



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### The future of the aesthetic past: A conversation between Jerrold Levinson and Birgit Meyer

van Keulen, S.

**Publication date**

2009

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Esthetica : Tijdschrift voor Kunst en Filosofie

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

van Keulen, S. (2009). The future of the aesthetic past: A conversation between Jerrold Levinson and Birgit Meyer. *Esthetica : Tijdschrift voor Kunst en Filosofie*, 2009. <http://estheticatijdschrift.nl/files/2014/09/Esthetica-Thefutureoftheaestheticpast-AconversationbetweenJerroldLevinsonandBirgitMeyer-2011-03-16.pdf>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

# The future of the aesthetic past. A conversation between Jerrold Levinson and Birgit Meyer

Sybrandt van Keulen

This conversation took place on the 10th of October 2008 at SPUI 25, cultural centre of the University of Amsterdam, in the context of a symposium organized by the Dutch Association of Aesthetics (Nederlands Genootschap voor Esthetica).

Sybrandt van Keulen:

I would like to invite you, Birgit Meyer and Jerrold Levinson, and the audience, to reflect upon what can arguably be called the most famous thought in the history of modern aesthetics, that is, the Hegelian idea of the end of art. My abbreviation of this idea goes as follows:

During the history of modernity, religion and art diminish in value and become both less and less important as forms of cognition and insight.

This thesis seems not to be confirmed by contemporary developments. One is rather inclined to think that the reverse is happening. Together with religion the arts seem to become more and more important in global processes of national, international and cosmopolitan self-awareness. With their performative, ritualistic and communicative possibilities of make-believe, religions were, and still are, and will perhaps be more and more, the birthplace of new artforms. Will these future artforms be as recognizable as ever before? Will it still be possible to appreciate and to judge future artworks on the basis of modern taste, as founded on the standards of Hume and Kant? I would like to invite you to reflect and reconsider the key notions of aesthetics, such as pleasure without interest and autonomy. Will we be able even to recognize future artforms on the basis of these traditional notions of aesthetics?

Jerrold Levinson:

I will address what my view is of the end of art thesis, but it isn't so much the way you put it, in terms of a general decreasing role of art *and* religion. Since I think one possible view of this matter – and I think this is what Birgit might support – is that religion might be in a process of replacing art, or vice versa. It isn't that both are declining at the same rate.

In any case, when I think about the end of art thesis, it isn't really in those terms, it is more in the terms discussed in the Anglo-American tradition, largely through the influence of the philosopher Arthur Danto. Danto gave a particular interpretation of the end of art thesis, grounded in Hegel, but going further, in a specific direction. Just to put it very bluntly, the end

of art thesis says in some sense that art is over, or that art is finished, or that art no longer has a point or purpose. But what does this mean most simply? Do we really mean that art is going to stop, or could Danto have meant that? No. Art is not going to stop; probably art is never going to stop as long as there are human beings. Art in my conception is an essentially self-regarding activity, it is continually feeding on itself, and there is no obvious way in which it will ever cease, anymore than, say, bacterial growth is likely to cease. Bacteria keep growing because there is already some bacteria growing. Or like yeast cultures. Art is something like yeast culture. Not the smell usually. But art has the same inherent inertia to continue out of its own nature. Because in some sense – and this is a kind of view of art that I defend – art is, as it were, something that necessarily refers to itself and previous traditions of art. And that is sort of what the essence of art is, now. Now that the Kantian, or more traditional standards of what makes something art – beauty or form, or some particular level of skill or technique – no longer make sense as general requirements for arthood. It is only as if by process of elimination the only definition, the only conception that does make sense, is a conception according to which art is a kind of activity that, as it were, feeds on itself, by relating itself in some way or other to its own concrete history. In short, something is art if it feeds into or feeds on preexisting art in a certain way.

So, I don't think that art is going to stop. And I don't think that Danto, or anyone else who supports the end of art thesis, has that in mind. So what I want to do before I finish this little discourse is to articulate a few senses of what the end of art could mean, in a reasonable fashion.

One possibility is the idea – and that is probably close to the Hegelian idea – that art no longer has a definite mission or goal or purpose, or a final state towards which it is striving. If you assert that thesis you are not saying that art is going to stop, but simply that it no longer has a kind of defining mission towards which it is all directed. If you do say that, then of course it is possible that this mission or goal will be reached. And in Danto's view it has been reached, or it was reached in the fifties or sixties. The goal or the mission in those days was something like: art should attempt to know itself fully, art should attempt to completely understand its own nature. Well, that sounds like something that philosophers do. They try to understand the nature of something fully. Of course philosophers get to use language – texts, arguments – and art doesn't usually have that available. It has instead images, pieces of stone, tones – and sometimes words, but they are often not very directly employed, as in much modern poetry. But if art can do something like that, that is, if art can know itself and somehow display that knowledge, then that is going to be a long, convoluted, difficult process, but it might eventually come to an end. And according to Hegel that possibility was always there, and according to Danto it was achieved, that is to say, when art acquired a certain kind of self-consciousness, and adopted certain sorts of styles and methods that were really addressed at making clear the nature of art, rather than doing what art more traditionally has done, such as express the artist's emotions, or explain the external world, or create objects of surpassing beauty.

When or how did art manage to acquire a certain kind of self-consciousness? Well, you can think of a modernist style or modernist ethos according to which – this is just one way, not the only way, to put it – you sort of purify the nature of the artform by making only those features that are essential to it salient. This is Danto's kind of narrative: painting got rid of representation and expression, and simply presented paintings that were manifestly paintings and nothing else. For instance, flat canvases with very little articulation, and perhaps one color. This is a way of drawing attention to the nature of painting, in a sense of drawing

attention to the minimal features of a painting. All right, that process, obviously, can have a kind of end. And it did reach, in the view of many people, a kind of dead end. And became not very interesting. But was that really the end of art? Of course not. Art then became more diverse, and more encompassing, and more, as it were, maximal. And these cycles of minimality and maximality, of art's absorption with itself rather than art's turning outward toward the world, will probably continue indefinitely. Since it seems to me very unlikely that, the fact that art conceived a certain way might achieve a sort of goal will also mean the end of art tout court.

Anyway, the distinguishing feature of this kind of claim is that art really does have inherently a given, definite, invariable purpose or goal. But that, I think, is just false. Despite what Hegel or Danto might have thought.

Another, second idea of the end of art is related but slightly different: it is the idea not that art has a definite mission or goal or final state towards which it is working, and thus might eventually get there, and then stop, but rather the idea that art does no longer fulfill for its audience, for its appreciators, the function or functions in human life that it either originally had or else, subsequently, importantly acquired or fulfilled. The idea is that the function of art in people's lives is somehow no longer being fulfilled, because of the way in which art has in fact developed. How could that be? Because art has become too abstract, too impersonal, too conceptual or too technological – choose your favored diagnosis. It is that kind of idea, that art, if it perhaps lacks an essential, divinely-ordained goal, has at any rate certain functions that it either originally performed or subsequently seemed to perform in people's lives, that it no longer is able to perform. In that sense, even though there may be still art, art has in practical terms ended because it is no longer doing what it is supposed to do or should be doing. Well, if that is the case – and I will forbear to pronounce whether that is true or not, though this is something Birgit will perhaps talk about – that leaves a vacuum where other activities might enter. Other activities might supplant or take the place of art, and somehow fulfill those functions that are deeply ingrained in human nature or human culture. What activities? Well, religion, perhaps. Sports, perhaps. Or maybe a kind of nature-religion, you might call it nature adoration, a sort of deeply ecological ethos. Or it could be a form of aestheticized hyperconsumerism. There is a lot of evidence of that in the place I happen to be living, namely Brussels. On the fanciest shopping street in Brussels, Avenue Louise, there is a Nespresso store. I don't know if you have Nespresso stores here?

Sybrandt van Keulen:  
Coffee shops we have.

Jerrold Levinson:

I do not mean your coffee shops :). When you enter the Nespresso store on Ave. Louise it's just amazing, it's a veritable high temple of consumerism. You feel that there is something sacred or holy, incarnate in all those perfectly aligned boxes in different colors, each containing ten little capsules, almost like jewels. That you stick into your Nespresso machine so as to make a liquor of the gods. And of course all the staff are perfectly groomed and attractive. It has the feeling of a rite when you reach the end of the queue and finally make your selection of Nespresso boxes, then walk out carrying a little Nespresso bag, you just feel, I don't know, somehow blessed or anointed. I am being, of course, a little tongue-in-cheek in saying all that, but not entirely. So that is another possibility: a sort of aestheticized consumerism might take the place of art, at least in part. Other prime examples of veritable temples of modern consumerism are the Emporio Armani stores, which exude some of the grandeur of ancient Roman temples or perhaps, closer to home, the Mussolinian grandeur of

the colonnades of Turin.

A third idea of the end of art, a third interpretation of the end of art, focuses more on how perhaps art is no longer working for creators, for the artists, as opposed to art no longer working for audiences or consumers. It is the same idea, but with just that transposition that maybe what art used to do for artists, the need that it fulfilled – self-expression, personal definition, social commentary, invention of new modes of beauty or sublimity – that maybe art doesn't do that anymore. That the way art has evolved, the particular styles and artforms that have evolved, provide less and less opportunity for that. Remember, I am not claiming that that is so, but only that that would be another interpretation of the end of art thesis, one that would not be as blatantly false as the idea that art has simply stopped. Because, if you haven't noticed, art has not stopped! But it might be that art by and large no longer fulfills the needs of creators, the traditional needs of the sort that I just mentioned.

The last interpretation of the end of art thesis that I will mention that has some currency or some plausibility, is the idea of the end of high art, or les beaux arts, as somehow superior to, dominant over, or suppressing all other kind of art – low art, folk art, naïve art, world art, whatever label seems appropriate to. The end of art thesis so interpreted is the idea that it's the end of the hegemony of fine art as somehow having the exclusive right to call itself art and other art somehow being art only in a secondary or a parasitic sense. To some extent I think that thesis has in fact been realized. It seems an aspect of cultural globalization and of how extensively popular art has permeated the lives of almost everyone, however elitist, hermetic and stand-offish they might try to be. It seems clear that art in this broader sense has in some sense triumphed, and has largely replaced high art, or has knocked high art off of its exclusive pedestal. And that might be what some people mean by the end of art, when they don't mean – what is obviously false – that art has simply stopped.

Sybrandt van Keulen:

Would you agree that the 'high art' of your last interpretation is equivalent to Western art?

Jerrold Levinson:

No, I wouldn't use those terms equivalently. Perhaps in art history text books they are used equivalently.

Sybrandt van Keulen:

Did you use 'high' in the Bourdieu's sense of the word, as a process of distinction empowered by an upper class?

Jerrold Levinson:

More or less. Western art – well you know, hip-hop music is Western art, produced in the West. But it's not high art.

Sybrandt van Keulen:

But from the start did 'we' regard Chinese art as high art?

Jerrold Levinson:

Given our notion of high art, we are able to recognize instances of it in cultures other than our own. High art is obviously present in Japan, China, India and a number of other cultures. It's less obviously present in some other cultures.

Birgit Meyer:

Africa would be a problem. That has always been *the* instance of primitive art. African artists struggle nowadays to transform their so-called primitive art into high art.

Jerrold Levinson:

It is maybe unnecessary for an artform to somehow earn the status of high art to be recognized as art *per se*. We have now a less exclusive understanding of the sphere of art. That is part of what someone might mean, from a conservative point of view, by the end of art, that is to say, the passing of a narrow notion of art restricted to what is in effect high art.

Sybrandt van Keulen:

That is maybe the reason why all these 'primitive' art objects end up in Western museums. But I would like to give Birgit Meyer the opportunity to reflect on the end of art thesis, as long as she likes.

Birgit Meyer:

Thank you. I will address this problem, and the question of the future of aesthetics, from an anthropological and social science perspective. I would phrase the question of Sybrandt differently, because you as philosophers start with Hegel and then ask: what do we think of the contemporary developments in the line of Hegel? In my field it goes, as it were, the other way around: the point of entry is very much contemporary developments. What is going on, what motivates and mobilizes people to change? What happens with the relation between religion and art?

For some anthropologists more than others, but surely for me, the philosophical, broader cultural questions are very important. It is clear to me, and that resonates with what Jerrold Levinson said, that of course there is no end of art or religion. But what we do encounter is a reconfiguration of art and religion, as certain social systems that involve people in certain ways and also produce subjectivities. What interests me is indeed this kind of reconfiguration. The problems many social scientists are facing have nothing to do with the end of art, but what is at the heart of social sciences is the question: what happens to religion? For in sociology, but also partly in anthropology, what has been dominating our thinking and our theorizing for a long time, has been a certain understanding of modernity in terms of disenchantment and secularization. But here and now we live in a world in which religion seems to become ever more important, so what to do about that? This re-emergence of religion requires reflection, in order to account for the contemporary developments. And I would add that it also requires tapping into other repertoires than the social sciences alone.

As Jerrold Levinson made clear from the start and also with his second interpretation of the end of art thesis, certain people think that, after disenchantment, after the diminishing of religion, art would fill the vacuum ('religion might be in a process of replacing art, or vice versa'). This interpretation I don't find very convincing, and it does not even seem very interesting to say that certain things go down and other things go up or exchange places. I am far more interested in reconfigurations of cultural and social processes. Therefore we must take the question of the future of art and religion together and focus on the relation between art and religion. When we conceptualize art and religion together, so to speak, this creates a new intellectual space. In order to understand the appeal of religion in these days we need to go further than a Durkheimian or a narrow social science perspective. The old and still relevant big question for anthropologists and sociologists is: how is it possible that people bond, that they come together? What organizes this? A very basic insight for social sciences in order to answer this question is: people must share beliefs and express these beliefs in rituals which they perform. So, what is relevant in our days, with regard to the rise of religions,

is that we note that all kinds of imagined communities are somehow appearing. The question is then to what extent religions are able to organize and mobilize people into certain imagined communities? How can they mobilize people? There have been attempts, by Benedict Anderson and others, to take into consideration the importance of the imagination.<sup>1</sup> But for Anderson and others, the 'imagination' is a process that takes place in the mind in a sort of Kantian categorical way. So from his perspective people share a certain set of symbols. Well, this is obviously not enough to understand why it is and how it happens that religion seems to appeal to people. What is needed for further understanding, is the notion that cultural forms – in order to be shared, and to produce by subjects and communities – also need the body and the sensorium.

Over the last five, ten years an explosion of publications in the anthropological field refers to this insight, together with the term 'aesthetics', as a kind of magical term. Especially in America, for example in the upcoming conference of the American Anthropological Association, many panels mobilize the question of aesthetics and self-making, political aesthetics and nation-making. But the question is, of course: how do we address and mobilize aesthetics? From my point of view it implies, to put it bluntly, a rejection of one of the main notions of high art, that is, the Kantian notion of disinterestedness of the beholder. More generally I perceive a strong turn to earlier aesthetics, Aristotelian aesthetics for example, and his core notion of 'aisthesis', which is about our sensory experience and sensitive knowledge of the world. And actually in my own field, people who work on religion try to understand the binding power of cultural forms that are mobilized in religious traditions.

There have been all kinds of terms coined, for example the British anthropologist Christopher Pinney wrote a book about India, about Hindu mass produced lithographs of Hindu Gods.<sup>2</sup> What he is interested in, is how these images are not just mass reproductions of some god, but operate in a certain setting of learned viewing. So religion involves certain learning and teaching processes. People learn how to approach these images – which are mass produced depictions – in such a way that they become alive, and that they become points of contact to get in touch with the gods. This has very strong sensory implications. It is not just that people look at an image. An image appears to be far more than a representation to be looked at: images also function in a synaesthetic way. What is of great value to me in the empirical study of Pinney, is the question how these images are able to touch people and to form them and transform them into viable Hindu worshippers. He coined a not so lucky term, 'corporeal aesthetics' or 'corpothetics', in order to stress this specific aesthetic power, which also goes down to more, ordinary, religiously loaded artforms that have a strong impact on the body. There are many more people who work in the strain of Pinney, and in my inaugural lecture I had also his work in mind.<sup>3</sup>

I myself work on Christian movements in Africa – Protestantism, Pentecostal movements – which excel by making prolific use of media, mainly television. The use of media in these kinds of churches is very interesting, which can be understood as part and parcel of broader mediation practices. In these churches television functions as a medium to convey a sense of transcendence, but it happens that it also assures people that – even only just in watching a 'super-pastor' on screen – they can be in touch with a divine power. It happens that pastors on screen say: 'touch the screen, and pray, and you will feel how the Holy Spirit is present'. In this way television very much mobilizes people in all their senses, and shapes and frames them, and gives them the assurance that a medium like television can function as a conveyer of, and an encounter with, the transcendental – that it can give you some truth. This use of media, such as television, brings me to the observation of an interesting phenomenon, namely

the simultaneous occurrence of two aspects: media and mediation are necessary and in a sense they may, as artificial constructions, alienate us and distract us from the world. Yet at the same time these constructions are often authorized, in various ways, as authentic. I am interested in this process of how cultural forms, as artforms, are authenticated by certain acts and structures of authorization. I think that these processes are also active in consumer Nespresso culture and common life.

This brings me to rephrase 'corporeal aesthetics' into a term that I find more appealing, that is 'sensational form'. To me it refers to the core of religious experience: 'form' I understand as a figuration that addresses and shapes people at the same time. Form is thus part and parcel of a process of formation that operates both on the sensorial level and the level of sense-making. The notion of 'sensational form' is useful when we want to answer the question how and why does religion appeal. It can give some insight in the ways religions address people in a certain way, and mobilize their senses, in such a way that often bodily experiences are taken as proof of a religious truth. The human body can thus be perceived as an operator in a process of authorization, as an authenticator.

Sybrandt van Keulen:

Can all kinds of media, or all mediated information (photos, internet) trigger this mood of divine presence?

Birgit Meyer:

They can indeed.

Sybrandt van Keulen:

For me, as a hard core Kantian, I would say: these people are just fetishists, they don't know anything about art per se. They just treat an object as demonic or divine, and use it to trigger religious feelings, but they don't have this exclusive feeling I have when I admire a piece of high art.

Birgit Meyer:

You relativize it nicely. :)

Sybrandt van Keulen:

But what would you say of the Kantian looking down upon the practices of fetishism you just described? I mean that practice of using media as a tool in a process of binding. Isn't this practice not already a devaluation of the pure aesthetic – disinterested – feeling? And in what sense could your notion of 'sensational form' be of help to understand Western art as a cult of fetishists, not only Nespresso consumers, but the consumers of all the objects of the Western art market? How would you balance these tensions, that is, our depreciation of primitive fetishism on the one hand, and on the other hand our self-reflection and self-esteem of our practice of worshipping our own art objects, our own high-and-low art cult?

Birgit Meyer:

This is a very complex question. As an anthropologist my task is not to say that Western art is a fetishistic obsession, and that art and religion are or should really be something else. It is not my task to criticize in a moral or cultural sense. What I see as my task as an anthropologist is to understand this, indeed miraculous, process of binding people and creating subjectivities. I am very much interested indeed in the way in which this process occurs. I would also caution against bringing in a hautain idea of high art – what art or religion really should be – and then dismiss what is happening. Because I do think that it is very



problematic to think about religion, for example, as a kind of field that is or should be above the material world. I do not hold that religion can ever work and address people if there is not a kind of mediation. Religion implies by necessity media and mediation – on this point I agree with Hent de Vries – and out of that follows the use of objects that are maybe secularized or sacralized. The process of sacralization is something that interests me. And of course the way in which these processes happen, and objects are sacralized, is something we see happening around us. I propose to look at these processes as part and parcel of power structures.

Jerrold Levinson:

You have offered a lot of concepts to theorize the aesthetics of religion, but it seems to me that one concept you should foreground in order to respond to the charge that in your way of thinking about religious authority you have wholly abandoned the Kantian notion of aesthetics as follows. You talk about sensational or sensory forms, and claim that the specific forms that embody and crystallize the content are essential. But that is closely connected with the Kantian idea that the essence of the aesthetic experience is a focus on form. Of course your notion of form is not purely Kantian, because for Kant the feeling from form is a pure feeling, focused on the form *per se*, and not on the form in terms of what it embodies or represents. But still it is not completely unKantian to say that the sensory form in which the religious content is deposited is essential in this process of mediation.

Here is what I thought when I read your text, where you say something about the aesthetics of the image as the concrete embodiment of religious content, something to be perceived and received through all the senses.<sup>4</sup> The idea here strikes me as a kind of return to and transposition of the central Christian notion of the incarnation, of the Divine in the body of Jesus, itself later symbolized by the rite of the Eucharist. It seems to me that this is not an accident, for this idea would only occur to someone steeped in the tradition of Christian religion. Am I right?

Birgit Meyer:

Well, it is an interesting point you make. I have just referred to the work of Christopher Pinney who works on Hindu religion, and I would think that this broader approach of religion, as producing a particular kind of aesthetics that involves people with all their senses, is something that would not be confined to Christianity.

Jerrold Levinson:

Well, I don't mean, after all, that it could not occur to someone of a different tradition, that would be too strong. But the notion of the sensory or material embodiment of meaning is a very natural, almost unavoidable, notion for someone imbued with Christian culture.

Birgit Meyer:

I have been working on Protestantism, and actually it took me a long while to get to the senses.

Jerrold Levinson:

You get to the senses sooner with Catholicism, don't you think?

Birgit Meyer:

Exactly. Sensuality is very much downplayed in Protestantism. But having said that, the conception of anthropologists of what religion is, is of course partly influenced by the traditions we are more familiar with, and there is something to the science of religion and the anthropology of religion that leans towards a protestant view of religion.

Jerrold Levinson:

Indeed, it may very well be that in all religious traditions there is a role for the idea of embodiment or incarnation of whatever, however abstract or spiritual a principle is being posited. That that is necessary for human beings to connect to religion.

Birgit Meyer:

That is something Hent de Vries argues in his work on religion as mediation.<sup>5</sup> He did very pioneering work on religion and media. Religion is about a gap between us and another world. Of course this gap is on the one hand asserted, but on the other hand it is claimed that it is possible to bridge this gap. And here the question of mediation and aesthetics comes in. De Vries' work has been very productive for more comparative work in anthropology.

Rob van Gerwen (philosopher):

In museums it is very important to be present at the work itself, it is called 'The Acquaintance Principle', and it maintains that aesthetic knowledge must be acquired through first-hand experience of the object of knowledge.<sup>6</sup> We think that looking at a painting hanging on the wall in a museum is a different experience from looking at it through a reproduction. Also contemporary artists, performance art, installations etc. are all focused on the present, the presence of the audience. It is all very ritualistic I think.

Birgit Meyer:

The interesting thing is that – referring to the work of Christopher Pinney, the lithographs are mass reproduced – there is no original. They are all reproductions, simulacra if you like. Yet they are posited in homes and small shrines. They are understood as being able to lead to and to trigger a transcendental experience. It means that this experience does not depend on the uniqueness but on placing the object in a certain setting which allows for this experience.

Rob van Gerwen:

What puzzles me is the use of television. If you touch the screen there is only glass, no one will bother. But when you touch for example the 'Guernica' you will be jailed. (Public laughter)

Birgit Meyer:

The point I try to bring across is that our idea – that the possibilities of mass reproduction would somehow destroy the core of a kind of immediate religious experience – is not well founded. Immediate religious experiences are part and parcel of broader mediation processes. These television preachers frame the whole performance, not as a casual serial, but as a multiplication of the power of the Holy Spirit, and yet we can all touch it. As if they say: 'The Holy Spirit is anywhere and now we use television to reach all of you'. This is a mode of rendering present a force that, as such, cannot be represented but can be made present, and powerful, and sensed. People say: 'I touched the television and I felt something'. And this is the key to religious experience that is being created. It would be too simple to say: 'they just use television as a medium'.

Rob van Gerwen:

But for us would that be a difference, I think.

Birgit Meyer:

Well, I am not sure.

Irma den Hertog (artist):

The icons in the orthodox churches are being used in the same way as Birgit Meyer described the religious use of television. You touch the icon. They evoke feelings of sacredness. I am an artist and I made a painting for an Italian friend and she was very pleased with it, and she went to Italy and have it blessed by a priest, and she told me: 'now it cannot be destroyed, it can only be burned, but now it is a sacred object'. These feelings are still vivid, maybe not here in the Netherlands, but in Italy and Byzantine churches, like in Russia. The Holy Spirit is present in the picture itself, it is for them not a representation of God.

Birgit Meyer:

I am not sure if it is only happening 'there' and not 'here'.

Irma den Hertog:

Of course not in a protestant tradition, it is a more catholic and orthodox thing.

Birgit Meyer:

In this respect the work of an author is very interesting, who also works on religious images, David Morgan, has been working on Jesus images in American popular Protestantism.<sup>[7]</sup> He encounters processes that are very similar to the ones Chris Pinney described. Morgan stresses the corporeal immediacy through which Jesus pictures achieve a compelling presence, rather than featuring as mere depictions. There are also these Jesus images by Warner Sallman.<sup>[8]</sup> Protestants put these images in their living room, they become sites of worship, and people can tell a lot about how they encounter the divine. Of course they don't worship the picture, but through the picture God becomes present to them. And these are also reproductions. Which shows that also in the protestant tradition something is overlooked: there is some importance of sensational forms. These images make it possible for people to get a glimpse of something that exceeds representation, but that can still gain presence through mediation. And even in the Jewish tradition sensations of awe (sublime) are generated. That is what I find so exciting: immediacy is very much conveyed in a process of mediation; mediation and godly presence are not opposed to each other, but very much enshrined with each other.

Irma den Hertog:

Would you call the images masks? As being used in the old Greek tragic performance, in the sense that they hide and reveal at the same time.

Birgit Meyer:

Well, I have to work with observations, with what people say about their feelings and experiences. What I find very interesting is that one encounters processes of authorization; 'forces' that authorize these images as being thorough materializations of the divine. That is the point. Of course the priests entertain a particular kind of relation with their followers, who indeed come to them, and they accept that the priest – and the mediation of images – conduces to convey some experience of divinity. The condition under which this experience can happen is that, of course, this whole process is being authorized. Social processes that make this experience possible.

Jerrold Levinson:

An essential reference for the issue we are talking about here is the famous essay by Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, which raises the issue whether the special feeling of sacredness or aura, that the individual artwork – the carved sculpture, the painted canvas – possesses, is tied to that essentially, or could instead survive the rise of mass art, the arts of mass dissemination. Part of what has been said is that maybe there is some sense in which aura or specialness can be preserved, even though you are dealing with multiple or mass artworks. It may be a different thing, but at least as far as I remember, the basic tone of Benjamin's essay is not really to devalorize the aura of the individual artwork, but rather to think of it more as a kind of perhaps outmoded fetishism, something we would do well to transcend, by moving towards what has become now the central artform of modern life, namely film.

But I want to add something that connects to the idea that we should go back to the old, Aristotelian sense of 'aisthesis', in the name of a broader notion of aesthetics. Well, yes and no. We should certainly broaden our notion of what is aesthetic, of what counts as an aesthetic concern, beyond that of the Kantian notion of aesthetics. But if you really return to the old sense of Baumgarten, you really have the idea of something like an interaction in which there is knowledge of the world through the senses, and presumably that is too broad to count as aesthetic in the sense that we want to operate with. For consider what that would include. It would include enjoying a meal, even fast food; it would include sex; it would include every ordinary perception of one's surroundings, it would include all sorts of things, that you presumably don't want to count as aesthetic interactions *per se*. So I agree that we need a broader notion, but I don't think we want to go all the way back to Baumgarten's original notion of 'aisthesis' as cognition through the senses. It is too broad for most theoretical purposes. Alexander Baumgarten published in 1735 his *Philosophical considerations of some matters pertaining to the poem* in which he introduced the term 'aesthetics' to mean 'a science of how things are to be known by means of the senses'. In 1750 the first part of his *Aesthetica* appeared.

Birgit Meyer:

Yes, I take that point very seriously. But what I tried to make clear in a text co-authored by Jojada Verrips and myself on 'aisthesis' is that neither will the confinement to high art suffice for those purposes.<sup>9</sup>

Jerrold Levinson:

No indeed.

Birgit Meyer:

I got very interested in the genesis of the notion of 'aisthesis'. Some curtailing things have happened since Baumgarten's time, and obviously we cannot simply claim to go back to that time.

Jerrold Levinson:

It is not possible to simply reduce aesthetics to the senses or interaction. But you have available a way of stopping short of that. It is the focus on form. For it is always the specific formal embodiment that counts in some way in the process of sensory interaction with the object, and through the object, to more abstract and spiritual things.

Birgit Meyer:

That is also where these reflections about aesthetics have led me. That is how I came to develop this notion of sensational form. Also here I enjoy our conversation, because, as far as I am concerned, the last word has not been said about aesthetics. I found it very important to launch a reflection about the potential of the notion, because I think the contemporary developments you talk about, in which our old understanding of art and religion is messed up, calls for new approaches that also bridge older cleavages.

Jerrold Levinson:

'The last word about aesthetics' puts me in mind of a thesis, not yet known to be the case, which might be called the 'end of aesthetics' thesis. That is, that maybe someday aesthetics will be of no more use. But I wager that as long as art goes on there will be aesthetics, because aesthetics is part of the reflection on art. Certainly art is more important than aesthetics. But aesthetics is important too.

Birgit Meyer:

What drives me in the interest in aesthetics is very much the question: how are people organized in these days? And I think that any mode of organization, thus creating ties between each other, always implies a process of subjectivation and self making that is formative. So I would not say that people are just made to experience whatever they like. The whole point is, when I talk about what religion calls upon and how it addresses the senses, that it is also a certain formation of the senses and thus the making of a particular kind of subject. In my inaugural lecture I have been talking about the ways in which sensational forms, which make the divine available in certain ways, involve people in particular disciplines and modes of conduct. It is not about kind of nice consumerist, individualistic processes, in which we can all just have pleasure freely; it is really about formation in a political and social sense.

Sander van Maas (musicologist):

Could you typify the kind of subjectivity that results from this kind of, let's say, gluing together of sense experiences?

Birgit Meyer:

Well, I would say that, at least from my perspective, religion does not tie up people's behavior in order to have rich sense experiences. I would say that any religious aesthetics frames and forms bodies in certain ways by privileging certain senses above others. Jonathan Crary's point of view is relevant here: he addresses the problem of attention in modern societies, the way in which, indeed, perception itself is in constant demand of being disciplined in order to make a capitalist society workable.<sup>10</sup> That requires, Crary argues, certain regimentation and a forming of the senses and the body, so that people perform and act in certain ways. I would always embed a process of appealing and addressing the senses into broader processes of social formation. And I think what is very interesting in the Pentecostal example, with the endless multiplication of the divine power via television, is that it fits very well into notions of a mobile subject that is not bound to one particular, sacred place, as would have been the case in earlier African traditions where the gods were somehow part of the village or shrines in nature. The sacred has now become rather not an impersonal god, but a god who can be reached anywhere, and who also reaches you through television. So if you are Pentecostal believer like that, you even switch on your computer, and when you are in Amsterdam you are still in touch. So I think it is very conducive to a certain mobile self that can be in touch with god – 'empowered' as it is more commonly called – irrespective of place. I would definitely tie this whole process of sense moderation to these power structures. Aesthetics and power are aspects that obviously belong together.

Irma den Hertog:

Maybe this new Pentecostal religious aesthetics can be seen as a shift from a god to a holy ghost, because this 'spirit' is anonymous and everywhere. You can just step in. A personal god would be more concrete for most people.

Birgit Meyer:

Absolutely.

Sybrandt van Keulen:

From the Kantian point of view, maybe in your opinion a rigid perspective, the power of religious aesthetics comes close to 'sensus communis aestheticus', but then without an empirical object. Without 'die Sache', as Kant has it.<sup>11</sup> The analogy rests on a certain kind of aesthetic bonding or sharing. In our eyes perhaps some trivial things happen but for the Pentecostal believers it is a kind of, what we would call, 'performance', a mediated immediacy.

Jerrold Levinson:

What do you mean by 'without an object'?

Sybrandt van Keulen:

Just as Birgit Meyer described it nicely: the presence and absence of 'a thing' as a process of mediation, of floating 'meaning' through the media (say: television). You can be aware of, and have access to 'some immediacy', but that immediate 'thing' merely reflects you. You yourself as a mobile subject can 'switch it off and on'. There is neither an empirical object left that one can possess or could enshrine (somewhere in a village), nor an absolute power that possesses you. What is 'here and there' is this practice of switching off and on your own subjective relation to your divinity.

Jerrold Levinson:

In this respect I want to raise a question. Connected to this sense of dialectics, this interaction

between religion and art, I am interested in the idea that art had the power to replace religion, that is to say, that art somehow *is* the modern religion. So, dealing with that point I want to ask Birgit and those in the audience: to what extent is the idea of religious aesthetics detachable from the holding of specific beliefs? Suppose you don't have any of these beliefs, could you engage in religion in this aesthetic sense, in any way that would have authentic value? Or would it just be a charade? My own intuition is it would be a charade. And I had a recent experience of it in my own former religious tradition, that of Judaism. I have not been a practicing Jew since I was thirteen or so, but I went to a service in a synagogue recently with some friends, because it was an important holiday, and it was enjoyable from a social point of view. The participants obviously seem engaged. But I felt I was in the dark ages. There is something about real religion that seems to me medieval. So I wonder to what extent, regarding the things you want to theorize about – religious feeling as embodied in concrete vehicles, icons and so on – to what extent that is detachable from real, concrete religious beliefs in a divine being, personal god, and the like? I think it is detachable, but then you might want to call it something else. You might want to say, it is a field of the aesthetics of the spiritual. Or the aesthetics of how people would give meaning to their lives. And that is extremely important, but maybe that goes beyond beliefs. Specifically religious aesthetics, to me, would have to involve some of these beliefs that are, well, to some of us, very difficult to adopt. Elsewhere I have used the phrase 'doxastically challenged' to describe those of us who are spiritually inclined but religiously incapable.<sup>12</sup> Anyway, I wonder how you might react to that?

Birgit Meyer:

I completely agree with you. The things I referred to are things one experiences as an anthropologist. We try to do participant observation and I must say that for me it is not easy to participate in Pentecostal mass prayer meetings. Last August I visited a big event of a catholic priest in Brazil called Padre Marcello Rossi who does something he calls 'the aerobics of Jesus', which is a very interesting mix of aerobics, some byzantine traditions and charismatic catholicism. Very, very intriguing, and I remember that I said to myself: 'come on, you write about sensational forms, now try to get into it, do what they do, in order, at least, to try to see how it feels!'. But I very much realized that I cannot really get into this, because I have been framed and formed in very different ways, not necessarily religious.

Jerrold Levinson:

What is the crucial stumbling block? Is it that you don't have the right kind of beliefs or that those particular forms of bodily expression of belief were so foreign to you?

Birgit Meyer:

This is not a question of either or. What is very clear is that the beliefs are also conveyed via these services and sensational forms. It is not so, that you have the belief, on the one hand, and the ritual expression of it on the other. In my view, beliefs or processes of making sense and sensational experiences go together.

Jerrold Levinson:

Of course, they fuse.

Birgit Meyer:

People also confirm that it is gradually built by participating in this kind of rituals. The one follows the other, but I would not say that belief is the entry point in order to get into the sensational form. There are very intriguing examples and analyses of people's participation, and certain religious sensational forms turn them into believers.

Jerrold Levinson:

That is the right way to put it: participating in the practice often brings about the beliefs or attitudes needed, in some sense, to justify such participation. There are, of course, some kindred ideas in Pascal, in Kierkegaard, in the contemporary philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre.

Rob van Gerwen:

Maybe there are two levels of believing at stake in participating in a practice? You can believe in the practice. But, apparently, there are certain rituals that require you to also believe in something else, and that extra requirement may prevent you from believing in the practice. That is why you can't partake in that ritual. We can answer the rituals of art, because we believe in that practice. Art as a practice in general is a practice that we believe in.

Jerrold Levinson:

We think that engaging in art is by and large worthwhile or rewarding. And it does not seem to involve any factual presuppositions or beliefs that are clearly dubious. But that is the problem of religion: the problem of the religious practice for the non-religious is that it seems involve presuppositions or beliefs that it is not clear one has any reason to accept anymore, except, as it were, through the back door. That is, on the grounds that if you do believe them and you do engage in those practices – sociological and psychological research seems to confirm this – your life is actually better. People function better when they are happier, and religious belief generally makes people happier. The religious are, in a sense, lucky. But I don't know if that is a sound argument for future religion or religious aesthetics.

Irma den Hertog:

In the mass at Easter you see the same structure in what the priest does. He makes an inner experience visible, there is no other way to express it. The same with Egyptian religion or the Hindu people. Basically these are expressions of people to communicate, and even forms for others to participate in.

Birgit Meyer:

Yes, I agree with that. And what I find very interesting, perhaps I do not necessarily feel happy about, is that we live in a time in which many new religious movements show up that make use of media, tied into consumer culture, and they frame indeed religious experience, but also the experientiality of something divine in new ways. And this is then, of course, repeated in several structures (every Sunday etc.), in different kinds of artforms. Whether we like it or not, religion will be with us. Religion is one of these systems in which, out of mediations – perhaps it is an illusion – a sense of reality or truth is being produced. This is a world that is subject to construction.

Postmodernism is taken for granted, and yet there is a certain resistance against it. A craving for something authentic and true. I think that religion is one of the sites, and the arts are another site, in which these experiences of truth and authenticity can be generated by a process that always implies some make-believe, perhaps even faking.



Jerrold Levinson:

But it depends on the perspective you have on it. The received view in social sciences is that these things are constructions. I am not in general a constructivist about reality, but I agree that certain social structures, practices and communities are constructed. However, if you are within such a practices and keep too much in mind that it is constructed, it may start to lose its efficacy for you ...

Birgit Meyer:

No, indeed, but the way we talk about it shows that it doesn't work so well for us. But what we do find is a craving for authentic states, and this is intriguing. We are in the midst of this, we need to reflect on it, and study it, and partly we are in it, and partly, hopefully, we are critical towards it, and feel the need to mobilize our concepts for that critical perspective.

Postscript by Birgit Meyer (January 2009).

Sybrandt van Keulen's careful transcription brings back the excited feeling I had after this stimulating conversation with him, Jerrold Levinson and people from the audience. Offering a lot of ideas, raising difficult questions and espousing plenty of loose ends, this text can serve as a departure point for further reflections. In this sense, the 'aesthetic past', taken as a theme, has already proven to have a future. What I particularly appreciate is the cross-disciplinary engagement through which hitherto still more or less separate circuits are getting connected.

As I sought to make clear during the conversation, the point of entry into the question of aesthetics is quite different for social scientists like myself than for scholars as Van Keulen, Levinson and many people in the audience who have long been working on aesthetics from a philosophical perspective. However, I also realized that there is a general agreement that certain developments in the sphere of consumption, art and religion – next to Levinson's example of the Nespresso store as a new kind of temple we can think of the display of Damien Hirst's diamond-plated skull 'For the Love of God' in the Rijksmuseum, or the mediatization of religion – prompt us to reconsider the usual concepts we use in making sense of such phenomena. Advocating a broader take on aesthetics, I am certainly not in favour of simply celebrating such new forms, and the breakdown of distinctions between high and low art, art and religion, consumption and aesthetic/ethical judgement. All the same, the conversation we had confirms to me that we need to move beyond an understanding of aesthetics that is confined to the high arts, separate from religion, and predicated on the Kantian disinterested beholder. While it may well be that Kant's views have been more subtle than what we now consider as his 'legacy', it is quite clear that the current interest in aesthetics, from a cross-disciplinary perspective, emphasizes a more embodied and embedded understanding.

I have problems with Van Keulen's tongue-in-cheek opposition of the fetish and the aesthetic art object, and that of the interested versus the disinterested beholder. Signalling a *mistaken* appreciation of a thing as being animated, the notion of the fetish is rooted in a view of people and objects as separate from each other, with people having agency over inanimate things. In my understanding, the notion of the fetish is of limited analytical value, because it privileges a problematic modern model of the relation between humans and objects, whilst in my understanding animation is central to human culture, in the West and elsewhere.

Notwithstanding the merits of Marx' notion of commodity fetishism, I am wary of deploying the fetish discourse with regard to contemporary consumer culture, certainly when high art and its 'pure aesthetic – disinterested – feeling' forms the counter point, as suggested by Van Keulen. I think that we need to link up with and further develop alternative ways (as developed e.g. by Bruno Latour, Alfred Gell, and others) of conceptualizing people's affective relation with things – be they consumer items, pieces of art, or religious objects – and move out of the, at least in my view, problematic discursive frame of the fetish and the artwork. In so doing, it is as important to discern similarities between affective relations people develop with different kinds of things as to be alert to differences, given that our attitudes towards things are part and parcel of broader processes of framing in the context of specific ideological regimes. In the future I would be much interested to think further about these questions as a follow up to the brief exchange with Van Keulen.

I agree with Jerrold Levinson that it would be mistaken to simply turn back to Baumgarten and Aristotle; the point in invoking broader, more sensorial pre-Kantian understandings of aesthetics is above all to become alert to the affective, binding power of art and/or religious objects. At stake is the materiality and agency of such objects, and the role they play in appealing and forming their users in the context of specific ideological regimes. The current fascination with aesthetics in my field of study is part and parcel of a broader turn towards acknowledging the importance of bodies and things in the making of communities, also in the sphere of religion. While the relevance of bodies and things – the material world – may be obvious, it is all the same true that systems of thought, meanings and symbols have long been the privileged entry point for social science analysis, including anthropology. Levinson is certainly right to remind me that the Christian idea of transubstantiation and the Eucharist echoes – even prefigures – my notion of sensational form as a mode through which the transcendental becomes articulated. Nevertheless, especially in the field of the study of religion there has been a, partly unacknowledged, anti-material bias, as if religion would essentially be about the immaterial and spiritual. The notion of sensational form, and other work as the already mentioned studies by Chris Pinney and David Morgan in this field, is intended to correct this bias. There is no such thing as immaterial religion, and exactly for that reason aesthetics has become an important notion to think with. I am much intrigued by both Van Keulen's and Levinson's point that, although I reject a Kantian view of aesthetics, actually the emphasis I place on form resonates more with Kantian ideas than I am prepared to admit. This is a question I need to ponder more, and where I can certainly get much out of the conversation we started. Actually my use of the notion of form is closely related to the notion of style, understood as – to invoke Michel Maffesoli – a 'forming form', that is, a structure of repetition that involves particular techniques of the self and the body that modulate persons into particular socio-religious formations. Although I am not at all versed in aesthetics, I think that my understanding of form differs from that proposed by Kant in at least two ways. One has been mentioned already by Levinson, when he states that for Kant 'feeling from form is a pure feeling', whereas my notion of sensational form stresses 'the form in terms of what it embodies or represents.' The second can be sketched by invoking Samuel Weber's very intriguing discussion of Kant's notion of form (and Derrida's notion of the *parergon*) as the 'enabling limit of the work'.<sup>13</sup> In Weber's understanding, form is not just there, but results from the work of framing, which by definition, entails a process of delineating, of drawing a line separating what is interior and what is exterior, hence making it possible for a Gestalt to emerge from Ungestalt. The frame, however, is not just intrinsic to a particular aesthetics, but also located outside of it, and thus functions 'precisely as that other capable of telling us just where form stops, and hence also where it starts.' As, certainly in the context of religion, attitudes towards pictures of the transcendental such as the examples mentioned exist

outside of the pictures themselves, a focus on form *per se* is too limited for my purposes. All the same I realize that the question of form would deserve more reflection, and the same holds true for the notion of the 'sensus communis aestheticus' ('Gemeinschaftssinn', unfortunately often translated as 'aesthetic community', and as delineating a superficial, hedonistic engagement with consumer culture) invoked by Van Keulen. Lastly, the conversation makes me realize that the increasing attention paid to aesthetics, and thus the body and the senses, raises big questions about the possibilities and limits of understanding other people's experiences as an outsider. Indeed, in trying to get into a particular sensational form as a researcher one may experience a kind of 'stumbling block', as Levinson puts it. In my view, as I tried to explain, this is not simply due to the fact that one may not share the beliefs which go along with that particular sensational form. In a way the difficulty of 'getting in' very much proves the point I try to make, that social processes of binding materialize through the body. We need to pay far more critical attention to incommensurabilities, in short, to the ways in which social-cultural differences are embodied. The point is not to naturalize embodied difference, but to get a deeper grasp of how cultural constructions are authorized as natural and true by working on the body (as in Bourdieu's notion of the habitus). In many ways, the body is not so much the instance – or even last reserve – of nature we may desire it to be, but instead the site of social inscription through which ideological systems are naturalized. Therefore the impossibility to feel along may after all be a most promising starting point for a critique of the binding power of sensational forms, and aesthetic formations at large.

Jerrold Levinson is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Maryland, USA, and Leverhulme Visiting Professor at the University of Kent, UK, during 2008-2009. [august@umd.edu](mailto:august@umd.edu) [1].

Birgit Meyer is Professor of Cultural Anthropology at VU University Amsterdam, Netherlands. [B.meyer@fsw.vu.nl](mailto:B.meyer@fsw.vu.nl) [2].

Sybrandt van Keulen is tutor at the Department of Philosophy of Art and Culture at the University of Amsterdam. [S.vanKeulen@uva.nl](mailto:S.vanKeulen@uva.nl) [3].

Geplaatst op 19 januari 2009.

---

1. Benedict Anderson (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. (Revised Edition). London: Verso.

2. Christopher Pinney (2004). *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*. London: Reaktion Books

3. Birgit Meyer (2006). *Religious Sensations. Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion*. Inaugural Lecture, VU University, Amsterdam.

4. The text Jerrold Levinson refers to is: Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrips (2008) 'Aesthetics' in: D. Morgan (ed.), *Key Words in Religion, Media, Culture*. London, New York: Routledge, 20-30.

5. Hent de Vries & Samuel Weber, eds. (2001). *Religion and Media*. Stanford University Press.

6. See for instance: Richard Wollheim (1980). 'Art and Evaluation' in *Art and its Objects*. Second edition.

Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 227–240.

7. David Morgan (1998). *Visual Piety. A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.

8. An American Christian painter (1892–1968).

9. Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrips (2008): 'Aesthetics' in: D. Morgan (ed.), *Key Words in Religion, Media, Culture*. London, New York: Routledge, 20-30.

10. Jonathan Crary (2001). *Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*. Boston: MIT Press.

11. Immanuel Kant. *Critique of the power of Judgment*, §7.

12. Review of Roger Scruton, The Aesthetics of Music, in: *Philosophical Review*, October 2000, 608-614.

13. Samuel Weber (1996). *Mass Mediauras. Form Technics Media*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 22ff.

© Estheticatijdschrift.nl

---

Gedownload van de pagina's van <http://www.estheticatijdschrift.nl>

**Links:**

[1] <mailto:august@umd.edu>

[2] <mailto:Netherlands.B.meyer@fsw.vu.nl>

[3] <mailto:S.vanKeulen@uva.nl>