognition and respect. For “a person’s culture” not to be “affirmed and given status” would be “considered to be a denial of equality”.⁴² The ideas of Charles Taylor had found their home in the British policies of difference.

Gradually, local and national authorities adopted and moulded a range of services to accommodate the supposedly different needs of citizens and clients all across society. Over time, the nation has established ethnic housing associations and healthcare, arts and cultural along with voluntary support, radio channels, public broadcasting, and policing units, all based on ethnicity.⁴³ Ethnic and cultural groups were encouraged to make demands based on their differences and cultural exclusion from the mainstream. Their ability to access resources from the public purse was often dependent on their being unfairly disadvantaged because of their “difference”. Slowly but steadily, over the decades, ethnically and culturally specific lobbying groups have emerged, “each arguing their own corner for more money, resources and support for their particular identity”.⁴⁴

As some of my interviewees recounted, the outcome has been the demarcation of people into visible cultural and religious “communities” headed by state-picked community “leaders”. The communities rub against and compete with each other, living apart, looking at each other with suspicion, if not hatred.

In fact, Britain inaugurated a multicultural policy that in reality *imposed* a religious identity on communities (plural) and inadvertently facilitated the creation of a Muslim community (singular): an invented community, not an imagined one, to use Benedict Anderson’s term.⁴⁵ As a government creation, this invented community did not to celebrate diversity within a British context; instead, a group of loud Islamists was elevated as community leaders. They did not represent the majority within their communities. Several people I interviewed, people knowledgeable about political Islam and extremism in Britain, emphasised this point. The community did not choose these so-called leaders, nor did the leaders, at the time, enjoy the support of the members.

40 Mirza/Senthikumar/Ja’far 2007, 23.

41 Mirza/Senthikumar/Ja’far 2007, 23.

42 Mirza/Senthikumar/Ja’far 2007, 24.

43 Mirza/Senthikumar/Ja’far 2007, 24.

44 Mirza/Senthikumar/Ja’far 2007, 24.

45 Anderson 1991.

Their demands represented their own political agenda, which was to spread their vision of political Islam, but by elevating these individuals to the status of leaders, the government placed them in a position to dictate what their group's cultural and religious needs were. They were the gatekeepers of the "Muslim minority".

Consider this example. Up until the London terrorist attacks in 2005, the British government treated the Muslim Council of Britain, an umbrella organisation, as the sole representative of the Muslim community. The Muslim Council of Britain was founded and controlled by members of an Islamist group, Jamaat-e-Islami (JEI). Created in 1941 by Abu al-Alaa al-Mawdudi, an Indian-born journalist who later moved to Pakistan, Jamaat-e-Islami became an indispensable part of the worldwide Islamist movement, comparable to the Muslim Brotherhood. Mawdudi and with him Jamaat-e-Islami set themselves the immediate aim of restoring a state which would apply sharia. Sovereignty accordingly does not belong to the people but to Allah alone and power is only legitimate if it is used according to the commands of God.⁴⁶

According to Lorenzo Divino, a leading expert on political Islam in the West, the UK Islamic Mission, established in 1962 and headquartered in the north London borough of Islington, was the embryo of the Mawdudist network in Britain. The mission defined itself as an "ideological organisation" grounded in the belief that "Islam is a comprehensive way of life which must be translated into actions in all spheres of human life".⁴⁷ Its official mission statement recorded that the organisation sought to "establish the social orders of Islam for the Muslims and non-Muslims living in Britain".⁴⁸

Starting from the 1970s, the UK Islamic Mission created a network of mosques. Concurrently, another Jamaat-e-Islami inspired organisation, the Islamic Foundation, became the main publisher of Mawdudist literature and later ensured that Mawdudi's books became standard readings on Islam in British schools. The Mawdudists' ultimate "political coup", to use Innes Bowen's expression, was its control of the Muslim Council of Britain, created in 1997 and recognised by the British government as the sole representative body of Muslims in the United Kingdom.⁴⁹ Not surprisingly, as a report of Policy Exchange (a British centre-right think tank) report on British Muslims stated, British government policies of engagement with Muslims made things worse: "By treating Muslims as a homogenous group, the Government fails to see the diversity of opinions amongst Muslims, so that they feel more ignored and excluded."⁵⁰ Indeed, a 2007 survey of British Muslims has revealed how misguided these policies were. When asked to name an organisation that represented their views as a Muslim, only 6 per cent named the Muslim Council of Britain, while 51 per cent felt that no

46 Kepel 1997, 92; Bowen 2014, 58–59; 75; 80–81.

47 Divino 2010, 116.

48 Divino 2010, 116.

49 Bowen 2014, 84–90; Kepel 1997, 109–111; 118–125.

50 Mirza/Senthikumaran/Ja'far 2007, 6.

Muslim organisation represented their views, and 75 per cent held that there was more diversity and disagreement within the Muslim population than other people realised.⁵¹

Yet by then the money, resources, and support these Islamist organisations had received from the British government, in addition to those flowing from the Gulf States, had helped them create a plethora of educational, religious, and charitable institutions. They had the tools to spread their own vision of political Islam among the members of their communities. Most importantly, they helped create what I call “closed communities”, like the one in which Leila lives, patriarchal power structures that exercise social control over their members and intimidate those who reject their designated social rules. Leila wears a veil not because she wants to, but because she has to. She does not dare to come out as either a lesbian or an atheist because she knows that she will be made to pay dearly for such an act of rebellion against the way a proper Muslim woman is supposed to behave.

I am quite certain that Taylor did not know where his ideas would take him. He said it was possible that the rights of individuals would be restricted by the state’s aim of safeguarding collective goals, but he did not expect that people would either invent a community or violate its members’ fundamental human rights. Sadly, this is exactly the outcome of his theoretical approach, which ignores the political and social contexts of what it describes and therefore fails to take account of the mechanisms and institutions that either sustain or alter an identity and its cultural traits.

TIME FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT

Context matters! Context matters in highlighting how a single Muslim identity has been constructed. It is context that shows how complex and diverse Leila’s identity is, and why she wears a headscarf even though she is an atheist. Yet the essentialist paradigm seems to ignore this very context with all its accompanying power and patriarchal structures, political and social factors, and roles played by both the state and fundamentalist Islam in constructing a homogeneous Muslim identity and with it the Muslim Woman and her dress code.

The diversity of reasons why women wear the veil does not negate nor eliminate the essential role played by fundamentalist Islam – defined here as a “political movement of the extreme right, which manipulates religion in order to achieve its political aims”⁵² – in mainstreaming the idea that the veil is part of Islamic religious identity and in constructing the Muslim Woman and her obligation and/or right to wear the veil, as we only started to hear in the late 1970s. In countries where Islamists are in power, the veil is imposed by force, regardless of whether the woman wants to wear it. This

51 Mirza/Senthikumar/Ja’far 2007, 6.

52 Marieme Hèlie-Lucas’s definition, quoted in Bennoune 2013, 14.

is the case in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and the areas controlled by Islamists in Iraq, Syria, and Nigeria; the list goes on. Those who defy Islamists' dress code are subject to punishment that may include flogging, imprisonment, or fines.

In countries where Islamists are not in power – Islamic countries or Western societies with a Muslim minority – the veil is portrayed as both a religious obligation and part of freedom of choice. This strategy is well suited to Islamic fundamentalism's worldview, well described by Karima Bennouna. First, Bennouna argues, this worldview seeks the imposition of “God's Law”, that is an interpretation of sharia, on Muslims everywhere. Secondly, it wants to create what Islamic fundamentalists deem to be Islamic states or diasporic communities ruled by these laws. Thirdly, Islamic fundamentalism wants to police, judge, and change the behaviour, appearance, and conduct of other people of Muslim heritage. Fourthly, it tends to limit women's rights sharply, couching its constraints in the soothing language of protection, respect, and difference.⁵³

Control of women and their social behaviour and the imposition of a dress code are all part of fundamentalism's worldview. That fundamentalist worldview is clearly articulated in the literature of all major Islamist ideologists, as Lamia Rustum Shehadeh highlighted in her book *The Idea of Women in Fundamentalist Islam* (2007). Shehadeh examined the discourse on the Muslim Woman in the writings of the most influential Islamist ideologists such as Hasan al-Banna, Abu al-Alaa al-Mawdudi, Sayyid Qutb, and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and came to the conclusion that despite their differences, they “all agreed on their image of the ideal Muslim woman and her role in society; [and] all followed an interventionist policy on women's issues and family matters irrespective of the needs or the opinions of women themselves”.⁵⁴

In other words, the ideal Muslim woman is part of the Islamist political project. The veil is intrinsic to this project. In Iran, for example, a member of the Iranian National Assembly bluntly explained to Shehadeh that the imposition of the *hijab* (veil) is political, noting, “The hijab is not being discussed as a religious issue, but as a political, social, and economic issue.”⁵⁵ Shehadeh comes to the conclusion that the veiled woman signalled the redefinition of gender roles and the transformation of Iranian society. An imposed redefinition, I must emphasise, I must emphasise, as any woman who chooses not to veil is subject to a penalty of seventy-four lashes without trial.⁵⁶ So much for the religious freedom hailed by the essentialists.

Oddly, precisely the very context is often ignored by essentialists who instead choose to focus on an intellectual debate separate from reality. I find it interesting that in their writings on the Muslim Woman and her right to veil, the role played by fundamentalist Islam, whether or not from a position of political power, seems to be

53 Bennouna 2013, 14–19.

54 Shehadeh 2007, 236.

55 Shehadeh 2007, 236.

56 Shehadeh 2007, 236.

of no consequence. Judith Butler went so far as to say that this connection is nothing but a joke, stating in an interview:

I have heard debates in France, for instance, in which public intellectuals who support the ban on the veil (*le foulard*) argue that the veil has only one meaning. Then they ... proceed to argue that it is (a) an assertion of female subordination within Islam ... (b) an affiliation with Islamic fundamentalism (which is a joke, considering, for instance, the fashion in scarves that prevails in cosmopolitan areas such as Cairo).⁵⁷

I certainly can follow the argument that the veil has different meanings and the reasons why women wear it are therefore also varied. But to dismiss as a joke the argument that it is affiliated with Islamic fundamentalism is more than just perplexing, for there is sufficient literature, not to mention practical evidence (in areas ruled by Islamists: Sudan, Afghanistan, Gaza, Saudi Arabia, Iran, etc.), that testifies to Islamic fundamentalism's imposition of the veil as a marker of separation and a symbol of a totalitarian Islamist type of governance.⁵⁸ It also makes light of all the efforts and sacrifices of women and men who fight Islamic fundamentalism in Islamic and Western societies. Women like Arwa Abdo Othman, whom I met while carrying out field research in Yemen in 2007. Arwa Abdo Othman, who is today the Yemeni Minister of Culture, is known for her lifelong mission to document how bright and joyful Yemeni's women clothes and folklore were, and how Yemeni women used to show their faces and the contours of their body through their traditional colourful garments. It is her mission to resist the onslaught of Salafi Islam, which forced its way into Yemeni society and changed both the colour and type of clothes wore by women. In rural areas where women traditionally showed their faces and wore colourful garments, today women have to wear the Salafi niqab. Black is today's colour. Arwa Othman has never lived outside her country, speaks only Arabic, and comes from a conservative family background. It would be hard to accuse her of being Westernised.

During the first civil war that raged in Iraq after the U.S. invasion, Jamaat al Tawhid wa'l Jihad, an armed Islamist group, kidnapped and executed Zeena, a women's rights activist and businesswoman who defied their dress code: "Her body was found wrapped in the traditional abaya, which she had refused to wear when she was alive. Pinned to the abaya was a message: 'She was a collaborator against Islam.'"⁵⁹ Women Living Under Muslim Laws documented Zeena's case on its website in order to highlight a fundamentalist pattern found worldwide: the use of violence against women as a form of political intimidation. Imposing a dress code is part of this intimidation strategy.⁶⁰ Women Living Under Muslim Laws is run by a diverse group of women scholars and activists of Islamic heritage and is known for its critical views on Ameri-

57 Butler 2006.

58 See for instance Bennoune 2007; Howland 2001; Imam /Morgany/Yuval-Davis 2004.

59 Hélié 2005.

60 Hélié 2005.

can foreign policy and the invasion of Iraq. It would be hard to sustain a claim that they are working on behalf of an imperial hegemonic Western agenda. And in Britain, a women's rights activist with South Asian roots confided to me during my field research in 2013 that in order for her to be able to work in certain closed communities in East London where forms of extremism are widespread and to have access to women living there, she has to wear the headscarf. Nothing in these examples seems at all funny.

In my opinion, these essentialists are the modern embodiment of those nineteenth-century orientalists who believed in a civilising mission that would emancipate the Muslim woman. Both groups see in this woman only her religious identity. Both consider her a religious entity that is part of another religious whole – the Muslims. Both deem her to be oppressed, by xenophobic society/the imperial West or by male Muslims respectively. Both think she needs protection and must be freed – the essentialists insist on her wearing the veil, and the orientalists want to take off her veil. Finally, both assume that they know best what this woman needs and who should speak on her behalf – no one but they themselves!

Context matters because it shows that the essentialist discourse on the Muslim woman and her veil is a construct crafted in isolation from historical, political, social, and religious contexts. That construct mirrors the essentialists' self-obsessed and self-centred image, assumptions, expectations, and ideological battles. Given the rise of a counter-narrative and contextual knowledge produced by female scholars of Islamic heritage, it is clear that the time is ripe for a paradigm shift.

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Book Reviews

Christian Wessely

Elijah Siegler, Coen. Framing Religion in Amoral Order

Baylor University Press, 2016

I would hardly seem the most likely candidate to review a book on the Coen brothers. I have not seen all of their films, and the ones I saw ... well, either I did not understand them or they are really as shallow as I thought them to be. With one exception: I did enjoy *O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?* (2000). And I like *A SERIOUS MAN* (2009). So, two exceptions. And, of course, *TRUE GRIT* (2010) – so, all in all three exceptions¹ ... come to think of it, there are more that have stuck in my mind in a positive way, obfuscated by *BARTON FINK* (1991) or *BURN AFTER READING* (2008). Therefore, I was curious whether Elijah Siegler's edited collection would change my view on the Coens. Having googled for existing reviews of the book that might inspire me, I discovered that none are to be found online, apart from the usual flattery in four lines on the website of Baylor University Press, mostly phrases about the unrivalled quality of Siegler's book. Turns out I have to do all the work by myself. Given that I am not familiar with some of the films used to exemplify some of this book's theses, I will be brief on some chapters and give more space to those that deal with the films I know.

FORMAL ASPECTS

Baylor University Press is well established in the fields of philosophy, religion, theology, and sociology. So far, they have scarcely published in the media field, although personally I found two of their books (*Sacred Space*, by Douglas E. Cowan, and *Shows about Nothing*, by Thomas S. Hibbs) particularly useful. The quality of the "hardware" of the book is as I expected: good paper, solid cover, skilled typeface (although dulled by some minor flaws such as the wrong headline on pp. 312f.). The binding, however, is not as good as it should be – the first pages in my copy came loose even before I had completed reading it (which might be linked to my habit of placing books face down overnight, though). Also, the quality of the (comparatively few) pictures is not really outstanding – it seems to me that they are optimised for a different paper type, that is, plain white and smooth. Some pictures even have a black framing, for

1 Similarities to a certain Spanish Inquisition are intended; cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nf_Y4MbUCLY.

they are screenshots from widescreen versions on differently sized monitors (see, for example, pp.193f.) or are poorly trimmed (for example, pp. 209 and 253). They are, however, all carefully placed and important illustrations for the respective text. References are grouped at the end of the book. This practice – unfamiliar to European eyes – benefits the reader. My preference for footnotes – which seem to me better suited to scholarly reading and looking up references – is merely a matter of taste.

The editor chose to group the articles by the period the films were produced in – after the introduction by the editor, the first part thematises the “early” films from *RAISING ARIZONA* (1987) to *THE HUDSUCKER PROXY* (1994). After an intermission on *FARGO* (1996), the second part deals with the “middle” films (from *THE BIG LEBOWSKI* [1998] to *BURN AFTER READING* [2008]). Another intermission on *NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN* (2007) separates part two and three, the latter claiming to cover the “later” films (*A SERIOUS MAN* [2009] to *INSIDE LLEWYN DAVIS* [2013]). The book concludes with an epilogue on *HAIL, CAESAR!* (2016). This classification is as good or as bad as any other. While the editor is not fully consistent in terms of a timeline, each part and chapter has a systematic subtitle (*Reading Religion as ...*, *Analyzing Religion and ...*, *Theorizing ...*) offering an alternative criterion for the inner choreography of the book (thus, for example, *THE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE* [2001] can be found amongst the “later” films).

The references are consistent and clear; the index provided at the end of the book contains names, film titles, and keywords – (too) short, but useful. The list of contributors provided is helpful, too, given that I knew few of the authors. What I miss, however, is a bibliography – if a second edition should be printed, I highly recommend its inclusion.

CONTENT

In his introduction, Siegler presents the Coen brothers as persons and as filmmakers and frames the research question of the book: “What do their films mean?” (p. 1). He does not hesitate to put his finger on a sore spot, pointing out that the Coens’ films are generally open to an interpretation that favours a moral order at least implicitly, but that they also may well be the intellectual and skilful études of two undoubtedly gifted directors who, at some point, chose to test the patience of the audience and its willingness to take seriously what I might consider rubbish (*BURN AFTER READING* would be my evidence for the latter interpretation). Artists, yes, but “postmodern contempt artists” (p. 4) feeling unbound to any code or iconic literacy... or, indeed, artists who enfold a hitherto unseen potential for transmitting moral concerns between the lines and are deeply rooted in North American and/or European tradition? Siegler uses *BLOOD SIMPLE* (1984, the Coen brothers first official film) to consider the (in)sincerity of this approach. Although I am not convinced that sheer counting (“the hero of Miller’s Crossing is addressed as “Jesus” almost thirty times” [p.9]) or implicit reference to biblical allusions is more than just an attempt to link to some rel-

ics of a fading religious iconography, the author certainly makes an important point here: film does not only refer to religion; it can possibly also be regarded as the object of religion, including its own cathedrals, cults, rites, and priests. Siegler refers here – amongst other movies – to STAR WARS (p. 10). I wrote my doctoral thesis on the mythological aspects of the structures of the STAR WARS trilogy and here I absolutely agree with Siegler. The chapter on the “Moral Hero” (pp.12ff) points to a character trait of many of the Coens’ heroes, stating that their peculiarity is mostly not of a superhuman kind but merely knowledge of “their own limitations and [... of the others’] capacity for self-delusion and vanity” (p. 13). This is, for me, the core sentence of the introduction, because it does not confront us with an attractive yet meaningless superhero but with a “mirror dimly” (cf. 1 Cor 13:12). The rest of the book shall be judged in relation to Siegler’s statement.

It is the question of *Morality* that is addressed by Eric M. Mazur in the next chapter, and he brings together film and literature, RAISING ARIZONA with Herman Melville and Isaac L. Peretz. Although I think his allegation against Georg Seesslen – “[he] pushes the interpretation [...] quite possibly into ‘Anti-Semitic-Country’” (p. 27) – completely invalid, he has certainly made an important point: it is inappropriate to assume that, in spite of all Christian symbolism, the protagonist in RAISING ARIZONA should be read as a representative Christian (p. 33). And that goes, I take it, for all the Coens’ heroes: they should not be taken for granted, even if evidence suggests something different.

In Kerry Mitchell’s contribution on MILLERS CROSSING (*Theology*), a film I have not seen, the author points out that in a radical secular world, the existential questions still remain the same. Even though all of the characters are a bunch of crooks (p. 35), they do not make their decisions “in radical freedom, but bearing the weight and even the shape of religious heritage” (p. 37). The author notes that “Jesus” and “Christ” are said thirty times in the film, on twenty-seven occasions addressed to Tom, thus justifying the identification of Tom (a killer) “with Jesus. But what kind of Jesus?” (p. 42). After an interesting excursus on the symbolism of a hat (which has, according to Mitchell, a quite similar meaning to the black dog in Andrey Tarkovskiy’s movies), he concludes by stating that “the Coen brothers relate to a tale of struggle and loss, with the Christian theological narrative drained of its promise of salvation and clarity” (p. 51). I would agree with that, but I am still not sure why the editor chose the subtitle “theology” for this chapter; I would rather refer to it as “radical existentialism”.

Let us glance at the chapter on BARTON FINK (*World Creation*) by S. Brent Plate and Elijah. Siegler. The authors point out that film as religion has the power to create new realities (p. 54). After rejecting various interpretations by film critics and philosophers, they state that the film is in fact self-reflexive on a high level, being a “clever movie about movies and heads and dreams” (p. 58). In this context, the observation that “several scenes of the film might be seen as microcosmos for the entire film” (p. 58) is very interesting. It seems that BARTON FINK is – for the authors – a constructive hologram, the function of which is not merely to provide a narrative but also

to re-construct the worldview of not only the unfortunate protagonist, but also the audience. And this may well result, they conclude, in the creation of hell in our own minds (p. 71).

Ellen Posman treats *Community* in her article on *THE HUDSUCKER PROXY* and immediately refers to the films of Frank Capra (1897–1991), demonstrating a “shift to an individualized, privatized form of American religion after the 1950s” (p. 74). She shows that a Buddhist reading of *THE HUDSUCKER PROXY* is as feasible as a Christian interpretation, in spite of Ethan Coen’s statement addressing this film as a “Capraesque thing” (p. 78). The classic “good guy” / “bad guy” plot scheme fails (as it usually does in Coen movies), and even the concept of karma, originally Hindu, seems to be in vain; the movie instead illustrates the core Buddhist idea. For me, the most important point of this chapter is that given that the sociological shift from collectivism to individualism was incredibly strong in the United States (and in Europe as well, I might add) in the late twentieth century (pp. 89ff.), worldviews that rely on community as their primary reference (Communitarism, Catholicism, Unionism, for example) have lost most of their power. But they left a gap behind: even as they are more individual than ever before, human beings still long for the security and comfort of a collective. This film might well be read as an “insightful reflection of the shift in culture and religion” (p. 91).

In the “First Intermission (So Are the Coen Brothers Religious Filmmakers?)”, which is about *FARGO*, one of the films I have not yet seen, Richard Amesbury broaches the issues of Christian moralism and postmodern irony. He mentions that a moralistic interpretation of *FARGO* seems possible but that it is not quite clear whether the “dividing line between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ characters is really as brightly marked as the moralistic interpretation requires” (p. 96). He tends towards reading the film as a work of postmodern irony, sketching that “the films real target is not demonic evil, but *banality*” (p. 97). In an analogy with Plato’s Cave, he states that the “characters projected onto the screen can be understood as indicative of our ‘essential displacement’” (p. 107). For him, *FARGO* is grotesque yet “ultimately a hopeful film, which ends looking toward the birth of new possibilities” (p. 110).

I move on to Erica H. Andrus’ chapter on *THE BIG LEBOWSKI*, which, the author states, is the “most religious Coen brothers film” (p. 113). Certainly, the Dude (the main character of the film, played by Jeff Bridges) has his worshippers and a living fan community, but Andrus’ classification does not refer to this so-called “Dudeism”, because its “production of culture ... reflects more the characteristics of a fan culture and less those of a religion” (p. 115). Instead, the author looks to the figure of the protagonist himself, the Dude. Far from being heroic, he resembles an oriental monk more than an ordinary member of an underprivileged part of society. For Andrus, “The Dude’s lifestyle and affect ... give him the quality of being a master” (p. 125) in the sense of Zen Buddhism. I have two grave problems with this chapter. First, it seems to me inconsistent to dismiss the question of the religious dimension of Dude-

ism and to exalt the Dude at the same time as a religious entity. Secondly, I have practiced Iai-Do for some years and I am familiar with the concept of Zen, but still I do not see the Zen master dimension of the Dude. Or, perhaps, is this in itself rather a *Koan*?

One of my favourite amongst the Coen brothers films is *O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?* (*Race*). Employing American Southern Baptism as a transparency, the Coens use – as always – bold permanent markers to draw a sketch. And the sketch is, according to author Chad Seales, notably about black(ened) faces and their “significance ... at the center of the story” (p. 132). The four rogues who finally become minstrels and are pardoned for political reasons are merely a vehicle for considering the role of the racial “other”, perpetuated in religion long after the 1930s (the time the film is set in) are over. Indeed the “black minstrel narrative” (as Seales put it) as part of American popular culture is something completely new to me. In my opinion, the “Man of constant sorrow” may well be read as a Job motive (the singer suffers poverty and loneliness and yet trusts in the transcendent promise of salvation), and it contains in an nutshell the fate of the protagonists, who survive, but only just, proving the film to be “dystopia: an imaginery place where everything is as bad as possible” (p. 148). Seales modifies this statement immediately – it might as well be an absurdity, which in itself would be “the joke, the inversion of the inversion, the laughing at the laughter” (p. 148). There is no redemption in *O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?* Even though we laugh, the minstrel faces make a difference, and the race question is still unsolved, seemingly unsolvable.

As far as I have understood the chapter on *INTOLERABLE CRUELTY* and *THE LADYKILLERS* (*Money*) by David Feltmate (I have not seen these films either), he seeks to point out that, beyond its potential for corruption, money also has a certain protecting (“purifying”?) function: “The money sanctifies the relationship, making them able to love each other” (p. 161). Humour is the key to catching up with the incongruities that money both represents and causes – an idea I greatly appreciate but have still to verify from the films themselves. Money, Feltmate concludes, has in some respects replaced the integrative power of religion, gaining some sort of religious meaning by itself. Sidenote: I am surprised that a scholar like Feltmate confuses Belshazzar (cf. Dan. 5) with Balthazar (in the Christian tradition one of the magi mentioned in Matt. 2:1) (p. 151).

I turn now to Finbarr Curtis’s contribution on *BURN AFTER READING* (*The State*). In the film, “the state is at once powerful and incompetent, omniscient and clueless” (p. 167). The protagonists share the creed that a superior power beyond the individual social life rules the world, and does so wisely. Curtis quotes C. Schmitt and his thesis that, if the state is threatened, ordinary law may be suspended in a “state of exception”. Given that the United States lives in a state of exception (cf. USA Patriot Act and Homeland Security Act), the parallels are obvious. And indeed the limits of a state painfully occur to anyone who demands absolute security and realises that utmost security means accepting a system more fascist than anything else. But that is not

what this film is about, because this film is about *nothing*, in the sense of a consistent (hidden) meaning: the film is made to be resistant to decoding (p. 175). Here, Curtis quotes the film critic Richard R. Corliss, who stated that “Either the Coens failed, or I didn’t figure out what they’re attempting” (oh, how I feel with Corliss!). Human beings long for revelation – knowledge that is offered to them to cope with the dull everyday and the limits of personal existence, like, “Behold, the wise and mighty state authorities will make your humble life safe and easy”. Curtis makes the link to political theology, but the Coen brothers connect with superstition, thus unmasking these authorities and their attitudes as secular and fallible respectively.

In the second intermission M. Gail Hamner treats *formal coherence* in the Coen brothers works using the example of *NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN*. As I am a formalist myself (have I mentioned that I wrote my doctoral thesis on the mythological structure of *STAR WARS?*), he is pushing at an open door for me. I agree with many of Hamner’s theses – such as the importance of subtle aspects of a movie – but where are the ties to *NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN*? The Coen brothers, Hamner argues, use a very specific approach to visualise a representation of religion: light. Now this is something I find very interesting because it is deeply linked to religious ideas (think of the biblical light metaphors in Gen. 1:3, Matt. 5:14, and John 8:12, for example). And indeed, Hamner gradually manages to change my point of view on this very film. Her sentences are beautiful, too: “Landscape and lifescape syncopates the light and breath of eternity with the sights and sighs of each mortal character” (p. 183). Even reflections (actually those on a switched-off TV set) become formal pointers to the “violence inherent in the gridded relations of [all] human culture” (p. 195).

I have not yet seen (pun intended) *THE MAN WHO WASN’T THERE* (*Transcendence*). The conclusion of this chapter, also by M. Gail Hamner, on a film noir about an unfortunate wannabe-blackmailer speaks for itself: “The transcendence is not Christian, but as with so many Coen films the failure of religious institutions never precludes the human needs for religious transcendence, a need that constellates the affective need for peace, the intellectual need for meaning, and the existential need for intimacy” (p. 216).

A SERIOUS MAN (*Hermeneutics*) by Gabriel Levy is of particular importance to me – our research group www.film-und-theologie.de (English version available) used this film at one of its conferences to illustrate aspects of the theodicy question. Levy states that “the film portrays the idea that being too serious a man is what leads to problems. Being a simple (tom like Job) man is better” (p. 222). He unfolds this thesis in five themes (Materiality, Eros, Evil, Activity, and Physics), in each of which he reflects about in the context of Jewish culture. He concludes by looking at “Meaning in Humor” (p. 230), which he ties together with “simple life” – not in the sense of a life of frugality but as “simply to live”, facing the fact that “there is a necessary place for evil, negativity, suffering, and materiality in this simplicity – in that wholeness” (p. 230), a statement that reminds me far more of Zen than what Andrus wrote about

the Dude (see above). The more important point Levy makes here is about hermeneutics. He points out that – in contrast to a common misconception – hermeneutics as a concept cannot be applied to an “object named life” but is merely an inseparable part of this very life itself: “hermeneutics is life, since the energetic dynamics between language and life are not distinct” (p. 231). I will adopt his suggestion (and apply this method for reading this film and other Coen brothers films).

Michael J. Altman deals with *Death*, exemplified through *TRUE GRIT*. He quotes several statements about *TRUE GRIT*'s being the Coens' most religious movie and observes that this attribution depends on the “extent that things audiences recognize as religion show up in the film” (p. 233). In opposition to this (simple) reading, he suggests we consider both the religious and the Western motifs in the film as genre conventions that are used and rearranged to create a post-Western film about death. After a brief description of the Western and its position in U.S. (media) history (pp. 234ff.), he verifies the role of death in the Coen brothers movies (p. 239), stating that it is “not only irrational but also monstrous” (p. 240) and “the story of a loss in the Coens' films” (p. 241). Based on a revenge plot (Mattie is bound to see the killer of her father punished), *TRUE GRIT* breaks a tradition of the common Western movie, in which the (male) heroes are materialists and religion is considered a matter for clergymen and women (given that the gender aspect of the Christian clergy is traditionally vague, religion is depicted as unmanly). In *TRUE GRIT*, religion and materialism are maintained by men and women, but towards neither a secularist nor a transcendent salvation, rather towards death, illustrated by the dozens of corpses lining the way of the plot (pp. 245f.). The Protestant religion that is depicted in the film is more justification for a secular ethic than a liberating message about something that is bigger than this (material) life. So, for Levy, “*TRUE GRIT* is a religious movie, just not in the ways most critics imagine” (p. 248), and he rejects the cursorily interpretations that focus on, for example, mentions of God in the dialogue, empty rites that are performed with some of the corpses, and the Christian hymn that is part of the soundtrack. “*TRUE GRIT* is a religious movie,” he writes, “insofar as it traces the limits of religion” (p. 249).

Jason C. Bivins chapter on *INSIDE LLEWYN DAVIS* is subtitled *Absence*, and indeed this film is absent from my “have seen” list. Bivins claims to “improvise on ‘religion’ in three ways, each one indirectly” (p. 255). It is the essence of improvisation to use the well-known canonical components of an art absolutely freely, but it is also the goal of improvising to find a new and coherent configuration. I am not completely sure I understand the chord Bivins strikes, although I admit that his conclusion on “the religious” being “an atmosphere, an environment, a ripple in space-time revealing a future incapable of sustaining the fantasies of present or past” (p. 270) is consistent with a number of the chapters in this volume. In my point of view, this reduces “religion” to something that is inevitably gone and felt only through the pain of missing it. As a Roman Catholic, I personally object to that position (and maybe that is why I'm pretty uncomfortable with the Coen brothers' movies ...).

In his Epilogue, E. Siegler tries to close the circle. The Coens' latest film, *HAIL, CAESAR!*, is mentioned only vaguely (it was not completed at the time this book went to press), as a reference to the form of worship the Coens receive from their audience. He points out that "the best advice of the brothers themselves [may be] 'None of [our movies] have messages ... You see a moral in them?'" (p. 274). The Coen brothers don't have to look for a message in their movies anyway; the viewer may do so, and if that viewer does not want to turn them down either in total or in part, he or she is even bound to do so.

CONCLUSION

In his Acknowledgements, Siegler thanks the contributors ("all-star roster", p. viii) for delivering excellent stuff cheerfully and on time. Anyone who has edited a book or journal issue in collaboration with several people will dream about such participation, and I am minded to ask Siegler for the contact details of these members of a rare species. Authors usually deliver either cheerfully or on time – well, envy is a grave sin in Christian religion, so I will rather refrain.

The book? Oh yes, the book ... it offers an unexpected number of insights beyond the Coens and their films. The contributors take their job seriously, and their positions are well argued, even though I would not agree with many of their points. They have surely done their work with diligence and are familiar with the most important concepts of contemporary philosophy and media theory.

Siegler's *Coen* is, in short, a good book and well worth reading. I will watch the Coen brothers' films I have not seen yet, and I will probably return to many of those I already know to review them with a changed attitude. I am pretty sure this goes for other readers of this interesting compilation too.

Theresia Heimerl

Matthew Rindge, *Profane Parables.* Film and the American Dream

Baylor University Press, 2016

CONTENT

The book *Profane Parables* assumes a clear twofold thesis: films are parables, and the biblical parables of the New Testament are parables of disorientation that therefore critically question their social context. The author, Matthew S. Rindge, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Gonzaga University, presents this thesis within the first three pages of the book along with his goal – to demonstrate the functioning of films as parables of disorientation on the basis of three examples. The first main chapter deals with the context of these modern parables, which are critically challenged and hence, according to Rindge’s thesis, become parables of disorientation. The author identifies the “American Dream” as this context, beginning with the statement, “The dominant religion in America is America itself” (p. 5).

To substantiate this thesis Rindge juxtaposes the – in his opinion – constitutive elements of religion (i.e. sacred text, sacred symbol, sacred ritual, sacred hymn, sacred days, myths of origins, sacred values) in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and finds parallels for each of them in the “Religion America”. He sees the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence as equivalent to the holy text, the flag as a sacred symbol, and the Pledge of Allegiance as sacred ritual. The Star-Spangled Banner takes the place of the hymn. With regard to holy days, he mentions several, such as Memorial Day, Veterans Day, Presidents Day, and Independence Day. According to Rindge, the narrative about the Pilgrim Fathers, connected to the leitmotif of freedom, corresponds to the myth of origin. At this point, the author proceeds to a critique of this Religion America and its leitmotif by mentioning its unmasking in the course of countless military interventions abroad in the name of freedom. According to Rindge, sacred value corresponds to the American Dream itself, although he admits how difficult it is to define this concept.

The two approaches for the critique of the American Dream quoted in the first chapter are quite well known: racial critique on one hand; a psychoanalytical perspective on the other hand. These two seem to have been chosen rather arbitrarily, with

the far more obvious approach of social critique lacking. The first main chapter concludes with two subchapters, “The American Dream’s Gospel of Success” and “America’s Denial of Death”. The examples from literature and film given on this topic are comprehensible but definitely too short, especially regarding the complex topic of death in American culture. The main thesis of the book mostly follows the well-known thesis of civil religion as the foundation of the United States. The problem lies not in this thesis as such (which has been widely discussed) but in its application by Rindge in detail.

One of the most problematic points of Rindge’s theory is the understanding of religion itself: according to religious studies as part of cultural studies, it is not at all clear that the mentioned elements *are* constitutive for a religious system, a concern especially in the case of the last element, sacred values, which is so important for the interpretation of the films that follows.

The term “value” is not genuinely religious and was not common in any of the three monotheistic religious systems until just a few decades ago. Furthermore, these values and their interpretation depend heavily on historical, cultural, and social context. They are not at all monolithic. A comparison with Religion America should certainly take this into account.

Similarly, a critique from the perspective of religious studies also needs to address the use of the term “myth” and its missing definition. The first sentence of the final chapter makes this very clear: “FIGHT CLUB, AMERICAN BEAUTY, and ABOUT SCHMIDT undermine American cultural values, depicting these cherished myths as meaningless” (p. 95). Are cultural values the same thing as myths? What about the interdependences between myth and the key elements of monotheistic religions quoted above? Is the American Dream the myth of the Religion America? And, finally, is the term “myth” correctly applied when talking about biblical parables? The interpretation of the biblical parables as disorientating is comprehensible, though conducted rather briefly.

The interpretation of the three films on which the book focuses is rather convincing, if one agrees with the introductory theses. FIGHT CLUB (1999) is interpreted as the lamentation over God’s abandonment and a deconstruction of the American Dream – with success as sufficient sense making. What remains unmentioned in this interpretation as well as in the examination of AMERICAN BEAUTY (1999) is the (de)construction of gender roles, mainly “masculinity”, obvious in both films, an absence already evident in chapter one. Despite a critique from a psychoanalytical perspective – which at least in Europe is tendentially old fashioned – and a critical examination from a racial perspective, the almost classic triad of race, class, and gender is missing. The third film that Rindge interprets is ABOUT SCHMIDT (2002), which, according to Rindge, is the most radical denial of the American Dream, because the leading character finds meaning in a relationship with a person in poverty, thus neglecting or even denying Ameri-

can family values. In the final chapter, Rindge once again explains and summarises the thesis of film as a parable of disorientation and compares it to biblical parables.

CONCLUSION

Profane Parables offers an interesting interpretation of three interesting films that requires both knowledge of the biblical parables as well as a willingness to disregard other interpretations grounded in cultural studies. In my opinion, the most problematic point is the very diffuse application of the term “religion” in this book. The book might offer, however, some interesting impulses for theological work with film.



Calls for Papers

Comics and Animated Cartoons

The May 2017 issue of JRFM deals with a topic rarely discussed in the study of religion, theology and media studies: comics and animated cartoons.

The complex history of comics dates back to figural book illuminations, such as in the *Biblia Pauperum* and the *Dances of Death* in the High Middle Ages. However, when school education became compulsory and reading an outward sign of education, the reputation of sequentially arranged illustrations, partially annotated with speech bubbles (banners), declined. Accordingly, a person who relied on the narrative expression of figural sequences was considered to be illiterate. In the 19th century, Rodolphe Töpfer and Wilhelm Busch paved the way for a renewal of autonomous picture sequences, with the picture being the essential component and the text the explanatory feature. By the end of the 19th century, comic strips had begun to establish themselves in the daily press, and from the 1920s onward, comic culture experienced its first remarkable upswing. Many contemporary popular comic characters can be traced back to this time, most of whom have had a surprising cultural impact. Today, comics are a mass phenomenon.

In theology and in the study of religion, an analysis of the use of religious motifs in comics is far from being complete. Many comics utilize traditional religious motifs and symbols (e.g. Thor as deity, the pentangle as symbol). Protagonists in comics often take on – in their own (and sometimes twisted) way – a savior-like figure who brings salvation (for whatever reason) into an evil (hostile) world. Many narratives also address fundamental and existential human questions. They do not necessarily offer answers to such questions but can provide these questions with a context of hope. Narratives also open up a space to allow for the audience to identify with the characters leaving traces – or imprints – in the audience’s everyday lives. As such, comics can have an impact on and become important in a range of socio-cultural contexts and questions: questions of violence, radicalization, a means of empowerment, or a way of uncovering hidden meanings.

So far, the difference between comics and comic book movie adaptations has received insufficient attention. It is also necessary to differentiate between animated and live-action movies based on comic books. Both use the original literary source in different ways to achieve a desired effect for the audience. In a narrower sense, one

of the most important questions is how “encodings of religious presences” (Armin Nassehi) are formally performed in comics and comic book movie adaptations. In keeping with the traditional theoretical problem of the translation of absence and presence and the staging of the indirect, this aspect holds religious potential.

We invite articles that focus on:

- theoretical reflections on the history of comics in the context of religious systems;
- comics and their movie adaptations as a means of expressing existential questions such as ethical categories, suffering, and tribulations as well as love, mercy and hope;
- issues of style, filmic language and narrative in comic book adaptations, especially the differences between animated and staged picturization;
- the comparison between the stylistic and narrative approach of selected comics, especially of Western and Eastern provenance (e.g. Mattel vs. Manga/Anime tradition);
- other topics related to the overall theme of this issue.

Articles of 25.000-30.000 characters incl. spaces should be posted online for peer review by August 31th, 2016 on the journal homepage www.jrfm.eu. We kindly ask authors to register. Publication is scheduled for May 2017. For any questions regarding the call for papers or the submission and publication process, please contact Christian Wessely (christian.wessely@uni-graz.at).

Using Media in Religious Studies

Strategies of Representing Religion in Scholarly Approaches

Studying media in religions and cultures is a common practice within disciplines focusing on religion. The deconstruction of media is multifaceted and performed by analyzing texts, by focussing on material and visual cultures, by dealing with traditional and popular media or with film and mass media like the Internet. Compared to the broad and well-established field of research on media within religions, the usage of media for representing religion in scholarly work is a rather neglected topic. This is astonishing, since media have different effects and are perceived with different impacts even within the scientific community.

The use of media has a strong influence on the academic culture and habitus. Looking at the media we use, allows us to gain insight into the scholarly work: the main means of scientific discourse is still the text, sometimes supported by illustrations.

The use of text and images as the main media of scholarly work is rarely the object of a specific reflection on their effects and possibilities. Theoretical and methodological criticism of media within academia is still lacking sufficient attention. Scholars evoke emotions and mediate their ideas through the materials they present and in the way of they represent religion.

A lecture for students and a conference paper will differ in the style, presentation, and technique used. One might use his/her own rhetoric, show a film or allow the audience to hear sounds from original contexts. It makes a difference if a presenter only speaks about material objects or if s/he allows the audience to actually see them – like in a university collection – or even touch or smell them.

The November 2017 issue of JRFM explores the possibilities of using media in representing religions. David Morgan estimates that our usual scientific usage of media aims at suggesting objectivity. For example, charts can be used to display empirical “truth” or a photograph to “demonstrate” an argument: these figures and pictures are often introduced without an explanation of their own perspective or an analysis

of the production and the context in which they are embedded. This issue will explore the possibilities of analysing media as a crucial part of research and as a means for both producing and representing scholarly results.

In this issue, contributors with different perspectives are invited to participate to an interdisciplinary debate about the significance and the impact of media within academic work on religion. This self-reflection about producing and transmitting data in analysing, deconstructing and representing religion through media considers also the emotional impact of media upon scientific research as well as the different genres used in academic work. Furthermore, a specific reflection on our perspectives and a good knowledge about recipients' possible perceptions are necessary, if our aim is to inform and make our own methods transparent and suitable to what we want to express.

Therefore this issue collects articles on:

- theoretical approaches on religion(s) and the media,
- methodological reflections on the specific options of texts, illustrations, films or objects for re-presenting religions,
- perceptions of different media and multimedia in science,
- aesthetic effects of different media on scholars, dealing with the tension between objectivity and subjectivity,
- interdisciplinary debates on religions connected with emic and etic positions represented by media,
- international or regional cultures of media in studying religions: preferring traditional texts or new media, favouring oral or written cultures etc.
- social contexts – like gender – connected with media dealing with religions
- other topics related to the overall theme of this issue.

Articles of 25,000-30,000 characters (including spaces) should be posted online for peer review by February 28, 2017 on the journal homepage www.jrfm.eu. We kindly ask authors to register. The publication is scheduled for November 2017. For any questions regarding the call for papers or the submission and publication process, please contact Bärbel Beinhauer-Köhler (beinhaue@staff.uni-marburg.de).



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