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Anna-Katharina Höpflinger

Staging the Dead

The Material Body as a Medium for Gender and Religion

ABSTRACT

The body is one of the basic media that form and communicate gender. How important gender is for the perception of an individual becomes especially clear by looking at the exhibition of a dead body. Having nothing left other than the body, the deceased are reduced to characteristics that seem to be the basis of a specific culture. However, in religious contexts the exhibition of mortal remains can also be used to overcome gender differentiations. In this article, I will focus on Central Europe, and argue that material presentations are an authoritative means of forming concepts of gender and religion.

KEYWORDS

gender, body, death, material religion, ossuaries, european history of religion

BIOGRAPHY

Anna-Katharina Höpflinger is a research and teaching assistant at the Centre for Religion, Economy and Politics (ZRWP) at the University of Zurich. Since completing her PhD in the Study of Religion, she has developed research projects in the field of media and religion, particularly focussing on the body, clothing, and gender. She also is interested in religions in the ancient world and in European history.

Media, religion and gender are interlinked in very different ways. As Mia Lövheim has shown, these connections must be understood as processes embedded in specific cultural contexts.[1] While Lövheim focuses on contemporary, primarily social media and their forming of religion and gender, I want to step back from technological development and see if it is possible to scrutinise functional similarities in more traditional forms of religion. Lövheim uses the term "mediatisation" for processes surrounding media, stressing the activity, the complexity, and the relevance of the context of media communication. She defines mediatisation as a shift from religious institutions to popular mass media in matters of the authority to form and communicate

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1   Lövheim 2013, 1–14.

world views.[2] From this point of view, media become an important agent of religious change. They support and form so-called "banal religion". "Banal religion" should be understood in the sense that media form religious knowledge, but not in an elaborate or coherent or institutionalised way, and often not in a way noticed as religious by the people using them. In the following, I will appropriate the term mediatisation and use the example of the exhibition of mortal remains in Central Europe to look at possible interrelations between gender and religion. This example is useful for examining mediatisation, because while it is embedded in an institutionalised and traditional sort of religion, similar processes can be spotted as in the so-called "banal religion". The dead body and its staging become the base of world views, practices and narratives that go beyond official statements of a religious institution. In this process, as I will argue, the body takes over the role of the main medium for communicating world views.[3] In the following, I will focus on the forming of ideas of gender through the dead body. The basis of my response is the assumption that gender ideas and norms are often not written down as "laws", but instead are frequently communicated visually and materially. In my example, it is the body that adopts the role of framing normative notions of the world.[4] Human interaction is focused on this single medium that takes over the main role of communicating gender. As the main agent, the body condenses the expectations and concepts regarding gender and religion. So, in the following, I understand mediatisation not so much as a shift, but as a compaction process of cultural meaning by one specific medium. These compaction processes are temporary and relate to specific contexts, in this instance the dead body, for only a short time and in a specific spatial setting.

To work out the role of the body in condensing world views, I will use a material religion approach.[5] The basis of the following observations is field research. Together with the photographer Yves Müller, during two years (2013–2015) I visited ossuaries and cemetery chapels in Switzerland and adjoining countries. Following a cultural studies approach, we focused on the contemporary usage of these chapels, the representation of mortal remains, and the normative regulations that are connected with such staging of the dead.[6]

Due to space constraints, I will operate in the following on a methodological level with the (heuristic) categories "individual" and "collective" and ask how gender is

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2   See Hjarvard/Lövheim 2012.
3   See Coakley 1997, 1–12; Zito 2011, 18–25.
4   See Wegenstein 2014, 127–149.
5   See Morgan 2010, 1–18.
6   These categories relate to the so-called "circuit of culture", elaborated by Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall and their colleagues at the Open University in London 1997. The circuit was designed to work out cultural processes and divides the analysis into questions regarding production, consumption, representation, regulation, and identity, see Du Gay/Hall 1997.

formed on a bodily level to communicate ideas about an individual person as well as a collective.[7]

The first portion will concern the importance of gender for the exhibiting of an individual dead body. The second will delve into the context of this exhibition, and will inquire into the collective staging of the dead. Finally, I will generalise the observations of the case study, emphasising the importance of material media for constructions of gender in a religious context.

THE LIFELESS BODY AS GENDERED

During fieldwork on Roman Catholic charnel houses in Switzerland, we visited a range of ossuary chapels, where the deceased are laid out for their relatives and friends to see them one last time (fig. 1).[8] The mortal remains (if they are not cremated) are exhibited as if the person were still alive. They are nicely dressed and coifed in a gendered way, either in their "Sunday best" or in special burial gowns. The burial dresses for women are decorated with lace or trim, while the men's clothing is generally plainer and sometimes decorated with a collar or bow tie (fig. 2). Clothing, as one of the most important remaining material media, is the main code used to communicate gender differentiations, which are based on culturally shared ideas of gender (e.g. the male as plainer and somehow more earnest, the female as more playful and decorated).

Fig. 1: A public laying out in the Roman Catholic ossuary chapel in Alpnach, Switzerland. The deceased are lying in catafalques (CH 2014) © Yves Müller.

7   The separation of these two categories is widely debated, see Elias 2001.
8   See Hauser 1994, for burials from 1700–1900 in Switzerland; Zihlmann 1982, for mourning practices in Central Switzerland in the 1920s; and Roost Vischer 1999, for today's burial practices.

Fig. 2: Very similar, but nevertheless different, burial dress for women (left) and for men (right) © Urnesa AG.

Fig. 3: Coffin pillows for women (left) and men (right) © Urnesa AG.

That the body is dressed and thereby gendered seems quite common for the Western[9] world, but it is surprising that this representation of gender is usual even if the body is not in view of the public, but put directly in an (afterwards closed) coffin and then buried or cremated. Nearly all burial dresses I found were gendered, with only a small minority unisex. Gender seems to be so important for this last presentation

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9   I understand "Western" in the following not in a geographical sense, but in the sense of a lifestyle and way of thinking that is influenced by late capitalism, consumerism and globalisation.

that even other objects around the corpses are presented as gendered. For example, the pillows under the head of the deceased person can be bought in female and male styles (flower prints for women, rhombi for men, fig. 3).[10] These examples show that a gendered exhibition seems to be important for this last presentation of the body. But why is this practice of gendering the dead and the materials around them so common? I would argue that death reduces the body and its representation to the cultural concepts that are thought to be essential for a person, her/his attributive identity[11] and a specific culture. The body itself is interpreted as passive in death, with the social actions around it coming from the living. The possibilities for communicating the individual characteristics of dead persons (besides talking or writing about them) are limited. The material medium (as a medium that persists) becomes especially prominent in forming and communicating ideas about the dead body. That lifeless bodies are represented so prominently as gendered supports Mia Lövheim's view that gender is "at the heart" of Western culture.[12] Gender in the form of the binary differentiation into male and female belongs in Western cultures to the main characteristics of an individual: a non-gendered individual is in fact "almost impossible for our imagination to accept".[13] So, to summarise, gender is so tightly connected to a person that it is staged prominently even after death, while other characteristics (such as profession, ethnicity or hobbies) are normally (at least in Switzerland) not central to the representation of the dead body.

OVERCOMING GENDER THROUGH DEATH

The above mentioned publicly exhibited bodies are nowadays usually displayed in specific chapels, which replace the exhibition of the mortal remains at home, a practice that was common, at least in Central Europe, until around the middle of the 20th century. Sometimes these chapels are newly built, but often, especially in the case of Switzerland and Austria, old ossuary chapels have been converted into display chapels. Ossuary chapels have been built since the Middle Ages to collect the bones of the deceased, which were exhumed after a number of years because of the shortage of space in cemeteries.[14] Some of these ossuaries still display the bones and skulls of the previous generations. For example, in Steinen (Schwyz, Switzerland, fig. 4), the mortal remains are laid out in front of an impressive wall made of human skulls

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10   For another example, see the website of the company Urnesa from Switzerland: http://www.urnesa. ch/sortiment/bestattungswaesche/kissenbezuege/index.php [accessed 15 March 2015].

11   I would define "identity" in our example as a self attributed onto the dead body in the sense of "a symbolic project that gives […] a guiding orientation to ourselves, to other people, and to broader society" (Elliott 2001, 4).

12   Lövheim 2013, 2.

13   Le Guin 2007, 85.

14   For charnel houses in general see Koudounaris 2011, for ossuaries in Germany: Zilkens 1983, for those in Austria: Westerhoff 1989, for Switzerland: Odermatt-Bürgi 1976.

and bones. While the freshly deceased person is gendered, the collective of the older mortal remains is exhibited in a non-gendered way, communicating the social equality (with regard to age, gender, social standing, wealth etc.) of the mortal remains.[15]

Fig. 4: The catafalque for the display of the dead bodies stands in front of the non-gendered collection of bones from past generations. Ossuary of Steinen (CH 2014) © Yves Müller.

In contrast to the individually exhibited dead bodies, the skull collections in ossuary chapels can visually emphasise a gender equality. The skulls are recognisable as woman, man, boy or girl only for experts or if they are painted with the names of the deceased. Accordingly, specific religious contexts, as I would argue, overcome socially communicated gender concepts. The lifeless body is still gendered if the focus remains upon the individual in a personal manner, but gender becomes irrelevant when the focus is placed more on the collective, as in the case of the ossuaries, where the deceased are thought of as poor souls for whom the living should pray. The idea of the poor souls in purgatory was linked at least until the beginning of the 20th century to a *memento mori* demand for the living: They should live their life – so the emic perspective – in a religiously correct way. Gender separations seem to be less important than the normative guidelines to live a proper religious lives that the masses of bones communicate visually. To summarise this second observation: the argument

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15   We can find *memento mori* slogans referring to this social equality in the ossuaries of Alvaschein/Mistail (CH), Naters (CH), Rickenbach (CH), Villmergen (CH) and Wildschönau-Oberau (AT).

can be made, using the approach of the sociologist Stefan Hirschauer, that gender is a continuous negotiation process.[16] Gender can, depending on the context, step back behind other cultural attributions and can even become, in specific mediatisations, irrelevant. In our case this works via material communication in a religious context.

CONCLUSION: THE MATERIAL BODY AS A MEDIUM FOR GENDER AND RELIGION

I have chosen the example of the exhibition of the dead because the end of life proves useful when thinking about the basic categories of culture understood as "shared meanings".[17] These shared meanings are communicated through social practices and different media "which carry meaning and value for us, which need to be *meaningfully interpreted by* others, or which *depend on meaning* for their effective operation. Culture, in this sense, permeates all of society".[18]

Using the example of the exhibition of mortal remains, I wanted to follow Mia Lövheim's argument that gender is a methodological lens for elaborating different mediatisation processes. In the example above, the body in a religious setting becomes the main medium for forming and communicating gender.[19] The dead body cannot be detached from materiality, and we can observe very different processes of communication through these material mortal remains. If the individual aspect is emphasised, the genderisation seems to be important. As a result, gender is interrelated with an individual's identity and the memory of this person. If the focus is on the underlining of collectivity, gender falls behind other semantics. In this second case, the function of the exhibition is not related to an individual memory, but much more to a normative demand to live in a certain (religiously virtuous) way. To conclude these observations: Religion can include and exclude gender differentiations, whereby dominant social expectations and ideas can be underlined or challenged. In our case, both happen through the body as the main (and a material) medium. Therefore, the material body can become a medium for communicating the importance of gender, but also a medium for overcoming such dichotomic gender separations, depending on not only the specific context and on cultural conventions, but also the function (in our case an emphasis on the individual or the collective) that the public presentation of the lifeless body adopts.

16   See Hirschauer 2001, 214.
17   Hall 2013, xvii.
18   Hall 2013, xix. Emphasis in the original.
19   McGuire 1990, 284.

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