

Shimmering Magic

Cross-cultural Explorations of the Aesthetic, Moral, and Mystical Significance of Reflecting and Deflecting Shine

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A quick overview of recent research in anthropology, history, and religious studies reveals that material culture in general and the materiality of sacred objects in particular have become foci of prolific academic attention. Some works have focused on the actual production and manipulation of ritual components and their meaning,¹ and others on the resilience of ritual forms in the face of rapid environmental change as well as forced migration and imposed contact.² All, however, seem to place the sensorial, immanent aspects of religious experiences on center stage, nudging to one side the textual, cosmological, and theological frameworks that previously held scholars' attention.³ This analytical shift has drawn attention to the embodied nature of religious

1. Paul Manning and Anne Meneley, "Material Objects in Cosmological Worlds: An Introduction," *Ethnos* 73, no. 3 (2008): 285–302; David Morgan, ed., *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London: Routledge, 2010).

2. David H. Brown, *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Karen McCarthy Brown, "Serving the Spirits: The Ritual Economy of Haitian Vodou," in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald J. Consentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 205–25; Karen McCarthy Brown, "Staying Grounded in a High Rise Building: Ecological Dissonance and Ritual Accommodation in Haitian Vodou," in *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 79–102; Grey Gundaker, *Signs of Diaspora / Diaspora of Signs: Literacies, Creolization, and Vernacular Practice in African America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Grey Gundaker, "Tradition and Innovation in African-American Yards," *African Arts* 26, no. 2 (1993): 58–71, 94–96.

3. Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer, eds., *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

experiences,⁴ to the aesthetic, ethical, and mystical effects of sacred objects,⁵ and in some cases also to the shifting ontologies that animate sacred materials as direct emanations or abodes of spiritual entities.⁶ The latter is the more controversial, but also the most challenging, side of this analytical move since it considers the meaning of religious objects not just as aestheticized symbols or representations of sacred entities that are able to elicit religious and moral states of being, but as their very animated conduits or manifestations.⁷

Inspired by the challenges of the “materiality of religion” turn, “Shimmering Magic” sets out to present ethnographically and historically grounded research that highlights the centrality of shimmer in religious and secular contexts, and thereby adds to the critical assessment of the centrality of immanence in accessing the beyond.⁸ The suite of articles in this special issue shows

4. Diana Espírito Santo and Nico Tassi, eds., *Making Spirits: Materiality and Transcendence in Contemporary Religions* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2013); Birgit Meyer, “The Indispensability of Form,” *The Immanent Frame* (SSRC blog), November 10, 2010, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/11/10/indispensability-of-form>.

5. Birgit Meyer, “Mediating Absence—Effecting Spiritual Presence: Pictures and the Christian Imagination,” *Social Research* 78 no. 4 (2011): 1029–56.

6. See Amy Whitehead, *Religious Statues and Personhood: Testing the Role of Materiality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). Also in this regard, Wyatt MacGaffey writes about Kongo *minkisi* (plural of *nkisi*), which are material objects abstracted by Westerners as fetishes: “The Kongo term *nkisi* is related etymologically to other Central African words often translated as ‘spirit.’ Such a translation captures an important feature of *minkisi*, that they are local habitations and embodiments of personalities from the land of the dead, through which the powers of such spirits are made available to the living.” MacGuffey adds, “the *nkisi* was an invisible personality, with a certain specific identity, which had chosen, or been induced, to invest itself in these objects and persons, through whom the powers attributed to it became effective.” MacGaffey, “Complexity, Astonishment and Power: The Visual Vocabulary of Kongo Minkisi,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 14, no. 2 (1988): 190, 191.

7. This is one of the epistemological junctions that connect discussions in the anthropology of spirit presence, the agency of matter, and the posthumanist and ontological moves in anthropology, science studies, and other related fields. See Webb Keane, “On Multiple Ontologies and the Temporality of Things,” *Material World* (blog), July 7, 2009, <http://www.materialworldblog.com/2009/07/on-multiple-ontologies-and-the-temporality-of-things/>, and the response by Martin Holbraad in the same location. Also pertinent is John D. Kelly’s introduction to the colloquium, “The Ontological Turn in French Philosophical Anthropology,” *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4, no. 1 (2014): 259–69.

8. Raquel Romberg wishes to thank Urmila Mohan for igniting her interest in shimmering materials at the Material Religion Conference held at Duke University in 2015, and for graciously sharing with her the panel proposal “Shimmering Surfaces:

the multivalent meaning and multisensorial effects of shimmer, and the manifold, cross-cultural, and diachronic modes in which shimmer, shine, luster, sheen, glare, flicker, sparkle, and glitter, to name a few of the light effects produced by refractive materials, may appear. Offering a variety of ritual contexts, the ethnographic and archival cases discussed in this special issue demonstrate that shimmering might reference distinct yet locally related epistemological and ontological dimensions. These are discussed not only in relation to shining objects per se, but also, and perhaps mostly, in relation to the aesthetic, moral, and mystical significance of reflecting and deflecting properties as they are manipulated by means of various technologies and used within a continuum of religious and secular contexts.

As shown in the work of the contributors to this issue, shimmering materials and their associated properties appear in their specific contexts to index mostly positive values, attributes, and states of being; some of the expansive, generative effects induced by shimmer include increased health, energy, well-being, prosperity, charisma, and wealth. At the same time, these broadly positive attributes of shimmer might need to be tempered in certain socio-cultural contexts to avoid the negative physical-social-moral connotations of extreme success or visibility. In such cases, the deflective powers of shining may be recruited this time for their apotropaic effect in warding off evil spirits and influences.

Moreover, as the contributors also show, the various powers of shimmering may be conjured both in precious natural elements (Douny) and common household materials (Wehmeyer), or may depend on ritual processes to summon and activate them (Mohan) or technological means to control them (Behrend). In some cases, following the displacement or colonization of practitioners, the shimmering powers of traditional substances need to be displaced onto equivalent materials, reinforcing the idea that the effect of shimmer is at stake. Indeed, new technologies of mass production and reproduction have facilitated the provision of readily accessible shining materials in response to the changing aesthetic, ethical, and economic demands of practitioners. In short, the principle of shimmer and its effects may find infinitely renewed embodiments of “mattering,” or “configurations of ideas, actions, and materials.”⁹

In some notable cases, apparently unritualized technological and/or secular

Subjects and Objects of Reflection” that was submitted to the 2015 American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting.

9. Gundaker, *Signs of Diaspora / Diaspora of Signs*, 30.

contexts may overlap with ritual contexts as a result of changing contingencies in social and ideological configurations that supplement emerging religious needs or effects. In response to particular emic meanings of shimmer, then, the contributors to this issue move lightly through the very permeable boundary of religious and secular concerns, not only uncovering technological and economic aspects of religious rituals, but sometimes also unveiling ritual concerns in apparently secular technologies and practices. To adopt Grey Gundaker's apt formulation, however, the evident comparative tenor of this collection of essays is less about unraveling a "deep grammar" of shimmer, and more about a "concrete articulation of what has mattered and continues to matter to people in their practical actions."¹⁰

Adding to the existing archeological, historical, and ethnological documentation on shimmer, this special issue brings together four swatches of complementary ethnographic material that highlight the pragmatic significance of substances that absorb, emit, reflect, and refract light. These materials range from mirrors, sequins, silk, tinfoil, and quicksilver, to bonfires and photographic adaptations of glittering images. As noted at the outset, contributors take on the analytical challenge of apprehending the multilayered significance of shimmering as it emerges in distinct religious and popular practices on three continents not just to *symbolize* unseen powers, but also to *conduct*, *channel*, *become*, *diffract*, or *deflect* them.

MULTISENSORIAL EFFECTS OF SHIMMERING

Archeological and historical sites and collections in and outside Europe attest to the incorporation of shining objects and properties in a variety of religious and social contexts, often to index or elicit high social status, distinction, and mystical experiences. The cross-cultural incorporation of shiny objects and materials in all sorts of ritual paraphernalia and spaces illustrates a variety of sensorial effects—visual, aural, tactile, kinetic—and meanings elicited by shimmer. For example, John Vincent Bellezza describes how the crowns of early Tibetan priests were ornamented with gold, the dazzling effect accentuated by gold and turquoise earrings with flower designs and a hanging silver bell.¹¹ He notes that the reflecting and deflecting effects of shining objects and the sounds they emit are relevant to this day as "copper alloy mirrors decorate the headdresses of Tibetan bards and spirit mediums," in order to both attract deities and repel demons.¹²

10. Ibid.

11. John Vincent Bellezza, *The Dawn of Tibet: The Ancient Civilization on the Roof of the World* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 262–63.

12. Ibid., 263.

The collection of pilgrims' badges by the laity of late medieval Europe evinces a parallel yet different practice. These small tin or pewter ornaments displaying an icon of the saint were a common item of memorabilia from successful pilgrimages, often worn on the hat. As pilgrimages became an increasingly popular pastime, the badges gained a new feature in the fifteenth century when they began to be made with shiny mirrors in them. Jonathan Green describes this as a response to the growth of mass pilgrimages, which "forced pilgrimage sites to display relics on raised platforms or suspended from church walls or steeples, so that pilgrims could only glimpse them from a distance."¹³ Quoting Kurt Köster, Green notes that "the image, the radiance of the displayed relics, caught by the mirror and carried home, was intended to give duration in the sphere of the pilgrim's daily life to the granting of mercy at the place of pilgrimage, and to let family members and friends participate in this grace."¹⁴ Thus, the mirror expands the spiritual utility of the pewter badge by expanding the range of its sensory features, both accommodating the difficulty of access to popular pilgrimage sites and making a more effective vehicle for their grace.

The materiality and multisensorial effects of shimmering have also been recruited, for example, in architectural spaces designed to awaken the senses and elicit the appropriate spiritual predispositions among devotees. In her brilliant analysis of the optical-acoustic perceptual experiences of Hagia Sophia, Bissera Pentcheva evocatively describes how the shimmering and quivering effects of its marble-covered floors and gold-decorated walls were instrumental in creating the appropriate aesthetic-metaphysical mood for the perception of transformative processes of matter into spirit during the Eucharistic ritual.¹⁵ Building on the linguistic-poetic-sensorial correlates of this architectural aesthetic, Pentcheva suggests that the visual gleam of marble has an aural echo in "the iterative Greek root *marmar* -, connecting *marmaron* (marble), *marmarygma* (gleam, glitter), and *marmairo* (to quiver, sparkle)," and argues that for its congregation, Hagia Sophia constitutes "an aesthetic totality—optical and acoustic—that reenacts . . . the perceptual experience

13. Jonathan Green, *Printing and Prophecy: Prognostication and Media Change, 1450–1550* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 36.

14. Köster, "Gutenbergs Strassburger Aachenspiegel-Unternehmen von 1438/1440" *Gutenberg Jahrbuch* 58 (1983): 24–44, quoted in *ibid.*, 36. Gutenberg had an early business interest in the manufacture of such mirrors for an anticipated large pilgrimage to Aachen.

15. Bissera V. Pentcheva. "Hagia Sophia and Multisensory Aesthetics," *Gesta* 50, no. 2 (2011): 93–111.

of polymorphy linked in the Byzantine imagination to coruscating water.”¹⁶ Pentcheva’s presentation offers a vivid demonstration of the multisensorial effects of shimmer tuned to multiple layers of mystical significance in Hagia Sophia.

In a similar manner, ethnomusicologist Marina Roseman has contemplated how shimmering effects result from the ways in which light hits leaves that sway and shudder during ritual dancing in Malaysia. She compares the effects of the fringes of flapper dresses worn by women dancing the North American “shimmy” in the 1930s with the effects of the ceremonial leaf ornaments worn by Temiar dancers as they enter into trance, and argues that “sway and shudder ‘shimmer’ in the kinetic realm.”¹⁷ “Shimmering in the visual, kinetic, tactile, and auditory channels,” Roseman explains, “activates and consecrates” shamanic experiences among the Temiars of peninsular Malaysia.¹⁸ The glimmer of hearthfire lights on shredded leaves of ritual ornaments, and in its quick-shifting presence and absence, disassembles the visual field.¹⁹ Shimmering things, combining movement and light, exist at the fuzzy boundary between the visual and the kinetic, and disassemble distinctions between sensory fields as well. Temiars say they don’t just “see” the leaves shimmer, they *experience* a sympathetic shivering in their hearts.²⁰

In a vein similar to Roseman’s, John McGraw, in a paper he proposed for this special issue, “Words of Fire, Speech of Flames,” intended to include soundscape in his treatment of shimmer. Sadly, John died suddenly on July 20, 2016, before he could submit his full contribution. As a way to honor his

16. *Ibid.*, 95.

17. Roseman, “Making Sense Out of Modernity,” in *New Horizons in Medical Anthropology: Essays in Honour of Charles Leslie*, ed. Margaret Lock and Mark Nichter (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 122.

18. *Ibid.*, 121.

19. To visually demonstrate the quivering effect of moving light on shining surfaces, Pentcheva produced and uploaded a short video recording of an experiment she conducted that shows the eerie effects of flickering candle lights when they shine on a Byzantine bronze icon, which make it appear to have come to life (<http://www.thesensualicon.com/>). This resonates with J. J. Gibson’s research on visual ecological perception and the “affordance” or action enabled by a “perception flow”—in this case, produced by the flickering candle.

20. Roseman, “Making Sense Out of Modernity,” 122. In her insightful review of this introduction, Grey Gundaker noted the connection of flapper dresses, “invented in the juke joints of the US South by African American women—who had started off trends of mobile, expansive twirling fabrics back in cakewalk days”—with Yoruba Egungun masqueraders, both of which point to “an agitated cloth and moving-air-as-spirit mix of stuff.”

work and memory, drawing on the abstract he submitted for this issue, we relay here the gist of his unfinished paper, in memoriam. John proposed to consider the unique sensory/spiritual semiotics of the flames burning, chirping, and crackling during the *ceremonia Maya*, performed in the Guatemalan Highlands. As the flames consume the offerings made, he noted, participants are bedazzled by a cornucopia of sensory impressions, by the scintillating colors and bright light they emit as well as their sound and warmth. McGraw aimed to analyze the spiritual significance of the fire's waxing and waning warmth, the dancing and resting of its flames, and the smells and smoke they emit as sign systems by which the flames of fire are rendered into words of speech and are deciphered, especially by the *ajq'ij* (ritual specialist) according to the cosmology of Mayan spirituality. We hope this issue as it has actually come together will be a fitting honor to his memory.

SHIMMERING TECHNOLOGIES AND THEIR EFFECTS

The “materiality of religion” turn also propels the consideration of the various technologies involved in producing shimmer and their expected effects. In contrast to the shimmering and quivering effects mentioned above—achieved mainly by precious and natural resources such as marble, gold, leaves, and natural combustion sources such as fire that emanate light and heat—mass produced, mundane shimmering objects and technologies, lacking the apparently auratic effects of the former, may nonetheless achieve auratic and out-of-this-world goals. As a way of summoning brilliance and promoting sumptuousness, prosperity, and well-being, cheap, mass-produced glittering objects are used in various Puerto Rican *brujería* (witch healing) rituals and magic works aimed at cosmically uniting distanced couples or promoting the success of a failing business.²¹ In this and other similar cases described below, what matters is the very effect of brilliance, or shimmer—not the price, elaboration, excellence, or scarcity of shining materials and substances.

Perhaps the summoning, enticing effect of shimmer is grounded, in such cases, on the overall energizing, kinetic forces that may be unleashed by shining materials, as with the small mirrors sewn onto the fabric of ritual garments and hats that sway in ritual dances to attract wealth and prosperity, for example. In Haitian Vodou, shiny beads and sequins that are embroidered in greeting flags used at the beginning of rituals create a moving luminosity and brilliance aimed at summoning and embodying the *loas* (spirit entities)

21. Raquel Romberg, *Witchcraft and Welfare: Spiritual Capital and the Business of Magic in Modern Puerto Rico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 116, 158.

for the duration of the ceremonies.²² In this regard, Raquel Romberg remembers how Haydée—the central witch healer (*bruja*) in her fieldwork in Puerto Rico—used silvery and golden glitter in performing magic works that were meant to enchant and entice the spirits in charge of promoting love, harmony, and good fortune. In order to enhance and expand the desired effects of brilliance, Haydée would mix *azogue* (mercury) with tiny shavings of gold and silver, so that good fortune, “like mercury, would run and spread” luminously and vigorously on the cosmic level.²³

In a similar vein, the brilliance of beads embroidered with threads of silver on Hindu deity garments, discussed in Urmila Mohan’s paper in this issue, shows the connection between such mundane gleaming manifestations and the deities’ proper brilliance. Her contribution, “Clothing as a Technology of Enchantment,” uses Alfred Gell’s understanding of “enchantment” to illuminate deity and devotee garments within a global Hindu group, Iskcon (the International Society of Krishna Consciousness), as practiced in Mayapur, the center of this worldwide movement in India. Mohan discusses the social and ritual efficacy of shining beaded and embroidered sacred Hindu deity garments, highlighting the implied double energetic circuits that tie the glaze and gaze of the deity and the worshiper and render both parties enchanted in the common circuit of *darshan*,²⁴ thus linked in a network including both human and artefactual realities and intentions.

Laurence Douny’s essay in this issue on the cosmological and social implications of sheen in West African talismanic magic equally explores the powers of the luminous and spiritual properties of silk to attract and direct intention. Her contribution, “Connecting Worlds through Silk” moves us into an Islamic context in West Africa. She shows how the sheen (*daoula*) of wild silk

22. Tina Girouard, “The Sequin Arts of Vodou,” in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald J. Consentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 357–77; Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983). Also, we kindly thank Grey Gundaker for noting the connection between shimmer, cross-rhythms, movement, and shifting personhood during possession that is evidenced “in Haitian Vodou (as well as other African Diaspora religions) when cross-rhythms in drumming (break patterns) cue spirit possession, and sequined “flags and cross-rhythms and moving bodies and bodies becoming something/someone else’s” set up an “ambiguating dynamics on every front.”

23. Raquel Romberg, *Healing Dramas: Divination and Magic in Modern Puerto Rico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 113.

24. *Darshan* is defined by Mohan in the introduction to her piece as “the mutually embodied sight exchange between deity and devotee in the temple (or between a spiritual guru and devotee) where the participants are both seeing and seen.”

cultivated among the Dogon acts as a living force that manifests in a kind of aura, empowering individuals with its innate and eternal charisma. Douny's ethnographic account details the ways in which material, social, and spiritual connections are established in both the production of wild silk and the making of *morou* amulets that combine the power of silk cocoons to attract spirit communication with Qur'anic scriptures, which activate them with an energy or spiritual influence called *Baraka*. Notably, the material and magic efficacy of wild silk among the Dogon depends on a process of activation and transmission that transfers the *daoula*, the sheen or force of the cocoon, from the silk worm to the thread, in a manner analogous to the process that transfers the *Baraka* or spiritual power emanating from God to the saints, and from the saints to other human beings. In her article's final section on activation processes, Douny describes the complex way that a silk amulet intended to guard the bearer against gunshot wounds is activated. Beginning with an animal sacrifice that is in part a test, the amulet is proofed with a drop of the wearer's blood and by recitation of a chapter of the Qur'an; it is then tested by firing a gun against a sequence of targets guarded by the amulet—first at a tree, then at a sheep, and then at the human bearer. If the gun damages none of the targets, the amulet is bitten, and words are spoken over it in a secret language, concretizing the agreement with the spirits. The *daoula* of the silken ingredients of the amulet, reinforced by holy words from the Qur'an, proofed with blood, saliva, and breath, thus plays a significant part in offering the amulet's bearer what must seem a strikingly tangible protection.

The reflective properties of materials may also have the contrary effect of deflecting rather than guaranteeing the attention of spirits, as when shining materials are used as shields in apotropaic or defensive ritual technologies aimed at enhancing invisibility and concealment from evil intentions and influences. As some of this issue's contributions show, shining surfaces might also produce glare in a way that blinds viewers (humans and spirits alike) from seeing what lies behind them. Recruited as apotropaic forces to hide, deflect, refract, and ward off negative energies, shining materials that deflect light may make certain objects (and their owners) invisible to possible attackers. Within the context of Revival Islam, discourses of embodied piety encourage hiding a woman's image from the gaze of others. Heike Behrend's essay in this issue explores the "aesthetics of withdrawal" in wedding photography along the East African coast, which recruits the fashionable, technologically produced aura surrounding the figure of brides in wedding photographs as an apotropaic mechanism that links the historically contingent desirable and undesirable physical properties of shine, to desirable and undesirable social and moral-cosmological values of radical modern Islam. In this regard,

her work speaks to Mohan's, whose article concerns the role of brilliance (or "glaze"), but also to the concomitant apotropaic force (or "glare") of richly embroidered wedding dresses, which were often made of the same sumptuous materials as those used in deity garments.

On yet another continent, based on folkloric and ethnographic materials gathered in African-American communities in the South, Stephen Wehmyer's contribution, "From the Back of the Mirror," unravels the numerous compelling ways in which the shining, glittering, or reflective elements that compose the esoteric pharmacopeia of Hoodoo or Conjure acquire their spiritual and moral force in ritual performances and sacred assemblages. The quoted words of healers, past and present, give a pragmatic everyday air to the otherwise apparently outlandish ways in which the shine and reflection of quotidian mass-produced objects, such as coins, tinfoil, and mirrors, and the glistening of dried physical substances such as blood, are combined in magical operations. The dual ability of the same shining source to both attract and deflect is particularly interesting here, for it suggests the ambiguous flow of positive and negative energetic fields. Some objects that reflect, augment, or produce light, such as mirrors and flashlights, can also produce glare and inhibit seeing. In like manner, not only can evil intentions be deflected by mirrors, they can also be diverted or refracted back to the sender as a form of cosmic vengeance. Tinfoil—the very stuff used in the kitchen—is often also used to protect magic works from cosmic interferences that might act against the ritual's purpose, in addition to the more banal purpose of holding its components together.

Such apotropaic effects come under special scrutiny in some of the influential research by Robert Farris Thompson on African and African diaspora material culture.²⁵ Several of his former students have tracked the persistence of a certain aesthetic, moral, and spiritual "mattering" that has structured the ways in which people in the African diaspora have shaped their living environments—from their yards, living rooms, and cars, to grave markers.²⁶ Among the many recurring elements of this "mattering," the principle of "flash" has acquired a quotidian yet spiritual presence in all of sorts of assemblages that include, for instance, light bulbs, mirrors, tinfoil, and silver pans.²⁷

25. See Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*.

26. See essays collected in Grey Gundaker, ed., *Keep Your Head to the Sky: Interpreting African American Home Ground* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998); also Gundaker, "Tradition and Innovation in African-American Yards."

27. See Gundaker, "Tradition and innovation," *Keep your Head to the Sky*, and *Signs of Diaspora*; Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*; Consentino, *Sacred Arts*.

Placing mirrors in yards and on porches in the Caribbean and the United States fulfills some of the same purposes as the apotropaic mirrors implanted in the belly of Kongo and Angola *nkisi* figures (mentioned above, note 7), which link to water (used in divination, and conceived as connecting the worlds of the living and the dead) and to roots, which do not shimmer but flow like water.²⁸ The work of Wehmeyer converses directly with this material, as it brings out not only instances of shining materials, including tinfoil, used for deflective purposes, but also permits a view into the dialectic between the “deflecting” and “directing” aspects of shining materials.

ESTHETIC-MORAL-COSMOLOGICAL FORMS OF AGENCY:
SOME THEORETICAL RUMINATIONS

On a broader level, the choice of whether to promote or hinder, open or close, or entice or reject the materiality of shining materials and their properties could be related to concomitant aesthetic, moral, and spiritual values that are not necessarily consistent with each other. Beauty, well-being, wealth, harmony, as well as extreme visibility, envy, and greed—the darker sides of wealth and luck—might all attend and cathect the same shining materials and the glare they produce, depending on how they are encoded in specific cosmic systems and ritual settings at any given moment. Indeed, this issue highlights the encoded specificity of shimmer-related practices and the wide and often inconsistent gamut of ethical and cosmological meanings that shimmer might elicit in the contexts laid open by a given practice. In addition to the complementary moral attributes related to the effects of reflecting and deflecting materials, each contributor unravels the pragmatic modes in which these seemingly contradictory effects of glistening are considered as agentive within the community of both humans and spirits.

When viewed in this manner, shimmering materials and properties can alternately or simultaneously act as a *representation* and *presentation* (or manifestation) of wealth, prosperity, and well-being. As a sensuous force, shimmering materials may summon, entice, activate, and manipulate cosmic forces to achieve wealth, prosperity, and well-being for the wearer or bearer of them. Metaphorically, shimmering may intimate these unique forces and powers, but metonymically, shining materials may be considered extensions, or bits of the brilliance of deities, of their wealth, prosperity, and well-being. By

28. For yard decoration see Gundaker, “Tradition and Innovation”; for *Nkisi* figures and meaning, see Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*; MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture: The Conceptual Challenge of the Particular* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 83; and Gundaker, ed., *Keep Your Head to the Sky*.

focusing on the diversity of ways in which shimmer is incorporated in ritual contexts, contributors to this issue stress multiple types of agentive relationships of enchantment. Shine, as it appears in various ritual contexts in this collection, becomes embedded with ethical-aesthetic-mystic significance and, in some situations, undergoes an ontological shift that transforms its sensorial materiality (representation) into divine aura (presentation), and directs the power or attention of an actual spiritual presence.

To what extent does this ontological shift—this experiential realization that bestows a certainty of divine immanence—challenge the academic world to account for the evident power and agency of shining materials and their sensuous effects? Some readers may posit that the attributed religious effects of shimmer are no more than the result of interpretations that human beings assign to shimmering. Others may counter that we do not need to account for the effect of human practices by calling them “interpretive”—a word that flattens into a single abstraction an array of possible complex experiential relations to things. Even outside ritual contexts, many human practices instantiated in particular symbolic objects have broad and powerful effects on experience that cannot be reduced to either the instantiation of an immediate material object or an immediate individual human interpretation of it (money, for example, which may be seen to have an agency that cannot be manipulated, or even predicted or interpreted very well, by the economist).

In fact, Webb Keane’s notion of “representational economies” is helpful in understanding some of the complexity involved in “how people handle and value material goods” and “how they use and interpret words, and vice versa, reflecting certain underlying assumptions about the world and the beings that inhabit it”; and most useful for our purposes here, representational economies also help in talking about “what will or will not count as a possible agent.”²⁹ Importantly, these representational economies offer not only epochal but also institutionally specific criteria for experiencing—not just *interpreting*—the effects of shimmering. A “semiotic ideology” that rationalizes such representational economies stipulates “basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world. It determines, for instance, what people will consider the role that intentions play in signification to be, what kinds of possible agent (humans only? Animals? Spirits?) exist to which acts of signification might be imputed, whether signs are arbitrary or necessarily linked to their objects, and so forth.”³⁰ These semiotic ideologies will

29. Keane, “Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things,” *Language and Communication* 23 (2003): 410.

30. *Ibid.*, 419.

determine the various kinds of agency bestowed on subjects and objects at a particular place and time. But depending on the scale of events, these semiotic ideologies might pertain to the “tacit knowledge” of participants, say, in private divination consultations, or be the result of complex, redundant, repetitive semiotic systems in large scale events.

Along these same lines, Birgit Meyer (writing about the immediate and authentic experience of the Holy Spirit by born again Christians) explains that “sensations of the divine do not happen out of the blue but require the existence of a particular shared religious aesthetic through which the Holy Spirit becomes accessible and ‘sense-able.’”³¹ Via what she terms “sensational forms” (multisensorial channels through which religious media shape religious subjects), “what is not ‘there’ and ‘present’ in an ordinary way can be experienced—over and over again—as available and accessible.”³² To generate these experiences and to “tune the senses and allow for personal religious experience to occur,” sensational forms must be articulated and “authorized via structures of repetition” within religious traditions.³³ Contextualizing the regimentation of sensational forms in various cross-cultural and historical studies is thus cardinal. The contributions in this issue show that, as a variety of attributes of shimmer are embodied in different materials, the associated aesthetic-moral-spiritual significance of the ritual objects change depending on particular authorized economies of representation.

The visible resilience that migrants display, particularly their ability to find substitutes for religious spaces, objects, and materials, rests on the principle (or semiotic/cosmic ideology) of cosmic resemblance, which allows new and different kinds of objects to carry the power of the same entity and become the alternate yet equally potent abode of spirits. “Shimmer” might be viewed here as a “qualisign” (in Peircean terms); that is, a sensuous quality with religious and moral significance that may be embodied in any number of icons, indexes, and symbols, provided they are connected cosmically. In other cases, when the same qualisign of shine appears as ritually significant in two or more religious systems, the various contexts in which this qualisign have been materialized might be fused as a result of migration or colonial contact in new rituals. That is, as Webb Keane puts it, new applications of the same qualisign may transmit the same principle via “thirdness”—a governing principle that assures the futurity of the system by means of the possibility of an “unbounded and unspecified range of possible tokens yet to be,” and which

31. Meyer, “Indispensability of Form.”

32. Meyer, “Mediating Absence,” 1037.

33. Meyer, “Indispensability of Form.”

appear as “realizations of ‘the same’ thing in future actions.”³⁴ In religious contexts, the semiotic principle of thirdness, or repetition of sameness, acquires a cosmic meaning as each immanent instance connects to an originating transcendent principle through what Bruno Latour has poetically conveyed as a “procession of angels”:

Religion is not about transcendence, a Spirit from above, but all about immanence to which is added the renewal, the *rendering present again* of this immanence. But for this immanence to be visible again in spite of the spiritualism of official theology . . . we have to make much more vivid the contrast between chains of reference and what I will call procession of angels.”³⁵

Such “processions” are delivered by “angels” who capture the spirit of the original transcendent experience so that the last in a series of renditions may elicit what had “descended suddenly in a great rustling of feathers and wings.”³⁶

The contributions of this special issue, each in their own way, show that a “procession” of apparently unrelated substances, materialities, sounds, properties, words, and subjectivities (human and non-human), tied by cosmic chains of similarity and contact, make present and transport transcendent entities and ethical attributes in potentially infinite renditions. In this line of thought, rather than explain away the materiality of religion, this special issue recognizes “the rustling of feathers and wings”—the spirit of and in matter, as reported and experienced by participants.³⁷ But this proposition does not go unproblematicized; for how can the claim that a physical substance has agency be made? And on what grounds can challenges to conventional notions about the agentive powers of religious objects be made?

34. Keane’s concept of “bundling” is productive in thinking about the contingent fusion of sensuous properties tied across contexts in chains of similarity and contact. See Keane, “Semiotics,” 414.

35. Latour, “‘Thou Shalt Not Take the Lord’s Name in Vain’: Being a Sort of Sermon on the Hesitations of Religious Speech,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 39 (2001): 219 (our emphasis).

36. *Ibid.*, 225. Latour also suggests that chains of reference manage “to maintain the constant message through the process of transformations — a matter of constructing immutable mobiles,” *ibid.*, 223.

37. Elsewhere, Latour writes, “If magic is the body of practice which gives certain words the potency to act upon ‘things,’ then the world of logic, deduction, and theory must be called ‘magical’: but it is our magic.” See Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. Alan Sheridan and John Law (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 180.

Without aiming to resolve these issues here, a closer look at the various levels on which the agency of objects may be entertained and claimed appears in Alfred Gell's posthumously published 1998 *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. However, some sorting out of the possibilities and limits of Gell's theorizing is required. The appeal of Gell's work for studies of material religion is evident, and centers on the encompassing framework he offers for analyzing the agentive, enchanting force of artworks.³⁸ Indeed, Gell is referenced by three out of the four contributors to this issue, with Urmila Mohan engaging his work most actively. Gell's model includes four elements: a) a material index, which is made by b) an artist, which refers to c) a prototype, that is experienced by d) an audience. When artworks, considered as "indices" partake of an essential idea of the intended viewer/operator, they may be "abducted" (inferred, projected) by subsequent recipients, in which case, crafted objects are "enchanted" in such a way as to bestow agency on them. As Gell puts it, "indices motivate abductive inferences about both the artist and the prototype, and exert agency on the recipient or the other way around."³⁹

Gell's work has not gone without critique; specifically, it has been suggested that the direction of agency is predetermined for Gell. In Karel Arnaut's description of this direction, "an object's agency is of a secondary kind, derived as it is from the motivated actions of primary agents" (artists or recipients).⁴⁰ The same might be said of Meyer, who writes about religious media, "rather than having intrinsic power and agency, people learn to approach, value, treat, and look at pictures in specific ways, ensuing a process of animation through which pictures may (or may not) impress themselves on their beholders."⁴¹ Stressing the agency of the imagination and gaze of the beholder, Meyer adds, "pictures and other media (for instance, relics) are indispensable to express—indeed, materialize—the religious imagination and its inner, mental images, yet are at the same time vested with insecurities and anxieties about their capacity to re-present truly and truthfully."⁴² For example, referencing David Morgan's

38. Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). *Art and Agency* was published one year after Gell's death in 1997 at the age of fifty-one.

39. Gell, *Art and Agency*, 27.

40. Arnaut, "A Pragmatic Impulse in the Anthropology of Art? Gell and Semiotics." *Journal des Africanistes* 71, no. 2 (2001): 193. More on Gell's "secondary agency" of objects can be found in James Leach, "Differentiation and Encompassment: A Critique of Alfred Gell's Theory of the Abduction of Creativity," in *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, ed. Amiria Henare et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2007): 167–88.

41. Meyer, "Mediating Absence," 1037.

42. *Ibid.*, 1038.

inspiring notion of “visual piety,” Meyer adds, “the picture is the locus for a spiritual encounter in which the presence of the divine is effected through practices of ‘visual piety.’ It is a medium that effects divine presence.”⁴³

The question that still remains is whether the agency of religious objects and materials is always secondary to the agency of practitioners, their perception, imagination, and gaze.⁴⁴ Gell’s artistic model intimates object agency only in a passing reference to “idols” and their “occult capacities,” when their believed animation is considered “*categorically* different” to that of (biological) persons and conceptualized as “social agency,” following a relational view that requires human agents “in their neighborhood.”⁴⁵ The issue here is that Gell refers to “idols” as “*representational* indexes.”⁴⁶ And yet, consider a case in which the fine line linking artistic effects to human agency is effaced as the agency of a religious entity (“prototype,” in Gell’s model) emerges to take over in relation to the primary agency of an index—an object, material, or surface—that is a “part” of and is connected to the “whole” of a prototype, not just its *representation*. This might be the case when a piece of metal *is* energetically and cosmically the extension of the orisha owner of metals within Santería, or again when a certain color or plant *are* parts of the orisha owner of that color or plant.⁴⁷

Under the influence of Latour’s relational networks and Philippe Descola’s Amazonian ethnography, among others, the prioritization of human agents over objects, materials, and non-humans has been put on hold by some anthropologists.⁴⁸ Not without due resistance, this analytical move has given

43. *Ibid.*, 1041. See also David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), and *idem*, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Comparable performative, albeit quite different, effects of gaze have been reported in ethnographies of divination and the making of magic works, referenced for instance, as *ligar* (Spanish, to bind). See Romberg, *Healing Dramas*, 30, 36, 188, 190, 191, 242.

44. On affordances, see J. J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 127–145.

45. Gell, *Art and Agency*, 123.

46. *Ibid.* Arnaut notes, “the magical power of ‘nail fetishes,’ for instance, is ‘liquidified’ by looking at the gradual process of what Gell calls ‘involution’ in the course of which ‘a whole series of relations’ are objectified in one index,” in “A Pragmatic Impulse,” 204.

47. See the discussions in “On Multiple Ontologies and the Temporality of Things,” especially Holbraad’s treatment of “is” in his ethnographic quote of the words of Cuban babalawos, “powder is power”; and Rane Willerslev, “Taking Animism Seriously, but Perhaps Not Too Seriously?,” *Religion and Society* 8 (2013): 41–57.

48. See the colloquium following the 2013 American Anthropological Association

center stage to sacred objects and spirits; it has certainly encouraged a closer attention to indigenous ways of producing and using materials of all kinds in religious contexts, and the potential for such materials to embody, communicate, and negotiate spirit.⁴⁹

In sum, broader explorations of the material and sensuous dimensions of religious experiences in changing cross-cultural and local contexts inform this issue, pointing to pragmatically grounded links between aesthetic, moral, and spiritual/cosmological effects of shining surfaces and materials. Contributors examine not only how contemporary technologies of mass production (tin foil, plastic sequins) and reproduction (photographs) have entered both iconoclastic and iconophilic ritual and popular culture spheres; they also illustrate how metaphoric and metonymic forms of agency and presence are attributed to shimmering properties and substances. They thus probe the limit of common sense assumptions about the agency of shine as presence, not just representation.⁵⁰ Even though some scholars may be hesitant to fully engage with what Matthew Engelke warningly terms the “fantasy of immediacy”⁵¹ that takes the presence of spirits at face value, this issue has proposed to take it seriously provided practitioners do.

meeting, introduced by John D. Kelly, “The Ontological Turn in French Philosophical Anthropology,” *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4, no. 1 (2014): 259–69.

49. Also relevant are recent discussions about materiality and personhood reviewed in Amy Whitehead, *Religious Statues and Personhood: Testing the Role of Materiality* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); Henare et al., *Thinking Through Things*; Ruy Blanes and Diana Espirito Santo, eds., *The Social Life of Spirits* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

50. See Donald J. Cosentino, “Vodou in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 47 (2005): 231–46; Birgit Meyer and Peter Pels, eds., *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Birgit Meyer, “‘There is a Spirit in that Image’: Mass-Produced Jesus Pictures and Protestant–Pentecostal Animation in Ghana” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52, no. 1 (2010): 100–130; Birgit Meyer, David Morgan, Crispin Paine, and S. Brent Plate, “The Origin and Mission of Material Religion,” *Religion* 40, no. 3 (2010): 207–11; Jeremy Stolow, ed., *Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

51. Engelke, “Number and the Imagination of Global Christianity: or, Mediation and Immediacy in the Work of Alain Badiou,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 4 (2010): 812, quoted in Meyer, “Indispensability of Form.”