

Conference & Workshop:

**Media, Material, and Visual Components  
of Contemporary American Religious  
*Erlebniswelten*  
("Experience Worlds")**

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**Abstracts**

Heidelberg University, August 16 – 18, 2012



Kathryn Lofton (Yale University):

## Spiritless Space: A Religious History of the Office Cubicle

In December 2009, Rich Sheridan, CEO of the Ann Arbor, MI software firm Menlo Innovations posted a blog entry to his company's site declaring that office cubicles "kill." He wrote that cubicles "kill morale, communication, productivity, creativity, teamwork, camaraderie, energy, spirit, and results." When AnnArbor.com ran an article about his post under the title "Death to Cubicles," many replied, including its famed mother company. After a skirmish of posts and angry disagreement by critics and connoisseurs, Herman Miller waded into the fray, posting to their own web site a compassionate commiseration with Sheridan, as well as a reasoned reiteration of their own marketing clarity. "For us, the best places to work give people a choice of where to work and how to work—if wide-open spaces suit the kind of work you do, go for them." This product was—and is—about choice, Herman Milller reminds its buyers. "People will always need privacy, and organizations around the world have found the good old cubicle a wonderful way to organize heads-down work and minimize distractions."

In the annals of modern design, it is difficult to imagine a more spiritless object than that of the office cubicle. And yet it is to this object that this research will turn, focusing on the ambition of its designer, Robert Propst, and the aesthetic of its producer, Herman Miller, to consider the ideology behind this pervasive sensory experience. Starting in the 1930s under the direction of Gilbert Rohde, Herman Miller mass produced modernism through furniture designed for living rooms and offices. "Modern design...is of our day and our spirit. It arises because there is a need for it," explained a 1934 catalog. "Modern design seeks to combine...comfort and utility to provide us with furniture that is suited to our living needs and as always, satisfying our sense of the beautiful." When George Nelson took over as head of Herman Miller design, the research offices focused on reimagining the organization and circulation of information in professional contexts. Propst described the workplace as a place where "workers performed meaningless, cog-turning activities where they had only to execute tasks." The Action Office emerged from an ambition to counter this meaninglessness with private order and communal spacing. In 1968, Propst modified the original 1964 design for the Action Office to make its components mobile so that everything might be remade. Propst insists that the purpose of the design was to encourage mutability and creativity. "The Action Office was supposed to be invisible and embellished with identity and communication artifacts and whatever you needed to create individuation," Propst later remarked. "We tried to escape the idea of being stylish, which is gone in five years. We wanted this to be the vehicle to carry other expressions of identity."

Three intertwined chords of investigation will guide this study. First, how does this design emerge from a specific cultural context of the American 1960s? Second, how does the relationship between spirituality and modernism affect the designs of Herman Miller? And, finally, how does the prescription of creativity and individuality connect to the longer religious history of commodities? Here, finally, I will consider not only the spiritual intonations of the inventors and producers about their utopian product, but also the ritual formats through which commodities develop their ubiquity.

Anthony Santoro (Heidelberg University):

## CongreNations: The Raider Nation, the Church of the Nation, and Experiences in the “In-Between”

Much has been made of the links between religion and sport in the United States, with more being made of these links all the time. Scholars have focused on the use of sport by religious groups to further their own aims and the use by sport of religious idiom in their packaging, presentation, and marketing efforts, as well as in other areas. Yet little has been done in the in-between, that poorly demarcated area along the continuum between “purely religious” and “purely non-religious” where these links, and the linked, reside. This in-between is in many ways a perfect vehicle for exploring contemporary “religious” experience worlds from the point of view of the people who create and live in these worlds. These links and the in-between provide a space within which individuals can negotiate and realize their dreams, their goals, their roles, their Americanness, their “Raiderness,” even their faith or their humanity. Rather than describing this in detail and presenting research findings, however, in this presentation I turn this in-between into a vehicle for reaching back outward and looking at the said and the unsaid, the signals and the silences, in these contemporary experience worlds. After briefly introducing the Raider Nation and the Church of the Nation, I set up two near-straw men, the “expansive” and the “scholarly” definitions of religion. Orienting my questions between these two imagined, artificial poles, I use these posited CongreNations—their material and visual culture, their language and story, their resources and self-understandings—to turn questions back outward from the subject of study to the what else of the study: What else are we doing and seeing when we look at these experience worlds?

## Sebastian Emling (Heidelberg University):

### Feel the Fieldwork! Researching and Being Researched at the Creation Museum

The Creation Museum in Petersburg (Kentucky) which is operated by Answers in Genesis (AIG) can be found in driving distance of more than two thirds of the American population and can be described as one of the most prominent religious sights in the contemporary United States. This 70,000 square feet building is a thriving religious theme park which opened its doors in 2007 and has by now seen more than 1,5 million visitors. Families, educators, ministers and many more are invited to explore the heart of the museum which consists of seven areas portraying human history according to Answers In Genesis. The christian apologetic organization AIG is among the most influential groups advocating a christian world-view directly derived from biblical sources that are brought to life in the Creation Museum.

Fieldwork is never a one-way street, no man – and especially no researcher – is an island, to almost quote the famous British poet John Donne. Once we enter our fields of research we become a part of what we set out to analyze. This presentation will address our entanglement with our research objects that oftentimes do not remain silent and simply sit still to wait for our scientific endeavors to unfold. What happens if the researchers suddenly get researched by those they set out to investigate? What is to be done when doing research at the Creation Museum turns into being researched?

Katja Rakow (Heidelberg University):

## Multisensory Worship at the Megachurch: Making Sense of Mediation and Sensation in Researching American Evangelicalism

Contemporary evangelicals' use of popular media and high-end technology still provokes puzzlement in scholarly studies. Sometimes, media-savvy evangelicals and their cultural products are seen as 'shifting towards the secular world' (Hendershot 2004: 39). Worship services in contemporary megachurches are described as being 'more like a rock concert than a church service' (Einstein 2008: 134). Part of that puzzlement about evangelicals' extensive use of contemporary media and media formats derives from the perception that new mass media, technologies, and economic forces are extrinsic to religion. Anthropologist Birgit Meyer approaches religion as a practice of mediation that takes into account the material and sensational dimensions of religions. This approach regards media not as extrinsic but as intrinsic to religion due to the fact that religious ideas and practices are always affected and formed by mediation processes. Those mediation processes are enabled by what Meyer calls 'sensational forms.'

In my paper, I will introduce Meyer's approach towards religion as a practice of mediation and her concept of sensational forms. Taking a worship service from Lakewood Church, a nondenominational megachurch in Houston, Texas, as a case study, I will analyze the worship service as a particular sensational form that mediates the divine and enables religious experiences. I will argue that the multi-sensory worship service at the megachurch not only involves the intellect of worship attendees but their bodies and emotions, too. Here, I will argue that praise and worship music supported by audio-visual technologies are not mere ornamentation but an important medium to convey the message and to make the divine 'sense-able'.

Omri Elisha (Queens College, New York):

## Giving in a Material World: Charitable Gifts, Spiritual Mediations, and the Trouble with Materiality in American Evangelicalism

My paper explores how problems of mediation and materiality inform the religious lives of evangelical Protestants, and how U.S. evangelicals in particular wrestle with these issues in their efforts to promote the gospel through ministries of evangelism. Building on ethnographic fieldwork, I consider the example of Christian charity, a morally and politically loaded area of ministry in the evangelical subculture, with an eye toward understanding how material gifts and services come to be seen as endowed with redemptive powers (i.e., the “fruits” of divine grace), despite iconoclastic and antimaterialist overtones in evangelical theology. The paper argues that some of the ethical challenges faced by American evangelicals in relation to charitable giving reflect, in part, larger ambiguities about the spiritual and moral significance of material objects themselves. I suggest further that these ambiguities are linked to a general tendency to regard materiality and material wealth in simultaneously positive and negative terms, a tendency that is deeply rooted in American religious, economic, and cultural history.

Kelly J. Baker (University of Tennessee, Knoxville):

## “The horror! The horror!”: Abject Objects and the Study of American Religions

Klan robes and hoods, burning crosses, end-times websites, “rapture practice,” prophecy books, zombies and zombie-destroying weaponry might appear unrelated cobbled together as a list, but all appear in my research as artifacts of religious life in America. While it might appear strange or disconcerting to include all of these objects in the study of religion, I would argue that each of these artifacts appear as the material manifestations of the religious life of many Americans. Why do these objects and their evidentiary traces need to be studied in religious studies, particularly American Religious studies? How are they relevant, much less religious? What is to be gained by analyzing objects of the so-called fringes from white supremacy to dispensational pre-millennialism to cinematic and literary monsters? How does the addition of hateful artifacts, embodied rapture theologies, and zombies contribute to scholarly understandings of “religion” in American life? This paper addresses a problem for the study of American religions, which is that some objects prove to be “proper” religion, ripe for study, while others are not. This assumed propriety has consequences for both the study of material religion and religion in American life. Claims of illegitimacy and inauthenticity function to limit what counts as “religious” and what does not. This paper, then, problematizes these limits by exploring what we might gain in the study of abject objects from Klan robes to zombies. Judgments about suitable studies emerge in both the hesitance to engage some objects as well as in the reticence to discuss the scholar’s often unstated relationship to her evidence.

Monika Sauter (FAU Erlangen-Nuremberg):

## “There is No Time to Change Your Mind”: Rapture, Conversion, and Love in Evangelical Popular Culture

My paper discusses selected examples of contemporary US-American evangelical popular culture with regard to their representations of religious experiences from a cultural studies' perspective. Drawing on recent scholarship that has debated the relevance of presence in a variety of disciplines and discourses (see the work by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and others), it puts a focus on forms and functions of discourses of a divine presence enacted in rapture, conversion and love. Donald W. Thompson's 1973 film A Thief in the Night dramatizes the scenario of the rapture and thus promotes a specific version of prophecy belief in the US. The heroine of the film experiences the rapture, doubts the evangelical interpretation of what has happened, but finally resists the new world order. The heroines of Christian chic lit, such as Kimberly Brook's He's Fine But is He Saved (2004), however, wrestle with shopping, men, love, and faith and thus closely follow the formula of secular chick lit within a Christian context. Reading a classic film of the US-American prophecy genre alongside with a selected text of the romance genre, the paper focuses on the wide array of narratives and their specific representations of religious experiences in evangelical popular culture. It argues that the discourses of rapture, conversion, and love can be read as moments of convergence between an "evangelical America" and a "secular America", which function as negotiating processes of internal communication and as a means to proselytize non-evangelicals. In addition, I am particularly interested in negotiations of gender in different historical contexts and genres of evangelical popular culture.



Jennie Chapman (University of Hull, UK):

## “Study So You Can be Prepared”: Interpretation as an Act of Agency in the Left Behind Series

The question of human agency is a fraught and contested one in the world of premillennial prophecy belief. Theological orthodoxy holds that the coming end-times are predetermined and unavoidable, having been written in advance by an omnipotent God who permits no human intervention in his plan, thus rendering humans passive in the face of divine power. In practice, however, premillennial prophecy believers have frequently refused to cede their agency so readily, as is manifest in their ongoing political activism in a bid to alter the course of America's future. It is my contention that one of the cultural functions of the Left Behind series of prophecy novels is to attempt to negotiate, and to some extent ameliorate, the paradox of agency that pervades contemporary premillennial prophecy belief. I suggest it does so by reconceiving agency by situating not in activity, but in cognition – in knowing rather than doing.

Prophecy novels are animated by an expressly pedagogical imperative, seeking to instruct their audience in how to read the Bible – and the apocalyptic ‘signs of the times’ – correctly in order to discern the contours of a divinely prophesied future. Through the examples of the characters in the narrative, readers are taught that acts of reading and interpretation can be uniquely empowering, even as their agency is curtailed by the inevitable unfolding of an immutable prophetic timetable. I argue that evangelical readers of Left Behind use the models of agency depicted in the novels to negotiate the complex messages about personal agency, free will, and autonomy that circulate in contemporary end-times discourse. An attention to the uses to which contemporary evangelicals put material artefacts, such as prophecy novels, allows us to encounter them not simply as static objects, but dynamic phenomena that perform necessary cultural work.

Shreena N. Gandhi (Kalamazoo College):

## Yoga's Magazine: The Yoga Journal and Advertising Culture

The Yoga Journal is the biggest publication on yoga in the U.S.; it is where many Americans get their information on yoga, and thus is an arbiter of legitimacy and authenticity when it comes to the practice and philosophy/spirituality of yoga. From the time of its creation in the early 1970s through today, the Yoga Journal has used advertisements for pragmatic purposes, but in doing so has also created a market around yoga needs (desires and wants). They have also created a yogaaesthetic, which the yoga product market perpetuates. This paper dissects the advertising culture of the Yoga Journal, and examines the ways in which the products being sold affects how people practice, imagine, utilize and experience yoga. The sheer explosion of yoga material culture in the past three decades also necessitates that we examine the relationship between yoga and capitalism and interrogate the role the Yoga Journal places in facilitating the connection. This sort of analysis is necessary to uncover the role of market forces in everyday religious lives.

## Dimitry Okropiridze (Heidelberg University):

### Text – Actor – Context and the Space in Between: Introducing “The Power Team” into the Field of Performative Communication

Theories of material religion, ritual, and communication have played a major role in the study of religion and have heavily influenced our way of understanding culture. After a series of epistemological turns it seems plausible that culture ought to be studied as a complex organism consisting of relational mediations that create, sustain and alter meaning. Following this argument the focus of academic attention should move to the very point where mediation takes place and examine its processes, hereby offering new perspectives on various cultural fields.

This paper aims at casting a light on the performative nature of mediation in religious contexts. The case study presented will focus on the Power Team, a U.S strength based ministry specializing in expanding churches through family-focused evangelism. The Power Team’s mission to “draw people from all walks of life together in one setting, through the use of performing visually explosive feats of strength, by incredible athletes, who share the life-changing message of the cross” will be studied as a performative mediation of meaning. To that end I will introduce and modify a communication theory that will then be applied to the object of study. The ultimate goal is to illustrate how a non-reductive structural approach can contribute to a broader understanding of material religion and vice versa.

Jens Kugele (LMU Munich):

## Forms of Narration: Memory, Space and Materiality in the National Cathedral, Washington, DC

In its very name the National Cathedral points to an intriguing conjunction of the national and the religious realm. Its physical structure, its iconography, its guided tours and highly mediatized public events, offer narratives of a national past and present them within a sacred space. The visitor encounters a narrative of the US national history through various media in the interior where stained glass windows depict the Apollo mission to the moon, the ideal American worker or the Declaration of Independence, and where life-size statues of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson decorate the side aisles. In light of its complex interplay of media, materiality and collective imaginary, the National Cathedral serves as a case study of national memory discourses as well as the narration and representation of national identity.

Maarten Paulusse (Heidelberg University):

## Studying Spirituality in the Context of Religious Advocacy

The study of religion and politics in the United States is currently being done from various disciplinary angles, of which political science, sociology (of religion) and history are the most prominent. Due to the political reality of the early 21st century, there has been a considerable focus on the political force of American Evangelicalism in academic handbooks, monographs and journal articles, and scant attention to the “Religious Left”. However, while limited when compared to the influence of conservative religious discourses, there has been a growing role for discourses of contemporary spirituality in the American public sphere. Besides a lack of academic interest, major problems of definition and methodology have halted research in this direction.

When the definitional boundaries between religion and spirituality on the one hand, and politics and religion on the other, have become less rigid than they were once considered to be, how can one study the role of contemporary spirituality in American politics? If spirituality is ill-defined, or perhaps rather well-defined but through a multitude of definitions, how can it be operationalized in order to conduct any meaningful research in this direction? If there seems to be no agreement on the extent to which religion plays a role in the public sphere, how can such a research project be placed in this framework? In my contribution to the “ConShop” I will give an account of the struggles and solutions I have come across in the process of overcoming these problems for my current research project on the influence of contemporary spirituality on religio-political discourses within the “Religious Left”. I will explain how definitional and methodological insights from the field of Religious Studies are crucial in this endeavor.