

Narrative Cultures and Aesthetics of Religion: Storytelling - Imagination - Efficacy

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Narrative cultures emerged as a new topic in the study of culture similarly as aesthetics of religion emerged as a framework in the study of religion. Both of them attempt to move beyond a study of text by encompassing a holistic aesthetic approach that is able to account for all aspects of sensory perception and human cognition involved. Although both of these fields of research emerged independently, it was not until the Aesthetics of Religion network (AESToR.net) conference at the University of Oslo that they were studied in conjunction with each other. As the program book states, this conference addresses „narrative cultures and storytelling in religious contexts“ and in doing so it aims at „seeing narration as an aesthetic phenomenon, focusing on storytelling practices and sensual aspects, the techniques and the effects that create imaginative formations.“

To explore possibilities in which the study of religion and narrative culture are able to reflect upon one another, this conference continued to further the development of the research paradigm called the aesthetics of religion.¹ A same-named working group within the German Association of the Study of Religion already started this work in 2007.² This endeavour takes aesthetics in a full sense of epistemology starting from the cognitive and perceptive subject and of a theory of forms. Around 40 international scholars mainly from religious studies but also from across disciplines faced the methodological challenge and the inspiring blending of narration with aesthetics.

The organizers, ANJA KIRSCH (Basel) and DIRK JOHANNSEN (Oslo), opened the conference by introducing narratological concepts as developed in literary and folk theories and by elaborating on several ways

how these become effective for religious discourse.³ They addressed WHAT narrative cultures are (i.e. narrative communities and their reservoir of particular stories and more abstract narratives), and WHY and HOW stories are told. The following two papers that also addressed aspects of narrative cultures focused on the role of storytelling in the formation of new religions. The first paper presented a theoretical model for analysing the fantasy Tolkien fan cult as held together through a narrative culture of the Tolkien books and further self- and world representations (MARKUS DAVIDSEN, Leiden); while the second paper explored the biblical subaltern narrative culture of ancient Egyptian monks and argued that this culture has to be understood as an imaginary sensual space blurring the boundaries 'legitimate' kinds of angels and demons, women and men (INGVILD GILHUS, Bergen).

In the section on the „The Untellable“, MARTIN LEHNERT (Munich) described the dilemma of the ineffable in a Chinese chan/zen narrative, which consists of the limits of human language and perception. By sensually seeing the essence of things in attaining Buddhahood, the bodily movement and attentiveness become central for analysing the chan/zen narrative and their commentaries. JAY JOHNSTON (Sydney) continued this line of thought by addressing the narratives of the bewilderment movement and their ecological and spiritual aesthetics of healing demonstrating how training one's senses, living in a burrow, and eating worms can lead to a reorientation and refinement of the senses. ARIANA BORRELLI (Berlin / Lüneburg) furthered the question of the untellable by introducing the multi-media narratives used in modern physics textbooks, which focuses on the perception and representation of time and energy in their coverage of the big bang theories.

¹Scientific research network Aesthetics of Religion AESToR.net, <<http://aestor.net>>; conference program: <<http://aestor.net/events/oslo/>> (08.08.2016).

²Arbeitsgruppe Religionsästhetik in der DVRW, <<http://www.religionsaesthetik.de>> (08.08.2016).

³Gabriela Brahier / Dirk Johannsen (eds.), Konstruktionsgeschichten. Narrationsbezogene Ansätze in der Religionsforschung, Würzburg 2013.

The second section „Narrating Ritual Sensuality“ approached narrative features in ritual practice. KATHARINA WILKENS (Munich) presented narratives and negotiations of spirit possession and exorcism among Muslims and Christians in the African context of Tanzania and compared theatrical play of spirit possession in conjunction with mythical narratives and autobiographical narratives of exorcism. BRIGITTE LUCHESI (Bremen) brought in a case where there exists a scholarly narrative script for the Rali Puja, a North-Indian Hindu ritual. While the participants are unaware of that script, she demonstrated how rituals and narratives use different media while rituals serving as narratives being told without language.

CHRIS DRISCOLL and MONICA MILLER (Bethlehem/US) elaborated in their joint paper on the conjunction between poetic forms, musical styles, and religious semantics by presenting their account of Hip Hop as a narrative culture. They both argued in different ways that Hip Hop as a seemingly subversive culture by text and acoustic performance nevertheless relies on traditional (religious) narratives to construct a framework for such notions called ‘identity’ and ‘home’. In the section „Space and Time“, JENS KREINATH (Wichita/US) explored possibilities to refine Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope to study the aesthetics of synchronicity and co-presence in virtual encounters with Hizir and related rituals of saint veneration at pilgrimage sites in Hatay, Turkey.

The section „Plausibilizing Authority“ was dealing with how religious authority is legitimized by different narrative genres. Presenting narratives on how to imagine Ninurta, a hero-god of Ancient Mesopotamia, LAURA FELDT (Odense) raised questions of how to study narrative cultures aesthetically by focusing on how the narrative aesthetics and composition are used to stimulate emotions and the senses through different strategies and styles of narration. In a pronounced different way, BERND-CHRISTIAN OTTO (Erfurt) placed the instructions given an early modern manual of conjuring demons in a narratological framework and argued for strategies of what he called ‘plausibilisation’ and ‘empirification’ strategies being prevalent

narrative features of these manuals.

The sixth section „Unmasking Traditions: The Aesthetics of the Secular“ addressed narrative cultures of secularism and modernity. STEFAN BINDER (Utrecht) presented a model to analyse ‘encapsulating’ as a narrative strategy of the Indian Atheism movement which uses a deep history of atheism as a counter narrative to question the predominant view of Hinduism as the original religion of India. JENS KUGELE (Giessen) explored the narrative culture in the construction of Zionism as a religious and political ideology. Using different narrative genres, including Theodor Herzl’s novel *Old New Land*, he showed how Zionism can also be analysed as a secular response to persecutions of 19th century drawing from the Jewish legacy. Tracing the prototypical character of Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes in early 20th century American culture, JOSH URICH (Austin) followed the trope of unmasking the supernatural throughout stories and movie productions showing how narrative cultures of disbelief can in times of uncertainty reintroduce rationalism as secular way of coping with crisis.

In the seventh section, „Mediascape and Meaning-Making“, ANNETTE WILKE (Münster), demonstrated how the Chinmaya Mission TV series *Upanishad Ganga* uses imagination and montage to allude to Hindu sacred literature arguing that the change in media leads to new possibilities of narration and the blurring of common representational conventions serves to raise their attractiveness for contemporary spectators⁴. The last two sections immersed into narrative cultures both subsumed under the theme of religion and literature. The members of the Norwegian research group entitled „The Jerusalem Code“, represented by KRISTINN B. AAVITSLAND, RAGNHILD ZORGATI, OTTFRIED CZAİKA (all Oslo), gave papers on the impact of Jerusalem on Norwegian cultural history. Their papers dealt with Jerusalem as an icon and narrative in the Christian tradition, and in the literary work of Fredrika Bremer, Selma Lagerlöf, and Astrid Lindgren. The

⁴ Annette Wilke / Lucia Traut (eds.), *Religion – Imagination – Ästhetik. Vorstellungs- und Sinneswelten in Religion und Kultur*, Göttingen 2014.

last section „Actualizations“ focused on the reception of Biblical figures. JENNY PONZO (Munich) used a semiotic method to analyse recent Italian novels and identified the ways in which the Biblical characters of Adam and Eve are used as protagonists in 20th century Italian fiction and serve as narrative devices in the postmodern rewriting of history, and, last but not least, ULRIKE BRUNOTTE (Maastricht) traced the reception of the biblical story of Salome during the fin-de-siècle and showed how Iser's concept of 'imaginative blanks' helps to reconstruct various narrative accounts of Salome as a symbol of engendered imaginations and an icon of an orientatised and sexualized femme fatale.

The last event was a guided tour through the university-owned Viking Ship Museum. The guide masterfully picked up the topic of constructing cultural and historic narratives and delighted in recounting several instances in which archeology and politics played hand in hand in order to construct meaningful narrative truths in situations of political upheaval.

In discussions the concept of 'story worlds' was debated as a means to organize narrative discourses and the question was brought up on how non-narratives can be conceived of aesthetically vis-a-vis the ineffable, mathematical formulas and other forms of knowledge. With the holistic paradigm of aesthetics of religion⁵ the results of this conference suggest that the methodological ground is prepared for scholars of religion to turn back to texts and narratives in a new key. The participants enriched the concepts of narrative cultures and storytelling with approaches ranging from literary and practice theory as well as historical discourse analytical approaches. All of them explicated in different degrees of empirical precision and theoretical sophistication the relevance of narrative cultures for the aesthetic study of religion. The results of the conference are scheduled for publication in due time.

Conference Overview:

Section I: Aspects of Narrative Cultures

Dirk Johannsen, Oslo / Anja Kirsch, Basel: „On Narrative Cultures“

Markus Davidsen, Leiden: „New Religions as Narrative Cultures“

Ingvild Gilhus, Bergen: „Ascetic life in Egypt in Late Antiquity: Conflicts of interpretation, categorical blending and the creation of sensual space“

Section II: The Untellable

Martin Lehnert, Munich: „Ineffability as an artifact of narrative strategy in gong'an/kōan-texts“

Jay Johnston, Sydney: „Healing Narratives: The Ecological and Spiritual Aesthetics of 'Nature'“

Arianna Borrelli, Berlin/Lüneburg: „Multimedial Story-telling and the Search for the 'Theory of Everything'“

Section III: Narrating Ritual Sensuality

Katharina Wilkens, Munich: „Narratives in Spirit Possession“

Brigitte Luchesi, Bremen: „Narrative aspects of Rali Puja, a North Indian ritual“

Section IV: Hip Hop as a Narrative Culture

Christopher Driscoll, Bethlehem/US: „White Gods or Slaughtered G.O.A.T.s?: Eminem, Odin, and Narrating the Contemporary Battle for Racial Authority with(in) Hip Hop Culture“

Monica Miller, Bethlehem/US: „K(NO)W Where to Go?: Hip Hop as Narrative Culture, Black Death, and the Migration of Protracted Life Options“

Section V: Space and Time

Jens Kreinath, Wichita/US: „The Work of the Chronotope: The Aesthetics of Synchronicity and Co-Presence with Hizir/Chidr as Legendary Saint“

Section VI: Plausibilising Authority

Laura Feldt, Odense/DK: „Narrativity, Aesthetics and Transformations of Religious Authority: Imagining Ninurta in Ancient Mesopotamia“

⁵ Alexandra Grieser, „Aesthetics“, in: Robert Segal / Kocku von Stuckrad (eds.), *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion* Vol. 1, Leiden 2016, pp. 14–23.

Bernd-Christian Otto, Erfurt: „Narrating Ritual Magic: Strategies of Plausibilisation and Empirification in the Clavicula Salomonis“

Section VII: Unmasking Traditions: The Aesthetics of the Secular

Stefan Binder, Utrecht: „Narrating Atheism: Towards and Aesthetics of Secular Oratory“

Jens Kugele, Giessen: „Exodus Narrative and Aesthetic Formation. Religion, Literature and the Senses“

Josh Urich, Austin/US: „Creating Space for Disbelief Through Narrative: Sherlock Holmes, His Legacy, and the Fictional Ritual of Unmasking“

Section VIII: Mediascape and Meaning-Making

Annette Wilke, Münster: „Staging Upanishadic spirituality and sacred literature in the Indian TV series Upanishad Ganga“

Section IX: Religion and Literature I: The Jerusalem Code

Kristinn B. Aavitsland, Oslo: „Jerusalem as Religio-Aesthetic Code in European Culture“

Ragnhild Zorgati, Oslo: „Narrating Jerusalem in Fredrika Bremer’s Travels in the Holy Land (1862) and Selma Lagerlöf’s Jerusalem (1909)“

Otfried Czaika, Oslo: „Tracing the Jerusalem-Code in Astrid Lindgren’s works?“

Section X: Religion and Literature II: Actualisations

Jenny Ponzo, Munich: „Adam Rewritten: The Re-elaboration of a Biblical Character in 20th-Century Italian Fiction“

Ulrike Brunotte, Maastricht: „How does a story become a woman? Salome and the death of John the Baptist: narrative blanks, intertextuality and visual re-presentation“

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