Embodied neo-spirituality as an experience filter: from dance and movement practice to contemporary yoga

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Abstract

The authors outline the framework of ‘experience filters’ as a theoretical and methodical approach to grasp the aesthetic effect and the cultural and social influence of religious practices beyond religious settings: Participation in and enactment of practices and rituals (e.g., ‘neo-spiritual’) shape the embodied experience of further practice and ritual performance, as well as cultural and social participation in general. They create experience filters which influence experience beyond the context in which they were created, and which are intrinsically linked to the transformation of ‘body knowledge’ in practice. Experience filters are embodied conditions for the selection, perception, and interpretation of experiences. Thus, the framework underlines the importance of a body focus in cultural studies of religion, and simultaneously offers a practical possibility of including the body in cultural research.

The article is based on ethnographic data obtained in the context of two neo-spiritual phenomena – the Israeli movement improvisation practice Gaga in Tel Aviv and Ashtanga Yoga in Germany. The authors sketch an exemplary evolution of different neo-spiritual experience filters in the two practice settings: the awareness, transformed body, positive emotions, and ‘secular’ filter

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in Gaga; and the mindfulness, balance, and spiritual filter in Ashtanga Yoga. The authors trace the filters in techniques and body knowledge actualizations, and demonstrate how the filters become effective with participants. Ultimately, the comparison of both sets of experience filters shows not only that typical neo-spiritual experience filters and common and collective effects of neo-spiritual practices exist, but also the way in which the framework experience filters enable researchers to close in on neo-spirituality as a greater social and cultural phenomenon.

keywords: experience filter; yoga; Gaga; body knowledge; neo-spirituality

Introduction

One part of the importance (and attractiveness) of the study of religious or spiritual practices is the fact that practice participants are changed beyond the space and time frame of the practicing itself. By ‘practice(s),’ we refer to situations of active bodily involvement in specific (religious) contexts, involving sensory stimulation, movement, and, consequently, bodily transformation. Practicing has an extended social and cultural impact. In the light of an aesthetics of religion (AoR) approach, practices are understood to affect senses, to change bodies, and, via bodies, cognition (Grieser and Johnston 2017:2). Participants take and apply embodied implicit and explicit (body) knowledge that they have gained to situations which are not related to the religious and spiritual practice from which the knowledge was originally produced. Discourses and ideas transmitted by practice – directly or indirectly, and always embodied – become the lenses through which participants perceive the world. They function as an applied worldview or, put differently, as implicit and explicit filters. As a consequence, participants are influenced in their perception and experience of different activities, contexts, or settings by prior practicing. Embodied practices thus turn into what we call ‘experience filters.’

This article shows the experience filter approach ‘in action.’ It argues in favor of our belief that the framework of experience filters holds particularly great potential for cultural studies of religion; first, by highlighting the cultural and social influence of religious practices beyond religious settings and enabling inter-practice comparison and, second, by underlining the importance of the body and simultaneously offering the possibility of including it in cultural research. Experience filters can serve as a framework for researchers who do not necessarily have access to data other than ethnographic qualitative methods and need to research, analyze, and describe using words.
Introducing ‘neo-spiritual’

In the following, the field of neo-spiritual movement practices provides the foundation for our considerations and the examples we cite. We will investigate how modern postural yoga and the Israeli movement practice Gaga create experience filters for a world inside and outside yoga and Gaga classes. By ‘neo-spiritual,’ we refer to practices that often appear as globalized leisure time activities of mainly middle-class individuals in a neoliberal consumerist society, seeking self-optimization and transformation, extra-ordinary experience, and holistic wellbeing. Previous research led us to establish ‘neo-spiritual’ as a category to appropriately designate different contemporary (movement) practices that are potentially but not necessarily discussed and addressed as ‘spiritual,’ and are characterizable by common techniques for transforming bodies or, as we will show, by common experience filters (see Aschenbrenner 2020). Thus, experience filters not only allow us to examine and evaluate the cultural and social impact of yoga and Gaga, but also those of other neo-spiritual practices. The concept moreover helps us to identify characteristics shared by these practices. Applying experience filters thus enables us to close in on ‘neo-spirituality’ as a greater social and cultural phenomenon.

On inter-practice comparison

We acknowledge that our ethnographic fields of modern postural yoga practiced in Munich, Germany, and Gaga practiced in Tel Aviv, Israel, might seem rather unrelated at first sight, because of the different social and cultural milieus they are situated in. However, we hold that the comparison of these data sets is both justified and productive. This is because both practices and their aesthetics are not confined to the environment in which they are carried out. Globalization and infrastructure convert them into transnational phenomena with shared somatic practices and discourses. A fixed set of ritual rules guarantees that the aesthetics of Gaga practiced worldwide are similar, and the aesthetics of Ashtanga Yoga are also unified by yoga teachers teaching all over the globe and by a global exchange of information and (body) knowledge. Furthermore, we find that the groups of people involved in the practice of yoga in Germany as well as in the practice of Gaga in Tel Aviv are part of what Andrew Dawson (2013) has called a global ‘new middle class’ phenomenon of globally entangled neoliberal societies – a ‘market-orchestrated, urban-industrial and technoscientific complex underwritten by structural and social integration.’ Andreas Reckwitz (2017:326) has associated this global middle class with an increased preoccupation with the body, which becomes the object of
everyday concern. Dawson (2013:137–42) has described how practices that could be chosen as leisure time activities became places for individual body-focused self-optimization and expressiveness; more specifically, they are places to produce and consume bodies, holding the individual responsible for the outcome of their practice. As Veronique Altglas (2014:7) has observed, with reference to Danièle Hervieu-Léger, this focus on individualized self-optimization has frequently been framed as an (oftentimes spiritualized) self-realization. For Altglas, too, the pressure of self-realization is especially present in the global middle class, which eclectically makes use of (exotic) religious resources for this purpose. This eclecticism also permeates our two research fields. Finally, as the following will show, the neo-spiritualities of Ashtanga Yoga and Gaga create similar if not identical experience filters. All of the above guarantees common experience filters beyond the boundaries of our ethnographic fields, and allows for comparison of the experience filters acquired in German yoga classes and Israeli Gaga classes.

Framing experience filters theoretically

‘Religious experience’ has remained in constant focus within academic discourse in the study of religion, with the topic subject to lively, extensive, and ongoing academic debate. While we acknowledge these discussions, unlike many others we will neither attempt to define ‘the religious’ of experience nor the ‘specialness’ of certain experiences, to use the terminology of Ann Taves (2009:26–48). Instead, experience filters shift the focus to religious and (in the case of this article) neo-spiritual practices as settings and contexts within which foundations and conditions for a specific kind of bodily manner of experiencing beyond the religious or neo-spiritual settings and contexts themselves are laid and established. Following a common dictionary definition, the ‘experience’ of experience filters, first, refers to ‘the process of doing and seeing things and of having things happen to you,’ and, second, to ‘skill or knowledge that you get by doing something’ (Merriam-Webster 2021). In this sense, religious and neo-spiritual practicing affects and filters experience (first part of definition), and it is experience as practicing which creates filters (second part of definition). Thus, experience filters are filters gained through experience, which are then embodied and come to filter experience.

Important foundations for such an approach have been laid by various thinkers and theorists, who have argued for an embodiment approach or alternatively focused on the culture, society, and world body connection, which regards the body as part of its environment, being both
interconnected with it and shaped by it. A milestone for this line of thought was set by French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who developed his ideas from the works of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. In *Phenomenology of Perception* ([2002 [1962]], Merleau-Ponty not only radically dismissed Cartesian dualism (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1962]:102), but also depicted how subjects perceived the world through and under given bodily conditions that restricted the limits to sensory perceived objects as well as dictated the possibilities of interactions (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1962]:106). Merleau-Ponty argued that perception is not caused by sensory stimulation, but is determined by a subject’s body, which is part of the world. The ‘being-in-the-world’ shapes the possibilities of interaction with and reaction to sensory stimulation (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1962]:92, 98, 171, 408). Following this observation, he concluded that subjectivity was, accordingly, inseparable from body and world (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1962]:475). In addition, according to Merleau-Ponty the body unit was not a fixed entity, because interactions – ‘learning’ – transform the ‘body image’ and create a new knowledge base for experiences, leading to experiences beyond and differing from those experienced previously (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1962]:177). Moreover, the idea of experience filters relates to Marcel Mauss’ (1973) ‘techniques of the body’ as the embodied and enacted ‘ways in which from society to society men know how to use their bodies’ transmitted throughout time by ‘imitation’ (Mauss 1973:70–5). Pierre Bourdieu (1977) picked up these discourses by his notion of ‘habitus’ as an individual, embodied, implicitly functioning ‘modus operandi,’ which creates ‘commonsense’ and harmonizes the experiences of different individuals in a social formation. The habitus structures the practices of an individual’s actions within this environment and makes them socially and culturally comprehensible (Bourdieu 1977:78–80). Later, Thomas Csordas (1993) further concretized some of these ideas by speaking of ‘somatic modes of attention’: ‘Somatic modes of attention are culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one’s body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others.’ (Csordas 1993:138) The ethnographic work of Kathryn Lynn Geurts (2002) supports these observations. In her research on the culture and society of Anlo-Ewe-speaking people in West Africa, she noticed a fundamental difference between the sensory order expressed in Anlo-Ewe and the Eurocentric-coined sensory order. Furthermore, she described how a cultural ‘sensorium’ (specifically, that of the Anlo-Ewe-speaking people), learned during childhood socialization, influences embodied self-perception and perception of the environment, as well as the development of certain culture-specific skills.
From the contemporary field of research into religion, we want to highlight three additional frameworks established by different researchers: worldview, cultural kindling, and body knowledge as part of an AoR approach. In the work of Ann Taves and Egil Asprem (2018), pre-existing belief systems have been termed ‘worldviews.’ A worldview, potentially gained in religious or other practice contexts, shapes interaction with and experience of the environment. The worldview helps the individual to make sense of the world and provides the individual with ‘ontology,’ ‘axiology,’ ‘praxiology,’ and ‘epistemology,’ and thus determines experience outside practice context. Alternatively, aiming at understanding religious experience, Julia L. Cassaniti and Tanya M. Luhrmann (2014) refer to the ‘cultural kindling’ of experience. They argue that individual ‘spiritual,’ ‘phenomenological experience is always the result of the interaction between expectation, cultural invitation, spiritual practice, and bodily responsiveness.’ The social and cultural environment, such as a local social religious setting, determines in advance which (and how) bodily sensations are attended, interpreted, and experienced (Cassaniti and Luhrmann 2014:S341). Anne Koch (2017), in turn, established ‘body knowledge’ to talk about mostly ‘implicit knowledge of [cultural] agents,’ which ‘prepares’ individuals for reaction to sensory stimulation and regulates individual and collective affects (Koch 2017:392).

Koch’s notion of body knowledge is especially significant, because it transfers important strands of natural scientific research on embodiment and cultural and social learning to a cultural studies and humanities framework. Body knowledge relates to the assumptions that, first, cognition is embedded and situated, thus perception or experience depend on the perceiving and experiencing body in a dynamic relationship with a particular setting of perception (M. Dawson 2014:59). Second, embodied reaction, however, is not the reaction to sensory information, but the preparation for reaction to said information, where an arousal of a ‘preparatory set’ takes place (Payne and Crane-Godreau 2015:75). Third, ‘brain maps’ activated in cognition, ‘body schemes’ or ‘schemata,’ ‘event schemata,’ and perceived action possibilities influence not only reaction, but also what is experienced and how it is experienced. Through experiencing and learning, they are constantly updated and neuronal pathways are rewired (Menon 2014:21; Wong 2016). Finally, as a concrete part of experience, embodied emotions – that is, sensations attached to specific emotional value – are linked to specific body states such as posture and muscle tone, visceral states, and attention, becoming ‘afferent emotions’ (Payne and Crane-Godreau 2015:78; Koch 2020:29).
Koch’s concept of body knowledge is also closely linked to an AoR approach, which seeks to understand how religious experiences, emotions, and attitudes are created, memorized, and normalized by analyzing how practices shape senses and thus produce meaning (Grieser and Johnston 2017:2). Practices in the sense of ‘rituals’ always meet the bodies of people participating in practice, creating sensations, and transforming the bodies of participants. How each practice does this is captured by its particular aesthetics. At this interface between practice and participants’ bodies, effects of practices are created in the form of body knowledge and embodied experience, which then potentially transform into experience filters for future experiences. On that basis, experience is to be understood as a direct aesthetic effect of practice, as well as an indirect effect caused by existing experience filters created by prior practicing. From an AoR point of view, experience filters are rooted in body knowledge and are updated as body knowledge changes.

Ultimately, experience filters are embodied conditions for the selection, perception, and interpretation of experiences. Any kind of practice that has the potential to change bodies directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, publicly or covertly, and consciously or unconsciously, can create or become experience filters. Here, the fundamental maxim is that of embodiment, meaning that even verbal, linguistic utterances brought to embodied individuals and reaching them through the senses always alter bodily states and structures and embodied perception, thus creating new filters of experience. It also seems that stronger and more comprehensive aesthetics, namely, senses-stimulating potential, create greater experiential filter potential. On the one hand, experience filters are (in part) easy to observe and analyze when experience is verbally rendered, that is, in narration. On the other hand, when looking at practices in detail, one can also approach the practical basis which leads to bodily transformation and provides the foundation for experience filters. Experience filters provide concrete starting points for understanding the impact of (religious) practicing beyond the (religious) practice setting. By applying experience filters, researchers are liberated from the need to ‘overinterpret’ phenomena or to look for a worldview beyond bodily transformation and creation of body knowledge; the only requirements are body-focused observation and body-focused qualitative data.

Experience filters, as a concept in cultural studies, are thought to complete physiologically grounded perceptual orders. More specifically, experiential filters are body knowledge gained in practical experiences and applied to the experience of new situations, where the knowledge can again be updated by means of practicing. The sum of experience filters created
through practice does not amount to a complete ‘worldview’ in the sense of Taves and Asprem (2018). Yet it may be said that experience filters arise in the same act of worldview building when the worldview, conveyed through a practice, is communicated through and embedded in practicing individuals. Thus, experience filters are, in a way, parts of an applied worldview that are active at a body knowledge level. Accordingly, a (potentially) encompassing understanding of all experience filters could potentially lead to an encompassing understanding of a practice’s worldview. At the same time, experience filters denote embodied culture-specific, ‘culturally kindled,’ structures of sensory attention and perception which are grounded in body knowledge – experience filters tell of ‘cultural kindling’ and the embodied worldviews informing cultural kindling. These filters consolidate with constant practice exposure, and – in a similar fashion to the phenomena noted by Mauss, Bourdieu, and Csordas – the collective nature of practicing produces collectively shared experience filters.

**Methodical and research practical considerations**

Experience filters, as an embodied and largely implicit part of neo-spiritual practice, seem to be methodologically difficult to access. They can only be investigated when they become sensorially perceivable by the researcher through empiric observations. In these observations, experience filters become sensorially explicit and accessible by looking at two different angles of the filtering process: (1) the creation of experience filters in the aesthetics of practicing as the interface of practice, senses, and the body, and (2) the creation and application of experience filters during the process of verbalization and narration. With respect to the first angle of this process, evaluation of the creation of experience filters in aesthetics necessitates detailed observation of sensory stimulation and sensory stimulants arising in practice. How are bodies affected in practice contexts, and how are the affected bodies changed compared to their state prior to practicing? How are bodies affected by sensations from outside the body (exteroceptive), such as sound, light, and temperature, or inside the body or body related (interoceptive and kinesthetic), such as movement, heart rate, blood flow, body temperature, muscular tension or relaxation, posture and afferent emotions, and position in space? How are bodies affected by passively being moved or touched and perceiving, or by actively moving and perceiving? Such observation is best carried out with the help of an aesthetic protocol within which the researcher defines what they are looking for, namely, certain sensations provoked by the environment and the body itself, which should then be set in context with the practitioner’s own perceived bodily
state before and after practicing.1 With respect to the second angle of the filtering process, researchers can investigate the creation and application of experience filters during the process of verbalization and narration by focusing on different narrative situations. On the one hand, the researcher can concentrate on the instructions, metaphors, explanations, and interpretations that are used by a teacher in the process of mediating the practices to students. On the other hand, researchers can gather data from the accounts of practitioners who translate their own, previously implicit experiences of practice into language. This not only helps to objectify other data gained through observation, but also allows understanding of bodily impacts on the observed practitioners. In any case, focusing research on the first angle of examining the filtering process does not impede investigation of the second angle. To access experience filters as a process, data gathered in body-focused participant observation always needs to be set in context with data gathered in qualitative communication with practice participants.

On data collection
The data that serve as the basis for this article were collected in two different research projects carried out in the context of the dissertations of the two authors, Lina Aschenbrenner (2020) and Laura von Ostrowski (2021). Both projects were based on ethnographic field research, Lina Aschenbrenner’s project focusing on the aesthetics of the Israeli movement practice Gaga on non-professional dancers in Tel Aviv, Israel, and Laura von Ostrowski’s project focusing on the aesthetics of Ashtanga Yoga training in Germany. For both projects, participant consent forms were signed, and the data were pseudonymized. Lina Aschenbrenner collected the data for the following considerations on Gaga’s experience filters in open ethnographic fieldwork in the context of the movement improvisation practice Gaga, involving participant observation in Gaga classes at the Suzanne Dellal Center in Tel Aviv from 2016 to 2018, qualitative narrative interviews with nine Gaga participants and three Gaga teachers, and in-field conversations led in the context of Gaga classes. Additionally, four participants agreed to keep ‘experience diaries’ regarding their Gaga classes. Laura von Ostrowski collected the data on yoga’s experience filters in an advanced Ashtanga Yoga teacher training course with students from all over Germany. Ashtanga Yoga is a global, dynamic style of yoga that was significantly shaped by South Indian Pattabhi Jois. Dr Ronald Steiner, the head of the investigated teacher training course, reformulated Jois’ Ashtanga Yoga to create a more therapeutic and individualized version of
the practice that is open to different influences. The training had a duration of five weeks and was undertaken from 2015 to 2017. Over these two years, the prospective yoga teachers undertook a daily yoga practice and were simultaneously introduced to a ‘philosophical’ framework for their practice through evening philosophy sessions held by Steiner. Von Ostrowski joined the teacher training as an observing participant and conducted qualitative interviews with five teachers and four students in the context of German and global Ashtanga Yoga. In addition, she generated audio recordings of the philosophy classes and analyzed them along with fieldnotes in addition to the assigned philosophy homework shared with her by nine of the training participants.

Example 1: creating Gaga filters

Gaga was introduced as a training method for the dancers of the Batsheva Dance Company in the early 1990s by its former artistic director, Ohad Naharin, and made available to Tel Avivians as a leisure activity soon after. By 2020, ‘Gaga/people’ classes for leisure-time dancers and ‘Gaga/dancers’ for professionals organized by the Gaga Movement Ltd could be practiced in about 30 different countries (Friedes Galili 2015). In the first half of 2020, due to the global pandemic, Gaga teachers started offering donation-based classes on Zoom. Since 2021, online and offline classes have remained co-existing. An offline Gaga class for non-professional dancers typically lasted one hour. Ongoing movement was required, and participants were told to always be aware of their body and the environment at the same time. A Gaga teacher stood in the middle, surrounded by 15 or even 100 people, constantly uttering instructions while accompanying the instructions with the according movement. Rather than following specific movement sequences, participants were expected to incorporate form-free instructions and movement given by the teacher while constantly moving without stopping. Gaga teachers instructed by using imagery, which participants were to fully enact instead as ‘dancing metaphors’ (Katan-Schmid 2017). Aschenbrenner’s research project uncovered a great importance of the teacher’s language and visual input in creating an embodied transformation. Participants experienced classes as extra-ordinary when they felt a particular empathetic ‘connection’ to the Gaga teacher, on the one hand. On the other hand, participants reported a great bodily effect of the verbal part of the teacher’s instructions and observed it as difficult to withdraw from. A further characteristic of the setting of the Gaga class was the absence of mirrors. Besides that, music played only a minor role among other sensory stimulations.²
The awareness filter

On the one hand, Gaga instructions – but also Gaga’s ‘ritual rules’ – demanded constant ‘awareness.’ On the other hand, Gaga participants trained and embodied a state of encompassing awareness by different, interplaying techniques, which stimulated sensory receptors and enhanced the individual’s connection to sensory receptors and sensory input. Gaga’s techniques addressed both: ‘open monitoring’ – a ‘non-reactive metacognitive monitoring of perceived sensory, emotional or cognitive events’ – and ‘focused attention’ – an action of ‘directing and sustaining attention on a single selected object’ (Schmalzl, Powers, and Blom 2015). Many of the techniques employed the skin sensory system, and the skin was understood as covering all body parts, including the eyes. Skin attention helped to direct attention to neglected body parts and to enhance the sensitivity to the expansion and movement of the body in space. The skin sensory system was activated by imagery such as ‘delicate,’ ‘generous,’ ‘tight,’ ‘too large skin,’ or, for example, by being addressed as ‘diving suit.’ Additionally, it was activated by directly stimulating movement, such as the action of beating one’s own body with increasing intensity, depicted as ‘dusting off,’ or ‘taking a cold shower.’ These movements increased blood flow, heart rate, body temperature, skin humidity, and so on. Directly stimulating movement was often followed by indirectly stimulating movement, such as ‘listening to the echo’ or ‘evaporating,’ monitoring the changed physiological state attentively. Attention toward and open monitoring of a bodily outside was created by eyes being kept open – visual information was treated equally to other sensory information – and by ordering participants to see and connect to fellow dancers, copying their movement, for example. Gaga teachers asked participants to ‘send the energy out’ or ‘receive energy’ from an environment and ‘connect to far-away engines,’ or to move in space. The instructions thus aimed at a creation of an encompassing awareness, including both, interoceptive awareness – the perception of body-related sensory stimulation, as well as exteroceptive awareness, the perception of environment sensory stimulation.

In interviews and in-field talks, participants reported that with ongoing Gaga practice they found themselves aware of a multitude of sensations involved in very ordinary movements outside Gaga class. Being bodily ‘aware’ became a perceived bodily state to be achieved, to be maintained, and to judge others by, too. Participants such as Ester (interview by L.A., January 3, 2017) mentioned how their open monitoring of incoming sensations expanded toward an encompassing owning of the body, a state they experienced as ‘amazing.’ This state, however, would not last, but needed to be constantly refreshed by ‘a little more Gaga.’ Bodily awareness also
became a narrative motif to distinguish oneself from others. In Uri’s eyes, ‘people who are not necessarily at the same level of intimacy [as him] with their own body’ were not able to enjoy Gaga class that much, for ‘someone who is not familiar with their body [...] Gaga can cause concern, can limit the participation and the experience’ (interview by L.A., December 29, 2016). In participant Idan’s (interview by L.A., June 4, 2018) eyes, bodily awareness had equaled artistry and artistic potential.

The transformed body filter

Gaga practice caused changes in posture, muscle composition and status, joint mobility, and movement range. There was, for example, the demand for constant movement without stopping throughout the duration of class, which enhanced stamina. Instructions introduced well-directed muscle contractions by addressing the ‘flesh’ in a certain area, by ‘grabbing the bones with the flesh,’ by ‘becoming thick’ in a body part or the whole body, by ‘moving through honey’ or ‘clay,’ by ‘letting something travel the body.’ Muscular contractions were often contrasted with muscular relaxation such as ‘becoming thick’ and ‘soft’ or ‘grabbing’ and ‘letting go.’ Muscular contractions concentrated on muscular ‘effort’ efficient contraction. Participants trained to use just the amount of effort and muscular tension needed, and to activate muscles most suited to a certain task. Other techniques included body weight exercises such as ‘crawling,’ balancing on one leg, sitting on the floor while moving the ‘mermaid tail,’ or sit-ups. Collective ‘count-downs’ increased the intension of movement actions and brought participants closer to their movement limits. Running in place and moving through the room increased the heart rate and activated the blood flow. Numerous instructions asking participants to ‘drop the pelvis,’ to activate the pelvic floor muscles and core muscles, to ‘bring the shoulder blades back and together,’ or to let the head ‘float’ on top of a flexible ‘seaweed’ spine invited postural change. Instructions asking for ‘stretches of the skin’ or imagination and movement of ‘ball joints’ trained joint and ligament mobility.

The embodied change was reflected in participant-related data. Participant Iris, for example, observed that,

I was suffering so much in my whole body and Gaga slowly relieved and healed in more and more places. For example, at first, I couldn’t stand on my feet, I had pain. Then slowly it got better. I couldn’t stand on my toes and now I can walk on my toes. And when I’m not suffering, I’m also happy in other areas of my life, I’m happy with my family, with people at work, in my errors. (Iris, in-field conversation with L.A., September 24, 2017)
Ester mentioned that,

After I started to do Gaga on a regular basis, I suddenly realized lots of things. I realized that I feel more stable on my feet when I'm walking. (...) One day I was showering (...) – I'm very right-handed, I do everything with my right hand – and suddenly I realized, I was scrubbing my body with my left hand, with the sponge (...). And I don't think, I've ever done that in my life. In other words, I realized that different parts of my body (...) are learning new things that they can do.

(Ester, interview)

A particularly important technique enhancing awareness and postural transformation, and thereby introducing the corresponding filters, was the so-called ‘floating’ movement, which appeared to coincide with a bodily state of ‘balanced tone,’ ‘in which every muscle is doing exactly what it should. This state is experienced as light, free, open, and effortless; but at the same time stable, powerful, and well-rooted’ – according to Peter Payne and Mardi Crane-Godreau (2013:4). Most of Gaga's movement departed from an embodied state of floating, instructed as ‘Only use the effort needed to resist gravity’ and ‘Feel like you have a thousand balloons in your body lifting you up,’ often accompanied by a wavy motion and shifts of weight. Some participants mentioned finding themselves floating outside class: in the street, while walking, in the bed, and while doing yoga – floating had the potential to become an explicitly observable embodied movement style. Gaga instructions trained floating as a so-called ‘default mode’ of the body, a state of awareness, balanced tone, and muscular efficient (erect) posture, where participants could initiate movement from, come back to, and rest in. Many classes started with floating as a first instructed movement.

The positive emotions filter

Gaga instructions incorporated much ‘playful’ imagery, fostering a relaxed atmosphere, such as ‘Move like and animal,’ ‘Find your silly dance,’ ‘Find your inner groove.’ This enabled participants to do things they would usually not do as adults in public. Practicing Gaga ‘removed the causes of frustration and judgment from the dance class,’ participant Eli (interview by L.A., January 2, 2017) told me. As participant Uri observed, participants were able to maintain this attitude beyond the Gaga class:

I love the silly word. I think it's a fantastic metaphor. (...) there is an opportunity to be silly in other ways, in life, and not to take things to seriously in life and to take pleasure in simple things like movement and (...) I think I take more balance with me. (Uri, interview)
On the other hand, Gaga teachers used the ‘playfulness’ of instructions to take participants to and beyond their perceived physical limits. They helped to reinterpret subjective effort experience by asking participants to experience ‘pleasure’ in moments of physiological ‘effort’ – this seemed to help participants to support effort experience, which they would otherwise have interpreted as unsupportable or ‘painful.’ Here, ‘piece of cake’ appeared as a signature instruction. However, instructions underlined that only ‘good pain’ and no ‘bad pain,’ connected to injuries or restricted capabilities, was allowed. Also, Gaga classes came with moments of intentional laughter and, of course, the constant erect posture an embodied state connected to positive emotions. Finally, the overall effect of Gaga class on participants could be observed as emotional-habitual change toward a bodily state perceived as extraordinarily positive and different from before – ‘I’m coming out, I’m light, I’m flying, I’m happy, and I manage to forget or to leave the shit I’m dealing with somewhere else and ah it’s just amazing,’ Tamar (interview by L.A., October 6, 2017) said.

The ‘secular’ filter

Gaga language as a collective pool of knowledge accessible to all Gaga teachers seemed to explicitly restrain from addressing specific religiously or spiritually relatable concepts such as ‘soul,’ while other concepts such as ‘energy’ seemed ‘secularized’ enough to be used in the instructions. Instead, Gaga worked with a body concept relatable to contemporary scientific discourses: the body as holistic and flexible unit of ‘skin,’ ‘flesh,’ and ‘bones’ with ‘porous’ borders, always aware, active, and moving, and physiologically transformable and infinitely capable. Moreover, Gaga teachers only ever talked of and addressed bodily states as sensory perceivable states. They seemed to avoid talking of emotions as interpretations of bodily states – ‘I don’t care about your emotions,’ one teacher even reminded her participants – and only addressed emotions as sources for certain movement and body knowledge: ‘Feel a good taste in your mouth,’ ‘Connect to a good memory,’ or ‘Be happy.’ However, the observed data suggested that Gaga teachers worked with a knowledge and view of emotions as embodied states, and knew about the positive emotional effect of Gaga practice. Ultimately, Gaga teachers never painted Gaga as a ‘spiritual’ practice – only when Gaga practice concurred with certain ‘spiritual’ worldviews of participants did these participants endemically render it as ‘spiritual.’
Example 2: creating yoga filters

During the formative time of their training, prospective yoga teachers were introduced to the physical Ashtanga Yoga practice, as well as to yoga philosophy. A highly regulated, intense, and continuous dynamic movement practice required stamina, and formed and sedimented specific body knowledge together with breathing and meditation exercises, all of which transformed the bodies of the practice participants over time. Additionally, notions of ‘yoga philosophy’ formed the understanding of what yoga was, a concept that is still associated with an old Indian Sanskrit text, the Yoga Sutra, attributed to an author called Patanjali. Nevertheless, the group was introduced to yoga philosophy in a modernized, westernized, and often universalized way by the teacher and some closely consulted, recently published commentaries on the Yoga Sutra, written by various (often German) authors. Also, during yoga philosophy sessions, the students developed explicit experience filters to verbalize their implicit, embodied experiences on the yoga mat. Additionally, the modern interpretations of the Yoga Sutra encouraged students to apply the experience filters to their daily life experiences as well, and distanced them from the framework of yoga only.

The mindfulness filter

Mindfulness is a fundamental theme in contemporary yoga classes; it is trained and embodied through certain practical cues such as focused attention on the body, as well as emphasized verbally. At the narrative level, it can be implemented in a very general way or be associated with contents of the Yoga Sutra, and has become an important interpretive moment of contemporary yoga philosophy. At a practice level, in Jois' Ashtanga Yoga, a body-focused mindfulness is, for example, established by inner muscle contractions of the pelvic floor (mula bandha) and the navel region (uddiyana bandha) that should be held constantly during the dynamic execution of physical postures, asanas, as well as a focus on a constant, sounding breath (ujiyai). The combination of static inner muscle contraction with dynamic movement and breathwork can be analyzed as the training of focused attention as well as open monitoring. In focused attention, from a cognitive point of view, certain skills are necessary and thus developed: monitoring and vigilance regarding distractors while maintaining an undisturbed focus on an object, here the bandhas or ujjiyai, a quick disen- gagement from incoming distractors and deliberate refocusing of attention back to the chosen object (Russell and Arcuri 2014).

The somatic effects of this practical training can in terms of content be associated with contemporary yoga philosophy teachings. Already, the first
sentence of the *Yoga Sutra, atha yoga-anuśāsanam,* was of great relevance for a verbalized creation of the mindfulness filter. In the exegetical tradition of the text, though, the sentence primarily takes on a text-opening rather than a content-related function, as Edward Bryant’s translation well reflects: ‘Now, the teachings of *yoga* [are presented]’ (Bryant 2009:4). In the empirical data, ‘now’ is also found to be the most common translation of *atha,* but in the contemporary transfer it comes to refer to a mental presence, through a form of mindfulness. Just as the term *atha* in ancient Indian texts serves as an introduction to what follows, *atha* now introduces the experiential dimension of modern yoga practice. ‘Yoga is always now!’ is an insight that the yoga teacher Renate would like to transfer from her practice experiences to her everyday life: ‘If you spin it a little bit further, then that’s really how it is, that what you do on the mat in your practice – the demand is to also develop such an inner attitude in every moment’ (Renate, audio recording by L.v.O., July 25, 2015). The ensuing group discussion specified the ‘inner attitude’ that Renate mentioned: by focusing – undistracted – on the here and now, yoga teaches not to wait with life and postpone important plans until later, but to savor one’s own life in its respective present richness. The students understood ‘atha yoga’ as a text-induced entry into the transformation of oneself toward an inner attitude that deems every moment precious – and thus the creation of a mindful experience filter that also pervades daily life. A certain sacralization of the present became apparent, as a time full of potential. Each present moment should get the undisturbed focus that has been trained in movement practice beforehand, on specific body parts, the breath, or certain tasks in movement. The relation of this modern interpretive shift of *atha* toward the body is also evident from the focus on the elevation of one’s own (psychosomatic) aliveness. In this way, the teacher Steiner stated that *atha* marks the moment of experiencing one’s own aliveness, which can only ever be now (field notes by L.v.O., July 25, 2015). A greater feeling of vividness can indeed be evoked by regular yoga practice, through proprioceptive training which can enhance body awareness, through mindful breathing techniques, and the like.

To summarize, the mindfulness filter fosters concentration on the present moment and is created through focus-oriented practices or body awareness in general, as well as through contemporary understandings of yoga philosophy. It can filter a person’s experience in terms of seeing the body, oneself, and the world with a different ‘quality,’ which means seeing more nuances to it or seeing it with a greater focus or clarity. Based on these embodied learning processes, the mindfulness filter might then affect daily life activities. An example could be the slowing down of one’s walking
speed for the sake of being able to better focus on (body) experiences made while walking.

The balance filter

On a practical level, the ‘balance filter’ materialized in the muscular area; the exercise range of Ashtanga Yoga is characterized by both, muscular strength and relaxation. Still, the students tried to balance out those two opposite states constantly and willfully. A neurological study on the effects of yoga refers to such a balanced physical state as ‘eutony’:

> While individual postures or parts of the practice may be characterized by a hyper-tonic (e.g., arm balances that require a high level of muscle tension) or hypotonic (e.g., a supine relaxation pose) state, the overall aim of the practice is to create a state of eutony or ‘well-balanced tension.’ (Schmalzl, Powers, and Blom 2015)

This quest for a balanced muscle tone has larger implications in the context of yoga practice, as David, already trained as a yoga teacher in a more static yoga style, and trainee in Ashtanga Yoga, stated:

> And I think I try to hold every asana in such a way that it is as stable as possible, and if it is not joyful, then it is an asana that I am doing incorrectly or an asana that is still too much for me. That’s why I always take a step back very quickly, and I think that’s how I never go beyond my own limits, even in Ashtanga Yoga. (...) And this is how I have also learned to respect my own limits in life. (David, interview by L.v.O., November 8, 2016)

Thus, what David experienced while trying to keep a balanced muscle tone in his practice also affected him mentally and emotionally, as he was able to transfer the ability to respect his physical limits (and possibly maintain a balanced muscle tone as a result) to his everyday life. In this way, yoga is often understood as a holistic practice, because the balanced state created in the body leads to a balanced mental and emotional state. However, this body inclusive and holistic vision of yoga, geared to balance, is no common trope in Indian yoga traditions. Indeed, historically speaking, the concept of eutony used by Schmalzl, Powers, and Blom (2015) was coined by the physical culturalist Gerda Alexander, and there is a strong similarity between the search for balanced muscular and inner states by means of movement, and the motifs of Alexander’s harmonic gymnastics of the early twentieth century. Based on this, it can be argued that the balance filter can likely be traced back to the physical culture movement of the early twentieth century, which intimately influenced the practices and discourses of modern yoga (see Singleton 2010). Still, through the explicit narrative input from the philosophy lessons and the broader yoga discourse, David
associated his reflections about his yoga practice with *sutra II/46, sthira-sukham-āsanam*. Bryant translates the sentence as ‘Posture should be steady and comfortable,’ and clarifies that it originally solely referred to a seated meditation posture (Bryant 2009:238). Many contemporary interpretations of *sutra II/46*, like David’s, understand *sthira* ‘stable,’ and *sukha* ‘joyful’ as two qualities of movement that should also be sought in dynamic yoga practice and lead to the said state of ‘eutyony.’ In the *Yoga Sutra* classically interpreted, on the other hand, such a topos of psycho-emotional transformation via bodywork cannot be found, although the text argues in some places that body and mind influence each other. The analysis of the balance filter showed the importance of discourses for the process of creating experience filters, as narratives have a strong effect on the somatic level.

**The spiritual filter**

The final proposed experience filter gets its name from the observation that yoga, within an emic perspective, is either directly termed ‘spiritual’ or understood as a form of modern (neo-)spirituality. This notion of spirituality is deeply interwoven with the moving body; indeed, the body itself is understood in the empirical data as something divine. This is in agreement with broader social developments, as Huss summarizes with regard to contemporary spirituality: ‘In contemporary definitions and uses of the term, the dichotomy between spirituality and corporality/materiality is much less distinct.’ And he concludes that the term ‘spirituality’ is increasingly somatizing in contrast to an earlier understanding: ‘In medieval terminology, spirituality was occasionally connected to physical activities [...] yet, such physical-spiritual practices were intended to subdue the physical, in order to increase the power of the spiritual.’ (Huss 2014:50–1) The same is, by and large, true for the role of the body in the *Yoga Sutra* and in medieval Hathayoga. Also, Jois, the founder of Ashtanga Yoga, saw the body more as a vessel to be purified by means of harsh effort (*tapas*), as a means to a (religious) end, rather than as a spiritualized substance itself (see Smith 2008).

In the research field, on a practical level, the spiritual filter manifested itself in the practice of body alignment. Following the famous Indian yoga teacher B. K. S. Iyengar, who established alignment as a basic method of his yoga style, and in contrast to the missing focus on ‘proper’ physical alignment in Jois’ teachings, the practice of alignment plays an important role in Steiner’s reformulation of Ashtanga Yoga. His alignment instructions are primarily based on spiral mechanisms (helixes), as they are also known from the alternative therapy form ‘Spiraldynamik,’ which was developed in
the 1980s by the Swiss physician Christian Larsen and the French physiotherapist Yolande Deswarte. Through what Steiner calls ‘counter-helixing,’ the alignment principles serve to stabilize body structures, especially joints, and are thus interlinked with the conventional medical fields of orthopedics, prevention, and sports medicine. Together with this ‘healthy’ joint stabilization, alignment results in straightening the body upwards. Discursively, in practice instructions, ‘straight’ and ‘upwards’ were equated with ‘positivity,’ ‘aliveness,’ as well as ‘divinity.’ In his therapy course on alignment (November 28, 2015), Steiner defined it as directing oneself toward the living, toward the divine. In this way, the (upwards) moving body was not only becoming a tool for a spiritual refinement, but the whole body and its structures were understood as a spiritualized substance. Thus, alignment served as the practical and narrative foundation to achieve a ‘divine’ body and created, among other practices, in von Ostrowski’s special field of research, the spiritual filter.

Discussion: neo-spiritual experience filter(s)?

In the above, the authors have shown how experience filters in neo-spiritual practices can be analyzed, with the specific filters they have identified serving as examples among various possibilities. As the analyses of the practice systems Gaga and yoga have shown, implicit and explicit, and conscious and unconscious aesthetics of practices work together in producing experience filters by developing and updating body knowledge. Furthermore, narrative aspects are an effective component of directing and thus filtering practice experiences; experience filters are embodied as well as explicitly verbalized. For the sake of comparison, the empirical data were examined to highlight both similarities and differences between Gaga and yoga. Generally, both systems build on demanding, ongoing movement that requires stamina and a high level of focused attention. Their practices also led to the acquisition of special body knowledge. For example, both systems somatically and discursively emphasized the achievement of a balanced muscle tone and an upright ‘positive’ posture, which in yoga was even interpreted as ‘divine.’ ‘Positivity’ was an overarching filter, as well as ‘awareness’ and ‘balance,’ which were likewise actively created through discourse and imagery by the teacher, who sometimes even redirected effort experience in a more pleasurable or mindful direction. Still, Gaga provided a greater movement variability than the more regulated yoga practice and employed a more pragmatic and ‘secular’ filter, while yoga practice and discourse showed a leaning toward spiritual orientation, sedimented in the constant refocusing on an old Indian yoga text in explicit ‘philosophical’
teachings. The text-based approach made some of yoga’s filters more explicit in the empirical data, even if the Yoga Sutra itself was often reinterpreted to suit the somatic experiences; yoga philosophy has been shown to be embedded in a broader, contemporary discourse. This, on the one hand, revealed that experience filters are influenced by mutual cultural, social, and historical roots of practices, seen for example in the common search for ‘eutony,’ a concept that can be traced back to the physical culture movement. On the other hand, their similarities may be shaped by the pick-and-mix mentality and flexibility of late modernity, which lead to practitioners participating in multiple neo-spiritual practices and likely combining their experience filters.

Drawing on earlier work, with respect to the notion of ‘neo-spirituality’ we referred to practices that often appear as globalized leisure time activities of mainly middle-class individuals in neoliberal consumerist societies who are concerned with seeking self-optimization and transformation, extraordinary experience, and holistic wellbeing. The analyses of yoga and Gaga have shown that such practices can also be characterized by shared experience filters. As late modern bodies are often part of several practice fields, filters created by one practice might mingle with those created by another practice in one and the same body. This was shown through the example of Gaga participant Tamar, who took Gaga ‘on a spiritual level’ because she considered herself to be a ‘yogi.’ This prompts reflection on the application of such experience filters created in practice contexts to broader social contexts. For example, can Gaga’s ‘awareness filter’ and yoga’s ‘mindfulness filter’ be understood as somatic, mental, and emotional regimes tailored to and shaped by the demands of neoliberal societies, seeking to enhance self-awareness and self-fulfillment? Can their global applicability and compatibility with different movement systems also be seen as an adaptation to the market? Can the practices and the experience filters they produce also offer spaces for building an internal sensory resistance to being co-opted by certain kinds of consumerism and certain aspects of market capitalism, as Verena Schnäbele (2009) has argued on the basis of her research in the context of German yoga? Schnäbele proposed that,

On the one hand, a greater ‘inner’ freedom is achieved, a greater mental distance to the internalized work ethic, on the other hand, precisely in the course of this, the adaptation to the working conditions is improved. The specific effect (…), i.e. the constitution of a ‘useful body’ and more controlled thinking, is in and of itself ambivalent in its effect within a capitalistically organized working society. (Schnäbele 2009:274–5, trans. authors)
Or, what if cultural phenomena like neoliberalism are investigated as body-bound experience filters? The presented theoretical and methodological approach for investigating experience filters can facilitate further research to answer such important, broader questions. Comparing our findings to data from other contemporary leisure time activities and movement practices of a neo-spiritual character would also be of great value. Stressing the extended impact of embodied experience filters highlights the relevance of neo-spiritual practices; by shaping practice participants outside the framework of practicing, they permeate deeply into culture more broadly.

Concluding thoughts

The ‘experience filter’ framework highlights the cultural and social influence of religious practices beyond religious settings. It underlines the importance of body-focused research, and simultaneously offers a possibility of including the body in cultural research. Ultimately, researching experience filters is only one way of focusing on bodies in an aesthetics of religious practices. Nonetheless, our concept of ‘experience filter’ provides qualitative researchers and ethnographers with a very practical possibility for setting different kinds of qualitative data in context and understanding them relationally.

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Notes
1 For an example of an aesthetic protocol see Koch in Laack and Tillessen (2020).
2 The following observations on experience filters coincide with observations of others such as Kimerer Lamothe, who talked of a ‘bodily becoming’ through movement in dance (Lamothe 2014:59), or Shay Welch, who argued that ‘dance and dancing can both create and communicate knowledge’ (Welch 2019:6). A Gaga-specific transformative potential was noted by dance philosopher Einav Katan-Schmid (2016). She described Gaga as a way to ‘enquire their movement habits and their own schemata of perception’ (Katan-Schmid 2016:25), provoking a ‘reformation’ of implicit and explicit ‘habitual embodied knowledge’ (Katan-Schmid 2016:55).
3 Gaga’s ritual rules appeared as so-called ‘work instructions,’ existed as written and verbal versions, and asked participants to ‘listen to the body.’ A discourse on the official website depicted encompassing bodily awareness as a goal to be achieved and as self-betterment, as a bodily state superior to the ‘unaware’ (Gaga Movement Ltd. 2019a, 2019b).
4 On the Gaga website, Gaga practice was marketed as a ‘workout that develops flexibility, stamina, agility, coordination, and efficiency of movement’ (Gaga Movement Ltd. 2019a), and the change was presented as physiological self-betterment accompanied by psychological benefits that could be achieved.
5 A valuable discussion on the production of ‘secular bodies, affects, and emotions’ can be found in Monique Scheer, Nadia Fadil, and Johansen Schepelern Birgitte’s edited collection (2019). Along these lines, a ‘secular’ filter can be interpreted as certain cultural-specific body knowledge, which evolves in environment-specific practicing, where a ‘religious’ is distinctively separated from a ‘secular’ sphere. Thus, by creating such a filter Gaga might possibly be understood as taking an explicit position in a state such as Israel, where ‘religion’ is deeply intermingled with political, social, and cultural affairs, and conflicts.
6 Current indological-historical research dates the text roughly to the period between 325 CE and 425 CE (Maas 2013).
7 Von Ostrowski defines contemporary yoga philosophy as a late modern version of yoga philosophy which is structurally based on Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra, but differs both from it and from the teachings of the important Indian yoga teachers of the twentieth century in several characteristic ways; for example, through its close connection with physical yoga practice (see Ostrowski 2022).
8 The Indologist Axel Michaels writes about the ascetic vision of the human body: ‘They regard the body as no more than an external envelope, filled with blood and excrement, a sign of frailty, age, and death’ (Michaels 2016:209).

References


LINA ASCHENBRENNER AND LAURA VON OSTROWSKI


