

Contested Desires

Figuration and Sensation in Abrahamic Traditions

14-16 March 2016

Workshop at Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO)
Kirchweg 33, 14129 Berlin, 030/80307-0
Convened by Birgit Meyer (UU, ZMO) and Terje Stordalen (UiO)

Program

Visual media have the remarkable capacity to represent – and render present – such parts of life that are not immediately accessible to the human eye. They produce images in the context of more or less shared visual regimes that direct the gaze of the beholders, shape sensation, and vest these images with presence. In this sense, visual media do not simply portray and depict a world out there: they take part in shaping worlds of lived experience. Religion, when rendering the invisible visible and suggesting embodied practices that shape what and how people see, is deeply enmeshed with processes of world making. And yet all three of the so-called Abrahamic traditions are commonly perceived to have more or less uneasy relations to pictorial media. There is a tension between word and image in Judaism, Christianity and Islam alike. And they all tend, at least nominally, to privilege verbal over pictorial media, preferring the spoken, sung, or written word. However, when inspecting actual practices in these religious traditions the case is rather more complex. In history as well as in contemporary practice forms of figuration are used to render the presence of the absent. ‘Abrahamic’ trajectories appear to have formulated specific visual regimes: embodied habits, traditions and standards for seeing, displaying, and figuring the sacred. In these traditions desires for rendering the invisible visible and for experiencing the beyond are paradoxically confirmed as well as contested and controlled by the various visual regimes in vogue. This generates episodes of iconoclasm, icono-clash, blasphemy charges and other negotiations of visual religion.

As such, these traditions offer intriguing cases for a post-secular rethinking of the nexus of religion and visual media from multidisciplinary angles, including biblical studies, Islamic studies, Jewish studies, archaeology, anthropology and art history. This workshop (and the volume that will be developed) will offer an explorative venue where studies of art may interact with studies of anthropology and religion, engaging historical as well as contemporary perspectives. Presentations may apply theoretical, material, or historical perspectives – or a combination of these. Central in our approach, however, are sensory experiences, visual regimes, and the performative dimensions at play when sensing figurative media. Participants in the workshop explore questions like these: What are the conventions that shape whether and how the divine or the sublime can be figured (and why and how not)? Which figurations are privileged and why? How are such figurations seen, sensed and addressed, on the part of

religious experts as well as in everyday practice? How do they tie into the broader religious imagination? How do people embed more or less authorized figurations of the invisible in their everyday lives, into practices of worship, prayer, healing and protection? What is the role of artwork in portraying the sacred and how do artistic modes relate to religious modes of rendering the invisible visible? Which synergies and conflicts ensue between art and religion, at different times and places, since their establishment as separate fields since the Renaissance? Whence the desire to figure the sublime, i.e., that what resists full representation and yet calls for it? In how far can a focus on (non)figuration be of help in grasping the fundamental ambiguity of visual media to make present and withdraw at the same time? What is the productive potential of multidisciplinary collaboration for a deeper understanding of the role and power of pictures in past and present religious and secular regimes?

This workshop follows up upon the earlier workshop organized at the Centre for Advanced Studies (CAS) in Oslo in April 2015. Given the high quality of the presentations, the very fruitful discussions, and the overall engagement of the participants, the idea arose to design a book project. This second meeting, hosted by the *Zentrum Moderner Orient*, Berlin (and supported by CAS, Oslo, and Utrecht University), is intended to deepen and focus our discussions and help contributors to further develop their chapters as part of a coherent volume.

Monday 14 March

14.00 Welcome

Birgit Meyer

14.15 Chair: Birgit Meyer

Christoph Uehlinger, University of Zurich

Abrahamic "Image Bans" and "Aniconism": Material Culture and Media, Ritual Practice, Book-encoded Normativity

Discussant: Sonja Luehrmann

15.15 Chair: Birgit Meyer

Terje Stordalen, University of Oslo

The Scriptural Ban on Images: "Biblical Logocentrism" — or Aesthetics of the Sublime?

Discussant: Else Marie Bukdahl

Break

16.30 Chair: Øyvind Norderval

Sonja Luehrmann, Simon Fraser University/ Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies

Moulded Imaginaries: Iconographic Media as an Environment of Canonical Perception

Discussant: Jens Kreinath

17.30 General Discussion

Tuesday 15 March

9.45 Chair: Vigdis Broche-Due

Yvonne Sherwood, University of Kent

Figuration and Sensation in the Abrahamic Traditions: Beyond the Hypericon of the Golden Calf

Discussant: Terje Stordalen

10.45 Chair: Vidgis Broche-Due

Birgit Meyer, Utrecht University / ZMO

Beyond the Second Commandment: Images in Christian World-Making

Discussant: Adrian Hermann

Break

12.00 Chair: Terje Stordalen

Hans Belting, School for New Media, Karlsruhe

Christianity, among the Abrahamic Religions the only Iconic one

Discussant: Birgit Meyer

13.00-14.15 Lunch

14.15 Chair: Terje Stordalen

Pedram Khosronejad, Oklahoma State University

Celestial Desires: Figuration and Sensation in Persian Devotional Shiite Mural Paintings

Discussant: Wendy Shaw

15.15 Chair: Birgit Meyer

Jens Kreinath, Wichita State University

Visions of Divine Light: Visual Culture and the Veneration of St. Mary among Christians and Muslims in Hatay

Discussant: Wendy Shaw

Break

16.30 Chair: Adrian Hermann

Heike Behrend, Universität Köln

Photographic Practices and the "Aesthetics of Withdrawal" among Muslims on the East African Coast

Discussant: Jens Kreinath

17.30 General discussion.

Drinks

Wednesday 16 March

9.45 Chair: Øyvind Norderval

Wendy Shaw, Freie Universität Berlin

Representing the Representation of God: Sound in Islamic Discourses

Discussant: Barry Finbar Flood

10.45 Chair: Øyvind Norderval

Christiane Kruse, Muthesius Kunsthochschule Kiel

Kunsttheorie der „incarnazione“ – Verlust und Rückkehr der Religion in Houellebecq's Soumission

Discussant: Jojada Verrips

Break

12.00 Chair: Terje Stordalen

Else Marie Bukdahl, Aalborg University

The Interplay Between the Concepts of Figuration and "the Aesthetics of the Sublime" in Modern Church Art and its Historical Basis

Discussant: Øyvind Norderval

13.00

Conclusion / Outlook

13.30 Lunch

Departure