

Book Review: Bull, Michael and Jon P. Mitchell (eds.). 2015. *Ritual, Performance and the Senses*. London: Bloomsbury.

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‘Ritual’, ‘performance’, and the ‘senses’ have long attracted the research interest of anthropologists and other social scientists. One may well wonder, as a result, what would be the scholarly and analytic value of a book that even from its title it is clearly stated and assumed that it contends with old and broadly scrutinised concepts. The question is subsequently raised as to whether this book is simply a repetition of old debates with regard to the three main concepts it focuses on, or does it really offer a novel argument that is scholarly worth dedicating time to read.

The significance of Bull and Mitchell’s edited volume lies principally in that it attempts to reinterpret and negotiate the concepts of ritual, performance, and the senses under a different critical light. In fact, it reintroduces some central theories that have in recent years gained widespread impetus and have become highly ‘fashionable’ and ubiquitous in the anthropology and sociology of religion: religious transmission, cognition, and ontology. The authors of this volume, some explicitly and others less obviously, attempt to create a link between these key theoretical contexts and the three concepts (namely ritual, performance, senses) that the book is predominantly concerned with. At times, the balance between theoretical and empirical description appears as if it could be further developed and/or improved in order to accomplish a better understanding of how ritual, performance and the senses engage in different sociocultural contexts; but also, from the opposite standpoint, how empirical data can be theorized under the umbrella of ontological, cognitive and religious transmission theoretical perspectives. Generally speaking, nevertheless, the contributors explore effectively diverse ways of religious belonging in terms of belief, embodiment, agency, experience, and ritual performance.

When it comes to its organization and contents, the book opens with a very useful introduction, which offers a detailed account of all the main theories that constitute part of the argument. From Durkheim to Whitehouse, and from ritual theory to ontological and neuroanthropological approaches, Bull and Mitchell provide an eloquent explanatory model of the book’s theoretical basis, stating as one of its main goals the ‘development of a new understanding of religious transmission (Bull and Mitchell 2015: 1). Following the introductory chapter, Mitchell’s opening article focuses on ontology. In direct dialogue with one of the most influential recent works regarding the ontological turn in the anthropology of

religion, that of Holbraad (2012), Mitchell casts a well-needed critical gaze upon this turn and upon Holbraad's theorization, proposing a reconfiguration of the ontological interpretation of religion through the act of mimetic performance.

The third and fourth chapters, the ones by Turner and Downey equivalently, place a crucial emphasis upon the relationship between ritual, cognition and neuroscience. Turner asserts that there is a direct co-dependence between ritual and brain function and thus ritual can be part of a cognitive process but at the same time it can affect our cognitive activities in surprising ways; Downey presents a specific paradigm of how this connection between cognitive function and ritual act operates, through examining a specific repetitive ritual practice, that of praying. The next two chapters by Marchard and Schechner concentrate on performance and its representation through space/place making. They both give excellent accounts of two different pilgrimage experiences: the first to the church of Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, and the second to Ramnagar, India; their importance lies in that they present two cases of ritual action, where people negotiate and meaningfully re/construct the flow of ritual performance, transforming its conflicts and multiple dynamics.

The last three chapters, by Zarrilli, Mendoza and Howes, place the senses at the centre of their analyses. Zarrilli locates sensoriality within various empirical examples of meditative, martial arts and acting techniques, which he approaches as metaphors of sensory awareness through performance. Mendoza's intriguing chapter brings well together a cognitive approach and an examination of the sensory model he investigated in Andes; he shows how the study of a synesthetic model of one particular society can lead to a better knowing of how ritual works not just in that specific society but also more universally. The book closes with an article by David Howes, one of the leading scholars in the study of the senses. Howes's argument does not disappoint. Proposing a theory of the 'extended sensorium', a new concept he develops, Howes argues for a religion as a sensational form, and suggests that religion should be approached in accordance to how people in each sociocultural context perceive, perform, and, perhaps most importantly, sense.

As can be presumed by the book's chapter outline above, this is an excellent collection of articles that are both theoretically and empirically rich, offering innovative approaches to long-standing concepts. It can certainly be a valuable reading company to students and scholars within a variety of scientific backgrounds, ranging from anthropology to cognitive science, and from ritual to performance and religious studies. Its readership, however, can unquestionably be extended to anyone who is interested in the themes of ritual, performance, religion, cognition, ontology, and, of course, the senses.

References

Holbraad, Martin. 2012. *Truth in Motion: The Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.