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To cite this article: David Morgan (2016): Materializing the study of religion, Religion, DOI: [10.1080/0048721X.2016.1210395](https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2016.1210395)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2016.1210395>



Published online: 15 Aug 2016.



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Review Symposium

Materializing the study of religion

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This response to Meyer's work focuses attention on the materiality of studying religion and how the sociality of religious practice may be studied in material terms. The value of this approach and the manner in which it is conducted vary from more traditional approaches to religion by offering a different conception of what religion is and does.

KEY WORDS material culture; sensation; entanglement; social body; Birgit Meyer

Birgit Meyer's new book offers something important to the material study of religions and does so in a way that draws across several disciplines and fields of study. My remarks offer a reading of her book cued to the materialization of Religious Studies and to what it offers us in thinking about the task of studying religion.

How to study the materiality of religion is something many of us have been exploring in a variety of ways. The task is hardly new, of course, if we think of archaeology, art history, and physical anthropology as ways of taking material evidence seriously. But so much has happened in the last two or three decades in terms of related inquiries that we must continue to think creatively about what the materiality of religions is and how we might proceed to study it. Consider the importance of such topics as embodiment, sensation, emotion/affect, food, dress, gender and sexuality, as well as the built environment over the last 20 or 30 years, and especially the last ten. Each of these topics has changed how we think about religions and has given us the opportunity to apply a variety of methods – from ethnography to semiotics, from material culture analysis to cognitive-science studies – to get at how human beings do and make their religions and how their religious communities, practices, and beliefs do and make them. This has meant an ongoing and necessarily critical reflection on what religions are, a

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careful consideration of their entangled relations with politics, economics, social structures, and authority. This has also meant, and Meyer has done a wonderful job with this, understanding more about the social nature of imagination, the shared imaginaries that link human beings to one another and help them construct their collective relations in the formation of such communities as religious traditions and nations.

The social character of religion comes through very clearly in Meyer's fascinating observation of the difference between watching Ghanaian videos alone and watching them in the company of her informants. I was especially interested in her discussion of the particular nature of the video product and its accommodation of the format of viewing. This is the sort of thing I have in mind when I refer to materializing the study of religions. The characteristics of the medium as produced by Ghanaian video makers for certain Ghanaian audiences become primary evidence in understanding how religion happens videographically for many of them. In a striking moment of ethnographic honesty, Birgit confessed that when she watched many of the video movies by herself in her home during her fieldwork in the 1990s, she found them 'quite boring' (p. 139). I was delighted to read this because it was an observation of critical importance that allowed her to recognize a significant distinction: when she watched the same videos in the company of Ghanaian friends in her home or at movie houses, she found them very engaging. Why the difference? What she realized was that scenes that were too long were in fact well made for audiences to use as the occasion to articulate audible responses without missing crucial moments or dialog. In other words, the videos were made to accommodate the particular conditions of public consumption. Seeing together is the proper mode for experiencing these videos.

This is the sort of thing that Lawrence Levine (1984) found in *High Brow, Low Brow*, his classic study of theater and orchestral production and reception in 19th-century America. Levine showed how taste evolved over the course of the century from willfully adapted scripts that were edited for response from rowdy audiences who interacted with events on stage to increasingly genteel audiences whose growing silence and absorption in artistic performances was structured by new protocols of observation and emerging canons of official versions of Shakespeare, Mozart, and others. The format of the work was deliberately oriented to the social class of the audience since they exercised a particular taste. Consciousness of class preferences in art genres and formats is something scholars have recognized for a long time. But what Meyer brings to this is a keen eye for the affordances of video as a medium. She situates it within a political economy of the neo-liberal marketplace under a political regime that relaxed regulations in order to promote commerce. She helpfully scrutinizes the circulation of popular iconographies in a setting of nationalism and pan-Africanism. And she traces the rise of Neo-Pentecostalism as one vital source of these iconographies, which negotiate the complex relationship between traditional religion, neo-traditional religion, and the modern religion deposited by colonial-era missionaries. And all of this is brought to bear on what video offers as a medium for production, distribution, display, and commerce.

The collective nature of experiencing videos in Ghana and the nature of the video as a commodity both help us recognize an important shift that distinguishes the contemporary study of material culture from earlier practice. Hitherto, the study of materiality tended very strongly to mean the study of objects – and very

special objects at that. The object-centered approach to material culture remains an effective methodology for the scrutiny of decorative and fine art, which is enshrined in museums, whose concern is principally the determination of aesthetic value premised on rarity, fine workmanship, and canons of artistic excellence that are maintained by the work of exceptional artists and the measures of taste that govern appreciation, collectability, and market value. The sociology of this art world does not apply in most cases to the work that Meyer studies or the subject of a great deal of scholarship on popular culture, devotional imagery, and mass-mediated forms of entertainment. This work is much less object-centered and much more practice-centered instead. The approach is not so much about studying discrete things as it is studying the sociality of things, that is, the way things get put together by makers, sellers, advertisers, exhibitors, audiences, and the discourses that thread through the production, circulation, and reception of the videos. This allows scholars to focus on what things do, on their social careers, their circulation, and the social construction of aesthetic value.

The sophisticated juggling of artifacts, practices, audiences, and social conditions captures both the difficulty of materializing the study of religion and the exciting payoff of doing it well. Such an integrative approach very nicely avoids reifying religion as some sort of black box while also resisting the temptation to reduce religion to economics or politics. Meyer deploys a terminology and conceptual apparatus that many of us have come to find very useful: *entanglement*, which she also characterizes as ‘the interlacing of technological, economic, social, cultural, and religious aspects’ of the video medium (p. 35). Religions are inextricably bound up with different forms of social structure, authority, practices and concepts of class, gender typologies, and so forth. Yet there is a certain density and momentum to religious traditions, institutions, and communities as well as tastes, styles, and practices to make the use of the term ‘religion’ helpful to the social analyst.

But where does this take Religious Studies concerned with the evidence of materiality? Meyer has developed over the last several years and deploys in this book a very useful set of ideas, which she refers to as ‘sensational forms,’ ‘sensorial regimes,’ and ‘aesthetic formations,’ which she registers in the very title of her book, *Sensational Movies*. By ‘sensational forms’ she means the routines or repertoires of feeling, emotion, and perception that shape practices of representation. And *seeing*, as I’ve tried to show elsewhere (Morgan 2012), is not an isolated optical event, but one intricately enmeshed in affect as well as other forms of sensation – hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting, as well as forms of body deportment such as sitting, standing, and moving. Seeing happens in the full sensorium and embodied context of human behavior, alone and among others in a variety of contexts. The study of religions does very well to put the eyes back in the body – the singular body of the individual and the social body of the many viewers seeing together. Meyer’s framing of religious experience in sensational forms fully recognizes this. The repertoires of sensation that she outlines as the focus of study are authorized by groups and by tradition, and exert influence on the production and reception of media. They rely most powerfully on seeing together. Such shared moments and practices constitute a medium that produces sociality, which may be defined as the inclination to do things in ways that engage and variously accommodate others, even when people think they are being independent. Seeing or otherwise sensing together shapes religious experience as much as it shapes communities in the form of tastes, emotions, and artistic styles. In this

way shared sensory regimes form aesthetic sensibilities that are internalized in the consumption of products such as videos. People come to feel and imagine in similar ways. As a result, the structures of feeling that arise from sensorial regimes, which are relatively enduring patterns of thought, feeling, and sensation, perform important cultural work.

What this means methodologically is fascinating. Meyer finds the phenomenology of film useful, to a degree. Inasmuch as it can interrogate the embodied experience of watching a video, phenomenology has something very helpful to teach us about sensation's interface with the world. But the introspective, existential practice of phenomenology makes it limited as a singular methodology. Meyer prudently warns that it comes at the expense of the wider world, especially the compelling issues of power at work in the social construction of publics and tastes, in the circulation of media, and in the formation of iconographies among different classes (p. 122). For those connections she relies on the entanglement of religion in a wide variety of social engagements. I like this distinction very much and have made use of it in my own work, arguing for the partnership of phenomenology and network studies, for example, as a collaborative model of methodology.

Meyer's project is to study media artifacts not as ends in themselves, but in connection to the urban imaginaries made evident in their reception. She is also very interested in learning about the anxieties and longings that become manifest in the experience of making and viewing the videos since these feelings give us a glimpse into the spiritual worlds of Ghanaians and the complex, layered history of modernity in the nation. I found the book repeatedly insightful and theoretically sophisticated. It marks a singular contribution to studying the visuality of religion as a form of materiality, deeply enmeshed in the embodied nature of religions as eminently cultural and historical phenomena.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

David Morgan is Professor of Religious Studies and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Duke University. He is author of several books, including *The Forge of Vision: A Visual History of Modern Christianity* (2015), *The Embodied Eye* (2012), and *The Sacred Gaze* (2005). Morgan is also co-founder and co-editor of the journal *Material Religion*.

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