

Learning to Listen: Reflections on Interreligious Aesthetics

By William Dyrness

Thank you for these three stimulating papers, which further our project not only of trying to listen to strange music, but of learning to see how strange or tone-deaf we are! Both Michelle Voss Roberts and Peter Doebler focus on the way images connect with and work on the viewer, while Peter Schadler calls attention to the historical development of the forms of special preparation for such sacred productions. Since Peter Doebler's and Michelle Voss Robert's papers address such closely related issues, I want to spend some time thinking about their similarities and differences, and then see what Peter Schadler might add to the discussion.

These two papers together portray a particular "receptive imagination" that I want to focus on. Let me begin with a comment on the way Senju's images evoke, as Peter Doebler says, a sublime that sustains a peaceful harmonious depth. We have seen in Peter's wonderful images of sliding doors in the Shofuso Japanese House in Philadelphia the way the multiple visual planes accentuate a shifting feeling of depth—where an experience "of spatial depth opens up to an experience of ontological depth." Using the Japanese notion of *Yūgen*, a mysterious, obscure depth that stills the mind, Peter describes the way it enables viewers to become "aware of the fundamental interdependence of all things." This resonates with Michelle's description of *rasa*, or "relish" as a theological category and not just a descriptive category, and especially the primacy of Abhinavagupta's ninth *rasa* "peace." It would be interesting to compare *Rasa* and *Yūgen* as related concepts that express somewhat different cultural and religious nuances. But I want to focus on what they have in common. Both papers underline the affective dimension of interfaith engagement, suggesting encounters that engage us as whole persons. But they also evince a fundamental difference that strikes me as worth noticing.

Michelle Voss Roberts describes the way religious texts and performances inspire the determination to live according to their reality, noting the way Indian religious performances carry rhetorical force—religion there, and in many cultures, is a performed art; the religious and aesthetic emotions are deeply intertwined. As Rūpa Gosvāmin put it, relishing performed dramas of Krishna can prepare the spectator to relish ultimate reality. But Michelle claims they can do more than this: Experiences of meditative peace can serve as aesthetic bridges between traditions, bridging she thinks conversations about transcendence, immanence and union. Her central claim is that discussions of *Rasa* bridge the gap between experience and critical reflection, helping us theorize how, for cultured spectators, aesthetics can be a medium of interreligious engagement. Her paper provides rich support for this possibility.

But how are we to conceive of this bridgework between traditions? Let me address this by referencing one of the chasms the bridge is meant to cross: experience and critical reflection. Her paper suggests to me that *Rasas*, for the Hindu believer, carry the very same

analytic weight that “critical reflection” does for a western thinker. *Rasa* is not simply a dimension of experience, it is clearly a reflective category, even as Michelle says, a theological category, in the sense of proposing that such experiences count as tastes of the divine and anticipate the final experience of *moksha*. But it is reflective only from a certain perspective—in terms of, I would say, a specific “receptive imagination.”

Consider how different the process she describes is from the argument developed by Peter Doebler, when he makes use of Przywara’s “immanent analogy” essence in and beyond existence, and his “theological analogy.” Peter notes the way John Betz pits this essence in and beyond existence—or “becoming,” against “Being” (in the sense of the identity between essence and existence) “that constitutes the most basic analogy between God and creatures.” Doebler’s claim that this provides a fruitful model for finding a relation between beauty and the sublime, without collapsing them, has much to commend it.

But I want to focus again on the chasm Michelle wants us to cross, the radical difference between these two approaches to relating to reality, which Peter Doebler’s paper especially highlights. Peter’s excellent discussion of Western notions of sublime and Senju’s “sublime,” demonstrates how Senju’s work “evokes” a mysterious obscure depth; while, Peter notes, Western notions of the sublime portray the sublime as tragic and depict nature as an enemy, which, Makoto Ueda points out, stimulates feelings of antagonism and resistance.

This way of comparing these notions focuses on how differently the sublime is experienced, but I would argue the difference goes much deeper than this. Contemporary theologians, Peter Doebler notes, have traced this to a western view of reality that is at root, violent. But I would propose this difference of terms reflects a radically different imagination behind these experiences. When one reads Kant’s description of the sublime, one is struck by the way Kant is not describing an experience; he is constructing a concept—and in doing so he is shaping an imagination. He is after what he calls the “faculty of presentation; so that in the case of a given intuition of this faculty or the imagination is considered as in agreement with the *faculty of concepts* of Understanding or Reason” (*Critique of Judgment*, Par 23).¹ Though like beauty, the sublime also pleases, Kant says, unlike beauty the sublime is “boundless” even if its “totality is present to thought” so that the “mind is not merely attracted by the object” but at the same time it is repelled. The sublime is ultimately, Kant judges, unsuited to the imagination, doing violence to it. This concept of sublime is then further analyzed according to its Mathematical and Dynamic determination (*Critique of Judgment*, Book II, Par. 23- 26). The difference here, it seems to me, is not simply experiences of the sublime—they may in fact be phenomenologically similar as Michelle argues; what is different is the stance toward reality that these traditions reflect, and what in the end is made of these experiences—how they are “seen.”

¹ *Critique of Judgment*, Trans. J. H. Bernard (Mineola: New York: Dover Publications, 2005), 61-63.

Flannery O'Connor has famously said the "beam in our eye is the 20th century"—perhaps we would now say the 21st century, or better the whole Western intellectual heritage, or even, for people like me, the Protestant Christian heritage. Michelle Voss Robert's rich discussion of *Rasa* and Peter Doebler's description of the art of Senju evoke a rhetoric deeply at odds with the one we take for granted in western discourse. We come to our work, as Western scholars, gifted (or burdened) with an imagination formed by what we might call "interpretive categories." We want to know: How can we construct a framework that accounts for what we experience? On reflection, even our language betrays us: we *grasp* things, we *construe* or *comprehend* them. Such an activist (or, in Kant's term, synthetic) imagination is not entirely perverse, of course, but these papers underline for me what they exclude. Even if we make use of the language of desire and pleasure, as Kant so conspicuously does, we enclose these within the procrustean bed of our categories, whose predatory stance further influences how we are inclined to experience aesthetic objects. By contrast, Michelle Voss Robert's discussion of *Rasa* (and also the peaceful sublime of Senju) offer, not interpretive categories, but a posture of reception—consider the way words like evoke, listen, open up, imply an eagerness to receive. I want to place this "posture of reception" over against our "interpretive imagination"—the one opens, the other seeks to close.

Peter Doebler hopefully suggests this imagination, being only 200 years old, may be corrected by a return to pre-modern resources; Michelle Voss Roberts similarly calls attention to the *Song of Songs* in the Jewish and Christian traditions, and Peter Schadler offers examples of pre-modern interfaith exchange. Such retrieval may include recovering Augustine's notion of the way desire moves the soul. As Robert O'Connell describes this, Augustine shows that what draws us upward and away from physical desire is a spiritual "appetite" for "beatitude: beatitude which is only the more attractive for embodying, on a higher, spiritual level, all the allure of erotic desire."² The interfaith exchange fostered by these two papers provides further impetus for this recovery.

Meanwhile, given the beam in our eye, how do we prepare ourselves to experience a mysterious depth without having to figure it out? To listen, to feel, without needing to comprehend? Here Peter Schadler's discussion of forms of preparation for artistic production is helpful. I am struck by the way preparation for writing icons, which did not develop, he tells us, until the 16th century in Russia, soon came to cultivate forms of prayer, asking for the Lord's help, an openness that seeks guidance and asks for illumination. This suggests the posture of reception need not be promiscuous. Prayer in the Jewish and Christian traditions is after all an arena of discernment, even, as with Jacob, of wrestling with God. Perhaps in the western tradition prayer is our best (maybe our only) example of reflective reception.

² This is Robert O'Connell description of Augustine's use of sexual desire, "Sexuality in Saint Augustine," *Augustine Today*, ed. R. J. Neuhaus (Eerdmans, 1993), 76.

Of course things are more complicated than I am making them out to be. As Michelle Voss Roberts points out, though the experiences of mystical union may be similar, differences “can spark various intensifications, denials or shifts in theology.” She goes on to note the way negative emotions—compassion, disgust, fury, and terror—can actually provide a kind of analytic function, telling us when something is wrong. Such anger can rally oppressed groups to action, as indeed it has done in India’s history.

So proposing as I am doing, following Michelle Voss Roberts, categories of reception (or better postures of reception) do not forbid discernment, though they demote it. But perhaps they also suggest that reception has its limits. In light of the evident violence that accompanies the human project, the yogic and tantric systems of meditation that still the mind to become aware of the mysterious obscure depth and the interdependence of all things, that seek the harmony in competing voices, provide precious resources. But all religious traditions have pressed the question at this point: Is harmony, or reconciliation, a gift, something simply to be received, something to which we simply open ourselves? Or is it a project, something that we must prepare ourselves to explore, and then apply ourselves to discover and work to achieve? These fine papers suggest ways in which it may be both.

William Dyrness is Professor of Theology and Culture at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena. His teaching and research interests include modern art and aesthetics, art in worship, global theology, and most recently interfaith aesthetics. His recent publications include "Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life" (2011), "Senses of Devotion: Interfaith Aesthetics in Buddhist and Muslim Communities" (2013), and most recently "Theology without Borders" is forthcoming in 2015, co-authored with Oscar Garcia Johnson.