

Struck by an Image? How to Reconstruct Resonant Qualities in Works of Art and Worship

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1. Introduction: Resonance in Historical Analysis

For empirical and historical research, resonance is a tricky thing – it is hard to identify from the outside, from a third-person or observer perspective.¹ At least when it comes to experiences of art, religious communication or political action, but surely also to relationships of love or friendship, resonance appears to be accessible only from the ‘inside’, from a phenomenological or first-person perspective. This is so because it never is in the objects of art (or worship or love) themselves that resonance is established: There is no such thing as a ‘resonant’ text or piece of music in itself; resonance is never in the object, and not in the subject either, but it establishes itself *between* the two. However, it is experienced by the subjects, it manifests itself in their actions and reactions – or in their bodily states such as tears in the eyes, goosebumps or a change in skin resistance.²

Now this obviously creates a huge problem for scholars working with historical texts, objects, images, and other artefacts: If it comes to contemporary rituals, we might be able to reconstruct moments of resonance ‘objectively’, with the help of video cameras and the tools of empirical aesthetics, or even with brain scans. But as we go back through the ages, there is no way to directly observe or identify resonance: As I will show below, the fourth element of resonance – uncontrollability or non-engineerability – rules this out categorically.

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- 1 The interdisciplinary approach of the Graduate School “Resonant Self-World Relations in Ancient and Modern Socio-Religious Practices” and many of its PhD-projects from Classics, History, Archaeology, Anthropology and Religious Studies nevertheless are dedicated to grasp resonance in historical and empirical research.
 - 2 For a full exploration of the concept, see Rosa (2019).

Yet, as I seek to demonstrate in what follows, we can still use resonance theory as an analytical tool to study historical objects or rituals by searching for traces and effects of past experiences of resonance and by identifying elements of those artefacts and practices which were designed or intended or in any case prone to elicit such effects.³ In addition, we might investigate the ‘setting’ of those artefacts or rituals for contextual signs of resonant relationships. Thus, the concept of resonance can be used to study objects in use in ritual contexts and communications as well as objects of art on the content level, on the level of aesthetic practice and on the level of context. At the content level, we search for explicit representations – narrations, depictions, performances – of resonant moments or experiences. On the level of aesthetic practice, the focus is on objects and on textual, musical, theatrical, or ritual elements which are produced or designed in order to elicit resonance, and on the contextual level, we scrutinise the contextual and material ‘setting’ or ‘staging’ of aesthetic practices and performances for the attribution of specific agential or resonant qualities – as we find them, for example, in ‘sacred sites’ or ‘holy times’. In short, the focus of such investigation necessarily is on performativity; it seeks to identify resonant elements on the plains of functional as well as structural performativity alike.⁴

In each case, we might pursue such an investigation along the four axes of resonance and with a focus on one, several, or all of its four basic elements. I will begin with the latter.

2. Elements and Dimensions of Resonance

The four basic components of any experience of resonance are ‘affection’, ‘self-efficacy’, ‘transformation’, and ‘uncontrollability’. In each case, we can ask whether an object, text or artefact under study is *about* a corresponding

3 See Gärtner, introduction to this volume, 3.2.

4 For this distinction, see the Gärtner, introduction to this volume, 3.4.; for applications see Baumann, in this volume; Gärtner, in this volume; Hafner, in this volume; Weidner, in this volume.

experience (content level) or uses elements *supposed to produce it* (level of aesthetic practice and contextual level). Let us look at it one by one.

2.1. Affection

The first element is affection, i.e. the experience of feeling touched, moved or called by something ‘out there’. Thus, resonance does not start with something we do but rather with something that happens to us and ‘grips us’ from the inside. Now obviously, we can ask whether an image or a text is *about* such experiences of strong affection, either directly e.g. through narration or depiction, or indirectly, by alluding visually or textually to it (content level). As we know from research in empirical aesthetics and cultural studies, images and iconographies as well as textual narratives or dramatic plays that represent strong experiences of resonance are capable of producing ‘narrative’ or ‘pictorial’ resonance in those who receive them, too – given that they share a common cultural background-understanding.⁵

A second mode of identifying structures of resonance in works of art or cultural artefacts lies in the search for symbols, motifs or instruments which are known for, or supposed of, producing (physical) affection (level of aesthetic practice). Of course, aesthetic experiences can never simply or uniformly be *produced* this way, but (as the contributions to this volume exemplify) at least certain levels of arousal in specific cultural contexts can be reliably expected. For example, displays of fire, loud sounds (e.g. trumpets or drums), vivid colours or displays of immense comparative size regularly have the effect of producing strong affection in the audience – and are regularly used to such ends. Thus, if we find such elements, we have good reasons to assume that spectators, visitors or audiences might have felt the corresponding affections and/or that those who produced the cultural objects intended to elicit them.

However, if we seek to pursue a resonance-theoretically inspired investigation in cultural history, we are not confined to these two forms of analysis. A third mode lies in the analysis of the resonance-quality of the *context*

5 See Breithaupt (2019); Rosa (2019), IX.3.

or background-conditions. This means: We can ask whether the objects, artefacts or practices under study are (or were) embedded in spatial, temporal, or ritual contexts⁶ that were apt to produce ‘dispositional resonance’. With this term, I mean the habitual readiness and/or willingness of practitioners to feel affection, and to be open to movement and touch. Thus, approaching a ‘sacred ground’ or a ‘holy place’ elicits in those who share the corresponding cultural background the expectation of an ‘inner affection’, which is characteristic of resonance. The same goes for periods of ‘sacred time’, and of course, being at a ‘holy place’ at a ‘sacred time’ amplifies the disposition towards affection and resonance. In cultural history, of course, it is one of the (if not *the*) main purpose(s) of rituals to produce such dispositional resonance in participants. And, hence, reconstructing how objects, texts and artefacts contributed to and profited from such contexts of dispositional resonance, appears to open up a major route towards transcultural understanding.⁷

2.2. Self-Efficacy (Emotion)

While affection signifies the experience of a motion from the outside of the world to the inside of the subject (af←fection), the second element indicates a movement in the opposite direction: e→motion.⁸ This is to say that resonance is not just a passive experience of something happening to us, and it is not just an action, either, but it consists of the interplay between af←fection and e→motion: Subjects answer the touch or ‘call’ they receive from an object or a narration by moving outward, towards it; by reaching out and reacting to it. This is the moment when they experience self-efficacy: The experience of agency, through which they reach out and touch, or connect with, the other side by themselves. Such self-efficacy can consist in voluntary or involuntary bodily motion, gestures of ritual

6 Of these contexts ritual contexts can be the most complex ones, since they combine temporal and spatial dimensions as well as human and objectual agents, see Rüpke (2021).

7 See on this Rüpke (2021).

8 See Gärtner, introduction to this volume, 1.

affirmation, but also in the production of vivid emotions, or a stream of thoughts and creativity, etc. Hence, scholars of ancient socio-religious practices can and should ask whether the objects under scrutiny are *about* such moments of strong self-efficacy (content level): Do they depict or tell about experiences of (self-)empowerment, or about energetic connectivity? By way of ‘aesthetic contagion’ and/or narrative resonance,⁹ we might assume that such cultural artefacts are prone to produce a corresponding sense of self-efficacy in recipients or practitioners who share a common cultural understanding, too.

And again, we can go beyond this level of direct significance to the level of *aesthetic practice* and ask whether a given object (a picture, a shrine, a festival, a theatrical play or a text) makes use of elements or symbols which are prone to initiate a sense of self-efficacy and empowerment in spectators and recipients. Such a sense is produced, for example, through bodily and/or cognitive participation, or through narrative involvement: Perhaps there is a riddle to solve, a question to be answered or a hidden meaning to be discovered, or a connection to be made which provides the recipient with a sense of inclusion and empowerment, of feeling ‘addressed’ and capable of a response? We may think of a church service, for example, where believers are routinely involved in affirmative actions of all sorts (singing, praying, kneeling down, crossing oneself, receiving the Holy Communion etc.). The contributions to this volume provide ample evidence for such elements of structural performativity across a wide variety of cultural and historical contexts.

And finally, here too, we should ask about the cultural embedding of the object, artefact or practice (contextual level): Are participants or recipients contextually ‘empowered’ and geared towards experiences or manifestations of self-efficacy? For example, rituals of initiation and rites of passage often are meant to empower (young) persons and provide them with a sense of inner strength; but apart from this, forms of direct address with appeals to cultural identity often have such effects, too: *You as a Roman*, or: *You Christians are meant and addressed by this...*

9 On the concept of narrative resonance, see at length Rosa (2020b).

2.3. Transformation

The result of the dynamic interplay between affection and self-efficacy, or touch and response, which forms the core of resonance, is a transformation of the subject as well as of the object, or ‘the world’, at hand. In experiences of resonance, we do not stay the same. Hence, we can ask the same three questions with respect to this aspect or component of resonance, too. Firstly, is the aesthetic or ritual object, the text, song, play or picture we investigate, *about* such moments or experiences of (strong) transformation (content level)? Does it depict or represent a moment of a healing or transforming connection with a higher power, or of conversion, for example? Or of a miraculous salvation? Does it tell or remind us of a story like the one between Odysseus and the Sirens, in which the call or touch is so strong that rational control is altogether suspended? Does it tell about a healing or saving connection with ancestors or forbears through time?

Secondly, we should ask whether the object, ritual or artefact makes use of elements or symbols which are known for transformative powers of such kinds, or which were traditionally thought or said to have such qualities? Obviously, wine and bread are such elements in Christian tradition, but clearly, there is a host of other objects in other cultural traditions, like gems or herbs or relics or even ‘holy’ words or syllables which are believed to be bestowed with transformative powers. Very often, we find ritualistic practices which are meant to produce or indicate transformative moments of resonance, such as sounding a bell, making the sign of the cross, elevating the bread, etc. Of course, we cannot directly observe any transformative effects resulting from this in participants or recipients, unless we find specific historical reports on them. But we can search the objects and practices under investigation for elements indicative of such processes.

Finally, again, searching for spatial, temporal and ritual contexts which are thought and designed to release transformative powers of the kinds discussed can be very rewarding. Obviously, sacred grounds of all kinds, temples and altars, for example, bristle with extra-mundane transformative powers for those who are part of the cultural tradition(s) involved. And similarly, the ‘sacred hours’ or ‘holy days’ are thought to carry transformative and connecting powers, too – not always for the good of believers: In

many traditions, there are also evil nights, days or hours in which demons and evil spirits are released and prone to ‘touch’ the bodies and/or minds of people – just think of the significance of ‘the midnight hour’ or ‘Halloween’ in modern Western tradition. This serves to remind us that experiences of resonance are not necessarily experiences of harmony or well-being: The interplay of touch, response and transformation can very well be disturbing at times.

2.4. Uncontrollability

Uncontrollability in resonance theory carries a twofold significance. On the one hand, it indicates the ‘non-engineerability’ of moments or experiences of resonance. Uncontrollability in this sense is a vital element of functional performativity. No matter how much we intend and desire to enter into resonance with someone (for example, at a candlelight dinner, or on Christmas Eve), or with God in prayer, or with a work of art in a museum or concert, or with nature in the wilderness – there is always the (high) risk of failure: We might end up being bored or alienated or even irritated. This is true for all sorts of rituals: While they are quite regularly intended to produce experiences of resonance, they can easily fail and produce boredom and alienation instead. In fact, this is a regular feature of traditions in decline – empty spaces in European Churches, for example, but also the ‘empty’ communist rituals towards the end of the Soviet Era bear witness to this. Thus, resonance theory can also be used to study the fading away of traditions and the decline of ritual practices. But on the other hand, *when* there is resonance, i.e., a transformative, intense encounter between subject(s) and the worlds, it is impossible to predict *what kind of change* or transformation will occur. Resonance is constitutively open ended; it is the very moment of ‘natality’ in Hannah Arendt’s sense, i.e., the moment where the new can be born.¹⁰ Resonance experiences always carry an element of ‘transgression’, of moving beyond the expected.¹¹

10 See Arendt (1958).

11 Cf. Rosa (2020a).

Once more, we can apply the same tools as before to search for traces of resonance – or, in this case, of its unfortunate absence. Thus, we may ask whether an image, or a text, or a play, is *about* the unforeseeability and/or uncontrollability of a (wanted or unwanted) connection or encounter (content level). Uncontrollability does not just mean that resonance might not happen when it is supposed or intended to, but also the other way round: It might well occur when we expect it the least as when Saul became Paul in the biblical story. Furthermore, the object under study might just as well tell about the unexpected, sometimes even counter-intuitive and in any case non-intended *outcome* of a resonant encounter. Non-enforced conversions by definition are of this kind.

With respect to this fourth aspect of resonance (uncontrollability), an investigation of the elements and symbols in texts, music, images etc. designed for gaining control over the non-controllable appears to be even more promising (level of aesthetic practice): Does the ritual or artefact we study contain or make use of any symbols or elements which are said to summon or ‘tame’ the Gods, or Higher Powers; or the demons and the spirits? Does it allude to things which are said to ensure a certain outcome in situations which are essentially uncontrollable? In fact, rituals and practices of magic almost always appear to operate along these lines of encounter: Make the uncontrollable appear – and make it act towards the desired outcome. In other words: Make the uncontrollable controllable.

Finally, with respect to *context*, investigation is a little harder here; but we may as well ask whether a certain spatial, temporal, ritual setting allows for uncontrollability in the sense of a deliberative ambivalence of encounter and meaning. Obviously, oracles and practices of divination manifest such uncontrollability on a symbolic level. But we might just as well find contexts designed for strong affection in which the direction of transformation (i.e. the effects) is deliberately left completely open – modern art obviously would be a case in point.

3. Investigating the Four Axes of Resonance

While the preceding section dealt with the inner experience and the transformative power of resonance as such, in the remainder of this contribution

I want to turn to the four identifiable ‘axes’ of resonance and ask how we can investigate traces, effects, and contexts of resonance with specific respect to them. It is one of resonance theory’s core claims that we can identify four separable axes of resonance: 1) *Social resonance* as resonance between human subjects, 2) *material resonance* as resonance between subjects and natural things, materialities or artefacts, 3) *vertical* or *existential* resonance between subjects and an ultimate reality or encompassing totality conceived of in terms of *nature*, *life*, *the world*, *the universe*, *God*, etc., and finally 4) a *self-axis* of resonance between the body, soul, psyche, memory, and biography of a human subject. Let us look at these axes one by one.

3.1. The Social Axis of Resonance

With regard to the social axis, a resonance-theoretical analysis should focus, first, on the quality of social relations we find on the content level of the work of art under investigation. Are there narratives or images or enactments *about* strong mutual affection, efficacy and transformation between the human actors involved? In visual art, for example, we can often read resonances between the figures involved from their eyes – eyes can be seen as ‘prime windows of resonance’, in fact –, but also from bodily postures as such. In general, we should scrutinise the quality of relationships between the actors involved: Who appears to be ‘empowered’, elevated, bestowed with higher powers or agential energy, who is experiencing transformation, and in what sense? Or, by contrast, who appears to be alienated either in the sense of utter indifference, non-affection, or even in the sense of hostility? In resonance theory, negative affection is not interpreted as negative resonance, but as a repulsive form of alienation, because it leads to a mode of closure and defence against affection, to a loss of the willingness to be touched and transformed by the other.

On the level of aesthetic practice, a resonance-theoretically inspired interpretation will be interested in the elements, techniques, symbols and signs used in the work of art or ritual in order to elicit resonance between recipients of a play, painting or story and specific persons or social roles involved on the content-level. For example, are the spectators of a play or

the readers of a text supposed to feel, reinforce and reaffirm their love for the king, or for the priest, or their support for the warriors? Or are they supposed to feel strongly with one group of people, and to despise or reject another group?

Finally, with a view to the context-level, we very often find social ‘primings’ which dispositionally create the will or the likelihood to resonate with a specific person or a group of people. For example, on the site of a historical battle against an enemy, or on a day of specific remembrance in the calendar, the rise of patriotic or religious feelings and the corresponding affections appears to come almost ‘naturally’, accompanied by feelings of hostility towards the other side; and rituals in such a setting are often supposed to give a sense of empowerment and self-efficacy in participants or spectators.

3.2. The Material Axis of Resonance

With respect to the material axis of resonance, what is of interest on the content-level are the specific *things*, i.e., objects and artefacts as well as their materialities, which appear to have ‘agential power’ in the work of art or ritual. Is there something sacred or holy involved in the story, or the painting? Is the play or the text about an object with magical powers, or do such objects play a role in it? Or is it, perhaps, about the opposite: About the failure of a sword, or a holy text, for example, to achieve a desired transformation?

Here, it is not always easy to distinguish between the content-level and the level of aesthetic or artistic practice. But of course, some objects or artefacts which are traditionally perceived as having ‘agential powers’, and hence, resonant qualities, can be used in a shrine or temple, or on an altar, or in a painting or story which contentwise is about something quite different, i.e., which is not in the focus of the ritual, play, or narration, etc.

Finally, once again, we can explore the setting of such a ritual or play or temple for contextual resonances. For example, we might find holy trees, or a magical rock, or an enchanted river, as the material qualities characterising a site. Or we might analyse the effects which the interplay

between the materiality of a given place (e.g. a temple, a graveyard) and the materiality of a given work of art in it might elicit.

3.3. The Vertical Axis of Resonance

The vertical, or existential, axis of resonance is not always easy to identify. It is defined as a sense of affective, empowering, transformative connection to the ultimate ground of human existence. As, for example, in the ritual of prayer, resonance comes as a sense of connection between the innermost core of the subject (however it might be conceived), and the outermost reality, which can be perceived as (a) God, but also as the essence of life, nature, the universe, the world, etc. It might be preposterous to assume that all cultural traditions develop such a sense of connection to an encompassing totality – perhaps this rather is a side-effect of monotheistic traditions. But in order to find out, it will be all the more interesting to precisely look for it.

On the content-level, this means looking for *conceptions* of an encompassing reality: is there a conception of nature, history, fate, a transcendent realm, an ultimate reality we can identify in works of art or ritual performance? And furthermore: Is there a sense of connection with it, is there a practice, or a narrative, which serves to establish such connection – perhaps a connection through time towards the past and the future, a connection with the ancestors and holy spirits, for example? And finally: Does the work of art or ritual make use of gestures, symbols, elements, or ideas which in that traditional cultural context are known to establish such connections (level of aesthetic practice)? Or is it placed and staged in a context which is traditionally bestowed with the corresponding transcendent qualities (contextual level)?

3.4. The Self-Axis of Resonance

Finally, an investigation inspired by resonance theory will ask about the kinds and moments of ‘self-encounter’ we find in a work of art, a text, play or ritual. What kind of resonant interactions between mind and body,

emotion and reason, biographical experience or memory and a given situation of the subject, or between dream-states and waking consciousness do we find on the content-level, the level of aesthetic practice, or the level of context? Is the practice, text or play *about* such intra-personal resonances? (And how is the intra-personal connected to the extra-personal world?) Does it make use of elements, symbols or ritual practices known or supposed to elicit such moments of self-resonance in spectators, participants or recipients? Is it staged in a context meant to serve experiences of self-encounter or self-transformation (like a space of silence, for example)? The level of practice is of particular importance here: What forms and kinds of self-perception are produced by the interplay between perspectives and proportions, movements and gestures, etc.?

4. Conclusion

As we have seen in the course of this explorative study, resonance theory can provide historical as well as contemporary cultural and social research with a number of sensitising concepts¹² such as affection, self-efficacy, transformation and (un)controllability which serve to guide our investigation in a specifically new, phenomenologically inspired direction. This direction is defined by the *quality of relationships* along the four axes discussed in the preceding section: Relationships between social actors, towards material objects, towards the ultimate, encompassing reality and towards the self. For each of these axes, we can apply the sensitising concepts on three levels of investigation: On the content level (focussing on what forms of potential resonance *explicitly* are at stake), on the level of aesthetic practice (asking how potential effects of resonance are produced or designed), and on the context level of a ritual, or a work of art, or a historical site (searching for contextual elements such as particular times and places which are supposed to harbour or foster a specific agency).

Brought together, the four sensitising concepts in conjunction with the four axes of resonance and the three levels of investigation form a useful heuristic framework, which researchers can use to analyse (ancient) ritual

12 Cf. Zaidi (2022).

sites, artefacts or texts for which we have no evidence or reports on actual experiences of participants or recipients. We will never know whether or when experiences of resonance *actually* occurred, but we can be pretty sure that in practices which survived over long periods of historical time, and which were taken up and resurfaced in a variety of differing contexts, some such relationships have been involved. Resonance theory can direct our attention and focus towards the relevant aspects of the relationships involved and provide us with the means to identify the traces and effects of resonant encounters as well as the methods and designs intended to produce such effects.

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