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(eds.)

Media and Religion in (Post)Colonial Societies

Dynamics of Power and Resistance

JRFM

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Philippe Bornet, Stefanie Knauss, and Alexander D. Ornella

Media and Religion in (Post)Colonial Societies: Dynamics of Power and Resistance

Editorial

Media and religion, both broadly understood, often form the mise-en-scène for power struggles in competing narratives of conflict, protest, oppression, and resistance. Religious practices are visual and material practices that communicate meaning, and media thrive on harnessing the cognitive and affective power of religious symbols or narratives. Many media producers draw on the ability of religions, as communicative systems, to distill human experience and to create particularly powerful structures of affect. The intricate and dynamic relationships between media and religion are part of cultural efforts to inscribe and embody meaning on an individual and collective level, and thus to turn chaos into order, to establish and communicate categories and boundaries.

Yet up until quite recently, the study of these relationships has not always paid attention to the fact that meaning is not simply communicated in a neutral fashion, but that meaning-making happens in a context of asymmetric relationships of power. With their images, stories, and practices, media and religions shape a community's imaginary and knowledge about self and others, and they contribute to the very "imagining" of "homogenous" communities and nations[1] that has played a central part in colonial history. These imaginings have resonated throughout the postcolonial emergence of independent nation-states, and they continue to affect the attempts to label, organize, and frame postcolonial and neocolonial (power) relationships between communities and nations.

In this issue of JRFM, we focus on how religion and media participate in and complicate the power relationships between (western) colonizers and

1   Anderson 1991.

(non-western) colonized during the historical period of colonialism and in "coloniality", a term introduced by Aníbal Quijano to describe the ways in which colonial dynamics of othering and difference, as well as western epistemologies, continue to shape the cultural, economic, political, and religious forces within and between communities.[2] The studies published here focus on these very continuities and ruptures between historical colonialism, postcolonialism, internal colonialism within a society, and neocolonialism: Amruta Patil introduces us to her work with graphic novels as a space of subversion and critique; Genoveva Castro discusses cinematic reimaginings of Indian mythology; Philippe Bornet directs our attention to 19th-century visual representations of India; Héctor Varela Rios offers a decolonializing theological reading of an influential work of 19th-century Puerto Rican art; and Sakina Loukili analyzes the ways in which self-identified Muslim parties in the Netherlands use social media as "third spaces".

In media studies, postcolonial theory, on which the contributions in this issue draw substantially, has provided a helpful frame for the analysis of dynamics of power and resistance, in both the past and the present.[3] Yet this theoretical framework also has come under some critique since the turn of the century, partly because of its tendency to reduce the complexity of colonial encounters to simplistic binary patterns. As Wendy Willems argues, attempts to "de-westernize" academic media studies have often perpetuated rather than subverted dominant eurocentric structures and cultural assumptions.[4] Raka Shome also emphasizes that media, their uses and users, have played a major role in maintaining colonial power imbalances and imposing western structures of knowing,[5] and they largely continue to be dominated by the west in postcolonial times, both in popular culture and in the academic study of it. Instead, Shome argues, media studies need to find new and different ways of "engaging how very different geopolitical and colonial contexts in the South (and the non-West more generally) have produced media practices, cultures, and objects that may challenge what we understand by media, its history of development, its possible uses, effects, and so on".[6]

2 Quijano/Ennis 2000.
3 Rajagopal 2011; Merten/Krämer 2016.
4 See Willems 2014.
5 See Shome 2019.
6 Shome 2019, 306.

This critique of postcolonial theory opens up a range of new questions and reconsiderations in media studies, not least the need for more sustained attention to the role of religion, which so far has been under-researched. We will use the remainder of this introduction to map out some of what we consider to be particularly pertinent questions for the field of media and religion in postcoloniality, gesturing towards initial considerations as well as avenues for further research. The contributions collected here touch on some of these questions and they will also, we hope, inspire further research.

One issue relates to the notion of "global" media itself, with its assumption that media produced in the west and globally distributed are perceived to be truly "global", i.e., received as formative meaning-making narratives everywhere. However, this notion perpetuates the binary of the (former) colonizer as the producer of cultural meaning and the colonized as its passive recipient. As Bornet in this issue shows, the stories of production and reception of media (in his case engravings and photographs) are much more complex and implicate multiple sites and subjects, with consequent shifts in representation and significance that are not always easily pinned down. In order to more accurately account for these movements and re-significations, it might thus be helpful to speak of "transcultural", instead of "global", media and media studies, and to look at the contextual and local sites of media production and consumption.[7]

Other questions relate to the epistemological dimension of media and religion: How do their stories and images with their affective and cognitive power shape our understanding of the world and of others and – more fundamentally – our understanding of reality itself? How do they not just reflect but also create reality, a reality in the service of colonial powers, or one that resists them? Varela Rios's critical analysis of the painting *El Velorio* shows for example the crucial differences between a colonialized view of the represented material reality as "chaotic" and opposed to the immaterial sacred and a decolonialized understanding of it as complexity and dynamic movement, and as participating in the sacred.

Discussing media in a postcolonial context also raises the question of media ownership and requires a reconsideration of notions such as "property" or "individual ownership" when media images or religious traditions are exchanged and travel across contexts, often without stating the original

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7   An example of an ethnography of "global media" in local contexts is Murphy/Kraidy 2003.

producer of an image or its "owner", as Bornet also notes. The blurring of the roles of media creators and consumers, expressed in the study of digital media in the term "prod-use/prod-user",[8] thus has, perhaps, a longer prehistory than imagined. In a more contemporary context, the productive ambiguity between media producer and consumer is apparent in Loukili's contribution, where the consumption of media (here, mainstream news) is directly related to, and even a part of, the production of media as a resistant discourse.

While digital media, the focus of Loukili's analysis, seem to open up new possibilities in terms of media production, accessibility, and consumption, they also raise further critical questions that need attention: Do they provide tools for more equitable access to distant or even global audiences and the production of local narratives and thus represent sites of postcolonial agency, or do they, on the contrary, reproduce old colonial asymmetries?[9] Are religious authorities contested through the broader participation in content production, or are they instead reinforced? Can digital media become, as Loukili argues, a means to "talk back" against mainstream media and religious or social institutions, and their images of the internal or external other, and a space for alternative socio-religious discourses and political agency to develop? Or do the logics of digital media, and perhaps in particular of social media, lend themselves to tendencies of polarization and populism, as we can also observe across the world?

The focus on the particular emphasized in methodologies inspired by postcolonial theory as a means to avoid the universalization of a single (western) perspective is also helpful in media studies. Attention to a specific medium can provide insight into the complexities of its production and reception contexts, and the way in which political and religious authority might have been associated with a medium and its use in the (post)colonial situation. For example, how did the predominantly written culture of post-Enlightenment Europe, with its particular forms of argumentation, rationality, knowledge production and conservation, and narrative memorialization favor the imperialistic ambitions of western powers?[10] The wide dissemination of textual material and the associated changes in media consumption (such

8   Bruns 2007.
9   See for example Sundaram 2009, about digital piracy as a way to overcome these asymmetries, which also challenges the above-mentioned notions of property and ownership.
10 See Goody 1986 for an anthropological analysis of the impact of writing on societies and religions.

as reading practices), as well as the emphasis on literacy (and with it literary practices and traditions) in western education in colonial contexts, arguably produced irreversible changes in social structures – including, of course, in religious communities and with the help of religious agents such as Christian missionaries. Yet at the same time, even if print was often imported by western agents, it was quickly used locally to promote local traditions and, over the long term, local independence movements and nationalisms.[11] Patil's creative mingling of text and images and her emphasis on the figure of the storyteller in her graphic novels might be seen as ways to play with these shifts between oral and literary traditions, visual and textual media, and to make her own contribution to the continued multimedia narrative of mythologies, both traditional and contemporary.

The media of photography and cinema also opened up particular new opportunities: while it has often been noted that films produced in the western cinematographic industry have tended to represent stereotyped images of non-western cultures, it must also be stressed that photography and cinema have been transnational (or global) enterprises from the very beginning.[12] As Bornet points out in his contribution in this issue, these technologies were quickly adopted in colonial contexts to serve their particular, and often anti-colonial, agendas. In many of these cases of local media production, religious themes have played an important role in the identity formation of groups. As popular and powerful stories, they are likely to bring together people from various horizons and have the ability to touch people on a deep emotional level, making them particularly persuasive – something Patil also draws on in her graphic novels. Religious themes can also be used to speak indirectly about political realities, especially in contexts in which the expression of political preferences is or was dangerous or censored.[13] Today, and with the assistance of cheaper and more accessible digital technologies, local production contexts continue to draw on religious stories and themes to make sense of the postcolonial and neocolonial situation of various communities in a global context.[14] These possibilities are apparent in

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11 See Green 2014 for a study of how evangelical missionaries in South Asia brought new techniques and media that were appropriated in Muslim circles, and Mitter 1994 for an analysis of the relations between printed art and Indian nationalism.

12 For a critique of the complexity of the role of photography and other visual media in the colonial and postcolonial context and their histories, see Azoulay 2019.

13 See for example Pinney 2004; Dwyer 2006.

14 Meyer 2015.

Castro's analysis of the cinematic reimagining of Rāvaṇa as a positive figure of identification for the oppressed and social outcasts, which shows that traditional religious narratives can become a resource to articulate critique or resistance with regard to socio-cultural issues.

With this attention to diverse sites of media production and consumption, it is critical to account for changes in linguistic practices and values – albeit sometimes "transparent" and invisible. English has become the de facto *lingua franca*, the dominant language for communicating across borders and cultural contexts, both in media and in their academic study. This raises the question of how the dominance of one particular language shapes knowing the world through its specific concepts and structures, and the forms of (visual and textual) communication of this knowledge. As Patil shows, the question arises of what these linguistic developments imply for creators and recipients of media in non-English cultures in terms of production and distribution, as well as in terms of worldviews or expectations associated with a given language. Are digital media, which have primarily been created within a western English linguistic framework and its respective technologies, for example, able to account for the diversity of the world's languages, alphabets, and cultures? What kinds of linguistic "hybridizations" are at work, how are they influenced by social and religious values, and how do they affect social and religious communities? Are we witnesses to a worldwide cultural and linguistic uniformization, or are new media providing ways for minorities to express their own views in their own idiom?

These questions open up numerous avenues of research on the relationship between media and religion in the context of postcoloniality. The contributions gathered in this issue of JRFM address some of them without, of course, exhausting the subject. Attending to a wide range of temporal and cultural contexts, as well as media and religious traditions, the articles investigate the complex relationships between people, religion, and media – continuously reworked and renegotiated – under the conditions of postcoloniality.

In the exclusive interview, "Playing with Words, Worlds, and Images", Patil discusses her multifaceted work with the editors of this issue. Through the medium of the graphic novel, she creates powerful narratives that are also visually beautiful artworks. Attentive to aspects such as gender, social inequalities, and the environmental crisis, she turns old stories that had been "fossilized" in the past into living mythologies for contemporary times.

Focusing on Indian mythology in the contemporary context as well, Castro analyzes in her contribution, "Validating Demons: Recasting Rāvaṇa as a Leader of the Oppressed in Mani Ratnam's Film Version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*", how the figure of the villain, Rāvaṇa, has been reinterpreted over time in interaction with contemporary social and political issues, embedding the film in a long tradition, especially in South India, that has recast Rāvaṇa in a positive light.

Moving back in time while remaining in the same context, Bornet's contribution, "Unruly Images: Representing India in the Calwer *Bilder-Tafeln zur Länder- und Völker-Kunde* (1883)", analyzes a volume published with the ambition to show the whole world through images. While such images have often been interpreted as a case of "visual Orientalism", a closer look shows that the images circulated through a range of contexts (from typical missionary visual propaganda to traditional Indian iconography, drawings made by travelers, and photographs) in the process, resisting attempts at reducing them to one-dimensional objects.

Also drawing on a historical artefact, a well-known 19th-century Puerto Rican painting, Varela Rios's article, "Using Latinx Theology's *Lo Cotidiano* to Decolonialize Oller's *El Velorio*", offers a decolonial reading of the painting "against the grain" which, with its emphasis on the everyday and material culture, highlights alternative (theological) forms of engaging reality and the divine together with a critique of colonial hierarchies.

Loukili's contribution, "Making Space, Claiming Place: Social Media and the Emergence of the 'Muslim' Political Parties DENK and NIDA in the Netherlands", is an example of colonial dynamics of othering and disempowerment taking place not only in the (former) colonies but also within metropolitan societies. Focusing on the example of two self-identified Muslim parties in the Netherlands, Loukili analyzes the role of media in othering, and the use of social media by the two parties to "talk back" and claim a space in discourses of migration, Dutch identity, politics, and religion, showcasing thus the ambivalent role of media and religion in dynamics of power and resistance.

These studies highlight the multilayered, and often contradictory, processes of power and resistance in the interactions of media and religion, and they offer rich material beyond their particular case to reconsider theoretical and methodological questions in the study of media and religion in postcoloniality.

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Amruta Patil

Playing with Words, Worlds, and Images

An Interview with the Indian Graphic Novelist Amruta Patil, by Philippe Bornet, Stefanie Knauss, and Alexander D. Ornella

Abstract

In this interview conducted by issue editors Philippe Bornet, Stefanie Knauss and Alexander D. Ornella in April 2021, Amruta Patil discusses how the unique possibilities of playing with images and words in the medium of the graphic novel allow for a creative critique and reimagination of ancient mythologies as well as contemporary social questions. Her use of the figure of the storyteller, sensuous visual style, and continuous micro-subversion of traditional motifs invite viewers/readers to enter into the story and make it their own, while at the same time encouraging a capacity to see each other and to engage constructively even with people or viewpoints one might critique.

Biography

Writer-painter Amruta Patil is India's first female graphic novelist. She is the author of *Kari* (2008), the *Mahabharat*-based duology *Adi Parva. Churning of the Ocean* (2012) and *Sauptik. Blood and Flowers* (2016), and, with Devdutt Pattanaik, *Aranyaka. Book of the Forest* (2019), which sits at the cusp of ancient Indian philosophy and ecological-feminist stirrings. Patil was a speaker at Jaipur Literature Festival and London Book Fair and artist-in-residence at the University of Chicago's School of Divinity and La Maison des Auteurs (France). In 2016, she received a Nari Shakti Puraskar from the 13th President of India for "unusual work that breaks boundaries" in art and literature.

Philippe Bornet: **Amruta, thank you very much for sitting down with us here on Zoom: it is great to have you. To begin, maybe you can tell our readers about your artistic development, your trajectory if you wish, starting with your graphic novel about a queer woman in Mumbai, *Kari*, in 2008, and then up to *Aranyaka*, published in 2020.**

Amruta Patil: It may appear like I have been creating very, very diverse books ranging from queer urban tales to something that springboards

from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. But in fact, I don't see it as a disjointed journey. To me, they're part of a continuum. My first book, *Kari*, was, like a lot of first books, very close to the skin. Actually, as a South Asian woman telling queer stories, I could have hit a different kind of mainstream success, even internationally, had I kept on that wave. But, back then, I was unconvinced about more exhibitionistic autobiography and the two books that followed, *Adi Parva* (2012) and *Sauptik* (2016), had a natural turning outward of the gaze. From telling my story, I went to trying to recount stories that belonged to many. I continued to explore personal themes even in these more "detached" works, whether it is the unsentimental mothers of *Adi Parva*, or injured masculinity and jealousies in *Sauptik*.

The first three books were really written as explorations of my own questions, with the additional benefit that somebody else might also resonate with what is going on there. My fourth book, *Aranyaka*, was more self-consciously the first that explicitly relates to who I write for. It is, after all, a book about *darśan* – a bidirectional visual relation, a shared gaze, between an individual and divinity, or as I propose, between one individual and another – it is about learning to see the other. I'm a loner in my work, but it made sense that a book about *seeing the other* was actually done with someone else, Devdutt Pattanaik. Those who enjoy the abstract, open-ended form of *Adi Parva* and *Sauptik* rebelled against the more defined structure of *Aranyaka*.

Stefanie Knauss: Could you also talk about what influences your art?

Patil: In my own imagination, I see myself as a writer first. So primarily, it is the words that move me. I am drawn to writers of cosmogonies, books about everything under the sun, the beginnings and ends of worlds. My influences are not comic books really. A couple of them hit that note, but most graphic novels don't inch in the direction of that complexity or ambition. I have loved Eduardo Galeano's *Mirrors* (2010), Nassim Nicholas Taleb's *Antifragile* (2014), Isaac Asimov's *Chronology of the World* (1991), Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965–1985/2005–2019) and Craig Thompson's flawed but ambitious *Habibi* (2011). I am moved by stories of marrow, blood, gristle, the juices of life, like Tarun J. Tejpal's *Story of My Assassins* (2013), David B.'s *Epileptic* (2006), or Jason Lutes' *Berlin* (2018). It has always troubled me that this sort of roaring, leonine voice is so rarely deployed by female writers – Jeanette Winterson and Margaret Atwood are exceptions.

Artistically, my books are all over the place. For a long time, I had an imposter complex, a sense of not being as good as I would have liked to be –

something that has led to each book being a new visual experiment. In *Kari* I was operating in a far more timorous space of someone unsure of her métier, drawing a clear divide between "illustration" and "painting". In the later books, I started to paint, take more risks, gain more control over the media.

Bornet: Could we talk some more about the connection between the visual elements and the text in your work? How do you conceive the relation between both? Does the medium of graphic novels open up new ways of expression for you? Why is this medium particularly suited for what you want to say?

Patil: The connection is hard-wired. From age three or five onwards, I have known my brain to be boot-camped into the writing side and the drawing side – text and image have always worked in tandem. It was only a matter of figuring out how to put the two things together. After college, I joined an advertising agency in a hyphenated copywriter-art director job description. Even there, text and art were happening together. Maybe I could have written scripts for films? Done animation? But the idea of working in large groups isn't appealing to me. So the graphic novel became an attractive proposition: you get to art-direct it *and* you get to write.

You have to remember that in the 2000s there was no "scene" to speak of in India for those interested in sequential art. Books were hard to find, and forbiddingly expensive. It's still a bit of an underdog medium. Nobody knows quite what to do with my books. I always say this, that Indian publishing has been avantgarde in that mainstream publishers have taken on graphic novels in their lists, and publishers do not segregate writers of literary fiction and writers of graphic fiction when inviting people to lit fests, but the books still don't get nominated for "literary" awards, because people have yet to make that leap of imagination.

While I didn't choose my medium in a sly way to capture a market, I recognise the benefits of being a graphic novelist and a first mover. Many people can write a good book in words, but not that many can do it with text and image. Globally, sequential art is one of the fastest growing segments in literature – people's fractured attention spans and visually led cognition have ensured that. It's only a matter of time before India tunes into this fact as well.

Knauss: You just mention people's short attention span, but when I was reading/viewing your novels, I realised that they need *more* attention: I had to pause and take time to look at the page as a whole, the words and the image.

Patil: What you're saying about my books needing attention is true – it's a learned skill, reading sequential art is just a bit more intuitive than reading sheet music.

The content I was dealing with in the mythology books, had it been dealt with purely through text, its readership would have been far more limited. I would have been heading into William Chittick territory, which means my readership would have been PhD students and flaneur-scholars. Personally, I like those books, I need those books, I need others writing them for me. But my own intent in choosing this medium is to disarm people into being receptive.

Some readers tell me, "The pictures are hypnotising, but I don't fully understand what you're saying." Others skim through the visuals, following the trail of words. And you know, both those ways are okay! We underestimate the amount of transformation that happens in visual and sonic spaces. Sometimes a beautifully designed monastery will do more for your mental state than an unimaginative spiritual guide.

Alexander D. Ornella: You deal with quite complex issues in your work. Would you say that what you are doing is philosophising through art and graphic novels? And also, you mentioned transformation in visual spaces: could you expand on what you mean by the transformative?

Patil: I shy away from putting a label on my books. But it could be said that what *Adi Parva*, *Sauptik* and *Aranyaka* are trying to do is *make the complex accessible*.

And about the transformation of visual space, my work isn't exactly sequential art. It uses text and visuals in a more hybrid way. *Kari* and *Aranyaka* are much more "sequential art" than *Adi Parva* and *Sauptik*. The images are often points of contemplation, a foil to heavy-duty text, or a lush counterpoint to a spare line. I pull the balance off more confidently in *Sauptik* than in others. So ideally, text and image dance with one another, one leads, the other follows, then they swap roles.

Ornella: You said you wanted to explore the topic of learning to see the other. Is there anything in particular that prompted you to explore that theme?

Patil: In 2017, Devdutt Pattanaik and I noticed a very extraordinary continental drift in India between the right wing and the left/liberals. As a nation, we have come a long way from founding fathers like Jawaharlal Nehru, who brought together people who believed in things *utterly* different from their own ideas to build a free India. Today, we cannot even read a Facebook post that is not saying exactly what you want.

An important question for creating *Aranyaka* was this: what does it take to tune into a point of view that isn't exactly like our own? Can I look at someone who isn't an ideological or physical clone and truly begin to em-

pathise? What do I need to do to slip under the skin of such a person? One part of the process is, of course, about tuning into the other person, but a bigger part of the process is about overcoming oneself. Devdutt and I were talking about this and decided that it was time to create this book about human preoccupation, and the forests that exist within and without us. He gave me carte blanche to create the universe and the cast of characters, and there came along Kātyāyanī, the protagonist of *Aranyaka*, who truly makes an effort to see others. In getting better at that, she becomes invisible because that favour is not really returned to her. Very few people are operating at a level of sophistication where the gaze can be reciprocal.

Bornet: In your books you make use of the figure of the storyteller: could you reflect on how you situate yourself in the tradition of the storyteller, and how it evolves in India today?

Patil: *Sauptik* is my favourite amongst my works, because it is the hardest, the least "successful", the underdog. *Adi Parva* has incandescent, affirmative feminist stories about unsentimental mothers and ambitious queens, it's a Go-Girl kind of a book. *Sauptik* requires you to acknowledge your dark side, it complicates the discourse by taking on heroic masculinity from the inside, via an injured male character. The reader needs to be ready for that sort of thing.

I've realised that whether we want it or not, like it or not, we're always playing *sūtradhār* [the one who holds the threads, i. e., the storyteller]. When Yogi Adityanath gives his hot take on Islam and Indian culture, he turns *sūtradhār*; or when Modi tells the Hindu *rāṣṭra* story, he turns storyteller. When I tell a story, I'm a storyteller. A lot of societal hokum and narrowness is because the storytelling is bigoted and unimaginative. People like me are now too ashamed to have anything to do with *sanātan*, and we're handing over priceless traditions on a platter to a group of fundamentalists.

After *Kari* my readers were confused by the shift in track: why has this cool chick gone godly on us? But while I'm *persona non grata* in the larger picture, I had a clear sense that it was my role to leave some grains buried under this soil to germinate when it was time. Flawed as they are, the books are around for those who want to find them. I am relieved that the three books are done; I would not have embarked on the journey now: the socio-political situation is just too toxic. I have done my bit. Now other storytellers can come and take over.

You asked about how I see myself in that storyteller space or tradition. The Sufis have a concept *futuḥ*, or opening, and they believe that it is giv-

en to certain prophets to speak without reflection. Theirs is a gnostic, not epistemic, equation with seeking. They cannot intellectualise their process. I sometimes feel that my relationship with this material is like that; when I start taking a position that even hints at any kind of authority over this material, words are being snatched away from me. So my approach to the material is more that of a *sadhaka* [practitioner], rather than a *pandit*'s [teacher].

Bornet: Let's turn from the figure of the storyteller to your visual style, which is very striking: the colours are so bright, sensual, luscious. Why did you choose this kind of style? How does this style resonate with narratives around mythologies, the body and so on?

Patil: I talked about the transformation that comes about because of visual spaces. I'll give you one example: In 2013, I attended the Dalai Lama's teachings at the Tsuglagkhang Temple in McLeod Ganj. I sat there with my folding cushion for three days and found that the thousand-armed gilded Avalokiteshvara located to the left of the stage that the Dalai Lama sat on was the thing that was causing some bizarre and wonderful effects. My state of heightened whatever-the-hell-it-was had more to do with that monumental statue than with the teachings. I realised after that experience that we underestimate and undermine the effect of the visual and material.

Ornella: Your visual style is very colourful, but it also has a tactile dimension [fig. 1]. You said elsewhere that you want your books to be touched. But since we're so immersed in digital media and this digital environment – and even now, we're having this conversation over Zoom – how is it that the tactile, the material element is so central to your artwork?

Patil: In extension of the earlier vein of thought, there are people whose silent presence can make others in a room feel good, no words need to be articulated. And we should recognise that. It is an important mode of transmission. We over-valorise the intellectual, but the sensual-erotic touches something more visceral. And that path, too, is very much within the *sanātan* tradition, of wisdom that is body-out. You need to get discursive, you need to offer yourself up to the sound, smell, the saturated pigment. I would like my readers to locate the stories *within* themselves.

Knauss: This resonates with something you said earlier about being interested in the gristly stuff of body and spit and flesh and blood. It seems as if that thematic interest is reflected in the way you tell stories, how you combine visual style and text.

Patil: In *Aranyaka*, I could well have used the metaphor of love and sex instead of the metaphor of food. But my purple, deep-diving, cavorting al-

Fig. 1: Patil's visual style: for example Lakshmi in *Adi Parva* (Patil 2012, 90; printed with permission).

lusiveness and excess needed to be tempered by Devdutt's logical, analytical, pared-down style. The artwork is more restrained and quite different than the complex jewel palette of *Adi Parva* and *Sauptik*.

Bornet: **Let's now turn to religion. We are all working in the study of religion and so we were very much interested in your use of religious motifs and mythological themes, from the *Mahābhārat* to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Vedic literature etc. Why did you choose these kinds of texts instead of other more secular mythologies or motifs? Sometimes it seems as if you use specific religious motifs to tell more universal stories: how do you understand their interaction?**

Patil: Improvisation is part of the DNA of a living tradition, an oral tradition. The details and motifs are *meant* to be adapted in new times, so long as fidelity to the essence is retained. A storyteller in what A. K. Ramanujan describes as a *pūram* setting is meant to have the finger on the pulse of the land: local politics, local calamities and scandals. The aim of telling stories is to offer insight into the human experience, to allay fears and traumas. What interests me about religions is the stories they came

up with as means to this end. No modern story can compare with epic lore, because it is not a lifetime's work, it is not ten people's work. It is a *distillate* of collective wisdom. History and science are similar in spirit. Mythology is a form of psychology, which is why it remains compelling. Stories stop being relevant because people stopped retelling them.

I realise that there is something counter-intuitive about writing books as an ode to oral traditions. But my way of countering that is to use storytellers and audiences as a narrative device. There are people who are listening, people who are sleepy, sceptical, bored, contrarian, lost. They pre-empt the zeitgeist and also do not present the *sūtradhār* as infallible. So little in our public or private discourse leaves room for such a possibility: I'm saying *this*, but how about we make it open-source, and you fix the part that I got wrong? Over-certitude is scary to me. For whatever flaws, too much certitude is something I've tried to not embed in my work.

Knauss: **But these mythologies were narrated in contexts that were quite hierarchical, and similarly with history: the history we know tends to be the history of a particular elite. This raises questions of (in-)equality and hierarchy, of who gets to speak for whom. How do you deal with that in your books?**

Patil: My method of dealing with this is to get an underdog to lead the story. Kari is a queer, androgynous, socially shy person whose most exciting life and best repartee is in her imagination. *Adi Parva* has a slightly sinister Queen/River as its *sūtradhār*, not some bearded brahmin. *Sauptik* takes it one step further – a heroic story is told by a resolutely unheroic *sūtradhār*, a man who has assassinated his childhood friends' sleeping children, a man who is naked and crawls about like a feral thing [fig. 2]. *Aranyaka* has this woman of large body and large appetites living in a cerebral setting that eschews hunger and excess. The minute you change the lens through which a story is seen, the story itself changes – how could it not? How can the *Mahābhārat* possibly sound the same with a jealous, wounded, abject narrator, rather than a predictable Arjun or Karṇ?

Within the story, too, there are people who question figures of authority and their actions. That is my method of saying: I'm not sitting in blind devotion at the feet of a self-proclaimed *satgūru*. Calling-out is part of this, but I don't over-valorise that either – the lens shifts between respect and irreverence and respect. I'd like to keep what's good, too. I have a deeply loving relationship with the material that allows me to scrutinise it. You can take the best sort of liberties only with what – and who – you love.

Fig. 2: The introduction of *Sauptik*'s narrator, the wounded Ashwattama (Patil 2016, 6; printed with permission).

Ornella: You said that mythologies are distillations of the human condition, but they have been distilled in these hierarchical contexts. Would you say that there is still value in these stories or mythologies? After all, you could also say: let's get rid of them, and let's create new stories. You're doing some heavy lifting here by looking at the underdog in them and shifting the perspectives. What value do you see in these mythologies with all the positives they have, but also with all the flaws that they might also have?

Patil: Right now, "people like us" in India aren't able to separate their anger at politically motivated fundamentalism, their anger at versions of the stories they received from family. I have friends who resented my working on epic lore because they had been traumatised by some bigoted version of the *Mahābhārat* or some misogynistic telling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* they received. It's a huge collective loss. And, back in 2009, I saw it as my responsibility to do my bit with not throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

It's like what Anant Pai set out to do with Amar Chitra Katha [ACK]. Does ACK stand the test of time? Sometimes not. Was Pai's effort staggering nonetheless? Without doubt! Should ACK be cancelled because it toes some regressive-uncle line now and then? No. It merely needs to be seen in context, as a product of its time and context, marked by the attendant blind spots in its creator, Anant Pai.

I guess I'm just against cancel culture and pretensions of any kind of purity. I have friends with whom I do not agree politically, who are problematic to my other friends, and I'm alright with that. I'll take what is good in them, and it's the same with this material.

Ours is a living tradition. There are innumerable versions of the *Mahābhārat* and *Rāmāyaṇa* and the Puranic stories, which I've been told in very different ways in folksy traditions continually. If there is something ossified and problematic about a story, *fix* it. This is not apologist behaviour, it's the process of keeping a living tradition aerated and alive!

People are getting wedded to hard-line, binary stances, though. I have been accused of being an apologist for the epics, an apologist for Brahmin men. People are out gleefully setting up cultural bonfires, discarding and disowning stuff, so the only people talking about *sanātan* will soon be the lunatics. If you read my work carefully, for all its flaws, there is more that's iconoclast there than apologist [fig. 3]! But my role with this is nearing its end. I gave all my fertile years to this stuff that sells 5,000 to 10,000 copies. Maybe I should write shows for Netflix after this. *[smiles]*

Fig. 3: An unorthodox rendering of Krishna in *Sauptik* (Patil 2016, 63; printed with permission).

Bornet: We talked earlier about your readership, about the mixed reception of your books because they are difficult to label. Could we return to the question of readership? And also, of language? Who do you have in mind when you write?

Patil: The books are critically well received, but they are demanding, so clearly it will always be a niche readership. The reception in Europe and North America has been disappointing but understandable, they are not a 101 Primer for Hindu Stories. They assert their place unapologetically and necessitate some amount of homework from the readers – even *Aranyaka*, which I thought was much less daunting, much more linear. In India, the work has never gone out of print, so that's good. You make peace that you're not going to be making mega bucks, there's no other way to get the work done otherwise.

Bornet: How about publishing in vernacular versions?

Patil: *Kari* has appeared in Italian, in French. You cannot do a vernacular run of *Adi Parva* or *Sauptik* because, full-colour and hardback, they would be way too expensive. With *Aranyaka*, we made the decision to not spill past a certain page count, to go paperback, so that the book remained accessible. I may think of planning future books in such a way that they remain black-and-white, so they can be ferried across easily into other languages.

Bornet: Perhaps to be really subversive by popularising the story you're telling or to change people's views, you would have to use the vernacular, because English is already westernised or seen as more liberal?

Patil: It's a delicate territory, Philippe, because one more thing to remember is that traditionalists don't like my work, it's too iconoclastic for those who see Hinduism uncritically. Which would also include vast swathes of people in North America! I used to wonder why people in Thailand or Bali are not reading *Adi Parva* or *Sauptik* despite the religious connection. They're not reading them because the books are too weird! My work is queer work in its truest sense, the form is queer, the interpretations are queer. I wouldn't bet on ever hitting mainstream.

Ornella: I'd like to return to the topic of religion again. You don't draw only on Hindu mythology but also on non-Hindu religious stories. Do you understand them to be part of these grand narratives, what you said earlier, distillations of centuries of experience? Or do you have other reasons for drawing on them?

Patil: The primary reason for my drawing on mythologies of all kinds is not so much that I think they are the best stories in the world. I have to explain with a small example. There is this Hindi film song with Manisha Koirala called *bāhon ke darmiyān*, meaning, "holding in the arms, in em-

Fig. 4: A "Last Supper" in *Kari* (Patil 2008, 58–59; printed with permission).

brace". Now, one day, I was in India, and rain was pouring down, and I was standing outside of a market stall, and this song *bāhon ke darmiyān* started playing on the radio. And in one second, everybody from cobbler to cowherd, from the shopkeeper to a gentrified person like me, we were all in an escalated romantic, yearning mode because of the notes of that song, we were united by the metaphor of that song. And I find something similar happens with the epics. So when I say, "Don't be a *Śakuni Māmā*" [a character of the *Mahābhārat*, the mastermind behind the war between the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas], or "Stop behaving like *Mantharā*" [a scheming character in the *Rāmāyaṇa*], or "He's fast asleep like *Kumbhakarṇa*" [a demon, brother of Rāvaṇa, known for having mistakenly asked the gods for the boon of infinite sleep], you speak a viscerally familiar language for a large tract of South Asians. What else can cut to the chase like that? I don't need to develop my own language, instead, I can tap into an existing idiom. And that's what I find this sort of lore does.

I grew up in Goa which has a fair presence of Roman Catholic Christians, so I grew up with that idiom as well. You can see it in the references that appear in *Kari* [fig. 4].

Ornella: Today in Europe and in particular in the UK, there's a very low rate of religious practice and people aren't familiar anymore with the kind of religious lore you use. What might that mean, for society or for your work, when you're trying to enter people's bloodstreams through these stories, but people aren't familiar with them anymore?

Patil: I deal with this continually, on multiple levels. In France, where I lived for a decade, there was a great suspicion towards anything not "laic", it was all seen as a cult, except Mahayana Buddhism which got a clean chit, just as de-Islamicised Sufism does. I have met many fundamentalists amongst secular people, because fundamentalism comes in many stripes.

Back home, there is now a vast segment of Indians, upper-middle class and elite, that is English-speaking and completely deracinated. They receive their university degrees and intellectual value system in the west, usually North America or England, and return to India with that gaze as their only convincing reference point. They not only absorb the good critical traditions, but also the inherent biases towards non-academic systems, towards *sadhaka*s and their gnosis. They come at spiritual traditions with a lot of dismissal or self-loathing, as if whatever there is, is frozen in some dated "book" like the *Manusmṛti*, stuff that cannot be adapted or spring-cleaned, just called out or burnt. But we aren't a people of the book! Our systems were open-source, and need to be taken in that direction again. It is hard, on an ongoing basis, to explain my choices, because people are actually not as liberal as they would like to believe.

Bornet: That's very insightful; we have people who are religiously illiterate, who cannot understand religion because they are so afraid of it, who don't even want to learn about anything religious.

Patil: Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar has written about the role that religious systems played in offering psychological care for people. The reason why people weren't institutionalised is that the system managed to pull them into the fold and give them some structure.

So many of my fundamentalist, irreligious friends are reading tarot cards, keeping feng shui turtles in their room and rose quartz crystals in their drinking water, attending yoga-pilates and mindfulness meditation classes. They're still yearning and seeking but they just do not even have the vocabulary to ask for the right thing in the supermarket to plug the existential hole in their heart.

Knauss: Let's turn to a different topic for a moment: one recurrent, important

theme of your books is ecology, nature, other-than-human animals. Could you tell us more about why this is so central for you?

Patil: *Aranyaka* does it most explicitly, but all my work stirs with a strong sense of the spatial, a sense of responsibility towards, and connection with, nature. Kari is very alert to the decay in the metropolis around her, the smell, the polluted water. There is an underlying anxiety about the state of the crumbling urban world. In *Adi Parva*, a river is the narrator. In *Sauptik*, the river is still in the backdrop, now gone dark and oily. *Sauptik* articulates the war between human inhabitation and the forest.

I grew up in Goa, which is as close to nature as one can get in India. This is part of my life and it is important to me. I have now started living much more in Kātyāyanī [the protagonist of *Aranyaka*] territory. It has been my own journey to move from an intellectual concern for ecology to a lived experience of being close to the ground.

One thing I always struggle to explain to my European friends is that you really understand *Kālī yuga* [the last, and darkest, of the world's four ages] when you live in India, you really know apocalypse. When you live in Europe, you feel immortal, like you deserve to go forth and multiply. Not in India, being here is a prophylactic. Dissolution is imminent here.

Bornet: Amruta, thank you so much for taking the time to sit down with us. This conversation has been so insightful and thought-provoking. One last question to conclude: can you tell us about your future projects?

Patil: I am writing a book called *The Sum of All Colours*. It straddles India and Europe, it is an alternate ethnography that uses the language of art and colour, theory and eros. The book was meant to be a sequel of *Kari*, but it has its own mind. It's been a bizarre, important year of stasis. My work has always been solitary, but I sought affirmation and resuscitation in physical escapes. But now there is no leaving. We'll see what that does to the work.

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Genoveva Castro

Validating Demons

Recasting Rāvaṇa as a Leader of the Oppressed in Mani Ratnam's Film Version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*

Abstract

This article focuses on Mani Ratnam's adaptation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and analyzes the ways in which the film rewrites the epic. The movie criticizes the traditional notion of a sharp opposition between the hero and the villain: Rāma is questioned and Rāvaṇa validated. A contemporary setting is used to comment on ongoing conflicts between the police and oppressed communities. The struggle in remote and poor areas encourages the celebration of the outlaw in the form of a present-day Rāvaṇa. Gender and sexuality also play an important role in the transformation of the demonic other into a more sympathetic character. The vilification and resistance to the demonization of Rāvaṇa are part of a longer history in India's literary culture which is explored and contrasted with the movie in this contribution.

Keywords

Rāmāyaṇa Adaptation, Mani Ratnam, Raavan, Raavanan

Biography

Genoveva Castro received her PhD from the Department of Asian Languages and Literature at the University of Washington, USA. Her research focuses on literary exchanges between Hindus and Muslims and adaptations in South Asian drama. She teaches at Southern Connecticut State University.

Introduction

This article examines Mani Ratnam's reading of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Raavan (Mani Ratnam, IN 2010). As Robert Stam points out, a film adaptation amplifies, ignores, subverts, critiques, and transforms its literary source.[1] In

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1   Stam 2000, 69.

this instance, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is not a source in the singular, but rather an intricate and long tradition that includes literature, performance, and film. Sheldon Pollock claims that the *Rāmāyaṇa* "with its demonizing imaginary provides, as does no other Indian text, a conceptual instrument for the utter dichotomization of the enemy."[2] This article focuses on Raavan (2010) because the film, instead of vilifying the antagonist, transforms the *Rāmāyaṇa* into a morally ambiguous narrative in which the dichotomy between good and evil is overturned. The motives of the villain are validated, the virtues of the hero are understated, and there is criticism of those who are empowered by the state as well as sympathy for the traditional enemy.

In his theory of adaptation, Stam also emphasizes that although the source is central, the context in which the adaptation is made also plays an important role and reveals ideological trends.[3] Ratnam transposes the battle between gods and demons to highlight a contemporary conflict between the police and oppressed forest villagers, thus making a critical statement about modern-day India. Although the movie seems to be realizing a radical reading of the epic, role reversals are not absent in the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition. I will provide a summary of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, consider interpretations of the battle between Rāvaṇa and Rāma, and then move to screen adaptations of the story. The analysis will focus on specific scenes in Mani Ratnam's film, contrasting it with distinct renderings of Rāvaṇa in literature.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* Story

The textual richness of the *Rāmāyaṇa* attests to the cultural significance of the narrative.[4] It is important to acknowledge how the literary renderings are reimagined in text and on screen and inserted in a manifold history of adaptation. The story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been revisited by filmmakers for over a hundred years. The "demon" Rāvaṇa has not been fully reinvented by Indian cinema, but rather is nourished by literary traditions that are worth exploring in order to understand how the character has been represented.

On the textual front, the retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are vast and have evolved in multiple directions. In a nutshell, the narrative is frequently

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2   Pollock 1993, 281.
3   Stam 2005, 45.
4   See Richman 1991; 2000; 2008.

centered on Prince Rāma who, endowed with all the necessary qualities, is about to be crowned king of Ayodhya in North India by his father. Nevertheless, as a result of the intrigues of his stepmother, he must go into exile in the forest, accompanied by his brother Lakṣmaṇa and his wife, Sītā. Rāvaṇa's sister, Śūrpaṇakhā, tries to seduce the two brothers in the forest, and Lakṣmaṇa punishes her by cutting off her nose and ears. In revenge, the demon Rāvaṇa kidnaps Sītā and takes her to his kingdom in Lanka. With the help of the monkey army, Rāma fights against the demons, kills Rāvaṇa, recovers his wife, Sītā, and goes back to Ayodhya. This story has been retold by Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Muslims across South Asia. Traditionally the *Rāmāyaṇa* is understood as *ādikāvya*, or "first poem", while scholars refer to it as an epic, since it is a long narrative poem describing the adventures of a hero. The Sanskrit text attributed to the sage Vālmīki is not the source from which all retellings originate but is the oldest extant version.

Contextualized Interpretations of the Battle of Rāvaṇa and Rāma

The nature of the main character is a matter of debate. John Brockington considers that Rāma was a martial hero and later became associated with the god Viṣṇu.[5] In contrast, Pollock suggests that the divinity of the hero pervaded the story and was already present in its original core.[6] However that debate evolves, the narrative of a divine warrior has been highly regarded by Hindus in South Asia and beyond.

The struggle between Rāma and the demon has been interpreted in a variety of ways. One explanation is that the conflict with Rāvaṇa in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is a newer rendition of the dispute between the older Vedic god Indra and the demon Vṛtra.[7] According to Pollock, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is a text of othering in which Rāvaṇa represents the sexually-deviant outsider in the form of the tyrant who threatens. The space of that other, who is the enemy in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, can be occupied by all those who are different, do not fit the norms, or constitute another group. The demons have been identified with

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5   Brockington/Brockington 2006, xi.
6   Pollock 2006, 21.
7   Brockington 1998, 51.

many groups, such as cannibals, primitive cave dwellers, shamans, particular tribes, historic ethnic groups, and Buddhists.[8] Furthermore, Rāvaṇa has also been understood in the tradition as "an enemy devotee who seeks liberation at the hands of Rāma".[9] The chief antagonist of the story may be seen as the representative of prejudices, or in other instances as a religious ideal.

George Hart and Hank Heifetz argue that the South Indian *Rāmāyaṇa* by Kampan, composed in Tamil in the 12th century, reflected local history. They explain that there were two patterns of social organization: the first consisted of small chieftains and armies which fought against each other in the first centuries of the Common Era, while the second was established during Pallava rule in the 6th century. In the later pattern, upper-caste land-owners who were non-Brahmins adopted a system of alliances with a more centralized government and North Hindu Brahmanical practices. There was a certain level of co-existence of both old and new structures. Rāvaṇa in Kampan represented the old Tamil king who terrified everyone, was strong in battle, and concerned with pleasure. All elements of Tamil tradition that did not fit in with the new order were assigned to Rāvaṇa.[10] Therefore, a distinct socio-political configuration was represented in the kingdom of the demon.

This political dimension of the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is also relevant to discussions in South India in the late 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century. In a literal reading, Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa come from the North, and the demons, who are explicitly not human, are from the South. In a more nuanced reading, the inhumanity could be interpreted as an otherness arising from differences in culture. In South India, people have recognized themselves in that otherness, and Rāvaṇa has become the character with whom they identify. The *Rāmāyaṇa* has been read as a struggle between the Aryan North and the Dravidian South.[11] Thus, the narrative of Rāvaṇa taking a different turn came to represent South Indian identity.

This Aryan–Dravidian reading of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was related to the development of a political movement in South India that sought social justice. In the first decades of the 20th century, there were calls for anti-caste social reforms

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8   Pollock 2006, 31–32.
9   Hospital 1991, 86.
10   Hart/Heifetz 1989, 27–29.
11   Richman 1991, 176. The terms "Aryan" and "Dravidian" refer to two distinct linguistic families spoken in the North and South respectively; the terms have also been used to identify different cultural streams.

and for rejection of the myth of the glorious Aryan invaders.[12] E. V. Ramasami (1879–1973), an important non-Brahmin leader, organized a movement to promote respect for Dravidian values and lower castes. He was a prolific writer of short vitriolic essays to convey his radical political messages, thus gaining attention for his strong criticism of the dominant worldview of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and its Brahmanical values.[13] The brief printed texts spread amongst the masses. As Paula Richman discusses, Ramasami published an exegesis of the epic in which he wanted to demythologize Rāma and Sītā and turn Rāvaṇa into a hero. He accused Rāma of improper behavior (treating his wife badly, killing a śūdra and attacking Vāli from behind). Rāvaṇa, by contrast, protected his family, acted courageously, and did not touch Sītā, whereas his sister was mutilated. He abducted Sītā not as the result of lust but rather as honorable retaliation, and he neither disfigured her nor forced himself upon her. The respect for Sītā was one of the arguments in favor of Rāvaṇa.[14] This critique articulated dynamics between geographical areas, caste differences, and gender roles.

Southerners were keen on looking at Rāvaṇa and the demons in a more empathetic fashion. In the Tamil milieu, Rāvaṇa was not a straightforward villain, but a complex tragic hero with many contradictions – harsh and kind at the same time.[15] This notion of the "tragic hero" has been used by several scholars to describe Rāvaṇa. As Clifford Hospital points out, this term is not an Indian category, yet it is present in Rāvaṇa's story in two senses: first, in the inability of the character to deal with a prescribed destiny, and second, as a flaw, in an otherwise good person falling in love with Sītā.[16] Rāvaṇa, his family, and the kingdom of Lanka were admired by Southerners who looked at the antagonists with sympathy.

Rāmāyaṇa on the Screen

There is a complex history of re-creation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* that includes devotional films and loose adaptations. Movies and texts have been interconnected across cultures and languages in South Asia in a non-linear fashion.

12 Krishnamurthy 2011, 119.
13 Ganagatharam 2002, 884–885.
14 Richman 1991, 186.
15 Zvelebil 1988, 134.
16 Hospital 1991, 101.

Since the beginnings of Indian cinema, the epic has been a major thematic source.[17] As Philip Lutgendorf has stated, the devotional plays that tell the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* have been influential in the development of movies. The so-called "mythological films" represent the story of Rāma with the emotional piety of the devotional tradition.[18] Dadasaheb Phalke, known as the father of Indian cinema, directed the first Indian movie based on an incident from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Lanka Dahan (The burning of Lanka, Dadasaheb Phalke, IN 1917) combines stage conventions with sophisticated cinematography.[19] In every decade since, many crowd-pleasing *Rāmāyaṇa* movies have been produced.[20] The Hindi movies Ram Rajya (Rule of Rama, Vijay Bhat, IN 1943) and Sampoorna Ramayana (Complete Ramayana, Babubhai Mistry, IN 1961) are worth mentioning because they won great acclaim from audiences. Also noteworthy is the Tamil film Sampoorna Ramayanam (Complete Ramayana, K. Somu, IN 1958), which was a great hit and revived interest for mythological movies in the South.[21] The first television series about the story of Rāma, Ramayan (Ramanad Sagar, IN 1987–1988), became the most popular program ever on Indian television.[22] The series Ramayan (Anand Sagar, IN 2008) was remade again in 2008 and this version, including songs, was dubbed into South Indian languages to win over more viewers. A Hindi TV mythological series, Raavan (Ranjan Singh, IN 2006–2008), explores the character of Rāvaṇa according to the texts of Vālmīki and Tulsīdās. The *Rāmāyaṇa* also figures prominently in films that are not based on the epic, as a referent in character names, motifs, and songs.[23] Therefore, the story of Rāma on screen has had a profound impact on religious experience and popular culture.

The inspiration of the South Indian *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition in film is ongoing. The Tamil movie Kaala (Pa. Ranjith, IN 2018) uses the framework of the epic as well. It is set among Tamilian immigrants in Mumbai who live in slums and are harassed by a gangster who wants to take over their land. Kaala, the Rāvaṇa-like character played by the celebrated Tamil actor Rajinikanth, fights for the protection of the rights of his people and prevents

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17 Aklujkar 2007, 42.
18 Lutgendorf 1990, 129.
19 Woods 2011, 97.
20 Aklujkar 2007, 42.
21 Baskaran 1996, 185
22 Lutgendorf 1990, 128.
23 Lutgendorf 2010, 144.

their eviction, although at the end he is killed. Nevertheless, Kaala's legacy lives on in the subsequent protests of the slum dwellers. The film provides an optimistic alternative to the Dravidian counter-myths of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in which Tamilians lose.[24] Thus, the *Rāmāyaṇa* continues to provide a vehicle for storytelling with a political message.

The Production of RAAVAN (2010) and RAAVANAN (2010)

In the remainder of this article, Ratnam's movie will be discussed as an example of a narrative that subverts the stark opposition between Rāvaṇa and Rāma. Mani Ratnam is a renowned and prolific Tamil film director, screenwriter, and producer with over 25 films in his œuvre. Although most of his films are in Tamil, he has directed a handful of movies in Hindi as well. Given the great linguistic diversity in South Asia, choice of language matters in movies. For one thing, it can determine consumption, although many movies are dubbed to reach wider audiences. Film industries are separated by languages and regions, but they also intersect.

Ratnam gained national acclaim with his movie ROJA (Mani Ratnam, IN 1992), a romantic story in which a Tamil couple goes to Kashmir, where the husband participates in a military operation against terrorists. The enormous popularity of the film and the fact that it was made shortly after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi by a suicide bomber from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam have been widely discussed.[25] Years later, Ratnam started directing movies in Hindi with the great movie stars of the moment. In his engagement with diverse industries, languages, and identities, Ratnam's movies "have squarely placed Tamilians within the discursive and representational framework of the Indian nation".[26] Ratnam has simultaneously shot movies in Tamil and Hindi and perhaps this capacity to work in a diverse framework can be considered one of his main accomplishments.

Collaboration with the celebrated Tamil musician A. R. Rahman, initiated with ROJA (1992), has been key in the success of some of Ratnam's movies. In Indian films, the songs are crucial and can help a movie thrive. Felicity Wilcox describes the work of A. R. Rahman in the following way:

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24 Manoharan 2021, 61.
25 Dirks 2001; Benjamin 2006; Devadas/Velayutham 2008.
26 Devadas/Velayutham 2008, 167.

His ability to blend Eastern and Western musical elements to create strong associations for audiences from both contexts while supporting receptivity to sounds that might sit outside the listener's cultural context is notable, even remarkable, and enriches every film he works on. His sound captures a multicultural aesthetic, drawn from his roots as a Tamil musician, that speaks to global audiences.[27]

Ratnam directed RAAVAN (2010) in Hindi, and simultaneously RAAVANAN (Mani Ratnam, IN 2010) in Tamil. The films were designed as a multilingual project and became a culturally diverse effort in which North and South India were both represented. Aishwarya Rai played Sītā in both, and Abhishek Bachchan played Rāvaṇa in the Hindi version. Interestingly, the actor Vikram played Rāma in the Hindi version, but the antagonist, Rāvaṇa, in the Tamil one. The Tamil version seemingly did better than the Hindi version at the box office.[28] The music was composed by A. R. Rahman. The soundtrack was a blend of Classical Indian, African folk, Sufi, and electronic music in the multicultural style that characterizes this composer. Rahman and Ratnam wanted a "groovy, yet folksy tribal feel" for the musical score, to match the story line.[29] RAAVAN (2010) and RAAVANAN (2010) were big budget mainstream movies; they were released in theaters and found a place in several online platforms such as YouTube and Amazon Prime. Film aficionados still comment on these films in online publications and videos.[30] The cinematography of Santosh Sivan has been particularly appreciated by online fans.

The screenplay of the movie was also written by Ratnam, who privileged the character of Rāvaṇa. In an interview, Ratnam stated, "The Tamil version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* – The Kampan *Rāmāyaṇam* – makes him [Rāvaṇ] even more dramatic, even more spectacular. If you look at folk arts like *Kathakali*, it is always Rāvaṇ's story that is performed. It is a tradition to narrate the story of the doomed person."[31] Ratnam has been fascinated with this kind of narrative throughout his career. In his movie THALAPATHI (Mani Ratnam, IN 1991), he explored Karṇa and Duryodhana, two troubled characters from the other

27 Wilcox 2017, 50.

28 Dundoo 2010.

29 Khurana 2010.

30 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZnkukRyTtk&ab_channel=FilmyHub360; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQv8fA9XcVo&ab_channel=FilmCompanionSouth [accessed 6 June 2021].

31 Rangan 2012, 268.

great Indian epic, the *Mahābhārata*. In Raavan (2010) and Raavanan (2010), he sought to portray the virtues of Rāvaṇa along with his wickedness, and justify part of his ill behavior. The fact that Rāvaṇa loses in the end makes him even more interesting.

Ratnam's *Rāmāyaṇa* Adaptation

Mani Ratnam's adaptation will now be analyzed taking into consideration the way in which the story of Rāvaṇa is amplified and the *Rāmāyaṇa* is used to criticize power dynamics in contemporary India. The movie starts with a scene in which Bīrā (a contemporary Rāvaṇa) is about to jump off a cliff into a river in the beautiful wilderness below. In the next scene Bīrā's sister Jamuniyā (corresponding to Śūrpaṇakhā) appears walking around a village fair with a couple of policemen; soon afterwards we see another scene in which a road in the forest is blocked and policemen are burned alive. Visually, Bīrā is connected to the wilderness, the forest to violence, and Bīrā's sister to the police. Two minutes into the film, the kidnapping of Rāginī (representing Sītā) occurs while she is gliding along a river; her canoe is struck and destroyed by a much larger boat in which Bīrā is standing. This version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* starts with the abduction of Sītā, because it is the part of the narrative in which Rāvaṇa becomes important. The destruction of Rāginī's boat is cinematographically grandiose, and the music dramatic. Ratnam considers that the main point of his film is "the clash of two kinds of people",[32] and this contrast is symbolized by the collision of the boats. The image of the boat tossed in the water depicts the human condition in devotional poetry and is used as an analogy for crisis, birth, and death.[33] Perhaps this kind of boat imagery also influenced Ratnam's choices: the boats might represent the merging of good and evil.

Although the storylines of Raavan (2010) and Raavanan (2010) are identical, the language makes a difference for each version, as is evident from the lyrics of the songs. The first song of the Hindi film is devoted to Bīrā (Rāvaṇa). He is presented as a proud, strong man and compared to fierce natural phenomena. The reference to his birth and caste points to his underprivileged origins yet great qualities. The virtues of Rāma are never high-

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32   Rangan 2012, 285.
33   Jackson 1988, 1; Wadley 1977, 144.

lighted; there are no songs describing him in the movie. In contrast, the associations with Bīrā are positive, despite his being a bandit:

> Bīrā has ten foreheads
> Bīrā has a hundred names
> Those who provoke him
> have to face a fight
> Bīrā is a rising storm
> Bīrā is a typhoon
> There is fire upon his breath
> Bīrā is burning life
> Don't ask about his birth
> Don't ask about his caste
> Ask him about his pride
> which is his identifying feature.[34]

In the Tamil version of the same song, the ambiguities of the characters of Rāvaṇa and Rāma suggest they are remarkably similar:

> He is Rāma if you say he is Rāma
> He is Rāvaṇa if you say he is Rāvaṇa
> If you say he is both, then he is both
> He is both Rāma and Rāvaṇa.[35]

After the introduction to Bīrā, the main character, we learn that Dev (representing Rāma) is the Superintendent of Police just transferred to a district called Laal Mati, where people are terrorized and protected by Bīrā. Dev's job is to catch him. He explains that nothing good or bad happens without Bīrā's acceptance. Dev's wife notes, "It is not clear if he is Rāvaṇa or Robin Hood", as Bīrā is an angel for some and the devil for others. "Bīrā is where the blood is shed", remarks Dev. Although Laal Mati is a fictional place, the characters are speaking Hindi in RAAVAN, locating the movie in a Northern cultural context, whereas in RAAVANAN the language matches the Southern

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34 RAAVAN (Mani Ratnam, IN 2010), 00:04:04. I have translated all the quotes from the Hindi movie.

35 RAAVANAN (Mani Ratnam, IN 2010), 00:02:15. I thank Preeti Gopal for her help translating the lyrics in Tamil.

context. Film scholar Selvaraj Velayutham points out that in Tamil movies it is common to conceive India from the perspective of a Tamil male, and films are set in Tamil Nadu even if the locations are fictional.[36] Part of the movie was shot in Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu in South India.

Bīrā's character seems to be partially based on the life of Koose Muniswamy Veerappan (1952–2004), a poor uneducated Tamil man who was born in Karnataka near the border with Tamil Nadu. He knew the jungles of South India very well and became involved in poaching and in smuggling sandalwood. According to the chronicles of an agent of the Tamil Nadu Special Task Force, Veerappan was popular amongst the locals, and a sort of Robin Hood legend developed around him. Veerappan defied the police, kidnapped people, and could not be apprehended for a long time. He was a generous employer in an area in which many were unemployed, and his story captured the imagination.[37] The idea of the forest criminal who confronted the police and was appreciated by the people resonates strongly.

Studies elaborate on the "Robin Hood principle", in which outlaws, either fictional or real, become celebrated heroes and their stories are told in songs, films, and literature in many cultures. Graham Seal claims there is a scripted narrative of the bandit hero: the outlaw suffers injustice, typically from government or local power, winning the sympathy of a resistance community as his bad acts are justified. He never harms women, distributes benefits amongst the poor, escapes from authority, and eventually dies bravely.[38] The commemorated outlaws often appear in contexts in which a group of people consider themselves to be the victims of injustice and therefore there is sympathy for the resistance of the bandit.[39]

As one can clearly see, in Ratnam's movie Rāvaṇa fits this framework well. He is validated because life has been unfair, and he opposes the corrupt police.[40] In the film, the people of the villages bow in front of Bīrā; everyone wants to meet him. He embraces the children tenderly, and many follow him. He is also shown playing with the little ones in a pond. In the jungle where Bīrā lives, there is talk about his virtues and the good things

36 Velayutham 2008, 8.
37 Vijay Kumar 2017, 18–20.
38 Seal 2009, 74–75.
39 Seal 2009, 83.
40 It is interesting to note that Veerappan is also used to illustrate the acclaimed outlaw in Seal's own work.

Fig. 1: Sophisticated Rāginī teaches Indian classical dance. Film still, Raavan (Mani Ratnam, IN 2010), 00:37:32.

that he has done. After kidnapping Rāginī (Sītā), he falls in love with her, yet he is always respectful and never touches her.

Although the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition is diverse, "standard" retellings depict Sītā and Rāma as constituting ideals of womanhood and manhood. In Ratnam's adaptation, however, Rāma is pushed to the background, while Sītā and Rāvaṇa are foregrounded through both story and songs. Rāginī (Sītā) is a high-caste educated woman from an urban setting. She is a classical Indian dancer and is shown teaching girls her art (fig. 1). Rāginī's refined nature contrasts immediately with the poor area in the forest to which she has been taken. The villagers are trying to fight for their rights against the establishment which has not helped their development. Suffering in the inclement jungle, Rāginī gains insight into the difficult life in these remote villages. Ratnam thus transforms Sītā into a woman awakening to a different social reality.

The portrayal of female characters such as Sītā and Śūrpaṇakhā is key to the narrative, and in text and on the screen, the relation between Rāma and Sītā is often represented as an example of perfect love.[41] Yet that is not the case in Raavan (2010), where the romantic relation between Dev and Rāginī does not take center stage. Instead, the movie shows the humanization of Rāvaṇa, and for that purpose, the transformation of the character of Jamuniyā (Śūrpaṇakhā) is essential. She is the victim of a rape perpetrated by the policemen. Horrifyingly, the rape of women by police in remote forest areas

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41 Pauwels 2008 discusses this topic and compares textual sources and the TV series by Rāmānand Sāgar.

where there are political conflicts is part of contemporary social reality.[42] In the film, Dev is trying to do his work by catching Bīrā because he is a high-profile criminal, but he is surrounded by a corrupt and faulty police system. He is also overpowered by his ambition to succeed in this mission, and thus chooses to appear at the wedding of Bīrā's sister, Jamuniyā. The ceremony is interrupted and Bīrā is shot but manages to escape. Jamuniyā is captured forcefully, hauled off by her nose and ears and taken to the police station where she is raped and afterwards commits suicide. In revenge, Bīrā kidnaps Dev's wife. Bīrā painfully narrates what happened to his sister, and Rāginī is touched by this tragedy. Rāginī talks to a Viṣṇu statue after learning about these ulterior motives behind her captivity. When Bīrā arrives at this location, he talks about his love and refers to himself as "an animal, uncouth" and "a worm", a trope to signal otherness. As a policeman, Dev is in a privileged position, whereas Bīrā is a man from the forest. His pure love, however, makes him appear greater. The conversation unfolds as follows:

> RĀGINĪ, *talking to God*: You are making me cry. I don't want to cry. Just let me be angry, don't lessen my anger. Don't show me any of the good qualities or innocence of these people. I am not weak, don't make me weak. Can't you do that much for me?
>
> *Rāginī sees Bīrā sitting close by.*
>
> BĪRĀ: Did I come here at the wrong time? What kind of man is he? Your Superintendent of Police? Just a good man or a very good man?
>
> RĀGINĪ: He is a god! Is that enough?
>
> BĪRĀ: Tell me about your god? No, don't give me an answer. I know. He is great; he has a big heart and is high minded. Does he love you very much?
>
> RĀGINĪ: Yes, he does.
>
> BĪRĀ: And you? I'm burning with jealousy, I'm burning up. Burning as if my damn soul was on fire. Burn, burn, keep on burning and burn even more. Burn so that the whole damn world will say that until today nobody has ever burned like Bīrā. I used to think "I am an animal, uncouth and I desire you. I'm a worm, a worm! Where are you? And, where am I? Where's your lord?" But now that I'm burning up, it seems that nobody is stronger than me. Jealousy is the fate of the fortunate people.[43]

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42 Sundar 2019 refers to these issues in Central India.

43 Raavan (Mani Ratnam, IN 2010), 01:28:35.

Fig. 2: Aggressive Bīrā in a masculine dance of combat. Film still, Raavan (Mani Ratnam, IN 2010), 1:08:29.

In Ratnam's film, Rāvaṇa is the leader of the dispossessed, an individual who fights against those in power. The abode of Rāvaṇa is not a palace filled with luxuries, as in many narratives, but rather a region where people are destitute. The world of Bīrā revolves around revenge and insurrection, but also seeks fairness. Through dance and music, the song "Ṭhok de killī" ("Hit the nail") invokes a culture of masculinity and combat (fig. 2). The Tamil version of "Ṭhok de killī" is entitled "Kōṭu pōṭṭā" ("If one draws a border") in Raavanan (2010), and the lyrics talk in extraordinarily strong terms about conflict and revenge:

> If one draws a border, kill him!
> If one builds a fence, cut him into pieces!
> Until yesterday, your law prevailed,
> from now on it will be our law,
> We were bent into submission,
> We stood up for ourselves.[44]

As the song "Kōṭu pōṭṭā" shows, both versions of the film evoke a social and political reality. Amit Basole suggests in his review of the movie that the story alludes to the conflict between *ādivāsī*s and the Indian state.[45] Although the film does not give specifics about the agenda of the *ādivāsī*

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44 Raavanan (Mani Ratnam, IN 2010), 00:52:09.
45 Basole 2010, 25. The term *ādivāsī* means literally "first dweller" and it is used for minority groups in India.

groups, it does portray a difficult relationship with the police. The social issues that Raavan (2010) highlights are like those of the Naxalite movement.[46] The state repression and attacks of the Naxalite groups have led to tremendous violence. The socio-economic gap is profound in southern and western states such as Andhra Pradesh, where the Naxalites are strong in the pristine hills and forest areas.[47] The oppression and injustice experienced by the communities of the forest are represented in Ratnam's work. The connection between fiction and reality is tenuous, but there is an acknowledgement, even if not extensive, of these issues in the film.

In addition, the violence between the *ādivāsī* groups and the police is graphic and likewise suggested through song lyrics. The film portrays the police's lack of commitment to moral principles and lasting projects in complicated regions. After Dev finds out that one of his subordinate policemen is loyal to Bīrā, he is reminded that his job as Superintendent in Laal Mati is only for six months. Dev's posting in the remote area will soon be over, but the men in the lower ranks remain for life and face the dilemma of either maintaining the law or breaking it. In this context, corruption is extremely common, as the policemen are not held accountable for their transgressions, such as raping women. Thus Ratnam's adaptation highlights the complex contemporary reality in which law and crime are intertwined.

When Dev comes to the jungle, Bīrā has the opportunity to kill him, but for the sake of Rāginī he does not do so, and he lets her go back to her husband. In the end, Bīrā's love for her is greater than anything else and he has no other romantic partner in his life. By contrast, in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāvaṇa, as the other, is hypersexualized: traditionally, he has three wives and his palace is conceived as illuminated by beautiful women.[48] However, Rāma just has Sītā. In Ratnam's adaptation, Bīrā conforms to monogamous ideals and his relationships with other females are ignored. Hence, Bīrā's redemption is his love for Rāginī, as his sexual behavior is no different from Rāma's.

The enmity of Bīrā and Dev goes beyond the capture of Rāginī; Dev has been obsessed with hunting down Bīrā. When Dev and Rāginī return home from the forest, he wants to know if Bīrā touched her. She says he did not, and Dev tells her that she needs to pass a lie-detector test. In some versions

46 The term "Naxalite" is broad and refers to a variety of non-unified movements calling for justice in deprived regions.

47 Gupta 2007, 178.

48 Vālmīki V.7.1–7. All Vālmīki references are taken from Goswami 1969, the vulgate edited by Chimmanlal Goswami.

Fig. 3: Rāginī reaching out to save Bīrā. Film still, Raavan (Mani Ratnam, IN 2010), 02:10:52.

of the narrative, such as Vālmikī's, Sītā must go through an ordeal of fire to prove her purity. In the movie, Dev lies to Rāginī, arguing that Bīrā told him that he had touched her. Dev uses Rāginī as a tool to catch Bīrā, acting like Rāvaṇa in that he uses tricks to achieve his goals.

Rāginī leaves her husband in anger; she goes back to the forest to look for Bīrā and finds out the truth. Rāginī asks him if she is the weapon to bring victory over Dev. Bīrā is happy to see Rāginī and he states, "We are cheap men, but we never allow even the wind to touch pure gold." It seems that Rāginī and Bīrā have become close, as she trusted him enough to return to the jungle. This is a departure from the Vālmikī, Tulsīdās and Kampan versions, in which Rāvaṇa is killed before Sītā and Rāma are reunited. Again, the film amplifies the story of Rāvaṇa and emphasizes his good nature.

Dev appears in the jungle with a group of policemen to attack Bīrā. When Bīrā is about to die, Rāginī symbolically reaches out to help him, standing in the middle of the battlefield (fig. 3). Bīrā was an honest fighter and spoke the truth, whereas Dev is portrayed as cunning, mistreating his wife. In the movie, Bīrā is killed, but his evilness is softened by his generosity to the oppressed, his search for justice, and his love for Rāginī. In this instance, the others – the outlaws, the *ādivāsīs*, and the Naxalites – oppose the unjust government and police. At times, Bīrā is transformed into a Rāma-like character. Whereas the demons are humanized, Dev's behavior is criticized. Thus, a take-away from the movie is validation, to a certain degree, of those fighting against power structures.

Contrasting Ratnam's Version with Renderings of *Rāmāyaṇa* in Literature

Within the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, there are numerous representations of Rāvaṇa in the North and South. In this section, various retellings will be contrasted to illuminate points of confluence and divergence between these literary narratives and Ratnam's adaptation. In Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāvaṇa is described as "the one who causes the world to roar" and "one who looks like a dark cloud", and one of his common epithets is "the ten necked-one".[49] In Ratnam's movie, Bīrā hears many voices in his head, suggesting some sort of mental illness – here is an actualization of the demon with ten heads. The voices represent the coexistence of good and evil in his mind.

In Vālmīki, Rāvaṇa's palace is depicted as a place where everything exists in excess. There were all kinds of meat: venison, buffalo, boar, deer, peacock, fish, and goat. Men and women got drunk without any shame.[50] His palace is luxurious, with many buildings and extremely attractive vast mansions, and many beautiful women.[51] Here, Rāvaṇa is not in the forest like many demons but inhabits a world comparable to Rāma's kingdom.[52] Rāvaṇa lives a life that is parallel to that of other kings in different locations. By contrast, as already noted, in RAAVAN (2010), Bīrā's world is in no way glorious nor is his world analogous to that of Dev (Rāma).

Rāvaṇa falls in love with Sītā in Vālmīki's text; he desires her above all, but later is extremely aggressive as he wants to possess her. When Sītā virtuously rejects him, Rāvaṇa tries to pressure her, threatening that if she does not sleep with him, he will eat her. In his harsh and licentious speech, he is depicted as "hissing like a serpent",[53] with frightening animal-like conduct. Again, by contrast, and although Bīrā describes himself as an animal, he never insists on engaging sexually with Rāginī; he just laments that she loves Dev.

According to Vālmīki, Rāvaṇa is warned that the war against the king of Ayodhya will destroy him, but he does not listen to the advice of others: he is arrogant and has a bad temper. He is not a righteous king and is only concerned with his personal interest in Sītā. Since he loves her and wants

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49 Vālmīki III.33.1.
50 Vālmīki V.11.13–18.
51 Vālmīki V.7.1–7.
52 Pollock 2006, 32.
53 Vālmīki III.22.30.

to keep her, he will go to war. Rāma is the exact opposite; he listens to the words of his father and sacrifices himself for the sake of his kingdom. He would never be driven by passion. Ratnam's adaptation overturns this opposition between the god and the demon entirely, as Bīrā ends up sacrificing himself.

The character of Śūrpaṇakhā also plays a major role, since she is strongly related to the episodes concerning Rāvaṇa. It is Śūrpaṇakhā who convinces her brother to take Sītā and kill Rāma. Śūrpaṇakhā can be seen in Vālmīki as the opposite of Sītā in the same way that Rāvaṇa is the opposite of Rāma: there is a clear opposition between Sītā's modest behavior and the lustful female demon who is also a blood-drinker and even expresses her desire to consume Rāma's, Lakṣmaṇa's, and Sītā's blood.[54] Demons lack moderation and reasonable behavior. In Raavan (2010), it is Jamuniyā (Śūrpaṇakhā) who suffers at the hands of the police, who are singled out for lack of moderation and bad behavior – mirroring the social reality of women ending up being the victims of clashes between the police and *ādivāsīs*.

In Sanskrit literature, there are other instances in which the character of Rāvaṇa is seen in a different light. An interesting take is found in the 11th-century poet Bilhaṇa. In one of his most important works, entitled *Vikramā kadevacarita*, he states, "The fact that the fame of the Lord of Lanka [Rāvaṇa] has been reduced, and that the prince of the Raghu family [Rāma] is a receptacle of fame – all this is nothing but the power of the very first poet [Vālmīki]. Kings should not make poets angry."[55] Not only had Bilhaṇa suggested that the good reputation of Rāma rested on the skill of Vālmīki, but he also showed an appreciation for the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s villain. According to Lawrence McCrea, Rāvaṇa is described as the "sole hero of the three worlds" on several occasions and there are sections of the poem in which the descriptions of Rāvaṇa are significantly more central and extensive than those of Rāma.[56] Rāvaṇa is foregrounded in this text and other later poets also chose to cast his character in a different light.

One notable example that converges with Ratnam's film is the already mentioned Tamil *Rāmāyaṇa* of Kampan. The work is entitled *Irāmāvatāram*, "The descent of Rāma". The poet is more compassionate towards the emotions of both demons: Rāvaṇa's love is expressed in detail, as is the pain of

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54 Vālmīki III.19.18.

55 McCrea 2010, 506.

56 McCrea 2010, 513–514.

the wounded Śūrpaṇakhā. These two episodes are long and clearly contrast with Vālmīki.[57] Thus, Rāvaṇa is described as majestic, and no one has the power to destroy him. All the powerful kings, gods, and demons tremble out of fear, give him all kinds of offerings, and are subservient. He has weapons, jewels, ornaments, and many women who dance and sing. Rāvaṇa enjoys all these things until he listens to his sister explain the killing of the demons and tell him about Sītā's beauty. After hearing of all the virtues of Rāma's wife, he falls in love with her. Kampan vividly depicts Rāvaṇa's longing:

> Even before he went and deceived
> that woman lovely as a peacock,
> the lord of Lanka with high walls
> had set her in the prison of his heart.
> That Demon who fights with a spear
> had a heart now that was like butter
> set out on a day of sun
> and heating and melting bit by bit.[58]

Although Rāvaṇa is one of the best warriors, he is defeated by his emotions, and thus not by battle. Rāvaṇa cannot stop thinking about Sītā and his love for her agitates him. His sister's suffering is also a part of the narrative. Śūrpaṇakhā goes to Lanka to inform her brother of what has happened in the forest. When she is wounded by Lakṣmana, she goes to Rāvaṇa's palace while she is still bleeding. The male demons are also impressed with what has happened. All the female demons look at Śūrpaṇakhā and suffer and wail along with her.[59] The attack on Śūrpaṇakhā partially causes Rāvaṇa's response in taking revenge. In Kampan's text this helps to justify, at least to some degree, the demons' anger. Since Śūrpaṇakhā was dishonored, some action must be taken. Although the female demon sexually assaulted the brothers, she was severely punished. The demons suffer from pain and love, and thus show human qualities.

The political movements of the South have left an indelible mark on the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The engagement of non-Brahmanical Tamilians against the North in the 20th century has seen literary manifestations in which the main char-

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57 Hart/Heifetz 1989, 6.
58 Translation by Hart/Heifetz 1989, 177.
59 Hart/Heifetz 1989, 167.

acters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are reversed.[60] Such is the case of the Tamil poem by Puluvar Kulantai entitled *Irāvaṇan Kāviyam*, published in 1946, in which Rāvaṇa is the noble cultured Dravidian protagonist and Rāma the cunning villain. Śūrpaṇakhā is depicted as an innocent maiden molested by Rāma. After rejecting him, she is punished.[61] As in Ratnam's film, the narrative here also requires the transformation of Śūrpaṇakhā in order to make a case against Rāma.

Sympathy for Rāvaṇa's experiences and emotions is still present amongst recent South Indian writers. In 2004, the contemporary poet K. Satchidanandan published a poem called "Come unto me, Janaki", in which Rāvaṇa, who is dead, expresses his intense love for Sītā in heaven.[62] Thus, Kampan's work set an important precedent in the reinterpretation of the villains, accentuating their feelings. We can see that Ratnam's interpretation is based on the devotional literary culture of the South, in which the emotions of the demons are amplified and validated, while also taking inspiration from socio-political interpretations of the epic.

Conclusion

As Stam states, when classical works are adapted, the story is transformed, turned around, and critically rewritten. Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* is a narrative in which the rightful rulers fight against pure evil, but where the villain has the same stature as the hero. Although Rāvaṇa is evil in Kampan's text, the demon becomes a suffering lover living a tragic story. Such emotional rendering has proved appealing, especially for a Tamil audience. Motivated by a political aim, Ramasami looked for Rāma's faults and Rāvaṇa's virtues. Tamil *Rāmāyaṇas* such as *Irāvaṇan Kāviyam* transposed the narrative into a contemporary context. Thus, RAAVAN (2010) did not take a completely new approach, but rather was influenced by diverse readings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the feelings of Rāvaṇa, contemporary political issues, and the celebration of outlaws in a country with profound social divisions.

Ratnam's adaptation criticizes the good/evil dichotomy of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and raises questions about the complexity of issues concerning otherness. It is not clear who is the hero and who the villain. The demon attains at times

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60 Zvelebil 1988, 132.
61 Zvelebil 1988, 132.
62 Richman 2008, 215–218.

the hero's qualities, and Bīrā (Rāvaṇa) is represented as a low-caste criminal, the leader of oppressed people, and his kingdom as an underdeveloped forest. The *ādivāsī*s were ignored and are agents of violence, but they are also its victims. Because of poverty and exploitation, there is a parallel government and war with the state. The film condemns police corruption and brutality in the hilly areas and villages near the forests where communist agendas, political movements, and powerful criminals have taken over. This reversal of strong significant characters such as Rāvaṇa serves to emphasize the worldview of the other.

Amongst the multiplicity of interpretations of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Ratnam demonstrates the relevance of the contemporary context for value judgements: his rendition favors the bandit and the perspective of Southerners, and it comments on conflicts in the *ādivāsī* communities. The character of Rāvaṇa is validated by showing goodwill towards others. Despite being an outlaw, he cares for people and is a sort of Robin Hood. The injustice his sister has experienced is amplified to justify his anger, and his love for Sītā is accentuated – two popular tropes in Southern *Rāmāyaṇas*. The policemen are portrayed as greedy for power, abusers of women, and cunning. In this struggle the police win, but without honor. The film thus constitutes a critique of those in power: they are not righteous, they just have the means. As it has been in the past, the *Rāmāyaṇa* remains today a key for understanding India.

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Philippe Bornet

Unruly Images

Representing India in the Calwer *Bilder-Tafeln zur Länder- und Völker-Kunde* (1883)

Abstract

This article focuses on a work published in 1883 by a German Christian press associated with a missionary society. The book provides a visual panorama of all the world's cultures in 1,690 engravings. Most images were reproductions of material that had initially appeared in a variety of other contexts, ranging from missionary periodicals to secular travel magazines and British colonial literature. This study examines the message that the volume's editors wanted to convey: the extra-European world was portrayed as devoid of historical agency, non-Christian religions as false, and the presence of western agents – in particular, missionaries – as providential. Retracing the life story of a few images, I show that some of them communicated these notions better than others. For example, engravings based on photographs were often not as polemical as those based on drawings, simply because of the characteristics of photography as a medium. Complicating the critical reading of the images as simply missionary propaganda, I argue that a volume like the one examined here is best understood when placed within a transnational (or connected) history of visual practices.

Keywords

Christian Mission, India, Engravings, Orientalism, Photographs, Hinduism, Calwer *Bilder-Tafeln zur Länder- und Völker-Kunde*

Biography

Philippe Bornet is senior lecturer at the University of Lausanne, in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilisations. After time at the University of Tübingen and at the University of Chicago, he completed a PhD in the comparative history of religions on rituals of hospitality in Jewish and Indian texts (University of Lausanne, 2007). His current research examines interactions between India and Europe and, more specifically, Swiss missionaries in South India at the beginning of the 20th century and the circulation of epistemic and visual cultures. Recent publications include *Rites et pratiques de l'hospitalité* (2010), and the edited volumes *Religions in Play* (2012) (with M. Burger) and *L'orientalisme des marges* (2014) (with S. Gorshenina).

Introduction: Unruly Images*

Since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 and its sequel, *Culture and Imperialism*, in 1993,[1] it has been a commonplace to look at western artistic and visual representations of non-European cultures as "orientalist" artefacts which essentialise what they represent and tacitly reinforce power asymmetries between Europe and its "oriental" others. One can think in this context of the "orientalist" school of painting[2] or the representation of "oriental" cultures in western cinema,[3] theatre or even music. In his analysis of artistic productions such as the opera *Aida*,[4] Said seems to suggest not only that art faithfully reflects the ideological (and colonial) worldview of its period of production, but also that its later performances are bound to reproduce the same "message". While Said expressed more nuanced views in later works,[5] such a perspective reduces an artwork to an unidimensional meaning and does not leave space for radical reinterpretations by new audiences, let alone the register of emotions: an artwork can trigger feelings in its viewers or listeners, and it cannot be assumed that they will be systematically aligned with whatever "ideological subtext" one identifies in it.

More recently, however, several studies have underlined that art – in particular music and images – are complex objects that cannot be quickly reduced to a single dimension: one must take account not only of the artist's intentions, but also of the medium itself and the individual interpretations of recipients. Thus, in his *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts*, John MacKenzie was one of the first to insist that even works produced within an imperialist context have the ability to "resist" imperialist ideological configurations.[6] More recently, François Pouillon has focused on the "polysemic"

1   Said 1978; Said 1993.
2   See for example Nochlin 1989.
3   See Derfoufi 2018 for an analysis of the trope of the white archaeologist in western cinema.
4   Said 1993, 111–131.
5   See for example his response to S. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*: Said 2001.
6   MacKenzie 1995.

aspect of images, specifically analysing the relative success of "orientalist" painting in the contemporary Middle East. He identifies cultural, comic (!), and financial aspects in the revalorisation of such visuals among a Middle Eastern viewership.[7] Yet more studies have analysed the translocal history of visual media and have shown that images that might seem to be reflections of a European orientalist imaginary have sometimes unexpected relations to actual images produced in the represented context, thus challenging the view of a visual Orient as a purely western creation and acknowledging the agency of local artists.[8] In that sense, analysis of "orientalist images" becomes a more complicated study of how images move across spaces, be it in terms of their production, their viewership, or the other visual cultures they encounter.

The present contribution explores a number of aspects of this complex transcultural framework through the study of one specific case. To do so, it focuses on the representation of Indian culture and religion in a volume dating back to the end of the 19th century and intended as a sort of global visual history. The first part presents the volume as a whole: the intended audience, the content's organisation, and most importantly, the diverse origins of the featured images. The second part analyses the volume's section about India, looking more specifically at the representation of religious practices, missionary activity, portraits of "natives", and the depiction of remarkable buildings or landscapes. Comparisons are offered between the volume's images and their appearance in other editorial contexts. The conclusion reflects on the translocal circulation of visual material and its implications for the interpretation of "orientalising" processes.

A Late Modern *Orbis Pictus*

The cover of the January 1851 issue of *The Missionary Magazine and Chronicle*, a journal of the London Missionary Society (hereafter LMS), carries an engraving showing a pair of Indian twins and a caption saying, "'John Angell James,' and 'George Storer Mansfield,' the Hindoo twin orphan children" (fig. 1). The opening pages tell the story of orphan twins who had been "found, when quite infants, on the road-side" and had subsequently been

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7   Pouillon 2014, 15–16.
8   For example Gruzinski 2001; Subrahmanyam 2012.
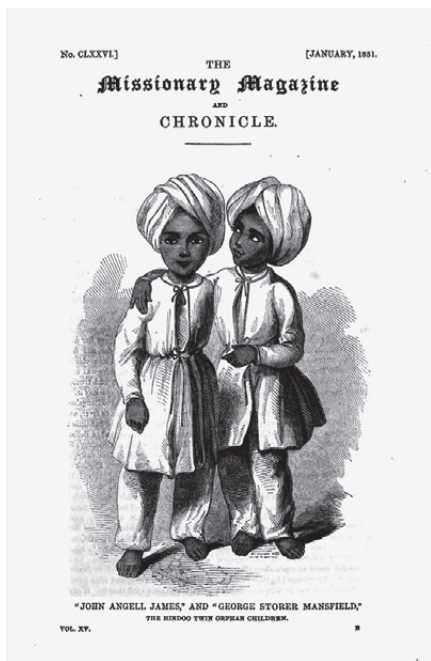
Fig. 1: Cover of the *The Missionary Magazine and Chronicle* 176, (1851), published by the London Missionary Society.

Fig. 2: Panel 56, "Tamil lands", *Bilder-Tafeln*, Calwer Verlagsverein.

educated by the wife of a missionary in Mysore, Karnataka. The engraving of them, based on a sketch drawn by a local artist, was aimed at inspiring compassion in the metropolitan sponsors of the mission, a society of women based in Birmingham. The author of the article, Annie Coles, ardently insisted that more financial support was needed.[9] She added that if properly educated with adequate means, these Hindu twins would later contribute to the progress of the missionary work. Noteworthy in the engraving are the children's clothes, certainly sent from Europe by the sponsors, and their facial expressions, suggesting a gentle character. The picture adds a strong evocative power to a compelling story.

9   The text invites donations: "Help them with your money and by your prayers, that they may never disgrace the much-loved names they bear (*sc.* George and John)". John Angell James (1785–1859) was a famous British "non-conformist" evangelical preacher and author of several books; George Storer Mansfield (1764–1837) had donated money for the foundation of Spring Hill College, a non-conformist seminary in Birmingham.

More than 30 years later, the same picture was reprinted in a different context: a collection of engravings which appeared in 1883 under the title *Bilder-Tafeln zur Länder- und Volker-Kunde* (literally, "Image Panels on Geography and Ethnology"), published by the Calwer Missionsverlag, which was run by eminent members of the Pietist mission of Württemberg, including Hermann Gundert (1814–1893).[10] The picture of the twins (fig. 2) was no longer illustrating a story or encouraging readers to sponsor missions. Rather, it had been selected for its artistic quality and suggestive character, as an edifying example of missionary activity in India. It was one of the 1,690 engravings depicting the entire world republished in this book without any text beyond short captions next to the pictures.

If we browse through the volume's pages, many questions arise, specific as well as general: what was the intent behind this project? Where did the images come from and why were they republished in this volume? Does the visual discourse of this volume systematically adopt an "orientalist" perspective that rehearses and propagates stereotypical conceptions about foreign cultures and religions?

The Making of a Visual World Geography

Audience

In the short preface to the *Bilder-Tafeln*, possibly written by Gundert himself, the work's intended purpose is clearly stated:

In the present work, we publish a series of the most interesting pictures from our collection [Illustrationsschatz]. In so doing, we would like to present, alongside detailed works about individual countries, a modest work made up of images, which only quickly gazes at Europe, and deals with the land and people of the four other parts of the world in manifold ways. […] We hope that those panels will contribute to increasing the knowledge and the engagement with the weal and woe of those distant countries in Christendom.[11]

10 Gundert was the successor of Christian Gottlob Barth (1799–1862), a well-known Pietist of Württemberg.

11 Anonymous 1883a, [iii] (this and all other translations are mine).

The preface also introduces the volume as an addition to another book, also published by the Calwer Verlag, the *Lesebuch der Erdkunde* ("Reader of Geography") by Eduard Schwarz, a work intended for the classroom and meant to be an illustrated (but mostly textual) depiction of the world's natural and human geography.[12] Even if its publishing policy evolved slightly towards more scholarly works under Gundert's direction,[13] the Calwer publishing house specialised in literature for young people. It published, for example, a *Missionsblatt für Kinder* ("Missionary Paper for Children"), following the model of the British *Church Missionary Juvenile Instructor* of the Church Missionary Society (hereafter CMS) and of the *Juvenile Missionary Magazine*, of LMS. This context suggests that the volume was intended as a pedagogical tool, and indeed, contemporary advertisements recommended it warmly as an illustrated atlas for geography classes as well as for "Missionsstunden", that is, catechesis in public schools. A review published in the *Evangelisches Missionsmagazin*, the journal of the Basel Mission, praised the use of this volume by schoolteachers and clergy, stressing the volume's exceptionally cheap price[14] – one way to secure a large diffusion.[15] Even though a thin booklet giving some context and explanations was published one year later, in 1884,[16] the quasi-absence of text in the original volume certainly singularised the work and broadened its audience, while also suggesting that the images were self-evident. In sum, the book certainly targets the usual audience of the Calwer Verlag: mostly young people, parents, and teachers belonging to a Pietist middle class. For these reasons, the volume can be considered a visual geographical history of the entire world intended for educational purposes, a kind of updated version of John Comenius's *Orbis Pictus* of 1658 with a Christian evangelical subtext.

A closer look, however, reveals that while some images conveyed an obvious message related to missionary propaganda, others were more ambigu-

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12 Schwarz 1866 and Schwarz 1869.

13 An example is Wurm 1908, a handbook about the history of religions. See however the title of Josenhans 1855, unambiguously intended for a young audience.

14 As advertisements in the *Calwer Missionsblatt*, the Calwer publishing house's official periodical, inform us, the book was available in different sizes, for different prices: as a booklet for 6 Marks, in slightly larger size (175×110 cm), for 10 Marks, and in full size (165×243 cm) for 12 Marks. The prices correspond approximately to USD 30, USD 60 and USD 70 today, see www.measuringworth.com [accessed 15 March 2021].

15 Anonymous 1883b, 224.

16 Anonymous 1884.

ous. The collection included visual elements showing a great variety of subjects and although some clearly reflect an evangelical (and critical) attitude towards local cultures, others do not echo such a polemical Christian perspective. Similarly, while the reproduction of wood engravings exclusively contributed to the book's homogeneity, the genealogies of specific images are highly diverse: sources range from sketches drawn by European or local artists to traditional local iconography and photographs.

Organisation of the Volume

Extracting pictures from their original settings in order to print them next to each other, the editors of the *Bilder-Tafeln* made decisions about selection and organisation. These choices created an implicit interpretative framework by arranging the images into a specific order, creating a categorisation into specific "panels" (each displaying 8 to 10 engravings), and placing other images as neighbours. The table of contents is striking in reflecting a particular conception of world history (fig. 3). Organised by continent, it is conceived as moving gradually from the known, local, and Christian to the more foreign and other.

The book opens on a presentation of Europe, which is represented by the Reformers and by a selected number of images depicting the landscapes of England, France, and the German region of Württemberg. Immediately after these introductory panels (seven out of a total of 178), the book goes both eastwards and backwards in time, first illustrating places in Palestine and Syria mentioned in the Bible. This thematic imbalance quickly suggests that the real subject of the volume is certainly not the "entire world", but rather the "exotic" and extra-European world. Leaving the Near East, the work then approaches India from the west, followed by Sri Lanka, China, and Japan. After a few pages about Africa, the Americas are shown with no mention of recent American history, such as the Civil War, but with an exclusive focus on native people, that is Inuit, native North Americans, and native South Americans. The book concludes with pictures of Australia and Melanesia.

With the volume's organisation strongly reminiscent of a Hegelian conception of world history, it is not surprising that only Europe is represented through actual historical figures. This approach is certainly not specific to this publication: the treatment of non-European cultures, in particular Africa and Asia, in western school material very often reveals a hierarchis-

Inhalts-Verzeichnis.

(Ausführliches Register siehe am Schluss.)

Fig. 3: Table of contents, *Bilder-Tafeln*, Calwer Verlagsverein.

ing conception of world history and religions, locating historical agency exclusively in the west.[17]

Engravings, Photographs, and Engravings of Photographs

According to the preface, the images published in the volume stem from a collection kept by the Calwer publishing house (an "Illustrationsschatz"). In fact, all the images had already been published, not only in periodicals published by the Calwer Verlag (the *Calwer Missionsblatt*) or the Basel Mission (the *Evangelisches Missionsmagazin*), but also in periodicals of British missionary societies such as the *Missionary Register* (CMS), *Church Missionary Gleaner* (CMS), *The Church Missionary Intelligencer* (CMS), or *The Missionary Magazine and Chronicle* (LMS).[18] Periodicals of these British societies had included images in the form of wood engravings from an early date, modelled on the American Tract Society, which was a pioneer in this domain.[19] Other pictures had initially appeared in secular publications, such as the French journal *Le Tour du Monde: Nouveau Journal des Voyages* – a journal which published travelogues and reports of explorers – or in books by British scholars, such as James Fergusson's *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (1868/1891).[20] Tracing the origins of a specific image can be a tricky task even though many of them are signed by an engraver. In some rare cases, the artist's name[21] or the technology used is specified, but this information does not reveal much about the image's own source, which might have been, for example, a sketch, drawing, painting, or photograph.

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17 See further examples in the volume edited by Richards 1989, as well as the case of depictions of Africa in Swiss children's literature in Purtschert 2012.

18 Chronologically, the first missionary periodical to include pictures was the *Missionary Papers for the Use of the Weekly and Monthly Contributors to the Church Missionary Society* (London, from 1816 on). The Calwer Verlag did not pursue missionary activities by itself but was closely associated with the Basel Mission; see Lahmann 1999, 10.

19 See Morgan 1999, 52, who emphasises the role of this medium in the context of American evangelical societies as examples of early mass-media communication: "Wood engravings conformed in medium and appearance to the format of the tract and its use: visual propaganda that was inexpensive, mass produced, and able to entice the eye with the tract and then its contents."

20 Fergusson 1868/1891.

21 Signatures are often (but not always) followed by a Latin abbreviation, for example *sc.* for *sculpsit* or *del.* for *delineavit*, which indicate respectively the engraver and the author of the drawing on which the engraving is based. See Gascoigne 1986, 48a-b-c.

A first series of images appears simply to have been drawn by an artist before being engraved. In these instances, the image was not bound by any technical constraints, which allowed for the reproduction of more dramatic scenes, for they could be created from scratch according to editorial needs. They might be based on drafts prepared in the distant context or entirely manufactured in Europe. In both cases, they "created a space in which the romantic imagination of the artist could intervene in very direct ways".[22] And indeed, as long as only engravings were printed in periodicals, almost full editorial control could be exerted by intervening at any stage in the making of these images, including forging an item in order to fit a particular agenda (see below for an example). The present collection includes works by the British "orientalist" engraver and artist Joseph Austin Benwell (1816–1886) and the French artists Émile-Antoine Bayard (1837–1891) and Horace Castelli (1825–1889), who had both worked for the journal *Le Tour du Monde*.[23]

A second set of images comprises engravings produced from photographs. Photography was already being used by missionaries in the second half of the 19th century, and it was widespread throughout India from at least the 1850s.[24] Photographs were included in the regular reports circulating between missionaries and their home institutions. The Basel Mission, for instance, sent a circular to its missionaries in India, China, and Africa in 1878 that stressed the importance of reports and photographs communicated to headquarters.[25] That message indicates that "visual material" about the distant countries was needed by the home institution and that even at an early date missionaries working in the field could take photographs without being professional photographers.[26]

22 Pinney 1997, 22.

23 Other artists whose work was reproduced include the British C. W. Cheshire, W. Dickes, W. Harrison, J. Johnston, J. Knight, E. J. Marty, C. E. O. Measom, T. Robinson, X. A. Ruff, R. Sayer, J. Scott, Sheeres, E. Whymper, and the French A. Bertrand, L. Dumont, C. Laplante, Auguste Trichon, as well as the Belgian Adolphe-François Pannemaker. For information on some of these figures, see the corresponding entries in Bénézit/Busse 1999.

24 See Jenkins 1993, 92: "Photographs were already being taken in the context of the London Missionary Society and Jesuit presence in the 1850s." Photography itself dates from the first decades of the 19th century and in India, photographical studios, clubs, and curricula were established from the middle of the 19th century on; see Karlekar 2013, 29–30, for Tamil Nadu.

25 Josenhans 1878, 4: "We would also like to urgently request drawings or photographs suitable for wood engraving and publication in our sheets. Any expenses for these will be gladly reimbursed."

26 See Jenkins 1993, 92: "At this stage of the study of missionary photography, [...] we should consider it likely that any missionary society was organising itself a supply of photographs

The determination of whether an engraving was based on a photograph is an important task, since drawings and photographs elaborate reality in vastly different ways – which is not to say that photography is any more "real" than drawings. First, the technique used for producing photographs in the 19th century had consequences for the representation of the subject matter, since, as Paul Jenkins writes, "Photography, especially with a slow camera, and in situations where the human object could help to determine how he or she was pictured, was much less likely to be sensationalist in its content than images which were generated by artists or by technicians at the request of editors in a metropolitan context."[27] Thus, for technical reasons, especially exposure time, engravings based on photographs usually show still-lives or landscapes, people posing, and peaceful situations. Secondly, some human subjects of photographs would have been able to control how they were positioned, the expression they wore or the context in which they were photographed. However, scenes were often staged under the direction of the photographer, a control reinforced with the introduction of studios in the earlier 20th century. In addition, one cannot assume that in the second part of the 19th century photographers in India were exclusively British or western colonial agents or missionaries. As Pinney noted, "early Indian photographic practitioners were part of an élite that mimicked key colonial aesthetic forms".[28] Photographic clubs developed quickly in India, for example in Bombay in 1854 – one year after the founding of the Photographic Society of London – and in Calcutta in 1856; at its founding the latter had some 30 Indian photographers as members. In this context, portraits and group photographs were becoming more and more popular in India, in part at the request of the photographed subjects, eager to show themselves in the progressive light associated with the new technology. A large collection of photographs taken by the famous Indian photographer Lala Deen Dayal (1844–1905) witnesses to this popularity and to the fact that

from overseas in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. 'Organising a supply' can also mean purchasing photographs from studios, where these existed, or obtaining images from other missionary societies. It is my impression that there was frequent exchange of objects, images and texts among Protestant missionary societies for use in their publicity into the 1860s and 1870s, if not throughout the century."

27 Jenkins 1993, 94. See also Jenkins 1993, 114, fn. 13, where the author suggests that the *Bilder-Tafeln* volume is actually a publication of the Basel Mission's "Cliché-Buch" (Basel Mission Archives, QQ-30.001), and that about 25% of the engravings of that collection are based on photographs.

28 Pinney 1997, 86.

photography percolated into many circles, from higher class families to royalty and schools, and included representations of female subjects.[29]

Thus, it may be speculated that engravings based on photographs represent scenes that are not as polemical as engravings based on sketches or drawings, reflecting technical constraints and often a negotiation between the photographer and the photographed subject.[30]

While making an engraving from a photograph might seem paradoxical, it is easily explained by both printing constraints – half-tone printing of photographs only became mainstream after 1895[31] – and ideological message, for the process adds opportunities for intervention and removes the original personal and contextual setting, creating a distance between the viewer and the object. The decontextualizing process at work in the making of an engraving from a photograph also evokes timeless notions of exoticism and antiquity – ideas that were all central to the general worldview the book was seeking to convey.[32]

Imag(in)ing India and Hinduism

Four main aspects of cultural diversity are highlighted by the volume, with a particular focus on religion: (1) local religious practices, (2) missionary activities as a civilising process, (3) portraits of natives, and (4) remarkable landscapes or sites with no direct connection to religion.

Religion

While religion is naturally a major topic throughout the *Bilder-Tafeln*, India is significantly (and oddly) the only region in the entire book with a dedicated section on religion. As expected, many images in that section reflect

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29 See Karlekar 2013, 34–38.

30 Although it was still possible to ask for specific subjects to be photographed, to select the most fitting clichés, and/or to reframe photographs before publication. See Jenkins 1993, 98–101 for a few examples of the relations between the photographer Christian Hornberger, active in Ghana, and the Directorate of the North German Mission in Bremen in the second half of the 19th century and for more on the interests at stake in the selection of the photographed subjects.

31 Rice 2010. For example, the *Evangelisches Missionsmagazin* printed its first photograph as late as 1896.

32 See Chatterjee 2011, 23 about a similar transition from photographs to engravings in the reproduction of images of major Indian sites in schoolbooks produced in the 1950s and 1960s.
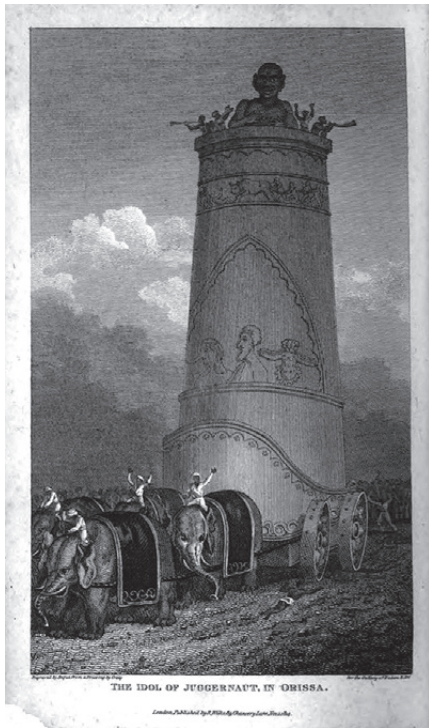
Fig. 5: *Bilder-Tafeln*, panel 31, "India: religion", "Heathen carts", Calw. (© Calwer Verlag)

Fig. 4: "The Idol of Juggernaut, in Orissa", in: Edward Polehampton / John M. Good, *The Gallery of Nature and Art: or, A Tour Through Creation and Science*, London, 1818, vol. 6, 485.

missionary propaganda, with a particular insistence on "strange rites" and various ascetic practices that would naturally make a strong impression on a Pietist audience accustomed to churches where nothing but minimal rituals were performed. The section includes a series of images dealing with hectic rituals and odd deities, although with the surprising absence of *satī*, a favourite theme of missionary polemics which had horrified western observers since medieval times.[33]

Here, as in the other parts of the book, the images were not new but had been borrowed from earlier publications. Thus, a picture showing the "extravagant" processions of chariots (*tērs*) at the Jagannath temple of Puri (fig. 5) is a republication of an engraving which had appeared as early as 1818, in a book about various curiosities of the world considered from a Christian Protestant perspective and entitled *The Gallery of Nature and Art*. The original image (fig. 4), with a carnivalesque chariot topped by a human

33 Weinberger-Thomas 1999. The absence of *satī* might have to do with the young audience targeted by the volume.

Fig. 6: Panel 32, "India: religion", *Bilder-Tafeln*, Calwer Verlagsverein.

Fig 7: Henry Lord / Jean-Frédéric Bernard / Bernard Picart, Dissertation sur les moeurs et sur la religion des Bramines, in: *Moeurs et coutumes de tous les peoples du monde*, 1723, vol. 1, part. 1, between pages 68 and 69.

figure surrounded by trumpet players, is referenced as "engraved by [William?] Angus from a drawing by [William Marshall?] Craig". The depicted scene does not bear much resemblance to anything actual: the chariot has nothing to do with a South Indian *tēr* and the deity certainly does not look like Jagannath. The painter, probably William Marshall Craig (d. 1827), therefore likely conceived the visual elements after a text and his own imagination. The image features the classic motif of a person crushed by the chariot, generally interpreted a sign of religious fanaticism. In its republished version, the image removes the scene from its natural setting of clouds and trees and relocates it in the middle of Hindu temples and an ecstatic crowd. With that transposition, the image loses the aesthetic qualities of the original, and its visual message becomes purely polemical.

Another depiction related to rituals shows practitioners engaging in astonishing bodily postures. Here the images do not seem to have been fabri-

Fig. 8: Panel 30, "India: religion", "Forced worship of Kali", *Bilder-Tafeln,* Calwer Verlagsverein.

8. Erzwungene Kali-Anbetung.

cated from a missionary point of view, but instead were mostly borrowed from other collections that emphasised the strangeness or unnatural character of the represented scenes. They can be read against the development of anatomical sciences, commenting critically upon bodily postures that do not accord with God-given normality. One example is the famous image of a yogi over a fire that appeared in Bernard and Picart's archaic work of 1723 and is republished here with a few alterations (fig. 6). While the image's original publication context (fig. 7) emphasised the extreme postures of Indian yogis who were practising austerity "by devotion, in the honour of a god" (in the original French caption), the comment accompanying its republication speaks of "public atrocities" which for the most part were "fortunately" banned by the British.[34]

Finally, the volume published examples of the iconography of Indian gods such as Brahma, Kali, or Hanuman. While some of these representations obviously reflect Christian apologetics, others were simply copied from traditional iconography. Thus, one image that is allegedly of Kali (fig. 8), actually borrows elements from the Christian iconography of Moloch – with the bull head and the evocation of child sacrifice – and shows nothing even remotely resembling the traditional iconography of

34 Anonymous 1884, 9. See the comment of von Wyss-Giacosa 2006, 165–166 for an analysis of the image's construction and its relation with an image published in the classical work of the Dutch chaplain active in South India, Abraham Rogerius (1609–1649), *De open-deure tot het Verbogen Heydendom* 1651.

Fig. 9: Panel 30, "India: Religion", "Brahma", *Bilder-Tafeln,* Calwer Verlagsverein.

Kali. It was created entirely in order to project a dark light on Indian reli-gious traditions.

Conversely, the image of the god Brahma and his *haṃsa* (a goose or swan) (fig. 9) had previously appeared (see fig. 10) in *The Complete Hindoo Pantheon* by Etienne Alexander Rodrigues (1842), who had evidently copied traditional iconography. The example in Figure 11 is typical of the syncretistic style of painting characteristic of the Thanjavur court, Tamil Nadu. The Indian artist, who had himself copied another version of a similar image – possibly a painting on a wooden panel on display at the Thanjavur court – worked with a technique that had been originally imported from Europe: gouache painting on European paper. While the Indian artist's copy already marked the move from an iconographic representation of the deity with religious function to a "neutralised" version on paper, the republication of a very sim-ilar image in the *Bilder-Tafeln* was meant to illustrate the strange, often zoo-morphic, shapes of Hindu deities and their *vāhana*s.

Also illuminating is the engraving of the Mysore bull (Nandi) statue (fig. 12), very likely based on a photograph, perhaps even the 1865 photo-graph in Figure 13. The only major difference between the engraving and the

Fig. 10: Etienne Alexander Rodrigues, *The Complete Hindoo Pantheon Comprising the Principal Deities Worshipped by the Natives of British India Throughout Hindoostan, Being a Collection of the Gods and Goddesses Accompanied by a Succinct History and Descriptive of the Idols. Deduced from Original and Authentical Manuscripts and also Extracts from Standard Authors*, Madras, 1842, between pages 10 and 11.

Fig. 11: Brahma as a youthful man on a throne, and his *vāhana*. Gouache on paper, around 1830, part of an album entitled "Hindu deities" realised in Tiruchirapalli/Trichinopoly (South India), British Museum, London, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1992-0410-0-1-5 [accessed 15 January 2021]. (© The Trustees of the British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)
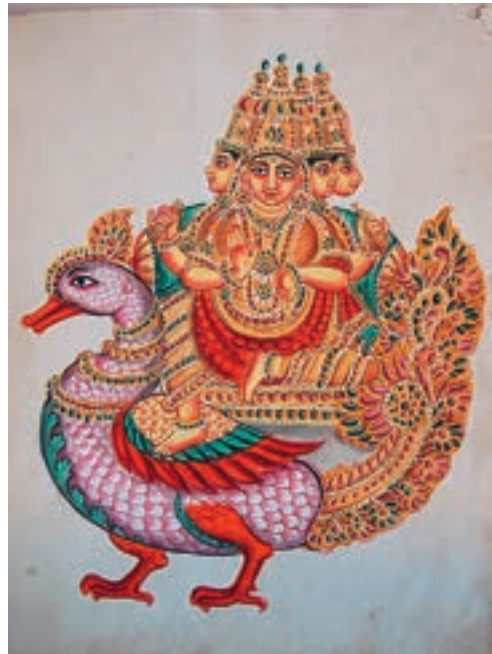
Fig. 12: Panel 33, "India: religion", "The bull Bassawa near Mysore", *Bilder-Tafeln*, Calwer Verlagsverein.

Fig. 13: Nandi on Chamundi Hills in Mysore, British Library, Photo 512/(13), photographer unknown, London, http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/g/019pho000000512u00013000.html [accessed 15 January 2021]. (© The Trustees of the British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

photograph is the position of the attendant at the site, a detail easily adapted in producing the derivative engraving. When looked at in isolation, the image certainly does not reflect missionary propaganda; instead it conveys a sense of both the site's majestic beauty and the technical prowess required to sculpt such a gigantic monolithic statue.

It is worth noting that images of the iconography of Hindu gods became important building blocks in the construction of a nationalist and anti-colonial imagery around the same time. Art studios active out of Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras specialised in the production of images showing Indian deities as well as scenes from the Indian epics, and artists such as Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906) specialised in the representation of mythological scenes, with reference to visual codes typical of western "orientalist" images.[35] Abandoning the images' local contextual specificities – such as the specific location of that statue of Basava/Nandi in Mysore, or a specific South Indian style in the previous image – their decontextualised reproduction turned them into visual components of an essentialised notion of a Hindu India. It is striking that images similar to those that were used for anti-colonial purpose appear in the present volume, thus showing the "unruly character" of images which can take on different meanings as a result of their context of performance.

35 Mitter 1994; Pinney 2004. A striking example is Ravi Varma's new version of the "orientalist" painting by Jean-Joseph Benjamin Constant (1845–1902) entitled *Judith*; see Mitter 1994, 187.
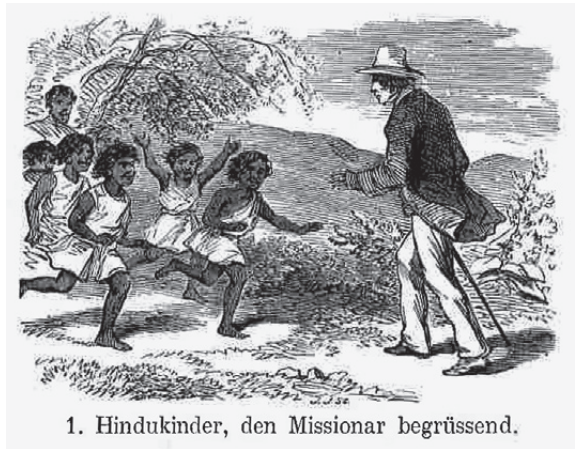
Fig. 14: Panel 55, "Tamil lands",
"Hindu children greeting the
missionary", *Bilder-Tafeln,*
Calwer Verlagsverein.

1. Hindukinder, den Missionar begrüssend.

The Civilising Mission

Next to images showing different aspects of "Hinduism", a second recurring theme in the collection is that of missionary activity itself. While the pictures depicting religion generally suggest the extravagant otherness of India and Hinduism, pictures showing missionary activity suggest that this otherness is not so extreme that nothing could be undertaken. The impression of an understandable otherness which one could improve is achieved through showing scenes of progress, most typically with a missionary at work and succeeding in his task. The missionary is easily recognisable: he (never she) is distinguished by his European clothing (often white), his hat, and his position in the picture, somewhat distant from the "native people", or at least standing in a space that is distinct from the main action, conveying the impression that he is observing and reflecting on what is happening (see, for example, fig. 14).

Sometimes pictures were reworked in order to put more emphasis on the missionary activity. Thus, a depiction of a scene showing a "Hindu dying"[36] kept in the Basel Mission archives (fig. 15) is supplemented in the republished version with the figure of a missionary with his Bible (fig. 16). Evidently the engraver could easily modify a drawing for editorial reasons, and

36 The scene refers to the customary giving away of a cow – the *vaitaraṇī* cow – to a dying Brahmin, which will help him reach safely the other side of the Vaitaraṇī river in hell. See Kane 1968, 182–183 for details about the ritual.

Fig. 15: Basel Mission Archives, Basel, ref. QC-30.001.0172, http://digitallibrary.usc. edu/cdm/ref/collection/ p15799coll123/id/21708 [accessed 15 January 2021]. (© mission 21)

1. Sterbender Hindu.
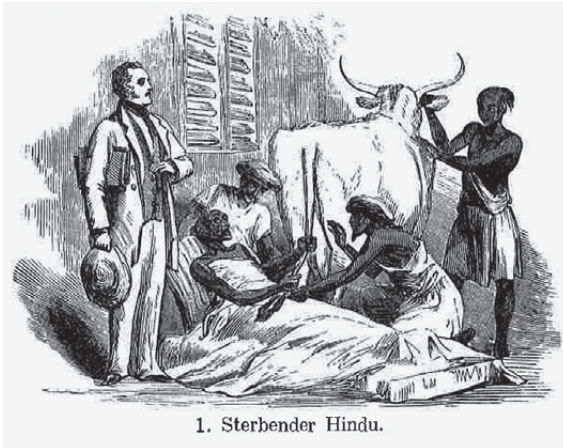
Fig. 16: Panel 57, "Tamil lands", "Dying Hindu", *Bilder-Tafeln*, Calwer Verlagsverein.

stereotyped characters – such as the figure of the missionary – were ready for insertion.[37]

A more extreme example of this "civilising mission" is provided by images suggesting the natives' lack of morality, and hence commenting on the pressing need for moral improvement through Christian mission. A good

37 Jenkins 1993, 93: "The image had to be transcribed onto a block of some kind (the presumption is that in most cases wood was used), which means that a craftsman intervened between the direct mechanical registration of an image in a photograph and its publication, and that changes therefore could be made in the image for a variety of editorial reasons."

Fig. 17: Panel 39, "The Ganges river region", "A mother sacrifices her child to the alligator", *Bilder-Tafeln*, Calwer Verlagsverein.

Fig 18: *My Picture-Book*, New York: American Tract Society, 1863, 46.

case is the figure of a mother sacrificing her child to a crocodile, seemingly implying that this was a common practice among Hindus (fig. 17). However, the same image was frequently printed in various missionary periodicals (fig. 18) without any specific link to India. Thus, a stereotyped representation could easily be reused in very varied settings, especially, perhaps, when the viewers were not directly acquainted with the depicted context.

Portraying the Natives

Some of the volume's images parallel British colonial projects attempting to document visually the characteristics of the native population, such as *People from India* (1868), a large photographical project that had the goal of visually recording all the diversity of Indian cultures. The anthropometrical perspective at work in this project depersonalised the human subjects to focus on their physical characteristics. In our volume, the same perspective is perceptible in images which document the physical attributes of a specific group, tribe, or caste.

Fig. 19: Panel 53, "Telugu lands", "Peitschi, the daughter of the snake charmer, as heathen and as Christian", *Bilder-Tafeln*, Calwer Verlagsverein.

Fig. 20: John Forbes Watson / John William Kaye (eds.), 1868, *The People of India. A Series of Photographic Illustrations*, London: India Office, 1868, vol. 1, 77, image 19, "Cole Christians. Aboriginal. Chota Nagpoor".

While the image from the *Bilder-Tafeln* found in Figure 19 seems entirely fabricated to fit the ideological message, with dress and hair playing the role of civilisational markers, the photograph from *The People of India* in Figure 20 is no less staged to convey the same message. In these cases, and in photographs as well as in drawings, the power configuration around the visual representation is strongly asymmetrical: the represented subjects are depersonalised and put to the service of an imperialist discourse which has no consideration for their interests. Though we noted above that photography was often used to depict more peaceful scenes than drawings, it appears here to be yet another "tool of imperialism".[38] Such images inscribe the colonial/missionary activity into a more global narrative of civilisational progress directed through the inexorable spread of western and Christian values on a worldwide scale, reassuring the reader/viewer that he or she is actually the model to which these other societies are aspiring.

38 To echo Headrick's 1981 classic work *The Tools of Empire*, on the relation between colonialism and technology.
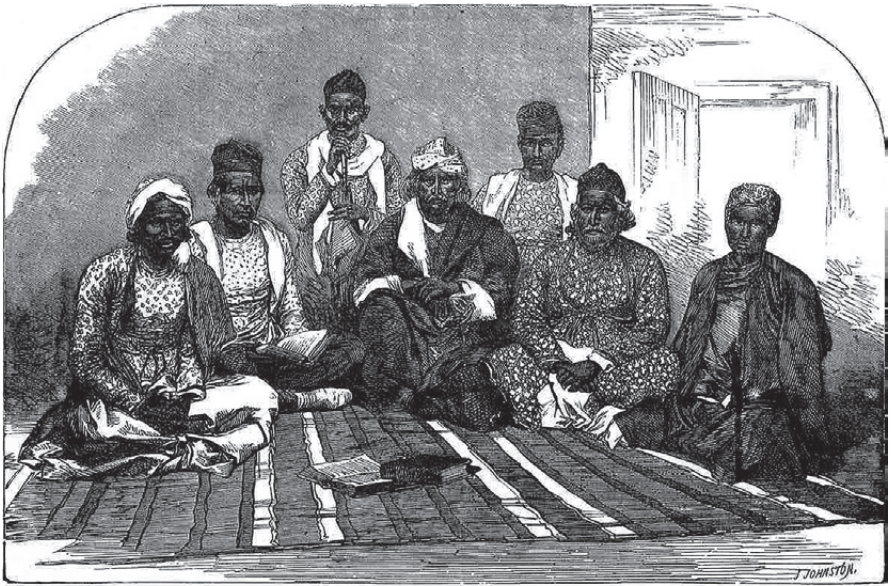
Fig. 21: Panel 43, "The Ganges river region", "Evangelists in Benares", *Bilder-Tafeln,* Calwer Verlagsverein.[39]

However, and in contrast with such depersonalising depictions, most images showing the natives in the volume are portraits, featuring people posing in costumes and in a rather flattering light. This description fits images commenting on successful cases of conversion, depicting native Indian "evangelists" who, it was hoped, would continue the initiated evangelising process on their own. The image in Figure 21 shows a group of Indian Christian male evangelists from Benares posing in elegant costumes around books that are probably Christian Bibles. While quite different from the depersonalising visual discourse of Figure 19, this composition has been carefully staged to suggest that Christianity was slowly but surely percolating through the local cultures, a picture that did not accord entirely with reality.

39 The original image appeared in *The Church Missionary Intelligencer* 12, 1861, 74 and 89. The text accompanying this initial publication focuses on the difficulties experienced by these Indian Christians, both in their conversion and in their work as evangelists. One of them (first from the right), a certain Nilakantha/Nehemiah Goreh (1825–1895), was a Brahmin from Maharashtra who had converted to Christianity before living a life of full renunciation as a "Christian Sannyasi". See Fox Young 2005 for an analysis of Goreh's life and the polemics between Christianity and Brahmanism in that context.

2. Der Swami von Schirale (Kanara).

Fig. 22: Panel 69, "Malabar", "The Swami of Shirali (Kanara)", *Bilder-Tafeln,* Calwer Verlagsverein.

Another image portraying the "natives" does not immediately convey the same sense of successful missionary activity. Figure 22 shows a religious leader, not in a case of "mistaken religion" but dressed in formal costume and clearly posing for the photographer. The person depicted here is the swami of Shirali, Karnataka, the guru of the famous and rich Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmin Math, Pandurangashram (1847–1915). A brief comment in the accompanying booklet indicates that the swami of this "little village agreed to sit in front of a photographer".[40] This wording suggests that the swami could have declined to be photographed, and that he controlled the interaction, not the other way around. With the medium employed, the group signalled its intention to appear modern and progressist, since photography was probably not a widespread technique in this location – an interpretation that is in accord with the profile of Pandurangashram, who is known for having turned the location into a

40 Anonymous 1884, 19.

"modern" (and widely successful) pilgrimage site.[41] Making an engraving out of the photograph had the consequence of removing the progressist aspect of the scene and so to say returning the swami back into a distant and past world of exoticism.

While I am not suggesting that such an image is a counter-example to Saidian criticism of visual orientalism, its production does not conform to the scheme of a "western" invention of the "East". Images like this carry a certain ambiguity and have the potential to resist the narrow evangelical subtext which runs throughout the volume: the "orientalist" aspect of the composition largely stems from the transposition of the photograph to an engraving and from its editorially determined location in the volume.

Picturesque India

The volume also includes a series of pictures that are not directly related to any religious theme and that show extraordinary natural landscapes, architecture, or human scenes. Previous collections of such images, such as F. B. Solvyns's *Catalogue of 250 Coloured Etchings*,[42] and images accompanying articles in the French *Le Tour du Monde* attempted to give to the stay-at-home viewer the experience of travel. An example is an image republished from the work of James Fergusson (1808–1886), a British historian of architecture better known perhaps for his rather eccentric work on comparative mythology entitled *Tree and Serpent Worship* (1868).

While the original publication (fig. 23) rightly indicates that it depicts a space adjacent to a temple for the temporary hosting of visitors, the *choultry*, the image's republication (fig. 24) suggests that we are actually looking at the dark nave of a temple.

Other images show Indian landscapes remarkable for one reason or another, such as alpine-like sceneries or picturesque views in which architecture is in harmony with a natural setting, as in the picture of Gorakhpur (Uttar Pradesh) in Figure 25.

Here, and without mentioning the obviously Islamic building in the image's centre, the accompanying book with text comments on the contrast between the beautiful scenery found in India and the "horrible religious

41 Conlon 1977, 143–144.
42 Solvyns 1799. See Hardgrave 2004 and the comments of Karlekar 2005, 29.
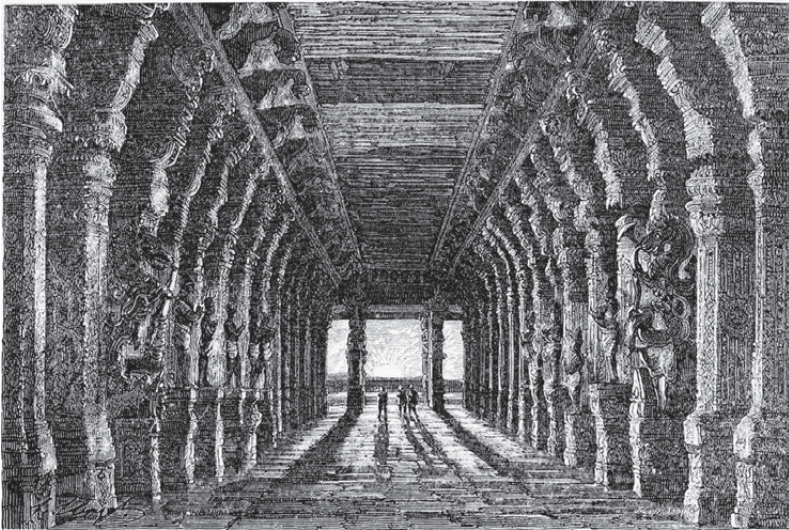
Fig. 23: James Fergusson, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, London: Murray, 1868/1891, vol. 1, 363, "View of Tirumulla [sic] Nayak's Choultrie, Madura (From a Photograph)".
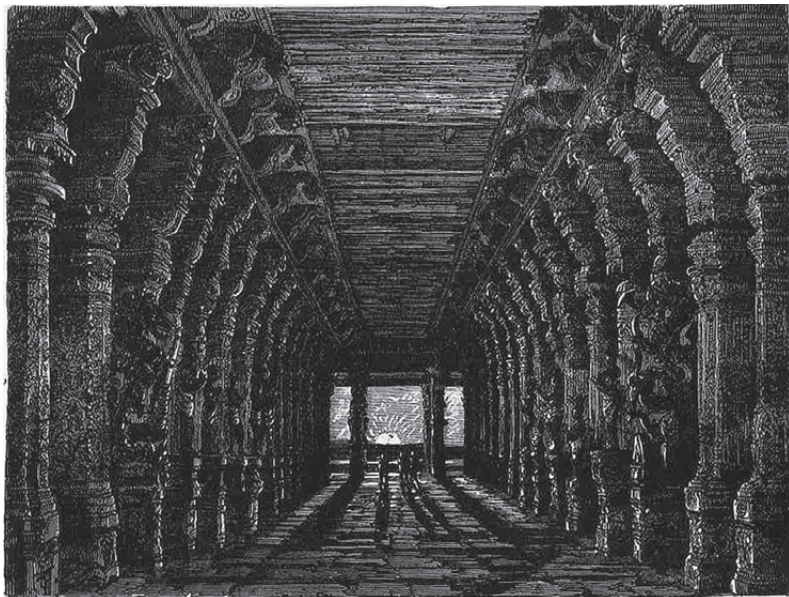
10. Schiff des Tempels Pudu-Mandapam in Madura.

Fig. 24: Panel 58, "Tamil lands", "Nave of the Pudu-Mandapam Temple in Madura", *Bilder-Tafeln*, Calwer Verlagsverein.

1. Bascharatpur (bei Gorakhpur).

Fig. 25: Panel 43, "The Ganges river region", "Basharatpur (near Gorakhpur)", *Bilder-Tafeln*, Calwer Verlagsverein.[43]

conceptions" associated with it.[44] The inclusion of such images republished from non-religious publications, such as *Le Tour du Monde*, without a clear relation to any evangelical or missionary agenda, anticipated a demand for exoticism from the viewership. These representations allowed viewers to travel without travelling, communicating a subtext on relations between modern metropolitan and distant contexts. As Peter Osborne noted about travel photographs, by "mediating between the private and the global", pictures had the implicit effect of providing "middle-class viewers with the means of identifying themselves in and with [a] global system".[45] This interpretation is also relevant in the present case since the collection of im-

43 Originally published in the *Calwer Missionsblatt* 12, 1866, 89.

44 For example: Anonymous 1884, 10: "The Hindus consider this magnificent alpine world to be the special domain of their god Siwa and his cruel wife Kali." Note Brooke 2010: "One of the dichotomies of missionaries' descriptions of India was the contrast of its natural beauty with its inhabitants' sinful nature, which prevented them from recognising it as a work of God's will. One LMS missionary – again describing the beauties of the picturesque Hooghly – urged his young readers to pity and pray for the heathen of Bengal, who had access to such majesty but were too 'depraved' to properly appreciate it."

45 Osborne 2000, 56.

ages keeps reasserting a specific notion of global progress (simultaneously religious, cultural, and scientific), with the viewers implicitly located at its apex, whatever their social position in their own society.

Conclusion

In his study of the role of images in the conquest of Mexico, Serge Gruzinski contrasts the "image-signifying" or "image-memory" with the "image-signified" or "image-miracle": while the first type of image had a simple pedagogical value, the second was performative.[46] He highlights the fact that missionaries did all they could to present Christian iconography – such as the Virgin Mary – as signifiers of something else. The volume examined here certainly pursues a "war of images" of its own on two levels: while some of the published images, such as those of Hindu gods, originated as "image-miracles" (having themselves a religious function), they were neutralised and disenchanted, recoded into the language of images as mnemonic tools.[47] At the same time, the volume displays an opportunistic use of the medium of engravings to produce an ad hoc visual depiction of the world that was suitable for edifying a broad and young European (German) viewership, even in competition with alternative media – such as photography – that would soon become mainstream.

Despite this general editorial intention, however, the genesis of specific images shows the ambiguity of their trajectory. While added elements with propagandistic purpose are quite easy to figure out, other visual artefacts lend themselves to various readings as either co-produced by Indian and European artists or showing scenes (such as the portrait of Pandurangashram, above fig. 22) in which the represented persons had interests that did not necessarily overlap with missionary propaganda. Aggregating decontextualised pictures from various sources and removing the represented topics

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46 Gruzinski 2001, 66: "An image of the Virgin was not God, no more than it could be confused with the Virgin herself. It was only an instrument of remembrance and memory. The Christian west had long known of this pedagogical and mnemonic function assigned to the image."

47 See Morgan 2005, 115–146: "If the missionaries destroyed and buried images, the *Child's Paper* exhumed and reinstalled them as 'idols', a cherished Jewish, Muslim, and Christian category of image that served not only to police the borders of cultures but also often to justify violent assaults against what this article described as 'debased, ignorant worship'." (168).

from "history", the volume created an artificial distance from the viewer and allowed for the easy manipulation of the visual discourse. The selection, organisation, and manipulation of the images, sometimes more than the images themselves, is then particularly meaningful for an analysis of the kind of "orientalism" at work here – hinting at a type of visual "editorial orientalism".

Published at a time when photography was becoming increasingly popular, the volume might represent one of the last examples of a large-scale reproduction of engravings, a medium particularly well-suited to show a decontextualised, ahistorical, and exotic world. A major shift arose with the ability to easily reproduce photographs with the use of half-tone printing techniques. The fact that printed photographs became mainstream in publications removed some of the editorial control and became a way to invite the readers/viewers to a more realistic "imaginary travel". Lithographs and engravings were increasingly criticised for not conveying a realistic impression of the depicted topic, reflecting an inflection in the "visual culture".[48]

The volume is thus an excellent witness to the long and tumultuous lives of images: not only are they frequently manipulated and modified, in more or less subtle ways, but they also travel from one editorial context to another, from one viewership to another, and from one visual culture to another. The gaps between an image's production context and that of its various (re-)productions increase the hermeneutic space available to viewers: the larger the gaps, the more possible readings an image can generate. Thus, the images republished in the volume could take on new meanings, sometimes escaping the narrow missionary framework its editors had wanted to give them. This probably explains why the companion textbook was released in 1884, indicating that contrary to initial expectations, not all of the pictures were actually self-evident, indeed far from it: the viewers' interpretation had to be guided in the right direction, and (perhaps) especially if the book was targeting a younger audience.[49] In this context, it is conceivable that

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48 Pinney 1997, 21. Of course, even with the reproduction of photographs using half-tone printing, it was still possible to ask for specific subjects to be photographed, to select the most fitting clichés, and/or to reframe photographs before publication.

49 Anonymous 1884, 2: "Some of the illustrations contained in those plates are so self-evident that any explanation of them would be superfluous; others, on the other hand, might hardly be understandable without an explanatory addition, especially to those viewers who have not yet dealt in detail with the customs of distant heathen peoples and the missions founded among them."

Hermann Gundert's grandson, the writer Hermann Hesse (1877–1962), came into contact with precisely this volume at an early age. Along with other artefacts and books about India which Hesse would have found in his family's home, these engravings might have contributed to shaping some of his conceptions about Asia – conceptions that certainly cannot be described as "missionary".[50]

Finally, even if many aspects of the making and transmission of pictures remain obscure and need further research, this example signals the presence of an elaborated system of image manufacturing, forging, and sharing in Christian Protestant missionary contexts from the beginning of the 19th century. This system involved not only regular interactions between Protestant and Anglican – but not Catholic – societies in the European context, but also contacts with artists and posing subjects in the local contexts. All these aspects have to be taken into account as part of a transnational and connected history of visual practices between Asia and Europe in the 19th century. Such a "connected" history of visual material needs to acknowledge the power asymmetries at work, since not all actors had equal access to resources for producing and publishing visual material. This approach can work, however, as a corrective to a perspective that would be limited to a (critical) analysis of western visual representations of extra-European cultures as mere inventions of a fantasised orient.[51]

In 1987, a facsimile of the volume was republished as an initiative of the Calwer Verlagsverein under the title *Calwer historisches Bilderbuch der Welt*. The volume was sold as such, without giving any hint as to its original context of production. Viewers are left to their own interpretations and the images show their astonishing ability to spring to life, once again.

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50 For a formulation of this hypothesis, which is likely but difficult to prove, see Giebenrath 2002.

51 As in Nochlin 1989, an influential but rather one-sided essay.

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Héctor M. Varela Rios

Using Latinx Theology's *Lo Cotidiano* to Decolonialize Oller's *El Velorio*

Abstract

This article explores the theological valences of Francisco Oller y Cestero's *El Velorio* (c. 1893), his interpretation of the child's funerary wake called *bakiné* in Puerto Rico, using the Latinx theological concept of *lo cotidiano* and its decolonializing force. In contrast to Oller's elitist and colonialized view of *bakiné* as "brutish" and "superstition", a decolonial *cotidiano* approach valorizes its nuanced expression of Puerto Rican popular religion, identity, and culture among everyday belief and practice. This approach construes *bakiné* as a celebration of life, orthodox in light of Catholic doctrine, and representative of the reality of many Puerto Ricans to this day, a life in which redemption triumphs over sin and creativity over chaos even when rife with suffering and oppression. Indeed, *El Velorio* evinces a popular hermeneutic, a quotidian relationality, and a creative faith that has larger theological implications about the complexities of being human, being religious-in-community, and being created, and about the relationship between theology, art, and human.

Biography

Héctor M. Varela Rios is Assistant Professor of Theology at Villanova University in Philadelphia, USA. His work focuses on the intersection between theology and material culture in the Latinx community, especially how the discursive space created by objects and humans can be theological. For instance, he has published on theological anthropology and *sancocho*, a heavy soup prevalent in the Caribbean. His upcoming research explores the documentality and authenticity of non-textual objects of belief.

Introduction

One of the most famous examples of Puerto Rican visual art, *El Velorio* ("The Wake", fig. 1) has been widely studied for its value in regional and global art history, in Latin American studies, and in Caribbean history and tradi-

Fig. 1: Francisco Oller y Cestero, El Velorio, oil on canvas, 244 x 396 cm, c. 1893, Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, San Juan, Puerto Rico.

tions.[1] To my knowledge, its value for Christian theology, however, remains unexplored. This essay aims to address this oversight using the Latinx theological concept of *lo cotidiano* (loosely translated, "the everyday"), especially helpful in this case for its decolonial force.[2] I suggest that a *lo cotidiano* reading of *El Velorio* can increase its importance for decolonializing Puerto Rican culture specifically and global religious art history and religious studies in general. To do that, after a brief analysis of the painting from the perspective of material culture, including painter Francisco Oller y Cestero and his context, I will use *lo cotidiano* constructively to subvert Oller's own understanding of *El Velorio*, which earlier scholarship on the painting has presupposed to be normative.[3]

1   See for example Benítez 1983; Taylor 1983; Schechter 1994; Delgado 1998; Alegría 2001; Martorell/Hurley 2010; Salazar 2010; Cortés 2012; Pons Irizarry 2012; Álvarez 2017.
2   The use of "x" in "Latinx" is an incomplete yet essential attempt to unite binary and non-binary folk under one ethnicity. I will also use it with other concepts as applicable.
3   My understanding of "material" comes from material religion and material culture studies, especially through the work of Miller 2005 and Morgan 2004. Briefly, the "material" is that which is expressed through/revealed by sensory interaction and with implications for "real life". I use "constructively" as in "constructive" theology, meaning open-ended and forward-looking, and as in the "constructivist" sense of material religion scholarship,

But first, why approach a painting theologically? The articulation of Western Christian theology and art together has had a tortuous history. From Tertullian through medieval, Reformation, and Counter-Reformation thinkers to Paul Tillich, through centuries of doctrinal nuances and outright schisms, theologians have debated the proper place and usage of pictorial works of art in Christian belief and practice. Yet the Roman Catholic Church, in the Council of Trent (1545–1563) for example, has construed art as an orthodox vehicle for God's agency and salutary for Christian life in general.[4] As "God-talk", theology is also a medium for divine meaningful action. Thus, discourse is of the essence in both theology and art, and both "speak" about being human in ways not easily explained but no less essential to faith and full life. Catholic theologian Karl Rahner says it well:

> Everything which comes to expression in art is a particular actualization of that human transcendence through which a person, as a spiritual and free being, is oriented to the fullness of all reality. Only because the human person is a being who by his very nature pushes beyond every given boundary, a being for whom every end is a new beginning, a being who encounters the unfathomable mystery of things, only because and insofar as the human person is a transcendent being can there be both art and theology in their real senses. Both art and theology are rooted in man's transcendent nature.[5]

In this article, I will use Latinx theology as the general framework of my analysis. Among its analytical categories, I will concentrate on *lo cotidiano* and its decolonializing force upon *El Velorio qua* a meaningful vehicle for the divine. *Lo cotidiano* refers to "the day-to-day reality in which [Latinxs] lived-experience is enmeshed".[6] This lived-experience, a key element of the

meaning that understanding is formed through experience. I also embrace material religion's historical (i. e., diachronic, contextual) and emic (i. e., insider) perspective. I mean "normative" in the sense of "mainstream" but also as opposed to "positive". As will be seen, Oller makes a normative statement about this *lo cotidiano* funerary ritual through *El Velorio*, yet presumes much (and mostly mistakenly) about its content and intent due to his rationalizing colonialized mindset.

4   E. g., Catholic Church 1545/1848.

5   Rahner 1982, 29. I do not presuppose maleness, masculinity, or heteronormativity of humanity or of God. Indeed, I consider such presupposition offensive. However, all quotes are kept as originally published.

6   Isasi-Díaz 2002, 6. "Latinx" mostly refers to people of Mexican, Central and South American, and Hispanic Caribbean ancestry living in the United States and its territories. The

Latinx hermeneutical lens, is particularly relevant to Latinx identity and history. On the one hand, Latinxs everywhere are subjugated by systemic racism and all its consequences to varying degrees, experiencing, for example, less access to education and health care, lack of equal economic opportunity and legal rights, and sustained violence due to their dark-skinned bodies and/or accented speech. To the quotidian question "how are you?", most Puerto Rican Latinxs (although U.S. citizens by birth) would respond "*en la lucha*", "in the struggle".[7] For those Latinxs thrown onto U.S. soil as non-citizens by the insidious push-and-pull forces of neoliberalism, this *lucha* is compounded exponentially – it becomes *guerra*. On the other hand, and ironically, lived-experience is also rife with hopes and dreams. In the United States, many Latinxs are able to carve a life in the intersection of oppression and celebration (e. g., of family separation and *quinceañeras*, the celebration of a girl's 15th birthday) together with strong devotion to family and popular religion.[8] This reality of *lo cotidiano* has become a *locus theologicus* for Latinx theologians: theological source, content, and context.[9] In other words, *lo cotidiano* as theological category grounds, signifies, and generates God-talk that enables and justifies Latinxs' God-given right to be fully human.

By "decolonial" I mean the power of *lo cotidiano* to shift the epistemic frame of Latinxs. The term derives from the work of Aníbal Quijano, who invites us to think of coloniality as the epistemology inherited through settler colonialism and modernity in Latin America.[10] Coloniality is invisible and pervasive, present even when the colonial situation has ended politically. For Quijano, coloniality sustains Latin American oppression by continuing to impose the epistemic framework of its oppressors. For instance, in Western Christian ec-

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term is helpful but not meant to reduce so many countries and cultures to a single ethnicity; indeed, many Latinxs do not agree with the term (mostly because of its gender neutrality) and use hyphenated demonyms. Earlier scholarship used "hispanic" and "*latina/o*" for the same group. In Spanish, many scholars have started to use *latine* as a gender-neutral term. "Latinx" is not meant to include Latin Americans who do not live in the United States, yet it is sometimes used interchangeably.

7   For a masterful elaboration of this theme, see Isasi-Díaz 2004, 52–61. Puerto Ricans are a good example of the precarious complexity of Latinx as a term. Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens by birth, a right no other Latinx group has outside the United States. This fact makes them only tangentially Latinx for many, yet Puerto Rican culture is overwhelmingly Latinx.

8   To borrow Alexander Hamilton's axiomatic statement in Lin Manuel Miranda's eponymous musical: immigrants get the job done.

9   Nanko-Fernández 2015, 16.

10   Quijano/Ennis 2000.

clesial spheres, religious practices of "everyday" believers (such as Holy Week pageants or home altars) are deemed "popular" and thus inferior, while those performed by the institutional church are "official". But behind this distinction are power asymmetries that range from the doctrinal (e. g., orthodox and heterodox) to the hierarchical (e. g., ordained and lay). Simply stated, that very distinction between popular and official is colonializing – all practices are "done by people" – and the difference between them is power.[11] From the standpoint of *lo cotidiano*, such dichotomies break down. Popular religion *is* religion. The theology of everyday Latinx folk *is* theology, not Latinx theology. For instance, a *lo cotidiano* concept of *imago dei* takes into consideration not only U.S./European theological anthropologies but also the "dirt under [Latinx] fingernails", that is, that being human includes being "for others".[12] Indeed, Latinx-*lo cotidiano* being human concentrates on community not the individual. *Lo cotidiano*, in sum, serves to decenter colonialized meaning within theology.

The decolonial thrust of *lo cotidiano* becomes evident as a mechanism to subvert meanings, and since *El Velorio*'s subject matter is unavoidably *lo cotidiano*, what better framework to decolonialize it? As will be seen, Oller intended *El Velorio* to communicate a specific message, yet in any painting the message depends as much on the painter's production as it does on the beholder's reception, and a decolonialized mindset certainly subverts the latter. Stuart Hall's distinction and relationship between "encoding" and "decoding" can be helpful to parse out this mechanism. According to Hall, the producer "encodes" meaning via discursive signs (such as words and images) with the goal that the receiver "decode" according to the producer's intention. Since the whole process is influenced by conditions internal and external to both producer and receiver and by the communicative mechanisms themselves (such as technological, semiotic, and social aspects), the message may fall some-

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11 For an excellent recent resource on decolonializing Christianity and theology, see Barreto/Sirvent 2019, esp. 1–21. They note: "The decolonial turn therefore examines how those in the 'underside of modernity' create spaces that serve as sites for producing theory, knowledge, philosophy, and we add, theology" (6).

12 González 1990, 129, 132. *Imago Dei* refers to Genesis 1:26–27, where we are told that God created humans "in God's own image". It is a central concept in theological anthropology, the area of theology that asks what being human is and means. For instance, what are the implications of being "like" God? In which ways, if any, are humans divine? What makes human beings human, especially among other humans? What does it mean that humans were created, and what does the God-given human mission of lordship over the rest of creation imply? What does the racial, sexual, and other diversity among humans say about being human and, by extension, God?

where between (conscious or unconscious) understanding and misunderstanding depending on the "positions" of both producer and receiver. Indeed, Hall hypothesizes that message and its meaning can be constructed from one of three positions: the "dominant-hegemonic", which I would here call the colonial; the "negotiated", which I would call colonialized; and the "oppositional", which I would call decolonial, which according to Hall "detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference".[13] This "alternative framework" is *lo cotidiano*, which "retotalizes" *El Velorio*'s normative meaning through its decolonial, that is, "oppositional" force. Moreover, *El Velorio* was painted by a Puerto Rican, its subject matter is a Latinx funerary ritual, and in this article its receiver/decoder is Puerto Rican – the painting is thus thrice colonialized.[14] Because of this dense coloniality, *El Velorio* necessitates strong "opposition", one that questions Oller's position and nuances his intended message by applying a *lo cotidiano* focus. To do that, I will analyze *El Velorio* in three interrelated steps: description, Oller's interpretation and my critical (re-)interpretation of the *bakiné*, and my own signification of the painting, concluding with the theological constructive insights that emerge from this process.[15]

The Painter and the Painting: Description

Oller was born in Puerto Rico in the first half of the 19th century. Puerto Rico, located in the Caribbean Sea, was then a colony of Spain and has been a territory of the United States since 1898. Oller started training as a painter on the island at a young age but later refined his studies in Paris. Arriving

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13 Hall 1993, 101–103. In my view, previous scholarship on *El Velorio* vacillates between the "dominant-hegemonic" (e. g., Benítez 1983; Delgado 1998) and the "negotiated" (e. g., Martorell/Hurley 2010) because their "decoding" is too closely aligned with Oller's "encoding".

14 The methodological implications of being both colonialized beholder and decolonializing agent were astutely raised by one reviewer. As they pointed out, this issue might necessitate its own essay! The possibilities and pitfalls of decolonializing are discussed at length by decolonial thinkers (cf. Mendieta 2012), especially considering prevailing colonialism on top of coloniality. In my case, as a Puerto Rican studying Puerto Rico, I must presume a "phenomenological bracketing" of my coloniality while doing decolonial work. In the end, however, I would say that liberative hope is of the essence of any decolonializing, and there it encounters theology.

15 Methods in material culture studies are numerous and diverse. One excellent methodology and four-step method foundational to my own work as theologian is in Prown 1982. In my second step, I present *El Velorio*'s normative interpretation and my critical reinterpretation, which then leads to "alternative" decolonial signification.

in the French capital at the time of the first stirrings of Impressionism, he became very skilled in its form and techniques and is considered one of its foremost even if less well-known exponents.[16] He also favored realism especially in subject matter, as *El Velorio* and other paintings such as *El Estudiante* ("The Student", 1874) and *La Escuela del Maestro Rafael Cordero* ("The School of Teacher Rafael Cordero", c. 1892) evince.[17] Oller is also a Caribbeanist in both form and content.[18] *El Velorio* certainly reflects that trio of stylistic preferences: the painting presents the Puerto Rican *bakiné*,[19] a real thing, yet with a special emphasis on the metaphorical, meaning-conveying qualities of light, color, and movement. According to the interpretation that has become normative, Oller was using the content of *El Velorio* to issue a scathing social and moral judgment of the Puerto Rico of his time while also showing his mastery of the Impressionist art form. Besides the deep resonances that the painting has had for Puerto Rican art due to its style, at eight feet by thirteen feet in size, *El Velorio* shadows Oller's other existing paintings. As explained next, the work is monumental literally and, more importantly, content-wise.

In *El Velorio*, one can see the funerary wake of a small child in the late 19th century in a hilly area of Puerto Rico. The child's body rests on top of a table in the main room of the modest house of a family of rural farmworkers. In the island, these farmworkers are called *jíbaros* and *jíbaras* (*jíbares* to be inclusive). The house is made of wood, with dimensions, materials, construction techniques, furnishings, and decoration that indicate a lower economic status: the house is not large or sturdy, and it is sparsely furnished and decorated. The people present are humbly dressed (most do not wear shoes, for example) and many *jíbares* are wearing *pavas* and *machetes*, the cane-field worker's hat and the large knife used to cut the cane, respectively. There are corn cobs and plantains hanging from the rafters. Only trees, hills, and the sky are visible through the doors and windows. Clearly, the owners of this house and almost all those in attendance are poor, working-class people and live in a rural area of the island – *jíbares*.

The wake scene itself is chaotic, meaning that multiple stories are present simultaneously: one can see small children and dogs running; other attend-

16 Taylor 1983, 1–7.
17 Delgado 1998, 43.
18 Sullivan 2014, 1–7. "Caribbeanist" refers to Oller's preference for themes and techniques identified with the Caribbean, located between North and South America in the Atlantic Ocean.
19 The word *bakiné* has an opaque etymology and no direct translation to English. The closest referent would be "young child's wake". See Alegría 2001 for further information regarding the word.

ees playing musical instruments, singing, and/or drinking; food about to be served under the gluttonous eye of a cat; men reaching for their *machetes* and staring menacingly at each other as if preparing to fight; the white-turbaned mother smiling despondently and offering the priest a drink, while an *hacendado* ("landowner", probably the *jíbare* father's rich landlord) offers him gossip; a couple lusting in a dark corner; a *jíbare* headed home on horseback; and an old dark-skinned man (given the late-19th century context, probably an ex-slave) thoughtfully paying his respects to the dead child. Notably, this last participant is the only one focused on the dead body itself while the rest are, arguably, amid a party filled with laughter, lust, and liquor.

In Puerto Rico, this wake is famously known as a *bakiné*. Grounded on the popular Christian belief that children who died at a young age are free of sins and therefore rise unimpeded to heaven, the *bakiné* celebrates the dead child, now an angel, and hence the funerary ritual is also called *velorio del angelito* ("angel's wake"). The peculiar practice has roots in both Spanish and African religious traditions and in the 19th century is ubiquitous throughout Spain and Latin America, where it goes by several other names.[20] The *bakiné* is a joyful family and community celebration, many times lasting several days. Indeed, songs were composed specifically for *bakinés* and drinking home-brewed alcoholic beverages (locally known as *pitorros*) was encouraged. The ritual is well-documented in Puerto Rican and Spanish cultural histories.[21] Its place in the island's folklore is also secured by its presence in influential 20th-century Puerto Rican literature and popular culture.[22]

Elitist and Colonialized: (Re-)Interpreting *El Velorio*'s Background and Oller's Worldview

For Oller, as for many of the island's "elite" (meaning richer, landed, and formally educated), 400 years of Spanish imperialism had left the island in dire need of economic development and social transformation while at the cusp of an autochthonous Puerto Rican-ness.[23] The Spanish colonial project was

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20 Some of these are *velatorio del angelito*, *quiniván*, and *florón* (Alegría 2001). In fact, a cursory online search yielded evidence that the practice continued deep into the 20th century but has been abandoned for decades, at least publicly.

21 See Abad y Lasierra 1788; Davillier 1874.

22 See Palés Matos/Steeves-Franco 1937/2010; Díaz Alfaro 1947/1996.

23 Delgado 1998, 42–44.

spent for these rich *hacendados*, and a cosmopolitan identity was emerging. *Bakinés* were but one example of the backward "superstition" of "country people".[24] For this so-called elite, the solution was more political autonomy. And since Spanish Catholic and monarchic powers were deeply aligned, greater religious autonomy was needed as well. One also cannot forget that the United States was already a major global power by the late 19th century and had its eye set on the Caribbean as the staging site for its hegemonic control of this hemisphere, supported by the Monroe Doctrine and Manifest Destiny with its connection of militarism and Protestantism. Soon after Oller finished *El Velorio*, Puerto Rico became a U.S. territory – unfortunately, the dream of either political or religious autonomy did not come to pass. This burgeoning Puerto Rican identity and its relationship to empire and Western religion is the social background and agenda of *El Velorio*.

Given his "position" (in Hall's sense), it is unsurprising that Oller envisioned the painting as social commentary on Puerto Rican everyday reality. The wake is represented as chaotic, a sign of the socio-political upheaval in the Puerto Rico of his time. While the funerary practice itself is not scandalous (that is, a wake at home was fairly common then), the undisciplined behavior of almost all attendees during a funeral is beyond inappropriate for Oller, exemplified best by the aforementioned lusting couple. There are other not-so-subtle hints of Oller's displeasure with the island's religio-political situation expressed in *El Velorio*: the incoming *lechón asao* ("roast pig") is impaled and together with a rafter, it forms a cross-shape, turning the pig into a sort of Christ idol, and the priest sins by attending more to the pig than to the dead child or the family. The *hacendado* seems to further provoke the idolatrous priest; here Oller seems to hint at the unsavory (unholy?) alliance between the Catholic Church and Spanish empire. The pig stick also seems to stab the child's body, which is nonetheless bathed in an incoming ray of light, ultimately transforming the child into a redeeming Christ icon and the house into Golgotha in the middle of chaos. Darker-skinned folk are much less present in the painting than light-skinned ones, with the notable exception of the centrally placed old ex-slave, who ironically is the only one behaving appropriately (at least for Oller), even when his skin marks him as less-welcome and unworthy of much attention by either the powerless *jíbare* or the powerful clergy and landed men – a clear commentary on race and class.[25] For

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24 See Oller's quote below for these specific words.
25 In fact, Osiris Delgado emphasizes the centrality and significance of the old dark-skinned

Oller, societal backwardness seems to be solved by a total transformation of Puerto Rico through education and an emphasis on a purified Puerto Rican human being free of empire and religion, exemplified by the dissolution of "uncivilized" practices such as the *bakiné*. In that sense, *El Velorio* is intensely humanist while inherently theological: intentionally or not, it mediates God-talk in pictorial form.

Beyond the pictorial representation, Oller's productive intent is clear in his reasons for submitting the painting for the 1895 Paris Salon, sent to its organizers:

> Astonishing criticism of a custom that still exists in Puerto Rico among country people and which has been promulgated by the priesthood. On this day the family and friends have kept vigil all night over the dead child [...] extended on a table with flowers and lace tablecloth. The mother is holding back her grief, on her head she wears a white turban; she does not weep because her tears might wet the wings of this little angel that will fly to heaven. She grins and offers a drink to the priest, who with eager eyes gazes up at the roast pig whose entry is awaited with enthusiasm. Inside the room of indigenous structure, children play, dogs romp, lovers embrace and the musicians get drunk. This is an orgy of brutish appetites under the veil of gross superstition. Two figures, in the midst of the chaos: the old countryman, [...] pants rolled up [...], who comes to bid farewell to the dead youth who left forever.[26]

Oller's socio-cultural critique shows in his own interpretation of the *bakiné* tradition as an "orgy of brutish appetites" and the beliefs supporting it as "gross superstition". He embodies the minority "cultured" elite in contrast to the majority "uncultured" masses. However, even if genuinely desirous of a *puertorriqueñidad* unfettered from an imposed *hispanidad* and *catolicidad*, Oller and this elite were deeply colonialized.[27] For instance, in his desire to critique the lack of social discipline of rural Puerto Ricans, Oller ends up

man in *El Velorio*, even calling him Oller's "*alter ego*" (Delgado 1998, 45). However, even allowing for Delgado's interpretation and its potential implications (for instance, that Oller's positive take on dark-skinned folk means he was not racist), Oller's description of the *bakiné* quoted below makes plain his elitist worldview.

26 Benítez 1983, 193.

27 *Puertorriqueñidad* ("Puerto Rican-ness"), *hispanidad* ("Spanish-ness"), and *catolicidad* ("Catholic-ness") are terms common in Puerto Rican literature; I introduce them in Spanish here, though I translate them later for the sake of English readers.

immortalizing a reductive and discriminatory, racist even, view of Puerto Rico as backward, indeed justifying the colonial agenda of both Spain and the United States![28] In the eyes of empire, any difference between cultured and uncultured in *El Velorio* vanishes. Simply stated, in his critique of Spain and imperialism, Oller sacrifices his own people. Sullivan argues that his art "mirrors the colonial experience" and is "marked by ambivalence and conflicted affinities".[29] *El Velorio* as pictorial God-talk is both colonialized and, worse yet, colonializes its beholders.

Signification in a Latinx Key: Life not Death, Redemption not Sin, and Creation not Chaos

As evidence of a real cultural event, the *bakiné* shown in *El Velorio*, like all *bakinés*, is not an "orgy" in the strict sense of excessive indulgence but literally an everyday family and community event. And it is from this that *lo cotidiano*'s decolonial force can spring: *bakiné* is now seen as a religiously orthodox and popular celebration of full humanity. First, whether this specific celebration was excessive for 19th-century "elite" morality or an incipient "Puerto Rican-ness" is beside the point in a decolonial *lo cotidiano* reading. What *bakiné* represents is a celebration of life at the border with death. For these mourners-celebrants, death does not win – *bakiné*, like the smiling mother, is actually laughing at Death. Oller sees disrespect for the dead child, that is, a lack of attention by empire, Church, the community, and the family. However, that is colonialized thinking. From the standpoint of those that truly matter in all funerary rituals, that is, family and friends, paying respect means celebrating life, the joy that was on earth and will be in heaven. From the perspective of *lo cotidiano*, Oller misses the *bakiné*'s point. Indeed, celebrating life upon death is orthodox Christian belief: through the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his ascent to heaven, believers affirm that death does not have the final word.[30]

28 Calling *El Velorio* "discriminatory, racist even" is justified by the analyses below. However, that interpretation does not determine Oller's own views on race, which could arguably be not racist (see note 24). Many times, decolonializing work sheds light on implied or less visible traces of racism yet conclusions remain open to critique.

29 Sullivan 2014, 7.

30 The doctrine of the resurrection is central to Christianity in all its forms (see for example Catholic Church 1994, §988–991). Christians believe that, just like Christ after his earthly

Second, Oller's characterization of the ritual as "gross superstition" reveals more about his own misunderstanding of Catholic religion and Puerto Rican rural culture than about the nature of *bakiné* itself. Indeed, the *bakiné*'s orthodoxy is evidenced because the celebration is based on the Catholic belief of the purity of the dead child's soul; that is, this soul is untainted by sins committed if still laden with concupiscence.[31] Thus, Oller's dead child, if baptized, was purged of sins, and even if not, the child is presumed too young to have sinned intentionally and is assumed to be welcomed into heaven by a compassionate God.[32] *Bakiné*, then, is a celebration of a child's sinless life in perfect accordance with Catholic belief even if surrounded by a sinful environment. In my view, this is what the old ex-slave man is pondering as he looks at the still child: the paradox of the fallen yet redeemed nature of humanity. Considering Oller's misunderstanding of doctrine, I suggest that Oller was deeply colonialized in a religious sense as well.

Third, taking Oller's representation as faithful to the reality of *bakinés*, the "brutish appetites" represented are not primitive or animalistic but fully human. In other words, a decolonial reading does not see anything "brutish" in the painting but people's lives as they truly are. On the one hand, one can certainly see the sins of lust, wrath, envy, and gluttony in the painting (and perhaps pride, sloth, and greed as well), represented in a range of figures from the lustful couple to the covetous priest. Yet, on the other hand, the theological values of hope, faith, and love are also visible, from the playful child to the pensive old ex-slave. Therefore, the *bakiné* painted by Oller is reality, that is, full human life in all its beauty and ugliness. In essence, what Oller expressed in *El Velorio* is creation, God's work on earth. In his colonialized mind, he interprets the creative as chaotic, "brutish". But inside *lo cotidiano*, the chaotic aspect of creation is not inimical to but an intrinsic part of the meaningful complexity of being human.[33] As stated before, for Latinx theological anthropology, the fullness of Latinx self and reality includes both joy and toil, health and sickness, harmony and chaos. Such is *lo cotidiano*: an amalgamation of experiences in the quest for human

demise, the faithful that have died throughout the ages will live again eternally when God establishes the kingdom of heaven on earth. The child's death is doubly hopeful in this regard because of their immediate presence in heaven and assured reunion with family at the end of days.

31 Catholic Church 1994, §1250.

32 Catholic Church 1994, §1261.

33 This insight is partly indebted to an anonymous reviewer of this article. Thank you.

fulfillment. Calling this event an "orgy" reveals Oller's colonialization in the socio-cultural and religio-moral sense.

Lastly, contrary to Oller's arguably humanistic intent, *El Velorio* values the religious besides the non-religious in this material space. The small cross over the entry door marks the humble rural dwelling as Christian. The presence of the priest makes "Catholic-ness" abundantly clear as well, even if ironically so: as previously stated, his face and body language express Oller's critique of the institutional Church. I already mentioned the plausible religious meaning of the ray of light shining on the dead child and of the "cross" formed by the stuck pig and the dwelling's roof beam, the latter turning the pig into the crucified Christ. I also see a less-defined figure behind the old black man – is it perhaps some sort of angel? Can one make out wings and the angel coming out of the child's body into the light? Could it be a veiled attempt at an allegory for the soul? Thus, a decolonial reading of this *bakiné*'s *lo cotidiano* does not separate the religious from the non-religious. Religious presence emerges in and sustains non-religious spaces, and apparently non-religious acts can express a religious intent. Indeed, the religious and non-religious collapse into each other in the materialities of *lo cotidiano*.[34]

Further Signification, Now in a Theological Key: Hermeneutics, Relationality, and Creative Faith

Signifying *bakiné* as an everyday celebration of life and popular beliefs has consequences for knowing and understanding popular religion, that is, for the theology behind religio-cultural practices such as the *bakiné*. Since *El Velorio* as pictorial God-talk springs from a colonial context, decolonial theology's allegiance with other disciplines that think decolonially can be helpful in parsing out these consequences. In the context of Puerto Rico, the decolonial subversive and liberative effort starts with a recognition of an autochthonous identity and culture that spring from a complex 500-year

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34 "Materialities" are opportunities for the "material" to occur (see note 3 on material). In *El Velorio*, there are materialities visible in all those present in the *bakiné* which matter in various ways to each individual and to all together; for example, materialities of hospitality and solidarity between friends and family, and materialities of grief in the mother. Indeed, there are materialities between *El Velorio* and its beholders as well, some of which are made evident in this essay, like the materiality of colony.

colonial history. For instance, Luis Rivera Pagán parses out some of that complexity in terms of language. To be Puerto Rican is to be born of at least two worlds, one Spanish and one U.S.-English: islanders are habituated to be bilingual.[35] I would also add the indigenous Taíno and African for a total of four entangled worlds and worldviews. The larger implication is that Puerto Ricans are in essence both of one culture and multi-cultural, that is, partially belonging to several cultures in discrete areas, such as traditions and political leanings, but not belonging completely to any one of them. Being Puerto Rican is both fixed and dynamic. This specifically Puerto Rican kind of Taíno-African-Spanish-U.S. "in-betweenness" is part of a paradoxical popular hermeneutics that tinges Puerto Rican autochthonousness both in the island and in the diaspora.

With this autochthonous hermeneutics in mind, *El Velorio* "looks" different. I do see the painting not as "astonishing criticism", to quote Oller again, but as a visual record of this paradox. Indeed, its ultimate concern shifts from critique to praise if viewed thusly. Beholding *El Velorio* plurally emphasizes its display of Puerto Rico's "in-between" relationality, in this case the collapse of racial, class, and generational barriers in celebration and in crisis. *El Velorio* certainly is not a romantic fictional account of *jíbare* existence; *bakinés* were a real thing and Oller's representation is fairly accurate. However, as developed above, what I see is moving hospitality and solidarity, not chaos. I also do not see idolatry in the pig or in the priest. I see an interacting trio formed by dead child, old man, and pig, the divine and the human relating materially. The Christ icon bursts into this domestic sacred space and completes a Trinity, with God and the Spirit-Consoler already there. The pig signifies commensality in the human realm and communion with the divine realm, collapsing their boundary and recording their relationality for the revelers in the painting and the beholders of the painting. Indeed, the mother is serving a drink to the beholder, not to the priest. In addition, *El Velorio* freezes in time an "in-between" autochthonous-ness wished for by those that celebrate a plural and harmonious Puerto Rican-ness. Oller's intention was to impactfully portray the *bakiné* as "backward". Indeed, the opposite has happened. *El Velorio* has transcended its eight by thirteen frame in the Puerto Rican mind because of its plural creative energy. *Bakiné* is not only about suffering but also about hope: what I see in the priest's eyes when he looks at the pig is "eager" expectation not gluttony. The *jíbare* life is sparse

35 Rivera Pagán 2019, 52–53.

but plentiful in other ways; in love, for one. Straining under the colonial yoke is hard, but those oppressed find ways to survive, and sometimes thrive, by drinking *pitorro* and dueling with *machetes* when called for.

El Velorio, then, is not predominantly about a ritual or the politics of rural versus urban or orthodox versus popular religion but about the *imago dei* Puerto Ricans should aspire to be: Oller's painting is nothing less than a *jíbare* decolonial Christian theological anthropology. Since the *imago dei* is a challenge to approach the human to the divine as much as possible, Oller's creation unintentionally expresses an imagined yet carefully curated Puerto Rican-ness as a challenge for the rest of humanity: being Puerto Rican by way of *El Velorio* is being eager and grateful to God, creatively faithful even in the direst of circumstances.

Theological Insights: *El Velorio* as Decolonial Ecclesiology, Creativity, and *Mestizaje/Mulatez*

After progressing from the description through (re-)interpretation to signification of *El Velorio* in light of the decolonial *lo cotidiano*, I offer three insights into the decolonializing power of *El Velorio* itself, in other words, three ways in which the painting decolonializes its beholders and their understanding of Latinx being human. This is a constructive endeavor, meaning it is open-ended and forward-looking, because each beholder must rethink their own hermeneutical lens and will not necessarily adopt mine or its implications.

Lo cotidiano, as central to Latinx theology, makes visible its particular hermeneutical lens, the preferential option for the poor, as reality is interpreted from the side of the socio-economically and spiritually deprived, that is, those marginalized by human non-religious and ecclesial kyriarchies. That *El Velorio* presents a particular moment of rural, impoverished family and communal life is self-evident. What is less evident is its Latinx ecclesiology, that is, the painting's interpretation of this Latinx community from a theological perspective. For these mourning-celebrating poor Puerto Ricans, as for many other less-privileged believers, funerary wakes in churches are for the rich. However, the church is not the building but the humans that dwell inside. The family house then serves as sacred space, confirmed by Oller through the small cross above the door in the painting. This sacredness is

made present or augmented not by a priest (especially an aloof one!) but by family and friends, that is, by a loving community in solidarity throughout days and nights of mourning. Seen from the perspective of the poor, this wake turned the family home into a church of the poor, a fact emphasized by Oller's placement of the roast pig as Christ icon. A decolonial reading sees this icon-pig not as idolatrous but as mediating the sacredness of family and friendship.

Another important aspect of *lo cotidiano* is movement, the everyday comings-and-goings of life in general. Oller the impressionist uses movement in *El Velorio* to wonderfully balance existence. For Latinxs, movement is a fact of life, many times tragic yet ultimately salvific under the grace of God. *El Velorio* is a factual snapshot of this movement among life and death. There is chaos but also order: one side of the painting is happier, the other sadder; folks and food are coming in through one door and others have already left (or are thinking of leaving) through the opposite door, perhaps after a long night of celebrating. Human and non-human glances crisscross. The dead child lies still and the old man stands without moving while children and adults play. A decolonial reading of *El Velorio* sees the painting's chaos not as lack of discipline or decorum but as creative force. Indeed, the chaotic scene counteracts the presumed finality of the child's death ("left forever", wrote Oller) and confirms the continuity of the child's soul. And it is a creative continuity in which all creation participates: human and non-human; man, woman, and others; child, adult, and senior; nature and culture; powerful and powerless, sacred and profane. Undoubtedly, there is darkness and light in this celebration: sadly a child is dead, even if happily now an angel. But that duality powers the moving *cotidiano*, a self-evident salvific process as ineffable as its ground of being, God.

Oller wittingly represented a racial cross-section of Puerto Rican society distinguishable in his time, and to this day. In the painting, some are or can pass as white while others are dark-skinned.[36] Seen as a spectrum with Taíno, Spanish, and African influences, all are inside of what could be called a "Puerto Rican" race where skin color and phenotype are undetermined within the spectrum. Indeed, for those of Latinx ethnicity, questions about race are fraught and extremely difficult to answer. Some Oller scholars have

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36 These racial categories certainly would not mean the same thing in Oller's time and in our time. "White" would be much more associated with Spanish heritage, and "dark-skinned" would signify *mestizaje* and *mulatez* to varying degrees (from the miscegenation of Taíno, Spanish, and/or African peoples).

identified *méttisage* in the painter's work, especially in *El Velorio*, as part of his attempt at developing an autochthonous Puerto Rican-ness, yet it must be interpreted in light of his elitism.[37] Latinx scholars have teased out theological valences of *mestizaje* (and *mulatez*, a related concept) that would contrast with Oller's views.[38] For one, *mestizaje* construes mixed/hybrid race in a hopeful light, as a symbol of the Latinx Christian unity-in-difference or as the *telos* of Caribbean ethno-political unity and not as an expression of racial difference. By preferring difference, Oller just reinforces the colonial trope of Catholic institutional versus popular or European versus Caribbean – of us versus them. A decolonial *El Velorio* does not forget difference yet sees *latinidad* ("Latinx-ness") in both its chaotic and harmonious complex meanings, perhaps best represented by the yellowish skin tone, the blue shoes, and the red-laced pillow of the dead child: the *raison d'être* of this celebration is not the different colors or the blending of color but being beyond indigenous, imported, and/or imposed skin color as a whole – the anti-colorist stance of *mestize/mulate* joy and suffering.

Final Word on Humility, Self-reflexivity, and Transcendence

These theological insights laid out above barely scratch the surface of the decolonializing force of *lo cotidiano* on *El Velorio*. As a "particular actualization" of "human transcendence", its meanings certainly are "unfathomable".[39] Yet decolonializing through *lo cotidiano* still opens up the painting's agency and transcendence to the benefit of a Puerto Rican (and Latinx) knowledge base. Decolonializing makes the beholder uncomfortable with their history and identity, more so if Puerto Rican, but productively so. As pictorial God-talk, the painting remains, yet the beholder transcends. This is what I take to be Rahner's meaning in the passage quoted above. Theology and art intersect in their transcending force, and the transcendent nature of the human connects with both through *El Velorio*'s theological and artistic agencies. This is one of the "so-whats" of decolonializing *El Velorio*: its ability to communally (that is, ecclesiologically), chaotically (that is, creatively), and racially/ethni-

37 Sullivan 2014, 1–7.
38 Nanko-Fernández 2015, 19–20. *Mestizaje* and *mulatez* are not easily translated; they both express the racial mixing/hybridity present in many Latinxs today.
39 Rahner 1982, 29.

cally (that is, theo-anthropologically) entangle Puerto Rican beholders (and by extension, all other beholders) with their own histories and identities in their sojourn as Latinx and/or Christian.

Thus, a decolonializing interpretation using *lo cotidiano* forces the interpreter to humility and self-reflexivity: imagine the audacity of implying one knows more about *El Velorio* than Oller![40] That is why a constructive approach is so useful. Decolonialization has an opaque *telos*, so understanding depends on the beholder's own experience. And even if any decolonial epistemologies can lead to further erasure of the painting's encoding on the part of decoders, it is still forward-thinking in an ethical sense.[41] However, this other "so-what" is less clear. Simply stated, once the decolonial change has occurred, what reality are we left with? What real-life implications does it have or produce? Have the powerful lost and the powerless gained power? Is this new knowledge agentic enough to subvert kyriarchy? Many of these questions are difficult or impossible to answer. The work is necessary, though, and can be fruitful for rescuing alternative (actually, native) epistemologies that colonialism destroyed or coloniality keeps erasing.

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40 For these two and other methodological implications, see Tuhiwai Smith 2012.

41 See Mendieta 2012.

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Sakina Loukili

Making Space, Claiming Place

Social Media and the Emergence of the "Muslim" Political Parties DENK and NIDA in the Netherlands

Abstract

In the Netherlands, two new political parties have emerged within the last decade against the rising influence of right-wing populism. DENK and NIDA, founded by mainly Dutch Muslims with a migration background, have increasingly countered right-wing rhetoric in Dutch politics (*verrechtsing*) in which Islam is problematized. The role of media is fundamental in understanding these parties and their success in politics, as they are known for the ways they use social media as a venue for political and social engagement and their critical attitude towards mainstream media. In this article, I explore the relationship between DENK and NIDA and mainstream media, and analyze some of the ways DENK and NIDA use social media platforms to foster resistance to dominant narratives on Islam and Muslims in Dutch society. This analysis shows that social media function as "third spaces" where these parties can "talk back" and discuss issues that concern Muslims, breaking free from places where their voices are marginalized.

Biography

Sakina Loukili is a PhD candidate at the Meertens Institute and VU University in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Her dissertation focuses on issues of religion, politics, and media in the Dutch context, with regard to the political parties DENK and NIDA in particular. She is a member of the research group NL-Lab of the KNAW Humanities Cluster and is affiliated with the research project "Populism, Social Media and Religion", both based in Amsterdam.

Introduction

For the first time in Dutch national election history, not one but two parties with a majority membership of Dutch Muslims with a migration background will officially participate in the 2021 elections for the House of

Representatives.* While one of the parties, NIDA, will be going national for the first time since its foundation seven years ago, DENK participated in the last national election, in 2017.[1] Both parties were founded by Dutch Muslims with a migration background who were previously active in established left-wing political parties. NIDA started as a local political movement in Rotterdam, founded by Mohamed Talbi and Nourdin el Ouali.[2] DENK was founded in 2015 by Tunahan Kuzu and Selçuk Öztürk, who left the left-wing Labor Party (*Partij van de Arbeid* or PvdA) in the House of Representatives as the result of a conflict about Turkish mosques and integration issues.[3]

One of the reasons why both parties are doing relatively well is how they relate to and interact with media, which is visible in the ways they deal with mainstream media and employ social media for political campaigns and engagement with their followers. DENK, for example, has become infamous for the so-called "cut and paste" videos they post on their online platforms,[4] and NIDA has been praised for their creative social media campaigns.[5] Public commentators have also grappled with the question of how religion relates to these political parties. DENK and NIDA have been labelled "Muslim" parties by various Dutch media outlets, although they repeatedly insist that this description does not capture who or what they are. At the same time, DENK and NIDA seem to be at odds with mainstream media. They have criticized, for example, the way Muslim women have been represented in Dutch newspapers during the COVID-19 outbreak (NIDA) or explicitly warn their supporters of the dangers of "biased" media (DENK).

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1   "NIDA" means "call" or "plea" in the Qur'an, and the party uses the concept to refer to the voice of a new "diverse" generation in politics. See NIDA's "about us" section on their website: https://nida.nl/nida/ [accessed 14 June 2021]. "DENK" refers to the verb "think" in Dutch and means "equality" in Turkish.

2   Markus 2014.

3   Wiegman 2017.

4   In Dutch, "cut-and-paste" (*knippen en plakken*) usually refers to work that is lazily done by combining (parts of) other works. In the context of DENK, it is often used in an accusatory sense, as they make videos for their social media platforms in which they combine parts of political debates and quotes from adversarial politicians to spin events in order to fit a specific DENK narrative.

5   See Loukili 2020; Valenta 2015.

Digital Religion, Media, and Methodology

A considerable number of studies have focused on the success of right-wing populism and its anti-Islam stance,[6] but less academic attention has been given to how Muslims themselves engage with these types of anti-Islam discourse in politics. DENK and NIDA specifically have yet to be studied more extensively in academic literature beyond some studies on DENK's constituency and electoral success.[7]

More broadly, various studies have contributed to the ever-expanding field of religion, media, and digital culture. Early on, notable scholars of media and religion argued that the connection between media, religion, and culture was becoming increasingly evident and urged further study of these intersections.[8] Scholars have distinguished four waves in digital religion research,[9] with the fourth and current wave of scholarly work characterized by a focus on religious actors' negotiations between online and offline lives.[10] The fourth wave of research is also described as a period in which scholars pay more attention to the intertwinement of digital religion with elements such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and political ideologies. As Giulia Evolvi notes, studies conducted with this approach consider the internet as a way of creating "new visibilities and narratives about religion, ethnicity, and gender that go against dominant perceptions and stereotypes".[11] Religion does not necessarily play an explicit role here, but religious-related discourses are diffused within people's everyday lives and experiences.[12] For the analysis in this article, this approach will be adopted.

Overall, various excellent contemporary studies addressing the intersections between media, religion, and culture have demonstrated the dynamicity, complexity, and diversity of the current state of research: for example regarding blogging[13] or the Twitter atmosphere.[14] The findings of research

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6   For example, Wodak/Khosravinik/Mral 2013; Kaya/Tecmen 2019.
7   Vermeulen / Harteveld / van Heelsum / van der Veen 2018; Vermeulen/Santing 2018; Vermeulen 2019; Blankvoort 2019.
8   Hoover/Lundby 1997; Hjarvard 2011.
9   Campbell/Lövheim 2017.
10   Campbell 2017.
11   Evolvi 2021, 9.
12   Evolvi 2021.
13   Evolvi 2017.
14   Van den Hemel 2019.

focused specifically on the mediation of religion and politicized Islam in the Scandinavian context[15] provide a fruitful base for this study with regard to questions of how media and politics influence politicized and critical attitudes towards Islam. The authors suggest that news media and politics work in tandem to influence a negative perception of Islam and that other media dynamics (social network media, for example) add to these representations. Thus, the politicization of Islam and the mediatization of religion are processes that mutually reinforce each other, which is taken as a starting point for this article.

The research question that I will seek to answer is twofold: how can we understand the emergence of DENK and NIDA in the context of the dominant Dutch discourse on Islam in politics and public debate, and how and where does media come into play?

This article consists of two parts. In the first part, I will provide some background on the emergence of DENK and NIDA in politics and how they relate to broader ongoing public debates around Islam and Muslims in the Netherlands. For this, I will make use of newspaper articles I have selected through LexisNexis, a database of all Dutch newspapers which allows the user to search for specific terms or time periods. I made a broad selection of newspaper articles using the keywords "DENK" and "NIDA" and narrowed down my search results to articles that refer to media material and articles that specifically discuss media use. I also draw on two qualitative semi-structured interviews I conducted in 2020 with a NIDA politician and a DENK politician in which themes such as the public debate about Islam and social media were discussed in relative depth.

In the second part, I introduce the concept of "third spaces" in regards to social media and consider how it might be useful for analyzing and understanding DENK and NIDA in their relation to media. Then, I highlight some cases of mainstream media framing of DENK and NIDA and cases that highlight their distrust of mainstream media.[16] Finally, I will discuss some ways in which the parties themselves use social media to resist dominant narratives on Islam in Dutch politics and society. For this part of the article, I have again used the LexisNexis database, this time selecting articles from

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15 Lundby/Hjarvard/Lövheim/Jernsletten 2017.

16 Media framing here is understood in terms of Gamson/Modigliani 1987's conceptualization of a media frame as a "central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events" (143).

different newspapers using the key term "Muslim party". I also draw on data collected from digital ethnographic fieldwork. While these parties are mostly active on Facebook and Twitter,[17] I focus solely on Facebook here.

From an ethnological perspective, the use of digital media by these parties provides an opportunity to study the ways they foster resistance against dominant narratives on Islam using social media platforms, so without being confined by geographical boundaries, and allows for fieldwork to be more open-ended and dispersed than more conventional fieldwork.[18] At the same time, however, it also presents a whole range of (novel) research challenges.[19] A central and ongoing discussion concerns ethics – for example, what do "public" and "private" mean in the context of digital ethnography?[20] Taking my cue from Tom Boellstorff and others with regard to participatory observation, I was a visible and identifiable participant during live sessions, taking fieldwork notes while listening, and occasionally posing questions to speakers in the session.[21]

Dutch, Muslim, and Digitally Literate

Dutch national identity, or "Dutchness", is one of the highly politicized themes that plays a central role in the integration debate for Dutch Muslims with a migration background. In the narrative that currently dominates politics and society, Muslims need to "attain" Dutchness by "feelings of attachment, belonging, connectedness, and loyalty to their country of residence".[22] The idea that Islam or "Islamic cultures" are fundamentally incompatible with Dutch values, norms, and heritage underpins this narrative.[23]

However, Muslims with a migration background have increasingly resisted this notion, together with normalizing the problematization of Islam, visibly and publicly. They question the dominant assumption that their re-

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17 Jacobs/Spierings 2016.

18 Burrell 2009.

19 Pink/Horst/Postill/Hjorth/Lewis/Tacchi 2015.

20 Góralska 2020.

21 Boellstorff/Nardi/Pearce/Taylor 2012.

22 Duyvendak/Geschiere/Tonkens 2016, 3.

23 For instance, with regard to a sexual politics in which Muslim citizens are perceived as repressed and homophobic and Dutchness is perceived as characterized by sexual tolerance and liberty. For more, see Mepschen/Duyvendak/Tonkens 2010, 962–979.

ligious or cultural identity cannot coexist harmoniously with their national identity and argue that not only is this perfectly possible, but these identities can even strengthen each other. Yet as Margaretha van Es rightfully notes, with a few exceptions, little attention has focused on how Muslims have challenged discourses and practices that marginalize them.[24]

In politics, resistance for Muslims has come to take shape as something more than simply voting for established leftist parties, a practice that had come to be expected of them.[25] In the Netherlands, certain political shifts after the attacks of 9/11 in the United States have signified the normalization of anti-Islam rhetoric in politics and left a deep impression on many Dutch Muslims. The most important shift is signified by the rise of Rotterdam-based politician Pim Fortuyn in the early 2000s and the later emergence of the anti-Islam Party for Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV) under Geert Wilders in 2008, which in many ways represented a continuation of Fortuyn's response to Islam and immigration.[26]

The politicians of NIDA and DENK illustrate the significance of these political shifts when their references to Fortuyn and Wilders mark particular moments of consciousness for them. An example came up in an interview I held with then fraction representative of NIDA in The Hague, Cemil Yilmaz. He described the growing influence of right-wing rhetoric in which Islam is problematized and how that impacted him and others in his faith community:

> Bolkestein started it. Paul Scheffer continued it. And after that we obviously had a few national and international events that influenced it. I also mean a Fortuyn, Wilders, and so forth […]. We [generation of people with an Islamic/migration background] have experienced the post 9/11 years in a very conscious way, and the post-Fortuyn, Van Gogh and Wilders years even more so.[27]

Not surprisingly then, NIDA was founded only a few years after the electoral success of the PVV in 2010 and was followed closely by DENK.

While there is a longer history of Muslims becoming and being active in Dutch politics, for two main reasons I believe that NIDA and DENK may rep-

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24 Van Es Margaretha 2019, 142.
25 Dancygier 2017.
26 Oudenampsen 2019.
27 Interview held with Cemil Yilmaz in The Hague, 5 February 2020.

resent a new phase and a (definite) break with former dynamics in the Dutch political landscape when it comes to the political participation of Muslims, especially those with a migration background. One reason is timing, as the parties fit well in a recent broader trend of marginalized groups in Dutch society pushing back against the long-held dominant narrative on Dutch identity.[28] Another reason lies in their relation and interaction with (social) media. The significance of new media is also obvious in a broader sense: in the digital age, for the majority of Dutch Muslims – and more generally for Muslim communities throughout Europe – the internet is part of their daily lives, as it is for their non-Muslim peers. With regard to politics, new media play an important role in (re-)shaping civic and political engagement by young European citizens.[29]

As the candidates and constituencies of both DENK and NIDA consist mainly of young (second- and third-generation) Muslims, it makes sense to assume that new media also plays an important role here.[30] For example, one of the interlocutors I spoke with in autumn 2020 was Yasin Makineli.[31] He became politically active with DENK after watching a video he had seen on Facebook which featured DENK member Tunahan Kuzu in a heated debate with Geert Wilders.[32] As social media effectively politicized Makineli, a young Dutch Muslim with a Turkish background, this example demonstrates, I believe, that to fully comprehend how young Muslims resist marginalization and exclusion in Dutch politics, we need to take into account the role played by digital media in their everyday lives.

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28 According to Rogier van Reekum, "Dutchness" post-9/11 has become (increasingly) politicized and is characterized by (racist) imaginations of those already included – the "natives" – and those considered citizens-to-be – the outsiders who should aspire to occupy the high ground of the majority. Van Reekum notes that in recent years, a rearticulation of anti-racist critique has been taking place in which this understanding of Dutchness is criticized. Rather than expecting that "newcomers" (i. e., immigrants, refugees, non-white citizens) should come to belong, members of minority groups argue that the Dutch should re-examine their traditions and understandings, for example in light of the presence of racism in society; see Van Reekum 2016, 40–41.

29 Loader 2007.

30 Otjes/Krouwel 2019; Valenta 2015.

31 Yasin Makineli was the president of the DENK youth movement Opposition (*Oppositie*) and the chairman of the DENK party in the municipal council of Veenendaal (city in the province of Utrecht) at the time. At only 19 years old, Makineli became the youngest chairman of any local political fraction in Veenendaal.

32 I interviewed Yasin Makineli virtually on 2 October 2020 in a WhatsApp video call; an in-person meeting was not possible because of the coronavirus outbreak and consequent measures applied in the Netherlands.

In the next part of this article, I will move on to my own analysis of DENK and NIDA in relation to media, primarily using the concept of social media as "third spaces". Then, I will dive more deeply into the role of media in relation to the two parties, focusing on two dimensions: (1) mainstream media in relation to framing, and (2) social media platforms functioning as "third spaces".

Social Media as "Third Spaces"

One way Muslims in a minority context respond to feeling excluded, misrepresented, or underrepresented is by using popular social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, or Instagram as alternative spaces within the public sphere.[33] Pennington refers to new media as "third spaces" that can serve as sanctuaries for individuals who elsewhere may experience social exclusion and marginalization, and as locations where they "do not have to fight to make themselves seen, heard, or understood".[34] These sanctuaries are online places where the complexities around identity can be appreciated rather than problematized, and identities are allowed to be "messy".[35] In addition, third spaces are sites where hegemonic and normative ways of seeing the world are challenged. Attributed originally to critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha, third spaces are imagined as cultural spaces where the hybridity of cultures is acknowledged, defying ethnocentric impositions, and where the voices of minorities can be heard.[36] Stewart Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi have related the concept of third spaces to digital religion, which is characterized by a sense of "in-betweenness" and is fluidly bounded.[37]

It is important to keep in mind for DENK and NIDA that not only are the political leaders of these parties younger than the politicians of other parties, their constituency is relatively young as well. For the majority of their supporters, social media is often already a natural part of their daily lives. Their digital media literacy shapes their political engagement, which

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33 Brouwer 2004; 2006.
34 Pennington 2018, 620–621. "Third space" here refers to social surroundings separate from the two usual social environments of people: the home and the workplace.
35 Although it is important to note that these online spaces have also made a surge in cyber-hate possible. For research on Islamophobia in online spaces, see for example Awan 2016.
36 Bhabha 1996.
37 Hoover/Echchaibi 2014.

is evident in the ways these politicians often make use of selfies and vlogs and interact with supporters through Q&A sessions on Facebook Live.[38] Additionally, this approach fits well with trends of engaging with politics in a far less formal manner and goes beyond the electoral focus.[39]

In general, DENK's Facebook use is a good example of a party personalizing its social media use for a specific target group.[40] Tunahan Kuzu, who is currently DENK's number two, was one of the three most-followed politicians on Facebook as of 2016, reflecting his active presence on the platform, and setting a precedent for the years after that.[41] On his individual Facebook page, photos of him "behind the scenes" with DENK or on vacation with family members (and even a selfie of him taking the Covid-19 vaccine) are mixed with more formal posts regarding his work as a politician, thus offering a more personalized "human" image of him than one would likely find in mainstream media.[42]

"Do Not Fall for It": Mainstream Media on the Stand

When DENK posted a video on their YouTube channel DENK-TV in June 2016 titled "The media does not want you to know this. Do not fall for it!",[43] they probably had little idea how much impact it would have on the said media. Even though DENK has had a tense relationship with most established news outlets since the beginning, after it posted this video, that relationship seemed to worsen significantly. Several news outlets criticized DENK for creating doubts about the integrity of Dutch mainstream media and accused them of vilifying critical journalists.[44]

In the video, the four leading members of DENK, Selçuk Öztürk, Farid Azarkan, Sylvana Simons, and Tunahan Kuzu, warn the audience about

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38 Among Dutch politicians, social media is widely used as a campaigning tool, with more than 90% of candidates in the 2012 elections active on social media platforms. Social media also seems to induce a more personalized style of campaigning. For more on this, see Jacobs/Spierings 2015.

39 Kahne/Middaugh/Allen 2015.

40 Spierings/Jacobs 2020.

41 Broekhuizen 2016.

42 For more photos, see Kuzu's official Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/KiesKuzu.

43 DENK TV 2016 (translation by author).

44 van Teeffelen 2018.

mainstream media, the "fourth estate" in Dutch society. They suggest that the media function as gatekeepers of the established order and therefore determine what is presented to Dutch citizens as either truthful or false information – both in general terms and specifically when it comes to the representation of DENK. According to DENK, journalists purposely target people who somehow form a threat to the establishment, creating suspicions by seeking out unsavory information from their past and acting as prosecutors who mete out damning verdicts. The video, accompanied by sinister background music, ends with DENK urging their followers to make their own conscious choices and "see through the game".[45]

The indignant responses by Prime Minister Mark Rutte and several journalists[46] suggest mutual feelings of distrust or wariness. The relationship between DENK and many mainstream news outlets had soured early on, when some news outlets cast Kuzu and Öztürk in a negative light after they left the PvdA-faction.[47] In particular, they clashed with journalists from media outlets that are generally considered right-wing, such as PowNed, but they have also been in conflict with journalists from news outlets with a less outspoken political stance. One example of a controversy that took place after the notorious "Don't trust the media" YouTube video comes from 2017, when DENK refused journalists from certain newspaper outlets access to their election gathering.[48] While several journalists responded critically to this exclusion, calling it a "dangerous development",[49] DENK's defense was that they have their own media (a reference to their Facebook page) and the decision to livestream the gathering.[50]

NIDA's relation to and visibility in mainstream media is significantly different. An explanation might lie in the variation in political style between the two parties. While DENK has often been accused of using populist strat-

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45 The video refers explicitly to the *trias politica* system of philosopher Montesquieu, in which media is seen as a shadow dimension of power within a state.

46 Unknown author 2016.

47 De NRC and De Telegraaf offered a contentious reconstruction of their exit based on anonymous sources in the PvdA fraction, which even included a quote about Öztürk combing his beard in the faction, seemingly implying that he was some kind of radical Islamist; see De Jong 2014.

48 DENK refused access to at least journalists from the NRC and BN/De Stem; see Pasveer 2017.

49 The secretary of the Dutch union for journalists (NVJ), Thomas Bruning, said this in response to DENK's refusal to give access to several journalists; Kivits 2017.

50 Pasveer 2017.

egies,[51] NIDA's representation in most established news outlets is more neutral in tone, and their idealistic brand of politics is often noted.[52] However, the politicians of NIDA have also had their share of negative experiences with journalists from mainstream media outlets.[53] Throughout the years, they have dealt with several cases where journalists have depicted them as suspicious or unreliable (especially in right-wing media), fitting into stereotypes of Muslims in (Western) media coverage as violent, radical, and prone to terrorism.[54] In line with the work by Knut Lundby, Stig Hjarvard, Mia Lövheim, and Haakon Jernsletten referenced above, these mediatized controversies were often directly related to the supposed politicization of Islam – for example in 2018 a leftist pact with NIDA and other progressive parties in Rotterdam failed to transpire because of an old and controversial NIDA tweet.[55]

One of the issues that NIDA have dealt with in the last years, just like DENK, is their being persistently labeled a "Muslim party" in several large mainstream media outlets. In the next section, I will examine more closely how the label "Muslim party" signifies a form of media framing that has been extensively studied in academic literature and is used to "culturally generalize" Muslims.[56]

"Muslim" Parties

Ever since DENK and NIDA have become active, one finds the label "Muslim party" littered throughout newspapers in reference to them both. To provide some examples: in 2015, the *Algemeen Dagblad*, the *NOS*, and the *Parool* all referred to NIDA as a Muslim party, without much critical reflection on

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51   Van der Laan 2016.

52   Former politician Fouad el Haji, for example, is quoted as saying that NIDA is ideology oriented, sincere, and unifying, which contrasts with the focus on feelings of discontent among their supporters, which he believes DENK is capitalizing on. Brahim Bourzik, also a former politician, notes that the idealistic side of NIDA is (partially) rooted in how the party has embraced a "softer" side of Islam; see Hoogstad 2017.

53   Van Arkel 2020.

54   Eid 2014, for example, argues that Western political discourses and media portrayals tend to promulgate racialized orientalist stereotypes, with fanaticism a characteristic often ascribed to Muslims as a homogenous group.

55   Liukku/Beek 2018.

56   Shadid 2005; 2009.

what that label implied.[57] DENK explicitly addressed the question of whether they were a Muslim party fairly early on,[58] but even today continues to be labeled just that by various news outlets.[59]

From a scholarly point of view, the insistence on labeling DENK and NIDA as Muslim or immigrant parties might be understood as a form of framing around cultural outgroups, which has been studied extensively. In her dissertation on media and audience framing of Muslims, Anouk van Drunen notes several categories of framing found in the relevant literature.[60] One of them is the "outsider's view", which does not allow Muslims their "own" voice or understands them to speak only as representatives of a homogenous group. They are, as Wasif Shadid suggests, "culturally generalized".[61] Other studies have analyzed cases of media framing of Islam and Muslims in the Netherlands, often focusing on aspects such as stereotypical imagery in relation to terrorism or playing into a West versus Islam dichotomy.[62] One theme that remains particularly prominent in the (academic) discussion that addresses media framing of Muslims concerns the framing of Muslim women,[63] and more recently the response of Muslim women in countering that framing by employing social media platforms.[64]

In the next two sections, I will briefly expand on this issue and focus on a recent case of media framing of Muslim women in mainstream Dutch newspapers. This case is interesting because it demonstrates how an instance of (perceived) mainstream media framing of Islam was picked up by NIDA on social media, which became the alternative space from where they engage critically with established (offline) media. These dynamics of engagement between different media platforms is further evidenced by examples of how DENK and NIDA use social media to foster resistance against dominant narratives on Islam and Muslims in Dutch society – sometimes explicitly in

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57 Hoogstad 2014; Unknown author 2014a; Unknown author 2014b.

58 In response to the question of whether DENK is a Muslim party, they stated that they were a party that "many Muslims will feel comfortable with, but also for non-Muslims who are fed up with the bleak right-wing climate [of Dutch politics]"; Niemandsverdriet 2015.

59 Regional newspaper *Dagblad 010* (Unknown author 2019) even referred to them as a "Turkish" Muslim party.

60 Van Drunen 2014.

61 Shadid 2005; 2009.

62 Shadid 2009.

63 Navarro 2010.

64 Islam 2019.

response to right-wing populist discourse and sometimes in less reactive ways, for example by discussing practical issues (Islamic burial in the Netherlands) or "controversial" subjects (freedom of speech and Islamophobia). For these sections, I draw on data gathered from a digital ethnography I conducted during Facebook "live" sessions on the official DENK and NIDA pages in autumn 2020.

"Talking Back" on Social Media

About a week before the Dutch government announced strict measures in response to the raging coronavirus pandemic, NIDA posted a video to their Facebook page.[65] Inspired by the well-known Dutch TV program *De Keuringdienst van Waarden* ("The Inspection Service of Goods"),[66] the clip shows several NIDA members calling the editorial boards of various newspapers to ask critical questions about images of visibly[67] Muslim women that appeared in newspaper articles about the coronavirus, seemingly suggesting a connection between the two (fig. 1).

As I discussed earlier in the article, social media, especially for young Muslims in a minority setting, can function as an alternative to the public sphere, where they often might feel excluded, underrepresented, or misrepresented. This NIDA video is a good example of how these dynamics can work in this context. Here Facebook functions as a third space, an alternative to the public sphere where mainstream newspapers are perceived to misrepresent Muslims (in this case specifically women), and also provides an alternative place from which Muslims can offer a critique of mainstream media at a "safe distance", so to speak.[68] The latter is particularly notewor-

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65 NIDA 2020a; the video was posted on 7 March 2020.

66 De Keuringdienst van Waarden is a Dutch TV program on NPO3 in which people perform what they refer to as "household journalism" – a participant might, for example, call up a company and ask critical questions about the ingredients of a food product.

67 "Visible" in the sense that all these images featured women wearing a headscarf and Islamic-style clothing.

68 One reason why Muslims feel it necessary to offer this critique from a distance is provided by political leader Nourdin el Ouali's view of mainstream media. He argues that in his experience, NIDA is purposely not given as much space as other parties, as news editorial boards are only interested in Islam and Muslims in the context of terrorism or other negative, stereotypical subjects. According to El Ouali, it is therefore necessary for Muslims to create their own media platforms; see Rijnmond 2021.
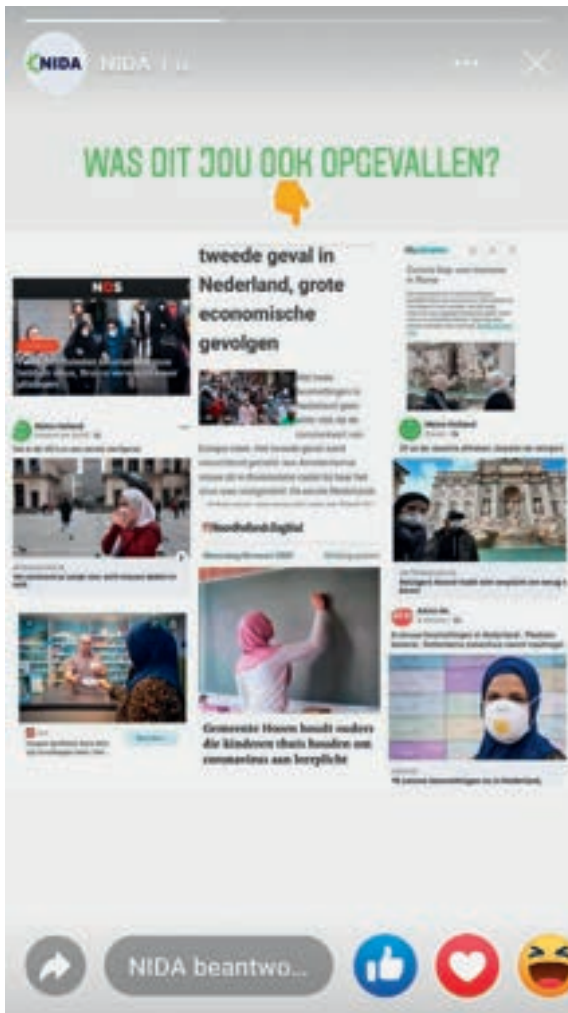
Fig. 1: Screenshot of NIDA's Facebook story page, featuring a collage of coronavirus-related newspaper articles from several news outlets with photos of Muslim women.

thy, for belonging to marginalized communities means that responding or "talking back" at dominant discourses from the "same place", i.e., mainstream media platforms, automatically includes unequal power dynamics.[69] By shifting the interaction to social media, the NIDA politicians thus withdraw from this power dynamic.

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69 Drawing on bell hook's concept of "talking back", Margaretha van Es explores how Dutch Muslims do exactly this in a context where the dominant majority urges Muslims to speak out against violent extremism; see Van Es 2019.

DENK employs social media platforms in similar ways. Known from the start for their particular "fire-on-fire" political style, they were digitally active early on and started their own platforms on social media. Their YouTube channel, fittingly called DENK TV, is particularly well known. Not only did the infamous "Don't trust the media" video appear on this channel, but other videos also became known for the deliberate ways they framed other parties, individual politicians, and debates such that they fitted into their narrative.[70]

It is worth mentioning that humor and satire seem to play a regular role in many of these videos. For example in a YouTube video, DENK compares a few of their fellow parliament members to the Daltons, a fictional crime gang, and another video suggests that right-wing politicians suffer from xenophobia and should all move to an island (fig. 2).[71] For DENK, the strategy based on mockery and ridicule became an effective part of their social media presence in relation to two particular "enemy" groups: right-wing parties and their politicians, and, less directly, politicians who have an Islamic- and migration background but are considered by DENK to have "sold out" to established parties and betrayed their communities.[72]

Other examples of how humor and satire come into play include DENK's parodic response to a well-known satirical Dutch television program shortly before the elections in March 2021,[73] and NIDA's 2014 Valentine's Day campaign, in which they "broke up" with the PvdA for profiting off Muslim communities to gain votes during the election of 2014 with a humorous postcard.[74] This postcard campaign was launched on their social media platforms, but printed postcards were also sent to various cultural, societal, and religious organizations in Rotterdam.[75] The postcard included a mock break-up text from the NIDA voter criticizing the PvdA for going along with right-

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70 For example, by "hijacking" offline events and spinning them in a way that fits their narrative on social media; see Loukili 2020.

71 DENK TV 2018a; 2018b.

72 The president of the House of Representatives, Khadija Arib, regularly features in DENK's videos. They suggest that Arib, a woman with a Moroccan and Islamic background, panders to parties and politicians who have worked against ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity (which according to DENK, accounts for most, if not all, established parties).

73 In response to a dig by comedian Arjan Lubach, Farid Azarkan (DENK's current political leader) produced a hilarious rap song, gaining over 90,000 views on their official YouTube channel; see DENK TV 2021.

74 NIDA 2014.

75 Wij blijven hier 2014.

Fig. 2: Screenshot of DENK TV's video, posted on 8 June 2018, titled *Het Xenofoben Eiland* ("The Xenophobe Island"), featuring (from left to right) Annabel Nanninga, Geert Wilders, Thierry Baudet, and Edwin Wagensveld (Pegida, anti-Islam far-right movement).

wing discourses about Islam and expressing the feeling that NIDA voters cannot "be themselves" around them and that therefore it is time for them to "stand on their own two feet", so to speak.[76] These examples from both DENK and NIDA show that humor and satire are used to resist the binary "us versus them" discourse[77] that underlies the dominant narrative on Dutch identity I discussed earlier in this article and that they allow the creation of a counter-narrative where stereotypes of (Dutch) Muslims are subverted.[78]

Going "Live" on Facebook: Discussing Islamic Burials and Freedom of Speech

Not long after the outbreak of the coronavirus in the Netherlands and the measures taken by the Dutch government against it, many political parties realized that they were going to need to adjust their plans for campaigning

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76   Wij blijven hier 2014.
77   Focusing on the United States, Zimbardo 2014a argues that political humor can be used by Muslims to interrogate Islamophobia and anti-Arab narratives.
78   Zimbardo 2014b.

and interacting with their constituencies in the period leading up to the elections in March 2021. Not only were the "traditional" ways of engaging with (potential) voters severely restricted (mass events could not be held, for example), but parties realized more than ever how beneficial a solid digital presence is for remaining visible and engaged. For DENK and NIDA the transition to digital platforms seemed to go particularly smoothly because they had already invested so much in their social media presence.

The first session I attended digitally shortly after the coronavirus outbreak was organized by NIDA on the evening of 26 March 2020 and seemed to be an early attempt to try out a new format for engaging with online audiences. The announcement made on the same day, aptly titled "Live with Nourdin in quarantine: about corona, politics, work, school & mosque", is a good example of a trend or (unconscious) strategy I had recognized in the political leaders of both DENK and NIDA, in which their individual self-presentation and personalization of political engagement was becoming an integral part of their online media presence.[79] In the following months up to spring 2021, I attended most of the online sessions held by both parties.

NIDA was the first of the two to start this type of informal sessions and continued to hold them until January 2021, with a total of 20 sessions featuring various guests (other NIDA members, but also prominent professionals with an Islamic background) and tackling various subjects, such as Islamophobia, free speech, and Islam in Dutch politics. DENK started their live sessions in October 2020, and by March 2021 had held eight sessions exploring topics such as Islam and media institutions, terrorist attacks in Europe, and systemic racial discrimination.

As I suggested with regard to the parties' use of social media more generally, these online sessions can be seen as spaces for these politicians (and their supporters from the same marginalized communities) to finally break free from the (offline) public space and establish a platform where they could discuss (controversial) issues without feeling subjected to a dominant frame they must adhere to. In these sessions, they are able to discuss important issues related to the position of Muslims in society with an audience who seemed to be mostly sympathetic to the cause. For example, NIDA went live on Facebook to discuss the need for (more) Islamic burial space in the Netherlands due to the outbreak of the coronavirus.[80] In line with Bhabha's charac-

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79 Mohamed/Kamaruzzaman 2019; Ekman/Widholm 2015.

80 This session took place on 5 April 2020, 8–9pm. When the first fatalities as a result of the

terization of third spaces as places where the hybridity of cultures is recognized, this session demonstrates how Muslims use this digital place where their multiple senses of belonging to different cultures (mainly for Muslims with a Moroccan migration background) are only implicitly valid but can be discussed constructively and practically without individuals having to defend or choose one identity over another.[81]

Another more recent example is the discussion among Dutch Muslims about insulting the prophet Muhammad and freedom of speech in the Netherlands. While this "internal" discussion is part of a larger ongoing public debate in the Netherlands about Islam and so-called "Dutch" values, of which freedom of speech is a particularly cherished example, it became a point of conflict again when, in October 2020, French high-school teacher Samuel Paty was murdered because he had shown caricatures of the prophet Muhammad in class.[82] In response to the murder, many Dutch non-Muslims had argued that the right response was to show and post even more caricatures, igniting a counter-reaction in the form of a petition calling for legal repercussions for insulting the prophet Muhammad gathering more than 100,000 signatures from Dutch Muslims.[83] When DENK defended the petition in parliament, they encountered a vicious backlash: Farid Azarkan, the current party leader of DENK, was called "sick" and accused of opportunistically taking advantage of the moment.[84]

On social media, however, DENK posted a short clip on Facebook with Azarkan's contribution to the debate and framed the controversy in parliament as a typical example of how a freedom paradox plays out: Muslims, they suggested, do not have the same freedom to address issues as non-Muslims,

coronavirus occurred within communities that were largely Dutch-Moroccan, it became painfully clear that the old ways of performing Islamic rituals around burials (e. g., the burial should take place as soon as possible) were no longer feasible. The Moroccan government's refusal to allow the bodies of Dutch-Moroccans who died during the outbreak into Morocco caused Dutch-Moroccans to become (even more) disillusioned with the Moroccan government and has raised urgent discussions on feelings of belonging with regard to Morocco and Moroccan land.

81 The double nationality of many Dutch Muslims with a migration background has been a controversial subject in public debate, with Muslims accused of double loyalties and a tendency to favor their country of origin.

82 Paty was a history teacher at the Collège du Bois d'Aulne in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine.

83 The petition was started by Imam Ismail Abou Soumayyah and circulated on social media in the aftermath of Paty's murder and the strict measures the French government swiftly took against certain Islamic organizations.

84 Meijer 2020.

who are encouraged and praised for their critical stance.[85] The comments and the thousands of likes the post received not only indicate that DENK's supporters agree with this argument, but also reinforce the idea that DENK is alone in these political spaces in standing up for the perspective of a large section of Dutch Muslims who until now have largely been invisible or misunderstood.

NIDA followed up on this issue by inviting the initiator of the petition, Imam Abou Soumayyah, to participate in one of their live sessions on Facebook.[86] In this session, El Ouali and Abou Soumayyah discussed how they felt like Islamophobia has become normalized to the point that there is national outrage or indifference when Muslims express their needs and wishes through civic engagement (by signing or supporting the petition in this case). They also discuss the arguments used by people who have criticized the petition (claiming it was bad timing, for example) and explain their perspectives on why they think the petition was a necessary signal from Dutch Muslim communities.[87] Thus NIDA provided the platform for Abou Soumayyah's voice and activism to be amplified and given positive attention rather than attracting the uproar it had caused in parliament. NIDA were thus doing something similar to DENK in visibly and consciously siding with the voices of people who have not felt heard or seen in a long time (or perhaps ever), and demonstrate that social media is a convenient place to facilitate this message.

Conclusion

The emergence of the political parties DENK and NIDA is clearly a direct response to right-wing populist rhetoric about Islam, but it also brings up a myriad of new questions in relation to Dutch politics, religion, and media. Exploratory in nature, this article has examined the role of social media in how these parties have been able to successfully "talk back" to the dominant integration discourse in relation to Muslims by on the one hand criticizing mainstream media for the ways they are framed and on the other hand utilizing social media platforms as "third spaces".

By combining social media data, qualitative interviews with politicians, newspaper articles, and academic literature, this article argues that it is im-

85   DENK 2020.
86   NIDA 2020b.
87   NIDA 2020b.

portant to consider the relation and interaction between mainstream and social media to fully understand how DENK and NIDA operate, in particular how they resist the dominant narrative on Islam in Dutch politics and public debates. The examples discussed in this article demonstrate that the relation between DENK and NIDA and mainstream media is fraught, which is reflected in the "Muslim party" label used by mainstream news outlets and the critical attitude DENK and NIDA have towards mainstream media. Consequently, I suggest not only that as "third spaces" social media offer the opportunity for these parties to talk back and resist from a "safe" distance, but that social media might also function as the space where party members break free from the dominant discourse on Islam and Muslims and are able to discuss issues without having to adhere to expectations of Dutch mainstream media and politics regarding the voicing of a Muslim opinion or perspective.[88]

Consequently, I suggest that DENK's and NIDA's discussions on social media of issues such as Islamic burial and freedom of speech might tell us something about the ways Dutch Muslims are claiming their rightful and equal place in society: not by adhering to the dominant narrative on integration, but by making spaces where they can create their own narratives. More research is needed to confirm whether these party members are in this regard representative of a larger group of Dutch Muslims with a migration background. Additionally, to present a more nuanced picture, it would be beneficial to study whether these groups and individuals have had negative experiences with social media.

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88 For example, being expected to speak out against violence in the name of Islam, as if Muslims are a monolith; see Van Es 2018, 146.

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Media Reviews

Lisa Kienzl

Book Review
August E. Grant / Amanda F. C. Sturgill / Chiung Hwang Chen / Daniel A. Stout (eds.), Religion Online
How Digital Technology Is Changing the Way We Worship and Pray

The edited work *Religion Online: How Digital Technology Is Changing the Way We Worship and Pray* is a comprehensive collection of 35 chapters in two volumes addressing religion and (digital) media technologies. The first volume, *Religion in Cyberspace*, focuses on a variety of aspects of religion and (digital) media technology in general, while the second volume, *Faith Groups and Digital Media*, addresses religious communities and their relation to media. This division structures the books and allows the reader to navigate easily through the comprehensive and differently themed volumes. The extensive collection also allows a discussion of a wide variety of topics, showcases disciplinary approaches, and presents numerous case studies, from thoughts on how religious institutions use social media (vol. 1, chapter 3) to questions of religious authority on specific media platforms (vol. 1, chapter 8) to an analysis of evangelical gamers as further development of the complex relationship between American evangelicalism and popular (digital) culture (vol. 2, chapter 4).

The chapters in volume one focus mainly on the ways religion has been influenced by and connected to (digital) media technologies in the last decades. In the introduction, August E. Grant and Daniel A. Stout provide insight into the multiple perspectives that have contributed to this volume and

highlight the significance of (digital) media technology for religious communities and practices. Digital media are important for religious communities to share information but also to engage in "real-time interactions" (vol. 1, p. 4) with their practitioners, for example when connecting for prayer online despite their different physical locations. In volume one, chapters 2 to 7 focus on technology and religious practices in general, for example how religious communities are using digital media. The next five chapters address specific traditions, such as the use of digital media by Catholic priests (vol. 1, chapter 8) or an analysis of the websites of congregations in the Union of Reformed Judaism (vol. 1, chapter 9), while chapter 13 discusses religious extremism, and chapters 14 to 17 examine "quasi-religious practices from festivals to fandom" (vol. 1, p. 8).

Volume two addresses religious communities and their relation to and engagement with (digital) media, offering insight into a broad variety of religious traditions. The discussion in the introduction by August E. Grant and Amanda F. C. Sturgill makes the selection process for the chapters in the second volume transparent for the reader and reveals the challenges faced when creating such an extensive project. The editors elaborate on their decision about how many chapters would to be dedicated to specific religious traditions and explain, for example, that only one chapter deals with Islam because they "found few differences in the utilization of digital technologies" among various Islamic traditions (vol. 2, p. 3). Various Christian communities are discussed in chapters 2 to 8 while the next three chapters deal with a variety of Jewish traditions. Chapter 12 engages with Islam and (digital) media. In chapters 13 to 15, Hinduism and Jainism with their various approaches towards media and technology are examined, while chapter 16 addresses Buddhism outside Asia and its connection to media. The last two chapters focus on new religious movements, Scientology and New Age religions, and their close relation to digital media technology. All chapters contextualize the respective religious traditions and provide general information about them, which makes this volume especially approachable for readers who are not highly familiar with a particular religious tradition or religion in general. Also, the remarks on future research possibilities that appear at the end of each chapter in both volumes open up interesting questions for the development of the field.

The editors pursue the ambitious goal of establishing "the most comprehensive picture available to date of the interplay of religion and digital technology" (vol. 1, p. 8 as well as vol. 2, p. 2). In the introduction to the first

volume, the editors emphasize a broad definition of religion. A discussion of the editors' and authors' understandings of cyberspace (in particular given the volume's title) and the Internet would have been an interesting addition, especially in relation to a more detailed engagement with historical developments and the use of these terms in academic discourses as well as in the field of media and religion. The editors highlight the importance of thinking about varying access to digital media technologies in different places around the world (vol. 1, p. 8). However, a broader discussion of the Global South as well as economic aspects in relation to religion and media technology would have enhanced the volumes' contribution to the existing academic discourse.

Some chapters provide very interesting thoughts on theoretical frameworks that can be used to engage with religion and media technology, such as Joonseong Lee's connection of Foucault and Deleuze as theoretical frameworks for an interpretation of Won Buddhism on the Internet (vol. 1, chapter 12). The author's discussion of his own position in this religious tradition (vol. 1, p. 176) helpfully highlights the necessity for researchers to reflect their own roles within their field of research. The discussions of the role of artificial intelligence (vol. 1, chapter 5) as well as big data (vol. 1, chapter 6) in the understanding of technology as an important part of religious practices and everyday life encourage the reader to think further about the development of technology and its relevance for religious traditions. Particularly, Heidi D. Blossom, Jeffrey S. Wilkinson, Alexander Gorelik, and Stephen D. Perry's discussion of the potential misuse of big data and the challenges posed by small data in polls and statistics emphasizes the importance of contextualizing collected data (vol. 1, p. 77–81). They explain the potential misinterpretation of small data using a statistic by Gallup as an example. This graph shows the number of people who have been members of a church or synagogue since the 1990s in the United States (vol. 1, p. 79). The authors emphasize that the data presented here is problematic, and could be misused, since it is not clear how it was collected, who exactly participated in the survey, or how the data of people affiliated with other religious traditions was handled.

The case studies in both volumes engage with a range of religious traditions and aspects of the interrelation between religion and (digital) media technology on particular levels, running from the challenges of digital media for Roman Catholic liturgy (vol. 1, chapter 11) to in-depth interviews with Jain mendicants to find out more about their understanding and use of

media technology (vol. 2, chapter 15). Because of this broad approach, chapters on very different religious traditions and their relationships to media are placed next to each other, especially in the second volume. This allows readers to easily move between chapters and encourages them to further think about similarities and differences between the presented religious traditions and media. For example, several chapters address the reluctant use or refusal of digital media in religious communities: Jack Turner (vol. 2, chapter 8) discusses the partly hesitant use of media in Orthodox Christianity, Yoel Cohen (vol. 2, chapter 9) gives insights into differences between Modern Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox approaches towards media, while Ian Case Punnett (vol. 2, chapter 6) discusses the Anabaptists' and especially the Amish's ambivalent relationship with media and technology. When the results presented in these chapters are compared, similar arguments within religious discourses, become visible. For example, the notion that the outside world acts as a distraction from a religious life or the view that media might challenge established community structures and authorities. I can only agree with the editors' conclusion that the studies collected here reveal similarities between religious traditions "despite the differences in faith, practices, and beliefs" (vol. 2, p. 8).

In *Religion Online: How Digital Technology Is Changing the Way We Worship and Pray*, the editors and authors provide a comprehensive overview of religious communities, practices, and traditions and of their entanglement with (digital) media technologies that will be appealing to many readers. Young researchers working in the field of religion and media might find this collection helpful if they seek an overview of this topic. Additionally, established scholars will be able to take away impulses for further research, gain new insight into the interrelation of religious traditions and (digital) media technologies, or learn from the results of a specific case study. In particular, the compilation of case studies on similar questions across religious traditions encourages reflection on overall similarities and differences, but also highlights the importance of further multidisciplinary research.

Jochen Mündlein

Book Review
Inge Kirsner, Komm und sieh
Religion im Film. Analysen und Modelle

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In her new book, Inge Kirsner, professor of practical theology at the University of Tübingen, considers how religious film might be interpreted at the beginning of the 21st century. After a short introduction, the volume is divided into two parts. The first part offers a broad overview of leading motifs and themes from the Christian-Jewish tradition – such as sacrifice and redemption – that can be found in films. Kirsner sees these elements as contributing to the existential character of filmic interpretation which emerges from films' adaptation of these themes and motifs to human life. This view is illustrated in the second part of the book by practical suggestions for liturgical events. In Kirsner's opinion, going to the cinema is similar to attending a church service, for both interrupt everyday life: "Idealerweise kommen wir aus dem Kino anders heraus, als wir hineingegangen sind" (Ideally we emerge from the cinema as different from when we entered it, 4). She describes film watching as an experience which addresses basic existential questions about being human. In the analyses that follow, films are then interpreted theologically, using images, motifs, and figures from the Christian Bible, and in relation to the viewer's life. The volume can thus be positioned between film analysis and theological hermeneutics. The title of the book conveys this threefold message from the beginning. "Komm und sieh" refers to the title of a film, COME AND SEE (IDI I SMOTRI, Elem Klimow, SU 1985). It also, however, reiterates the condensed revelatory knowledge of Jesus as the messianic savior found in a statement made by the apostle Philip (John 1:46). And it can also be understood as an urgent invitation to read this book, and as an offer to relate motifs and themes from Christian tra-

ditions found in films to the reader's personal experience. The second part of the title, "Religion im Film" is, however, misleading: the films are consistently considered only in light of the Christian tradition and a Christian perspective and never from the point of view of other religious traditions. This specifically Christian consideration of film highlights the many possibilities of Christian motifs in current cinema and illustrates the contemporary relevance of the medium of film for theology and the study of Christianity.

The first part of the book is subdivided into ten chapters and considers Christian themes and motifs in selected films. The first two chapters concentrate on the complex representation of social life organized by binding rules. Using specific films as examples, Kirsner illustrates the challenges of portraying the role of the divine in the genesis of these rules. In this way, Kirsner circumscribes two basic challenges of portraying religious motifs in film in a dense description: first, the challenge of representing transcendence, since images of the divine in films are dependent on and embedded in a cultural context and therefore can only ever claim to be a provisional and incomplete experience of transcendence, and second, the thematization of normative instructions for action as found in the Decalogue and naturalized as a primary human experience. Kirsner understands the representations of the divine as an expression of interpersonal relationships in society and at the same time as an expression of a relationship between humans and God. The dialectical character of theological film interpretation becomes clear in her hermeneutic reflection. From an emic perspective, the individual films can be understood as a foundational experience of Christian faith, while an etic perspective emphasizes the provisional nature of these experiences and their fundamentally anthropological character.

In the following three chapters, the book uses selected films, such as Arrival (Denis Villeneuve, US 2016) and The Dark Knight (Christopher Nolan, US 2008), to discuss central themes of Christian theology: selfless sacrifice, misunderstood suffering, and resurrection. The existential longing for redemption is presented here as a basic anthropological motif. The films are interpreted as a recapitulation of biblical narratives within a framework of Christian hope and expectation of salvation. At the same time, the audience can identify with the characters in the films and be reminded of their own hopes from a Christian perspective. The book summarizes the prerequisites for this need for salvation in Christian motifs. Kirsner argues that based on the typology of representations of evil and the analysis of apocalyptic and dystopian representations, films create imaginative places for negotiation of

salvation expectations and redemption motifs. Within cinematic dramaturgy, she shows, motifs of doom and destruction are complementary to the represented redemption.

At the end of the analytical film reviews, Kirsner establishes a link to the beginning of the book. She emphasizes the position of digital media and film in shaping social life. The filmic representation of technical and scientific progress again raises the question of how human life can be organized in society. Drawing on science fiction films, she contrasts being human with artificial intelligence and, at the same time, thematizes the ethical responsibility of humans towards their environment. The question of the role digital media, and in particular cinema, will play in the fundamental experience and interpretation of reality in the future remains necessarily unanswered. The orienting achievements of movies and the changing and growing presence of digital media in the everyday experience of the audience suggest that we needed a fundamental reconsideration of the implications of digital media for everyday life.

The second part of the book focuses on the practical use of films in worship services. In concrete examples, films are examined for their Christian statements and their individual interpretations of life. Examining devotional practices and services in detail, Kirsner shows how films can be interpreted theologically and applied in practice. The films serve as spaces of identification for the audience and are reflected theologically in sermons and in connection with biblical stories. These interpretations are then presented as a finished template with songs, prayers, and liturgical elements. The liturgical embedding of the films is creative, even if the interpretations are sometimes one-sided and do not always do justice to the complexity of cinematic productions.

The book offers a very good and broad selection of Christian references in current cinema. However, these references are interpreted very statically. Individual motifs are covered in the discussion of the films, yet the ambivalence and diversity of Christian references within an individual film are not addressed. For the film ARRIVAL (2016), for example, Kirsner notes the main character's willingness to make sacrifices and the experience of suffering as a form of Christian life. But she ignores the messianic transformations of this figure and the resulting questions about free will and predestination. Thus, the film not only creates a space for the audience to engage their personal suffering, but also addresses philosophical questions about people's ability to make decisions. Cross-references within the book itself would help

avoid the impression of eclecticism with regard to individual religious motifs in the movies.

Overall, the theological film analyses and liturgical applications offer a very good introduction to the field of film and theology for students of theology and in studies of Christianity. The overview of the various topics of the Christian tradition, their everyday relevance and the discussion of the medium of film from an ethical perspective illustrate the central importance of this field for contemporary religious questions. The two complementary sections of the book, film analysis and application, will be particularly inspiring for students and those interested in theological film work, as they draw attention to the religious horizon of the reception of films and at the same time encourage the productive use of films themselves in church services.

Filmography

Arrival (Denis Villeneuve, US 2016).
The Dark Knight (Christopher Nolan, US 2008).
Come and See (Idi i smotri, Elem Klimow, SU 1985).

Baldassare Scolari

Festival Review
35th Fribourg International Film Festival

At this year's Festival International de Films de Fribourg (FIFF, 16–25 July 2021), the artistic director, Thierry Jobin, and his team presented a rich and varied selection in the international competition for feature films. The twelve films dealt with diverse subjects using different stylistic approaches and narrative strategies. This diversity was also reflected in the evaluations of the juries for this category, which all awarded their prizes to different films. Nonetheless, recurring topics can be clearly identified.*

In the first place, several films tell stories of petty criminals, disenfranchised, exploited and excluded people. LA NUIT DES ROIS (NIGHT OF THE KINGS, CI/FR/CA/SN 2020) by Philippe Lacôte, winner of the main award given by the International Jury, is a special kind of "prison film". It leads us into the world of the MACA, a notorious Ivorian prison that is ruled by its inmates. Its title immediately suggests that this film is also about power games and intrigues, the struggle for authority and sovereignty: *La Nuit des Rois* is the French translation of the title of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Lacôte's production shifts the power struggle – one of the trademarks of Shakespeare's dramas – to a prison, a place where hierarchies and power dynamics are abundantly clear. In this prison, a complicated system of unwritten rules, sanctions and rituals regulates the retention of power and assigns to each prisoner a specific place and a specific function in the prison community. One of these rules states that a weakened sovereign who is incapable of governing must give up power and take his own life, reminding of the figure of the god-king, described by the anthropologist James Frazer, who must be ritually killed as soon as his divine effectiveness threatens to be diminished by age or illness.

In the film, the sovereign's (lack of) power is closely linked with the power of storytelling. In fact, the rules of the MACA state that the sovereign can choose a storyteller who has to entertain all occupants with a story on the nights when the moon turns red. If the story displeases or ends before sunrise, the narrator is killed. Barbe Noire, the terminally ill sovereign of the MACA, invokes this rule when he appoints the pickpocket Zama as a storyteller to gain time and postpone his own fatal deposition. Zama is clearly reminiscent of Scheherazade from *One Thousand and One Nights*, a figure that Lacôte combines with the West African figure of the griot, a professional singer, poet and instrumentalist who recites epic texts in a specific form of singing as a professional singer, storyteller, teacher or entertainer.

When Zama learns that he will be killed as soon as his story ends, he begins to expand the plot with flashbacks. What began as a realistic story about a petty criminal gradually turns into a fairy tale. Zama's story offers the director the opportunity to escape the walls of the prison and bring the vast landscapes of West Africa onto the screen, where real events merge with myths and legends. What is unique in Lacôte's film is the back and forth between a primary *narrative space* and secondary *narrated spaces*. Indeed, what Zama tells is not only visualized with the help of flashbacks but also staged performatively and physically by the inmates. For Zama and the other prisoners, voice and body become means of spiritual (admittedly only temporary) escape from their precarious circumstances.

The power of narrative and fictionality is also at the center of ZHELTAYA KOSHKA (YELLOW CAT, KZ/FR 2020) by director Zheltaya Koshowa. In this tragicomic, sometimes absurd work, whose characters are at times reminiscent of those from Aki Kaurismäki's early films, the former criminal Kermek dreams of building a cinema in the middle of the mountains of the Kazakh steppe. The film is also an homage to, if not a remake of, Tony Scott's TRUE ROMANCE (US 1993): in ZHELTAYA KOSHKA too, a cinephile protagonist falls in love with a prostitute, comes into possession of a considerable amount of money (or cocaine in Scott's film) owned by the local gangster boss, and escapes with his lover. There are many references to film history in ZHELTAYA KOSHKA – for example, the characters recreate Jean-Pierre Melville's LE SAMOURAÏ (FR/IT 1967), Martin Scorsese's CASINO (US 1995) and Stanley Donen's SINGIN' IN THE RAIN (US 1952). For Kermek and his beloved Eva, cinematographic fictionality is not just a place of refuge where the hardships of life in the Kazakh steppe become bearable. Rather, fictionality is a means of resistance against inhumanity and mutual exploitation in a society

ruled by corruption and brutality. Even if, unlike True Romance, Zheltaya Koshka has no happy ending, its protagonist still seems to win: he refuses to dehumanize others and reminds us that without fictionality, without the ability to tell stories and to be affected by them, human beings forfeit their humanity.

Another recurring theme in the films selected for the international competition is the struggle about and for children. In the black comedy La noche mágica (Bad Christmas, AR/UY 2021) by Gastón Portal, which was awarded the Special Prize of the International Jury, a thief becomes friends with the girl whose house he tries to burgle on Christmas night. This friendship brings to light a dark, terrible family secret, and the thief functions almost like a divine authority in order to bring about justice. Asa Ga Kuru (True Mothers, Naomi Kawase, JP 2020) also deals with the topic of family or, more precisely, with the question of the definition of "true" motherhood. The film, which was awarded the Ecumenical Jury Prize, sensitively recounts the story of adoptive parents who one day are called by their child's birth mother, who asks for money. What at first looks like blackmail soon turns out to be a desperate act by a young woman who was pressured by her parents to give birth to her child secretly and to put it up for adoption. But now she would like to see, get to know and love her son. This film is visually remarkable above all for the softness of the natural light that graces characters and landscapes at the same time. It manages, without ever becoming pathetic, to create a strong emotional bond between the audience and the boy's "true" mothers.

Although children only appear prominently at the end in Jasmila Žbanić's Quo Vadis, Aida? (BA/AT/RO/NL/DE/PL/FR/NL/TR 2020), their central role must not be overlooked if one wants to understand the ethical and political power of the film. Žbanić's forceful work won the COMUNDO Youth Jury Prize and the Audience Prize. Aida, played by an outstanding Jasna Đuričić, works as a translator for the United Nations and accompanies us through the terrible events and wrong decisions that resulted in the Srebrenica massacre and the killing of more than 8,000 Bosniaks. The film is set apart from many other war films by providing a woman's view on the spiral of events that, through the complicity of the United Nations, led to the latest genocide in European history. At the same time, it is also a memorial film that not only asks us not to forget, but also guides us to reflect on how to deal with terrible memories. Quo vadis, Aida? Where are you going, Aida? Why is she returning to Srebrenica several years after the events of July 1995? How

can she bear to live in the same place as the murderers of her own family, friends and neighbors? In the last scene, we see Aida, who is now working again as a primary school teacher, as she had done before the war, looking at the faces of the murderers during a school performance – that is, looking at people who were capable of the most cruel and inhuman acts and are now happily and lovingly watching their children. Here the children, eternal symbols of innocence, there the beasts, who no longer seem like beasts, but are like normal fathers. The exchange of looks is wonderfully staged here: the men's brief, fleeting glances at Aida reveal that they would like to forget but cannot, because she, the survivor, is there. Aida is their memorial, the one who makes it impossible to forget and who, despite everything, still appears able to believe in the possibility of reconciliation, because humans, the film seems to tell us, are not born as beasts, but become beasts when they are fed with hatred, racism and brutality. Aida has returned because the children of those who have become beasts are not to be blamed and have the right to grow up in a world worth living in.

Another film that deals with murder, cruelty and brutality is Michael Franco's NUEVO ORDER (NEW ORDER, MX/FR 2020), set in the near future. In reaction to a popular uprising, a coup d'état is taking place in Mexico, during which the corrupt military and the no less corrupt political and economic elite do not hesitate to use any means available to oppress and exploit the population. In the society shown here, almost all individuals – insurgents, common soldiers, generals, politicians, poor and rich – act only out of pure greed and egoism. In several interviews, the director states he was inspired by works such as A CLOCKWORK ORANGE (UK/US 1971) by Stanley Kubrick, George Orwell's *1984* and Alfonso Cuarón's CHILDREN OF MEN (UK/US 2006). Especially in comparison with CHILDREN OF MEN, however, the film's weaknesses become apparent. The quality of Cuarón's film lies in, among other things, the fact that it does not "anthropologize" political violence, but rather depicts it as the result of a complex power network in which both ideological attitudes and economic-political interests play important roles. Cuarón critically examines state and "revolutionary" violence but does not simply present it as an expression of a universal human inclination to brutality. Franco's film, by contrast, is a superficial and unintended caricature of the Hobbesian state of nature, where all are *homo homini lupus*, that is, wolves exploiting each other. In Mexico, the film was rightly criticized for the stereotypical portrayal of the rich and poor, which ultimately only reproduces the classism and racism against which the director claims to

fight. In addition, the film was also criticized for the reactionary portrayal of demonstrators as wild anarchists. In fact, the film discredits social protests insofar as they are represented as the prelude and cause of the coup and thus the establishment of a fascist military dictatorship. I agree with these critics in my view that this film is an expression of a very reactionary, very bourgeois fear of the mob, of the crowd, which if not disciplined will only create chaos and disorder.

In order not to end the festival review with these critical remarks, I turn to a last film that in this age of increasing ecological catastrophes is highly topical because of its representation of the relationship between humans and nature. Filmed in Moerdaoga National Forest Park in Inner Mongolia, China, Cao Jinling's directorial debut, Mo Er Dao Ga (Anima, CN 2020), tells the story of a community of poor loggers. They earn their living by slowly but systematically cutting down a thousand-year-old virgin forest on behalf of the government. The exploitation is becoming more and more aggressive. We can observe the consequences of economic growth at different levels. On the one hand, the film shows us the unbalanced, profit-oriented use of natural resources. On the other hand, we see how the traditional way of life of the Evenks, an indigenous people of North Asia with a particularly pronounced animistic worldview, is thrown into crisis through the exploitation of nature and human beings.

The film includes numerous scenes of breathtaking beauty: massive trees, filmed from above, make us feel tiny; snowy landscapes gilded by the rays of the sun at dawn; fog rising in the thick forest. The shots inside the lumberjacks' hut, where huddled bodies move in the smoke and steam, are particularly striking. The plot revolves around the two brothers Tutu and Linzi, who work in the same lumberjack team. As a child, Tutu killed a bear – a taboo for the Evenks, a sacrilege against the spirits of the forest – to save the life of his little brother. The close relationship between the two is disrupted when Tutu and Linzi fall in love with the same woman, who chooses Linzi and marries him. When Tutu kills another bear, trying in vain to win the woman's heart, the fundamental and irreconcilable difference between the two brothers becomes visible: Linzi's deep, spiritual bond with the forest and its creatures collides with Tutu's urge for self-affirmation and a much more profane worldview. The dispute intensifies because Linzi's belief in the sanctity of the forest leads him to oppose his workmates, including his older brother. Despite his desperate attempts to save the forest, the consequences of the systematic clearing soon become apparent. One day, after

a thunderstorm, masses of water flood the logging settlement and destroy it. Linzi's daughter is killed in the process. This event finally breaks up the already tense relationship with his wife, who cannot forgive that instead of staying with his family in the hour of need, Linzi went into the virgin forest to prevent his colleagues from cutting down the last part of it.

The film is very topical because it shows us the catastrophic consequences of the excessive clearing of forests not only in terms of climate change but also in terms of people's concrete lives. In the summer of 2021, when enormous amounts of rain devastated large regions of Europe and Asia, this film should be understood as an important alarm call: this is not happening for the first time and, according to climate research, it's likely to happen more and more often. It remains to be seen whether an animistic re-sacralization of nature can be sufficient to counteract ecological destruction. The fact is that warning signs have been around for years and they are increasing in number. It is time to finally take these warning signs seriously – not only in the cinema!

Filmography

A Clockwork Orange (Stanley Kubrick, UK/US 1971).
Asa Ga Kuru (True Mothers, Naomi Kawase, JP 2020).
Casino (Martin Scorsese, US 1995).
Children of Men (Alfonso Cuarón, UK/US 2006).
La noche mágica (Bad Christmas, Gastón Portal AR/UY 2021).
La Nuit des Rois (Night of the Kings, Philippe Lacôte, CI/FR/CA/SN 2020).
Le Samouraï (Jean-Pierre Melville, FR/IT 1967).
Mo Er Dao Ga (Anima, Cao Jinling, CN 2020).
Nuevo Order («New Order», Michael Franco, MX/FR 2020).
Quo Vadis, Aida? (Jasmila Žbanić, BA/AT/RO/NL/DE/PL/FR/NL/TR 2020).
Singin' in the Rain (Stanley Donen, US 1952).
True Romance (Tony Scott, US 1993).
Zheltaya Koshka (Yellow Cat, Zheltaya Koshowa, KZ/FR 2020).

Christian Wessely

Game Review
CREAKS (Puzzle)

Amanita Design, 2020

The last time I reviewed an Amanita Design game (Samorost 3, see JRFM 3/1, 2017), I was so enthusiastic that I asked the Amanita team to drop me a note when their next puzzle game was going to be released. And they did: in summer 2020, Creaks was published and is available in a collector's edition and a standard edition for downloading the respective Steam keys at https://amanita-design.net/games/creaks.html. It is controlled by keyboard (or game controller, if available) using only the four cursor and three function keys. Various screen resolutions, including 4K (which indeed makes a difference in terms of focus and detail), are supported. The engine runs smoothly, and even on my 7-year-old notebook, the gameplay neither hangs nor stutters. Unlike Samorost 3, this game does not have a hint book included, which can be frustrating, because some of the puzzles are really challenging.

But now for the game itself.

Imagine you live happily in a slightly shabby, but charming and comfortable small house. Then, one day, strange creaking sounds can be heard, the light flickers, dims, and goes out, the bulb shatters, and a general feeling of discomfort startles you. Would you rather leave, sleep in a hotel, and then call a pest exterminator the next day, or would you try to find the source of these phenomena for yourself, sneaking into a hitherto unknown passage hidden behind a piece of wallpaper? I am not sure what I would do in real life, but in the game, I chose the latter option.

The passage is small, one needs to crawl through it on hands and knees, and the ground is shaking, damaging the passage. At last, a ladder leading down provides a way out – and this is where the game starts.[1] Arriving in

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1   Ladders are not the only means of getting from one floor to another; in fact, elevators and cable cars are necessary to cope with the impressive distances.

Fig. 1: The mechanical watchdogs sleep in the upper corridors … How can they be lured onto the floorplates which trigger the lights? (CREAKS 2020).

a strange building (is it a huge and labyrinthic house? A castle? A manor?), which is located in a literal "underworld" (consisting of vast spaces and other houses, even windmills in the distance), I notice that I am not alone: bulldogs that look strangely mechanical are guarding neuralgic points, and the first challenge is to find a way to get around them.[2]

It turns out, fortunately, that they are rather nocturnal – they avoid light, and they have reason to do so, because they transmute into nightstands when light falls on them unexpectedly.[3] Is it possible to control the lights in the dim corridors I need to pass through? Is it possible to lower a drawbridge or to pull up a grate blocking a passageway? Yes, it is – floor plates, cranks, or power switches on the wall are helpful, and it comes in handy that the guarding creatures are not exactly intellectuals. They can be lured onto floor plates that switch on lamps, which, in turn, freeze them there (fig. 1).

2   The course of the game involves so much walking, jumping, and climbing up and down that one completely loses a sense of the dimensions of the game the designers built. Only in scene 55, when the hero takes an elevator together with his/her companion to get up to the very top of the mansion, does one grasp the multiple levels.

3   It should be mentioned that coat hangers may have special qualities, too, that jellyfish may not swim only in water, and that goats may not be as peaceful as they look. Just saying.

Fig. 2: A puzzle in a puzzle: the animated music box on the wall tells a story and, if properly solved, boosts a skill (CREAKS 2020).

The bulldogs-turned-nightstands can then be used to reach ladders or to push them onto other floor panels. But beware, when moved out of the light, they turn back into their bulldog existence and tear the poor creature nearby (in this case, my character) to shreds.

It is rewarding not only to look out for these grim animals but also to watch the walls – from time to time, paintings on the wall contain valuable hints. Animated music boxes and small automata provide further information and skill boosts respectively (fig. 2).

It turns out that I am not the only "intelligent" being in these hallways. A distinguished-looking, well-dressed gentleman (or, rather, a gentle-bird) strolls through the corridors, obviously looking for something – and he is familiar both with the rooms and with the now run-down inventory. And he has some friends who help him, as it turns out, looking for a special book. These bird-like creatures seem to be the original inhabitants of this building and they are in constant danger of being destroyed: a giant monster is periodically attacking the building, tearing it down piece by piece, and the desperate attempts of the birds to fend it off seem to be in vain. Since this monster is also responsible for what the player has experienced as earthquakes (and the initial creaks and light bulb problems), it is self-evident that helping the gentle-bird and his avian entourage would be a good decision.

After moving through a number of levels (somewhere around level 45), it becomes obvious that the monster is a seemingly undefeatable giant multiheaded dog, apparently a relative of the mythological Cerberus of ancient Greece (fig. 3).

Fig. 3: At a glance: the monster, one of the birds, and his brass-headed helper (Creaks 2020).

Yet this creature does not guard the entrance to the underworld but instead attacks the mansion of the birds, for reasons that do not become completely clear. The journey goes up and down and many more challenging puzzles are to be solved before the book can finally be recovered. With the support of one of the birds and one of their technicians (a brass-head, literally), a magic light can be recovered from a floral cavern (fig. 4). But wait, light turns the dangerous creatures into furniture – so how about we confront the Cerberus with the magic light? It turns out that this is not as easy as expected, but finally, after being swallowed by the monster like Jonah by the whale, my character opens the lantern and hit by the light beams, the monster shatters – no, not into pieces, but into furniture.

In a long final video sequence, the now friendly mechanical dogs, coat hangers, goats etc. reconcile and celebrate with music and dancing (fig. 5). The underworld is saved – and I (my character) can climb back up the ladder and crawl back through the tunnel into my room, which is now bathed in bright daylight.

The game has been highly praised for its creative artwork, and rightfully so. "It's almost like a Hieronymus Bosch painting, where I feel like I could look at the artwork forever and still notice new things."[4] The soundtrack and music are remarkable too: the score is linked to the progress one makes in

4   AppUnwrapper 2020.

Fig. 4: Now for somewhere completely different: using flowers as means of transportation is not as odd as expected (CREAKS 2020).

Fig. 5: Music and dancing create unanimity: the final sequence of the game (CREAKS 2020).

solving the local riddles in a room, and listening closely proves to be helpful in situations where the visual information seems to be insufficient. Communication amongst the non-player characters (and also between the birds and the player) is completely non-verbal apart from the options menu or the very few hints for which key to press in order to activate an automaton or use a crank. This is a technique for which the Amanita games are well

known. Apparently, it took eight years from idea to finished game[5] – to me the result was worth every day.

Just as in SAMOROST 3, the message one can draw from this game is that creativity, empathy, and charity can overcome the strongest challenges, and that reconciliation is possible even with feared foes. Yet one remaining antagonist has to be destroyed before it destroys the community; there is no possibility of getting around annihilating it. This echoes Girard's concept of religious sacrifice as the rightful, justified act of violence in a ritualized context, where the victim is constructed as the root of all evil – the scapegoat – so that the violence can discharge against it, thus ensuring the survival of the community.[6]

But what is more: the game is, in a nutshell, the paradigm of "the hero's journey" according to Joseph Campbell.[7] Campbell describes a hesitating hero who is summoned to save a society whose life-granting balance is severely disturbed; and the hero – after learning special skills and receiving magic items – is able to fight first the antagonist's crew and then the antagonist itself. Having restored the balance, the hero can go back to the everyday – the cycle is finished, and yet returns to the beginning. And this is what this game presents to the player.

The Amanita crew have managed to create a game that is in several respects fascinating, not only for its artistic quality but also for the message they managed to weave into the details of the game. From the very beginning, the uncanny feeling that is purposely created in the labyrinth of walkways, stairs, elevators, and funiculars is interwoven with small sparks of light. Light is the essential ingredient of change for the better, both figuratively and literally. Thus, CREAKS can be read as a mythological story about courage, trust, and hope, about the eternal fight of good against evil, of darkness against light, and about the overwhelming power of benevolence which is capable of including, and bringing relief to, those who at first glance do not merit it. And thus, although by no means a religious game, CREAKS is a story that provides one with clues to the transcendent.

5   Sigl 2020.
6   Girard 1977.
7   Campbell 1973.

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SCHÜREN