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Introduction to the Special Issue: Film, Television and the Body

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Film, Television and the Body

When we think about body and film or television, our first thoughts probably revolve around body images, the propagation of unhealthy body ideals, make over shows, or the objectification of (more or less) naked female bodies. Many seem to agree that (unhealthy) bodies on-screen affect bodies in front of the screen. What we often tend to neglect, however, are the rich and diverse ways in which bodies on-screen and in front of the screen interact, or in other words how on-screen, off-screen, imaginary, and conceptualized bodies are entangled with each other.

Brent S. Plate argues that “[f]ilms create worlds. They do not passively mimic or directly display what is ‘out there,’ but actively reshape elements of the lived world

and twist them in new ways that are projected on screen and given over to an audience” (Plate, 2005, p.1). Drawing on Plate, one could argue that film and television do not only create worlds but create, stage, and shape bodies. To put it provocatively and to rephrase Plate’s quote one could argue the following: film and television do not only create bodies but they create us as bodies. They do not passively mimic or directly display bodies that are out there, real bodies, imagined bodies, the bodies of the audience, but actively reshape (elements) of lived bodies and twist, stir, re-work, re-think, and re-do bodies in new ways that are projected on screen and given over to an audience. Doing so, taking bodies, twisting them, and giving them over to an audience, screens create (us as) bodies. Plate’s quote helps us to see that what happens on screen is not limited to the immediate experience of what is being screened, but by giving something, e.g. bodies, over to an audience, screens can become part of and shape the audience’s lived experience and contribute to the process of creating worlds.

The papers in this special issue aim to address some of these complex processes and relationships between bodies, screens, us as embodied audience, and religious narratives and practices. They show that representations of bodies are never just that, i.e. mere representations of bodies, ideas, or stereotypes. Representations actively contribute to the transformation of bodies and bodily and religious practices, or better: bodily practice as religious practice and religious practice as bodily practice. Bodies, then, are not static but practised and as such always also entangled with questions and practices of power, governance, and subversion. As the articles in this volume show, representations of bodies always need to be understood from the perspective of bodies *as practice*.

In the introduction to his *The Body and Society*, Peter Brown discusses several examples and ways in which “societies can lay their codes across the body” (1988). Religions and media, too, lay their codes across bodies. But they are also one of the ways to question, subvert, critique, and transform these codes. Religious symbols are part of this repertoire of codes that can be laid across bodies, but as a “queer” collection of codes they always also escape easy interpretation. Bodies *as practice*,

then, are entangled in the creation of knowledge about bodies, societies, and ultimately ourselves as bodies. As such, we can also understand bodies *as* knowledge.

“You cannot be in love with a word” is the title of **Alina Birzache’s** discussion of embodiment in the films *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, France 1928), *Babette’s Feast* (Gabriel Axel, Denmark 1987), and *Breaking the Waves* (Lars von Trier, Denmark et al. 1996). Her analysis aims to uncover how in these films, in her own words, “the body is brought into the foreground through a confrontation between the body as pathos and the word as logos.” She explores how these three films can contribute to a renewed theological appreciation of body. She shows that powerless positions might not be so powerless after all if they are – or become – embodied positions. Showing that the Kingdom to come always also needs to become embodied in this world, Birzache’s analysis brings the bodily and the spiritual together. The analysis, however, does not remain limited to the frame on screen but Birzache argues that the camera does not only frame on-screen bodies but also effects bodies in front of the screen, i.e. us as embodied audience.

Stefanie Knauss analyses Pedro Almodóvar’s camp cinema and its challenge for and contribution to understanding and rethinking theological aesthetics in her paper *Excess, Artifice, Sentimentality*. Similar to Birzache, Knauss, too, argues that film and bodies-in-film and on-screen can contribute to a renewed understanding of body and the senses in theological thinking. Almodóvar’s camp cinematic style and his camp bodies, she argues, challenge theological aesthetics to take more seriously the affective dimensions in aesthetic experiences. As such, she sees this camp style and camp bodies and the sensory and emotional reactions they can cause as a source for knowledge and wisdom. With her paper, Knauss aims to bring theological aesthetics to its senses, or in other words: she aims to contribute to a renewed understanding of theological aesthetics where a camp style and camp bodies can help theological aesthetics to come to its senses – so to say – and rediscover its own critical and subversive potential.

Davide Zordan’s paper *Screening Piety, Invoking Fervour* on the practice of broadcasting Catholic Sunday Services in Italy does not explicitly address or mention

“the” body. Yet, bodies – on-screen bodies and the bodies of the audience – are an important means of identification and serve the recreation of real world hierarchies on the television screen. The TV camera’s focus, Zordan argues, creates gaps between the active male celebrant and the flock of believers who appear (predominantly) female and passive. He points out that the emphasis of various formal and visual means of television broadcasts of services is to create an (active) emotional – and one could argue thus bodily – identification with the (passive and often passive-female) role of the audience rather than active participation in the celebration.

Deborah Justice's article *When Church and Cinema Combine* ties in with Zordan's paper. She, too, analyses the use of screen in the context of worship and how religious communities "embrace" screening in and screening of worship. Her perspective is distinct from Zordan's, however, because she focuses on, as she calls it, a “media-centered worship style that positions popular media as an outlet for divine power, a tool God is using to reach out to humanity.” Despite this difference in approach and perspective, the two articles speak to each other because Zordan, too, is interested in how actual services are performed for the screen.

Similar to Zordan, body is absent-present in Justice’s paper. Justice only mentions “body” a couple of times but “body” is important to her argument. She talks about the “experiential nature” of services, what the experience “feels” like, as well as a repertoire of body postures and movements. Media, as Justice and Zordan show, contribute to these bodily experiences on a variety of levels.

Media, screen, or the internet are often thought of in terms of disembodiment or as having a detrimental effect on “religion” (for an example of the perpetuation of this “myth” cf. Ravitz, 2014). Yet, media can foster religious practices (Drescher, 2014; Drescher’s post is a critical response to Ravitz) and bodily experiences *as* religious experiences (Knauss, 2010). Zordan’s and Justice’s papers, then, show how religious communities and practices struggle with, adapt to, and creatively engage with (new) media, and demonstrate that the body more often than not is a key ingredient (even if on an unconscious level) to these practices. Doing so, religious and bodily practices themselves undergo transformation processes.

Jutta Wimmmler ventures into the realm of science fiction and explores the TV series *Caprica* (2009-2010). Similar to Birzache, Wimmmler understands femininity and the female body as source of power and subversion. Her starting point is the traditional – or stereotypical – conception that relates masculinity with rationality and femininity with the irrational and the bodily. She argues that by “embodying”, i.e. rooting in the body, these traditionally masculine realms, body can help overcome traditional ideas. In her re-discovery of female bodies, she does not oppose female bodies with male bodies. Instead, Wimmmler argues not only that traditional dichotomies are intimately intertwined, but that embodied rationality, embodied science, embodied technology can bring ethical perspectives into the discourse. That is not to say, according to Wimmmler, that these embodied or feminized spaces are necessarily “good” spaces but *as* embodied spaces they remain ambivalent – and therefore open. Drawing on the storyline *Caprica*, Wimmmler argues that we can understand the female body in this TV series as God’s interface. Wimmmler’s argument shows that popular culture can question processes of othering, not only through resorting to religious language but also in religious contexts.

Lisa Kienzl’s paper “*You’re My True Vessel*” looks at body from the perspective of the construction and transformation of knowledge – or what one perceives as knowledge. Her starting points are religious practices and traditions of body as medium. Using the TV series *Supernatural* and its online fan culture as her source material, she looks at the ways in which knowledge about the medium-body is transformed and constructed when – so to speak – bodies change their contexts from religious contexts to the screen to fan forums. Her study, then, shows how directors and writers draw on and play with religious and cultural narratives and how fans pick up what they are presented with and contribute to these transformation processes. Coming from a religious studies perspective, Kienzl stays away from moral judgements about these transformation processes. Rather, her analysis renders obvious that “religion”, religious practices and narratives are never contained and highly dynamic.

As diverse as the articles coming together in this special issue are, they show that body is more than the “thing” we have and we are, the “thing” we see, dissect, idealize, or are obsessed with. Rather, body and bodies are a rich yet utterly messy and ambivalent religious and cultural resource. They are inscribed with narratives and meaning but they are also the very material through which we – as bodies – sense, write, feel, see, experience, smell, and incarnate religious and cultural practices. Screening and thus framing these ambivalent cultural resources does not necessarily reduce their ambiguity but can help to better understand the very bodies we are.

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