

# The Aesthetics of Interreligious Connections



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## Abstract

Seeing is one part of human biological processes devoted to perception. As with the other senses, past experiences control the way we sense the world in the present, while our physical and bodily surroundings impact the ways we understand the world we are living in now. All sense-based operations are fluid and flexible, operating through brain and body, as they produce order, meaning, and purpose in our lives. In this short article, I take this malleable nature of perception and use it to prompt a renewed take on interreligious work through attention to *aesthetics* (from the Greek, *aísthēsis*, related to “sense perception”). Aesthetics, in its primal forms, relates to the senses, and through human sense experience we humans developed more abstract theories of “art” and “beauty.” Beginning with some comments on the linguistic basis of “dialogue,” I shift our attention to aesthetics-as-perception, ultimately returning to the perception of art, and specifically the medium of film, in order to provide an example of an interreligious aesthetics.

## Keywords

aesthetics, interreligious, seeing, vision, dialogue, words, perception

For *The Art of Interfaith: A Festschrift in Honor of Lucinda Mosher on Interreligious Engagement and the Arts*.<sup>1</sup>

The late, brilliant neurologist and writer Oliver Sacks once wrote an essay about a man who went blind as a child due to cataract growths. (Sacks calls him “Virgil.”) Later in life, with surgical advances in ophthalmology, his vision was restored. Physiologically the operation was a success: light, color, and form entered his eye, imprinted on his retina, and the light was translated into chemical and electrical information and delivered to the visual cortex. Only, he

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this essay appeared previously as: S. Brent Rodríguez-Plate, “Seeing the other in cinema: interreligious connections through the senses,” *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 38:3 (2017) 296–304; and S. Brent Plate, “Interreligious Aesthetics: From Dialogue to the Senses,” *CrossCurrents*, 68:3 (2018), 329–35.

could not *see*. That is, he did not *understand* the lights, colors, and forms: he mistook his depth of field, was unsure of where one object began and another ended, could not remember the difference between his dog and cat, and became overwhelmed by large displays of fruit at the grocery store. Virgil struggled hard to make sense of this new sighted world, and eventually fell into depression and his visual system began to shut down.

Sacks entitled his essay “To See and Not See,” and was clear that vision is not just an on-off switch, either seeing or not seeing, but made up of millions of neurological and cultural processes that make human seeing what it is. “When we open our eyes each morning,” Sacks summarizes the process, “it is upon a world we have spent a lifetime learning to see. We are not given the world: we make our world through incessant experience, categorization, memory, reconnection.”<sup>2</sup> While “vision” may give us the materials to form a world, it is “seeing” that makes vision and constructs our worlds by making the objects seen meaningful.

Seeing is one part of human biological processes devoted to perception. As with the other senses, past experiences control the way we sense the world in the present, while our physical and bodily surroundings impact the ways we understand the world we are living in now. All sense-based operations are fluid and flexible, operating through brain and body, as they produce order, meaning, and purpose in our lives.

In this short article, I want to take this malleable nature of perception and use it to prompt a renewed take on interreligious work through attention to *aesthetics* (from the Greek, *aesthesis*, related to “sense perception”). Aesthetics, in its primal forms, relates to the senses, and through human sense experience we humans developed more abstract theories of “art” and “beauty.” Beginning with some comments on the linguistic basis of “dialogue,” I shift our attention to aesthetics-as-perception, ultimately returning to the perception of art, and specifically the medium of film, in order to provide an example of an interreligious aesthetics.

## Linguistic Limitations

Those of us with scholarly, clerical, and other commitments to interreligious life like to talk and use our words. We have meetings to discuss upcoming plans, we write essays, we host conversations, and we write and edit scholarly research on the topic. “Dialogue” has been the primary activity of interfaith and interreligious work, and verbal language is the primary medium through and in which we connect.<sup>3</sup>

In the modern age, language increasingly became foundational for philosophical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, and religious constructions of reality itself. After millennia of using language in what seemed like natural ways, humans began turning their newly discovered scientific gaze on the ways in which this base communication system was itself constructed through social, technological, and biological means. By the twentieth century,

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<sup>2</sup> Oliver Sacks, “To See and Not See: Neurologist’s Notebook.” *New Yorker*, May 10, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> To be clear, I am using *language* in its strict form as symbolic words that are spoken, written, or gestured, and that are communicated and comprehended by particular social communities. *Dialogue*, then, is the use of language by two or more parties about a specific topic.

scholars made note of this “linguistic turn” and the ways it affected many fields of study, arguing that objective reality is not accessible outside of language systems.<sup>4</sup>

Language is so important to us moderns that we use it as a metaphor for many other human processes that do not actually involve language. Seventeenth-century astronomer and mathematician Galileo Galilei compared the universe to a book, indicating that the universe “cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language in which it is written.”<sup>5</sup> The eighteenth-century anti-Catholic philosopher Voltaire said that “tears are the silent language of grief.”<sup>6</sup> In the twentieth century, Jewish philosopher Martin Buber observes in *I and Thou* that “an animal’s eyes have the power to speak a great language”<sup>7</sup> and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan stated that the “unconscious is structured like a language.”<sup>8</sup> When we can’t comprehend a phenomenon or experience, we use metaphorical language *about* language to bring it home to us. Humans are familiar with the ways in which language works, and so inexplicable things like the universe, grief, animal intelligence, and the unconscious are all compared to languages to make them more explicable. Or so we are led to believe.

Interreligious work has also relied heavily on language and has often been built around dialogue. When one religious group does not understand the ways and means of another, these groups revert to language to make the cognitive leap. “Oh, I understand now!” exclaims the Sikh after the Buddhist carefully delineates the real meaning of *dukka*, the prevalence of discontentment and suffering in life. Or the Muslim wonders if eating kosher food is similar enough to halal, so she may go and ask around for a verbal confirmation. Or an outsider might question how similar Buddhist meditation is to Christian contemplative prayer, and so ask for verbal accounts from practitioners of each tradition, comparing the terminology of each. Language offers an exceptional linkage and is useful for navigating the complex play of similarity and difference.

## **Aesthetics**

With the gravity of language and the centrality of discourse in mind, what happens if we shift our interreligious emphasis from *dialogue* to *aesthetics*? That is, from using language about religious traditions, their similarities and differences, to highlighting the performances, material objects, and sensual dimensions of differing traditions as they are enacted through food, architectural design, music, images, poetry, the arts, smells, and bodily interactions? What if we don’t use language as the literal or metaphorical grounding for an interreligious engagement? What if we begin our approaches to interreligious connection through the basic religious activities of bodies, their encounters, and interactions? What if the Christian, in seeking to understand the Islamic

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<sup>4</sup> See Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.)

<sup>5</sup> Galileo Galilei, in Richard Henry, ed., *The Philosophy of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 65.

<sup>6</sup> Or, the “mute language of sorrow.” See Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*, translated by H. I. Woolf (New York: Knopf, 1924), p. 299.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons) 1958, p. 96.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Lacan, 1981, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 20).

fasting practices of *sawm*, actually fasts during the days of Ramadan, and not only asks doctrinal questions about it? How would this bodily knowledge be different from conceptual knowledge?

In its ancient Greek meanings, as used by Aristotle and others, “aesthetics” (Gk. *aísthēsis*) was about sense perception, about the ways in which human bodies perceive the world through smell, hearing, vision, taste, and touch, among many other sensual confrontations. This was generally in contrast with *noesis*, knowledge gained through the intellect. Aesthetics was, as the literary theorist Terry Eagleton described it, “born as a discourse of the body.”<sup>9</sup> Aristotle’s aesthetics were deeply entwined with the soul (*psyche*) and while many Western, often Christian, thinkers would occasionally draw on these body-based aesthetics, it would not be until the eighteenth century when the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten would revive these ancient contentions to found a modern, scientific study of aesthetics. He realized that any comprehensive theory of knowledge would need to encompass the ways in which our sense perception operates. In these accounts, bodily sense perception, rather than the arts, was the primary focus of aesthetics. However, through Immanuel Kant and other modern western philosophers, “aesthetics” rapidly evolved into abstract theories, often leaving the insights of the body far behind. Aesthetics became synonymous with “beauty,” “discernment,” or a “theory of art,” a means of rationalizing the often chaotic forces and flows of the body, and making judgements about art. Aesthetics became a cognitive exercise of thinking, not feeling, of judging, not sensing. In short, the field of aesthetics became disembodied.<sup>10</sup>

Into the twenty-first century, new scholarly investigations in religious studies and elsewhere have sought to revive the ancient ideas, to return aesthetics to the body and bring them to light alongside sensual encounters with the arts.<sup>11</sup> Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrrips sum up some of this research in relation to the understanding of religions: “Religious aesthetics, in the current sense, refers to an embodied and embedded praxis through which subjects relate to other subjects and objects, and which is grounded in, as well as offering the ground for, religious experience.”<sup>12</sup> Aesthetics is returning to the body, to practices of actual people in physical spaces, engaging objects, and relating to each other. Discussions of beauty, and critical approaches to discernment are not absent, but this current mode of study does not necessarily end with these abstract qualities. I quickly note that this revived aesthetics is also understood through newer fields such as the cognitive sciences, affect theory, and attention to empathy and the emotions.

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<sup>9</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 13. The initial development of the field of aesthetics, Eagleton further states in an excellent phrase, “is thus the first stirrings of a primitive materialism--of the body’s long inarticulate rebellion against the tyranny of the theoretical” (ibid).

<sup>10</sup> This is of course a quick historical sketch and there are many substantial histories of the field of aesthetics. I refer the reader to Peter Lamarque’s bibliographic overview, “History of Aesthetics” in *Oxford Bibliographies*, 2012. DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780195396577-0002. While this provides a solid history of the field, even moving beyond western views to include some African and Indian aesthetics, Lamarque’s view tends toward the typical philosophical reduction of “aesthetics” to thinking about “art,” and does not assume much connection to sense perception. Nonetheless, he points to many helpful works on the topic.

<sup>11</sup> There has been a notable turn toward the senses and aesthetics across areas of religious studies. See, for example, Birgit Meyer and Dick Houtman, eds., *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012); Sally Promey, ed. 2014, *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); S. Brent Plate, *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to its Senses* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014); and Inken Prohl, “Aesthetics” in S. Brent Plate, ed., *Key Terms for Material Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrrips, 2008, “Aesthetics,” in Morgan, David, *Key Words in Religion, Media, and Culture* (New York: Routledge), 28.

The hope is that a renewed sense of aesthetics can provide a fertile field within which we can think about interreligious experiences, and the embodied religious practices of diverse groups of people.

Indeed, the community service and social activist dimensions of interreligious dialogue are often about bodily-based practices. Marching from Selma to Montgomery with Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously noted, “I felt my legs were praying.” There is a form of mutual interreligious understanding that is enacted through collective social activity, as legs, feet, bodies, eyes, ears, and hands come together for shared experiences. We might even suggest that such ethical activity is predicated on aesthetic activity, that, to a great extent, there is no ethics without aesthetics. Thinking about interreligious engagement through aesthetics reimagines some of the ways social justice issues are enacted.

This sensual, material investigation continues my ongoing work in comparative religions. Material and visual culture becomes the lens through which the comparisons and contrasts come into view. Simply put, I am interested in what humans smell, taste, touch, hear, and see as part of their religious lives and experiences. Much of this is summed up in my book *A History of Religion in 5½ Objects*. In the conclusion there, I argue:

[The] crux of religion itself is the sensual engagement with the physical objects of the world. I believe that starting a history of religion from this point also offers the potentials for a renewed take on dialogues between religions... Instead of asking whether all gods are the same thing, we might have renewed respect for each other if we begin in wonder of why so many of us carry stones, burn incense, beat drums, regard crosses, or eat bread as part of our religious devotion.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, the arts, while not necessarily the central focus of this new aesthetics, can become a privileged site from which to understand the links between material objects, sensing human bodies, space, performance, and the experiences that emerge from such interactions. To put it perhaps too dryly, experiences with the arts constitute a laboratory within which we can better understand the impact of the physical world on human sense perceptions. Writing on the relations of art and interreligious dialogue, Mary Anderson argues that the “capacity of art to limn between contemplative and active, intrasubjective and intersubjective, orientations makes it a particularly well suited resource for dialogue among religions, most of which have rich traditions of material culture.”<sup>14</sup> The arts work from and trigger the imagination, fostering new ways of seeing, hearing, and touching, forming aesthetic connections between communities of bodies in time and spaces. This includes not only literary analyses of poetry but also poetic recitations, not only architectural theories but also bodies in physical places, not only nicely framed photographs but also the faces of the photographed and their abilities to evoke emotions in the bodies of the viewers.

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<sup>13</sup> Plate, *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects*, 222–23.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Anderson, “Art and Inter-religious Dialogue” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-religious Dialogue*, Catherine Cornille, ed. (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 102. See also Illman, Ruth, 2012, *Art and Belief: Artists Engaged in Interreligious Dialogue*, Sheffield, UK: Equinox Publishing.

People will continue to use words to connect. Scholars will write about encounters while local interfaith workers will hold “dialogues.” Language can be an efficient means of demonstration and connection. Yet, we also find ways to move beyond the words on the page, into the images of faces of others, into specifically designed spaces, into material objects on ancient pilgrimage routes, and through writing words delicately and beautifully through calligraphy.<sup>15</sup>

## Film as Interreligious Insight

As I have worked with films, among other visual media, I find many resources for working through interreligious connections, and for finding ways that we see each other, and again I mean that literally. Not only do many films display conflict and resolution (and more conflict) across traditions and within traditions, but they also challenge people watching the movies to see differently.

The world “on screen” has a direct connection with the world “off screen,” and these two worlds are continually intertwined.<sup>16</sup> I am motivated by the comments of filmmaker and theorist David MacDougall who notes the ways ethics, the senses, and knowledge are bound to each other: “Appearance *is* knowledge, of a kind. Showing becomes a way of saying the unsayable. Visual knowledge (as well as other forms of sensory knowledge) provides one of our primary means of comprehending the experience of other people.”<sup>17</sup> MacDougall argues for the importance of seeing films outside the Hollywood-Industrial system. Outside that dominant system, we the viewers become exposed to bodies and behaviors of people outside our own worlds. Part of the implication here is that there is an ethical component to cinema, even if on-screen, particularly when we the viewers can enter into another world not otherwise allowed. The senses, ethics, and knowledge come together. For MacDougall, “Visual knowledge (as well as other forms of sensory knowledge) provides one of our primary means of comprehending the experience of other people.”<sup>18</sup> This, I take it, suggests a new perspective from which to build interreligious relations.

One film, to give an example, that holds up the contested and convergent versions of the sacred is a wonderful, whimsical work by the Canadian Julia Kwan, *Eve and the Fire Horse* (2005). The film is, on one hand, a film about children, and the ways children learn to interpret the world, encouraged and sometimes coerced by the powerful forces of family and religion. Here, interreligious connections are both portrayed in the diegetic world of the film, just as they are created through the filmmaker’s vision for the film audience. The young Eve (Phoebe Kut), and her elder sister Karena (Hollie Lo), struggle to grow up and make sense of their world which is somewhere between the old world of China and their new home in Vancouver, Canada.

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<sup>15</sup> Lucinda Allen Mosher, “Writing the Sublime: Visual Hagiography and the Promotion of Interreligious Understanding,” *CrossCurrents* 68.3 (2018): 383–93.

<sup>16</sup> I discuss this at length in S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>18</sup> MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image*, 5.

Ultimately, the film is about the ways in which children learn to distinguish between things, including religious traditions, as they become socialized within their communities.<sup>19</sup>

Buddhist, Confucian, Christian, and other images and stories mix together in Eve's world. There is, curiously enough, no real sense of "difference" and "otherness" for her, at least at first. Her sister's Punjabi Sikh would-be boyfriend is treated the same as her poor white Protestant girlfriend. The most memorable scenes show the Buddha, Guan Yin, and Jesus dancing together in the living room, brought together in Eve's own visions. But even this synoptic imagination can't hold together these contrasting forces and conflicts arise as Eve gets older. Eve's Jesus gets jealous ("Thinks he's the only one," says Guan Yin) and after the death of the matriarch of the family (Eve's grandmother), Eve's mother goes on a spiritual quest trying Zen meditation and heading to the theaters to watch Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments*, thinking this Christianity thing isn't so bad with its emphasis on family and obedience, and maybe "two gods in the house are better than one."

The film offers some key insights for interreligious relations, first by suggesting that something other than verbal dialogue is necessary in order for religious traditions to begin to make sense of each other. What is needed is imagination, vision (in the physical sense), and play. Indeed, the film tends to cast some suspicion over sacred words, and the more the big-sister Karena reads about Christianity the more dogmatic she becomes, ultimately forging a literalistic and ultimately dangerous understanding of metaphorical theology. In contrast, Eve's vision is "syn-optic," and even when she tells stories she is mixing and matching traditions, telling Chinese stories to her school mates, making up extra flourishes for other stories, and when she does read directly from the Bible it is the from the erotic poetry of The Song of Solomon, much to her schoolmates' delight.

Many other films create narratives of transformation in their diegetic spaces, and a coming together across and sometimes in spite of lines of difference. Another example is the film *Babette's Feast* (dir. Gabriel Axel 1987) which tells of a remote village in the Jutland of Denmark in the nineteenth century. The strong Protestant leader of the community dies, and his two adult daughters, along with the congregation, struggle to get on without clear leadership. Infighting ensues and the once-strong community appears to be breaking down.

Meanwhile, a Frenchwoman named Babette has been exiled from Paris during the communes, and comes to Jutland, agreeing to serve as cook and housekeeper for the daughters. When the Catholic and urbane Babette—in contrast to the Protestant, rural villagers—gets a chance to host a celebration she spends all her money (10,000 francs, won in a lottery) on a lavish meal she prepares for the community. Not only is this a lot of money, but it marks the fact that she will never be able to start her life over again as a chef in Paris.

The local people come to the table still fighting, angry with each other for petty, and not so petty, mistakes and wrongs. But as they sit at the meal, partaking of fine wine and exquisite cuisine, they are changed, and reconciled to each other. Babette's culinary arts work a spell on them. The final scene finds them holding hands outside, singing an old hymn under the stars. Austere Protestants come together, transformed by the aesthetic skills of a Catholic. While the

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<sup>19</sup> Sharon A. Suh, *Silver Screen Buddha: Buddhism in Asian and Western Film* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 183ff.

film ends on a note of optimistic togetherness, questions remain: what happens when everyone sobers up? Will their religious services change because of this event?

## Aesthetics as Changed Perception

From art exhibitions to shared meals, photography to poetry, sacred site visits to the mapping of places, there is a vast expanse opened for the possibilities of meetings between religious practitioners within contemporary globalized cultures. In so doing, films and other aesthetic experiences provide us with alternative worlds. Coupled with the malleability of sense perception, MacDougall suggests how “In films the close-up creates a proximity to the faces and bodies of others that we experience much less commonly in daily life.”<sup>20</sup> Films offer us privileged points of view, engaging our vision and hearing (and related senses of touch, taste, and smell), and bringing into other religious worlds.

These *art*-ificial worlds are not to be confused with something called the “real world,” and yet they do begin to change the very ways in which we perceive the world beyond the movie screening. To really move toward an interreligious aesthetics is to start seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching the religious worlds of our neighbors, our fellow citizens, our fellow humans. And while we can write essays and have plenty of dialogue about such things, we can also train our perceptual bodies to experience the worlds of others through the sensuality of the arts. This is what an attention to aesthetics can do as a supplement to dialogue.

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<sup>20</sup> MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image*, 21.