UZH, Religionswissenschaftliches Seminar, Kirchgasse 9,CH-8001 Zürich

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International Exchange on Media and Religion
Religious Images and Cultural Imaginary

Cambridge, 7th – 9th September 2011.

The international exchange on media and religion was held this year in Westcott House in Cambridge. After having worked for a number of years on different methodological approaches to the visual in religion, we are now focusing on a common theme derived from our previous work on visual sources, arising from a particular interest in reception processes. By considering the category of "social/cultural imaginary" we are investigating its heuristic potential for understanding the presence and diffusion of religious images within both religious traditions and contemporary pluralist society.

1 Participants

The Bible in Art, Music and Literature, University of Oxford
Christopher Rowland, Queen's College
Natasha O'Hear

Fondazione Bruno Kessler, Istituto di ScienzeReligiose, Trento
Stefanie Knauss
Davide Zordan

Medien und Religion, ZRWP, Universität Zürich
Monika Glavac
Anna-Katharina Höpfligner
Marie-Therese Mäder
Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati
Paola von Wyss-Giacosa

Heythrop College, University of London
Ann Jeffers
Sean Ryan

Cambridge Theological Federation and Anglia Ruskin University
Zoë Bennett

## 2	Programme

Part I: Discussion of Theoretical Approaches

The analysis of cases studies was introduced by a discussion of influential approaches to the concept of cultural/social imaginary. Presentations of alternative definitions of this concept by Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, Cornelius Castoriadis and Charles Taylor informed the group's own thinking on the category of "imaginary", and situated the discussion within broader philosophical currents.

Literature
Charles Taylor, "Social Imaginaries", in: E. A. Povinelli (ed.), Public Culture: Society for Transnational Cutural Studies 14, 1, 2002, 91–124.
Cornelius Castoriadis, "Imaginary and Imagination at the Crossroads", in: Figures of the Thinkable, Stanford 2007, 71–90.
Jean Jacques Wunenburger, L'imaginaire, Paris 2003.

Part II: Case Studies

Paola von Wyss-Giacosa: *The Mystery of the Black Jungle*. Illustrations of Salgari's Indo-Malayan Cycle through time as source and mirror of a collective imaginary
Monika Glavac: East meets West, Identity Processes in Word and Picture
Davide Zordan: Robert Crumb's *The Book of Genesis Illustrated*
Ann Jeffers: The Witch and the Reformer. Cultural imaginary representations of the Witch of Endor in Bible Illustrations of the 16th and 17th centuries
Marie-Therese Mäder: Constructing a cultural imaginary in documentary as an identifying practice using the example of *DRIVING MEN* (Susan Mogul, USA 2006, 68')
Sean Ryan: Re-learning to Read the Sky: Devotional Images in the Cultural Imaginary of *I Could Read the Sky*
Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati: Religious images in the public space. Meanings, functions and receptions of religious symbolism in contemporary museum exhibitions
Natasha O'Hear: Apocalyptic imagery in contemporary art, film and media
Stefanie Knauss: An apple is an apple is an apple?
Anna-Katharina Höpflinger: National Visions. Representations of Female State Personifications in 19th Century Europe
Christopher Rowland / Zoe Benett: The Reflection in a Stagnant Pool? The Uses and Abuses of Narcissism

## 3	Retrospect

It is not easy to see a common thread linking the concepts of "imaginary" in the selected authors. One reason is that they are writing at different times and are responding very differently to the social setting in which they are embedded. An additional reason is that they each come under different philosophical influences.

Castoriadis uses imaginary to describe the human possibility to generate innovation:
"I talk about the imaginary because the history of humanity is the history of human imaginary and its works." (71) Imagination is a *visformandi*: "Consequtnly, it is quite natural that we call this faculty of radical innovation, this ability to create and to form, the imaginary and imagination." (72). Imaginary is conceived as a basic category with which to understand culture: "Culture is the domain of the imaginary,

in the literal sense, the domain of the poietic, of that element of society that goes beyond the merely instrumental." (77)

Taylor looks at "imaginary" from an interest in the public sphere in modern society: "The social imaginary is not a set of ideas. Rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society." (91) He defines the term as follows: "What I'm trying to get at with this term is something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking rather of the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations. I want to speak of social imaginary here, rather than social theory, because there are important –and multiple– differences between the two. I speak of imaginary because I'm talking about the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms; it is carried in images, stories, and legends." (106)

Wunenburger presents an overview of classical positions in the French speaking tradition (G. Bachelard, G. Durand, P. Ricoeur, H. Corbin) which is particularly important as "imaginary" first appeared in Maine de Biran (1820) and was unknown for many decades in other languages. Finally he proposes five basic ideas that can serve as a fundament for further developing a theory of imagination and imaginary, stated here in the summary provided by S. Knauss und D. Zordan:
"First, the imaginary obeys a logic that gives structure to the images and that can be analysed.
Second, the imagination uses the contents of perception, but cannot be reduced to them.
Third, the imagination produces works whose sense is potentially open and not given.
Fourth, the imaginary is involved in the construction and formation of the self and his/her sense of life, belonging both to an individual and a collective level.
Fifth, the imaginary is ambivalent, it can be both a source of illusion and a revelation of truth."

The concept of cultural und/or social imaginary remains a challenging category. Difficult to define in a univocal way, it can be used either on a psychological or on a socio-political level. Nevertheless, it doesn't seem appropriate to look at "imaginary" as a closed, specific term. "Imaginary" is useful for our investigation if considered in a dynamic manner, as a conceptual possibility to relate processes of production with processes of reception, individual ideas and images with collective, stereotypes and common sense with innovation, emotions with traditions, memory with ideology. In the workshop, these general considerations led to the presentation of case studies.

The idea of focusing on a common topic, to which the participant then relates the research work on religious images that s/he is doing in different setting and disciplines, has given coherence and methodological strength to the workshop.
The concept of "cultural imaginary" opened a theoretical space that encompasses all the case studies presented. It also outlined the relationship between the reception of visual expressions and processes of identity. More work has to be done on the last link between imaginary and identity. Furthermore, the different usage of cultural or social imaginary should be taken into consideration and the differing nuances deepened.

All the presentations of case studies were thematically and methodologically pertinent to the topic. Although we were each coming from different disciplines, the participants approached the sources and materials from a very similar, descriptive perspective. In this sense, the project has a strong profile as a contribution to the research on visuality within the study of religion/religious studies.
The case studies and the debates which followed were extremely useful in relating the theoretical, heuristic devices from the first part of the meeting to the phenomena we are dealing with. Equally, thinking about historical and contemporary cases allows a stimulating criticism of the abstraction of

theories. In this sense, the combination between inductive and deductive procedures in dealing with "imageries" appears to be fruitful. Nevertheless, the main interest of the consultation lies on the development of a methodological reflection on the approaches to visual symbols, plots, and elements within a pluralist society. The main question is not about a general theory of the imaginary rather on an accurate analysis of the presence and diffusion of religious traditions within a culture and the multi-layered reception processes that are initiated.

4   Prospect

To complete the concept for the volume we are looking for systematic contributions on the concept of imagery in the French tradition (Pierre Bühler, Zürich?) and in the English speaking tradition (Gordon Lynch, London?), and a contribution on the interaction between technology and imaginary (Alexander Ornella, Hull?). Natalie Fritz, a member of the research group "Medien und Religion" is on maternity leave. She may join the project in 2012.

The next steps towards a publication of the results are:

September 2012: Posting the drafts of the contributions on a server for mutual exchange and
        improvement.
March 2013: Exchange about the revised contributions of 5000–6000 words during a meeting in the U.K.
        or Switzerland.

5   Abstract of the presented papers

East meets West. Identity Processes in Word and Picture
Monika Glavac

In the picture book *Der Wunderkasten* the German-Syrian author Rafik Schami connects pictures with words by telling us how old stories and pictures can survive in a more and more chaotic world, where western media and other influences become prevalent. The picture book shows how the collective imaginary of a certain society can change and be disturbed. The French-Iranian comic-strip artist Marjane Satrapi tells and shows in her comic *Persepolis* how the coming together of two different cultures acts on the figure Marjane. The world in which Marjane lives continually changes, and besides this she is in continual conflict with herself. My contribution aims to analyse the two books and to ask what impact the relative stranger has on the individual identity of the figure Marjane and on the collective identity of the society that Rafik Schami creates.

Robert Crumb's The Book of Genesis Illustrated
Davide Zordan

With the *Book of Genesis Illustrated*, published in October 2009, Robert Crumb has achieved the transition from cult figure of underground comics to a mainstream graphic artist/novelist. The presentation aims to show the way Crumb renders the biblical narrative visually mixing a generally bland, withheld imagery with a very personal, recognizable and well-shaped style, that implicitly appeals to his more transgressive works and imagination.

The Mystery of the Black Jungle. *Illustrations of Salgari's Indo-Malayan Cycle through time as source and mirror of a collective imaginary*
Paola von Wyss-Giacosa

One century ago, Emilio Salgari (1862-1911), by far the most successful author of popular fiction in late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italy, committed suicide. For a period of 25 years he had - in something like 80 novels and 100 short stories, many of which celebrated record breaking sales – enabled the Italian public to imagine travelling to the four corners of the world experiencing fantastic adventures and learning about exotic worlds. Many of his books have seen countless editions and translations and remain popular to this day, particularly the cycle concerning the pirate Sandokan, Tiger of Mompracem, and his friend, the hunter Tremal-Naik. The series of novels is set between the mangrove forest of Bengal and Malayan Borneo. The dark tale of the Thugs, the infamous votaries of the goddess Kali, and of their death cult, constitutes one of its most vivid narratives. The contribution shall examine illustrations thereof in various editions through time, postulating their importance in establishing a collective imaginary and hoping to discern continuity as well as change in the visual interpretation of the subject by draftsmen of different generational and cultural backgrounds.

Constructing a cultural imaginary in documentary as an identifying practice using the example of DRIVING MEN *(Susan Mogul, USA 2006, 68')*
Marie-Therese Mäder

In DRIVING MEN Susan Mogul (*1948), American filmmaker and actress (film and stage), looks back over her own relationships. She asks herself why none of them was successful. During a journey by car she attends a Bar Mitzwa, meeting Ron, a Jew and, as it later turns out, the man of her dreams. She considers her Jewish roots in a filmic digression, wondering whether there is such a thing as a specifically Jewish characteristic. Mogul uses various stylistic means to reflect on the question and meaning of being Jewish: Interviews, footage showing one of her earlier stage performances, music and photos as inserts. Throughout the film scenes containing symbols, topics and practices construct a field in which "to be Jewish" turns into a kind of cultural imaginary shared with the audience through its cinematic representation.
Central questions regard the way the film communicates the cultural imaginary of "being Jewish" and the tension between understanding it as an individual imaginary created by the filmmaker and understanding it as a collective one shared by the audience.

Re-learning to Read the Sky: Devotional Images in the Cultural Imaginary of I Could Read the Sky
Sean Ryan

The photographic-novel, *I Could Read the Sky* (1997), blends the elegiac prose of Timothy O'Grady with the stark black and white images of Steve Pyke, to construct a synthetic cultural memory of Irish emigration, loss, and the myth of the return. The novel, and its subsequent cinematic adaptation by Nicola Bruce (1999, UK), presents an elderly immigrant's fractured attempts to recall his life through snapshots of memories, dreams, and traditional-tunes. My presentation will analyse the presence of Catholic devotional iconography (statues, pictures, shrines, crosses), attentive to their interrelationships with the surrounding words and images, to assess the role that such images play in the work's formation of a composite cultural identity.

Religious images in the public space. Meanings, functions and receptions of religious symbolism in contemporary museum exhibitions

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati

This paper outlines methodological aspects in dealing with the question of multiple meanings, contexts and receptions of religious motifs within the social context of a public museum. It analyses an exhibition on contemporary art where religious references play a central role: "Signs of Life. Ancient Knowledge in Contemporary Art", Museum of Art, Lucerne 2010.

The main steps of the analytical process are presented and critically discussed using as an example a selected work: "World of Plenty" by the Finnish artist Tea Mäkipää (2005-2006, digital print, 400 x 2670 cm). This photoshop collage, printed on paper, confronts the visitors with a contemporary, utopian vision of a paradise they could explore while sitting on a comfortable chair-bed.

"World of Plenty" presents a utopian vision of the otherworld in a secular setting by a device that can be diffused and reproduced on demand, since the digital collage consists basically in electronic data. By employing religious motifs, symbols and by playing with religious practices the work itself and the exhibition as a whole reproduce religion in a secular, public context. This staging of religious images in the museum can be received on different levels, either as a reflection about religion in society and/or as a critical approach to it. The art museum, as a secular public space, engages in a discourse about religion and participates actively in the transmission of religious imagery in culture.

Apocalyptic imagery in contemporary art, film and media
Natasha O'Hear

In the paper I will explore how traditional imagery drawn from the Book of Revelation has been appropriated at key moments during the twentieth century by artists, film directors and the media more generally to help to shape our understanding of current affairs and of our current state more generally. WW1 and WW2, the Vietnam War, modern American culture, and more recently, the nuclear disaster at Fukushima and the events unfolding across Libya, Syria and the Arab world have all been investigated via apocalyptic imagery and vocabulary. Do the Book of Revelation and other related apocalyptic texts merely provide a convenient lexis with which to explore such events or do these examples reveal a deeper and more complex cultural link with the imagery found in the Book of Revelation? And are there examples of apocalyptic imagery being used in a more 'positive way' in the contemporary world or does it only have negative connotations?

An apple is an apple is an apple?
Stefanie Knauss

No other fruit (or vegetable) has attracted as much attention throughout the cultural history of the West. Ever since its identification as the fruit which seduced the first pair of humans to transgress against God's will, the apple has been the material symbol of a vast number of immaterial ideas: seduction, sin, temptation, but also paradise, pure nature, health, fitness, and is used, with these multiple meanings, as a visual short-cut in media, culture, and economics.

My presentation will focus in particular on the use of the motif of the apple in advertisement where it references paradise, sin or temptation, but has also become a symbol for the essence of advertising itself.

National Visions. Representations of Female State Personifications in 19th Century Europe
Anna-Katharina Höpflinger

In the course of the strengthening of nationalism in the 19th century, state allegories took on great significance in cultural imagination and were often symbolised by idealised female figures, such as the

French Marianne, the German Germania or the Swiss Helvetia. Above all, the visual representation of this figures was of considerable importance. Their images were struck on coins, mounted as statues, portrayed on oil paintings, or were used as a theme in patriotic plays. In all these visual stagings, a corpus of repeated conventions crystallises, allowing the recognition of the figures right away. Studying this corpus, it is striking to note how many iconographical elements taken from religious systems contribute to shape them as figures of national imagination. The leading part hereby is shared by Christianity and the ancient world, suggested by idealised versions of them. On a semantic and pragmatic level, female state allegories foremost take on a sociopolitical role; however, especially in the 19th century, the visual depictions of such figures can be put in relation with the reception of presentations of deities. My contribution will explore this kind of interaction of the sociopolitical imagination and meaning of female national emblems and their visual staging as "State Goddesses".

Witchcraft in the biblical imagination
Ann Jeffers

This paper will look at the visual representations of the story of the woman of Endor (1 Samuel 28) in Bibles of the 16th and 17th centuries. It will examine how the illustrations reflect the 'cultural imaginary' of witchcraft during this period.

The Reflection in a Stagnant Pool?The Uses and Abuses of Narcissism
Christopher Rowland / Zoe Bennett

The subject of our presentation will be narcissism. We shall use three items, Caravaggio's famous painting, a clip from the film Peeping Tom and images from Blake's series on Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress' to explore the positive as well as the negative features of narcissism culturally and theologically.

6 Emails

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