

Fuglerud, Øivind and Leon Wainwright (eds). 2015. *Objects and Imagination. Perspectives on Materialization and Meaning (Material Meditations Vol. 3)*. 270 pp. Pb.: \$34.95. ISBN: 9781782385660.

The volume *Objects and Imagination. Perspectives on Materialization and Meaning* in the series *Material Mediations: People and Things in a World of Movement* is a collection of articles exploring the importance of social imagination in the study of material culture, aesthetics and art and is intended as a contribution to the ‘material turn’ in the social sciences (p. 1-24). The editors are Øivind Fuglerud, Professor of Social Anthropology at the Museum of Cultural History at the University of Oslo, and Leon Wainwright, reader in Art History at the Open University (UK), Kindler Chair in Global Contemporary Art at Colgate (New York), and editor-in-chief of the *Open Arts Journal*.

In addition to the editors’ introduction, the book contains eleven chapters with empirical studies, grouped into three thematic parts that are overlapping, Museums (I), Presence (II), and Art (III), as well as a list of illustrations, notes on contributors and an index. The cover shows a detail from Ahmet Moustafa’s work *The Attributes of Divine Perfection* (1987), displayed at the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow, thus illustrating Saphinaz-Amal Naguib’s article *Materializing Islam and the Imaginary of Sacred Space* at the same exhibition (p. 64-80).

In the words of Birgit Meyer, Professor of Religious Studies at Utrecht University and one of the contributors, the purpose of the book is to ‘take objects as entry points to synthesize the still quite separate fields of inquiry into materiality, on the one hand, and imaginaries, on the other’ (p. 160). The question, according to the editors, is the ‘specificity of the social imagination as it produces human relationships and comes to have a distinctive impact on them’ (p. 20).

Each chapter is a case study that sheds light on the intersection between imaginaries and materiality, in a variety of contexts and cultures: contemporary Iroquois art (Sylvia S. Kasprzycki, Chapter 1), two exhibitions in Switzerland and Denmark (Peter Bjerregaard, Chapter 2) and one Islamic art exhibition in Scotland (Saphinaz-Amal Naguib, Chapter 3), remittances to the Mbuke of Papua New Guinea (Anders Emil Rasmussen, Chapter 4), national rituals among Tamil migrants in Norway (Stine Bruland, Chapter 5), food presentations among Tongans (Arne Aleksej Perminow, Chapter 6), battles with ghosts in Southwest China (Katherine Swancutt, Chapter 7), Christian objects and imagination in Ghana (Birgit Meyer, Chapter 8), art in urban Aboriginal Australia (Fiona Magowan, Chapter 9) and in Tamil Nadu (Amit Desai and Maruška Svašek, Chapter 10), and whiskey advertisements in India (Tereza Kuldova, Chapter 11).

A common thread that runs through the different case studies is how the ‘material world comes into being, how its objects are seen and used, and how they acquire and change value and meaning’ (p. 1). Fuglerud and Wainwright suggest a model for understanding ‘what the object *is* in any meaningful sense of the word’ (p. 20). This has four concentric circles, with “object” in the centre, marked by dotted lines, probably signalling its openness (Figure 0.1, *Objects and imagination*). The next circle is ‘situated production, creativity, individual imagination’, with ‘institutional field’ around it, and the

‘field of the socially imagined’ in the outer circle.

Some of the case studies are informative, for example, Birgit Meyer’s study of ‘how pictures matter’, a material approach to religious imaginaries, grounded in solid empirical research of Christianity and media in South Ghana (pp. 160-186). Meyer analyses the role of pictures and media in practices of religious mediation and shows how the Ghanaians’ engagement with cheap, mass-produced Jesus pictures and props ‘shapes the habitus of the people involved’ (p. 178). In addition, the religious images prepare the ground for their religious experiences by enabling the worshippers to see “beyond” this world. As such, she convincingly argues, this case shows that ‘imaginaries not only represent the world’, but also ‘take part in making it’ (p. 162).

Stine Bruland’s chapter (pp. 93-110) on national symbols and objects in the *maveerar naal* ritual performed by Tamil migrants in Oslo discusses the importance of aesthetics in people’s understanding and experience of the world. The ritual in question is performed by Tamil supporters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which carefully stages it. For that reason, it follows the same pattern in the Tamil diaspora worldwide, where it gains its power from its ability to meaningfully bridge the gap between the homeland and the migrants’ daily life and grievances in exile. Moreover, Bruland notes, it paves the way for continued support for the LTTE.

Katherine Swancutt’s study of protective magic, ritualised warfare, and exorcism among the Nuoso in South China is an analysis of efforts to control troublesome ghosts (pp. 133-159). In ritualistic battles, plant and animal products are used to lure the ghosts into firing range, a trap in which they can be exorcised. This is done by transforming the adversaries’ ghostly effigies into mere symbols or representations. However, as there is always a risk of ghostly counter-attacks, the exorcism also involves ‘imaginative precautions against the possibility that ghosts could hijack the effigies, “animate” them and overturn their ontologically safer status as mere representations’ (p. 157). Swancutt’s chapter is thus a fascinating study of the complexities of the human imagination.

Sometimes the theoretical discussions in the book are very vague in character, or state the obvious, for example when the editors in line with Howard Morphy write that the ‘knowledge, interpretations and experiences that people bring to bear on objects cannot be reduced to individual agency, nor can they be thought of as contained in the objects themselves’ (p. 5). Whether fuzzy terms like “social imagination” and “social imaginary” really bring the analysis forward is debatable. In any case, *Objects and Imagination* offers some original studies and interesting examples of ‘how the material embodies and influences our idea of the social world’ (cover).

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