



**International Exchange on Media and Religion  
Religious Images and Cultural Imaginary**

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**Report**

**1 Participants**

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**2 Main lines of the project “Mapping Religion in Cultural Imaginaries”**

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The project “Religious images and cultural imaginary” is developing extremely well. The discussions that occurred during the meeting at Heythrop College this year, rooted in the work we have already undertaken, are bringing a strong consistency to the project at the theoretical level.

The central question that we discussed in the workshop this year – and which will become a central issue in the publication – is to what extent the category “imaginary” is a helpful heuristic tool to engage with the complexity and plurality of meanings and meaning-making processes in society. In particular, we are interested in how the concept may help to understand the presence and intentional use of religious elements in culture and how they are received and understood. Whilst each paper focuses upon a particular case study, this common question will also be reflected upon (at a more theoretical level). Each paper will discuss how “imaginary” is used and its usefulness for the particular case study in question, and on the basis of these case-studies it will be possible to trace common mechanisms and processes by which the imaginary works (in a descriptive sense). Theories of the imaginary will be introduced and serve as background, but will not limit our approach or use of the concept.



A (graphic) map of the imaginary will introduce the book and serve as a framework within which to locate each article. As such, it will also provide coherence to the collection of papers. The map in itself can also be seen as a contribution to the study of the imaginary.

The main aspects of our discussion deal with the following themes that should be reflected in the introduction. We will further develop those topics in the next meeting, when we will also consider the individual case studies and their particular ways of engaging with the concept of imaginary:

- a) Reconstructing the history of the term and the main lines of research in the use of the concept of the imaginary.
- b) Characterising the different theories of the imaginary and their particular contribution to academic research.
- c) Using a “map of the imaginary”, afforded a methodological and epistemic function, to outline the different relationships to other key terms in the study of religion.
- d) Defining the relationship between image, imagination and imaginary.
- e) Using the terminology “cultural imaginary” as a basic, general, all-encompassing term in preference to “social/religious/moral/political imaginary”. The latter adjectives denote a more specific usage that can be used and defined for the purposes of individual papers, where necessary.
- f) Stressing the crucial significance of intermediality and the particular function of visual media.

### 3 Abstracts

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#### The Witch and the Reformer

*Cultural imaginary representations of the “Witch” of Endor in Bible Illustrations of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries*

Ann Jeffers

This paper will look at the role of imaginary in the production of woodcuts in Bibles from the time of the Reformation. I will attempt to analyse the concept of the ‘imaginary’ in a culturally specific example: that of the illustration of the story retold in 1 Samuel 28:3-25. I am interested in the interplay of how this story has been read and understood, and how it has been used (distorted?) in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in order to give ideological credence to witch-hunts. The story has been re-imagined using both the visual trappings of late Medieval ‘witches’ (‘witchart’), and the theological construction of witchcraft, as exemplified by the *Malleus Maleficarum* (“The Hammer of the Witches”). I will illustrate the discontinuity in the history of the illustrations of the Woman of Endor and hope to demonstrate that the cultural imagination of Bible illustrators is both political and ideological/theological. Ricoeur’s concept of the ideological imaginary will constitute the framework to my contribution.

#### *National Visions*

*Representations of Female State Personifications in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe*

Anna-Katharina Höpflinger

In my contribution I will look at the Swiss state personification of Helvetia as an example of the construction of collective identity through religious imaginary.

I will approach selected examples with a (neo)semantic method and analyze them regarding their semantics, syntax and pragmatics (Höpflinger 2011) with a special focus on their relationship to religious depictions.

Helvetia is the personification of an imagined political community and is closely connected with boundary processes constructing otherness.

On a semantic and pragmatic level, Helvetia first and foremost, takes on a socio-political role. She serves as a marker for national identity and gives orientation in difficult normative and political contexts (e.g. in wars). This allegory is also connected with a sort of secular worship that has some parallels, especially regarding its function, with religious practices.

On a syntactic level Helvetia is strongly connected with the depiction of religious figures, specifically the Christian Mary as well as ancient goddesses—or at least romantic reconstructions of those goddesses—such as Athena/Minerva, Demeter/Ceres and even Aphrodite/Venus. In her representation as well as in her function, esp in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Helvetia adopts elements of a transcendental female protector of the community (e.g. as a symbolic military leader or as the mother of an imagined community).



*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

My paper focuses on a key motif– the representation of the “blood thirsty goddess” Kali–within the book illustrations of Emilio Salgari’s Indo-Malayan cycle, which appeared in manifold editions over the last century. The lore of a mysterious India, threatening and cruel, but all the same fascinating and tempting, found a compelling and influential expression in the image of the many-armed black goddess. The choice of topic stems from personal experience. As a child growing up in Italy, I read Salgari’s novels and was fascinated by the exotic world he so vividly depicted. My parents read these same books before me, and their parents before them. The fantastic adventures invented by Salgari (1862-1911), by far the most successful author of popular fiction in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italy, represent a gripping experience of armchair travelling shared by a vast majority of Italians for over three generations. More generally, thus, my interest concerns popular/children’s literature and its impact on individual and collective memory. I am interested in the significance of this literary genre and its cohesive power in communication within and between generations.

In this context, I would like to refer to the verbal and visual representations, which are received and elaborated, expressed, perpetuated and varied in a set of shared notions, stories and images as cultural imaginary—a common system of reference both durable and flexible, in which tradition and innovation are tied together. For my analysis, I will concentrate on one of Salgari’s most remarkable narratives: The dark tale of the Thugs, the infamous votaries of the goddess Kali, and of their death cult, told in *I misteri della giunglanera* (1895) and *Leduetigri* (1904). This story line constitutes the core of one of the author’s most successful and influential series, the cycle around the hunter Tremal-Naik, and his friend, the pirate Sandokan, set between the mangrove forest of Bengal and Malayan Borneo. From the very first edition on, cover and book illustrations were perceived as crucial elements for the success of the volumes by both the author and the publishers, as well as, of course, by the reading public. During his lifetime, Salgari, for whom engravings and photographs of foreign places and people were an important source of inspiration, was always in close contact with his illustrators and influenced their vivid, theatrically staged interpretations of his narrative. But even after the author’s untimely and tragic death 1911 and until the present day, year after year new illustrated editions of his novels were put on the market by various publishers, all competing for the young readers’ attention through different visual references and strategies. In my opinion, the consistent attention accorded to illustrations in Salgari’s novels through time and the immediacy of their impact on the public makes this visual material an excellent source, in which the previously defined “cultural imaginary” becomes tangible.

*Moral Imagination in “Campo dei Fiori”*

Anna Abram

Czeslaw Milosz (1911-2004) – a Polish poet and the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1980)-in his poem ‘Campo dei Fiori’, through a powerful use of images and symbols, conveys something important about the nature of moral attitudes, their cultural expressions, meanings and complexities in the context of various (social) relationships. There are two key pictures in this poem: the execution of Giordano Bruno in 1600 in Campo dei Fiori and the burning of the inhabitants of the Jewish ghetto in 1943 in Warsaw. I will focus on four images/symbols in my analysis of *Campo dei Fiori*. I am interested in relating the concept of moral imagination to the ideas associated with the ‘cultural imaginary’ (Charles Taylor/ Graham Ward).

*Re-learning to Read the Sky*

*Devotional Images in the Cultural Imaginary of I Could Read the Sky*

Sean Ryan

My paper focuses on the use of images of Catholic devotional objects (rosarybeads, Sacred Heart painting) to communicate the identity of the working-class Irish emigrant in the photographic novel *I Could Read the Sky* (O’Grady & Pyke, 1997). I will focus on how the novel attempts to communicate a collective “cultural memory” of Irish emigrant identity to second or third generation Irish readers of the novel, as well as nuancing stereotypical images of Irish identity already contained in the “cultural imaginaries” of a wider readership. Accordingly, my paper



will tease out some of the distinguishing characteristics of the concepts of “cultural memory” and “cultural imaginary” in order to highlight elements of continuity and discontinuity.

*Robert Crumb's The Book of Genesis Illustrated*  
Davide Zordan

The object of my paper, as presented last year in Cambridge, is *The Book of Genesis Illustrated* by R. Crumb, a comic book published in October 2009. I would like to contextualize my analysis with two preliminary annotations, one, very short, concerning the current and extensive interest on comics noticeable in the academic community (1), and the other concerning the specificity of comics as a text bringing together words and images (2). This second remark will give me the opportunity to specify in what sense the concept of the imaginary is worthy of consideration in my analysis (3).

*Re- and Deconstruction of the Holy Family in Film*  
Natalie Fritz

Although times have changed, family as a specific form of human coexistence is ubiquitous in contemporary cinema. In most cases filmic interpretations of the family do not focus on harmony or affection but reflect the ambivalence and fragility of this social construct and its implicit moral concepts that are based on the Christian motif of the Holy Family from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. This paper will show how cinematic representations re-and deconstruct our cultural conceptions of the ideal family using selected film scenes.

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

Susan Mogul (\*1948), an American filmmaker and performer in films and on stage, looks back on the relationships in her life in *DRIVING MEN*. She asks herself why none of them were successful. During her journey by car she meets Ron at a Bar Mitzvah, a Jewish man who, it turns out later, is the man of her dreams. She thinks about her Jewish roots in a filmic digression and asks if a specific Jewish characteristic exists. To reflect upon this question and what it means to be Jewish, Mogul uses different stylistic means: interviews, footage of one of her former stage performances, music and photos as inserts. Many scenes contain symbols, topics and practices constructing a field in which “being Jewish” becomes a kind of cultural imaginary which is shared with the audience by its cinematic representation.

The question is how the cultural imaginary of “being Jewish” is communicated by the film and on what level it may be described as an individual imaginary created by the filmmaker or a collective imaginary shared by the audience? In my paper I will outline how the filmmaker’s subjective experience of her cultural imaginary is turned into a collective experience in the reception process. I will achieve this aim by analysing the audio-visual realization and connecting it with the theoretical discussion of the imaginary.

For Taylor the social imaginary is manifested in products of the material culture: “... 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.” (Taylor 106). From Taylor’s perspective, films and the cinema may be interpreted as a place where imagination is expressed. Watching films is then a *practice* in the public sphere: “The social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of it, the practices of a society.” (Taylor 91). According to this understanding of the “imaginary” filmmaking can be seen as a practice in which – as in the case of *Driving Men* – a personal argument about one’s religious background and self understanding is expressed.



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

This paper seeks to use the Apocalypse, the last book in the Bible, as a lens through which to examine the artistic expressions of contrasting twentieth-century *cultural imaginaries*. Far from being a relic of an earlier, more uniformly religious age, the appeal and impact of the Apocalypse has, if anything, grown in the last century. Perhaps in response to the often dramatic and tragic events of the twentieth century, such as WW1 and WW2, as well other occurrence of genocide and more recently of the growth of terrorism, both the biblical book and the term *apocalypse* are, on the whole, now connected with mindless destruction, suffering and the end of the world. It has evolved into a convenient and easily understood label or metaphor for chaotic or mysterious events and accordingly has often been appropriated by authors, journalists, film-makers, musicians and cartoonists. As a result, there is a general, tacitly understood, cultural understanding of the term, which the first half of this paper will address. However, within this dominant popular understanding of the Apocalypse exist other treatments arising from different contexts or *cultural imaginaries*. What is distinctive about such interpretations is the fact that they are more deeply rooted in the text of the Apocalypse itself, rather than just consisting of more generalised references to disaster. Thus these interpretations challenge (to different degrees) the dominant, one might say, superficial, understanding of the Apocalypse that exists in our society today. The second half of this paper will examine three such examples, drawn from the worlds of film, music and popular literature. They are Ingmar Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal*, The Reverend Gary Davis' song *Twelve Gates to the City* and Jenkins and Lahaye's *Left Behind Series*. I am particularly interested in the relationship between our dominant Western culture and more marginal or theologically sophisticated *cultural imaginaries* and the differing interpretations of the Apocalypse that these contrasts produce.

*Religious images in the public space*  
*Meanings, functions and receptions of religious symbolism in contemporary museum exhibitions*  
Daria Pezzoli-Olgiatei

In the last few years, several authors have outlined the relevance of material culture within religious practices and beliefs (e.g. Lanwerd 2002, Arweck/Collins, ed., 2006; Morgan, ed., 2008; King 2010; Morgan 2010). This contribution broadens the topic looking at the presence of and reference to religion in the public space with a focus on visual media (Bräunlein 2004). Symbols, narratives and performances explicitly related to religious traditions and communities are widespread on different levels and places in contemporary culture: in films, cartoons, literature, games, visual art and exhibitions religious motifs and themes are well attested. The paper pays attention to meanings, contexts and receptions of religious symbolism in exhibitions displayed in museums open to a large public. It focuses on the exhibition "Signs of Life. Ancient Knowledge in Contemporary Art" by the Museum of Art in Lucerne (2010).

The museum, as a secular institution, demonstrates the relevance of religion within the contemporary art production with a broad, international selection of works.

This paper outlines methodological aspects in dealing with the question about meanings, contexts and reception s of religious motifs within this particular social context. The main steps of the analytical process are presented and critically discussed using as an example one selected work: "World of Plenty" by the Finnish artist Tea Mäkipää (2005-2006, digital print, 400x2670cm). 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.

Firstly, the work is analysed with particular attention to the employed digital print technique and the composition of the motifs. Indeed, the electronic collage allows the assemblage of a huge amount of quotations, items, forms and colours. There are re-enacted scenes from European paintings next to images from travel catalogues and other magazines. This monumental work displays explicit references to Christian themes such as the Holy Family, Maria lactans, the Garden of Eden, Isaiah 11 and the idea itself of Paradise as an eschatological dimension. In the analysis of the religious motifs three levels play a central role: the reference to narratives, the usage of symbols and the references to religious practices and performances.

Secondly, "World of Plenty" will be contextualized within the general conception of the exhibition with particular regard for the 'intertextual'—or more precisely 'intervisual' and 'intermedial'—frame created by the selection of works and their mutual influences: the multi-layered references to religious traditions in past and present in all the exhibits outline their specific relation to religious discourses and reflections. Seen in another context, the religious references of the single works would still be present, but probably perceived as less important.



Since I argue that the intention of the curators and the thematic program of the exhibit have a crucial role in outlining the religious significance of the single works, the third step is dedicated to possible reception processes. Here the spatial collocation of the work in the white cube of the museum and the possible receptions suggested by this mise-en-scène will be considered. Furthermore, I include entries and comments in the visitors' books and a broad collection of cards (15x21cm) where the public was invited to express their impressions after the visit by drawings or short texts. Finally reviews of the exhibition in newspapers are also integrated into the process of interpretation.

"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.

*An apple is an apple is an apple?*  
Stefanie Knauss

I have chosen the apple as a prominent symbol of the western imaginary, which – in a working definition – I take to be a shared reservoir of symbols and stories on which people of a group draw to make sense of their lives and which are, vice versa, shaped by their accumulated life experiences. Being a common source of symbols, it allows communication between subjects, but due to the numerous connotations each sign carries with it, it can also developed further and change. The apple provides an interesting example for this, because on the one hand, there seems to be both an agreement on what it mainly refers to (sin and temptation), but on the other, all its multiple other meanings are not silenced by this predominant one. My interests in this study are to understand better, using the apple as an example, how the imaginary is developed and transmitted through the use of media and stories. This will also contribute to a better understanding of the concept of the imaginary as a shared, social, and individual reservoir of meaning making structures and narratives. Thirdly, it will help to understand better the presence of religious symbols in the public realm in non-religious contexts.

I will begin with a mapping of the symbolic meaning of the apple in western culture (which I take to be the cultural realm mainly shaped and influenced by classic antiquity and Christianity): I see four main (yet interconnected) fields of reference for the symbolism of the apple: classical mythology, the story of Genesis, nature/health and political power. Thus, for its meanings, the apple draws equally on the sphere of religion, culture, nature and politics, and maybe it's because of that, that the apple is still such an extraordinary fruit in the Western imaginary where it turns up in all these areas, distinguishing them from each other, yet connecting them as well in a powerful mix that touches all levels and dimensions of human individual and communal existence. What is also interesting, and this makes it in my opinion such a good example for how the imaginary works, is how the individual symbolic meanings of the apple colour off on each other. In a second step I am interested to see which of these meanings are most referenced in today's use of the apple, in particular in advertisement, which I take to be an area where the 'social imaginary' is most accessible, because in order to function, ads have to relate to people's individual and shared imagination. The apple is remarkably present as a motif, and not only because of the sheer amount of Apple Macintosh ads. There are three formal reasons for that, at least: the fact that apples have a very distinct and easy-to-draw shape, that they are easily available and therefore known everywhere in the western world, and that they come in these strong, distinct colours so that it is possible to play the "'I'm different' game with them, too, which is at the base of advertising strategies. In advertising, the most commonly associated meanings of the apple are temptation and nature/health, with a few hints on politics and mythology, and thus indicate that the contemporary social imaginary is centred around issues of desiring, satisfying desires, youth and well-being, all of which are also religiously associated through the apple's symbolic connection with the story of the Garden of Eden and of the Fall. In a third step, I want to pick up what Claudia Strauss pointed out, namely that it is very important to keep in mind (and to research this as well) that the imaginary is imagined by somebody, that it develops out of concrete persons' imaginations, and what is 'on offer' in their society on the visual and literary level is interpreted by them respectively. I will do this through an exemplary study of blog entries in response to two questions: why an apple with a bite taken out as a logo for Apple; and why all the apples in *Desperate Housewives* posters. These can be taken as indicators of which meanings are most present in people's minds (or imaginaries) and which they draw upon to find meanings



for unknown in their worlds. Surprising or not, it is again the story of the Fall that comes up most frequently, associated with the search for knowledge in the case of the Apple logo, and with sexuality and temptation in the case of *Desperate Housewives*.

*Imagining Technology – Imagining the Human Condition?*  
Alexander D. Ornella

Technology does not simply exist or is used in a social or cultural vacuum, but technology becomes part of our symbolic universe. It does not only emerge from a specific socio-cultural context but mediates, shapes, and transforms the way we perceive and view the world and ultimately ourselves. Creating, encountering, engaging with, using and incorporating technology into individual and social practices we ascribe and inscribe meaning and values to technology. Often, we see past technologies through rose-colored glasses while new and ever more complex technology is often met with distance, scepticism, or even worry. In short, we create narratives with and around technologies to make sense of past experiences and frame moral and ethical issues we expect to arise in the context of new and emerging technologies. Understanding pop-culture representations of technology and narratives with and around technology, such as science fiction, as individual and social imaginaries can help us consider both individual and shared experiences, perceptions, and ideas of past, present, and future technologies. This paper, then, will look at representations of technology in pop-culture and analyse the processes through which technology becomes part of our symbolic universe. I will suggest that visions and imaginaries of technology are not confined to a 'virtual' realm or imagined worlds but have an impact on 'real' life. Ultimately, technological imaginaries are not so much about technology itself but rather they are about the human condition itself.