Postscripts

**The Journal of
Sacred Texts
& Contemporary
Worlds**

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Contents

Guest Editors' Preface

Stephen Hughes and Birgit Meyer

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are confronted by two entwined global developments: the resurgence of religion in the public sphere and the spread of audiovisual mass media. All over the world, religious movements and audiovisual media increasingly engage and overlap as part and parcel of attempts to address and captivate an ever-expanding public. As both religion and film—film understood here in a broad sense as audiovisual technologies, such as cinema, television, and video, which produce moving images—work together and act upon each other, it is increasingly difficult to differentiate the two as distinct fields of activity and meaning. Whether in Hollywood, Bombay, or Lagos, religion and film are involved in complicated and productive relationships. The boundaries between modern mass entertainment and sacred traditions such as Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity are continually being redrawn and blurred. That religion and filmic media are now so reciprocally implicated in such new and powerful ways calls for a more rigorous and nuanced scholarly engagement.

This special issue of *Postscripts* addresses the interface of religion and film by exploring both how religion is deployed through film and how film is utilized in service of religion.[1] While film can be seen as a kind of religious

practice and religion can be studied as a filmic text, this special issue refuses to reduce this complex and ongoing encounter to one side of the equation or the other. This interface cannot be contained exclusively within either film or religious studies. Although there is a long and rich history of religious material represented through filmic media, issues of religion have not received much attention within film studies.[2] This may be due to the fact that the cinema usually has been theorized from a modernist perspective as a technology of make-believe, which offers a kind of surrogate for religion in our increasingly secularized world.[3] What little there is in the way of scholarship on religion and film has mostly been produced within the framework of religious studies. A great deal of this work has been devoted to addressing questions concerning the extent to which religious images on screen are in line with, or deviate from, established religious repertoires. All too often, this scholarship has confined itself to a Eurocentric framework privileging Christianity and Hollywood (in particular films relating to the story of Jesus).

This special issue seeks to explore the common ground shared by practices of filmmaking and religious institutions located within postcolonial settings and increasingly linked in global infrastructures. The articles presented here converge in combining theoretical reflections about the interface of film and religion with specific examples or historical and ethnographic cases. Written by authors with backgrounds in film studies, religious studies, and anthropology, the contributions to this multidisciplinary issue are based on two common, more or less explicit, points of departure. One concerns the realization that the actual entanglement of religion and film highlights the limitations of a modernist view proclaiming the retreat of religion from the public sphere as an inevitable consequence of the processes of modernization and secularization. In our perspective, the interface of film and religion can more fruitfully be addressed from a postsecularist perspective, which seeks to overcome the unproductive, teleological, and normative understanding that religion should be confined to the private sphere. As the contributions to this issue show, in contexts as diverse as India, Ghana, Nigeria, Brazil, and postsocialist Poland, the accessibility of modern mass media in conjunction with the politics of neo-liberalism actually facilitate the proliferation of religion in the public sphere.

This implies not only that religions may assume a strong public presence, but also that religion and entertainment are increasingly difficult to distinguish from each other. For example, as Maria José de Abreu shows,

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2.   An important exception is the volume, *An Invention of the Devil? Religion and Early Cinema*, ed. Roland Cosandey, André Gaureault, and Tom Gunning (Sainte-Foy, Canada: Les Presses de L'Université Laval, 1992). See also S. Brent Plate, ed., *Representing Religion in World Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

3.   Rachel Moore has provocatively made this point in *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

the Catholic Charismatic priest, pop-singer, and film actor Marcello Rossi embodies this convergence. Not only has film become a prime medium of religious expression, films also often address a religious audience which in turn is seen to authorize audiovisual representations of the transcendent or divine as truthful and authentic. Ravi Vasudevan argues here how Hindu devotional films represented their own religious spectators as a kind of self-authenticating redefinition of the social with the divine. Whether this authorization actually occurs, as the articles by Birgit Meyer on Ghanaian pentecostally-oriented video-films and by Matthias Krings on Hausa videos in Northern Nigeria show, is a matter of an intense politics and aesthetics of persuasion that may or may not be successful. While in our era of globalizing media the condition of the possibility for religion to assume a public role appears to depend on the successful accommodation of filmic media, the incorporation of such media also threatens to transform religious practice into a form of mass entertainment. The fear of being made subject to superficial visual regimes, as the articles by Mattijs van de Port and Marleen de Witte highlight, may lead religious practitioners to be highly suspicious about the formats and styles that go along with audiovisual mass media.

In addition to this postsecular stance, the articles presented in this special issue also share a commitment to moving beyond the assumption of an ontological difference between religion as a domain of the transcendent, on the one hand, and film as a domain of neutral technology, on the other. In this regard, we prefer the notion of mediation as a more open-ended, non-determinist solution for exploring the multiple relationships between religion and film. For example, once religion is understood as a practice of mediation, media appear not as alien to the realm of religion, but as an inalienable element on which any attempt to access and render present the transcendental ultimately depends.[4] By using "mediation" we hope to shift our emphasis away from religion and film as abstract substantialized essences towards a non-dualist emphasis on the relational and contingent practices in which film and religion overlap and engage each other. Brent Plate, in his contribution to this issue, coins the term "religious cinematics" to stress explicitly this point where religion and film merge through the embodied practices of the human senses. In various ways, the articles in this issue explore the multiple and constitutive encounter of religious and filmic mediation as a productive and dynamic mix of the sacred and pro-fane, the private and the public, of reality and representation, and of the material and the imagined. Developing these themes, a number of articles also employ the notion of "remediation" so as to follow the transcription of

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4.　　For further discussion on this point, see Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, *Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of "Religion" within the Limits of Mere Reason in Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Plate, *Representing Religion*; Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, eds., *Religion and Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

religious and filmic mediations beyond any reference to any unmediated and foundational origin. In this sense, there can be no unmediated experience of religion and film, but only remediation upon other religious and filmic mediation.

Tucson, Arizona. December 2003. Photo by Stephen Hughes

Precisely because mediation is intrinsic to religion, a given medium may be taken for granted as a natural means to authenticate religious experience and authorize religious authority. The introduction of new media, such as film, almost inevitably calls into question already-naturalized mediation practices. In this sense, as a number of articles presented in this issue show, the adoption of filmic media into existing practices of religious mediation can entail a sense of crisis, in that a medium such as film needs to be authorized as able and suitable to convey religious experience. For example, Esther Peperkamp, focusing on conflicts in postsocialist Poland surrounding the making and circulation of a new Catholic version of the well-traveled protestant film *Jesus* made by the evangelical movement Campus Crusade for Christ, highlights complicated politics of a religious authorization of film. The point is not simply whether to adopt or reject a particular medium such as film per se, but also concerns modes of representation, and ultimately, the question of representability. From the perspective of filmmaking, too, the efforts to appeal to a religious audience requires that filmmakers develop representative forms that are found to be in line with, for example, Pentecostal vision practices (Meyer), Muslim notions of the visual and representation (Krings), or popular images of

Hindu gods (Hughes, Vasudevan). Many of the articles presented highlight that any given medium makes possible *and* constrains the articulation and circulation of religious messages in particular ways.

Approaching religion as a practice of mediation and investigating the relationship between film and religion in terms of remediation is, of course, nothing more than a productive starting point from which to raise questions about the confluence of religion and film. While the first four articles (Meyer, Krings, Hughes, Vasudevan) approach the interface of film and religion by focusing on how religious materials are remediated or transcribed on screen, the last four articles (De Witte, Van de Port, De Abreu, Peperkamp) concentrate on how religious movements reinvent their mediation practices by accommodating filmic media, and the formats and styles implied by it. Brent Plate's article, located in between these two sets of articles, addresses a situation in which religion and film are inextricably entangled, reaching near-convergence as embodied through the human senses. If religion and media are co-constitutive, it makes little sense to claim that the one exists prior to the other. Still, the question of what constitutes an adequate approach to studying the relationship between religion and film ultimately cannot be postulated in the abstract or in advance. It will always be contingently specified in particular historical instantiations such as those presented in this special issue of *Postscripts*.

Religious Remediations: Pentecostal Views in Ghanaian Video-Movies

Birgit Meyer

Abstract

This article addresses the interface of video-films and Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity in Ghana. This interface, it is argued, needs to be examined from a position that transcends the confines of film studies and religious studies and leaves behind a secularist perspective on the relationship between religion and film. On the basis of detailed ethnographic research, it is shown that, far from standing apart from the realm of religious beliefs, video-films call upon audio-visual technologies so as to remediate Pentecostal views of the invisible world around which Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity evolves. Video-films invoke a "techno-religious realism" that addresses spectators in such a way that they authorize video representations as authentic. Transcending facile oppositions of technology and belief, media and authenticity, and entertainment and religion, video-films are shown to achieve immediacy and authenticity not at the expense of, but thanks to, media technologies and practices of remediation.

Introduction

Since the beginning of cinema more than a hundred years ago, over and over again religious forms and elements have been made to feature on screen. Many films have set out to visualize religious texts so as to bring them to life, as in the case of the numerous Jesus films or, in the context of Indian film, the Mahabharata. Throughout the history of film, such representations of religion on screen have engendered debates and been subject to contest.[1] In the United States, for example, conservative

1. Roland Cosandey, André Gaudreault, and Tom Gunning, eds., *Une invention du diable? Cinéma des premiers temps et religion/An Intervention of the*

Christians from Fundamentalist and Pentecostal camps have been keeping a close eye on how religion features on screen, dismissing certain representations of Jesus, such as Martin Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ*, as blasphemous; authorizing others, such as Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*, as more or less authentic; or warning against the potentially dangerous impact of watching occult or even demonic forces depicted on screen, as in the case of *Harry Potter*. While in the context of film studies the medium of film itself has been recognized as driven by filmmakers' urge to re-enchant and offer new spiritual forms,[2] there has been remarkably little attention for empirical or theoretical explorations of the relationship between film and religion.

This at least partly may be due to the view of cinema, and for that matter film in a broader sense, as an, albeit partial, surrogate for religion in an increasingly secularized world. Reducing religion to little more than a symbol bank upon which the culture industry can freely draw, this view of the medium grants film, as the technology of optical illusion and make believe *par excellence*, the ability to stand in temporarily for the decline of true religious belief in the wake of modernization and secularization. Such a view is of little use in grasping the interface of film and religion in our contemporary post-secular era, in which religion, far from being confined to the private sphere, appears to be enmeshed with the world of entertainment of which film is part. Recently, Brent Plate has called for an approach to religion and film that not only transcends the disciplinary limits of film studies and religious studies, but also the Eurocentric perspectives and strong bias towards popular Hollywood cinema still dominant in both disciplines, and pays due attention to the broader political and cultural field in which film and religion are situated.[3] Focusing on the interface of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity and video-films in contemporary Ghana, this article seeks to contribute to developing such a new approach.

The popularity of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity, and the emergence of video, marked the advent of a new era characterized by mass mediatization and Pentecostalism's increasing public presence. This occurred in the wake of Ghana's turn to a democratic constitution in

Devil? Religion and Early Cinema (Sainte-Foy: Les Presses de L'Université Laval, 1992).

2.   Rachel O. Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000). For a useful discussion of phenomenological realism in the work of the French film theorists André Bazin and Edgar Morin, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 459–84.

3.   S. Brent Plate, "Introduction: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making," in *Representing Religion in World Cinema*, ed. S. Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 1–15.

1992, which entailed the privatization of hitherto state-owned and state-controlled media—TV, radio and film—thereby restraining the state from assuming full control over the politics of representation and, conversely, creating new opportunities to establish a public presence for religious groups. The easy accessibility of video technology enabled not only Pentecostal-Charismatic churches, which embraced these new opportunities, to broadcast their message to a broad audience beyond the confines of the congregation,[4] but also enabled initially untrained film lovers to produce and market their own feature films. Portraying problems of everyday life in a melodramatic mode, these "Ghanaian films" feature such stereotypical characters as staunch pastors, faithful Christian wives and innocent children facing womanizing husbands and fathers, irresponsible girls who are easily enchanted by a little glitter and glamour, and evil mothers-in-law. Furthermore, in the midst of this profanity, many successful movies visualize the spiritual war between the Christian God and Satan and his demons. Locating these demons, in line with popular Christian understandings, right at the heart of local religious traditions, video-films partake in diabolizing the latter. The popularity of this kind of movie signals, as I argued earlier, the emergence of a new "pentecostalite" mass culture, in which Christian views are popularized, yet at the same time made subject to the technology of video, and the formats and styles of mass mediated entertainment.[5]

Given the entanglement of Ghanaian films with a broader popular culture that leans heavily towards Pentecostal Christianity, it would make little sense to analyze them in the light of more conventional approaches developed in the sphere of film studies. Ghanaian films are certainly not *auteur* films, crafted carefully by an artistic genius demanding interpretation and critical reflection. Their production very much relies on the repetition of successful formulas and the recycling of well-known materials. Ghanaian films mirror—and at times excessively exaggerate—everyday life and common sense (somewhat like soap operas). Having to appeal to paying audiences,[6] they are woven out of and feed into the dreams and frustrations, pleasures, and specters that make up the texture of everyday life in the city. Any analysis of the video phenomenon needs to take into account its transactions with popular culture and with

4.   Marleen de Witte, "Altar Media's *Living Word*: Televised Christianity in Ghana," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33 (2003): 172–202; Rosalind I. J. Hackett, "Charismatic/Pentecostal Appropriation of Media Technologies in Nigeria and Ghana," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28 (1998): 258–77.

5.   Birgit Meyer, "'Praise the Lord….': Popular Cinema and Pentecostalite Style in Ghana's New Public Sphere," *American Ethnologist* 31 (2004): 92–110.

6.   Until the late 1990s video-films were screened in the cinemas before being sold as tapes, nowadays films are immediately reproduced as cassettes and VCDs.

Pentecostal Christianity, and thus has to move beyond movies *per se*. Conversely, it would be equally inadequate to approach these movies from a narrow religious perspective, solely examining the extent to which these films reflect biblical stories and themes (as is often the case in theological analyses of, for example, Jesus films). Such a view reduces visualizations of the divine and the demonic, which form one of video-films' key attraction points, to predefined conventions of (textual) representation. In so doing, such an approach fails to acknowledge both the specificity of video as an audio-visual medium and the fact that the perception of these visualizations as adequate depends on historically particular practices of authentication and authorization. The medium and these practices should be not taken for granted, but need to be explored.

In short, as these movies are part of an evolving Christian mass culture, it would be a mistake to approach film and religion from narrow disciplinary perspectives that fail to address the links between both. This article addresses exactly these links. Taking the entanglement of video-films and Pentecostal Christianity as a point of departure requires an acknowledgment of their circular relationship. Not only do these films mediate Christian views onto TV and cinema screens, building on televisual formats and styles; they also shape popular religious structures of feeling, which eventually inspire new films. They mobilize belief by making use of techniques of make-believe. In the confines in this article, it is impossible to pay equal attention to all aspects of this circularity.[7] My main concern here is to focus on mass-mediated representations of the divine and the demonic in video-films so as to chart the interface of religious conventions or styles of conveying the invisible realm, on the one hand, and the possibilities and constraints inherent in audio-visual technologies bound to represent, if not render present, this realm, on the other. This examination is based on the assumption, explained in more detail in the first section of this article, that the notions of mediation and remediation offer suitable entry points into the interface of Pentecostalism and video-films. While it may be obvious to talk about mediation in relation to video as a particular medium, it makes as much sense to understand religion as offering practices of mediation between human beings and the supernatural or invisible. The notion of remediation, signaling the recycling of messages in a new medium and format, is useful so as to grasp processes of transmission from the sphere of religious mediation onto the screen.

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7.   See Rafael Sanchez for a brilliant examination of the incorporation of televisual modes into the Venezualan Mario Lionza cult, where adepts are possessed by characters from the sphere of film and television ("Channel-Surfing: Media, Mediumship, and State Authority in the María Lionza Possession Cult [Venezuela]," in *Religion and Media,* ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001], 388–434.

After having sketched a theoretical framework on the basis of the notions of mediation and remediation, this article will focus on the appearance of the divine and the demonic on screen. Key questions are: To what extent are Ghanaian video-filmmakers inspired as well as constrained by Christian forms of mediating the divine and the demonic, and which thrive on diabolizing traditional religion? How are video mediations of the divine and the demonic authorized as authentic (or, conversely, dismissed as fake)? How do Pentecostal beliefs, and the make-believe that is intrinsic to this kind of film, relate to each other? Answers to these questions, this article will show, cannot be found in analyzing film fragments as such, but only through a more mobile kind of analysis leading from video-film scenes to the world, which is depicted and addressed, and back. The main aim of this article is to contribute, on the basis of a detailed empirical study, to mapping out the interface of film and religion from a post-secularist perspective. It will be argued that video-films, far from standing apart from the realm of religious belief, engage in invoking what I would like to call a "techno-religious realism." Calling upon audio-visual technologies so as to produce representations of the invisible world around which Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity evolves, this techno-religious realism transcends facile oppositions of technology and belief, media and authenticity, and entertainment and religion.

Mediation, Remediation, and Immediacy

Several scholars have suggested that the notion of mediation is useful to overcome the unproductive opposition of religion and media, according to which the former belongs to the province of spirituality and transcendence, and the latter to the province of technology. Insofar as religions posit the need to overcome a distance separating human beings and the divine, they offer mediation practices of which media—understood in the broadest sense—form an inalienable part.[8] Any attempt to access and render present the divine—and, in the case that stands central here, to invoke the demonic so as to fight it—and to communicate among religious practitioners ultimately depends on media. The use of particular media, in turn, appeals to specific senses and generates particular religious experiences. Once media are understood as intrinsic to religion, it is possible to ask intriguing questions about the implications of the adoption of new mass media by established religious traditions. But an understanding of religion as necessarily implying mediation also opens

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8.   E.g. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, eds., *Religion and Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Jeremy Stolow, "Religion and/as Media," *Theory, Culture & Society* 22, no. 4 (2005): 119–45; Plate, "Introduction"; Meyer, "'Praise the Lord.'"

up new possibilities to explore the interface of religion and film that stands central here, and to examine how cinematic or video mediations of the divine and the demonic relate to mediation practices in the context of Pentecostal Christianity. What is at stake when the "Gospel moves onto the screen," that is, when a new audio-visual medium is made to express already existing religious forms hitherto tied to specific media, such as the biblical text, sermons, and services? In other words, the question arises: How far are Pentecostal representations, conveyed through a number of interrelated media, transformed in the course of their transfer into the new medium of video-film? This transfer is not simply an act through which an existing message is stripped from its old medium and inserted into a new one, but a question of remediation. Remediation, in others words, refers to the ways in which different media relate to, and indeed, quote each other. What media remediate is other media, not content as such.[9]

The notion of remediation, as it has been proposed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, is a useful point of departure to grasp this transfer.[10] As reality is always mediated, any mediation refers to and absorbs earlier mediations, and hence can aptly be described as remediation.[11] Bolter and Grusin use the notion of remediation in a quite generalizing manner and tend to represent it as driven by a fixed logic. Notwithstanding their lack of attention to historically specific remediation processes, however, their ideas about the nexus of media and immediacy (or authenticity) are important to understand the recycling of Pentecostal materials in video-movies that stands central in this article.

9.   For a similar point, see, in this volume, S. Brent Plate, "Religious Cinematics: The Immediate Body in the Media of Film" (pp. 259–75) and Matthias Krings, "Muslim Martyrs and Pagan Vampires: Popular Video Films and the Propagation of Religion in Northern Nigeria" (pp. 183–205).

10.   Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999). Although this notion makes immediate sense in relation to our contemporary media-saturated environment, in which the entertainment industries make ample use of "repurposing" (e.g. borrowing elements from a textual medium and reusing it in cinema) and new supermedia absorb a range of previous media technologies (the latest being the mobile phone annex TV, p.c., and camera), the authors insist that it would be mistaken to understand remediation as an entirely new process. On the contrary, it is a useful notion to demystify celebrations of new media, such as ICT, for achieving a complete break with the past, and urges us to conceptualize the relationships between new and old media in terms of media genealogies.

11.   "…just as there is nothing prior to the act of mediation, there is also a sense in which all mediation remediates the real. Mediation is the remediation of reality because media themselves are real and because the experience of media is the subject of remediation" (Bolter and Grusin, *Remediations*, 59). See also William Mazzarella, "Culture, Globalization, Mediation," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 345–67.

Remediation, the authors point out, thrives on a "double logic": that of "transparent immediacy" and of "hypermediacy." The logic of transparent immediacy implies that media technologies are erased from the representations which they produce, making it seem as if these representations offer immediate access to reality in a raw and unmediated sense. In other words, the medium itself is rendered entirely transparent and invisible, like a window, and creates the illusion of the representation as an authentic presence. The distance on which mediation depends is paradoxically transcended by the promise of immediacy that denies mediation though it is dependent on it. According to Bolter and Grusin, this somewhat naïve view of immediacy speaks to and expresses a "historical desire for unmediated experience," that is mobilized explicitly in shifts from one medium to another (in that new media are claimed to offer better access to reality). This promise is well captured by the Latin etymology of remediation, *remedere*, which means "to heal, to restore to health."[12] In this sense, remediation entails the possibility of reform. Photography and film, for example, were celebrated as able to document unmediated presence through visual representation. Such promises have been unmasked by post-structuralist critique as illusions or "reality effects." Hypermediacy, on the other hand, asserts multiple acts of representation—as in the case of Microsoft's Windows—and acknowledges that technology itself is real, in that it is gradually becoming our second nature, and claims to offer pure, authentic experience.[13] In this post-modern logic, reality is not supposed to lie beyond representation, but to be constituted by it. Reminiscent of Baudrillard's simulacrum appearing as hyperreal, hypermediacy claims immediacy and authenticity not beyond, but through media.

This perspective on (re)mediation is intriguing because it highlights the paradox that immediacy and authenticity, though by definition opposed to media and allegedly unmediated, are produced by media. Nevertheless, as intimated already, Bolter's and Grusin's work has a somewhat dazzling effect. This derives from the authors' strong focus on media without actually situating them in particular social fields. As a consequence, the accent lies more on media as technologies than on historically situated mediation practices which shape communication among people. It is important to stress that remediation is not an arbitrary, unbounded process of absorption, but is shaped and governed by established mediation practices, and hence subject to power relations. This is how remediation is understood in this article. Bolter and Grusin's lack of attention for practices of (re)mediation at the expense of media *per se* also implies that the assumed "historical desire" for

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12. Bolter and Grusin, *Remediations*, 59.
13. Ibid., 42.

transparent immediacy which new remediations promise to satisfy, yet—unavoidably—feed, gets little relief in their work. Striving for immediacy and authenticity should not be reduced to a dynamics of media, but should be viewed as being part and parcel of broader processes of generating desire and authorizing immediacy in particular mediation practices. It cannot simply be assumed that immediate access to reality is always what new media promise, nor that this promise would always be effective. Instead, what needs to be investigated is how new media are made to speak to questions of immediacy and authenticity in particular social fields.

This is certainly the case regarding religious traditions, such as Protestant Christianity, which have developed and authorized particular modes of accessing and representing the invisible (see below). Rendering transparent the medium for the sake of invoking immediacy seems pertinent in relation to Pentecostal, and for that matter Protestant, attempts of rendering the divine accessible, without making God, whose presence depends on mediation (and hence on media), appear as a mere human construction. Representing God and invoking his presence, in other words, are governed by more or less fixed conventions that have been authorized as adequate. Digression from such conventions may entail severe conflict (as in the Protestant struggle against the Catholic icon), or entail charges of sacrilege and blasphemy. Not just any remediation, though possible in principle, is acceptable in practice.

Obviously, both the introduction of new media as TV and video into established mediation practices and the transmission of religious representations into the medium of video impinge on religious experience and raise critical questions among religious leaders and followers, in particular concerning the maintenance of religious authority and the authentication of media representations as truthful.[14] In fact, much literature on religious films in the sphere of theology—in particular on "Jesus" films—is situated on this very same level, partaking in discussions about the truthfulness of mediated representations and authorizing certain films as authentic. [15] Written from a standpoint located outside of such

14.   See, in this volume, Marleen de Witte, "Insight, Secrecy, Beasts, and Beauty: Struggles over the Making of a Ghanaian Documentary on 'African Traditional Religion'" (pp. 277–300); Krings, "Muslim Martyrs"; Esther Peperkamp, "Being a Christian the Catholic Way: Protestant and Catholic Versions of the *Jesus* Film and the Evangelization of Poland" (pp. 351–74); and Mattijs van de Port, "Priests and Stars: Candomblé, Celebrity Discourses, and the Authentication of Religious Authority in Bahia's Public Sphere" (pp. 301–24). See also Charles Keil, "From the Manger to the Cross: The New Testament Narrative and the Question of Stylistic Retardation," in Cosandey et al., *Une Invention du Diable*, 112–20.

15.   E.g. Adele Reinhartz, *Scripture on the Silver-Screen* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003); Eric S. Christianson, Peter Francis, and William R. Telford, eds., *Cinéma Divinité: Religion, Theology, and the Bible in Film* (London:

discussions, this article all the more seeks to grasp the dynamics on which they thrive. Below it will be shown that questions of authorization and authentication of religious remediations in the context of making, watching, and interpreting video-movies are a matter of eminent concern for both the filmmakers and the audiences, and thus lead us right into the heart of the interface of Pentecostalism and video-movies.

Remediating the Divine and Demonic in Video-Films

Video-Movies and the Liaison with Pentecostal Christianity

Video-filmmakers' relationship with Pentecostal Christianity is complicated. While some of them attend Pentecostal-Charismatic churches, others are more reserved or even opposed to "all this Pentecostal crap," as one filmmaker put it. Nevertheless, most of them asserted in my interviews with them that in order to make a financially successful movie, it is crucial to link up with Pentecostal perspectives that have become increasingly popular in the course of the last twenty years and shape Ghanaian popular culture and the public sphere at large since the liberalization of the media. Pentecostalism, as I argued elsewhere, is characterized by a remarkable ability to encapsulate, and by the same token encroach upon, everyday life, while at the same time promoting the desirability to reach beyond the constraints of the local and become part of a global network of born-again believers.[16]

The increasing relevance of Pentecostalism to video-filmmaking can easily be discerned by a brief retrospective. When filmmakers took up the medium of video in the late 1980s, the main concern was to make "local films" that were not only an affordable substitute for celluloid, but would also be closer to people's everyday life than earlier productions by the state-owned Ghana Films Industry Corporation (GFIC) that had been devoted to the project of educating the nation through the medium of film. While Ghanaian films pictured the local environment, their plots were nevertheless inspired by foreign films, especially Indian movies, which paid much attention to depicting spirits and gods, and the Western genre of horror films. Both of these genres, of course, had been around in Ghana for some decades. For example, the film *Diabolo*,[17] depicting a

SCM Press, 2005); Richard C. Stern, Clayton N. Jefford, and Guerric DeBona, *Savior on the Silver Screen* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999).

16. Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999); idem, "Commodities and the Power of Prayer. Pentecostalist Attitudes Towards Consumption in Contemporary Ghana," *Development and Change* 29 (1998): 751–76.

17. Birgit Meyer, "'Delivered from the Powers of Darkness': Confessions about Satanic Riches in Christian Ghana," *Africa* 65 (1995): 236–55; Tobias Wendl, "Visions of Modernity in Ghana: Mami Wata Shrines, Photo Studios and Horror Films," *Visual Anthropology* 14 (2001): 269–92.

snake-man who lures unsuspecting prostitutes into his home where he enters their vagina in the shape of a snake and makes them vomit money before they die, was inspired by the horror film *An American Werewolf in London* and an Indian movie about snakes. The producer and director William Akuffo, a pioneer in the field of Ghanaian films, told me that he wanted to make a movie involving occult powers that was embedded in the local environment and would speak to local anxieties, hence the choice of the snake rather than a werewolf. While the name Diabolo invokes the image of the Devil, the first sequel of the film (eventually four parts appeared) is certainly not obviously framed as a Christian film. *Diabolo I* ends with a scene involving car mechanics who catch the snake-man and burn him. Interestingly, Akuffo even changed the ending after the first show, as he noted that audiences were furious about the fact that Diabolo was able to sneak away without being duly punished (a device chosen by Akuffo so as to make possible the snake-man's miraculous reappearance in Part II). This attitude is as exemplary of filmmakers' strong sense of having to appeal to audiences as of viewers' expectations towards film as offering a moral lesson, showing explicitly who is good or bad, and making the latter receive a punishment on screen.[18]

Next to *Diabolo*, there was a series of popular movies featuring ghosts, that is, returning dead who suffered a violent death, seek revenge, and restore the moral order by punishing evildoers. These movies, too, did not foreground Christian views very explicitly, but rather affirmed popular ideas about ghosts and morals in a broader sense. Interestingly, ghost films fit in with a more general obsession with spirits of the dead that gained much attention in popular papers and rumors. It seems that in the beginning, Ghanaian films derived much of their appeal from making visible, through simple though ingenious special effects, how ghostly forces operate according to the popular imagination. This earned them much public critique from established filmmakers trained at the National Film and Television Institute (NAFTI) or affiliated with the GFIC, and from state institutions, which found that local movies affirmed popular superstitions, thus failing to employ film for the sake of education. Though striving for recognition, independent video-filmmakers realized at the same time that the popular taste on which they depended was almost diametrically opposed to that of the established film circles. Interestingly, in the shadow of these criticisms, the ghost films were also opposed from a Pentecostal point of view, which argued that it was wrong to attribute to ghosts the power to take revenge and restore

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18.   This is an expectation that has, at least in part, been sustained by the requirements of the censorship board, which stipulate that morality be visualized on screen.

morality. Only God, or Jesus, was supposed to act in this way. The crux of this critique does not concern the visualization of ghosts *per se*, but their celebration as moral custodians and the absence of an explicit Christian frame.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, one can discern an increasing and explicit alignment of video-films and Pentecostal perspectives. As intimated above, democratization and the liberalization of mass media offered unprecedented possibilities for Pentecostal-Charismatic churches to appear in public.[19] By skillfully making use of newly available media technologies—often in hi-tech church-run media studios—these churches (in contrast to more orthodox Protestant churches and the Catholic church) seek to address new followers. Pentecostalism's deliberate use of audio-visual technologies indicates an almost seamless articulation of the religious quest for being able to look beyond the level of mere appearance (see below) to the possibilities of new media. At the same time, the adoption of these media into practices of religious mediation marks a significant rearticulation of Christianity in the era of technological reproducibility, instigating new modes of belief that rely on mass membership, spectacle, and a voyeuristic concern with the demonic.[20]

The obsession with staging spectacular struggles against demonic forces for a mass audience is a central point of convergence between video-films and Pentecostal-Charismatic churches. Pentecostalism has successfully absorbed popular forms of grassroots Christianity that place a strong emphasis on Satan and the demons that serve him. These demons, as I have explained elsewhere,[21] are held to be behind the gods worshipped in the context of local religious traditions and the power of witchcraft, but also encompass new spirits, such as Mami Water, the erotic goddess at the bottom of the ocean who seduces people with sex and commodities. In the Pentecostal perspective, such demons are responsible for the hardships and problems of everyday life, and thus are to be fought by the power of the Christian God. In other words, the obsession with demonic forces is positioned in a dualistic frame of God and Devil. Since their struggle, though shaping the material world, by

19. The striking popularity of this type of church in Ghana stands central in Paul Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalising African Economy* (London: Hurst, 2004). For an overview on the popularity of such churches in Africa see my, "Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 447–74.

20. See also Patricia Birman, "Future in the Mirror: Media, Evangelicals and Politics in Rio de Janeiro," in *Religion, Media and the Public Sphere*, ed. Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 52–72; Marleen de Witte, "The Spectacular and the Spirits: Charismatics and Neo-Traditionalists on Ghanaian Television," *Material Religion* 1 (2005): 314–35.

21. Meyer, *Translating the Devil*.

and large takes place in the "realm of the spiritual," Pentecostals feel compelled to make visible what happens in that realm and to fight a spiritual war. In Pentecostal-Charismatic practice, much emphasis is placed on the need to reveal the operations of the powers of darkness. Making demonic forces visible is a necessary device in the fight against them.[22]

To my knowledge, the first movie that explicitly took up Pentecostal views is *Deliverance from the Powers of Darkness*, which spectacularly visualizes how a witch, in the course of becoming a born-again Christian, is exorcized from her links with demonic forces, many of which she has embodied spiritually and is made to vomit out. This movie not only offers a visual supplement to Pentecostal-Charismatic exorcism practices, but also to the Nigerian preacher Emmanuel Eni's famous, widely circulating tract, "Delivered from the Powers of Darkness," which increased the popularity of Pentecostalism throughout Africa, including Ghana. The filmmaker, director, and producer Sam Bea told me that he had first seen this film appear on a white wall, and that pastors had assured him that this had been a God-sent vision. Offering spectacular scenes featuring demonic forces and at the same time asserting the superiority of the Christian God over traditional powers, this movie signaled a shift from spectacular depictions of occult forces towards the incorporation of this kind of spectacle into a Christian dualistic frame in Ghanaian films. Although this film met with the protests of established filmmakers and intellectuals, who were not only worried about the endorsement of popular "superstitions" but also about the celebration of Christianity and demonization of local religious traditions, the remediation of Pentecostal views became a characteristic feature of Ghanaian films. The link with Pentecostalism was more or less outspoken, ranging from an explicit focus on the spiritual war of God and Satan to the display of divine power at work in the midst of the profanity of everyday life. The bottom line was filmmakers' realization that a film critiquing Christianity and celebrating local cultural heritage might do well in international festivals such as FESPACO, but would surely flop in the local market and hence destroy one's business. They found at least some positive reference to Christianity to be unavoidable. Conversely, the dualism of God and Satan allowed for spectacular representations of occult forces and stunning special effects, provided they were marked as demonic and hence inferior to the Christian God.

This trend has been very much enhanced with the arrival of Nigerian video-films in the Ghanaian market in the late 1990s, which thrive on

22. Birgit Meyer, "Mediating Tradition: Pentecostal Pastors, African Priests, and Chiefs in Ghanaian Popular Films," in *Christianity and Social Change in Africa: Essays in Honor of J.D.Y. Peel*, ed. Toyin Falola (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 2005), 275–306.

similar plots, but put remarkably more emphasis on demonic forces, involving computer-made special effects, violence, and the smashing power of God—and which, as Ghanaian actors working on Nigerian film sets and Ghanaian viewers assert, look "terribly real." A great number of Nigerian films are produced by Pentecostal churches, which use the medium to attract believers.[23] Having to live up to the new standards set by these Nigerian movies (which are usually made with more money, and hence are superior in terms of acting, set design and camera work, in addition to being able to circumvent the strict standards of the film censorship board to which Ghanaian video-movies are to be submitted), Ghanaian filmmakers realized even more the need to satisfy audience expectations, rather than bother about intellectuals' critique of misrepresenting local religious traditions. And hence video-filmmakers, irrespective of their personal conviction, developed modes of depicting the spiritual realm in film that mimicked pastors' oral accounts about this realm. Substituting the eye of God with the camera, many movies were (and still are) framed as Christian revelations and made to remediate Pentecostal concerns in the medium of video. Invoking a Christian frame—articulated through Bible quotes or such statements as "Thank you Jesus!" or "Glory to God"—video-filmmakers strive to make their movies exceed mere fiction and make-believe. In order to appear as genuine revelations of divine power, however, audio-visual representations of divine and demonic power need to be authorized as authentic by the audiences. By explicitly addressing them as Christian viewers in search of revelation, calling upon the Bible to give credence to the film (and by the same token actualizing the Bible), and remediating familiar Pentecostal views, video-filmmakers try to assure that audiences are tuned in such a way that this authorization actually occurs.

An apt example is the film *Stolen Bible,* by Augustine Abbey. Having experimented with different genres (in particular melodrama and comedy) for some time and being in dire need of success, Abbey decided in 2002 to make a movie closely aligned with Pentecostal concerns. *Stolen Bible* is about a group of selfish wealthy men worshiping an indigenous spirit, who offer money in exchange for a beloved person (in particular a wife), yet are finally destroyed by divine power. The theme of the sacrifice of the beloved wife has been endlessly recycled in paintings, written narratives, rumors, and a host of Ghanaian and Nigerian films. Remediating these already circulating materials, *Stolen Bible* does not claim to tell a completely new story, but rather to visualize an existing one in such a way that it appears as ultimately

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23. Obododimma Oha, "The Rhetoric of Nigerian Christian Videos: The War Paradigm of The Great Mistake," in *Nigerian Video Films*, ed. Jonathan Haynes (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), 192–99.

authentic. In order to make *Stolen Bible* look as truthful as possible, Abbey even decided to invite a real pastor to stage the harsh fight against the bloodthirsty spirit and his followers in his own church. In Abbey's experience, many actors, even though they might be staunch Pentecostal believers, were not able to embody the role of a pastor in a truly convincing manner. Therefore, audiences might find certain scenes "too artificial," and hence unable to forget that they were just watching a movie. Shooting in a real church and collapsing the identity of the pastor with the film character of the pastor, *Stolen Bible* seeks to convey authenticity. Successfully so—as Abbey assured me, tapes of the film sold like "hot cake" in the streets, and some churches even organized screenings for their members.

Despite these deliberate attempts to transfer Pentecostal views and practices onto the screen, it would be mistaken to assume that video-films fully converge with Pentecostalism. It is important to keep in mind that video-filmmakers, in order to keep the business going, need to attract large audiences. Writing off filmmakers' appeal to popular belief as "mere" business, however, would be too simple. Such a view suggests an irreconcilable distinction between business as profit-oriented and belief as sincere. It is important to realize that Pentecostal-Charismatic churches are run deliberately in a business-like fashion. As the attraction of a mass membership is key to their survival in the highly competitive religious market, these churches, in their own way, also have to make sure they appeal to a broader public. As is the case with video-films, Pentecostal-Charismatic media ministries also appeal to audio-visual mass media so as to secure popular support. Certainly in regard to the spectacular representation of miracles in the context of televised church services and prayer sessions, a striking elective affinity can be discerned between video-filmmakers' and pastors' attempts to use audio-visual technologies so as to make people believe.[24] Both the video-film phenomenon and Pentecostal-Charismatic churches are part and parcel of a broader process in which belief and spectatorship, religion and mass entertainment, being born-again, and making money, are becoming inextricably entangled.

Video-filmmakers' main targeted audience are women, who are supposed to make their boyfriends and husbands watch those movies that satisfy women's expectations in relation to standards of piety and morals, especially in relation to marriage. Many women feel attracted to Pentecostal churches, though they are involved to a greater or lesser degree. Video-films adopt Pentecostal modes so as to achieve popularity. This

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24.   On the elective affinity of miracles and special effects, see Hent de Vries, "In Media Res: Global Religion, Public Spheres, and the Task of Contemporary Religious Studies," in de Vries and Weber, *Religion and Media*, 23–29.

implies that the Pentecostal remediations that characterize many movies need not be authorized as truthful by pastors *per se*, but rather by popular opinion. Interestingly, when I questioned Pentecostal pastors about video-movies, I received quite diverse answers. Some, among them the pastor participating in *Stolen Bible*, asserted the relevance of such Nigerian and Ghanaian films for creating a Christian mass culture, and stressed that many visualizations of occult forces did indeed capture adequately the operations of demonic powers. If only films would make clear that the power of God was superior, films were suitable devices for proselytization, certainly among youth and female audiences. A number of itinerant Pentecostal pastors, who moved through the coastal region so as to preach, also stressed that they would preach about films, and at times show them to Christian audiences (the point being that the films are good, but that the process of watching and the interpretation needs to be controlled). On the other hand, some of the pastors I spoke to about this matter were rather dismissive of this type of movie, lamenting the low technical quality and being suspicious of entertainment *per se*, which they perceived as distractive and potentially amoral. Still, also these pastors acknowledged that many members, in particular women, actually did watch such movies with much interest and often even questioned pastors about certain features.

In this sense, video-movies, remediating popular views that are heavily leaning towards Pentecostalism, though not entirely controlled by Pentecostal leaders, are an unavoidable reality to which pastors, too, have to relate. Here we get a glimpse of a paradox: in the course of the popularization of Pentecostal views that goes along with its spread into a Christian mass culture, it is increasingly difficult for Pentecostal pastors to control and streamline popular Pentecostal religiosity. In contrast to more orthodox churches which are organized around the model of congregations that are localized in particular areas and supervised by a pastor or priest, Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity is much more mass-oriented. Though omnipresent in public space, this brand of Christianity faces the problem of how to effectively claim religious authority over an ever-expanding, dispersed mass audience.

Screening the Divine and Demonic

The representation of God, Satan, and demons on screen by and large resonates with, and in turn informs, how these forces are envisioned in Pentecostal circles. Here, the Pentecostal, and for that matter, Protestant, stance towards religious images comes in.[25] Let us start with images in relation to God. Referring to the Second Commandment, Protestants claim that it is wrong to make an image of God, and this is

25. See also David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

the central argument raised against Catholic icons as well as against statues of local gods which are both dismissed as idol worship. Nevertheless, many Protestants do have mass-reproduced print images of Jesus on the wall, insisting that they do not worship the image as such, but the power behind it. This somewhat inconsistent attitude towards the image also comes back in movies. In *The Beast Within*, for example, there is a set of scenes in which a desperate Christian housewife prays in front of a picture of Jesus in the living room, not knowing that a *juju* (an object embodying magical power) is hidden behind it. In the end, it is only the *juju*-man from the village who is able to control this power, whereas the prayer to Jesus does not help solve the problem and possibly even increases it, because it renders the *juju* hidden behind the picture more powerful. This movie, though well made, was not very successful because of these very scenes. The young people with whom I watched the movie (in 1996) did not at all like the suggestion that prayer to Jesus would be less efficient than an indigenous priest. This clearly went against the common idea, endorsed by many movies, that Christianity was far more powerful than local religious traditions, which were dismissed as diabolic. Therefore, these spectators were not prepared to authorize the film as a truthful representation.

Against the background of later discussions about religious images, however, I understood that the appropriateness of depictions of Jesus is considered problematic in Pentecostal circles. This became very clear to me through a conversation with an actress on the set of the movie *Turning Point* (in October 2002). This woman, a member of the Winner's Church (a popular Pentecostal-Charismatic church originating from Nigeria), told me that upon the advice of her sister she did away with the image of Jesus in her room. Her sister had told her that "there is a spirit in that image, not the spirit of God, but a devilish thing. The problem is that the spirits can look at you through images and masks, and the like. They use the eyes." When I did not get her point, she immediately brought a photograph. Pointing at the eyes, she said: "Wherever you are in the room, the image will look at you, so you are seen." This blurring of the distinction between a picture that is subject to a person's gaze and the picture looking back is attributed to the power of the Devil, who is even considered able to appropriate the eyes of Jesus in a picture so as to observe and confuse a Christian. This is why it would be dangerous to have pictures—even those depicting Jesus—in one's house. Against the background of this understanding, it could even be argued that *The Beast Within* is less scandalous, for it points out exactly the danger imbued in a religious image and might also be interpreted as a warning against the use of religious pictures.

Pictures of Jesus feature in a number of films. Particularly interesting is the way his image is represented in *Women in Love*. This movie is

about the disastrous implications of a pact between Mami Water, her adept, and a young woman called Sabina, who has been lured into a lesbian relationship with the latter. There is a scene in which Sabina, after having been reprimanded by a born-again taxi driver that she should follow Jesus, has a dream in which she sees the evil plans of the Mami Water adept, who strives to offer Sabina as a blood sacrifice. When she wakes up in despair, she looks at the picture of Jesus in her room and starts praying to him (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Still from *Women in Love 2* (Movie Africa Productions, 1996)

Western classical-religious music underlies a close-up of the picture, focusing on the clouds behind Jesus, zooming in on lightness and a kind of smoke. In this way the picture of Jesus is rendered increasingly ephemeral, making it seem as if the camera were offering a glimpse of an absent presence. This particular use of the picture of Jesus is signifi-cantly different from its use in the *Beast Within*, where the prayers were directed at the picture itself. The use of the picture of Jesus in *Women in Love* suggests the ultimate impossibility of depicting Jesus, the camera here being introduced as a device able to transcend the materiality of the picture as such and to invoke his presence irrespective of a medium.

It is also important to recall that this scene comes after Sabina's dream. The true power of Jesus, the movie suggests, lies in the fact that he is able to provide a kind of revelatory vision, one that will protect a person from danger. In so doing, the movie links up with the popular understanding, much stressed in Pentecostal circles, that Jesus is able to

offer believers what is also called the Spirit of Discernment or—in more traditional parlance—a second pair of eyes. Many movies have scenes with God-sent dreams, in which believers are made to see what is ahead of them. But also films as a whole, by offering spectators the privileged perspective of the eye of God, can be understood as offering to audiences a superior vision—or "super-vision"—that makes it possible to peep behind the surface of mere appearance, beyond the mere "physical," right into "the spiritual." Interestingly, in popular understanding the power to look into the realm that is invisible to the naked eye is likened to the medium of film. I was often told that both God and Satan would observe human beings with cameras that could look into people's deepest and darkest secrets, and that would produce films of people's lives. To invoke the actress who told me about the danger of pictures once again: "The Devil and his demons are very smart, they have pictures of all of us and see us, because they have still the power they had as angels. And they can see, they will always try to get those who are born-again and not too strong, they work on them, not on nominal Christians [i.e. people who have once been baptized but never attend church], because they belong to them already." While being observed by the Devil, as the fear of the picture looking back suggests, is to be avoided because objects of his gaze are supposed to be under his power, being observed by God is regarded as desirable. For in this way God can keep an eye on his followers and protect them in time of need.

Being observed by God is not simply a matter of divine control, but it also empowers believers by offering them a kind of super-vision, through which they are able to transcend the limitations of the eye and achieve a religious way of seeing.[26] This, of course, comes at the cost of the awareness of being always observed and totally transparent—reminiscent of Foucault's panoptical view—and hence obliged to conform to Christian discipline. At the same time, as intimated above, the mass orientation of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity makes individual believers' control by pastors virtually impossible. The point is that Pentecostal believers have more or less internalized the idea of being watched by both God and Satan. They know that divine protection against demonic attacks ultimately depends not only on being seen by God, but also by attempting to lead a Christian way of life that would please him. In this sense, the mass approach instigated by Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity heavily appeals to individual conscience and self-discipline.

26.   See Birgit Meyer, "Impossible Representations: Pentecostalism, Vision and Video Technology in Ghana," in Meyer and Moors, *Religion, Media and the Public Sphere*, 290–312, where I explore Morgan's suggestion to understand "looking" as a religious practice (Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 8).

By and large, Ghanaian—and as far as I can see Nigerian—movies, place much more emphasis on showing divine power at work than on depicting divinity *per se*. The most remarkable action kicking off the operation of divine power is the magical outcry "Jesus!" in times of utmost despair. In the language of video-films, as well as in popular Christianity, this is a sure device for divine intervention. The power attributed to this outcry is backed by the conviction, popularized in churches and popular newspapers, that demonic powers cannot stand to hear the name of Jesus, on the one hand, and that Jesus, when called in sincerity, will not let down a faithful person and chase demonic forces away instantly, on the other. The most spectacular scene I ever saw is the last scene of the Nigerian–Ghanaian movie *Time*, where a young, born-again woman who is bound to be sacrificed in a shrine in the bush, calls out Jesus' name, quietly first, and then increasingly loudly and desperately. From nowhere a string of fire appears, freeing the girl who has been tied to a pole and causing the whole shrine and its priest to perish in flames (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Still from *Time* (Miracle Films, 2000)

The fire here is a hot, violent, and cleansing force that, in Pentecostal circles, is associated with the Holy Spirit. Watching this scene and similar ones, spectators would rejoice and stress the power of God to make this spectacular event happen. Remediating popular Christian ideas about the power of the name of Jesus and the Holy Spirit fire, movies visualize these ideas in the framework of spectacle.

If the divine hardly appears as such, movies deliberately picture demonic forces, including bloodthirsty witches, erotic Mami Waters, and mean African bush spirits who involve their followers in dangerous pacts that ultimately destroy them, but only after having harmed more or less innocent people. On the one hand, the inspiration to depict such demonic forces comes right out of the practice of Pentecostal deliverance services and prayer camps, where demonic forces are expelled in a spectacular manner.[27] Common understanding has it that the Holy Spirit forces the demonic powers that possess a person—at times without him or her being aware of this—to manifest themselves. Having been present at many of such occasions, I often noted that persons, once the Holy Spirit had been invoked, started to move in a strange manner, as if they were embodying another kind of being (for example, wriggling like a snake on the ground—taken to be a sign of possession by Mami Water). I was told that this performance also had a dimension that was hidden to the naked eye and visible only to those who had the Spirit of Discernment. Only those could see, "spiritually" as it were, frogs being vomited, snakes leaving vaginas, and other unsettling manifestations. Being compelled to appear in this way is considered the first and necessary step in the procedure of exorcising an evil spirit. In other words, the power of the Holy Spirit, invoked by the Pentecostal pastor and his prayer warriors (i.e. staunch Christians assisting the pastor in the spiritual war), forces demonic spirits to reveal themselves, albeit spiritually. This, of course, enhances the power of those blessed with the Spirit of Discernment which enables them to look into "the spiritual." While the Holy Spirit forces demonic spirits to make themselves visible, it also offers the faculty of divine vision to staunch born-again Christians.

Video-films partake in the endeavor of rendering demonic forces visible. What I find particularly interesting here is the role of the image in depicting demonic forces. Whereas, by and large, it is considered ultimately impossible to capture the divine in a picture or moving image—the point rather being to mimic divine vision power with the help of the camera—demonic forces are supposed to be fought through the very act of depiction. Rendering these forces visible is regarded as a necessary step in the spiritual war against them. In contrast to the Pentecostal prayer sessions, in which the power to witness what happens in "the spiritual" is not available to everybody, movies put film technology in the service of the faculty of divine vision, the Spirit of Discernment. Making demonic forces appear and showing their capacity to

27.   Therefore filmmakers, certainly in Nigeria, visit such deliverance sessions so as to get ideas for films. A Nigerian scholar studying a Christian church told me that at his first visit to the church he was asked whether he was a filmmaker. This exemplifies the extent to which at least Nigerian pastors are aware of the fact that their practice of fighting demons is a key resource for video-films.

change shapes and perform magic, movies remediate Pentecostal modes of fighting the demonic in such a way that they become accessible to all viewers. Certainly in the beginning of the video era, this was one of the main selling points. As intimated already, the depiction of local religious traditions has been a point of considerable debate between state representatives, intellectuals, and GFIC people, on the one hand, and independent video-filmmakers, on the other. Far from striving for adequate depictions of local gods,[28] the latter from the outset decided to visualize popular imaginations of traditional religion. Following up on the diabolization of local religious traditions that characterizes popular Christianity—successfully incorporated by Pentecostalism—video-filmmakers inscribe their movies into a Christian perspective on the world. They listen well to the spectacular stories of conversion that come out of Pentecostal-Charismatic churches, and produce imaged supplements. What is at stake here is not a truthful representation of traditional religion, but the authorization, in the name of Pentecostalism, of the visualized demonic forces as truthful. As some sales women whom I interviewed in the street, and who stressed the importance of films showing that "God always wins," put it: "Films have to teach, also about *juju*. They teach us about the evil forces that try to bring us down. In this country, when you want to progress and grow, some people will not like it, so they do something against you. Films show how this all works, so you can do something about it." With this statement they not only recognized the usefulness of films to enlighten viewers about evil forces, but by implication authorized these depictions as true.

Blurred Boundaries

The closeness of the video scene and popular Pentecostal Christianity that I sought to highlight through the notion of remediation also figures in the perceived blurring of boundaries between film and everyday life. This is a central topos in the world of video-filmmaking. I heard numerous accounts, proudly told over and over again, of lead actors being addressed by viewers in town in terms of the role they played—the actor playing the snake man (Bob Smith) invoking fear and frenzy wherever he went in the heydays of the film, the recurrent film pastor (Eddie Coffee) being approached by people in the street for offering moral support, and the actress playing a witch (Edinam Atatsi) being scolded by children in her own church for being evil. Similarly, video-filmmakers recounted with much pleasure how people took as real their

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28.   Whether it is possible at all to produce adequate film images of local religious practices is a matter of debate. Elsewhere I discuss traditional representatives' assertion that such forces refuse to be photographed or filmed (Meyer, "Mediating Tradition," 291–95). See also De Witte, "Insight, Secrecy, Beasts, and Beauty."

computerproduced special effects, which took a substantial part of the budget, and were the film's key attraction points. Filmmaker Socrate Safo told me how he listened to a radio program about witchcraft, in which people phoning in referred to Ghanaian films to prove that Satan truly exists and to explain how witchcraft works. Although filmmakers tend to be bemused about ordinary people's inclination to believe what is deliberately construed as make-believe, there is more at stake than the assertion of a neat distinction between false beliefs about occult forces and true knowledge about film technology, or of the idea that the latter will eventually replace the former. Actually, as I experienced over and over again, video-filmmaking is situated betwixt and between the technologically facilitated representation of demonic forces and the fear that these representations become real—a kind of reality effect not confined to the film as a finished product, but also at work in making films.

The point is not simply that spectators would unmask the appearance of occult images as false once they were enlightened about the computer technology that made it possible to depict occult forces and magical powers. Filmmaker Michael Akwetey Kanyi recounted how an old acquaintance who had seen some of his films asserted: "you have occult powers!" How otherwise could he be able to show a person transform into someone else, imprison miniature doubles of a bewitched person in a pot in the wardrobe, or let witches flying through the air on a carpet? While from this perspective a filmmaker is attributed with occult powers, a competing perspective views filmmakers as analogous to pastors, in that they are found to have the power to look into the invisible—a capacity, as we saw, that is a prerequisite for claiming spiritual power (and in fact, power *tout court*). Rather than standing in opposition to spiritual power, technology is here called upon so as to affirm this power and make it materialize.

All in all, as in so many other settings, the explanation that extraordinary powers can be depicted thanks to computer-produced effects fails to disenchant these images and turn them into mere representations. Echoing Jacques Derrida's observation that "[t]he critique of televisual mystifications does not prevent them from operating, and from doing so in the form of the spectral noema of 'making present,'"[29] here too spectators' knowledge that video-images of demonic forces are produced with the help of audio-visual technologies and special effects does not disenchant them. Instead, spectators are inclined—certainly if they identify as Christians—to authenticate these images as revelations of the invisible powers which hold such a central place in the popular imagination and, as a consequence, in Pentecostal Christianity. Knowledge about

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29. Jacques Derrida, "'Above All, No Journalists!,"' in de Vries and Weber, *Religion and Media*, 87; see also Stolow, "Religion and/as Media," 144.

technological devices producing special effects and belief in the existence of demonic forces easily go hand-in-hand, or even appear to enforce each other. "Technology shows what is there," would be a common remark. This reality effect occurs because video-films quite successfully appeal to audiences so as to authorize video-images as authentic. In short, film technology itself is considered not to stand in contrast to, but to be fully consonant with supernatural power. This pertains not only to video-films but to the use of audiovisual technologies at large. Certainly in Pentecostal circles, as indicated above, one may notice a skilled and effective use of modern mass media, which are called upon so as to assert—and indeed produce—the pastor's charisma or even his power to perform public miracles. TV and video are called upon so as to provide evidence for the truthfulness of spiritual power.[30]

Interestingly, the mediated images of demonic forces do not only have a kind of reality effect for spectators who are outside the context of filmmaking and only see the finished product. Also on the set the visualizations of occult forces and the forces themselves were perceived to come uneasily close. The camera and other devices were viewed as technologies operating in accordance with an inbuilt logic, yet at the same time there was the belief that spirits or demonic forces are able to work on the camera, so as to stop it, or make it impossible to make certain shots. Actors, certainly if they were staunch Christians, were convinced of the necessity to depict the operations of demonic powers, and yet they felt incredibly vulnerable when doing so, and sought to protect themselves through prayers. Likewise, set designers felt insecure about setting up artificial shrines, since, according to the popular imagination, numerous spirits roam about in the sky, seeking suitable abodes to inhabit.[31] As Nina Nwabueze, a set designer from Nigeria working in Ghana put it: "Here the belief is still there that there are spirits in the sky. When you create an idol, they can get into the idol." This is reminiscent of the suspicion of the image pointed out above. Filmmaking, though defined by producing images, seems not beyond this suspicion. Paradoxically, movies are made to mimic Pentecostal vision as a power to make demonic forces appear, yet in the very process of mimicking, these powers may actually come true. Therefore, every day on set begins and ends with prayer.

Conclusion

This article has been devoted to exploring the interface of film and religion through an empirical study of the entanglement of video-films

30.   De Witte, "Altar Media's *Living Word*."
31.   Meyer, "Mediating Tradition."

and Pentecostal Christianity in Ghana. Such a study requires a mobile kind of analysis that travels along the trajectories through which Pentecostal beliefs and practices are made subject to intense remediation in video-films. While it is impossible to undertake a more detailed analysis of these trajectories in the confines of this article, at least the contours of the interface of Pentecostalism and video-films, and the dynamics of the transfer of Pentecostal mediation practices onto the screen, have become visible. For the sake of staying in the business, video-filmmakers mimic Pentecostal modes in such a way that audiences are inclined to authorize these visualizations as authentic. I have shown that in this setting, film is not confined to mere representation and the sphere of fake and illusion, but involves an unstable relationship between representing demonic forces and their actual presence. While practices of representation are understood to be separate from the actual presence of divine or demonic power, in the sense that video-films consciously create illusionary effects, audiences are by the same token addressed in such a way that they authorize these effects as technologically mediated revelations. Even though viewers often are aware of the technological processes through which special effects are made, this knowledge does not necessarily lead them to unmask video-films as unfounded illusions. And even actors, who know the ins and outs of film production, are prone to assume that initially empty technologies and props may easily be overtaken by the forces they seek to represent. Rather than merely representing the visible and invisible dimensions of reality, video-films embody reality, thereby breaking open the distinction between representation and presence, as well as that between media and immediacy or authenticity.

Video-movies' remediations of Pentecostal beliefs and practices give rise to what I propose to call a "techno-religious realism." This techno-religious realism, I would like to stress, does not merely derive from the power of films to "spontaneously appeal to his [the spectator's] sense of belief," their intrinsic capacity to "speak to us with the accents of true evidence, using the argument that 'It is so,'" but above all from combining films' capacity to appear "believable" with an appropriation of Pentecostal belief resources.[32] In video-films, the technologies of make-believe and the spectators' desire to believe in, and receive visual evidence for, the power of God easily go together. Pentecostal beliefs and technology act so much in support of each other that they become more or less indistinguishable. This being so, it is impossible to maintain a stable distinction between film and religion.

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32. Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 4.

One of the most striking features of this techno-religious realism concerns the fact that video-movies' remediations of Pentecostal views do not so much claim to erase the medium and offer immediate access to the spiritual world out there in the dark. These remediations rather produce, to invoke Bolter and Grusin again, a kind of "hypermediacy" that is generated by merging the medium of video with practices of religious mediation. Audiovisual technologies are mingled ingeniously with the Pentecostal quest for divine vision and fear of being seen by the Devil (and the concomitant awareness of the tension between the need to depict the demonic so as to fight it and the potential danger of the image). This mingling suggests not only that these technologies are inalienable parts of Pentecostal mediation, but also that they are highly suited to be vested with spiritual power. Ultimately, this mingling breaks down the distinction between techniques of representation, on the one hand, and the presence of the powers depicted, on the other. This distinction is called upon, yet at the same time perceived to be transcended in the practice of video-filmmaking. By the same token video-filmmaking implodes the distinction between media and authenticity that characterizes, according to Bolter and Grusin, a naïve stance towards transcendent immediacy that views authenticity as a privileged origin situated beyond the sphere of media and remediation. By contrast, in the world of video-movies, the authorization of film images as immediate and authentic depends on audio-visual technologies.

Obviously, this use of media for the sake of making a supposedly dark, invisible realm appear and the concomitant transcendence of the rift between religion and technology implied by it, is not specific to the Ghanaian context. The techno-religious realism outlined here should therefore not be mistaken as an indication for the failure to understand the true nature of media technology as a neutral device. Instead, the particular use of media in the service of religious vision reveals an understanding that has much in common with postmodern practice and analysis. Far from more or less truthfully reflecting a world still held to exist out there, media are able to articulate a reality that features as convincingly true. Here, immediacy is achieved not by virtue of the alleged absence of media, but instead is made to depend on them. The fact that media technologies are called upon to visualize the very religious views in the name of which these technologies are to be authorized as authentic, challenges all too simple views of religion and film, and urges us to devote far more attention to their interface than has been the case so far.

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Muslim Martyrs and Pagan Vampires: Popular Video Films and the Propagation of Religion in Northern Nigeria

Matthias Krings

Abstract

In December 2000 the government of Kano State in Muslim northern Nigeria reintroduced *shari'a* and established a new board for film and video censorship charged with the responsibility to "sanitize" the video industry and enforce the compliance of video films with moral standards of Islam. Stakeholders of the industry took up the challenge and responded by inserting religious issues into their narratives, and by adding a new feature genre focusing on conversion to Islam. This genre is characterized by violent Muslim/pagan encounters, usually set in a mythical past, culminating in the conversion of the pagans. This article will first outline northern Nigerian video culture and then go on to explore local debates about the religious legitimacy of film and video and their influence upon recent developments within the video industry. By taking a closer look at video films propagating Islam it will focus on three points: first, videomakers' negotiation between the opposing notions of religious education and secular escapism; second, inter-textual relations with other (film)cultures; and third, political subtexts to the narratives, which relate such figures as Muslim martyrs and pagan vampires to the current project of cultural and religious revitalization.

North of Nollywood

If one speaks of "Nollywood," as Nigeria's prolific video industry has been recently labelled, one usually thinks of English-language feature films set against the backdrop of today's predominantly Christian culture of southern Nigeria. Probably not even those Igbo businessmen, who in the early 1990s invented Nollywood with films like *Living in Bondage*,[1] could have envisaged

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1.   *Living in Bondage*, 1992, dir. Vic Mordi (part I), 1993, dir. Christian Onu (part II).

that in less than a decade video production would become Nigeria's fastest growing private industry. Nollywood's center of production, reproduction, and distribution is Lagos, where marketers at Idumota market sell more than 100,000 VHS cassettes and video-CDs every week, which then are distributed all over Nigeria, to many other African countries, and to the African diaspora overseas. This, however, is not even half of the story. Apart from the Igbo-dominated English-language video industry, Nigeria hosts two equally prolific video industries which produce films in local languages: Yoruba and Hausa. Kano, situated in the Muslim north of Nigeria, is the centre of the Hausa video industry. Locally also known as Kanywood, the city hosts more than 200 video production companies specializing in the production of Hausa-language feature films. The annual production figure lies somewhere around 350 video films. Unlike southern Nigerian video films, which reach private video sets and semi-public video viewing centers in the north too, Hausa videos rarely travel south. They address a Hausaphone Muslim audience, which, apart from northern Nigeria, lives in neighboring West African countries like Niger, Benin, Togo, Ghana, and the eastern Sudanic diaspora as far as Saudi Arabia.

An average Hausa video film may sell up to 40,000 copies; some, such as the box office hits *Sangaya*[2] and *Wasila*,[3] are said to have been sold well over 100,000 times. Shot on simple VHS, S-VHS, or Mini-DV cameras in only a few days and cut with the aid of digital software, the cost of production lies between 300,000 and 600,000 Naira (2,000–4,000 USD). On the market, films are sold as VHS cassettes for 250 Naira (1.60 USD) or as video-CDs for 350 Naira (2.30 USD). Apart from creating jobs for several thousand predominantly young people who otherwise would likely find it difficult to earn a living, Kanywood has also changed the landscape of the city's youth culture. Sound and editing studios, video shops, and the offices of production companies are the loci of an emerging subculture shaped around the production and consumption of video films. This subculture is marked by a comparatively free interaction between the sexes, a feature which must raise questions in a society in which the religiously sanctioned social order is based on gender segregation. Although men still dominate the production milieu, young women and girls play important roles within the industry. As actresses, playback singers (i.e. studio singers who record songs to which actors only mime), scriptwriters, costume designers, or caterers, Kano's video culture offers girls many opportunities to earn their own income and to gain (at least to a certain extent) independence from their parents. Public opinion has difficulties with this deviation from traditional female roles. Young women's independence and their interaction with men on the film sets—that is in non-public and therefore socially

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2.   *Reluctance*, 2000, dir. Aminu Mohammed Sabo.
3.   *Wasila*, 2000, dir. Ishaq Sidi Ishaq.

uncontrolled spaces—as well as their exposure in films draws young unmarried girls, especially actresses, close to *karuwai*—free women or prostitutes. The social pressure to marry is correspondingly high, and so far all starlets have finally consented to their socially expected role and married after spending a prolonged adolescence of one or two years in the video industry. Since women's careers end abruptly after marriage, the fluctuation among actresses is much higher than among actors, who act irrespective of their marital status.

Besides comedy and a still-limited number of religious films, the dominant genre of Hausa videos is the romantic melodrama. Inspired mostly by Indian films, videomakers introduced the foreign concepts of "romance" and "love marriage" and contrast them in their plots with the traditional concepts of arranged and forced marriage. Since many films explore novel gender and generation relations, they also work as modest forms of cultural critique. Perhaps the feature of Hausa videos that most distinguishes them from their southern Nigerian twins is the frequent use of song-and-dance sequences, which also is a legacy of the long-time engagement of northern Nigerian popular culture with Bollywood cinema. As Brian Larkin has shown, Indian films have been part and parcel of Hausa popular culture for well over forty years, and it has been Bollywood's difference from Western cinematic traditions which in the past accounted for its special appeal in the eyes of Muslim northern Nigerian spectators.[4] In line with Larkin's analysis, I suggest that one way of thinking about Hausa videos is to consider them as "inter-cultural transcripts" of Indian films. Here I wish to borrow the concept of "transcription" from German media theorist Ludwig Jäger and expand it by a dimension of inter-culturality.[5] All media operate by transcribing, that is, re-mediating other media or, to be more precise: media scriptures (i.e. images, texts, or music). While intra-cultural transcriptions are limited to processing difference of media alone, inter-cultural transcriptions process both difference of culture *and* of media. According to Jäger, the operation of transcription makes media scriptures readable, visible, or audible anew or in a different way for certain audiences. Hausa videos, however, not only transcribe Indian celluloid films into video films (that is, with the aid of a different technical medium that has other intrinsic properties than cinema), but also re-localize and re-address them by "translating" them into the context of a different culture.

4.   Brian Larkin, "Indian Films and Nigerian Lovers: Media and the Creation of Parallel Modernities," *Africa* 67 (1997): 406–40; Brian Larkin, "Hausa Dramas and the Rise of Video Culture in Nigeria," in *Nigerian Video Films*, ed. Jonathan Haynes (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2000), 209–41.

5.   Ludwig Jäger, "Transkriptive Verhältnisse: Zur Logik intra- und intermedialer Bezugnahmen in ästhetischen Diskursen," in *Transkription und Fassung. Bericht des Kolloquiums Mainz 2004*, ed. Gabriele Buschmeier, Ulrich Konrad and Albrecht Riethmüller (Mainz: Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, in press).

Prior to any kind of remediation, local audiences had acquired a remarkable competence in decoding Indian films—despite the barrier of language and culture. Still, Indian films remained only partially "readable," and moreover, access to them (at least until public television stations began to air them twice a week in the late 1970s) was limited to certain audiences. This changed when in the late 1980s a number of young authors began to invent what later on was labelled Kano market literature.[6] These novels were the first local inter-cultural transcripts of Indian films that processed both difference of culture and of media, and as such re-mediated Indian films (in a twofold way) for a local audience. In the early 1990s, many of these authors turned to producing, directing, or scriptwriting within the emerging Hausa video industry, and today several production companies are even specializing in producing inter-cultural remakes of Indian films.

Both forms of remediation—novels and video films—have stirred up ongoing critical debates which show great concern for both of the intertwined aspects of inter-cultural transcriptions: that is, medium and content. Authors and filmmakers have been accused of "destroying" Hausa culture and of spoiling their audiences with foreign lifestyles. While this kind of argument is largely based on a critique of media texts, other arguments are directed against the intrinsic properties of small media, which foster privatized and informal production, distribution, and consumption, and therefore are more difficult to control than big media, such as television, radio, and cinema. In order to contextualize the critical debates surrounding Hausa videos, which eventually led to local censorship and—as I will demonstrate below—subsequently to the foregrounding of religious themes in local video film production, I first of all would like to outline the discursive cultural framework, marked by a recent wave of religious revitalization.

Shari'a, Politics and Cultural Reform

Hand-in-hand with the political transformation from military rule to civilian leadership in 1999 that eventually led to Nigeria's fourth republic went a popular campaign for the reconstitution of *shari'a* criminal law in the northern states of the Nigerian federation. Until then, similar attempts during Nigeria's post-colonial history had always failed because of Nigeria's constitution, which mandates a united secular system of higher juridical authority for the whole of the federation. As in the past, these calls for a reconstitution of the pre-colonial Islamic legal system were formulated as calls for cultural self-determination, and in that sense as a last act of decolonization. The latest, and this time successful, though still unconstitutional,

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6.   See Yusuf M. Adamu, "Between the Word and the Screen. A Historical Perspective on the Hausa Literary Movement and the Home Video Invasion," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 15 (2002): 203–13.

campaign for a legal reform in Islamic terms was triggered by Governor Ahmed Sani of Zamfara State who, in December 1999, kept one of his electoral campaign promises by having *shari'a* criminal law fixed in written form and as such implemented, with the massive approval of his electorate.[7] Until then Islamic law was classified as customary law and could only be applied by local area courts in civil cases, while the application of criminal law modelled after British—and therefore Christian—legal codes was limited to institutions of higher jurisdiction. The Islamic reform of the legal system was intended to serve as a basis for an all-embracing social and cultural reform in religious terms. Thus, under the new law, prostitution and consumption of alcohol are sentenced with draconian punishments. Witchcraft, which carries "pagan" connotations, and the "worship or invocation of any subject other than Allah (S.W.T.)" are punishable by death.[8] Other regulations relate to the conduct of women and men in the public sphere. Thus, a gender segregated public transport system was introduced, as well as a new religious dress code which stipulates that women cover their hair.

The popularity of the reconstitution of *shari'a* is grounded in the belief that it provides a way out of the social and economic crisis into which corrupt military regimes had plunged the country after decades of plundering and mismanagement. This belief was widely shared among the masses. In sharp contrast to the secular jurisdiction, the divine law and its worldly representatives were thought incorruptible, which fostered the hope of a sustainable way of curbing venality and criminality. Especially corrupt elites should be prevented from living and acting above the law. Also many people hoped for Allah's blessing as a consequence of the pious reformation and hoped thereby to gain prosperity.[9] Closely following the example of Zamfara State, twelve northern states reintroduced *shari'a* by 2002. Many governors were at first critical of popular calls for *shari'a* implementation, knowing that such a step was unconstitutional and therefore likely to raise sanctions from the federal government led by Yoruba Christian Olusegun Obasanjo. In Kano, Governor Rabi'u Musa Kwankwasso had to give up his initial refusal after a number of public protest rallies in front of the governor's house, and finally implemented *shari'a* with the beginning of Ramadan in December 2000.[10] Soon, vigilante-like groups of young men from within the city's neighborhoods formed a religious police (*hisbah*), which went out to observe the strict adherence to the *shari'a*-associated moral codes, and,

7.   Daniel C. Bach, "Application et implications de la Charia: Fin de partie au Nigeria, " *Pouvoirs* 104 (2003): 121–33, at 124.

8.   Ruud Peters, *Islamic Criminal Law in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2003), 41.

9.   Murray Last, "La Charia dans le Nord-Nigeria," *Politique Africaine* 79 (2000): 141–52.

10.   Ibid., 147.

where necessary, enforced them with violence.[11] Full of religious enthusi-asm, *hisbah*-groups destroyed beer parlors and "hotels," damaged musi-cians' technical equipment and instruments, fought violently with followers of the local cult of spirit possession (*bori*), and successfully prevented *galas* of video film stars (public playback performances during which actors and actresses re-enact song-and-dance sequences from Hausa videos on stage, and which before used to fill whole soccer stadiums).[12]

Critical Debates

Through their cultural hybridity, Hausa video films deviate from the current discourse of religious and cultural "purity," which advocates cultural closure and the exclusion of the other (that is, all things considered un-Islamic, like Western dress and lifestyle). Local critique focuses on the representation of the female body and gender relationships, which (at least partially) contra-dict Islamic body politics. Even video film fans complain about their stars' behavior on- and off-screen:

> For the sake of Allah, actors, you should remember Allah! Remember the religion of Islam! Especially girls should stop revealing their bodies in films. They should remember that the female body should be covered completely, but instead they dress in blouses and trousers, and smooth out their hair as if they were Europeans—such attire does not fit into the Muslim tradition. So you should stop it, because your behavior disturbs us since you too are Muslims as we are. Be cautious in filmmaking in order to prevent going against God Almighty.[13]

The current debate is governed by cleansing metaphors, which fit well into the paradigm of religious and cultural "purity" associated with the establishing of the *shari'a*. Censorship is considered as "sanitization" of the local video culture, aiming at something which could be termed an "Islamic hygiene." Video dramas are said to pollute Hausa culture and to poison their consumers, who are conceptualized as passive recipients and, as such, are considered easy prey to the manipulative capacity of video images. A similar debate about the portrayal of violence, sex, and ritualism in video films exists on the national level, where the social and cultural effects of such scenes on Nigerian society and Nigeria's image abroad are discussed. In 2002 the National Film and Video Censors Board in Abuja, under the leadership of born-again Christian Rosaline Odeh, launched a campaign

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11.   Tahir Haliru Gwarzo, "Activities of Islamic Civic Associations in Northwest of Nigeria: With Particular Reference to Kano State," *Afrika Spectrum* 38 (2003): 289–318, at 305–7.

12.   Jean-Christophe Servant, "'Shariahphrenia' Reigns in Northern Nigeria," *World Press*, November 18, 2002, http://www.worldpress.org/article_model.cfm ?article_id=928&dont=yes (accessed October 10, 2005).

13.   Firdausi Musa Bamalli, Zainab Muhammad, and Hannatu Aliyu Namaibin-diga, "Letter to the Editor," *Fim* 9 (2000): 4, my translation.

against such contents.[14] Since Hausa productions are much more cautious in this respect, however, they do not really play a role in the national censorship debate, which is concerned first and foremost with productions from the south.

In the local northern debate, radically minded members of the religious establishment called for a total ban of video production, while liberal scholars advocated an Islamic re-orientation through censorship. These liberal-minded scholars consider video technology as a neutral tool, whose negative or positive influence upon the consumer solely depends on content. Malam Yahaya Faruk Ce'di, an Islamic scholar who takes part in the local debate through public sermons, pointed out the following to me:

> We don't think that the video drama is bad generally. It can be used to educate and to teach moral lessons, but only if it is employed in such a way that it doesn't destroy our religion and culture. But the way it is used by video makers right now is bad. Therefore, the harm of video dramas to our society is currently higher than their potential benefit.[15]

By pointing out traditions of prophet Mohammed's life (the *hadith*) and certain *sura* of the Qur'an, where dramatic forms are employed for didactic purposes, Malam Ce'di and other scholars argue that drama (and by extension video drama) can be considered as a legitimate educative tool from an Islamic point of view. Therefore, a video film can be considered legitimate if its overall purpose is an educative one. In contrast, entertainment and escapism, or an *art pour l'art* attitude, are considered as deviations from Islamic traditions.

This differentiation into legitimate and illegitimate films has an antecedent in a much older media discourse dating back to early northern Nigerian cinema experiences. Through Brian Larkin's analysis of northern Nigerian media history, we know that the introduction of commercial cinema houses to Kano in the 1930s was accompanied by public debates about their religious legitimacy.[16] Those who went to the pictures seven times became *shaitan's* prey—as the saying went. What interests me here is that it was the cinematic *dispositiv*, the cinema as built and social space, which raised public doubts, rather than the audio-visual medium of film as such. Cinema houses were built in the strangers' quarters, associated with all sorts of vices, and situated outside the old walled city of Kano—that is, outside of Hausa moral space. Unlike private commercial cinema, which became associated with things un-Islamic, foreign, and amoral, mobile film

14.   See press clippings in National Film and Video Censors Board, ed., *Film and Video Directory in Nigeria* (Abuja: NFVCB, 2002), 57–61.

15.   Interview with Yahaya Faruk Ce'di, Kano, April 15, 2003, my translation.

16.   Brian Larkin, "From Majigi to Hausa Video Films: Cinema and Society in Northern Nigeria," in *Hausa Home Videos: Technology, Economy and Society*, ed. Abdalla Uba Adamu, Yusuf M. Adamu and Umar Faruk Jibril (Kano: Centre for Hausa Cultural Studies and Adamu Joji Publishers, 2004), 46–53.

shows of the Colonial Film Unit were considered morally sanctioned pastimes. These screenings took place within the walled city, usually in front of the Emir's palace and in the presence of the Emir and other honorable members of local society. While commercial cinema houses came to stand for entertainment and escapism, the Mobile Cinema stood for information and education. This situation fostered a moral taxonomy of media legitimacy built on a hierarchy of media content and space of media consumption that was carried over well into post-colonial times. With the advent of the "small medium" video and the rise of the local video industry in the early 1990s, this taxonomy broke down. Although video films are screened in cinema houses too, they are largely consumed within the sphere of private households, allowing housewives and children who had been excluded from the public sphere of cinema houses access to moving images. This also holds true for the consumption of TV broadcasting, introduced to northern Nigeria in the 1960s. But unlike state-controlled TV broadcasts, the content of video films, which are produced by private production companies, is much more difficult to control.

To justify the moral legitimacy of their video films, filmmakers recast their work in religious terms as admonition (*fa'dakarwa*) or preaching (*wa'azi*). According to this new terminology, the credits of video films no longer list actors under the rubric of "players" but under that of "admonition deliverers." Opening credits usually start with a line that reads, "In the name of Allah," thus legitimizing a video film as sanctioned by divinity. In a similar manner all video films end with a text line reading, "Thanks be to Allah the Merciful and Almighty." Unlike the Christian Ghanaian filmmakers to whom Birgit Meyer spoke,[17] however, filmmakers in Muslim northern Nigeria do not claim divine inspiration through visions and dreams. Within the current context of fundamentalist Islam the reformulation of filmmaking as revelation and prophecy which can be observed in Christian Ghana and southern Nigeria would be considered as heresy. Through their invocation of Allah's name, filmmakers rather seek divine protection as every faithful Muslim should do before commencing any kind of work. Apart from that, these invocations can be interpreted as tactics to counter the clergy's strategy of debasing video films as religiously illegitimate.

Showstoppers and Censorship

That the average video film is still considered undesirable even in the eyes of liberal Muslim scholars can be accounted for by a reconsideration of local film style, where the narrative frame is interrupted by sequences which,

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17.   Birgit Meyer, "Impossible Representations: Pentecostalism, Vision and Video Technology in Ghana," *Institut für Ethnologie und Afrikastudien, Universität Mainz, Working Papers* 25 (2003), http://www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de/workingpapers/ Meyer.pdf (accessed October 10, 2005).

following Martin Rubin, I would like to call "showstoppers."[18] The narrative frame is the place for didacticism and moral messages. Adopting the classical Hollywood style, Hausa filmmakers employ continuity editing, the shot-countershot technique, and other stylistic devices to absorb the spectator into the narrative, to achieve what film theoreticians call "suture": the merging of the viewing subject's gaze with a screen character's gaze that stands in for the camera gaze and which at the same time fosters the cinematic illusion and the identification with screen characters. The narrative flow, however, is interrupted by spectacular showstopper sequences which address the viewer in a quite different way and which are rooted in a cinematographic tradition that film historian Tom Gunning calls the "cinema of attractions."[19] These sequences, which come along either as song-and-dance or choreographed fighting routines, open up a non-narrative space of spectacle and attraction, constructed in an awareness of the viewer's gaze and conferring on him the pleasures of looking and listening. By arguing that these sequences have an especially negative influence on video viewers, local critics assume that the attraction of spectacle distracts viewers from paying attention to any moral lesson that the narrative frame may contain.

Following the official introduction of *shari'a* to Kano state in December 2000, filmmakers faced a difficult and most uncertain situation. Until the implementation of a new censorship law and the subsequent establishment of the Kano State Censorship Board in March 2001, video production and distribution were banned for four months. When the board came up with its guidelines, it became clear that mixed gender song-and-dance sequences in particular would be closely scrutinized by the censors. In early 2003, rumor had it that such sequences would be proscribed completely. Although these sequences are produced as interruptions of the narrative and serve to visualize a character's dreams and desires, local critics maintain that women and men dancing together and singing about their love and longing for one another are inappropriate within Hausa culture and everyday life. Another argument is that, since Bollywood's song-and-dance routines are rooted in Hindu religious worship, Hausa filmmakers, who "copy" these routines, advocate idolatry. The Executive Secretary of the censorship board explained the following to me:

> The government did not ban songs. You can sing. Even in Hausa culture there is singing and dancing, but moderately. What the government did say is: you cannot have male and female dancing of this kind of dancing that is being shown in our movies. That kind of dancing where you see a

18.   Martin Rubin, *Showstoppers: Busby Berkeley and the Tradition of Spectacle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

19.   Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrativ*e, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: British Film Institute, 1990), 56–62.

> lady half naked dancing with her breasts shaking—it's not allowed… So the government said no male and female dancing of such kind of useless dancing I am talking about. If you do that in your film, we will ask you to remove that.[20]

In spite of what this statement may imply, however, a rigid censorship of song-and-dance sequences has not been enforced up to the present. According to some filmmakers with whom I spoke in 2003, videos which do not contain song-and-dance sequences are likely to perform badly at the box office. Since 2004 and 2005 still saw a huge number of video films on display with lots of mixed gender singing and dancing, it seems as if the initially announced rigid censorship on Islamic grounds has given way to a more or less flexible process of negotiation between censors and filmmakers.[21]

However, at the particular moment of the board's implementation, film-makers faced the difficult problem of negotiating between intentions and counter-intentions. What they felt were necessary ingredients to sell their films—that is, a melodramatic plot with song-and-dance routines—censors deemed offensive to the moral standards of Islam. In search for new story-lines and in accordance with the overall project of religious revitalization, some filmmakers began to foreground religious issues and to propagate Islam.

Propagating Religion

Video films should, in order to count as legitimate (*halak*) before the Islamic law, represent the culture and religious constitution of the Muslim north, and as such propagate the Islamic reform within and outside north-ern Nigeria. Such calls do not only come from conservative critics but also from video film fans, who express their views in reader's letters of Hausa-language video film magazines:

> I am writing this letter to you, in order to support one Umar Idriss Hassan, who said (in *Fim*, 6 June 2000), that it is time to make films about the religious knowledge of Islam. That is absolutely right. One only has to think of films from Lagos, like *Karashika*, *Gozilla* and *Blood Money*. These films are produced by Christians, and they are heavily demonstrat-ing the meaning of their religion. For example, you can see witches or spirits in these films, who seem to be invincible, but as soon as one reads the Bible to them, you can see, that they dissolve or disappear. That is why I am calling at [northern] filmmakers…to show their love for Islam and to make films that demonstrate the wonderful power of the Qur'an.[22]

20.   Abdulkadir A. Kurawa, Executive Secretary, Kano State Censorship Board, Kano, February 4, 2003, interview conducted in English.

21.   Abdalla Uba Adamu, "Enter the Dragon: Shari'a, Popular Culture and Film Censorship in Northern Nigeria" (lecture, University of Cologne, November 15, 2004).

22.   Adamu Shu'aibu Tanko, "Letter to the editor," *Fim* 9 (2000): 10–11, my translation.

As a method, the argument went, propagating religion within popular video films should not be left to the southern Nigerian video industry, where a number of Christian producers and even pastors and evangelists-cum-producers are active.[23] Northern filmmakers have responded to such calls and have addressed religious issues in quite a number of their films. For didactical purposes, filmmakers employ a strategy of clear-cut differences similar to productions from the south. Thus, "paganism" and pagan magic—or at least Muslim imaginations of them—serve as negative opposition to the true religion of Islam and Muslim comportment. Like their southern Christian counterparts, Hausa filmmakers address the fears local societies have of traditional or neo-traditional magical practices, which are pejoratively labelled "pagan" both in southern Christian and northern Muslim religious discourse. While southern Nigerian video films employ Christianity as the *ultima ratio* to fight "paganism," northern films employ Islam.

Although Hausa videos share a great deal with their southern equivalents, and some may even be called transcripts of southern video films, northern filmmakers were reluctant to support my suggestion of commonalities between the regional video cultures of Nigeria. Against the overall discursive backdrop of cultural exclusion and critical debates about the cultural authenticity of Hausa videos, it is only too comprehensible that my interlocutors had to argue in favor of sharp differences between their own productions and those of their southern colleagues. The boundaries of the regional video industries, however, are not knit so tightly as to prevent the movement of ideas, technological knowledge (i.e. special effects), and even personnel. Northern stars have acted in a number of southern English-language productions, for example in *Holy Law—Sharia*[24] and *Amina*.[25] And although an exchange of actors in the opposite direction has not yet taken place, there are at least a number of producers and directors of southern Christian origin who are settled in the north and produce Hausa-language video films (for example, Prince Oskar Baker, Izu Ojukwu, Ikye Moore). Others, like director Sani Mu'azu and cameraman Umar Gotip, of northern origin, have worked within the southern video industry, and have recently returned to the north and brought back their knowledge and experience.

Love/Magic

Within the genre of the melodramatic love story, under which the majority of Hausa videos can be subsumed, love's potentially anti-social force, its selfish dark side, is sometimes coupled with the equally undesirable forces

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23.   See Meyer, "Impossible Representations," who describes this for Ghana; and for Nigeria, Obododimma Oha, "The Rhetoric of Nigerian Christian Videos: The War Paradigm of 'The Great Mistake,'" in Haynes, *Nigerian Video Films*, 192–99.
24.   *Holy Law—Sharia*, 2001, dir. Ejike Asiegbu.
25.   *Amina*, 1999, dir. Ndubuisi Okoh.

of witchcraft and "pagan" magic. In such films, the use of witchcraft and magic is associated with the female sphere. In a typical love triangle, a good and pious female protagonist willing to accept her fate meets an evil female antagonist, who does not hesitate to employ pagan magic to reach her own selfish ends, namely, to gain both the hero's love and wealth. At first, the evil antagonist is successful, usually with the aid of a *boka*, a traditional magician. But finally, at the end of the narrative, when the proper moral order has to be reinstated, the amoral occult forces whose help the antagonist employed turn against her. If she does not die, she will be robbed of her senses or at least of her wealth. The video film *Tsumagiya*,[26] for example, develops such a scene as remediation of Michael Jackson's video clip *Thriller*.[27]

Stills from Tsumagiya:
Spirit as zombie and dance of the spirits à la Michael Jackson's *Thriller*

26.   *Cane*, 2001, dir. Sani Musa.
27.   *Thriller*, 1983, dir. John Landis.

This sequence transcribes Michael Jackson's zombies against the background of the pre-Islamic belief system of the Hausa in which spiritual forces are of crucial importance. Because the female antagonist has angered the spirits, who through the mediation of a *boka* initially had helped her, the spirits finally turn against her. She subsequently goes mad, and the evil spell over the female protagonist is broken.

Within these misogynistic narratives, men are characterized as double victims—victims of female desire and pagan magic. Magical practices and occult forces associated with them are depicted as malign and amoral. Although these forces have power, their power is only limited. Against an upright Muslim faith (*imani*) and the supreme power of Allah, occult forces cannot gain the upper hand for long. Depending on the script, filmmakers use different strategies to demonstrate the superiority of Islam and the inferiority of the belief in pagan spirits or other occult powers. If a plot needs a magician, the cast usually includes one out of a couple of well-known comedians who play the role of the magician in comedy fashion as a silly face-puller. Through this casting, the figure of the magician and the forces associated with it become objects of ridicule. Some plots have an Islamic scholar, or *malam*, who fights against the power of the occult. Such plots end with a showdown between the *malam* and the evil woman who is associated with the occult. *Jarirai 99*[28] tells the story of a married woman who makes a pact with an occult power to overcome her barrenness. To give birth herself she has to snatch ninety-nine unborn babies from pregnant women's wombs and deliver these to the occult power. While she is going about her dreadful work, facilitated by an "evil gaze" (made visible by beams of light shooting from her eyes to the wombs of her victims), her own pregnancy grows and the one hundredth child shall be her own. That, however, never happens, since after the snatching of the ninety-eighth child a *malam* comes to her house, detects her sinister machinations, and breaks her power through prayers and recitations of the Qur'an.

To render the power of occult forces or "the wonderful power of the Qur'an" (see above) visible, filmmakers draw upon the "iconography of electricity." I am borrowing this term from Heike Behrend, who argues that popular African discourse draws a similarity between electrical power and power as an ubiquitous and invisible force as conceptualized in an African cosmology of power.[29] Like electricity, this power, which flows through invisible channels, can be manipulated by the knowledgeable; it can be activated and deactivated and likewise used to heal or harm. Referring to Robert Brain,[30] Behrend illustrates her argument about the reformulation of

28.   *99 Babies*, 2004, dir. Aminu Bizi.
29.   Heike Behrend, "'Call and Kill': Zur Verzauberung und Entzauberung westlicher technischer Medien in Afrika," in *Signale der Störung*, ed. Albert Kümmel and Erhard Schüttpelz (Munich: Fink, 2003), 287–300.
30.   Robert Brain, "Child-Witches," in *Witchcraft, Confessions and Accusations*,

this cosmology of power in the light of electricity with the story of Cameroonian child witches, who were taken by their parents to the electrified colonial capital with the intention of having their evil power neutralized by the power of electricity. Against the backdrop of this electrical cosmology, it may come as no surprise that filmmakers use computer-generated flashes, lightning, or missiles of light to make the otherwise invisible power of witches, sorcerers, and transcendental beings visible.

Stills from *Dan Adam Butulu*, part 2: The visibility of occult forces—
Billy shoots at the malam with missiles of electric light

Although still rare in Hausa videos, such computer-generated special effects are well-established features of the technically more advanced video production of southern Nigeria. In fact, the first Hausa-language video film which employed this kind of special effects was *Dan Adam Butulu*,[31] which was produced by Ikye Moore, a Kano-based Igbo businessman. *Dan Adam Butulu* tells the story of Hamza, who becomes the victim of Billy. After their marriage Billy casts a spell on Hamza and he turns into a *mijin hajiya*, a

ed. Mary Douglas (London: Taylor & Francis, 1970), 161–79.
    31.   *Man—the Ingrate*, 1999/2000, dir. Abdulkareem Mohammed (part I), Izu Ojukwu (part II).

pitiful husband who has to live by the rules of his wife. Only a *malam* consulted by Hamza's relatives is able to break the spell. During the showdown between Billy and the *malam,* Billy shoots at the scholar with electric light missiles coming out of her hands. The manifestation of the occult powers in Billy's body is made visible with morphing effects. In a close-up, her face turns into that of a cat and into a painted pagan grimace. Still, the occult powers cannot harm the *malam* since his recitation of Qur'an verses makes him invincible, a fact which is expressed by small bombs of electric light dissolving on the surface of his body.

Video narratives like these depict Muslim women who break away from their Islamic faith by seeking the aid of occult forces that are associated with the sphere of "paganism." Occult powers lie in wait as temptations, and only a strong Islamic faith helps to resist these compliant powers which may serve as shortcuts to the fulfilment of female desires. In sharp contrast to the figure of the evil woman, the figure of the devout and good woman accepts divine predestination (*kaddara*). The propagation of devoutness fits well into the current discourse of religious revitalization. In this manner, filmmakers produce morally acceptable movies, which both earn them a living and may play a role in the inner mission of the Muslim community as part of the overall religious reform.

Video Conversions

Some filmmakers have begun to pronounce the virtues of Islam in a whole new genre which, for want of a better term, I call the "conversion" genre. With this coinage I do not wish to denote the social or religious function of these films, but their generic plots. Video films constituting this genre contain storylines of Muslim heroes who conquer pagan tribes and subsequently convert them to Islam. By telling stories about Muslim superiority, films of this genre serve to assert the cultural and religious self of their Muslim audiences rather than to proselytize so-called animists. The narratives of the genre, like those of the melodramas discussed above, aim at a mission internal to the Muslim community. The new genre, however, shifts the fears of the sphere of "paganism" from within to outside the Muslim community by projecting them upon a threat emanating from non-Muslim societies. Usually these films are set in a pre-colonial, mythical past. In this way filmmakers on the one hand relate to the long history of Islamic conversion in Hausaland, and on the other hand avoid censorship. Against the backdrop of recent violent *shari'a*-related conflicts between Muslims and Christians or so-called animists in the Nigerian middle belt region, films set in the present would likely have been forbidden by both local and national censors.

An important source of inspiration for the new genre may have been a much older genre of so-called "epic films," a well-established genre in

southern Nigerian video taxonomy.[32] Also set in the pre-colonial past, these films treat the overthrow of traditional African religions by Christianity. In northern Nigeria, the first film of the conversion genre which appeared on the market was *Shaheed*,[33] although the foundations of the genre seem to have been laid by director and scriptwriter Dan Azumi Baba who had begun to shoot his film *Judah!*[34] as early as 2001. Unlike *Judah!*, which is built around a story of a faithful Muslim falling in love with the pagan princess Judah, other, more puritanically oriented films try to avoid the romantic pit-falls of the standard Hausa video. *Shaheed* is a case in point. Directed by well-known director and actor Zikiflu Mohammed, *Shaheed* was made by a production company closely associated with a religious brotherhood known as "Muslim Brothers." Sheik Ibrahim Al-Zakzaky, leader of this so-called *shi'ite* brotherhood, openly advocates the use of video films to propagate the religious stance of his sectarian movement, which has for a long time pursued the transformation of Nigeria into an orthodox theocracy modelled after the Islamic Republic of Iran. I suspect that it is his knowledge about the Iranian revolution that makes him advocate video films as tools of religious propaganda.[35] Through his personal contacts with Iran, Al-Zakzaky must be well aware of the revolutionary capacity of small media such as audio and video cassettes.[36]

Shaheed is heavily influenced by *shi'ite* religious doctrine. It idealizes the figure of the martyr who dies for the cause of his religion during his efforts to proselytize. Islam is portrayed as a just and "egalitarian" religion. The fearless martyr sacrifices himself in order to free the unbelievers from their submission to cruel, blood-thirsty idols and unjust kings and to lead them on the path of a just and merciful God. His selfless sacrifice is rewarded by his immediate ascendance into paradise and, since it serves as proof of the superiority of his faith, it causes a young pagan warrior to convert. The first convert succeeds the martyr and successfully proselytizes his fellow tribesmen.

As in *Shaheed*, though stripped of the notion of martyrdom, a pagan convert is also the lead character of the 2003 video film *Qarni*.[37] In this most extravagant story, director Hafizu Bello, who is a well-known figure in Kanywood, couples paganism with vampirism. Unlike *Shaheed,* the story of

32. Matthias Gruber, "Cultural Epics. Die Konstruktion von Geschichte in nigerianischen Videospielfilmen" (master's thesis, University of Frankfurt, 2004).

33. *The Martyr*, 2002/2003, dir. Zikiflu Mohammed.

34. *Judah!*, 2003, dir. Dan Azumi Baba.

35. See, for example, the script of his speech at the launching party of the first video film produced by members of the Muslim Brothers, in *Fim* 20 (2001): 48–49 and *Fim* 21 (2001): 52–53.

36. Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

37. *The Century*, 2003, dir. Hafizu Bello.

Qarni is set in the present. Prior to the hero's conversion from paganism to Islam he has to be cured of vampirism. *Qarni* shows a Muslim city plagued by a mysterious vampire who kills virgins by sucking their blood at full moon. The police apprehend him and bring him to a hospital where he is connected to a machine that is able to make his memory visible. A flash-back serves to tell the poor vampire's biography: he comes from a pagan tribe whose chief priest intended to kill him as a young boy because an oracle foresaw him as the bringer of a new religion in the future. He escapes and grows up at the hands of a witch, who feeds him with human inner-organs, which is the cause of his later vampirism. A surgery transforms the vampire into a human being and his conversion to Islam soon follows. The convert returns as a missionary to his pagan tribesmen, where he has to overcome fierce opposition before accomplishing his task.

Stills from *Qarni*: The pagan as vampire and as convert proselytizing his fellow tribesmen

The narratives portray Muslims as Salvationists, who free pitiful pagans from their religious ignorance by bringing true religion and civilization. The

difference between Allah, a just and merciful god, and pagan idols, who demand human sacrifices even among those who believe in them, couldn't be greater. Conversion to Islam does not only have a civilizing effect but runs much deeper: conversion stands for becoming human. The video film *Qarni* neatly expresses this equation through the transformation of a pagan vampire into a Muslim human being. The analogy of vampirism and paganism turns paganism into a dangerous but still curable illness. Islam is the antibiotic against it.

Negotiating between Entertainment and Education

In addressing religious issues, video filmmakers intend both to appease the religious establishment and to make their contribution to the current process of religious revitalization. Asked to evaluate the educational value of the new genre against that of the romantic melodrama, actor Kabiru Maikaba, who appears as pagan king in several films, reports in an interview with the Hausa-language magazine *Bidiyo*: "I think that these films help the government [of Kano State] in her endeavor to strengthen the *shari'a*, since the people may learn what the *shari'a* is all about and how it is put to work."[38] In order to be sold and reach their audience, however, video films of the conversion genre cannot break totally with the stylistic conventions of the average Hausa video. How then, do filmmakers negotiate between their new sense of mission and their economic interests, between education and entertainment?

In order to guide their audience, filmmakers draw upon stereotypical images of the savage pagan and the pious Muslim, well-established through older genres of popular culture such as folklore, stage drama, TV series, and the ritual drama of spirit possession.[39] The transcription into the new medium, video, remediates these stereotypes and renders them meaningful under the terms of the current video culture. Paganism serves as an antithesis to Islam. Beyond the narrative, filmmakers express this opposition on several cinematic levels. In accordance with Hausa color symbolism, where white stands for the positive, black for the negative and red for danger and power,[40] Muslims wear white garments, and pagans are dressed in black or dark colours (that is, if they are not depicted half-naked). *Qarni* clothes the pagan chief priest and the main antagonist of the Muslim hero in red. The set design is also guided by color symbolism: pagans are preferably

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38. *Bidiyo* 8 (2003): 40, my translation.

39. See Esther Morgenthal, "Sprachliche und kulturelle Kontaktphänomene im *bori*-Kult der Hausa: das Beispiel der Gwari Geister" (master's thesis, University of Hamburg, 2005); Graham Furniss, *Poetry, Prose and Popular Culture in Hausa* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1996), 94.

40. Pauline Ryan, "Color Symbolism in Hausa Literature," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 32 (1976): 141–60.

depicted at night while Muslims congregate in daylight. While the place of the civilized Muslims is the city or the village, the unbelievers are settled in the wilderness, preferably on rocky hill tops—that is, in an environment which served as a refuge for non-Muslim groups following Dan Fodio's *jihad* in the nineteenth century and which still carries pagan connotations. Language, too, is used to mark differences: Muslims speak proper Hausa, while pagans either speak an artificial language which has to be subtitled in Hausa (as in *Qarni*) or revert to a corrupt form of Hausa known as *gwaranci*.

Qarni and *Shaheed*, as well as other video films of this genre, still contain showstoppers, albeit in a modified form. *Shaheed* has three song-and-dance routines showing women and men dressed in proper white Muslim garments chanting praises of the martyr and begging Allah to have mercy on his behalf. The religious legitimacy of these sequences is stressed by the use of the *bandir* drum which is associated with *sufi* Islam and therefore carries religious connotations. While song and dance is Islamized in *Shaheed*, *Qarni* does quite the opposite: it portrays a pagan ritual in a showstopper sequence and thus confines song and dance to the sphere of the non-Muslims. Another new and Islamized form of the showstopper is modelled after the form of religious sermons and resonates with the reformulation of filmmaking as "preaching." These showstoppers interrupt the narrative flow with lengthy didactical monologues (which is a stylistic device also common to Indian cinema). *Shaheed* shows the Muslim community in a debate about the legitimacy of *jihad* against the pagans. In a monologue of five minutes, the Imam addresses an intra- and extra-filmic audience at the same time, and thus educates the viewer about the Islamic tradition of *jihad* by drawing a comparison between the video narrative and Prophet Mohammed's battle against the idolatrous Meccans.

Obviously filmmakers do pay their dues to the current discourse of religious and cultural exclusion. Nevertheless, they still engage in playful intertextual relations with Eastern and Western mainstream cinema. Figures and stylistic forms are borrowed, reworked, and localized within the videos. Pagans fight with karate kicks—a reminder of Hong-Kong cinema's martial arts genre. *Qarni's* vampire is a reminiscence of Western Dracula films in the tradition of Friedrich Murnau's 1922 classic *Nosferatu,* now transcribed into an African context and reworked against the backdrop of local discourses about occult economies. A sequence in *Shaheed* where the young pagan warrior and future convert fights against a bush monster is another case in point. This sequence has subjective shots of the monster's gaze that are shot in negative colors. The subplot of the sequence, as well as the stylistic device of using negative colors for the monster's gaze, are influenced by Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Predator*,[41] which has already been remade in northern Nigeria as *Tarzomar Shahada* (2002).[42]

41. *Predator*, 1987, dir. John McTiernan.
42. *Deadly Struggle*, 2002, dir. Suleiman Sa'eed.

Conclusion: Political Subtexts

I would like to come back to the narratives of conversion and conclude by pointing to the political subtext of this genre. The greater part of the country's political history since independence has been determined by a political elite of either elected presidents or military dictators who came from the Muslim north. This situation has changed since 1999, when a southern Nigerian Christian was elected as president of the fourth republic. The northern movement for a reintroduction of *shari'a*, which gained ground following the 1999 elections, has to be understood also as reaction to widespread fears of a loss of northern religious and cultural identity as a consequence of the new southern Christian political hegemony.[43] In the eyes of many northern Nigerian Muslims, Christian southern Nigeria is seen as an agent of the undesirable forces of Westernization. The reintroduction of *shari'a*, understood not only as criminal law but as divine yardstick for a good Muslim life, seemed to be the appropriate step to counter and exclude undesirable cultural influences from outside and to reorganize the Muslim community from within. Against the backdrop of this discourse of closure and revitalization, I suggest reading the Muslim fight against paganism as portrayed in the conversion videos not only as a fight against traditional Hausa culture, but also as a fight against the threat of Westernization (or even globalization); on the local political stage, southern Nigeria is regarded as a gateway for these encroaching Western forces. This reading may seem to be over the edge at first glance. Taking into consideration, however, that in colloquial Hausa, Christian southern Nigerians (especially Igbo) are still called *arna*, that is, "pagans," this reading may gain some plausibility. Although northern Nigerian Muslims do know that most southern Nigerians belong to the Christian faith, there is the common belief that under the surface of the southern Christian confession lurks a barely concealed paganism. Southern Nigerian video films, whose plots are full of false prophets and bloody ritual killings, confirm this belief in the eyes of a northern audience. As a friend of mine told me: "Our grandparents used to tell us for a long time—but now we can even see it for ourselves in their video films: these people are cannibals!"

The video films I have been discussing address both the fears of a threat to the Muslim community emanating from within, from their own pre-Islamic traditions which are massively attacked within the current fundamentalist discourse, as well as the fears of a threat to cultural and religious identity coming from outside. Censorship prevents filmmakers from directly

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43. Ali Mazrui, "Shariacracy and Federal Models in the Era of Globalization: Nigeria in Comparative Perspective" (paper, International Conference on *Restoration of Shariah in Nigeria: Challenges and Benefits*, Nigerian Muslim Forum, London, England, April 14, 2001), http://www.shariah2001.nmnonline.net/mazrui_paper.htm (accessed October 22, 2005).

addressing the "real" current national conflict between North and South, Islam and Christianity. "Luckily enough they do not treat the conflicts between Muslims and Christians," writes a staff member of the Hausa-language video film magazine *Bidiyo*, who must have been aware of the conversion genre's potential inflammatory political effect.[44] Like no other, the video film *Qarni* binds the current northern fears of political (i.e. economic) marginalization and loss of cultural identity together in the figure of the vampire. As a blood-sucking monster, the vampire kills virgins and therefore threatens to drain local society of its prosperity. If not for the mercy of the Almighty, who holds his protecting hand over the heads of the faithful, the local community would be doomed. Though films like *Qarni*, *Judah!*, and *Shaheed* are products of the current fundamentalist discourse, they still contain many features which are clearly influenced by other (film)cultures such as Bollywood, Hollywood and southern Nigerian "Nollywood." But these features are localized and transcribed within narratives that are able to serve as affirmations of the current project of cultural exclusion and religious renewal. The preferred reading encoded in these films is that taking part in that project is the only option for a true Muslim. Forces that counter the pious transformation of the community of the faithful have to be excluded, or, as the video films suggest, converted and won over for the true cause of Islam.

Video films of the conversion genre, however, did not perform very well at the box office. It seems as if, by 2003, three years after the reintroduction of *shari'a*, the religious vigor which had characterized the popular call for its implementation had somewhat cooled down and, instead of watching religious hero tales, video consumers again favored romantic melodrama or comedy. Still, at the Hausa Home Video Awards 2003, which were organized by members of an Internet discussion group, *Qarni* was nominated in the categories "Best Film," "Best Make-up," and "Best Special Effects," and its director Hafizu Bello won the prize of "Best Director." Actor Kabiru Maikaba, who appeared as king of the pagans in *Shaheed*, won a prize for "Best Actor in a Villainous Role."

Acknowledgments

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44.   *Bidiyo* 8 (2003): 39, my translation.

grammar; Tobias Wendl for his comments on an earlier German version; and Abdalla Uba Adamu for sharing his profound insights into Kano video culture with me. Last but not least I wish to thank all those members of the northern Nigerian video industry, who welcomed me in their midst during my fieldwork in 2003.

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Mythologicals and Modernity: Contesting Silent Cinema in South India

Stephen Hughes

Abstract

During the 1920s mythological films provided the first Indian cinematic formula for commercial success based on this presumed all-India appeal of Hindu religious stories. This article examines the early history of mythological films as a particularly useful site for addressing questions about the complex and changing relations between media, religion, and politics. In particular, this article concentrates upon a series of significant films and debates contesting the contemporary significance of mythological films in Tamil speaking south India during the 1920s. It argues that mythological cinema was implicated within and refigured a series of ongoing religious, political and cultural debates on modernity during the 1920s.

Introduction

Mythological stories drawn from the Hindu religious epics *puranas* or about the saints and great devotees have always had an important, though changing place in the history of cinema in India. This was especially the case during the early years of Indian cinema when mythological films dominated all indigenous cinematic output. Early Indian filmmakers combined the technologically modern cinematic medium with traditional mythological stories and performance genres to create a new cultural form. In this article I focus on this early history of mythological cinema as a key site of contestation within an emergent cultural politics of modernity in south India. From the arrival of the first Indian silent film in 1919 and its immediate aftermath, I identify various positions on how those in south India tried to reconcile a new set of relationships between Hindu mythology, nationalist politics, cinema technology, and the cultural politics of modernity. With

primary reference to extra-cinematic sources, mainly contemporary press and government documents, I examine how critics understood the various political stakes of mythological films against the background of the Indian nationalist movement under British colonial rule. I argue that mythological cinema posed a new set of possibilities and problems for cultural and political critics in south India. With its mix of Hindu stories and Western technology, mythological films presented a particularly ambiguous articulation of modernity, which simultaneously traversed and challenged a dominant set of cultural and political dichotomies of British India—spiritual and material, indigenous and foreign, past and present, and sacred and profane.

Before I begin, a few words on the notoriously loaded notion of modernity are necessary to frame my argument. Recently scholars have started to return to the issues surrounding the modern, modernity, and modernism to question the older universal presumptions of a unified Euro-American modernity. In so doing, the linear teleological model of modernity's break from the traditional has been radically questioned and reposed into a wider, more historically, spatially, and theoretically diverse terrain.[1] From this re-interrogation I take it that modernity is always multiple, ever-changing, and historically contingent. When I speak of modernity I am not referring to some kind of linear transition or something that has come from the West and diffused to India, or even some kind of internal cultural evolution. Rather, when I take up the question of modernity I am referring to a way of thinking about the present situation in relation to the past.[2] In this sense, modernity is a disposition regarding the past. This disposition assumes some kind of break that uniquely differentiates the present from the past. As I use it, modernity is not something that can be measured or calibrated, but is historically contingent on the articulation of a presentist sense (albeit in the case discussed here located in the past) that the contemporary has moved on to something new. This article seeks to contribute to the ongoing reassessment of modernity by exploring the encounter between religion and cinema through the specific example of early mythological film in south India.

Mythologicals on the Stage of Modernity

One of the corollaries of McLuhan's famous pronouncement, "the medium is the message," is that the content of media is always based on that of

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1. Among recent critical discussions of modernity, I have found the following to be particularly good to think with: Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, "On Alternative Modernities," *Public Culture* 27 (1999): 1–19; Sudipta Kaviraj, "Modernity and Politics in India," *Daedalus* 129 (Winter 2000): 137–54.

2. My approach here is informed by Michel Foucault's discussion of Kant in "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York Pantheon Books, 1984), 32–50.

another media. Thus, the innovation that comes with the introduction of new media technology is not its recycled content from other media, but rather the innovation is in how the new media shapes and controls the scale and form of human thought and feeling.[3] In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the historical convergence of a set of closely related new media—oil painting, theatre, chromolithography and film—all reworked Hindu mythological materials with varied and overlapping agendas of devotion, commerce, and politics.[4] Within the span of several decades these new representational forms radically remediated the mythic according to new technologies of reproduction, modes of access, and codes of realism. While it is impossible to separate neatly these parallel media developments, the emergence of professional drama most closely preceded and coincided with the arrival of mythological films. I focus in this section on how a critical discourse on mythological drama helped set a definitive discursive framework for the mytho-politics of Indian cinema in south India throughout the 1920s.

Over the course of about thirty years before mythological cinema reached south India, professional drama companies had established a new commercial form of mythological performance. Starting in Bombay during the 1850s, Parsi drama companies created their own distinct operatic style of performance with what was considered to be elaborate, westernized stagecraft and costumes. By the late nineteenth century, this performance style was adopted by travelling Parsi theater companies who toured the important urban centers throughout India.[5] Kathryn Hansen has argued that these highly portable and permeable theatrical activities created the "connective tissue of images, tastes, and values that underlie the success of [Indian] mass media in the twentieth century."[6] As the leading form of commercial entertainment at the time Indian film production began, the success of these drama performances was an obvious referent for aspiring Indian filmmakers.

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3.   *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1994 [1964]), 8–9.

4.   Though the main focus in upon the printed image, Christopher Pinney makes a compelling argument about how these media were related in mobilizing the mythological as part of nationalist politics. See his "*Photos of the Gods": The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion, 2004).

5.   The recently translated definitive account on the topic is by Somnath Gupt, *The Parsi Theatre: Its Origins and Development*, trans. and ed. Kathyrn Hansen (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2005). For other general accounts of what is usually referred to as company drama, see R. K Yajnik, *Indian Theatre: Its Origins and Its Later Developments under European Influence* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1933); Anuradha Kapur, "The Representation of Gods and Heroes: Parsi Mythological Dramas of the Early Twentieth Century," *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 23–24 (1993): 85–107; and Kathryn Hansen, *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

6.   "The Migration of a Text: The *Indar Sabha* in Print and Performance," *Sangeet Natak* 35 (2000): 3–34, at 4.

In south India, professional drama companies from the north were the first to introduce this new and cosmopolitan style of stage performance. Performing in Marathi, Kannada, Telugu, and Hindustani, touring companies visited the larger cities of Madras Presidency on a regular basis from the 1870s onward. Inspired by these drama performances, new professional Tamil drama companies began to perform in this new Parsi style by the 1890s.[7] These Tamil dramatists also borrowed from the common repertoire of popular Parsi drama, which consisted mainly of some well-known Persian love stories and Hindu mythological stories from *puranas* and epics. The most important figure during this period was T. T. Sankaradas Suvamikal (1867–1922), who as a *vathiyar* (teacher) almost single-handedly wrote, composed, and directed what became the canon of Tamil musical drama. His drama companies launched several generations of the most important drama artists of the twentieth century.[8] Starting from about 1900, these theatrical companies performed in a hybrid, cosmopolitan fashion using European-inspired innovations in scenery, costume, and stage techniques for audiences largely confined to an urban-based elite. Over the course of the next twenty years, however, as the number of professional companies proliferated and their itinerant travels increased, Tamil commercial drama reached out to lower-class audiences through south India.[9] By 1920, Tamil professional drama was without question the most popular form of commercial entertainment, but had also acquired a dubious reputation for being rowdy all-night affairs. As a mark of its lower class status as well as its overall success, cultural elites in south India routinely condemned professional drama as being hopelessly vulgar and obscene.[10]

Professional drama companies were highly successful at remediating Hindu epic traditions. Before Parsi-style stage dramas, mythological performance genres in the south had previously been rendered in myriad forms of storytelling, religious discourse, ritual reading, recitation, print, song, dance, painting, and sculpture. Mythological materials were widely circulated primarily within devotional contexts of the home, temple, pilgrimage, or festivals. By 1920, professional stage performances had relocated mythological performance spatially and temporally away from religiously

7.   P. Sambanda Muthaliyar, *Natakamedai Ninaivukal, Part One* (Chennai: Peerless Press, 1932) [in Tamil].

8.   For a collection of testimonials from leading cultural figures, politicians, and religious leaders, see the commemorative volume: T. K. "Avvai" Shanmugam, ed., *Tamizh Natakametai Cankaratas Suvamikal Nuttandu Vizha Malar, 1867–1967* (Chennai: Tavattiru Cankaratas Cuvamikal Ninaivu Manram, 1967) [in Tamil].

9.   See S. Theodore Baskaran, "Popular Theatre and the Rise of Nationalism," in *The Message Bearers: The Nationalist Politics and the Entertainment Media in South India, 1880–1945* (Madras: Cre-A, 1981), 21–42.

10.   For example, see T. V. Seshagiri Iyer, "Presidential Address," in *The First All India Drama Conference, 1921*, ed. C. R. Reddy (Bangalore: Amateur Dramatic Association, 1927), 1–10, at 5.

inflected settings to secularized public halls for socially mixed audiences. This dramatic displacement was a crucial shift. It rendered mythologicals as a commercial venture where actors and managers, no longer motivated by devotion, were, in the words of one drama critic, driven by "avarice" and only concerned with "making pots of money."[11] Once company drama had remediated the mythical on the stage of modernity, a new set of problems emerged. Among drama critics, the relationship between mythological performance and modernity became a matter of much discussion. One of the key issues to emerge in the ensuing debates was how mythological drama should or should not relate to the contemporary situations of modern social life. Drama critics took up sides on whether mythological form was outdated or still relevant for the current social and political circumstances.

Between the years 1919 and 1921, the Amateur Dramatic Association of Bangalore held a series of debates on the state of drama in India. In these wide-ranging discussions, the topic of mythological drama was singled out as one of the most contentious issues. The tone of the debate is well-exemplified by a public lecture delivered by C. R. Reddy, who later went on to a distinguished career as an educationalist and reformer, best known as the first Vice Chancellor of Andhra University.[12] Using the issue of modernity as the key contrast, Reddy presented an extended comparison of Indian drama with that of the West. He claimed that the greatest strength of drama in the West lay in the realist depiction of social life and that this was the great motive of modernism in the arts. On this standard of theatrical realism, Reddy provocatively claimed Indian drama to be a failure: "Broadly speaking there is no such thing as 'modern motive' and 'modern life' presented in our dramas."[13] Reddy's main example of this failure was the predominance of the mythological. He described a performance of "Krishna Leela" recently staged in Madras by a company from Bellary with a plot consisting of disparate and discontinuous episodes from the life of Krishna starting with his birth and finishing with the Mahabharata war. Then he posed the question, "Now what I want to ask, is how it is possible to present a thing like that with any approach to realism?"[14] One of the main reasons for the persistence of mythological drama, for Reddy, was that there was not sufficient creative genius in India to transform everyday material into what he called the "substance of poetic or dramatic representation."[15] Instead of dealing with modern problems of society, sex, or great moral questions, Indian drama just repeated the same old mythologicals again and again. According to Reddy, mythologicals could

11.   C. R. Myleru, "The Tamil Drama," *Journal of the Annamalai University* 3 (April 1934), 71–78, at 74.

12.   C.R. Reddy, *Drama in the East and West* (Bangalore: Amateur Dramatic Association, 1919).

13.   Ibid., 7.

14.   Ibid., 14.

15.   Ibid., 15.

not, indeed should not be updated by putting modern ideas or settings into the classic stories. In another example from a mythological drama taken from the *Mahabharata* of the tragic love story of Nala and Damayanti, he cited a production where a modern police court scene was anachronistically interjected as a kind of referent to contemporary reality.[16] Such a strategy would only produce an absurd confusion of past and present. Reddy's position anticipated what we might now consider to be part of the secularization thesis, where traditional religious mythological stories only represented India's past. They were not only irrelevant to modern life but also considered incompatible with modern progress.

Two years later at the First All India Drama Conference at the same venue in Bangalore, K. S. Ramasastri, a Brahman Madras lawyer and active amateur dramatist defended Indian mythologicals in an almost point-for-point rebuttal to Reddy. Ramasastri again used the example of Western drama and its emphasis on social realism as the constitutive other in defining the spiritualism and devotion of Indian mythological dramas. Rather than equate modernity exclusively with the secular, however, he portrayed mythologicals as also being compatible with modernity: "India is one modern land where the passion for God, the longing for the spiritual ideal and living are still valid."[17] Mythologicals were not, on this account, necessarily opposed to modern life, but could work together and be relevant in the present. He argued that India had its own unique modernity, which unlike the West still retained its commitment to religion and could be represented in mythological performances. For Ramasastri, the example of mythologicals seemed to prove that it was possible for Indians to be modern on their own spiritual terms without having to give into the imposition of a foreign materialism and colonial rule. Rather than "copying slavishly from modern western social dramas," he argued that, "At all times and under all circumstances, our epics and *puranas* must forever be the source of our highest dramatic achievement."[18] Ramasastri claimed, contra Reddy, that the continuing reliance on the *puranas* and epics was not due to lack of imagination or creative talent. Rather, Indian dramatists choose not to invent their own plot and write new stories "due to a desire to intensify in the national consciousness the heroic age in India."[19] For Ramasastri, the *puranas* were an "eternal heaven" and "endless mine of feeling and sentiment," which were not just relevant in the past, but could also be used in the modern present for national uplift and self-expression. Thus, Ramasastri's mytho-politics of drama both opposed and accommodated the modern within its inclusive frame.

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16.   Ibid., 17.
17.   K. S. Ramaswamy Sastri, "The Motifs and Methods of Indian Drama," in Reddy, *First All India Drama Conference*, 15.
18.   Ibid., 22, 15.
19.   Ibid., 17.

As a matter of drama criticism and debate, the contemporary signifi-
cance of the mythological did not submit to a single explanation or consen-
sus. Yet within the overall debate, Reddy's secular modernism, which nega-
tively defined mythologicals as unimaginative, stuck in the unchanging
past, lacking realism, and without modern motive, was definitely in the
minority during the 1920s. Much more typical was Ramasastri's positive
reading of mythologicals as expressing the eternally relevant greatness of
Indian religion and morality, which served the contemporary political needs
of strengthening Indian national consciousness. The Bangalore drama
debates, however, indicate that, even without considering the further com-
plication of adding the technology of cinematic representation into the mix,
the mythological and modern were locked into a constitutive typology of
antagonism and accommodation. This antinomy, initially expressed through
the discourses of drama criticism, was to be become even more pronounced
with the emergence of cinema as a dominant medium of mythology during
the 1920s.

The Mythological Origins of Indian Cinema

The emergence of cinema was a key constituent in the invention of modern
life, whether in Shanghai, Paris, Kano, New York, or Madras.[20] As a techno-
logical apparatus for the reproduction of moving images, as a form of repre-
sentation, and as an embodied subjective experience, the cinema was both
a symptom and a co-constitute of the broader economic, political, social,
and cultural transformations of modernity. Insofar as the cinema stood as
an icon of modernity within the context of India, it also represented Western
culture and colonial power. Thus, the cinema in India started as a foreign
import closely associated with the colonial culture of the British Empire.
From the first film screening in 1897, cinema in India was a medium of
foreign representation, located within venues of European entertainment
and catering to the colonial elite. This dominance of foreign cinema lasted
to a large extent throughout the silent period. In 1927 a government report
estimated that, of all films cumulatively screened in India, 90% had been
imported from abroad and 80% had come from the United States. This
initial foreign and colonial orientation of the cinema provided the key
baseline in relation to which Indian cinema unavoidably had to respond.
Early Indian cinema and its interlocutors necessarily understood their own
films against the domination of foreign cinema and the political rule of the
British in India.

20.   See, for example, Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, eds., *Cinema and
the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Leo Ou-
fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: the Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–
1945* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); Brian Larkin, "Theaters of
the Profane: Cinema and Colonial Urbanism," *Visual Anthropology Review* 14, no. 2
(Fall/Winter 1998–1999): 46–62.

For my argument here, the most important early Indian filmmaker was Dhundiraj Govind Phalke, a Maharastrian Brahman from a strongly orthodox family of Hindu priests.[21] Phalke trained at an art school and worked variously as a photographer, magician, theatrical set designer, and lithographer, before beginning his career in cinema with the production of one of the earliest Indian silent feature films in 1913. Entitled *Raja Harischandra*, the story was based on a well-known episode from the Hindu epic, the *Mahabharatha*, about an honest king dispossessed of his kingdom. Though several other Indians before him had experimented with film production, it is Phalke who has received most credit for starting the Indian film industry and creating an Indian film following. This is, in part, due to Phalke's own self-promotion. He was well-aware of his place as a pioneer in Indian film production and proclaimed himself to be the founding father of Indian cinema. Writing about his motivations for moving into film production Phalke created his own filmmaking myth of origin based on his own viewing of an imported motion picture entitled *The Life of Christ*. In a now-famous quote, he wrote, "while witnessing Christ on the screen, I was mentally visualizing in its place the gods Sri Krishna, Sri Ramachandra, their Gokul and Ayodhya… Could we, the sons of India, ever be able to see Indian images on the screen?"[22] Phalke's filmmaking project, though incorporating foreign film technology, was self-consciously nationalist, "in the sense that the capital, ownership, emphasis and stories were *swadeshi* [indigenous]."[23] Phalke made the purpose of his filmmaking project explicitly clear in his extensive writings. He aimed to create an Indian national cinema by adapting Hindu mythological stories for the screen as an alternative to foreign films and their religious themes.

Phalke used the new medium as both a continuation and improvement on older Indian performing and visual arts. On the one hand, the mythological film genre was a composite form made up from the vast repertoire of widely shared religious stories and modes of representation. In this way, mythological films could lay claim to a rich cultural inheritance, which directly linked them with literature, drama, music, dance, the visual arts, and the practices of Hindu worship and devotion. On the other hand, mythological films were, however, more than just a continuation of traditional modes of religious expression. The new representational technology of the cinema brought its own mechanical magic with editing and photographic techniques such as the dissolve, stop-motion photography, or

21.   In this section I draw mostly upon Ashish Rajadhyaksha's authoritive account, "The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology," in *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, ed. Tejaswini Niranjana, P. Sudhir, and Vivek Dhareshwar (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1993), 47–82.

22.   See *Phalke Commemoration Souvenir* (Bombay: The Phalke Centenary Celebrations Committee, 1970).

23.   Ibid.

superimposition. This endowed older mythological genres with a new kind of cinematic realism where Gods and divine miracles were visually brought to life like no other cultural form had previously achieved. Phalke seized the moment and made the modern miracle of film technology indigenous by materializing the spiritual and making Hindu Gods appear as historically contemporary. Taken as a whole, Phalke's unique combination of Hindu mythology, nationalist politics, and cinema technology all worked together to articulate a powerful nexus, which, in relation to other contemporary Indian visual arts, Christopher Pinney has aptly referred to as a magical realist mytho-politics.[24] In the following sections, I turn to how this played itself out in the context of south India.

Exhibiting Mythological Films in South India

Mythological films came to south India with an already over-determined religious content, which explicitly referred to Hindu epic traditions. But, of course, these films did not contain their own inherent meaning encoded through the processes of production. Films were also continually remediated as they were exhibited, understood, and acted upon. Phalke's filmmaking project may well have resonated with the mytho-politics of the Indian cultural nationalists in theater, painting, printing, literature, song, and poetry, but it was only through the institutions and practices of distribution and exhibition that these films engaged audiences throughout British India. In this section, I consider how the practices, institutions, and discourses of exhibition articulated mythological films within the local contexts of south India both as a commercial activity and religious practice.

Phalke's first five feature films were screened to enthusiastic Indian audiences throughout western and north India from 1913, but were not exhibited much, if at all, in the south. Phalke's sixth film, *Shri Krishna Janma* or *The Birth of Shri Krishna* (1918), was the first of its kind to attract a great deal of attention in south India. This film was widely credited as being the first "completely Indian film" and "true Indian representation" to be screened in south India.[25] The film consisted of a series of well-known episodes from young Krishna's life, from the birth of the deity to the triumphant victory over the demon Kamsa.[26] Because the stories were familiar to most south Indians, including most non-Hindus, Madras film-goers could follow the films even without being able to read the captions,

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24. Pinney, "*Photos of the Gods*", 70.

25. For example, see G. Narayanswamy, President of the Corporation of Madras, in *Indian Cinematograph Committee Evidence, 1927–1928* [hereafter *ICC Evidence*] (New Delhi: Government of India Press, 1928), 3:388.

26. For a detailed description of the surviving portions (about 500 feet out of 5500 feet) of this film see, P. K. Nair, "Those illuminating aspects," *Cinema In India* 3, no. 9 (October–November 1992): 21–28.

which were in Hindi and English, both non-native languages in south India. This film was first screened in the city of Madras (now known as Chennai) in January 1919. *Shri Krishna Janma*'s first run in Madras at the Wellington Cinema, though lasting only a few weeks, was something like the second coming of cinema to south India. With the *Birth of Sri Krishna*, south Indian interest in the cinema was reborn after over twenty years of an exclusive supply of foreign-produced films.

Shri Krishna Janma's first run in Madras was preceded by several weeks of publicity in local papers consisting of advertisements and short news items about the success of the film elsewhere in India. Besides trying to create a sense of anticipation and excitement among Madras residents, these advertisements also tried to fix the film as a traditional practice of popular religion. The film was prominently advertised as a "*Kalakshepa* on the screen," which was a widely prevalent form of mythological story recital in south India.[27]

Figure 1. An advertisement from *New India*, 9 January 1919

The form featured a single performer with minimal musical accompaniment narrating a religious story in a manner that displayed knowledge, verbal wit, singing, and dance.[28] These dramatic devotional narrations were a kind of religious education, which served to elevate audiences with moral and ethical purpose in an emotionally moving and entertaining manner. A commercial drama performance would have been the much more obvious mythic medium with which to compare Phalke's film. The *kalakshepa*, however, was held in high esteem and did not carry the negative social connotations of a professional drama. The point of the promotional discourse was clearly to situate the new mythological media as closely associated with an

27.   *New India*, 9 January 1919.
28.   V. Raghavan, "Methods of Popular Religious Instruction in South India," in *Traditional India: Structure and Change*, ed. Milton Singer (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1959), 130–38.

established Hindu tradition of moral learning and devotion. This advertisement was an attempt to portray this innovative cinematic representation of myth in the familiar terms of a respected religious performance genre.

The publicity preceding the film seemed to have worked. There are stories about how crowds waited for the film's arrival at the railway station and accompanied the film through the streets to the Wellington Cinema. The demand to see the film was such that the Wellington management held extra shows running from 10am to 3am on the weekends by special permission from Madras police. The film was said to have drawn 200,000 in attendance at the Wellington. The Wellington's owner, Rustom Dorabji (a Parsi businessman based in Bombay), who purchased the south Indian exhibition rights for only three or four thousand rupees, was said to have made a fortune on this one film alone.[29] By one estimate, Wellington and Company made about Rs. 60,000 and by another they "made up the whole capital of their concern."[30] Not missing out on any opportunity for extra business, the Wellington management even arranged for *Shri Krishna Janma* merchandise by selling a very popular "Sri Krishna" devotional pendant at the affordable price of two annas.[31]

More than any other film, the exhibition of Phalke's *Sri Krishna Janma* helped to establish the mythological film as a kind of religious ritual with a definitive place as part of the calendar of Hindu festivities. There can be no doubt that the Wellington management made a deliberate choice to promote this first Indian mythological film in relation to traditional modes of Hindu religious worship and coordinate its first screening with a major south Indian Hindu festival season. The film was screened as a special event to coincide with the Tamil festive season of Pongal and Hindu holiday of Vaikunta Ekadesi. An advertisement for this first run of *Shree Krishna Janma* made this connection explicit:

> Book in advance to make sure of your seat and bring your friends and relations—men, women and children—to see the show; for you cannot give them a better treat on Vaikunta Ekadesi and Pongal Holidays.[32]

The timing of this first Indian film event helped to reinforce the notion that attending this film screening was an appropriate part of Hindu festival celebration. This hugely successful linkage between Indian cinema and the Hindu ceremonial calendar also helped to establish a seasonal exhibition pattern that has regulated south Indian film production and film releases to the present. But in 1919, the synchronization of the first Indian film

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29.   See the testimonies of S. Devasankar Aiyar, Amateur Cinematographer; and G. Narayanswamy, President, Corporation of Madras, cited in *ICC Evidence*, vol. 3.

30.   E. Nicolas, *ICC Evidence*, 4:208; A. Venkatarama Iyer, *ICC Evidence*, 3:240.

31.   They advertised the lasting value of this film product tie-in as being made out of "American silver," which would "neither tarnish nor get black at any time." *New India*, 13 January 1919.

32.   *New India*, 9 January 1919.

screening with the Hindu holidays was another way of rearticulating what had been a foreign imported cinema technology within an indigenous religious sensibility.

An Opportunity for every Indian to Witness

A RELIGIOUS AND HISTORICAL DRAMA

SHOWING WHAT THE ANCIENTS DID 5000 YEARS AGO IN THE EXTRAORDINARY FILM

LANKA DAHANAM

The Destruction of the Capital of Ravana by Hanuman, the Messenger of SREE RAMA

By the request and for the Convenience of the outstation Public we will give THREE SHOWS daily at 3-15—6-15—9-30.

It is the sacred duty of every Indian to see this Religious Film during the

SREE RAMANAVAMI Week

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Commencing Saturday 5th April, 1919

Rates:—Rs. 3, 2, 1, As. 8, 4 & 2

DO NOT MISS THIS OPPORTUNITY

—

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Figure 2. An advertisement from *New India*, 4 April 1919

After this first and spectacularly successful outing, those in the south Indian cinema trade continued the aggressive religious marketing of mythological films. Especially during these first few years, mythological films were advertised in religious terms with an increasing zeal. It became common for advertisements to command attendance at mythological films as an act of religious duty and merit (*puniyam* in Tamil). For example, when Phalke's *Lanka Dahanam* was screened in Madras, a newspaper advertisement for the engagement claimed that, "It is the sacred duty of every Indian to see this religious film" (see Fig. 2).[33] And again, a few weeks later when the

33.   *New India*, 4 April 1919.

next new mythological film, *Kacha-Dewayani*, was exhibited at the Crown Theatre, R. Venkiah promoted its religious significance in local newspaper advertisements in the following terms: "A beautiful episode, a powerful adaptation, a wonderful picturisation from the pages of the 'Mahabarata.' Don't miss! To see the sacred-moral and instructive picture today."[34] There is a wealth of such evidence, suggesting that these early mythological film screenings were heavily promoted and exhibited as a kind of moral mode of cinematic address.

This promotional discursive practice was not about conversion or prose-lytization, but was making a direct appeal to what south Indian exhibitors considered to be pre-existing constituency just waiting to be accommo-dated within the growing market for cinema. Mythological cinema held out the promise of drawing new Indian audiences that might not otherwise have gone to the cinema, such as orthodox Hindus, women, and families. The earliest Indian cinema in south India was consistently promoted as a form of Hindu religious devotion and entertainment more acceptable and suitable for Indian audiences than the imported foreign films, which had over the previous twenty years defined cinema in south India. Even those outside of the cinema trade readily acknowledged the financial advantages of mythological films.

> Exhibitors have their fingers on the pulse of the audiences and they may be left to take care of themselves. They know when and where to exhibit special films… The balance of profit will remain with Indian films showing stories from Indian mythology where the Gods of the Hindu Pantheon take the leading part.[35]

Reduced to a kind of commercial logic, the cinema trade deployed the sacred and moral aspects of mythological films in a decidedly new terrain where financial considerations and continuous daily screenings were a key part of the performative context of mythic materials. Epic story-telling tra-ditions and the Hindu religious calendar may have lent early Indian cinema some moral and cultural credibility, but the cinema trade also remediated religious performance to suit their exhibition halls, show times, and profit margins.

Playing Representational Politics with Mythological Cinema

Early mythological films can, with reference to production and exhibition, be understood as a remediation of religious materials as a kind of commercial strategy designed to maximize profits. Yet this was only one part of how those in south India understood, acted upon, and argued about the place of

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34. *New India*, 19 April 1919.
35. Written Statement of T. S. Nataraja Pillai, councilor, Corporation of Madras, *ICC Evidence*, 3:193.

mythological films as part of the wider political and cultural milieu of colonial India. The arrival of *Shri Krishna Janma* in Madras not only opened the possibility of Indian cinematic representation, but also crucially coincided with a fundamental shift toward the politics of electoral representation. The first mythological films in south India were part of a very auspicious moment when political reforms had just started a limited transfer of power, which radically altered the local political landscape around representational governance. In this section, I briefly outline how the nationalist Home Rule League sought to capitalize on the first mythological film event to counter critics and further its political agenda at precisely the time when electoral representation was introduced.

In the few years preceding the arrival of Phalke's film, the provincial political scene in Madras had been dramatically transformed from a peaceful backwater into a hotbed of turmoil. A new set of political agitations, organizations, and antagonisms had developed around the unlikely figure of Annie Besant (1847–1933) and her Home Rule League. Besant was born in London of a mixed Irish and English family and pursued a public life as a social reformer in Victorian England. She originally took up the causes of atheism and secularism, before moving on to birth control, women's rights, and socialism in the 1880s. After being converted to Theosophy by Madame Blavatski, however, she threw herself into the study of the occult and followed it to India in 1893. When Besant took up the presidency of the Theosophical Society in 1907, she gradually developed a new interest in the cause of Indian nationalism. From about 1914, she began organizing a Home Rule League in association with Maharastrian radical Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920) under the auspices of the Indian National Congress.[36] The goal was to gain a representative self-government and the strategy was to get beyond the elitist politics of the nationalist movement and involve the masses in the struggle for freedom.

Tilak was a key political collaborator for Besant, who was still only a relative newcomer to nationalist politics and whose Theosophical background was viewed with some suspicion. Three decades before Gandhi, Tilak had been the first leader to organize mass political protests during the early nationalist movement in Maharashtra.[37] He understood that if educated Indian leaders were to come to political power they would have to do so with the support of the wider masses. Mass demonstrations were necessary not only to prove that the nationalist movement went beyond an educated elite and was truly representative of the Indian people, but also to disseminate a sense of national identity among the common people. To do

36.   Hugh P. Owen, "Towards Nationwide Agitation and Organization: The Home Rule Leagues, 1915–18," in *Soundings in Modern South Asian History*, ed. D. A. Low (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 159–95.

37.   Richard I. Cashman, *The Myth of the Lokamanya: Tilak and Mass Politics in Maharastra* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

this, Tilak appropriated the public idiom of Hindu religious festivity, which was for him an exemplary indigenous model for mass mobilization. The familiar formats of worship and festivity were seen as the best means to reach the Indian masses whose unifying identity he conceived as a function of a common popular Hinduism.[38] Tilak asked, "Why shouldn't we convert the large religious festivals into mass political rallies?"[39] For Besant, whose Theosophical Society had been actively promoting Hindu spiritualism as an answer to the West's empty materialism, Tilak's religious model of political activism usefully coincided with her priorities and crucially informed her participation in the work of Indian nationalism.

Starting in 1916, Besant mobilized her considerable energies and resources to organizing, touring, pamphleteering, and educating throughout south India. The Home Rule movement was immediately successful in energizing large numbers of mostly students with new political purpose. But this agitation also earned Besant many opponents and provoked a great deal of political action. Besant used her newspaper, *New India*, to attack Government policy, which greatly angered both official and non-official British commercial interests in Madras. For Europeans resident in south India, the certainty of British rule upon which their whole way of life depended, had never before been so openly flouted. Among Europeans, Besant was considered a dangerous traitor who was mobilizing widespread Indian opposition at the worst possible moment of war. The Home Rule movement also threatened another emergent south Indian political movement of non-Brahmans who felt their interests would suffer under any devolution of self-government. Thus, the threat of a successful Home Rule movement raised new fears of a Brahman take-over of political power in Madras Presidency and helped to galvanize the formation of the Justice Party in 1917 for the purpose of representing non-Brahmans.[40] The Justice Party rejected the calls for Home Rule and supported British governance in India as the best way to assure a fair and equitable treatment of all communities.

With a number of new organizations at loggerheads over the future of representative government, south India had become a scene of intense

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38. It should also be pointed out that beyond the rhetoric of politicizing the masses and spreading the cause of nationalism, Tilak had a "more immediate and practical concern of protesting the alleged government partiality for Muslims, or conversely against the non-recognition of the Brahmans of the Deccan" (ibid., 79). In direct competition to Moharram, which is the main public expression of Indian Islam, the festival was meant as a Hindu alternative appealing to what he considered to be the essentially religious nature of Indian national identity.

39. From an editorial in *Kesari*, 8 September 1896, quoted by Cashman, *The Myth of the Lokamanya*, 79.

40. Eugene F. Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916–1929* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 44.

political activity. When Edwin Montagu, the British colonial Secretary of State for India visited Madras in December of 1917 after a five-year absence, he was appalled at the increasing antagonism of local politics. Comparing his earlier impressions with the present situation, he noted in his diary that, "Now the English hate the Indians; the Indians hate the English and this new violent opposition of the Brahmins to the non-Brahmins has become the guiding principle of the place."[41] Much of this new political contestation was waged through the local newspapers, which in addition to holding public meetings and pamphleteering had become an indispensable tool of organized politics. Within a span of a few short years before 1919, every political group had established their own newspaper and often multiple newspapers in the different languages of south India.

This political background helps situate how the first of Phalke's mytho-logical films to arrive in Madras was taken up within the specific circum-stances of local politics. Out of all the competing newspapers, Annie Besant's *New India* stands out as the only one to have given *Shri Krishna Janma* any kind of political prominence (note that most of the citations from the last section were from this article).[42] Published in English, this newspaper had served as the controversial mouthpiece for the Home Rule League since 1915 and had by 1919 a wide circulation among nationalists throughout south India. Over the course of January 1919, *New India* pub-lished three editorials, which were usually used for scoring political points, to praise Phalke's film. The importance given to Phalke's film in *New India* stands out as extraordinary on several accounts. First of all, up to this point *New India* had not covered the topic of cinema as an important political issue. Second, other than a few advertisements, the cinema in general had not yet started to figure in the local commercial press and certainly had no place in political journalism in south India.

New India's coverage of *Shri Krishna Janma* would have in part been informed by Besant's political association with Tilak and their mutual involvement as leaders of the Home Rule movement. In 1918, Tilak had met with Phalke, a fellow Brahman from Maharastra, after reading a series of the latter's articles describing the struggles of his nationalist filmmaking project. Tilak offered, along with a group of Bombay industrialists, to let Phalke join in the formation of a new film company. Even though Phalke failed to convince the industrialists of the commercial viability of the cinema, Tilak remained sympathetic and supportive of Phalke's vision of

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41.   Edwin S. Montagu, *An Indian Diary*, ed. Venetia Montagu (London: Heine-man, 1930), 113–14, cited in Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict*, 80.

42.   To be fair, I have not been able to track down the Tamil weekly, *Desa Baktan*, edited by important journalist and labor activist, Thiruvarur Viruddhachala Kaliyanasndaranar, better known as Tiru Vee Kaa. It highly probable that this publica-tion would have followed *New India* in support of Phalke's film, but I am not in a position to make the claim with certainty.

cinematic nationalism.[43] Phalke also explicitly aligned his filmmaking agenda with the politics of the Home Rule movement and contributed a number of his own writings on cinema for publication in Tilak's Marathi newspaper, *Kesari*.[44] But even over and above this linkage with Tilak, Phalke's nationalist-inspired mythological cinema was also a useful tool for *New India* to use in the local politics of Madras.

New India heralded the early success of Phalke's film as proof of south India's profound and continuing spirituality, which, within the logic of representational politics, was crucially capable of mobilizing, unifying, and elevating the Indian masses with moral purpose. The following editorial read the success of the film as a triumph of Hinduism:

> The thousands that flocked to see *The Birth of Shri Krishna* filmed [*sic*] at the Wellington Cinema yesterday and the day before testify to the very deep religious feeling that underlies Hindu life. The cinema is an especially happy medium to express the mysteries that underlie the life of Shri Krishna and it was a wonderful stroke of imagination that inspired Mr. Phalke to produce this film. The deep love for Shri Krishna that abides in the South is evinced in the atmosphere charged with emotion at the Wellington, where thousands that gather are intensely moved by the show.[45]

This passage is remarkable in describing the experience of watching the film show as a form of Hindu worship. In this account, the Wellington Cinema hall was transformed into a temple where watching a film became a new kind of religious experience. Film spectatorship was equated with devotion, where the deep love for Krishna created a spiritual *communitas* of film and audience, based in the sensuous experience of the emotionally charged atmosphere and kinetic participation of an intensely moved crowd. When employed for the purposes of depicting mythological themes, the cinema could be a new and "especially happy medium" for the religious expression of its audiences. These editorial comments effortlessly resolved all complications in the relationship between cinema technology and religion within a monistic embrace of Hinduism. According to this position, mythological film aligned itself with tradition as a triumph over a colonial modernity.

Reading *New India*'s editorial within the wider frame of its political agenda in Madras, the massive success of Phalke's mythological cinema seemed to offer an answer to both European and non-Brahman critics. Since Montagu's historic announcement of reforms in August 1917, which

43. A. H. Gadre, "Dada Seheb Phalke: A Struggle from Start to Finish," *Screen* [Bombay] (15 February 1952): 28–34.

44. Somnath Zutshi also highlights the connections between Tilak and Phalke as part of an argument questioning the limits of Phalke's inclusive project of Hindu cultural nationalism. See "Women, Nation, and the Outsider in Hindi Cinema," in Niranjana et al., *Interrogating Modernity*, 83–141.

45. *New India*, 20 January 1919.

would for the first time grant Indians limited electoral representation in the form of provincial assemblies, a new set of political priorities was emerging. The new model of electoral politics involved a double movement of representation. For south Indians to be represented in an elected government also required the related representation of their identity. The newly enfranchised electorate was now in the process of being reconstituted as an ideological necessity for representing political authority. Through the ultimate act of democratic agency, that of marking the ballot, the will of the people was to be represented in elected assemblies. Yet this fundamental valorization of the people was continually reworked and displaced in the representational practices of political parties and their leading figures.[46] A new field of struggle emerged where political parties and their leaders competed to more authentically represent the people. Of course, the newly empowered "people" were never an already given social reality, but rather, a motivated and continually contested construction. Given this new political reality, the crowds, which turned out for *Shri Krishna Janma*, and the devotional response to the film, could be cited by *New India* as representing a mass outpouring of national pride and identification with Hindu philosophy and morality. *New India* was in effect trying to claim the popular response to mythological cinema as the constituency they represented and justify the political authority of their demand for Home Rule. The public enthusiasm for mythic film, which crowded the cinema halls of Madras, could not be dismissed as merely a Brahman conspiracy, nor be democratically represented by a foreign colonial regime.

At the organizing end of the nationalist movement, what Benedict Anderson has called "print-capitalism" provided "the technical means for representing the kind of imagined community that is the nation" and helped to launch the Indian nationalist movement among the elite educated classes.[47] But, as *New India* realized, the Indian masses, made necessary by the demands of representational politics, could not be unified as a reading public. At that moment in 1919, Phalke's mythological cinema seemed to present a new possibility for articulating a nationalist collectivity around a shared religious identity. It did not work, however, as the editors of *New India* might have hoped. The prominence of Annie Besant and her Home Rule League were already on the wane in 1919, soon to be overtaken by the charismatic and dramatic leadership of Gandhi and the Non-Cooperation

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46.   For Baudrillard, this is the "double bind" of the democratized masses: "They are at the same time told to constitute themselves as autonomous subjects, responsible, free, and conscious, and to constitute themselves as submissive objects, inert, obedient and conformist." Jean Baudrillard, "The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media," in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1988), 218.

47.   *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983), 30.

movement of 1920. Further, the singular popularity, which Phalke's mytho-logical films enjoyed when they first arrived, was somewhat lost in a flood of new Indian film productions, which kept coming in increasing numbers and in new genres throughout the 1920s.[48]

The Mythological as Modern Allegory

The exhibition and surrounding publicity for *Shri Krishna Janma* minimized the modernity of cinema technology by rendering the mythic in religious terms for commercial purposes. Nationalist discourse in Madras also mini-mized the modernity of the cinema by promoting mythological films in religious terms for political purposes. It can be argued that, at least in these two instances, the mytho-politics of early Indian cinema were decidedly anti-modern, insofar as the modern was negatively associated with immoral foreign films and colonial rule. Yet these were only part of the ongoing encounter between cinema and religion during the 1920s. While commercial and political purposes usefully collaborated in endorsing an anti-modern reading of mythological films, there were also other ways in which the cinema rendered the mythic and the modern as fully compatible and per-meable. Even while the modern, imported technology of cinematic repre-sentation was in part being promoted and understood in religious terms, mythological films also rendered Hindu epic traditions in a distinctly contemporary manner, which clearly articulated them in the present. When mythic materials were represented along with the settings, trappings, and connotations of present-day reality, it was difficult to deny the modernity of mythological cinema.

Many of the early mythological films explicitly articulated their compati-bility with modernity through the obvious photographic realism of the medium. This was especially the case with a number of the first silent films produced in south India. Since there were only very limited studio facilities, many early south Indian films were shot outdoors in full sunlight in recognizable locations. A good example of this was the first commercially successful silent film produced in south India, *Valli's Wedding or The Love Story of the Jungle*. Produced in 1920, the film took up a well-known Tamil mythological story involving the romance between Murugan and Valli, which crucially integrated a sacred geography of south Indian pilgrimage sites. The film attained great popularity, which in the opinion of at least one reviewer, eclipsed that of *The Birth of Shri Krishna*.[49] From contemporary newspaper reviews, advertising, and newspaper readers' letters, we know that the majority of the film was shot in the open air "amidst Beautiful

48. On the relationship between mythological cinema and other film genres dur-ing the 1920s in south India, see my "House Full: Film Genre, Exhibition and Audi-ences in South India," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 43 (2006): 31–62.
49. *Madras Mail*, 8 January 1921.

Mountain and Jungle Sceneries in south India" and included scenes from the important temple pilgrimage cities of Palni and Madurai. The appearance of the mythic in the present setting was particularly obvious in the temple scenes, where south Indian actors performed in full costume while sharing the same outdoor locations with curious onlookers and religious devotees. Along with the novelty of Tamil inter-titles, these outdoor on-location temple scenes were specially advertised as the highlights of the film.[50]

Figure 3. An advertisement from *Madras Mail*, 29 January 1921

Though the stories and characters of the religious epics could be traced to longstanding historical traditions, mythological cinema went beyond its reference to some religious past in constructing its narrative within contemporary settings. It was very common in these films to have constant references and reminders of their setting in the present. Conspicuous signs of modernity abounded. Actors wore wristwatches and contemporary fashions. Mythological sets were adorned with portraits of Gandhi, European furniture, and electric ceiling fans and lights. This tendency could at one level be understood as a violation of the self-contained fictional diegesis of the classic Hollywood feature film, which by the 1920s was considered increasing necessary to absorb spectators' attention within narratively constructed on-screen reality.[51] Yet at this stage Indian silent cinema had not reached

50.   For local coverage, reviews, and advertisements see the *Madras Mail* for 8 January 1921, 29 January 1921, and 2 February 1921.
51.   See Noel Burch, "Narrative/Diegesis—Thresholds, Limits," *Screen* 23, no. 2

the high levels of conformity and standardization, which would eventually eliminate such obvious anachronism from cinematic representation. Compared to Indian cinema of the 1940s, what is particularly striking in the 1920s was that Indian filmmakers did not seem particularly concerned with maintaining an unambiguous distinction between the mythological and the modern as respectively corresponding to the past and present. In film-making practice, the categorization of the mythic and the modern seemed to overlap and intermingle in an unproblematic manner.

To some extent, Indian filmmakers were borrowing from already established modes of theatricality, which had already articulated a strategic juxtaposition of past and present, of mythic and modern on stage. By the 1920s, Indian dramatists had made widespread use of a number of specific incidents from Hindu mythology, which emphasized the protection of the nation against tyrannical rule. These mythological stories used introductory scenes and interspersed speeches to explicitly rework dramas as elaborate allegories on contemporary nationalist politics.[52] In a similar manner to nationalist drama, some early Indian filmmakers purposefully used mythological stories to suggest the current social and political situation in India. Contemporary references were woven into the narrative as a way of making pointed allegorical commentary critically aimed against British rule in India. In an approach quite different from Phalke's films where the contemporary political relevance of Hindu mythological stories was a celebration of the superiority of the timeless Hindu morality and a counterpoint to foreign cinema, other filmmakers exploited mythic material in a more direct provocation to British authority.

The case of the film *Bakta Vidur* is a good example of how mythological films related to contemporary political events. The film took up part of the story of the *Mahabaratha* focusing on Vidur, who plays an important role as the innocent agent unwittingly used by the Kauravas to cheat the Pandavas out of their rightful share of the kingdom. This main character also bore a striking resemblance, however, in the manner of clothes, demeanor, and appearance, to Gandhi, who had recently emerged as the leader of the Indian National Congress. Although the story was firmly rooted in the epic performance tradition, the obvious reference to Gandhi meant the story would also be understood in reference to the contemporary political situation. The film was originally passed by the Bombay Board of Censors without any problems and was distributed throughout the country. When a

(July–August 1982): 16–34; and Kristin Thompson, "The Formulation of the Classical Style, 1908–28," in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, by David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 155–240.

52.   See Nandi Bhatia, "Censorship and the Politics of Nationalist Drama," in *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theater and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 19–50.

print made its way to the provincial south Indian town of Madurai, local officials raised the alarm. On the first night of the film's screening at the Imperial Cinema, at key moments the crowd shouted nationalist slogans. Two days later the Collector of Madurai District (the highest ranking colonial official at the district level) came to witness the film and delivered a harsh verdict on it. In a letter to the Government of the Madras Presidency, he claimed that the film was:

> …nothing more than a thinly veiled resume of political events in India, Vidura appearing as M. Gandhi, clad in a Gandhi cap and Kadder shirt. The obvious inference is that the blind king represents the King Emperor [of the British Empire] and the Evil Kauravas, his bureaucratic advisors and officers in India, whilst the banished Pandavas represent the ideal rule of Mr. Gandhi's imagination. Recent political events are cleverly introduced into the story. The intention of the film would certainly seem to be to bring hatred and contempt and stir up feelings of enmity against the Government… That the audience recognized the nature of the film is evident from the fact that its display was punctuated by shouts of "Bande Mataram" and "Gandhi-ki-jai" [victory to Gandhi] at appropriate points in the exhibition. The appeal is to the uneducated Hindu, who knows the stories of his own mythology and has a vague understanding of present political events and cannot but do serious harm.[53]

This passage clearly articulates an urgent sense of the contemporary political stakes of mythological films and an official recognition of a potentially dangerous cinematic threat to the continuance of British rule in India.[54] From our perspective now, the letter quoted above may seem like an overstated case of political paranoia, but in 1921 there were real fears about the unravelling of British India. The threat of mythological cinema would have seemed especially heightened in the context of the recent series of uprisings, protests, and radicalization of political movements within colonial India. The nationalist Non-Cooperation movement, the agitation for a pan-Islamic Khilafat, a four-month industrial labor strike in the textile mills of Madras, the picketing of liquor shops throughout south India, the Moplah revolt on the southwest coast, left-wing militants in the Punjab, and the still-recent threat of Bolshevism all coincided with the sudden appearance of mythological cinema in south India.[55] From this point on, the regional

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53.   Government Order no. 2260 Law (Gen) 19 December 1921, Tamil Nadu Archives.

54.   In this instance, the District Magistrate arrested the proprietor of the cinema, impounded the film and brought them up to Madras for interrogation. Oral evidence of Mr. K. V. Acharya, former exhibitor and Film Producer, The Mysore Pictures Corporation, Bangalore, 12 January 1928, *ICC Evidence*, 3:400.

55.   For an overview of the all-India political situation, see Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885–1947* (Madras: Macmillan India, 1983); with reference to south India see, V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium, From Iyothee Thas to Periar* (Calcutta: Samya, in association with Book Review Literary Trust, 1998).

board of film censorship based in Madras and headed by the Commissioner of Police was alive to the possibility of mythological films being understood and used as a form of contemporary political critique.

The inclusion of the present into mythologicals was not seen as a logical inconsistency, but a way of using Hindu religious and moral truths as vehicles for modern social reform and uplift. The conspicuous display of the political garb of the Indian National Congress, *khadi* clothes and Gandhi caps, were used to tap into and energize the nationalist political fervor in the wake of the Non-Cooperation movement. Yet this allegorical use of the mythical as commentary on the modern could not be read in strictly religious terms. These films were not about religious devotion for orthodox Hindus on religious holidays. Compared to the accounts of *Shri Krishna Janma*, the description of the audience reactions within the space of the cinema theater to *Bakta Vidur* in Madurai did not suggest a similar atmosphere of worship and reverence of a Hindu temple. The audience's active response to *Bakta Vidur*, which was cited as the most conclusive evidence of the dangerous content of the film, suggests a much different atmosphere more akin to a boisterous political rally. This mythological mode of address did not highlight the religious for the purposes of representational politics, but obliquely used religion as a cover for a more direct politics of agitation and protest.

Conclusion: The Lost Promise of the Silent Mythological

At the moment of their arrival, Phalke's films may have seemed to promise more than they could have possibly delivered for the politics of Home Rule. Yet the success of *Shri Krishna Janma* did help to articulate mythological cinema as part of a general cultural politics of national pride. Throughout the 1920s, mythological films provided a position from which to critique Western modernity and uphold the moral and religious superiority of Indian tradition. Mythological films were explicitly and favorably compared to the usual fare of imported cinema, which was portrayed variously as chaotic, immoral, materialistic, and forever tainted by colonialism. In contrast, the *puranas* and epics provided a kind of eternal and endless font of feeling, sentiment, and moral guidance, which were upheld as being "pure and free of moral objections from the Indian standpoint."[56] Mythological cinema was equated with public Hindu devotion, festivity, and higher moral purpose, which made a direct appeal to the essentially religious instincts of average Indian cinema audiences. Hindu devotional practices offered south Indians a powerful model for understanding the early success of mythological films. Cinema was infused with religion as a form of worship, as a sensuous and emotional engagement with the divine, a form of moral uplift and improve-

56.   S. Devasankar Aiyar, *ICC Evidence*, 3:388.

ment. This formulation sought to resolve any ambiguous implications of modern cinema technology by understanding it in the terms and priorities of traditional Hindu practices, which in turn were equated with and enabled a certain kind of nationalist politics. In this sense, mythological films allowed Indians to remediate the modernity of cinema as part of a religious discourse on India's spiritual superiority over the West and an affirmation of a distinctive Indian national culture. Mythologicals can be read as part of a widely shared aesthetic response to colonialism, which embraced a new media form that was both modern and national, and still recognizably different from that of the West.[57]

Not only Phalke, but also other Indian early filmmakers and exhibitors clearly realized that mythological subjects had a wide enough commercial appeal and familiarity to secure a very wide Indian market for their films. This was particularly exploited during the years until 1923 when about 70% of all Indian silent films produced were based on mythological stories.[58] But the initial enthusiasm for mythological films quieted to some degree throughout the 1920s as the novelty began to fade. After the great success of *Sri Krishna Janma* in south India, most of the other Indian mythological films that followed had difficulty in generating the same levels of enthusiasm. Already by 1921, a note of scepticism had crept into the once highly optimistic discourse on mythological cinema. A newspaper column purporting to be a letter written by a film fan complained that the cinematic trick of making Gods real was not enough to make up for poor standards in film production:

> In the past Indian producers have been content to rely on the magic of a name like Sri Krishna, Rama, Ravenna, Parvati to secure a public for their mediocre productions. Consequently we have to see half-baked productions in which settings and acting would not have done credit to a fifth-rate theatrical company as examples of Indian art.[59]

For some in south India, the thrill of mythological cinema did not last very long.

There were also obvious limits to the popularity of mythological films with Indian audiences. Mythological films could only be promoted as the Indian national film genre on the basis of a series of social, religious, and cultural exclusions of Muslims, Christians, Anglo-Indians, Europeans, and educated elite Indians. As the production of Indian silent films increased in the 1920s, a number of mythological films proved to be failures. Further,

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57.   For a broader discussion see Partha Chatterjee, "Whose Imagined Community?," in *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 3–13.

58.   B. V. Dharap, "The Mythological or Taking Fatalism for Granted," in *Indian Cinema Superbazaar*, ed. Aruna Vasudev and Philippe Lenglet (New Delhi: Vikas, 1983), 79.

59.   *Madras Mail*, 16 July 1921.

there was also a general proliferation of other Indian film genres, such as the historical and social, which became increasing popular over the course of the decade. Between 1924 and 1930 mythological films only accounted for about 15% of Indian film productions.[60] But even as the production of mythological films declined in number, the older films continued to circulate widely throughout the 1920s and the mythological continued to be a dominant film and iconic genre in south India.

While the political potential of mythological films was still strongly maintained by some of those in the nationalist movement, this was an idealist and moral vision that Indian cinema never seemed to fulfill. Phalke's original mytho-politics of Indian film served well as a myth of origin, but it could never contain the multiple agendas and surplus of appeals that the cinema had to offer. Mythological cinema could not live up to its own myth of origin. Already by 1921, doubts were being raised about the moral, religious, and political purpose of mythological films. For example, a brief but revealing newspaper exchange about *Valli's Wedding* suggests that mythological films were not always expected to uphold such lofty purposes. The film received nothing but high praise from the *Madras Mail* correspondent, yet in his review of the film he included critical commentary from readers' letters. A common complaint about the film, which the reviewer felt compelled to defend, was that the film failed to convey any religious significance to Hindus, despite being based on a mythological story and including famous temples of pilgrimage. The correspondent agreed with this criticism in that the film did not create any "awe or reverence" for him either. The reviewer, however, disagreed with the critical reader that the only purpose of a mythological story should be that of devotion and that the reader had failed to appreciate that the "pranks and merry-making of the Gods" were an important aspect of the entertainment.

By 1928, it had become increasingly obvious that mythological films offered more than religious devotion, moral uplift, and political activism. In particular, commercial considerations were often cited as encouraging Indian filmmakers to deviate from the religious and nationalist political scripts for mythologicals. When the Indian Cinematograph Committee queried P. Sambandam Mudaliar, a lower court judge and prominent playwright and amateur dramatist, about the quality of Indian films, he claimed that it had become common for Indian filmmakers to use sex as an added cinematic attraction, even in mythological stories. He referred to one obscene and inappropriate mythological film based on the well-known story of *Savitri*. In the film version, to which he referred, the heroine pursued Yama, the god of death, to the underworld to beg for her dead husband to be returned to life. Sambandam Mudaliar reminded the Committee that the character Savitri was commonly upheld as the highest ideal of Hindu

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60.   Dharap, "The Mythological or Taking Fatalism for Granted," 79.

womanhood because she miraculously succeeds in this impossible task through the force of her saintly devotion to her husband. In the film, however, Savitri decided to stop along the way, right in the middle of her urgent chase to catch Yama's chariot, to have a leisurely bath in the river. Sambandam Mudaliar argued that the idea of the heroine being made to take a bath had nothing to do with the plot and that it had obviously been added to the story for the sole purpose of attracting the cinema-goers.[61] The implied commercial logic behind this juxtaposition of the sacred and profane stands in stark contrast to the more high-minded religious and political aspirations, which others still hoped mythological cinema would achieve.

In conclusion, I want to return to the question of what early Indian mythological films might tell us more generally about the encounter between religion and cinema and the ensuing relationship between myth and modernity. Certainly, the earliest mythological films in south India arrived with great promise. As a form of indigenous representation, these films seemed to offer a future cinema of devotion and morality, a cinema celebrating the greatness of Indian national culture and offering an alternative to foreign cinema and colonial rule. Those in the cinema trade and in the emergent field of representational politics, though motivated by different agendas, shared the hope that mythological films would open up a new frontier of mass participation. By highlighting the ambiguities and diversity of commercial, religious, and political responses, I hope to have shown that the historical conjuncture of mythological cinema and modernity cannot be understood teleologically. The early encounter between Hindu mythic material and cinema technology does not conform to any model of linear transformation that can be aligned according to a simple before-and-after chronology, nor either/or alternative. Not only were both sides of the encounter between religion and cinema mutually constitutive, even as they moved on and changed over the course of the 1920s, but they also enabled and animated a new kind of representational politics.

This encounter between the mythic and cinema also suggests the need to rethink the recent scholarship on the relationship between religion and media in India during the 1990s. Largely focusing on the conjunction of Hindu mythological TV serials and the rise of Hindu nationalist politics, many have argued that the introduction of television was largely responsible for articulating a new relationship between Hinduism and nationalist politics.[62] In light of what I have argued here, the contemporary debates about the satellite TV revolution and the growth of Hindu nationalism in the

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61.   *ICC Evidence*, 3:242.

62.   For example, Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999).

1990s are part of a much longer and complex historical relationship. The debates and discourses around mythological films in the 1920s clearly attest to the mutual and productive implication of religion, media, and politics. We still need to be more attentive to how the contemporary relations between television and Hindu nationalism have been built upon and enabled by the mytho-politics of new media throughout the twentieth century.

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Devotional Transformation: Miracles, Mechanical Artifice, and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema

Ravi Vasudevan

Abstract

This article focuses on the specific Indian cinematic form of the Hindu devotional film genre to explore the relationship between cinema and religion. Using three important early films from the devotional oeuvre—*Gopal Krishna*, *Sant Dnyaneshwar*, and *Sant Tukaram*—as the primary referent, it tries to understand certain characteristic patterns in the narrative structures of these films, and the cultures of visuality and address, miraculous manifestation, and witnessing and self-transformation that they generate. These three films produced by Prabhat Studios between the years 1936 and 1940 and all directed by Vishnupant Damle and Syed Fattelal, drew upon the powerful anti-hierarchical traditions of *Bhakti*, devotional worship that circumvented Brahmanical forms. This article will argue that the devotional film crucially undertakes a work of transformation in the perspectives on property, and that in this engagement it particularly reviews the status of the household in its bid to generate a utopian model of unbounded community. The article will also consider the status of technologies of the miraculous that are among the central attractions of the genre, and afford a reflection on the relation between cinema technology, popular religious belief and desire, and film spectatorship.

Introduction

This article uses the devotional film genre of Indian cinema to explore the relationship between cinema and religion. I try to understand certain characteristic patterns in the narrative structures of these films, and the cultures of visuality and address, miraculous manifestation, and witnessing and self-transformation that they generate. I pay particular attention to the relationship between the spectators who witness miracles in the narrative

world and the cinema spectator addressed by the film. Janet Staiger once remarked that explorations of cinema and religion require an evaluation of other forms of causality than those arising from human agency and realist causality, for example, the particular significance of the sacred and the supernatural in the determination of narrative events.[1] My analysis speaks to this agenda and is part of my ongoing concern to understand the particular types of causal logic, which define structures of narration in Indian popular film, and how these in turn invite a certain ordering of spectatorial subjectivity.

Central here is the way the devotional film articulates a vision of self-transformation through the practice, sometimes even the condition of being, of devotion. In these films, being able to speak to the divine or to access the divine requires a great deal of social and cultural creativity, struggle and, very often, suffering. The imperative of accessing the divine initiates a contest with Brahmanical monopoly over the spiritual learning embodied in sacred texts. It also generates a narrative that contests the ritual social order, its hierarchies of caste, its prescription of life-stages appropriate to various castes, and its institutions of bodily difference, as in notions of purity and pollution. Important to the dominant social order of these films is the codification of property, both the intellectual property vested in Brahmanical control over the scriptures, as well as physical property in land and livestock, the wherewithal of the village economies that define the social world of the genre. I will argue that the devotional film crucially undertakes a work of transformation in the perspectives on property, and that in this engagement it particularly reviews the status of the household in its bid to generate a utopian model of unbounded community. Here, in particular, gendered dimensions strongly emerge in the narrative world of these films, and not always in ways that clearly afford the male devotee a superior status.

The question of intellectual property means that access to the divine in these films critically requires a verbal register, a capacity for language, and the reinvention of languages of devotion to challenge scriptural monopoly. This is predominantly a culture of orality, where popular languages, given form in *bhajans*, spiritual songs invoking the lord, are the main language of this contest. However, the contest may also be bodied forth in writing, captured as image, as in calligraphy, in piles of manuscript, sometimes perhaps even in the recovery of established texts whose messages have to be retrieved and disseminated.

Here, the musical and verbal registers are supplemented by the magical, imagistic status of texts. Visuality is, however, most clearly defined by the

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1. Janet Staiger, "Conclusions and New Beginnings," in *An Invention of the Devil? Religion and Early Cinema*, ed. Roland Cosandey, André Gaureault, and Tom Gunning (Sainte-Foy, Canada: Les Presses de L'Université Laval, 1992), 353–60.

question of iconicity. Here, figures address audiences inside the fiction but also, implicitly or explicitly, outside it too. This is rendered by highlighting them within the frame or the space of the scene and through a motif of direct address. This is a mode of address constructed out of looks into the camera and to an elevated off-screen space. Such features are more generally observable in Indian popular cinema but are perhaps most pronounced in devotional genre.[2]

The mode of address tends to be pedagogical, spreading the word of god, but may also be used to spread secular imperatives, as, for example, the rights of community or of the marginal to dignity and property. The key pay-off or return on the devotee's dissemination of the lord's glory and, indeed, for the spectator of the genre, is the spectacle of the miraculous happening. These are divine interventions, which seek to protect the devotee and to resolve the crisis he faces in his contesting of Brahmanical edicts. The miracle demonstrates the divine standing of the devotee before the assembled public, among whom are not only his supporters, but also those opposed to him. It therefore not only consolidates but may indeed extend the constituency for his message. In crucial instances, once such divine manifestation has worked on behalf of the devotee, he may acquire the magical powers himself and be able to counter the assault of his enemies. As I will suggest in the case of *Sant Tukaram* (Fattelal and Damle, 1936), there is also a very suggestive instance where the functions of the diegetic audience may undergo a significant change. Their function is not only to witness sacred authority and its validation of the new form of worship and vision of community; the audience itself becomes the object of transformation, so that it comes, however fleetingly, to embody a new sense of democratic equivalence. Here, it is not simply an issue of all being able to access the sacred, but of being changed, collectively, into an image of the sacred.

The Saint Film of Prabhat Talkies

First, a note on the particular studio whose product I am examining.[3] This is important in understanding the circumstances that produced the particular social imaginary these films relayed. Prabhat emerges out of the prior history of Kolhapur's Maharashtra Film Company, run by Baburao Painter. Painter was an important figure of popular visual culture, well-known for

2.   I have explored the question of direct address in Indian popular film in "The Politics of Cultural Address in a 'Transitional' Cinema: Indian Film," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Edward Arnold, 2001), 130–64.

3.   These references to the history and reception of Prabhat's devotional films come from the following writings: Bapu Watve, *V. Damle and S. Fattelal* (Pune: National Film Archive of India, 1985); and *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*, rev. ed., ed. Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen (London: British Film Institute, 1999).

his work especially in set design, and his company produced a number of important mythical and historical works, the best known of the latter being a focus on Shivaji, the key figure of Maharastrian national identity. Major Prabhat studio figures such as Syed Fattelal (art direction), Vishnupant Damle (sound) and V. Shantaram (actor/director) emerged under Painter's tutelage and carried on the distinctive engagement with set design, regional culture and language, and social reform inaugurated in Kolhapur. In all of this, the studio's imagination of the social domain appears more rooted in idioms of language and lineages of cultural contest and representation than the creations of its contemporaries in Bombay, and especially the Bombay Talkies studio. Here, the studio drew upon the powerful anti-hierarchical traditions of *Bhakti*, of devotional worship that circumvented Brahmanical forms, in figures such as Tukaram, Dnyaneshwar, and Eknath, all of whom were subjects of their devotional films.[4] The overall result was a strong regional identity in the world conjured up by the studios, one rather different from the abstractions of Bombay Talkies, a studio which took recourse to a simplified Hindustani to appeal to the broadest market and whose fictional worlds often appear uprooted from reference to any specific regional habitat. There is the distinct feeling of a lived world, which is close, perhaps, to an urban–rural continuum, appropriate enough for a studio working first out of the smaller urban sites of Kolhapur and then Pune. The Prabhat socials situated in the modern era, especially *Kunku* (V. Shantaram, 1935), are in fact probably the first strong evocation of a small-town culture and its traditional social mores in Indian cinema.

Apart from mining traditional formats of representation and expression, the Prabhat oeuvre also drew on a strongly modernist context. Since the nineteenth century, Maharashtra and especially places such as Pune were defined by a powerful social reform movement and, in the twentieth century, a lively novelistic and theatrical culture; one actively invested in a wider international reflection on social and aesthetic issues. Such a modernism is evident too in the aesthetic design of the films. They display a strong drive to generate a sense of cinematic rhythm through editing, framing, and lighting techniques. A certain deliberate jaggedness of construction emerges that alerts one to a shifting phenomenology of narrative space and a different rhythm for spectatorial attention. On occasion, we are even offered indication of a media self-consciousness, as in the way record players are used in *Kunku*, or the cinema itself is deployed in *Aadmi* (V. Shantaram, 1939). Indications of how a new culture of mechanical production and reproduction intervenes in and re-shapes traditions of perception and consciousness are also more generally observable.

4.   *Bhakti* traditions developed in various parts of the subcontinent during the premodern period. These sought to circumvent Brahmanical monopoly over access to the divine by circumventing the scriptures through an oral culture, which also generated new and popular languages.

Here one might hazard a distinction in the way technology and its effects are registered between genres. The social film, which in industrial parlance was the genre of social reform and social change in the modern epoch, could highlight technology as theme and self-reflexive form directly. In the devotional film, however, cinematic technology and its effects—for example, stop-motion, superimpositions—are "naturalized" by the generic verisimilitude accorded the miracle. Such genres, however, could also exhibit elements associated with a modernist destabilization of perception in their style. And, indeed, I will argue that the miraculous spectacles for which the genre is noted also invite a reflection on the implications of cinematic technology, and, more broadly, the cinematic techniques of artifice, of mechanical reproduction and copying, for the nature of social subjectivity. While such readings are the analyst's cherished prerogative, however, it should be noted that contemporary discourse on these films did not reflect on these issues at all. Thus, a left nationalist public, represented by critics such as K. A. Abbas, tended to be impressed by the evocation of traditional village life in terms of its realism of characterization, dress, and habit, and also for its delineation of social conflict.[5] The miracles, on the other hand, were regarded as dragging the realist achievement down and were seen to be pandering to popular audiences.[6] And popular these films were. *Sant Tukaram* ran for an unprecedented 52 weeks, and still gets full houses whenever it is revived. The film has contributed to the cult of Tukaram in Maharashtra, where his *abhangs* or songs in honor of the Vaishnavite deity Pandurang have great durability in the culture.

In referring to these genre divisions, one may also briefly allude to another difference within the studio, one that highlights a folk versus modern urban engagement. Thus, V. Shantaram was more strongly associated with the modern social film, while Syed Fattelal and Vishnupant Damle tended to draw upon the folk elements of oral culture and traditional beliefs. (One could not ask for a better model of syncretic resonance for the devotional film than the fact that its key collaboration was between a Hindu and a Muslim!) Here, they remained strongly attached to their origins in the popular Maharashtrian, urban folk culture of Baburao Painter. Shantaram, on the other hand, may have been closer to modernist elements in Maharashtrian literature and theatre.

5.   Abbas, who was a leading figure in the leftwing Indian People's Theatre Association, wrote film criticism, screenplays, and also directed films. For more information on this figure, see K. A. Abbas, *I Am Not an Island* (Delhi: Vikas: Publishing House, 1977).

6.   "It is essentially a human, rather than a super-human story and one can appreciate and even admire it without believing in the miracles by which Dnyaneshwar makes a buffalo recite the scriptures" (K. A. Abbas, "Sant Dnyaneshwar—His Miracles and Manushya Dharma," *Bombay Chronicle*, 25 May, 1940, reprinted in Watve, *V. Damle and S. Fattelal*, 33–35).

Let us now look at three important films from the devotional oeuvre: *Gopal Krishna*, *Sant Dnyaneshwar*, and *Sant Tukaram*, all directed by Damle and Fattelal between the years 1936 and 1940. I do not deal with these in chronological sequence, and use them to resonate among each other as they map the narrative structures, auditory and visual practices, and spectacular manifestations characteristic of the genre. If I dwell at greater length on *Sant Tukaram*, which is the earliest of these films, this is because it appears to me not only to be the most creative of the oeuvre, but because it highlights certain issues around cinematic spectatorship and the technologies of the miraculous in the most suggestive way.

Household, Village and the Child-god

Gopal Krishna (Fattelal and Damle, 1938) is arguably not a devotional in a straightforward sense. Instead of the earthly saint-mediator who aligns our view with another, divine space, the divine figure is himself present in the diegetic world, as a character directly available to other characters. He does not have to be conjured into existence by devotional acts of the sort which define, for example, *Shree Krishna Janma* (DG Phalke, 1918). In the latter film, diegetic spectators positioned as spectator surrogates at the bottom of the screen are recipients of his miraculous emergence atop the celestial vehicle of the Shesh Naag. Nevertheless, the god has a liminal position, being both a child born of earthly parents as well as a divine entity. And he orchestrates a devotional culture around him, of the village folk at large, who venerate him and follow his lead, and, more particularly, a devotional throng of women folk who succumb to the lure of his divine and magical flute.

Krishna in the Prabhat film is a child-god who inhabits a children's world, involved in play with other children, and is looked at by adults, especially adult women, both with admonition but also indulgence. This is the figure of play associated with the butter thief, the figure whose passion for ghee involves him in a variety of pranks. This figure too is available to us in Phalke's *Kaliya Mardaan* (DG Phalke, 1920). Phalke's rather beautiful silent film develops a rhythm of swaying movement deriving from the choreography of village women who involuntarily dance to Krishna's flute-playing. He is, of course, no ordinary child, possessed as he is of his flute magic. In *Gopal Krishna*, the flute exercises a particular power over the cattle of the village, the source of its nourishment and wealth. This resource is jeopardized by the demands of the evil and powerful Kansa, whose armies make demands on the village's milk and, ultimately, its cows; and yet, like a child, he is cuddled and cosseted by women folk. The liminal status of his child identity is highlighted by the film when his parents, overwhelmed by the lead he has given the village against Kansa, say, with a sense of awe, that they know who he is. They speak as if about to acknowledge his divine status. And yet this possibility is arrested by a mutual complicity, when

Krishna declares that he is their *laadla* (darling son), and the family burst into giggles.

Krishna is otherwise offered as a figure of exhortation and action, a child who dares to intrude in the assembly of elders and urges that the village elders refuse the demands of Kansa and his army. He is distinguished from other children by his crown, the finer garments he wears, and his lightness of complexion. The last is, of course, at variance with the conventional iconography of the dark-skinned child-god. Lighting strategies highlight this difference and also create a brighter space for him when he appears in the assembly. Here, iconizing structures of address in scene construction center him in the frame, pushing others to the margin and into audience formation. His speech is hortatory, as in the mode of a general rallying flagging troops. This is in a situation of danger. Otherwise, his beatific figure orchestrates the spatial dimensions of the village as a place of flows and play, a phenomenology which goes against the logic of household boundaries and delimited village interest articulated by his opponents.

The main figure here is Ayan, the husband of Radha. In this version, Radha, traditionally identified as a figure who expresses romantic desire for Krishna, is referred to by the child-god as mother, in the generic way that he addresses all women of the village. But she still has a special attachment, a protective disposition to him that is singled out and infuriates her husband. Ayan is a figure at the boundaries of village economy and superordinate authority. He argues a *realpolitik*, urging the village's incapacity to deal with the power arraigned against them in Kansa's army. Unlike others, he regards Krishna as an upstart child and nothing else, and as one who endangers the village's security by his foolhardy challenge to Kansa. If you want, this is the figure who embraces a reality orientation, who militates against the fluid functions of the child-god and his divine powers. It is also through him that we are given a solid sense of household boundary, of property in cattle, and of hierarchy. This is the hierarchy not only of reality over magic and myth, or of adult versus child, but also of employer over servant, displayed in his attitude to the servant and cowherd Pendya (known as Mansookh in the Hindi version of the film).

It is Pendya who provides the most fascinating dimension of the film's social imaginary and of a dynamic in the relationship between deity and devotee. He is Krishna's playmate, lieutenant, and incompetent double. Dogged by physical deformity, a twisted hand and leg, he resides in clear contrast to the beatific one and periodically succumbs to emotional distress at his inability to provide adequate support to his ego ideal. And yet it is typical of Prabhat, and especially its folk registers, that it highlights the ungainly face of everyday village life in order to extol its valor. Other children act alongside Krishna as equals in an agenda of play and political action, even if they must ultimately concede center stage to their divine playmate. And the narrative highlights a recurrent imperative of the devotional film. This is an imagination of equivalence with the divine, where

hierarchy between the earthly and the divine is, if only temporarily and playfully, neutralized. In one instance, Keshi, Kansa's general, determines to disguise himself, enter the village, and abduct the troublesome child leader. He is led in a merry dance by the children, who by turns claim to be Krishna, ostensibly to protect him, but also as a spectacle for their leader's amusement. In the process, they display aspirations of equivalence to the divine figure, which ultimately culminate in a triumphant physical over-whelming of Keshi by their collective might. This aspirational dimension is extended later when Pendya insists that it is he rather than Krishna who will go to parley with Kansa, leading to a ridiculous encounter, but one nonetheless touching for its valiant effrontery.

From Household to Community in the Itinerary of *Sant Dnyaneshwar*

Let us consider further some of these recurrent narrative structures, as these negotiate and rehierarchize issues of ritual position, familial and householder status, and a broader, inclusive sense of community in *Sant Dnyaneshwar* (Fattelal and Damle, 1940). Trade papers and public dis-course often refer to the saint films also as biographicals, and this is so if we consider these as hagiographical moments in the unravelling of an exemplary life. In *Sant Dnyaneshwar*, dates provide reference to the pas-sage of historical time, events which occurred to a demonstrably historical figure from the thirteenth century. But this film is quite remarkable in the concrete evocation of embattled lives in the familial/biographical detailing of its opening sequences. It is also perhaps distinctive in the genre of the devotional in mobilizing melodramatic methods. This is deployed both for the family but also, and perhaps most powerfully, for a register of unful-filled romance. Perhaps the mobilization of such registers, more commonly available in the social genre of these years, relates to a distinctive strategy of evoking a new situation of the ritually ascribed household as one of femi-nine lack and sublimation. In turn, this could be related to the emergence of a new and more differentiated audience profile for the film. It was remarked at the time that *Sant Dnayeneshwar* was a much more polished work than its predecessors in terms of composition, cutting, and performance, though there were serious reservations about the miracles that abounded in the film's second half, seen by certain critics as concession to popular audi-ences. Perhaps in the circumstances of the film's main female character, Manu, the film was trying to encompass a more modernized sector of the women's audience. Certainly, as we will observe, the characterization contrasts sharply with the figure of Jijai, Tuka's wife in *Sant Tukaram*.[7]

7.   And it also contrasts with Shanta Apte's portrayal of Radha in *Gopal Krishna*. In fact, in a less inventive fashion, it invokes the more troubled, unhappy char-acterization essayed by Apte in Shantaram's *Kunku/Duniya Na Mane* (1936).

We are given an account of the miserable conditions of a Brahman, Vithalpant, who has lost standing due to his infringement of ritual taboos. In the opening of the film, the narrative defines this in very familiar and indeed iconic ways, in the recurrent tale of the poor Brahman compelled to seek alms not only because of religious vocation but also for the needs of family survival. This passage explores the recurrent enquiry staged by devotional narratives into the constraints posed by familial and household imperatives in imagining a wider sense of community. The infringement of protocols in fact thematizes this strongly. The Brahman Vithalpant becomes a follower of a famous guru while still married. The guru has admitted him to the order of a renunciatory sect, and thereby into the status of the *sanyasi*, without knowing that he is still a *grahasti*, a householder. This movement out of an ongoing, rather than a concluded, marital status into *sanyas* is prohibited, just as the return from *sanyas* to householder status is forbidden. Vithalpant's movement in and out of the prescribed ritual stages of the life cycle is seen as a challenge to the ordained path. The Brahmanical community therefore casts him out, and this has consequences for the four children he has fathered. Compelled to be a householder, but deprived of the ritual standing which would give his family economic security, the originary or back story to the main narrative line highlights a crucial division and dilemma posed by the films of spiritual and social quest. How to seek the divine once one loses ritual standing and access to the protocols which alone can provide communion with the lord? How, in turn, lacking ritual status, can the Brahman still remain in the established order of the world, at the center of which lies the family, reliant for its reproduction on the capital of ritual status? This can only be resolved when the family and the ritual passage of householder are removed from their authoritative roles, a move which unlocks the social terrain itself and provides a broader, inclusive sense of who can access the divine. This is undertaken by Vithalpant's second son, Dnyaneshwar. After successive attempts to regain ritual status, he and his siblings leave the Brahmanical community, and receive the spontaneous hospitality of a farmer, a shudra low in the ritual hierarchy. In keeping with the somewhat different address of this film, there are elements of a more hierarchical social reform agenda in this narrative move. While the encounter mobilizes a key motif in the devotional, that of embracing the popular language of Marathi to communicate the words of god to the people, there is also a pedagogical dimension to this. The farming community is fearful of a particular well, and goes far away to get its water. They are shocked to find Dnyaneshwar and the other children drinking from the well, which they fear is populated by malignant spirits. Dnyaneshwar here undertakes a work of educating them out of superstition. And from now he acquires a popular acclaim as people come from far and wide to listen to him.

But let us return to the question of the household, now jettisoned as an imperative once the family moves out from Brahmanical society and finds

provender from the wider community. The household still exists, but in the space of the unfulfilled woman, Manu, Dnyaneshwar's childhood friend. The daughter of the bigoted Brahman Visoba, Manu is romantically attached to Dyaneshwar, a romance which mingles with her devotional yearning for the sacred. Visoba takes Manu to make a marriage alliance with another Brahman family, and she is eager to go, for this happens to be in the very place where Dnyaneshwar has grown to become a famed *bhakt* or devotee. Her attraction to him proves fatal to the marriage alliance as, at the very moment the deal is about to be struck, she hears Dnyaneshwar in the street outside, and is drawn involuntarily to him, blighting her family's chances. Here, the melodramatic structures work forcefully along the grid of the household as a form of imprisonment. Dnyaneshwar returns to Alandi when invited by the Brahmans, but Manu, who has sworn to her father that she will never try to see him or speak to him again, can only look out from her window as she hears his religious sermons. It is only at the climax, when Dnyaneshwar demonstrates his powers to their full over a revered sage that Visoba gives in and begs Dnyaneswhar's forgiveness. But it is not too long after this that Dnyaneshwar takes *samadhi*, or heavenly transcendence from the world.

This structure of devotion as unfulfilled romance integrates the Brahman household back into narrative space as a marginalized form and a constraint on desire, dramatizing its symbolic function within the narrative world of the devotional film. It is melodramatic in a modern sense, for it works by integration rather than dispersal. In *Gopal Krishna* the constraints are simply dissolved in the utopian imaginary produced by the child-god, where everyone is converted into the mother, even if this carries a latent charge of sexuality in the figure of Radha. But here, Manu is the type of modern woman constrained by patriarchal caste restrictions. She is tied down to the house but nevertheless driven by desire for a figure she can never gain. Here, we have a significant mobility of the figure, away from the more folkish invocations of the other films, and in alignment with the unfulfilled figure of the so-called woman's movie.[8]

The Disaggregated World of *Sant Tukaram*

Sant Tukaram (Fatehlal and Damle, Marathi, 1937), like the other films in this selection, have the reformist saint of the seventeenth century invoking the Vaishnavite deity to provide an alternative vision of social conditions and political self-determination for the character/spectator. The story centers on how the Brahman community, led by Salomolo, seeks to break the

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8.   For the key work on this theme, see Christine Gledhill, ed., *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987).

popular standing of the lowly saint, Tukaram. They do this through a number of methods: Salomolo takes Tuka's compositions and passes them off as his own; he later seeks to ruin him by engineering a buffalo stampede on the crop that Tuka has been retained to protect; he calls upon Rameshwar Shastri, a renowned interpreter of scriptural authority, to denounce Tuka's mode of worship, which challenges priestly monopolies; finally, when Shivaji comes to seek wisdom from Tuka, he instigates an attack by a local chieftain on the Maratha King and his spiritual mentor. All of Salomolo's attempts fail. Apart from the unassailable nature of Tuka's creativity with popular language, Tuka handles the various problems through the power of his devotion, a faith to which the deity responds by bestowing a series of miraculous solutions for his follower's earthly travails.

Geeta Kapur has written evocatively about the aesthetic address through which the film acquires its luminous power.[9] She has in particular drawn attention to the iconic registers of Tuka's address, the way in which his singing enwraps the spectator in the embrace of popular and folk forms, in a sense recovering a familiar universe of devotional song and image for the contemporary audience. This positing of community through sound and image provides for the particular regional inflection that the Prabhat films brought to the forms of frontality and direct address, generally characteristic of Indian popular cinema and, in particular, of the devotional genre. These are augmented, in Kapur's account, by Vishnupant Pagnis as Tukaram, a performance which mobilizes a motif elsewhere observable in ritual performance and play, that of a condition of being rather than of representation in the relationship between actor and character. This aura of devotional presence is made available through a certain beatific embodiment, a situation of popular grace and equipoise that can encompass the earthy body as an aesthetic form. This unusual sense of understanding between actor/character and audience resonates in this reading as political allegory alluding to the historic centrality of Gandhi to the culture of the times.

I will return to the logic of this suggestive reading, especially in exploring further its reference to contemporary politics. I would, however, like to complicate it by suggesting two other dimensions to the story world of *Sant Tukaram*, which explore further the thematic of household and ritual determinants in the narrative logic of the genre. The first is a different register of performance, of bodily disposition and, indeed, of camera presence. For the serene equipoise of the central figure of the devotee saint to acquire its particular auratic power, it has to be distinguished from other modes of performance and ways of being in the narrative world. While the caricatural performance of Salomolo is the obvious other of Tuka, composed of the

9.   Geeta Kapur, "Mythic Material in Indian Cinema," *Journal of Arts and Ideas* (Delhi) 14–15 (July–December 1987): 79–108; reprinted as "Revelation and Doubt in *Sant Tukaram* and *Devi*," in *When was Modernism?: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000), 233–64.

frenetic physicality and broad humor of the Prabhat comic actor Bhagwat, it is perhaps more powerfully Jijai, Tuka's wife (Gauri) who captures Tuka's true other. These are indeed gendered differences but are also to do with different senses of being-in-the-world. While devoted to her unworldly husband, Jijai is also frustrated by his indifference to everyday wants and is driven by an earthy commonsense. When the munificence of Pandurang, the Vaishnavite deity worshipped by Tuka, visits an abundance of grain on him, Jijai finds her spouse allowing the villagers to take whatever they want, leaving hardly anything for his impoverished family. Later, when Shivaji offers his spiritual mentor a dazzling array of fine clothing, Jijai and her children enthusiastically adorn themselves with the gift, only for Tuka gently to have them take these off and return them to the king's emissaries.

The interest here is not only of vividly capturing different dispositions to the world and the fascination of different modes of performance. It lies in the trajectory of different worlds, which perforce overlap but nevertheless remain separate. These are crucially the world of the household and that of the transcendent to which Tuka aspires. The duality of overlap and separation is crucial here, for this suggests a disaggregated form, in which the household maintains its own logic of existence irrespective of the spiritual calling by which the protagonist is motivated. But it is the coming together of the worlds that facilitates the advancement of the narrative and its political trajectory. Here Jijai springs a certain logic which she shares along with other worldly entities, that of placing a demand that the faith of her husband, and the powers of Pandurang, be given concrete form, be materialized in specific acts. It is through such demands that the narrative precipitates its imagination of social, and, indeed, political transformation through the *bhakt*.

This is suggested in the opening set of episodes. While the sustained, statically framed musical performance by Tukaram is then juxtaposed with the vulgar (and comically pleasurable) movement of Salomolo as he lays claim to authorship of Tuka's verses, the juxtaposition gives way to the world of Jijai and her children. Jijai invokes her personal goddess, Mangalai, as she bathes the buffalo. The image is an extraordinarily tactile one, as Jijai separates hay from sodden earth, and pours water over the animal, lovingly cleaning him down. The film here evokes through Jijai a world of pantheistic beliefs, a kind of lived reality of *bhakti* worship's emphasis on the presence of God in all living creatures. In contrast, in the persona of the angry housewife, she is livid when Tuka returns from his devotional world. In a startlingly dynamic and violent rendering, she flings her ailing son first onto Tuka's lap and then, frustrated by his continuing invocation of Pandurang, runs across, tears the child from Tuka and then flings him down on the ground. She then pulls the crying child along, a series of cuts interspersed with lateral tracking shots to capture the dynamic of her movement along the street to Pandurang's temple. Here, she pushes past Salomolo,

throws the boy before the image of the deity and accosts him with her slipper. Despite Jijai's lack of belief in Pandurang, the god bestows the miracle, as fingers of light pass over the child and bring his health back. The mercurial Jijai abruptly transmutes into an affectionate and loving mother, delighted at her son's recovery. But this in no way converts her to a belief in Pandurang. She remains resilient in her attachment to Mangalai.

The opening set of sequences is then organized in terms of a certain narrative, and additionally, a cinematic imperative. The first two sequences are organized so that Salomolo's effrontery is intercut with Tuka's devotion to his lord; after its completion, we are returned to Tuka and the conclusion of his devotional singing. Salomolo's space is differentiated from Tuka's, in the representation of the forms of worship, the one still and immersed, the other manic and gestural. But it is also differentiated because the latter has an audience, and Tuka lacks one; or, more precisely, his audience is the cinematic audience, but in a way markedly different from the forms of frontality and direct address we may observe elsewhere, and which in a sense makes the cinematic audience into a diegetic one. Here, the communication sought is between Tuka and his lord, and the film's audience is the privileged witness to this address. His singing directs us to a point that is both inner, but also higher, not-material, and this elevation in the look is not just contingent or fortuitous, but could be said to refer to a space beyond. Here is an invitation to look in a distinctly imaginary way.

Whatever the distinctive privilege this address offers its public, it is not enough, neither for characters in the fiction, nor, perhaps, for the historical audience. Thus, Jijai, the unbeliever, makes a demand on Pandurang, and that demand is responded to in terms of material effects. More pointedly, she abruptly, and violently, brings together hitherto separated spaces by the visceral qualities of her angry movement, a narrative move that enables editing and camera movement that jolts and ruptures the rhythm of spectator perception.

Redefining the Social Realm

Like the other films in the oeuvre, *Sant Tukaram's* narrative dynamic is intent on reshaping social and cultural perception of rank and hierarchy, and like *Sant Dnyaneshwar*, aims to find an audience, perhaps more pointedly a constituency, within the story world of the saint's message. The constituency is even more extensive than Dnyaneshwar's. It is first of all that of lower-caste folk, which in the film's social imagination includes well-to-do farmers and agricultural laborers and, subsequently, beggars and the destitute. Again, like Dnyaneshwar, the momentum of the saint's appeal draws the upper castes, and especially the Brahmans, into its fold, suggesting thereby a mingling and co-presence of groups hitherto separated by caste prohibitions and hierarchies. Once Tuka leaves his lofty perch, where

he meditates and seeks communion with his lord, there is a presentation of, literally, bodies, followed later by an accumulating throng of people seized with his message, chanting Pandurang's name and singing Tuka's verse. When Rameshwar Shastri, the great Sanskrit scholar and protector of sacred protocols, arrives to investigate Tuka's infringement of religious ritual, he is surrounded by a moving picture of everyday life in work spaces and the bazaar permeated by a sense of devotional being. This is the particular achievement of the film, to body forth in strong images the working world of the devotional constituency.

The first intimation of this bodily transformation of story world into a space of devotion comes across startlingly. Tuka, hired by the rich peasant Dnyanoba to guard his fields from cattle, is seated on a platform, looking over the lush vista of the standing crop. As he sings his praises of Pandurang's creation of a bountiful world, where dissolves track the growth of tiny seeds and saplings into the glorious crop in front of his eyes, a cut to the tight framing of the immediate vicinity of the saint shows the space accumulating laboring bodies, their backs, shining with sweat, to the camera. Voices invoke Pandurang, and bodies sway in hypnotic rhythm to the song of the saint. The tightness of the frame makes it swell with a sensual, laboring presence. It is as if the song space has broken through the opposition of the original constellation, between different dispositions to the sacred, such that the popular form has acquired a material, social presence and perceptual weight. In terms of the sheer density of a *mise-en-scène* of bodies, we will observe two registers in the film, of desire and what we could term a vision of moral economy. The congregation of laboring bodies suggests how the devotional realm provides them with a voice and a spiritual content. Here the subjectivity of labor can, through a devotional idiom evolved outside caste interdiction, find a form to access the divine and acquire public self-assertion. In the process, another logic is released, a redistributive one which challenges the rights of castes and individuals over the productivity of human labor and nature.

Property and Community

Gopal Krishna's utopian idiom argues that the cattle of the village are common property. *Sant Dnyaneshwar* removes the ritually defined family economy from its revised vision of society, except now as a place of lack occupied by the other, the unrelenting Brahman and his unfulfilled daughter. But *Sant Tukaram* displays a greater investment in evoking a culture of the laboring bodies who constitute the community and of the cultures of scarcity that confront human society. When Tuka completes his first successful day of work in guarding the crops, he is paid with grain and sugarcane. As he walks home, invoking in his slow, steady movement the name of his benefactor, a crowd of children emerges, asking for the sticks of

sugarcane. These are pictured on a street corner and in a straggling troupe, which follows Tuka as a playful, massing body of incessant demands. The image of a popular redistribution of earthly needs is even more powerfully rendered in a subsequent moment. Pandurang, pictured as small child familiar from images of Krishna in popular folk performance and in the cinema, stands atop a cloud, and rains grain down to compensate the losses sustained by the cattle assault. A grateful Dnyanoba gifts the excess of production to the saint whom he had earlier berated for his incompetence. Tuka, of course, gives everything away, and we see hands thrusting into the heap of grain and into the bags of wheat sent to Tuka's house by Dnyanoba, as myriad people are sated by the gift.

Here, there is a utopian imagination of the social realm as one predicated on a giving up of propertied control over material wealth and provender, a disposition that is embodied by Tuka, but infuses others such as the well-to-do peasant, Dnyanoba. Significantly, in the logic of narrative transformation, village authority itself undergoes a change of heart and redefines the power exercised by landed authority. We are given the information that Salomolo owns the land on which Dnyanoba's crop stands. The Patil, or village headman, appears to side with Salomolo, sharing his skepticism when the honest Dnyanoba hires Tuka. When Pandurang grants his devotee the magical gift of grain, Salomolo as owner of the land claims the surfeit of the product, but Dnyanoba refuses, offering only what is due to the Brahman in the crop-sharing agreement. Of course, subsequently, he himself gives up the surplus to Tuka, who in turn gives it to the destitute and needy. The miracle, in its very bestowing of the bountiful crop, not only resolves the immediate threat Tuka and his family face; it provides the conditions for a larger symbolic act. The goods produced by the labor of humanity and the productivity of nature cannot be accumulated as property, but must be distributed among the community. Richard Dyer has perceptively remarked on the utopian propensities of popular cultural imagination, where a sense of lack in everyday life is provided imaginative compensation. Thus scarcity, monotony, diminished energy and marginality are compensated through narratives of abundance and plenitude, action, adventure and performative energy, and a recovery of dignity and significance to the marginalized individual and community.[10] The abundance of material provender released by the miracle would be a case in point.

From Physical Property to Intellectual Property

What is particularly interesting in *Sant Tukaram* is the shifting ground on which miraculous manifestations are called upon to stoke the utopian

10. Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," in *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols (2 vols.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 2:220–32.

imaginary. When Salomolo finds himself outflanked in his bid to ruin Tuka, he turns to religious authority to oust his opponent. Rameshwar Shastri, the renowned religious scholar and authority, arrives in response to Salomolo's complaint. And he arrives in an entirely transformed setting. From the sight of the congregation of laborers who surround Tuka in the fields, through the multitude which emerges as constituency for his redistribution of goods, there now comes into view an overwhelming constellation: the entire village invokes Pandurang in their daily routines of work and public congregation. As Rameshwar Shastri rides through the village he sees women shaping pots, men in their foundries, and all invoking the name of the folk deity.

The village will be lost to the imprimatur of Brahmanical authority. This is clearly indicated when the Patil or village headman, hitherto Salomolo's ally, protests when he hears Salomolo demand that the upstart be removed from the village. The protest signals how power in the village has been neutralized by the growing popularity of the saint. Thus, the village and its hierarchies can no longer be the ground of Salomolo's strategy. He sidelines the Patil, saying that he has no authority to meddle in religious matters. This provides the new ground on which the contest will be fought, around Tukaram's infringement of ritual authority and scriptural protocols.

Dnyaneshwar too had been pitted against scriptural authority as a child seeking readmission to ritual status. He responds to the priests' declaration that they can find no precedent for his family's case by debate, arguing that this shows how far the scriptures have departed from *manushya dharma*, the religion of humanity. While in this case the saint responds in kind, in the case of *Sant Tukaram* what is suggestive here is the question of how the lowly saint would dare to use a language different from that of Brahmanical diktat to invoke and thereby access the lord. The film not only stresses the importance of words and of poetic speech, but also the public availability of such speech, unencumbered by ritual intermediaries, and open for anyone to use irrespective of caste or rank. From the contest over the material riches produced by the community as they work on nature, we have shifted to the spiritual wealth of language and its communally embodied practice.

Religious Texts as Magical Objects

We have observed that in *Sant Tukaram* the particular power of the contest is manifest in terms of the embodiment of the idea of god rendered through the voice and practice of community, that startling constellation of sound and image, which greets Rameshwar Shastri on his arrival. The film, however, makes another move, shifting the contest onto another imagistic level. When Rameshwar Shastri judges that Tuka has blasphemed and must never again compose devotional *bhajans*, Salomolo adds the rider that all

previous compositions must never be used again and must be destroyed. For Tuka's verses are not only available in oral form: they are also stored in written form, physically imprinted on paper and bound into the dusty volumes which accumulate on the shelves of Tuka's family dwelling.

How do we understand this movement away from the primarily oral and musical culture that has hitherto been the dominant focus of contest and assertion? Perhaps we need to look at the history of popular perceptions about the relationship between oral and written culture in *bhakti* traditions. For the moment, I will restrict my analysis to the question of the image-driven status of the written form, and its relationship to the main character's subjectivity. Here, we have a commutation of Tuka's work and his subjectivity into the written form. The film undertakes this move in order to concentrate attention on the *object,* one that can be destroyed, and thereby jeopardize the subjectivity it houses. Clearly, this is again a way of referring to the subjectivity not only of the author, now rendered in written form and as talismanic object, but also as embodying the creativity of community to which the verses have given sensuous form. More to the point, it can be sacralized as something which can take its rightful place in a space hitherto available only to the sacred texts read and interpreted by the Brahman. Once the object has been miraculously restored, this is what happens, as Rameshwar Shastri undertakes penance by giving the object due honor and standing.

In *Sant Dnyaneshwar*, the written form of religious wisdom is specifically indexed as a book, the *Bhagwata Gita*. The book in *Sant Dnyaneshwar* functions iconically, as the source of inspiration for Dnyaneshwar and his siblings in the face of adversity, and subsequently manifests magical properties. When Brahmans accost them for having brought the village into jeopardy by taking on the sage, Chandrashekhar Jaidev, the saintly family is assailed with doubt, retreats to their dwelling, and sets the house alight. It is the *Gita* which repels and reverses the flow of flames, tongues of fire licking at the pages but finally being dispersed. If the sacred text acquires an imagistic status, so too does Dnyaneshwar's writing, which is not only read out but presented as ornate and embellished calligraphy.

Cinematic Miracles: An Aesthetics of Astonishment?

In terms of cinematic tropes, the devices typical of a magical or miracle cinema, rather than those of visceral bodily action, provide the armature of attraction and narrative transformation. If, in the first instance, we are drawn into the violent bodily rhythms of Jijai's forcible movement between spaces, then the more characteristic filmic devices are those of dissolves, superimpositions and stop-motion editing. Tom Gunning has, in the context of such devices, remarked on an aesthetics of astonishment in the mode of address of the early cinema to its audiences. This address solicited a sense

of wonder at the visual changes that the apparatus of cinema could pro-vide, as in the manner of a magic show or conjuring trick. Through dis-solves and superimpositions, bodies are seen to substitute for each other, as frames fade out and in. With stop-motion editing, the camera is stopped, the object in front of the camera changed, and the camera started again, providing the impression of a change in object without a cut.[11]

In the early period of Euro-American cinema, films highlighted the technological wonders available to the new medium in what has been called a "cinema of attractions," governed by the pleasures of ocular attraction rather the subsequent industrial emphasis on narrative integration.[12] Clearly, these attractions continued, even when cinema entertainment's main objective came to be those of telling a story, and subordinating whatever one sees and hears on-screen to the onward flow of character-centered narrative causality. This is most evident in American and Euro-pean cinema in the context of certain genres for which special effects are central, as in the case of science fiction and horror films. In the Indian case, the mythological and devotional films clearly demand such an empha-sis on techniques of magical transformation. Attempts have been made to understand the continued importance of such genres, from the earliest days of cinema through to the 1940s, in terms of a discourse of audience dispo-sitions. Thus, it was said that plebeian classes tended to be attracted to genres such as stunt films and mythological films. The trade implied that these audiences enjoyed the visceral and trick effects, as well as the aura of devout belief retailed by the mythological films.[13]

My speculation is that sensational attractions alone cannot explain the hold of these films nor, probably, the sensory orientations of their audi-ences. Generic verisimilitude in mythological and devotional films requires something more than the convention that figures with magical powers populate a particular story world. For the films show that the miracles intrinsic to the genre require a certain narrative logic to make them "work," and that a critical disposition and a process of reasoning define this logic. This reasoning is oriented to a vision of society, how it works, what hierar-chies compose it, and the social conditions that provide for change. Such reasoning does not take place only by tracking the awareness and actions of a character, and the way they develop over the time of the story. It does so by orchestrating a certain logic of emergence of collective social forms. Thus, for miracles to happen, they must flow not only from belief in the

11.   Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the [In]Credu-lous Spectator," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 114–33.

12.   Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Film: Space—Frame—Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker (London: British Film Institute, 1989), 56–62.

13.   Vasudevan, "The Politics of Cultural Address."

miracle-giving agent, the divine entity, but in the devotional community. As we have observed, the genre requires that the saint make himself present to his social environment, and in the process makes this environment visible, assertive, and desiring. It is on the ground of such a making of subjects into communities that the miraculous intervention can take place.

Gopal Krishna actually uses very few trick shots. On one occasion, when Krishna's flute is snatched away and stamped on, it continues to play, however fragmented and dispersed it is. It is as if the object has a subjectivity of its own, carrying on the will of the master but without the requirement of the master's presence. Magical objects continue to function as vehicles of desire, whether these be the flute or religious texts that carry the aspirations of community in them. Indeed, the force of such magical condensation can reverse narrative temporality. Thus, Dnyaneshwar's followers, a set of burly farmers, are intent on chasing away the Brahmanical emissaries of the great sage Jaidev. His powers freeze them in mid-flight. They now reside in the stilled photographic image, and also function as photographic backdrop to the narrative movement that occurs in front of them. Here, not only the dynamic of film, but of the narrative world inaugurated by Dnyaneshwar grinds to a halt. Chastened, the saint and his siblings prepare to dissolve themselves and the world they have produced, setting their abode on fire. But it is now that the *Bhagwata Gita* pushes the flames back, restores the house, and returns the peasants, and the momentum of the narrative, to its original direction.

Such reflections on the perceptual logic of the camera, of photography and film, may be covered over by the generic event of the miracle. But we may observe other instances where the miraculous mobilizes an awareness of how the new culture of mechanical reproduction, the culture of the copy, generates a new sense of community and, indeed, of politics.

Conclusion: Cinema as Miracle—The Culture of the Copy

Let us end by returning to *Sant Tukaram*. Having failed to mobilize scriptural authority against the saint, Salomolo now turns to the realm of politics for redressal of his grievances. Here, too, his designs run aground. He makes a representation to the Maratha King Shivaji about the transgressions of the low-caste devotee and views the arrival of Shivaji's emissaries with great anticipation. The emissaries, however, lavish rich garments on the impoverished family and are startled to see Tuka arrive and gently remove them from Jijai and her children. The film abruptly cuts to an unexpected image: Shivaji himself is a secret witness to the gesture. The king, it appears, is already an admirer of the saint, and Tuka's gesture of refusal only confirms the high standing in which he is held. He announces his desire to give up worldly matters, for which Tuka gently chastises him.

A key sequence of the film now unfolds in the shrine of Pandurang.

Tukaram expounds a discourse of duty to Shivaji, and this extends into a more general address, as the film frames Tukaram in relation to other segments of the general public who have assembled in the shrine. Tukaram's discourse of duty is designed to persuade Shivaji not to give up his kingly role for a life of devotion, and it would appear to have conservative dimensions, fixing people to the roles they are assigned. But Tukaram's message emphasizes that all will find their path to the divine, and the film then goes on to replay this message of ultimate, transcendent equality in terms of an earthly political equivalent. Salomolo, having failed to bring the king to his side, instigates his enemy, a local chieftain, to attack him. Taking advantage of Shivaji's immersion in the religious dialogue, they descend on the shrine, and at this point Tukaram appeals to Pandurang to save his devotee. Cuts from Tukaram to Pandurang ultimately culminate in a series of phantom images of Shivaji being released from the deity and coming to repose in the assembled public; wherever the invaders look, they see Shivaji, but when they grasp the figure, he turns into a startled member of the public.

The ultimate act of divine intervention, the protection of Shivaji by the distribution of his image, is rendered through a triangulation of looks among spectator, saint, and the deity, a figure without clear diegetic location who seems generated out of the eyelines of the saint and the spectator, out of a momentum of demand to see the enactment of a miracle. In this instance there is a decidedly cinematic materialization of the miraculous. For when the deity Pandurang releases images of Shivaji, this is done through the technique of superimpositions. Shivaji is copied and distributed among the assembly. In a sense, then, the aura of kingship is dispersed by its distribution as a copy, and we are presented with a return on our desires as spectators. The desire to witness the miracle of cinema: a new utopian imagination, where the king is only a reproducible image, or, indeed, everyone is the king.

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Religious Cinematics:
The Immediate Body in the Media of Film

S. Brent Plate

Abstract

Religious cinematics is concerned with the "moving picture," and with its impact on the "moving body." Particularly utilizing Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological descriptions of the "aesthesiological body," this article briefly outlines a movement of the film viewer's body that is pre-conscious, before rational awareness, in front of the film screen. Ultimately, it turns to Stan Brakhage's unwatchable film, *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*, to make the case for moments of "cinematic mysticism," when the categorizing functions of film and the senses break down. In this way, a renewing function of filmic ritual emerges, not from a transcendental other-worldliness but from a grounding in the human sensing body.

The creation myth of cinema goes something like this: In a Paris café in December 1895, the Lumière brothers projected several films onto a wall. A bemused audience had gathered to see the latest in a string of imagistic inventions that emerged through the nineteenth century—from reconceived camera obscuras to the newer camera lucidas and stereoscopes, from the daguerreotype to photographic film and eventually color photographs—and that offered fascinating new modes for re-seeing the world. The viewers that winter night were apparently not disappointed. The films were all silent, single-reel, and lasting less than a minute. They portrayed everyday events of modern urban life such as workers leaving a factory, the demolition of a wall, and, most famously, a train arriving at a station. The latter was shot with the film camera mounted on a train platform, as if the cinematographer-cum-viewer were waiting for the train her/himself, and the action unfolds as the train moves toward the camera. In popular retellings of the initial viewing, some of the Parisians watching *Train Arriving at a Station*

that evening jumped from their chairs and even began to run away as the train seemingly came through the walls of the café. With this screening and a popular retelling of the event of that screening, we are firmly in the realm of myth.

A number of scholars have attempted to demythologize these origins of cinema, particularly when the retelling smacks of a pedantic, contemporary viewpoint looking back on "those" naïve viewers in the beginning.[1] Whether or not viewers in that café actually got up from their chairs may never be known for sure, but one does not need to go any further than the local multiplex to observe the ways the audio-visual experience of film works on the body: audiences sit engrossed in the unfolding scenes on screen, jumping back in their chairs at suspenseful moments, weeping at poignant scenarios acted out, hiding their eyes at the scary parts. There is a visceral reaction to film. To go a step further toward proving the extreme bodily responses possible among the *fin de siècle* Parisians, one merely needs to attend a contemporary screening of a 3-D film: here audiences actively reach out to grasp objects and creatures that seem to come off the screen and into the theater space. The 3-D film is the latest in a series of technological inventions in film production and projection, and takes its place among more than a century's worth of new modes of reinventing the world on film. In each of these developments one thing remains constant: the perceiving body in the screening space is an active body, perpetually in motion.

In the beginning, then, "religious cinematics" is concerned with *the body in motion*. In this article I take up the issue not just of the "moving picture," but also of the "moving body," and of the relations between the two. The relation between filmic and bodily movement, I suggest, has much to do with traditional religious ritual, especially when particular film images strike the bodily senses and cause the body to move in response to an aesthetic, formalized liturgy of represented words, images, and sounds. In this way, my article attempts to chart a potential new direction for studies working at the intersection of religion and film. By focusing not simply on some religious *content* of a film but on the bodily responses to film, I attempt to take seriously the formal structures of film and the ways in which film works sensually and aesthetically, and to consider how this interaction is analogous to the ways traditional religious rituals have operated.

The first section below will introduce some of the dimensions of a "religious cinematics," of the general interrelations between film image and

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1.   Rachel O. Moore argues that this retelling of "naïve spectatorship," reassures "us of our superior position as spectators, while at the same time they enact our felt affinity to the primitive faced with our disappearing world" (*Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* [Durham: Duke University Press], 4). Then again, compare early filmmaker George Méliès' response on that first night: "We were open-mouthed, dumbfounded, astonished beyond words in the face of this spectacle" (quoted in Emmanuelle Toulet, *Birth of the Motion Picture* [New York: Harry Abrams, 1995], 15).

body more broadly. Engaging Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological descriptions of the "aesthesiological body," that which combines both sensing and thinking, I outline in further detail the dimensions of the sensual, perceiving body. My investigation here takes place within a longstanding philosophical and cognitive investigation into the relation between haptics and optics, the point at which *vision is felt*; between the ways in which film is never "merely" image and/or sound but always multimedial, impacting the various senses of the human body and causing it to shudder or sob, laugh or leap.[2] What I aim to outline (or at least point toward, since my ultimate trajectory shoots beyond or before language) is a movement of the body that is pre-conscious, before rational awareness. Thus, in the final section, via Stan Brakhage's "unwatchable" film, *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*, I make the case for moments of "cinematic mysticism," when the categorizing functions of film and the senses break down. In sensual confrontation with the filmic image of the dead body, I suggest that a religious cinematics has a powerful potential to escape its mediated confines and bring a viewing body face-to-face with death. As such, images and bodies merge in an experience not unlike that of the mystical experience, when borders, divisions, and media all break down. In this way, a renewing function of filmic ritual emerges.

Religious Cinematics: From Film to Body and Back

> The artist has carried the tradition of vision and visualization down through the ages. In the present time a very few have continued the process of visual perception in its deepest sense and transformed their inspirations into cinematic experiences. They create a new language made possible by the moving picture image. They create where fear before them has created the greatest necessity. They are essentially preoccupied by and deal imagistically with—birth, sex, death, and the search for God.
>
> —Stan Brakhage,
> *Metaphors on Vision*

About the making of the avant-garde film *Wavelength*, Michael Snow observed: "I wanted to make a summation of my nervous system, religious

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2.   There have been a number of recent works in film theory relating the body to the cinematic experience. In the background of the current article are works such as: Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000); Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Theory Out of Bounds 2; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); and Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). Each of these works are, in turn, especially indebted to the corporeal philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

inklings and aesthetic ideas."[3] In response to such a statement one might immediately raise the question: What possible "religious inkling" could be expressed in a film that for 45 minutes does little more than slowly zoom in on a small picture from across a somewhat empty room? What does the nervous system have to do with it? To put it more generally, what is the nature of the relationship between the formal and structural components of avant-garde filmmaking, and religious experience? I cannot be sure if what I have to say in the following resembles the intents of Snow or Brakhage, but it provides an answer for the relation of religion and the corporeal, nervous activity of seeing.

Like the scientific investigations of its variant spelling "kinematics" and, more specifically that of its etymological cousin "kinetics"—"the branch of dynamics which investigates the relations between the motions of bodies and the forces acting upon them"[4]—religious cinematics is concerned with the motion of the human body being acted upon by the audio-visual forces of film. My aim here is to look at the relation *between* motion pictures and moving bodies and some of the particular ways in which films *can* stir the body to action. Ultimately, I argue that there is a deep resonance to religious ritual found within this interaction. Yet to understand this interaction, we must first break down the relation and analyze the various media that exist between image and body.

By "media" I do not merely mean what so often travels under that name: high-tech, electronic media such as the Internet, television, or even "mass media." Instead, I intend it in its more literal and primal form as something "in the middle." Being "in the middle" of things, *in medias res*, is to alter the relations between the things themselves, so that media end up working as a "filter," by which substances are sorted, categorized, and thus forced to become something other than they were "originally." (Without getting too far into metaphysical speculation here, it is indeed questionable to say there is any*thing* in an original form; things only exist as they are embodied, mediated, put into form.) To say with Marshall McLuhan that "the medium is the message" may be slightly hyperbolic, but not by much.

In terms of religious cinematics, singular film images do not simply meet a singular body mass. Rather, images are sifted and sorted, compartmentalized and cataloged, as they are taken in by the seeing body. I am dealing here with two varieties of media. The first is the medium of film, whereby the sounds and images of the world outside are filtered through various apparatuses of film production. These mediated sounds and images are then engaged by the second medium, the bodily sense receptors; most specifically those dealing with hearing and seeing, even as an all-important

3.   Michael Snow, *Film Culture* 46 (1967): 1. Quoted in P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 352.
4.   *s.v.*, *Oxford English Dictionary*.

synaesthetic response occurs so that the body is ultimately *touched* and stirred to movement. Just as filmic sounds and images are understood to be mediated, so, my argument goes, should bodily perceptions of these sounds and images be understood as having a mediating effect. The medium of sense perception is the corollary to the medium of film.

Film images and the body must be understood in light of their *media*. Film, as the term is most broadly understood, is a medium, just as are print, oral speech, and oil painting. The filmic medium works through recording and projecting apparatuses. These technological mechanisms capture images from the world "out there" which are then filtered through the processes of framing, shaping, bending, twisting, condensing, and reshaping, and varied by differences in light, color, frame size, film stock, and projector bulbs, among other mechanical influences. The result is a world that is re-created through the medium of film. We may recognize the train on the screen from our experiences in the world outside, but its structure, shape, and power have been altered through its filmic appearance. This much is hardly news.

What is perhaps more challenging is the idea that the other side of the equation—that is, the body—is also part of a mediated system. To discuss this, I reappropriate "aesthetics" here as the name for such a focus. Aesthetics, in its etymological guise, studies that which "pertains to sense perception" (from the Greek, *aesthetikos*). I assert that *sense perception is the medium of the body*, and if we want to understand aesthetics (meaning everything from theories of art, to judgments on beauty, to cultural tastes) we have to start with the body and its senses. The human sense organs perform an analogous role to that of artistic and communications media. That is, they function as an intervening substance that alters the world "as it is" (leaving aside metaphysical questions of the nature of reality). Sense perception binds the body, shapes it, controls its input and output. The sense organs are passageways between the inside and outside of the body, a connection between the internal and external worlds. Sounds and images affect the body through the bodily sense organs of the ears and eyes—connected ultimately to the cerebral cortex and all its compartmentalizing functions—and it is ultimately this sensual, *mediating*, experience that causes the body in the theater (or, wherever) to move.

The human senses are trained from infancy to categorize the sights, sounds, and smells of the world by cultural and technological forces. How we see, how we touch, and how we taste, are all part of the social construction of reality. But where sociologists like Peter Berger tend to stress the role of language in this process, I am pointing toward a more primary locus (which is not to say it is the origin, the *arché*) for world-building: the senses of the human body. For in learning what smells and sights to privilege, and which to shun, we construct our worlds. Social world-building, like the mythical creation of the world in Judeo-Christian contexts, is never "out

of nothing," but always a matter of separation, selection, and focus. (Cf. God's creative activity in Genesis 1: there is the creative work that comes from speech, but there is the second and equally important activity of separation: light from dark, land from sea, and ultimately the first human is literally split in two as God creates the two sexes out of one.)[5] From the sense experiences that we take in from the world around us we select particular sounds and feelings, arrange them in the reflective capacities of our mind, and forget all that does not pertain to us. This creates and maintains the world in a familiar way and allows us to get along in social environments.

Over the course of human development, what emerges is what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls the aesthesiological body, an entity in which sensation and rational thought work together, and sometimes against each other. Merleau-Ponty did more than any modern philosopher to bring philosophy back to its senses and to argue for a sensual mode of thinking. The aesthesiological body is in distinction to the rationalized senses—particularly the eye, as epitomized by Descartes—in which vision operates from a single-point perspective, observing the world from a stable single-point perspective and calculating its components. Merleau-Ponty suggests that Descartes, while attempting to be phenomenological, did not go far enough with his descriptions. Without motion, the eye sees a *measurable* thing. The observing subject is provided a knowledge that exists in and through pure motionlessness (two-dimensionality), and it is certain of this. This, according to Merleau-Ponty, was Descartes' visual mistake, and he counters the stillness of certainty when he asserts that "vision is attached to movement."[6] This statement may seem innocuous in itself, but the eye that sees is an eye in motion, bound, as it is, with the body. Vision is not something which resides in the mind, or the *cogito*, or the *ego*, a place of final assurance and knowledge that something is there. Rather, vision resides within the body. With the body we must confront the enigma of "overlapping": "the fact that my body simultaneously sees and is seen."[7] (And from such an idea, Jacques Lacan formulated his thoughts on the look and the gaze, so important for later film studies, though Lacan's structure was always more visually isolated and had little impact on the relations of the seeing body.) The "self" implied here is not the assimilating self which is assured of its beliefs, but "a self by confusion…a self, then, that is caught up in things."[8] The whole and certain self which says "I" and sees clearly must be

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5.   I deal with "creation as separation" more fully in the introduction to my *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics: Rethinking Religion through the Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

6.   Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 124.

7.   Ibid.

8.   Ibid.

abandoned for an eye which is *in media res*. "I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it."[9] "The visible about us seems to rest in itself. It is as though our vision were formed in the heart of the visible, or as though there were between it and us an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand."[10] Though Merleau-Ponty spent little time writing about the cinema, his notions here have much to do with the interrelation of filmic image and sensing body.

The aesthesiological body, according to Merleau-Ponty, resides at the intertwining—the in-between, mediating space—of the invisible and the visible: "My body as a visible thing is contained within the full spectacle. But my seeing body subtends this visible body, and all the visibles within it. There is reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other."[11] The body can both see and be seen; because of this it is subject to the impulses of the world, including film images. The aesthesiological body brings together ideas and the sensible world; knowledge of ideas does not come about through an abstracted, bodiless mind. Rather, "however we finally have to understand it, the 'pure' ideality already streams forth along the articulations of the aesthesiological body."[12] Thoughts and feelings work together in the world-building enterprise.

Because ideas are never separate from the bodies that help produce them, one of the more intriguing dimensions to Merleau-Ponty's quasi-empiricist articulation here is a certain affirmation of *doubt* within epistemological language. His writings on vision (e.g. "Cezanne's Doubt") work against the rationalism, the certainty, and the measured perspectives of a great deal of philosophy. Merleau-Ponty makes a strong argument for the doubting, empirical subject. This is a sensing subject who remains open to the world, and therefore willing to move and be moved. Likewise, the aesthesiological body, I suggest, becomes key to my analysis of religious cinematics.[13]

9.   Ibid., 138.
10.   Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1967), 130–31.
11.   Ibid., 138.
12.   Ibid., 152.
13.   Luce Irigaray's feminist critique of Merleau-Ponty is important: that Merleau-Ponty gives too much to vision (c.f. "The Invisible of the Flesh," in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill [London: Athlone, 1993], 151–84). There is much that is culturally gendered and sexed within the aesthetic make up of the body: the "distant senses" such as the eyes and ears are traditionally asserted to be a masculine register, while the "proximate senses" such as touch and taste are claimed to be feminine. Nonetheless, what Merleau-Ponty ultimately does is to show the relations, the synaesthesia even, between vision and touch, and I think therefore offers many opportunities for rethinking the gender of aesthetic construction. Irigaray somewhat acknowledges this, but at times seems to reaffirm too much of the "traditional" sensual rendering whereby touch is feminine and vision masculine.

It is doubt that stirs up the twitching, tearful, tense body that moves in front of the two-dimensions of the motion picture. And it is doubt that opens the doors for the believing body to experience a larger world. Adult humans are made up from a complex body that contains aesthetic and rational experiences, among other configurations, and the very complexity of this intertwining demonstrates paradoxes and desires. For psychoanalytic film theorist Christian Metz, following the work of Freud and Lacan, the subjectivity of the film viewer is ultimately split, simultaneously containing multiple perspectives and viewpoints: "I shall say that behind any [filmic] fiction there is a second fiction: the diegetic events are fictional, that is the first; but everyone pretends to believe that they are true, and that is the second; there is even a third: the general refusal to admit that *somewhere in oneself* one believes they are genuinely true."[14] Metz's analysis here could just as well be applied to the function of religious myth: performers of traditional rituals often rationally know the ancient story they are reenact-ing in their rites is fictional; meanwhile somewhere within the self is the tinge of recognition that the story might in fact be true and the ritualizing bodies act as if it were so. Moreover, and here I am extrapolating on Merleau-Ponty's and Metz's thoughts, these layers of fiction have to do with the corporeal-aesthetic experience in contrast to the reasoning, reflective cognitive dimensions of mind. What I want to suggest in the brief space of this article is that this "somewhere in oneself" is the space of the body in motion: that moving entity that escapes the rational mind, that stirring of the leg muscles that makes us want to run from the projected images; that corporeal impulse to bow down before a deity that we know is not somehow "above" us, to outwardly sing to a supreme being that theologically already knows the depths of the heart. There is the still body of certainty, sitting smugly in its chair, naysaying the special effects. And there is an aesthetic engagement with film and with ritual, the body that believes, that jumps in its seat when the killer emerges from the shadows, when the upbeat music erupts and the congregation rises to their feet.

Religious Cinematics: Seeing the Dead Body

By "religious cinematics," I ultimately intend to indicate the activity of the body, and the forces acting upon it, in a way related to religious ritual. There are any number of theoretical definitions of ritual that could be quoted here—from Victor Turner to Richard Schechner, Mary Douglas to Ronald Grimes—each with slight variants in their accents, but what is common across them is a stress on the physicality of performance, of bodies

14.   Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1977), 72 (emphasis added).

engaging in symbolic actions, using formalized speech, music, and move-
ment. Rituals act upon bodies, and are likewise acted out *by* bodies.
(Transposing the physical into the human sciences, we might say that ritual
theory is a type of kinetics for the ways it investigates performing bodies in
accordance with the forces of religious practice, tradition, and belief.)
Specifically, I am thinking here about the way the aesthesio-body moves in
response to film. So on one level the cinematic experience has several
parallels with religious ritual.

In a postindustrial, postmodern, information society, the cinematic
experience supplements traditional ritual.[15] At the turn of the twentieth
century, film became a magic medium, offering the possibility to reenchant
a western world that could increasingly explain itself away with scientific
rigor. Soon after the invention of cinema, Einstein would elucidate how
things in the physical world are not all they appear to be, as would Picasso
and Braque through artistic means, and Saussure through linguistic means.
Things do not appear as they are, nor say what they seem. In the wake of
the development of cinema, filmmakers and film theorists responded to this
situation, as Rachel Moore argues: "The most striking and consistent
concern of early film theory was the way modern language was seen as an
impoverished expressive form whose arbitrariness and imprecision could be
overcome by the moving picture."[16] If verbal language could be dissected
and shown to have an inconsistent relation between signifier and signified,
and if the physical world could be proved to actually operate in distinction
to its appearance, moving images could step in and fill the representational
gap, to demonstrate what is meant in relation to how it is represented. A
train arriving at a station is exactly that, and so much so that viewers'
bodies twitched and jumped in response. The cinematic experience prom-
ised a substitute for the traditional enchanting forces of ritual, offering
ways—even if magical and ultimately unfulfilled—to get back to the work-
ings of the world itself. The gap in representation between event and the
mediation of the event could be collapsed with film. (If this sounds strange,
recall more contemporary promises of cable television and the Internet,
where Headline News promises "The world every half hour" and the World
Wide Web promises just that, as if the whole world were enfolded in its
grasp—if those aren't magic promises, I am not sure what are.)

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15.   I mean "supplement" in the full etymological sense Jacques Derrida has
given to it in that it is an "addition" and a "substitution": "the supplement adds itself,
it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of
presence," but also, "it if fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an
image, it is by the anterior default of a presence" (*Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri
Chakravorty Spivak [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976], 144, 145).
This seems to me a concise way to think about the relation of contemporary
cinematics to traditional ritual.

16.   Moore, *Savage Theory*, 7.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, when the fully "magic" possibilities of cinema have somewhat subsided, film nonetheless offers a reconnection to the workings of the world via ritual means. This is especially true in relation to that most critical of religious and ritual categories, the confrontation with death. In relation to rituals of death, contemporary societies are sorely *out of touch* with the body of death. As Philippe Ariès concludes in his study *Western Attitudes Toward Death*,

> In the modern period, death, despite the apparent continuity of themes and ritual, became challenged and was furtively pushed out of the world of familiar things. In the realm of the imagination it became allied with eroticism in order to express the break with the established order. In religion it signified…a scorn for the world and an image of the void.[17]

And the contemporary ritual theorist Ronald Grimes argues,

> Not only are we spiritually unprepared for whatever hereafter there may be, most of us know little about what happens at death in what our forbears used to call "this" world. Even the mundane actions surrounding death—embalming a body, building a casket, cremating a corpse, adapting a funeral rite—are foreign to us. Even though media and movies traffic in death, only a few of us preplan funerals.[18]

Death marks a division between this world and the next, and in this way it can be pushed aside, made as arbitrary as the verbal signifier, and even made "invisible" as Ariès suggests in his later study.[19]

In the following, I want to point toward the ways in which the visible confrontation with the dead body strikes the aesthetically perceiving body, and thereby reawakens the senses (and ultimately perhaps the entire conscious system). What I point toward is a cinematic confrontation with the dead body, and through the mediations of film and vision, the divisory dimensions of representation are broken down. I take the importance of the two mediators of film and sense receptors discussed above, and look toward their dissolution in the ultimate religio-technological quest: the desire for an unmediated experience with the world, a quest that is finally the quest for transcendence of the world. The paradox is well noted: the quest to get beyond media is achieved in and through media.

Stan Brakhage, and many in the avant-garde, continued to work toward a "magical" mode of filmmaking in the twentieth century, not by going back before the Enlightenment to some pure and innocent place, but through a retrained perception, enabling a transcendent experience in and through

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17.   Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 105–6.

18.   Ronald Grimes, *Deeply Into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 221.

19.   See Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Vintage, 1982).

media. Brakhage makes the link between the religious and the filmic clear: "Suppose the Vision of the saint and the artist to be an increased ability to see—vision."[20] When a ritual is edited and turned into a film, watchable in one sitting, time and space are compressed and reconfigured, and the viewer experiences a relation between, for example, death and life in a new form. Not only is the oscillation between death and life at the center of many traditional rituals, but the reconfiguration of space and time into a singular aesthetic experience is also a key trait of ritual. As avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren puts it: "A ritual is an action distinguished from all others in that it seeks the realization of its purpose through the exercise of form. In this sense ritual is art; and even historically, all art derives from ritual. Being a film ritual, it is achieved not in spatial terms alone, but in terms of Time created by the camera."[21] Film production records and reinvents time and space themselves, offering new perspectives on the sacred and profane, the fabulous and mundane, life and death.

To conclude I want to highlight Brakhage's experiments with seeing the world anew. Brakhage was obsessed with "birth, sex, death, and the search for God," and in his filmic approaches to death, he also turned to the search for God and the dead body. The dead, unmoving body is transposed through his camera which is then perceived by the cinematic body of the film viewer. One of the best examples here may be Brakhage's *Sirius Remembered* where, in the search to create a meaningful new symbol of death because the old inherited symbols had lost their value, Brakhage placed the body of his deceased dog, "Sirius," in the woods near his house and filmed the corpse at various stages of decomposition over several seasons. Rather than being the gruesome spectacle that many in modern, sanitized society might expect after such a description, the film creates a beautiful and loving rite of mourning and meaning-making out of death, and the relation to the mutable, fallible body. "This is an age which has no symbol for death," Brakhage claimed in the early 1960s, "other than the skull and bones of one stage of decomposition…and it is an age which lives in fear of total annihilation."[22] Seeking a new image of death, a way to experience it before the abstractions of the "logical" body, Brakhage's camera intrudes into and crosses the line between death and life. "Suddenly," he recalls on the death of his dog, "I was faced in the center of my life with the death of a loved being which tended to undermine all my abstract thoughts of death."[23]

Nowhere is the confrontation with death more immediate than in his 1971 film, *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*. The title refers to the literal signification of "autopsy," and the film consists of 31 minutes of

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20.   Stan Brakhage, "Metaphors on Vision," in *The Avant-Garde* Film, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1978), 120–28 at 120.
21.   Maya Deren, "Ritual in Transfigured Time," *Film Culture* 39 (1965): 5–6 at 6.
22.   Brakhage, "Metaphors on Vision," 121.
23.   Ibid., 18.

silent footage of autopsies shot in a Pittsburgh morgue. Bodies are cut into, cut apart, opened up, skin peeled back, organs removed and measured, until there is almost nothing left that resembles a human body. Many of Brakhage's films, as is true of other avant-garde filmmakers, tend to work on an abstract, even mythical level, rarely engaging with the historical world. This film, to the contrary, "anchors itself to the historical world relentlessly."[24] *The Act of Seeing* confronts the cinematic body with a "real" body. This is strikingly distinct from the thousands of fictional dead bodies we see in films all the time. In fiction films, the death (fictive death) is portrayed with conventional symbolic actions: usually something like a close up of the dying victim taking his last gasp of breath while lying in the lover's arms, revealing the deep secret of his life, as the heavily-stringed musical score crescendos. Such a representation of death, Vivian Sobchack suggests, "does not move us to inspect it." We remain sated in our seats, understanding the necessity of death within the film's narrative; sad perhaps, but there is little offering to actually think or feel our way through death itself. However, "while death is generally experienced in fiction films as representable and often excessively visible, in documentary films it is experienced as confounding representation, as exceeding visibility."[25] Because a majority of us moderns have seen hundreds more fictional, represented deaths than actual deaths, our eyes have been trained to see death in particular ways. A display of real death then breaks into our aesthetically constructed world and our bodies do not know what to do with it. We writhe, turn away, feel our stomach churn, walk away. Brakhage's film is excessive and resists symbolizing and narrativizing. We have the rational capacity to deal with represented death (often becoming cathartic), but we are rarely given the structures to face real death. "As excess, the by-products of mechanical vision defy the containment of the work and are more capable of touching the exposed sensibilities of the viewer."[26] What we are left with is the cinematic body reacting to the dead and dissected body. The moving body of observation reacts/responds to the still body that is being acted upon by coroners.

The clinical approach of the coroners in the film may be somewhat disturbing (they move on the bodies like a car mechanic on a transmission), but Brakhage's camera remains strikingly non-judgmental, indeed, clinical. He is careful not to reveal the faces, and therefore the identities, of the dead bodies or the coroners (see Fig. 1). (Interestingly, the faces of the coroners performing the autopsies are not seen, with two exceptions: once a custodian's face is seen as he cleans up after the autopsy, and at the very

24.   Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 79.
25.   Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 235.
26.   David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 18.

end a coroner is shown in a pure-white, cadaver-free room speaking his report into a recorder.) We understand the necessity of performing autopsies, so the activity itself cannot be thought of as unethical. Here is Enlightenment science, with its removal of magic, its pure dissection, objectifying what is most feared.
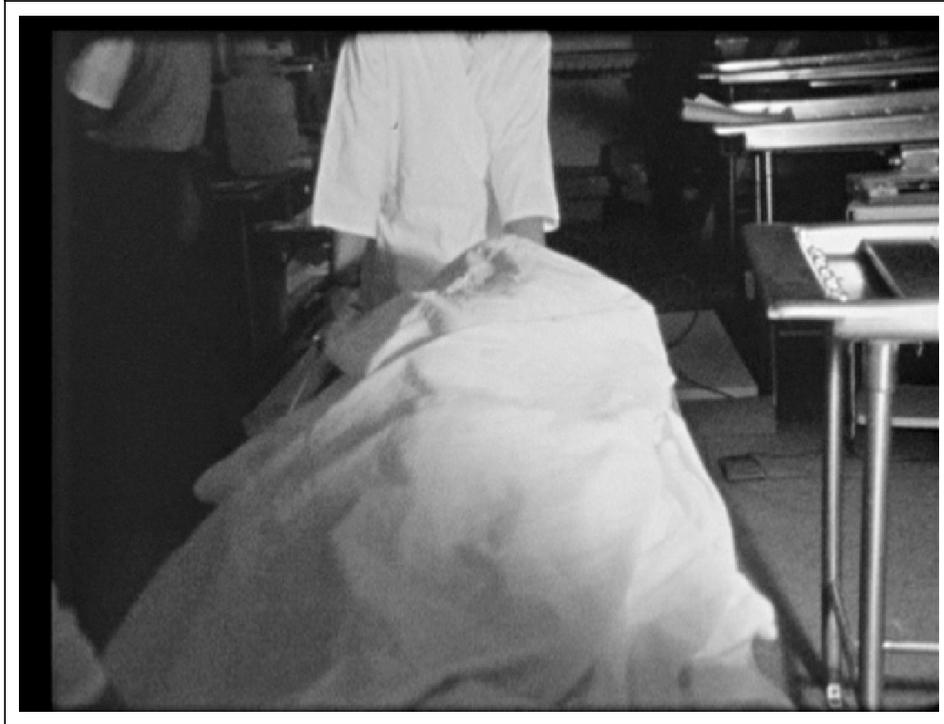
Figure 1. From Stan Brakhage,
The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes. Frame capture

Anthropologist Michael Taussig has recently considered the power of "defacement" as a mode of understanding how the despoiling of something beautiful and/or sacred can in itself become mysterious and thus reaffirm the sacred. Related to certain societies' ritual acts of "unmasking," Taussig also relates defacement to the activities of contemporary art, including film. He quotes from Thomas Elsaesser on editing: "It is the cut as the montage principle that makes the energy in the system visible and active."[27] There is a hidden magic that is brought into the open, but its liberation often requires the violence of defacing, cutting, desecrating, or splicing in the editing room. The act of defacement, "brings insides outside, unearthing knowledge, and revealing mystery. As it does this, however, as it spoliates and tears at tegument, it may also animate the thing defaced and the mystery revealed may become more mysterious, indicating the curious magic upon which Enlightenment, in its elimination of magic, depends."[28] Film, on

27. Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 4.
28. Ibid.

such an account, in its carving up of space and time, of taking apart the seemingly seamless beauty of the "world as it is," transgresses a natural order and is therefore de-creative. But in this activity it unearths other mysteries. The Enlightenment's visual technologies brought the cosmos closer. Attempting to chart the workings of the universe, new tools were created to see better and clearer, to demonstrate that it was not magic at the heart of the workings of the world but rather natural causes and effects. And yet, in these discoveries, before the rational body describes its new chartings and categories for the ways things work, there is the aesthetic body that has simply seen, and moved in response.

Film technology has acquired the tools of Enlightenment science and turned the findings into a spectacle, to be sure, but film has also shown this re-found world to a mass audience, eager to see new things in new ways. Film allows a new perspective on the world, a different way of viewing material structures and events. Conceptions of the way the world works is dramatically different at the beginning of the twenty-first century than it was at the beginning of the twentieth, due in part to the influence of film. From Eadweard Muybridge's photographic experiments with bodies in motion to Dziga Vertov's reconstruction of the city in *Man with a Movie Camera* to Stanley Kubrick's reconsideration of space and technology in *2001*, filmmakers have recreated the "reality" of the world, allowing viewers a new way of looking and ultimately conceptualizing the world around them. By offering a vision of everyday life in an innovative, challenging way, film changes the perceptions of the familiar. As Walter Benjamin suggested, what were once overlooked structures—"our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories"—are brought into a new focus, from a new angle. Benjamin continues: "With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. And just as enlargement not merely clarifies what we see indistinctly 'in any case,' but brings to light entirely new structures of matter."[29] The world is perceived anew, leading to a reconstructed "worldview." Here the metaphorical language of world*view* must be broken down in order to see the ways vision is a constructor of worlds, that it plays a prominent role in world-building enterprises, and that film has become a key broker in the activity of world-building.

This, I suggest, gets at what Brakhage's film revives. And nowhere is this truer than during the few moments where the camera gazes for lengthy periods of time on a human face that is slowly being peeled back from the top of the head to nose, allowing the coroners access to the skull, and ultimately the brain. The body is literally defaced, and through such activity

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29. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings: Volume 3, 1935–1938* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 101–33 at 117.

the mysteries of the human brain—this soft spongy stuff responsible for tremendous acts of creation, invention, and destruction—is revealed (see Fig. 2). Even with all the advances of science we really know little about how this bodily substance can produce activity in the world. This gap in knowledge, then, between inhabited body and knowledge about that body, is the curious magic. It is one thing to write this, but another to see it.
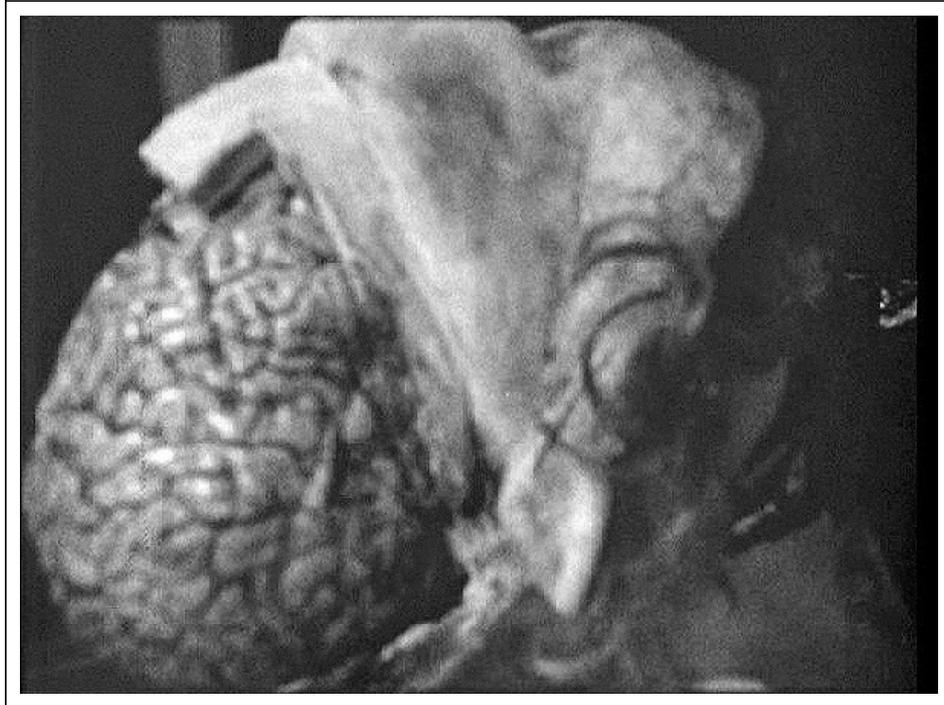
Figure 2. From Stan Brakhage,
The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes. Frame capture

The film may be the most literal rendition of Walter Benjamin's analogy of the medium of filmmaking as compared to the older visualizing practice of painting: "Magician is to surgeon as painter is to cinematographer. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, whereas the cinematographer penetrates deeply into its tissue."[30] What is revealed is "another nature," one not accessible to the social life of the status quo. The camera offers glimpses into another world—outer space, outer Mongolia, or the inner cavity of the body. "[W]ith all its resources for swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching and compressing a sequence, enlarging or reducing an object," the camera brings us to "discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis."[31] Brakhage's camera collapses Benjamin's analogy, penetrating into the body.

The Act of Seeing strikes at primal fears: the fear of invasion of one's own body, the fear of contact with the dead body, the fear of death itself.

30.   Ibid., 116.
31.   Ibid., 117.

In bringing insides outside, in crossing the boundaries between death and life, the viewer transgresses socially imposed divisions. Social divisions keep the pure and impure separate, and little fits these categories better than the difference between life and death. All that is associated with death is to be kept, literally, "out of sight" in the modern, civilized society. Thomas Laqueur explains this well:

> Corporal politics—making manifest the body in all its vulnerable, disarticulated, morbid aspects, in its apertures, curves, protuberances where the boundaries between self and the world are porous—is somehow indecent. "It is in keeping as far as possible out of sight, not only actual pain, but all that can be offensive or disagreeable to the most sensitive person, that refinement exists," writes the great liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill. In fact, it is a sign of the "high state of civilization," of the "perfection of mechanical arrangements," that so much can be kept hidden… The infliction of pain, as Mill points out, is delegated "to the judge, the soldier, the surgeon, the butcher, the executioner."[32]

Brakhage's film offers the opportunity to be uncivilized, to reclaim a magic relation to one's own body, to see with one's own eyes. To be moved, not to rational knowledge, but to a corporeal response that may be no response at all, is the effect of the immediate experience, of the religious cinematic experience.

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32.   "Clio Looks at Corporal Politics," in *Corporal Politics*, essays by Donald Hall, Thomas Laqueur, and Helaine Posner (Cambridge: MIT List Visual Art Center; Boston: Beacon, 1992), 14–21 at 14. No reference is given for the inner J. S. Mill quote.

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Insight, Secrecy, Beasts, and Beauty: Struggles over the Making of a Ghanaian Documentary on "African Traditional Religion"*

Marleen de Witte

Abstract

Since the liberalization of the Ghanaian media in 1992, audiovisual representation has become crucial in the struggle over religion and culture. This article examines the neo-traditionalist Afrikania Mission's struggles with audiovisual media in the context of a strong Pentecostal dominance in Ghana's religious and media landscape. It argues that the study of religion in an era of mass media cannot be limited to religious doctrine and content. One must also take into account matters of style and format associated with audiovisual representation. This article shows how new media opportunities and constraints have pushed Afrikania to adapt its strategies of accessing the media and its styles of representation. Adopting dominant media formats such as the documentary, the news item, and the spectacle involves a constant struggle over revelation and concealment. It also entails the neglect of much of the spiritual power that constitutes African religious traditions. The question of how to represent spiritual power through audiovisual media occupies many religious groups, but the question of its very representability seems to be especially pressing for Afrikania.

Introduction

In April 2003, a journalist from the Ghanaian private television station TV3 approached the head of the neo-traditional Afrikania Mission, Osofo Ameve, to make a documentary on the survival of "African traditional religion" in times of Christian dominance. It was to appear as part of the weekly series, *Insight*. Keen on public representation but constrained by a lack of money, Ameve was pleased with this proposal as it promised half an hour of television exposure at TV3's expense. What followed, however, was a long process of negotiations between the TV crew and Afrikania leaders, members, and shrine priests and priestesses. In the end there was much frustration and a disappointing result. Ameve was especially bothered by the abundant shots of a goat and fowl sacrifice at one of Afrikania's rural branches. He felt that this would only confirm popular Christian stereotypes of traditional religion as cruel and backward. According to Ameve, "the media always refuse to show how beautiful traditional religion can be, because they are all Christians."

This article examines the Afrikania Mission's struggles with audiovisual media in the context of a strong charismatic-Pentecostal dominance in Ghana. In postcolonial Ghana, religion and culture are not an automatic heritage, but an arena for struggle between different social groups and a matter of conscious choice and contestation. Public representation has become crucial to this struggle, especially so since the liberalization of the media in 1992. Over the last decade, Ghana's formerly state-controlled media scene has developed into a plural, liberalized, and commercialized field of interaction. Religious groups, and especially Pentecostal-charismatic churches, have effectively appropriated new media possibilities, resulting in an increased public presence of a particular type of Christianity and an increased tension between Christians and traditionalists in the public sphere.[1] In response to the (charismatic) Christian dominance, the Afrikania Mission actively seeks to access the media to represent "Afrikan Traditional Religion" (ATR) publicly.[2] Its politics of representation is complicated,

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1.   Rosalind Hackett, "Radical Christian Revivalism in Nigeria and Ghana: Recent Patterns of Conflict and Intolerance," in *Proselytization and Communal Self-Determination in Africa*, ed. Abdullahi A. An-Na'im (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999), 246–67.

2.   Afrikania often spells Afrikan Traditional Religion with a "k," as a protest against being misrepresented on outsiders' terms and as a claim to self-representation, and with capitals in analogy with other world religions. Analytical use of the term "African traditional religion" is problematic, as the term suggests a static, unchanging, and bounded set of beliefs and practices; moreover, it is itself a historical construction that placed these beliefs and practices in opposition to modern Christianity. For lack of a better alternative, however, I use it, following common usage in Ghana, to denote the highly diversified, ever-changing, and unbounded field of pre-Christian cults, shrines, practices, and beliefs. I use Afrikan Traditional Religion or ATR wherever it concerns Afrikania's reformulation.

however, not only by its limited financial means but also by its awkward position in between the public sphere, on the one hand, and the shrine priests and priestesses that it claims to represent, on the other. The dominant, Christian formats and styles of representing religion do not easily match with the concerns of ATR practitioners which are with concealing rather than revealing.

Studying the encounter between religion and audiovisual media raises the question of how the technical and stylistic particularities of a medium relate to the particularities of religious practice.[3] I take as a point of departure that neither religion nor media can be reduced to the other; they are mutually constitutive. Mass media are never a purely technical form that can be simply applied to the realm of religion; rather, they entail specific forms, styles, and modes of address. The question is how these different aspects of media resonate with, clash with, or transform religious modes of representation and practices of mediating spiritual power, of creating links with the divine. Connected to this set of concerns is the question of how mass media forms relate to the constitution of religious authority. Although the adoption of mass media is never smooth and uncontested, some religious forms seem to be particularly well-suited to technological mass representation. Elsewhere I have argued that the success of the televisual culture of charismatic Pentecostalism can be traced to the similarity between specific forms, styles, and modes of address of the medium of television and the Pentecostal emphasis on spectacle, mass spirituality, revelation, and charismatic authority.[4] With African traditional religions, the use of such mass media is much more problematic and contested. The emphasis on secrecy and concealment, in practices for dealing with spiritual power, and in the constitution of religious authority, does not easily fit the public nature of audiovisual mass mediation.

To understand the dynamics of African religion in an era of rapid mass media development, we thus cannot limit ourselves to studying doctrines, beliefs, and rituals, but must take into account matters of style and form associated with public media representation. Challenging easy oppositions of form and content, medium and message, this article deals with the interplay of religious forms and media forms in the reconfiguration and public

3.   Hent De Vries and Samuel Weber, eds., *Media and Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors, eds., *Religion, Media and the Public Sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

4.   Marleen de Witte, "The Spectacular and the Spirits: Charismatics and Neo-Traditionalists on Ghanaian Television," *Material Religion* 1 (2005): 314–35; see also Tamar Gordon and Mary Hancock, "The Crusade is the Vision: Branding Charisma in a Global Pentecostal Ministry," *Material Religion* 1 (2005): 386–403; Eric B. Kramer, "Spectacle and the Staging of Power in Brazilian Neo-Pentecostalism," *Latin American Perspectives* 32, no. 1 (2005): 95–120; Birgit Meyer, "Impossible Representations: Pentecostalism, Vision and Video Technology in Ghana," in Meyer and Moors, *Religion, Media and the Public Sphere*, 290–312.

representation of a highly contested religion. It does so by situating these dynamics in the context of the wider power relations within the media field and its dominant discourses and representations of religion. For Afrikania, the historical changes in the relations between the media, the state, and religion in Ghana, resulting in the current charismatic-Pentecostal media dominance, have been crucial not only for its possibilities of media representation, but also for the media styles it has adopted or into which it has been forced.

The encounter between African religious traditions and television film opens a field of enquiry that has up till now hardly been studied. This article attempts to contribute to the debate on religion and mass media by focusing on the specificities of the relation between audiovisual mass media and a religion that has usually not been associated with public representation. The first part of the article introduces the Afrikania Mission and its relation to the changing Ghanaian media landscape to show how new media opportunities and constraints have pushed Afrikania to adapt its strategies and styles of representation. The second part concentrates on one case study, the making of a local television documentary on Afrikania, to address the larger issue of the relation between practices of dealing with spiritual power and the formats and technologies of audiovisual mass mediation.

The Afrikania Mission:
"Afrikan Traditional Religion" Reformed

The Afrikania Mission is a nationalist religious movement with a strong political vision on African identity and national development. It aims at reconstructing and promoting "Afrikan Traditional Religion" as a modern pan-African religion. Despite its explicitly non-Christian stance, the reformation and public representation of ATR has nevertheless involved the appropriation of Christian forms. Over the course of the movement's history, however, the specific formats and the representational strategies employed have changed in relation to wider religious and political developments.

In studies on the Afrikania Mission, two aspects are central to the foundation of the movement in 1982: the Catholic background of the founder Kwabena Damuah and his connection to J. J. Rawlings's 31st December Revolution in 1981.[5] Both have shaped Afrikania's representations of ATR.

5. Paulien Boogaard, "Afrikania. Of: Hervormde Traditionele Religie: Een Politiek-Religieuze Beweging in Ghana" (master's thesis, University of Amsterdam, 1993); Samuel Gyanfosu, "The Development of Christian-Related Independent Religious Movements in Ghana, with special Reference to the Afrikania Movement" (Ph.D. diss., University of Leeds, 1995); idem, "A Traditional Religion Reformed: Vincent Kwabena Damuah and the Afrikania Movement, 1982–2000," in *Christianity and the African Imagination: Essays in Honour of Adrian Hastings,* ed. David Maxwell and Ingrid Lawrie (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 271–94; Kofi Asare Opoku, "Damuah and the Afrikania Mission: The Man and his Message: Some Preliminary Considerations,"

Afrikania's "origin myth" teaches that it was at the World Conference of Religions that Damuah, who had then been a Catholic priest for 25 years and was sent as the Ghanaian representative, had the idea to form an organization to represent ATR as a world religion. He left the Catholic Church and founded the Afrikania Mission. To create a "systematic and coherent doctrine for Ghanaians and Africans in the diaspora," Afrikania has picked elements from traditional religions, such as belief in multiple gods and spirits and in the power of ancestors, and reformed and integrated these in an intellectualist, Christian-modeled doctrine, including Holy Scriptures, prophets, commandments, and standardized liturgy, prayers, and slogans.[6] So although Afrikania consciously presents itself as non-Christian and calls for a "revolution in the meaning of Religion," it uncannily subscribes to a universalist, modern definition of religion by recasting traditional religion in terms of belief, teaching, and symbols.[7] Local religious traditions are organized instead around practices of communicating with and influencing the spiritual world. Damuah's Catholic background also provided the practice of and format for Afrikania's newly invented Sunday worship. The whole sequence of prayers, greetings, slogans, songs, rituals, "Bible" reading, and preaching, communion, offertory, and benediction is modeled on the Catholic liturgy. It is given "traditional" content and symbolism, but in a way that has very little to do with what takes place in shrines.

Damuah shared the anti-Western and anti-Christian ideology of Rawlings's Revolution and briefly took part in his government. Damuah's revolutionary background provided Afrikania not only with government support (a car, a public address system, a press conference, and radio time), but also with an intellectual, nationalist orientation and specific rhetorical styles. Inspired by Black emancipatory literature,[8] Afrikania radically rewrote the history of civilization and reframed ATR in the discourse of African emancipation.[9] Drawing on ATR mostly as a discursive, ideological

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Trinity Journal of Church and Theology 3, no. 1 (1993): 39–60; Pino Schirripa, "Afrikania: Une Église Afrocentriste du Ghana," in *Afrocentrismes: L'Histoire des Africains entre Égypte et Amérique*, ed. F.-X. Fauvelle-Aymar, J.-P. Chrétien, and C.-H. Perrot (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2000), 341–52.

6. Osofo Kofi Ameve, *The Divine Acts: Holy Scriptures for the Sankofa Faith (Afrikanism)* (Accra: Afrikan Renaissance Mission, n.d.).

7. cf. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

8. E.g. George M. James, *Stolen Legacy* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1992 [1954]); Chancellor Williams, *The Destruction of the Black Civilization: Great Issues of a Race from 4500 B.C. to 2000 A.D.* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1992 [1971]).

9. Osofo Kofi Ameve, *The Origin of the Bible and Pertinent Issues*, new ed. (Accra: African Renaissance Books, 2002); Kwabena Damuah, *African Contribution to Civilization* (Accra: Nsamankow Press, 1985).

tool, Afrikania engaged very little with the religious specialists it claimed to represent. Damuah's main strategies of mobilization were writing tracts, giving speeches, and organizing rallies that were reminiscent of political ones, and a weekly radio broadcast replete with revolutionary rhetoric.[10]

The year 1992 was a turning point, both for society at large and for Afrikania. First of all, with the turn to democracy in Ghanaian national politics, relations between the state and Afrikania became weaker and eventually broke down. Although Rawlings remained in power, the government from now on had to compete for popular support. It especially could not do without the increasingly popular and influential Pentecostal and charismatic churches, which steadily grew to dominate the public sphere. The result was a gradual "Pentecostalization" of the state, where Pentecostal influence and rhetoric penetrate the government on several levels and pushes the state's support of traditional culture to the background. In the 2000 elections, Rawlings's National Democratic Congress government lost power to the liberal opposition party, the New Patriotic Party, resulting in a further devaluation of traditional culture. Afrikania is now increasingly critical of the government and its cultural policy and fiercely raises its voice in defense of tradition.

The year 1992 was a turning point for Afrikania as an organization because, in August of that year, Damuah died. Osofo Kofi Ameve, a building contractor by profession, became Afrikania's new leader. He subsequently passed away in June 2003. A successor has been chosen, but Afrikania's future remains uncertain. Ameve led Afrikania to an increased public presence and its establishment as a religious organization. In 1997, for example, Afrikania organized a big public convention of ATR at the Independence Square in Accra. In addition, Afrikania built a huge, new headquarters, founded a "Priesthood Training School," publicly ordained sixty new priests and priestesses, and started an "evangelization" program of mobilizing traditionalists and establishing branches throughout the country and abroad. Because of growing competition with other religious groups, Afrikania increasingly needs to manifest itself in the public sphere.

In this struggle for public presence, Afrikania has appropriated many symbols of religious establishment: a nice building, head offices with a spacious office for the leader, a signboard indicating times of worship, a "ministry" school, a printed cloth with name and emblem, official registration,[11]

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10.   E.g. Kwabena Damuah, *Afrikania Handbook* (Accra: Nsamankow Press, 1982); idem, *Afrikania (Reformed Traditional Religion)* (Accra: Afrikania Mission, 1984); idem, *African Contribution to Civilization*.

11.   PNDC law 221, passed in 1989 and repealed in 1994, was meant to control the mushrooming of new religious groups and required all religious groups in the country to register. Like many new, independent churches, Afrikania saw this as an opportunity to gain legitimacy. It was the only traditional religious group that registered.

a constitution, and membership cards. In addition, the terminology Afrikania uses points to this borrowing from a Christian idea of religion: church, headquarters and branches, Bible, liturgy, preaching, and communion. With the rapid rise and public appearance of charismatic churches, however, there has been a shift in the form for religious expression. Whereas, in the past, Catholicism provided the format for Afrikania, now practices such as public conventions, evangelization, camp meeting, all-night prayer, sharing of testimonies, and the preoccupation with public visibility and audibility are being taken over from the charismatic churches.

Not surprisingly, a tension exists between Afrikania's "modern" Christian-derived reformulation of ATR and the interests of "traditional" shrine priests, priestesses, and adherents. Many of them contest Afrikania's (ex-Christian) leaders, the "easy" initiation of anyone—even foreigners—into the priesthood, and the concern with orderliness, cleanliness, and beauty that hardly leaves room for dealing with spiritual power. The question of how to relate to traditional priests has always been a matter of dissent within Afrikania.[12] Whereas Damuah was reluctant to involve them at all, Ameve during his time expended much effort to mobilize and engage them. Still, the tension remains and it intensifies especially in Afrikania's interactions with the media.

Afrikania in the Media: Struggling with Media Formats

From its birth in 1982, the Afrikania Mission has made use of mass media—first, radio and print, and later, audiovisual media—to establish a public presence, to disseminate its message, and to attract followers. Yet, over the last decade, Afrikania's relationship with and operation in the media field has drastically changed as a result of shifting relations between and among the media, the state, and religion. Not only have these changes made Afrikania's access to the media increasingly problematic, they have also altered the frames and formats upon which Afrikania can draw in its efforts at self-representation.

Until 1992, the media in Ghana were largely controlled by the state, which favored "African tradition" in its promotion of national culture. During Damuah's time, Afrikania's friendly rapport and convergence of interests with Rawlings's government sustained its constant media presence and made the movement and its leader widely known. First, the Afrikania Mission, as the religious branch of the revolution, was the only religious group granted airspace on state radio. Its weekly radio broadcast, in which Damuah explained Afrikania's objectives and ideologies, thus reached a large audience throughout the nation. Second, Damuah was constantly present at official ceremonies, which greatly enhanced his appearance in

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12.   Boogaard, "Afrikania."

the news. Third, Afrikania was regularly invited to appear on state television to express its opinion in all public debates touching on traditional culture and religion. Yet the media's preference for ATR over other religions also implied a reduction of traditional religion to "cultural heritage" as part of a nationalist project.[13] Three interrelated media formats were thus available to Afrikania during the first decade after its foundation: revolutionary rhetoric, news, and cultural heritage.

When Ghana returned to democracy in 1992, the consequences for the public representation of Afrikania and ATR were enormous. Afrikania's loss of government support, including free airtime, put an end to Afrikania's radio broadcast. More generally, the process of democratization fundamentally changed the Ghanaian media field. With the gradual liberalization of the media, the Ghanaian state loosened control and gave way to a rapidly evolving private media scene. Pentecostal-charismatic churches eagerly bought airtime with the new commercial TV and radio stations to broadcast their worship services and sermons. Their productive media attitude, their large financial resources, and the dominance of Christians among media professionals has resulted in a strong charismatic-Pentecostal media dominance, in the form of TV preachers, radio sermons and phone-in shows, Pentecostally oriented video movies, sermon tapes, popular gospel music, and Christian print materials. In a commercial media environment that increasingly chokes marginal groups, the Pentecostal-charismatic voice literally shouts down weaker ones.

The implication of this entanglement of Pentecostalism and the Ghanaian media for the representation of traditional religion is that these churches use the media not only to advertise their own success and morality, but at the same time circulate a counter image of the non-Christian Other that finds fertile ground in the Pentecostally oriented public sphere. Their diabolization of African traditional religion nurtures a widespread animosity, which is rooted in a long history of Christian suppression.[14] The media play an important role in reinforcing popular fears and fascinations with sensational stories and images of "juju" priests and shrines as persons and places of evil. The Afrikania Mission, dedicated to the public promotion of ATR, tries to counter such negative, stereotypical representations, with a more positive image.

Afrikania's access to the media, however, has become increasingly difficult. Lack of money and of "traditionalists" working in the media sector make it very difficult for Afrikania to counter the Christian hegemony and to influence public opinion about ATR. As Afrikania does not have the financial

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13.   Cati Coe, *Dilemmas of Culture in African Schools: Youth, Nationalism, and the Transformation of Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

14.   Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999); Marijke Steegstra, *Resilient Rituals: Krobo Initiation and the Politics of Culture in Ghana* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004).

and technological means to produce and broadcast—and thus control—its own programs as charismatic churches do, it tries to find other ways into the media. Afrikania depends, however, on the goodwill and concerns of journalists and media houses and struggles with media formats that do not allow it full control over the message and image produced and circulated in the public sphere. When Ameve was featured in radio and television talk shows, for example, this gave him the opportunity to have Afrikania's political-religious voice heard in public debates. Yet it is always the talk show hosts who direct and frame the interviews, often from an implicitly Christian perspective. Far from framing ATR as "our cultural heritage," talk shows on private stations instead frame it as belonging to a kind of exotic Other, believing in all kinds of strange things and spirits. This tendency to exoticize can be more widely observed, especially with the private media.

Afrikania also finds its way into the media by inviting (and paying) the press to attend traditional festivals where Afrikania plays a major role, to newsworthy Afrikania events, or to press conferences on specific topics. It thus has to reframe the movement or ATR in general as "news." In Ghana's commercial media scene, newsworthiness has come to depend to a certain extent on sensation and spectacle. In order to attract journalists to a positive image of traditional religion and to ensure coverage, then, Afrikania stages spectacular performances. In this, it is very particular about beautification. Whereas in its early days, Afrikania's representational strategies were mainly to *talk* about ATR as an ideological source, it is now more than ever concerned with public *image* and popular aesthetic styles, with making ATR look nice, clean, and modern "to make it attractive to the people." Yet Afrikania can never control the image journalists make of it and often complains of misrepresentation. Afrikania's relationship with the media is ambiguous. It is very much aware that it needs the media in order to gain recognition and to compete with Christianity. Yet it is also highly suspicious of the media, because of their Christian bias and "wrong" portrayal of traditional religion as filthy, ugly, and backwards, or as evil and demonic.

Furthermore, Afrikania's politics of representation is complicated by its awkward position in between the dominant formats and styles of representing religion in the public sphere and the shrine priests and priestesses that it claims to represent, but who are themselves often more concerned with concealing than with revealing. The shrine officiants often do not recognize themselves in the public image of beauty that Afrikania seeks to present. But, more importantly, many of them feel they have nothing to gain from media publicity and choose instead to remain somewhat secretive. Their spiritual authority depends on highly restricted access to spiritual knowledge and practice. Afrikania's aim of reforming and making ATR public clashes with the performance of secrecy that surrounds traditional religious practices. This tension between Afrikania's project and shrine priests' concerns with spiritual power and secrecy often flares up during media

activities, when Afrikania finds itself caught between those it aims to represent and the available means and modes of representation. The making of a TV documentary on African traditional religion highlights these dilemmas.

The Making of *Insight*

When Kafui Nyaku, a journalist working with TV3, approached Kofi Ameve about making a TV documentary on Afrikania, Ameve readily agreed despite his bad experiences with "misrepresentation" of ATR by TV3. In Ghana, it is often the subjects of TV documentaries (or news items) themselves who ask—and pay—for being documented. In this case, however, the journalist took the initiative, so it meant TV3 was to bear the cost. Moreover, Kafui is Ewe by ethnicity, just like Ameve and most Afrikania members, and this gave him confidence in the project's outcome. *Insight* is a weekly half-hour TV documentary series dedicated to various aspects of Ghanaian social and cultural life. Ameve pictured thirty minutes of prime-time television showing nice Afrikania events in Accra and in the rural areas, and pro-Afrikania commentators. This must have seemed like a great opportunity to boost Afrikania's public image. But interests differed, and control over the images to be broadcast was negotiated between different parties involved in the various shooting sessions organized by Osofo Ameve and Osofo Boakye, Afrikania's "national organizer."

First, the crew went to a shrine in Accra, selected by Ameve for its neatness—the Berekusu shrine of Okomfo [priestess] Boadi Bakan. Osofo Boakye visited her beforehand to inform her that TV3 was coming to film and to ask her what she wanted to show on television. Ameve told me that "we will not go and shoot what *we* want, but ask her what *she* wants the world to see, whether healing, prayer, sacrifice." But the priestess did not want the world to see any of these and only allowed the crew to take rather static shots of Ameve and her conversing in the waiting area outside the shrine room. This greatly disappointed the producer, who had expected much of this session and afterwards told me that "it was nothing much after all, the shrine was very neat, nothing like the images we see on TV and in films. They didn't perform anything." Clearly, her expectations were influenced by the dominant images of shrines in Ghanaian films.[15] Interestingly, she was evidently conscious of such influences: she explicitly examines the impact of film on popular ideas by including in her documentary a shrine scene from a Ghanaian video movie and challenging the portrayal of traditional religion in such movies as "juju," as empowering people spiritually for destructive purposes, and its followers as agents of the Devil. She also used

15.   Birgit Meyer, "Mediating Tradition: Pentecostal Pastors, African Priests and Chiefs in Ghanaian Popular Films," in *Christianity and Social Change in Africa: Essays in Honour of J.D.Y. Peel*, ed. Toyin Falola (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2005), 275–306.

editing to give visual expression to her disappointment at being denied access to "the real thing." The last scene of the documentary shows Okomfo Bakan entering the waiting hall and disappearing behind the white curtain that closes off the shrine room. While her voice invokes Onyankopon (God), the closed curtain fills the screen. Unintentionally perhaps, Kafui thus extended the priestess's strategy of performing secrecy so as to suggest something powerful and assert her own authority of having exclusive access to the spiritual power hidden behind the curtain.[16]

For TV3's visit to a rural Afrikania branch, Ameve selected the Apertor Eku shrine in the village of Dagbamete (Volta Region), because, as he told me, "here we still have traditional religion in its natural form." Ameve's wish to include a rural branch in the documentary has much to do with widespread notions of rural authenticity; the idea that what is far away in the village is "more authentic" than what one finds in the city, where religion and culture have become contaminated by modernity. Afrikania's techniques for generating authenticity tie into such notions, when it claims that what it does derives from the rural areas where "the real thing" still exists, and refers to such rural places in its public performances and representations.[17] Moreover, it is widely believed that the Ewe people in the Volta Region have access to powerful spirits and "medicines," and Afrikania exploits such popular stereotypes in its claims to spiritual power. Ameve himself is an Ewe from the Volta Region and this has greatly influenced the ethnic composition of the movement, with Ewe members now being dominant (about 80%). Making use of his personal network in the Volta Region, Afrikania's "outreach program" has been most successful there, and many old shrines, such as the Apetor Eku shrine, are now affiliated to Afrikania.

When the Afrikania leaders, the film crew, and I arrived in Dagbamete after a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Accra, a crowd of people was waiting for us. In front of the camera, Ameve was spectacularly welcomed like a big chief. He walked under a royal umbrella, proceeded by women sprinkling water on the dusty ground, and followed by a drumming group and hundreds of cheering and singing people. Shots of this scene were later edited as the opening shots of the documentary. In procession, we walked to the shrine, a simple but large, open wooden structure with a low cement wall all around, several entrances, and a corrugated iron roof. Inside the structure under a canopy stood a kind of altar with bowls, clay mounds, some objects, and a lot of dried blood on it. Before the altar on the ground was another, bigger clay mound, also with blood on it, and bottles of drink

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16.   See Mattijs van de Port for a discussion of the performance of secrecy in Candomblé and the visual representation of this in film, in "Visualizing the Sacred and the Secret: Televisual Realities and the Religious Imagination in Bahian Candomblé," *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 3 (2006): 444–61.

17.   Marleen de Witte, "Afrikania's Dilemma: Reframing African Authenticity in a Christian Public Sphere," *Etnofoor* 17, no. 1 (2004): 133–55.

standing by it. This part was clearly much older than the structure that had been built around it quite recently. Behind the altar were an office, a store, and a notice board with the program of the shrine festival the previous month. Seats were arranged for the important people; all the members of the shrine were sitting on the ground. When it was announced that nobody may wear sandals or slippers inside the shrine, Kafui and I removed ours, but the cameramen did not. Ameve was not expected to take his sandals off because he had "every right to wear sandals." He was clearly the big man here. He, his wife, and Osofo Boakye were seated on luxurious sofas beside the altar and when he was officially welcomed, people yelled as if he was a hero. In his speech to the worshippers, in English for the purpose of television and translated into Ewe, he said:

> I am happy TV3 is here to cover the activities of the shrine. I thank them for that. They for some time have not been our friends. Because when they cover our things, they don't show them well. But today they are here to cover our activities for the purpose of a documentary on our religion. I am very happy about it. They are welcome.

Soon, however, trouble arose about what was to be filmed and what was not. As soon as the ceremony started with the taking of some bowls and objects from the altar and the arrangement of these beside the clay mound on the ground, the shrine keepers told the cameraman, to his anger, not to film from this point onwards until they would tell him to continue. The calling of the deity Apetor Eku with a "cow bell," "special prayers," and rituals was not to be caught on camera. When the animal sacrifice started, he could film again, but the altar at the back was not to be filmed and this determined the position and direction of the camera. The shrine keepers remained constantly busy to prevent the camera from disturbing Apetor Eku by capturing his dwelling place in its lens.

After a priest poured libation on the altar on the ground, asking Apetor Eku to accept the offerings, men and women kneeled down in half a circle, holding goats and fowls. Some also brought money or "schnapps." A microphone passed around for everybody to announce his or her name and offering. The priests collected all animals and money and placed them by the altar on the ground. All this could be filmed, even though it included shrine objects. The problem lay with the high altar under the canopy. After the deity accepted the fowls and goats, the owners held the animals by the neck and strangled them to death (Fig. 1), supported by the cowbell, singing, and drumming.[18] As soon as an animal died, the person laid it down, kneeled and touched the ground with the forehead and elbows. When all

18.   To test the sacrifice, the animals were taken one by one, made to touch the sacrificer's back and head and laid down over and over until they did not stand up again, a sign of being accepted by the deity. One fowl was not accepted and was given back to the woman. It was said that she had aborted her pregnancy to the anger of the deity.

animals were dead, the priests assembled them at the altar, cut their throats one by one, and poured their blood over the ritual objects on the ground, the high altar at the back, and the rest into bowls. While the animals were carried away, women poured sand on the blood that had spilled on the ground and started sweeping the floor. The service ended with drumming, dancing, singing, and merrymaking. Afterwards the local Afrikania branch provided drinks and food to the television crew and the Afrikania leaders from Accra. This sharing of food and drink after the official program had ended recalls the journalistic practice of invited assignments to state functions and forges informal relationships of intimacy, and thus of obligation, between hosts and journalists.[19] Also, when departing for Accra, Ameve gave Kafui some cash "for transport home." Again, this was a token of mutuality.

Figure 1. Fowl sacrifice at the Apetor Eku shrine, Dagbamete[20]

The third event to be filmed was a Sunday service at the Accra headquarters, something totally different from what had been shown at the rural branch. Modeled after a Catholic mass, it includes no bloody animal sacrifices, no frenzied possession, but is conducted in a very orderly and "civilized" manner. With much drumming and dancing, it is also a very lively event—a good occasion to show the world that Afrikanians are, just like Christians, a happy and dancing crowd, worshipping one supreme God in a

19.   Jennifer Hasty, *The Press and Political Culture in Ghana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

20.   Due to the bad quality of the available VHS copy of the TV3 documentary, all images included here are stills taken from the author's own recordings of the events filmed for the documentary. Shots have been selected that are very similar to those included in the documentary

nice and modern way. During the Sunday services the weeks before, the coming of the film crew was announced to the members and they were called upon to show up in their numbers to "give these TV people no chance to film empty seats to show on TV." For that, Ameve complains, is what "the media" always do. Afrikania has a preoccupation with numbers. Angry that ATR is always represented as marginal and with very few adherents, as for example by the (highly contested) population census, Afrikania wants to show that "we are many." The 1997 Convention of ATR was primarily meant to do just that. Television images of charismatic churches with their masses of people also provide a point of reference for Afrikania's media representations. Indeed, many more people than usually attended services showed up for the Sunday service that TV3 had come to film, all dressed in their Sunday best. While normally only the officiating priest dresses in the white gown of Afrikania priesthood, now all Afrikania priests wore their white gowns to increase the spectacle of the event.

There was a major problem, however. The TV crew planned the visit during the annual "ban on drumming and noisemaking."[21] This thirty-day period of silence preceding the traditional Ga Homowo festival is meant to give the local deities a rest before they are called upon during the harvest festival. This meant that the traditional authorities in Accra would not allow drumming and libation, both crucial to Afrikania worship. Afrikania could not of course defy the ban, but neither could it influence the date. As the priests and congregation were waiting for the film crew, Osofo Yaw Oson took the microphone and explained what was going to happen.

> We are in the ban on drumming and noisemaking by the Ga traditional council. And for that matter our service today will look a bit awkward. There will be no drumming. For the same reason there will be no libation.

A discussion followed about whether to do libation or not. In the end it was decided, on the advice of an elderly Ga shrine priest, Nii Nabe, that there would be "dry libation," the motion would be shown, the prayers said, but without water.

> The act is what we want to portray, that is how we do our services. We will hold the calabash and whoever will do the libation will just display the action, but we will not drop any drop of water for the purpose.

When the TV3 people finally arrived (two hours late, which was angrily interpreted as a sign that they were not interested), the camera, light, and sound were set up and the officiating priest quickly went through the service. All the usual parts were performed, except the drumming, and thus the dancing. There was still singing, but without the drumming, it was much less lively than usual. The result was a rather dull, spiritless service

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21. Rijk Van Dijk, "Contesting Silence: The Ban on Drumming and the Musical Politics of Pentecostalism in Ghana," *Ghana Studies* 4 (2001): 31–64.

that lacked the participation and the pleasure of the congregation in dancing. Libation was indeed done "dry," with a calabash empty of water, and thus of spiritual meaning. An Ewe shrine priest, Torgbe Kortor, performed it and the camera captured it from below so as not to reveal the empty calabash (Fig. 2). The ritual Ewe words, mumbled by the elderly priest, lent the act an aura of authenticity. But the fact that the libation prayer could be said at all during this pre-Homowo period, suggests that Afrikania ascribes very little power or sacrality to this ritual speech. Apparently, without water being poured, the words did not disturb the deities' rest, or indeed may not even have reached them. All in all, the whole service was clearly a show put on for TV. Interestingly, the documentary producer seemed to take the rituals much more seriously. During the sprinkling of Holy Water on the congregants, she ducked away so as to prevent any drip of water from touching her body. She, as well as the camera men, all of them Christians, clearly chose to remain outsiders to this event and not to participate in any way.
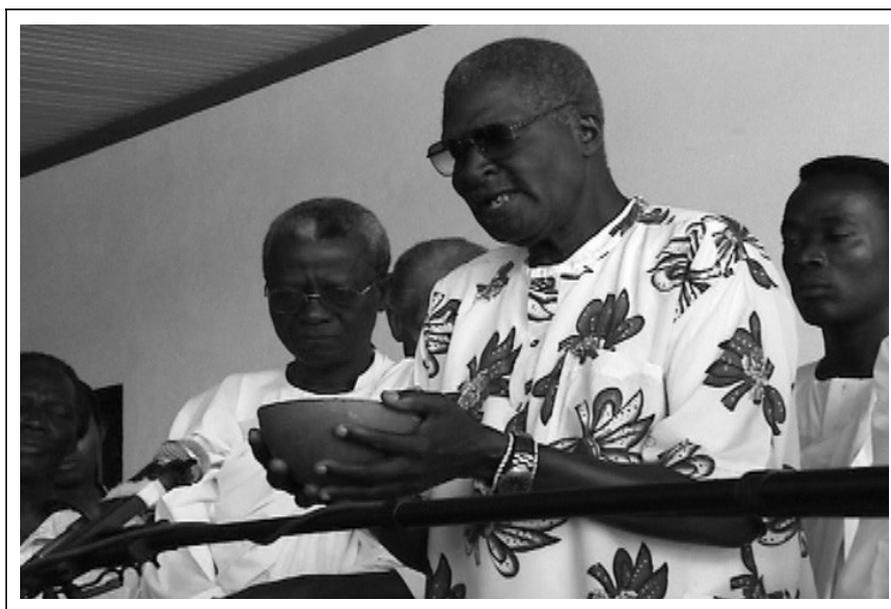
Figure 2. 'Dry' libation at the Afrikania Mission headquarters, Accra

A last event, the ordination of new Afrikania priests and priestesses, a "public spectacle" primarily geared towards an outside media audience, was for practical reasons not filmed by the TV3 crew itself. My own film recordings of the event were, on the producer's request, included in her documentary, however, so I briefly discuss it here. The day after the opening of the new Afrikania headquarters, sixty men and women were ordained into Afrikania priesthood in front of the cameras with a spectacular ceremony. The crowd of initiates in their spotlessly white uniforms posing and dancing in front of the mission's equally spotless new four-storey building could, as the organizers hoped, convince the public of the beauty and

cleanliness of Afrikania. At the same time, the abundant use of symbols referring to "traditional spirituality" had to show that this nice and neat religion is nevertheless "authentic" African religion. The grass necklaces around the initiates' necks, the leaves in their mouths (Fig. 3), the Holy Water sprinkled on their bodies, the "stone" (piece of clay) they were given to eat, and the medicine rubbed into their hair, all invoked a vague idea of "traditional spiritual power" and thus confirmed Afrikania's authority. Not to be witnessed by the audience and the media public were the "initiation rituals," which took place in seclusion behind the building. More than the concealment of a powerful ritual—I was told that hardly anything had happened—it was the suggestion of it, an assertion of spiritual authority.

Figure 3. *Ordination of Afrikania priests and priestesses at the Afrikania Mission headquarters, Accra*

Negotiating Authority

The making of the documentary involved a negotiation between different people with different interests and different ways of asserting authority. Ameve and his assistants, who acted as mediators between the TV crew, the shrines, and the Afrikania congregation, wanted to exploit the opportunity to present a beautiful, positive, and clean image of ATR to the general public, a PR strategy to promote ATR. He thus was rather uncomfortable with the animal sacrifice at the Apertor Eku shrine. Meant to be "traditional religion in its natural form," it certainly did not fit his ideas about ATR as a "modern religion." Great was his disappointment when the documentary came out, with the first and larger half of it dedicated solely to the sacrifice. The strangling of the animals and the people bowing down before the dead animals on the dusty floor would only confirm popular stereotypes of

traditional religion as dirty, backward, and cruel. But he had no control over the final production.

Ameve also pushed Afrikania, and therefore himself, forward as *the* representative of all traditional religion in Ghana—a highly contested claim. The fact that TV3 approached him and put him in the position to organize all the shooting events, gave him the opportunity to show the public that the Afrikania Mission is indeed the mouthpiece of traditional religion in Ghana. As the authoritative specialist on traditional religion and culture, he received the film crew in his spacious office on the first floor of the Afrikania headquarters for an interview on camera, in which he explained the ins and outs of ATR. What he did not know, however, was that, apart from him, other knowledgeable specialists were also included as authoritative voices.

In the whole organization of the making of the documentary, Ameve also tried to re-establish his relationship with TV3 at the same time as strengthening his relationships with shrines. The whole event in Dagbamete seemed very much geared towards welcoming and honoring the great leader from Accra. Unfortunately for Ameve, however, the documentary eventually introduced the Afrikania Mission and him only very late. To the viewer, the Apertor Eku shrine that came first had nothing to do with Afrikania at all. Instead, the documentary commented that Afrikania "finds it difficult mobilizing people already in the practice of traditional religion; most traditional priests are suspicious of them."

The TV3 producer Kafui Nyaku, herself a Catholic, wanted to give a "neutral" impression of the survival of African traditional religion in these times of Christian dominance and thus to show whatever was going on. She did not mind visiting shrines for this documentary. She thought it could not affect her, because she does not believe in the power of divinities and she did not go there with bad intentions or feelings towards traditional religion. She did pray to Jesus about it though and hoped that she did nothing wrong to insult the divinities. She said she is "just neutral" and "respects the shrine adherents." She was also critical of popular condemnation of traditional religion and expressed this in her documentary with voice-over comments like

> This aspect [of sacrifice] of the religion is condemned and termed as backward by this modern era of religious fanaticism. Unfortunately, when people talk about traditional religion, they ignore the faith and rather talk about these sacrifices.

She concluded with the statement that

> People like Okomfo Bakan remind us that African traditional religion is still with us. It is therefore important for people with different beliefs to accept them and not ignorantly condemn their practices.

Kafui thus underlined her authority as the maker of the documentary by making clear that her representation of the subject is neither distorted

by any personal, religiously inspired aversion against it, nor by personal involvement.

Being "neutral" meant not only being value-free with respect to the subject, but also not accepting gifts from any party. After the Sunday service in Accra, Ameve wanted to give Kafui some money, but she did not accept it, telling Ameve that it is against her ethics. Later in the car she explained to me:

> We have this culture in Ghana that people give journalists money for the work they do. But I am not going to make a pro-Afrikania documentary and that is what he expects when he gives me money. I want to remain neutral and I can't when I would accept money.

She did accept his "transport money," however. Her idea was to make two films out of the material: a neutral one for TV3 and a pro-Afrikania one, for which Ameve, Kafui hoped, would pay millions of cedis. Unfortunately, shortly after the TV3 documentary came out, Ameve died and was succeeded by a much less wealthy man.

The objectives of the TV station as a whole had to do with credibility. Private TV stations in Ghana are still very young and thus still have to prove themselves. They have to cope with an image of being primarily commercial and therefore not responsible and objective enough. Credibility is especially important with the authoritative genre of the documentary. Unlike fiction film, the documentary genre is concerned with representing reality, in particular with providing insight (hence TV3's documentary series title) into an aspect of reality. Embedded in the genre is the claim that a documentary depiction of the world is factual and truthful. In the documentary on Afrikania, several techniques were used to enhance its credibility. First, voice-over narration, characteristic of the expository documentary mode, was used to anchor meaning and construct authority.[22] An authoritative voice frames, explains, and clarifies what the audience sees, translates the subject matter to a lay audience. Decoupling voice from person reinforces the impression of objectivity: one hears a voice, but does not see the person that speaks. In this case, the producer herself performed the voice-over. It is this "Voice of God" commentary from an all-knowing, all-seeing viewpoint that aligns the expository documentary with investigative journalism.[23] While one sees images of the sacrifice at the shrine, for instance, the voice-over explains that "most religions believe in various forms of sacrifice; in traditional religion sacrifices are made to atone for sins, or in approval of an answered prayer" and that "their belief is that God forgives those who confess their sins in public and offer a feast in atonement. This is the reason why birds and animals are sacrificed."

22.   B. Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

23.   Keith Beattie, *Documentary Screens: Nonfiction Film and Television* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004).

A second strategy involves drawing upon diverse "authoritative voices," by which both objectivity and expertise are affirmed. Short interviews with "specialists" were included in the documentary, answering questions about and giving their informed view on African traditional religion. Afrikania was not involved in the selection of "specialists." Instead of being presented as *the* authoritative expert on traditional religion, Ameve thus became one among others: Dr. Akrong of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana; Alhaji Sule Mumuni of the Religions Department of the University of Ghana; the Methodist Archbishop Asante-Antwi; the Catholic Archbishop Sarpong; and Dr. Dartey Kumordzi of the traditionalist Hu-Yaweh Foundation.

The other side of the coin of professed objectivity is the construction of otherness. As the voice-over makes clear, the documentary on Afrikania is about "them," not about "us." This "us" and "them" dichotomy is characteristic of the tradition of the ethnographic film (and of classical ethnography in general), but, interestingly, also characterizes much of Ghanaian private media production on traditional culture, that tends to exoticize "African culture and traditional religion." Partly, this may be due to the fact that the private broadcast media, much more than the public ones, tend to copy foreign program formats and modes of representation, including modes of representing "African culture." CNN and BBC documentaries about "disappearing cultures in the far corners of the globe" provide a point of reference for local documentary makers. But it also has to do with the Christian bias of the Ghanaian media and the Christian background of most media professionals. They tend to represent a traditionalist Other in opposition to a Christian Self. The framing of the documentary narrative binds the makers and the spectators in an implicitly Christian "Us," gazing at the non-Christian Other. As with classic ethnographic filmmakers and their subjects, the relation between the makers and subjects of the Afrikania documentary, between observers and observed, is an unequal-looking relation.[24] The people behind the camera use the power of vision and "insight" to represent and explain the people in front of it, to whom they clearly do not belong and do not want to belong. The documentary thus shows how the frames and formats of classical expository ethnographic film, including its construction of otherness, map onto the dominant Ghanaian framework of thinking about religion in terms of modern Christianity versus traditional African religion.

Despite its claims to credibility and neutrality, as a commercial station, TV3 is also concerned with ratings, and thus with attracting and binding viewers, targeted primarily among the urban and predominantly Christian population of southern Ghana. Thus, in the selection of shots in the editing

24.   I am referring here to the older expository style of ethnographic filmmaking, in which the Afrikania documentary seems to fit best. There are other modes, however, that explicitly question this relationship through reflexive and collaborative modes of documentary (Beattie, *Documentary Screens*).

phase, the audience's satisfaction in seeing stereotypes confirmed also counted. The unfamiliar, almost repulsive images of the animal sacrifice resonate with the spectacularization of the rural, non-Christian Other in much of Ghana's visual popular culture.

Both Afrikania's concern with showing the polished beauty of ATR to the public and TV3's concern with providing insight clashed with the concerns of the shrine priests and priestesses who Afrikania asked to participate, especially Okomfo Bakan, the priestess in Accra. Initially, she did not see the benefit of the documentary and was reluctant to receive the TV crew at her shrine. Ameve managed to convince her to participate, but rather than promoting her practices to an outside public, she was concerned with concealing as much as possible. The priests and shrine keepers of the Afrikania branch in Dagbamete were equally concerned with keeping the camera away from the divinity, although they allowed the crew to film certain rituals and performances. The performance of secrecy is a way of asserting power.[25] In African traditional religious practice, spiritual authority derives from long processes of initiation and transmission of spiritual "secrets" from established priest to initiate. Access to religious knowledge in traditional cults is thus restricted, and this is the power base of religious specialists. Moreover, access to the spaces in which spiritual power is dealt with is equally restricted. Healing or consultation sessions usually take place in seclusion on a one-to-one basis, often at night, while many rituals of spiritual communication are performed in secret rooms where nobody but the priest may enter. This concealment of spiritual practice and knowledge is partly the outcome of a long history of suppression and attempts at eradication, culminating in the current Pentecostal hostility against traditional religious practitioners and places. But it also has to do with the structures of authority of African cults and shrines. This restriction on vision and knowledge, then, makes the representation of African traditional religiosity through the medium of television film problematic.

Formats, Technologies, and Spiritual Power

To understand the encounter between African religious traditions and audiovisual media technology, I have proposed to analyze the relationship between the formats and styles of media representation and the specificities of religious mediation. For the Afrikania Mission, the media styles and formats it has used to represent ATR publicly have to a large extent been shaped by the changing relationships between the state, religion, and the media. In its early years of state support, Afrikania's politics of representation fed on the anti-Western rhetoric of the political and cultural revolution. Now, although Afrikania employs the media in response to the

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25. Cf. Van de Port, "Visualizing the Sacred and the Secret."

mounting Christian suppression and the "Pentecostalization" of the nation, it draws on representational styles that derive exactly from Christianity. It depends, however, on media formats, such as the documentary, talk show, and news item, that do not allow it full control over the message and image produced. Thus, Afrikania finds it hard to escape stereotypical Christian representations of traditional religion as the non-Christian Other or even enemy.

Compared to charismatic-Pentecostal TV programs, which may actually mediate "Holy Ghost power,"[26] Afrikania's media representations lack much of what occupies the religious practitioners they claim to represent: spiritual power. Local divinities seem to refuse to operate through modern media. This has to do with the TV formats available to Afrikania, which hardly leave room for spirituality. They are in the first place informative formats, not meant to invite participation *in* religious practice, as do Christian broadcasts, but to convey information *about* it. Such framings fit Afrikania's intellectualist approach. But they are also formats of "othering." They are about *them* and what *they* believe and do, making it hard for Afrikania to counter popular stereotypes. The absence of spiritual power from Afrikania's media representations also has to do with Afrikania's difficult position in between the public sphere and the shrines and the negotiation about revelation and concealment. Afrikania's concern with cleanliness, beauty, and visual attraction conflicts with, for example, the spiritual power of animal blood used in rituals. Both Afrikania's project of public representation and the dominant formats of televisual mediation clash with the formats of religious practice in shrines. In the first place, spiritual power and authority thrive on secrecy, concealment, and the restriction of religious knowledge. But it is also the particular aesthetics of shrines that makes televisual representation problematic. In the secret places where "the real thing" is, there is usually not much more to see than some mounds covered with dry blood and barely identifiable objects, black pots, stones, or at best carved figurines. These do not so much represent particular deities, as *present* them. They make them present in the space of the shrine and enable the shrine priest to communicate with them and deal with their power. The dominant formats of spiritual representation and communication in shrines, then, are not modes of visual attraction, of spectacle, of mass address. As such they are not aesthetically fit for television formats aimed at seducing people and drawing them in, formats of which charismatic churches make ample use. As we have seen, the aesthetics of shrines and traditional religious practice are fit for television only as a "spectacle of otherness" in a documentary format or in Ghanaian movies. But this was not as a spectacle of beauty and attraction, as Afrikania would like to see.

26.   Marleen de Witte, "Altar Media's *Living Word*: Televised Charismatic Christianity in Ghana," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33 (2003): 172–202; idem, "The Spectacular and the Spirits."

So much for *formats* of mediation. There is also something about the relation between the *technology* of film and spiritual power that complicates its media representation. The problem is not that spiritual power cannot be mediated by modern media technologies. On the contrary: the very reason that certain places and activities connected with the presence of spirits may not be filmed is that the camera is believed actually to be able to catch a spirit and take it away. When photography was introduced in West Africa, some people feared that the camera would steal their souls. Several "spiritualists" explained to me how they would use a person's photograph to spiritually heal or harm the person depicted over a long distance.[27] None of them used video for this purpose, but one said it could be possible if only you use the right words. In our case, filming a divinity's dwelling place would disturb it and interfere with its operation. Hence also the stories of videographers and photographers who did try to capture secret places and mysteriously found their cameras not functioning, or the images not appearing. There seems to be something about the interaction between visual technology and spirits that is beyond human control.

In the above examples, the power of vision is closely connected to spiritual power. Images and spirits are not separated by a relation of referentiality. Visual representation can acquire power of its own and seeing it can affect the seer. An image does not represent spiritual power but makes it present.[28] In other words, the image is iconic rather than symbolic; it does not symbolize, but it embodies the spiritual reality behind it. Interestingly, then, charismatic-Pentecostal looking practices, in which images can transfer the power of the Holy Spirit to the viewer, show a continuity with traditional African ideas about seeing and spiritual power.[29] The difference is that, whereas in charismatic Pentecostalism every believer is able and expected to access the power of the Holy Spirit personally, and thus its mass mediation is encouraged, in traditional religious cults, access to the powers of particular divinities is restricted to initiated religious specialists, whose authority depends on their exclusive access to these powers. By preventing outsiders from taking shots of powerful places and events, then, shrine priests and priestesses protect their control over the spiritual power they work with and depend on for their living. Documentary makers' efforts of giving the general public insight into traditional religious practices by visually representing them, clash with shrine priests' efforts at keeping these practices invisible in order to prevent such images from transmitting the power they embody, through the camera and the television screen, to the wrong people in the wrong, non-ritual contexts. The struggle over the

27.   Heike Behrend, "Photo Magic: Practices of Healing and Harming in East Africa," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33 (2003): 129–45.

28.   Behrend, "Photo Magic"; Meyer, "Mediating Tradition."

29.   De Witte, "The Spectacular and the Spirits"; Gordon and Hancock, "The Crusade is the Vision."

eye and its technological extensions thus becomes a struggle over the control of spiritual power.

The question of how to represent spiritual power occupies many religious groups seeking media access, but the question of its very representability seems to be especially pressing for African traditional religion. The challenge for traditionalists in this era of mass-mediated religion is how to make use of the new media opportunities to participate in the religious public sphere without losing the strength and specific qualities of traditional religion. This is a challenge that the Afrikania Mission has up till now hardly been able to meet.

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Priests and Stars:
Candomblé, Celebrity Discourses, and the Authentication of Religious Authority in Bahia's Public Sphere[*]

Mattijs van de Port

Abstract

This article discusses the inextricable entanglement of religious and media imaginaries by pointing out how, in a thoroughly mediatized society such as Bahia (Brazil), the public articulation of religious authority comes to depend more and more on celebrity discourses. Candomblé, the Afro-Brazilian spirit possession cult on which this article focuses, is an intriguing example of this trend. The cult has become the main "symbol bank" of the Bahian state, and groups have increasingly sought access to its rich arsenal of images, sounds, myths, and aesthetics. Disconcerted by this development, Candomblé priests have sought to publicly assert themselves as the only authentic representatives of the cult. Whereas within the temples, their religious authority is firmly rooted in the performance of ritual practice and constantly reconfirmed in the rigid and minute prescriptions as to how the different ranks in the temple hierarchy should interact, the public sphere requires the mobilization of other resources to back up claims of religious authority. The author argues that Candomblé priests are very successful in "colonizing" the tremendous appeal of celebrity discourses. Exploiting the society-wide interest in Candomblé, they create media events that allow them to display their contacts and affinities with the stars. They thus find their religious leadership authorized in terms that are well understood by the consumers of modern mass media.

Introduction

The intricate ways in which Candomblé—an Afro-Brazilian possession cult—is connected to the media society that is contemporary Brazil has been largely ignored in the ethnographic literature. Scholars have pointed out Candomblé's longstanding performance of secrecy and the media shyness this performance has induced. They have highlighted the strong taboos on filming, taking photographs, or making sound recordings of rites and ceremonies. Moreover, the "re-africanization" of the cult, a project to which many of the Bahian temples have committed themselves, also seems to favor calabashes over microphones and Yorubá over Java-script—strengthening that deeply rooted idea that modern mass media are incongruous with the realm of traditional religion.

Yet such observations do not tell the whole story of what is becoming of Candomblé in the thoroughly mediatized world of which it too is a part. First of all, attempts to keep the cameras out of the temples are in fact media performances: communicative acts that primarily address the public sphere and seek to construct Candomblé as a realm of tradition, a place where the media do not reign. Secondly, these cameras and recording devices are but the most manifest layer of the media's expansionist tendencies: the impact of media society on Candomblé is not only to be detected in the cult's concrete relations with "the media" and its agents but also at the level of the collective (religious) imagination.

Recent debates on religion and media have highlighted that the religious imagination, in ever more inextricable ways, has become entangled with the expressive and communicative modes of modern mass media. Honed by the visual teachings of Hollywood, many people have come to conceptualize miracles as "special effects,"[1] the assembled believers of the *Renovação Carismática Católica* are instructed to raise their arms in the air as "antennas" so as to turn their bodies into "receivers" of the Holy Spirit;[2] and in Pentecostal circles in Ghana, video cameras have been attributed with the revelatory power of divine vision, making visible the "powers of darkness."[3] The styles and formats of new media have been found to transform religious performances, as well as their reception among mass audiences. Reporting from Cairo, Charles Hirschkind has alerted us to the fact that the

1.   Hent de Vries, "In Media Res: Global Religion, Public Spheres, and the Task of Contemporary Comparative Religious Studies," in *Religion and Media*, ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 3–42.

2.   Maria José Alves de Abreu, "Does It Breathe? Motion, Pneuma and Embodiment" (paper, Workshop on *Mediating Religion and Film in a Post-Secular World,* University of Amsterdam, June 16–17, 2005). See now, in this volume, her "Breathing into the Heart of the Matter: Why Padre Marcelo Needs No Wings" (pp. 325–49).

3.   Birgit Meyer, "'Praise the Lord…': Popular Cinema and Pentecostalite Style in Ghana's New Public Sphere," *American Ethnologist* 31 (2004): 92–110.

producers of audio cassettes with Islamic sermons are fully aware that they address an audience of modern media consumers, and they seek to tune in with the modes of perception and appraisal that these modern media consumers have cultivated.[4] What is moving Brazilian spectators to tears when watching Padre Marcello Rossi's famous movie *Maria—Mãe do Filho de Deus* (Mary, Mother of the Son of God) is impossible to say: is it the suffering of handsome soap actor Luigi Barriceli who plays the role of Jezus, or is it the suffering of Christ himself? Is it a response to the conventions of televisual melodrama or is it a response to the sacred narrative? What these examples signal is the fact that there is no clear demarcation line to indicate the point where the religious imagination stops and where the imaginary work of the media takes over. Clear-cut distinctions between medium and message, form and content, or surface and substance may serve analytical clarity, but blind us to the fact that "religiosity exists in its mediated performance and nowhere else," as scholar Angela Zito recently put it.[5]

This observation has—or rather ought to have—profound implications for any analysis of the production of religious meaning and experiences in contemporary media society. What I hope to show in the pages to come is that, at the level of the collective imagination, Candomblé proves to be part and parcel of media society—no matter how much its public performance of secrecy and tradition seeks to suggest otherwise. The moment we stop thinking about Candomblé exclusively in terms of a religious institution, or about practitioners exclusively in terms of their religious make-up, it soon becomes clear that members of the Candomblé community are as "embedded" in the imagination of Brazilian media society as anybody else.[6] People from Candomblé, too, are interested in the latest plot of the telenovela—although they may construct it somewhat differently sometimes, as anthropologist Rita Laura Segato tells us.[7] They are equally moved by talkshow confessions, equally impressed by documentary films on the animal kingdom, equally excited by the latest gossip about this actor or that singer. These are hardly surprising facts or revolutionary research findings. What is surprising, though, is the fact that the ethnographic literature seems to have developed a blind spot for the presence of media society within the

4.   Charles Hirschkind, "The Ethics of Listening: Cassette-Sermon Audition in Contemporary Cairo," *American Ethnologist* 28 (2001): 623–49.

5.   Angela Zito, "What is Religion: Vocabularies, Temporalities, Comparabilities" (keynote address on Falun Gong at the International Conference on *The Future of the Religious Past,* the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research, Amsterdam, Beurs van Berlage, 2–4 June 2005).

6.   It was brought to my attention that some readers may consider this approach—which in a way ignores Candomblé's splendid performance of "religious tradition" and focuses on the side-acts in the public sphere—somewhat cynical or even disrespectful. I would like to state that, clearly, cynicism is not intended here.

7.   Rita Laura Segato, "A tradição Afro-Brasileira frente à Televisão ou duas mortes entre a ficção e realidade," *Religião e Sociedade* 16, no. 3 (1994): 50–63.

temples or at least has declared that presence to be irrelevant for a study of the cult. It is my opinion that this attitude severely underestimates the grip of the media on contemporary imaginaries, whether religious or not. To come to a better understanding of the entanglement of religious and media imaginaries, I will discuss the mobilization of celebrity discourses by a number of Candomblé priests, who attempt to mark their spiritual power and religious authority in the public sphere by entering into an "auratic exchange" with media stars.

Throughout my research in Salvador, I was struck by the fact that the birthday or funeral of an important priestess, an important ceremony in the "liturgical" calendar of Candomblé, the re-opening of a prestigious temple, or the official recognition of a temple as part of Bahia's patrimony (*tombamento*) have become important media events. Celebrities from the world of politics, culture, and media and priests/esses use these events to appear jointly in front of cameras and microphones and thus make public their mutual links, affinities, and affections. These relationships between Candomblé priests and people of fame and influence have a long history, not least because beliefs in Candomblé's magical power were—and still are!—widely spread in Bahian society, including among the upper classes.[8] The public display of these relationships in the media, however, does add a new element that needs further consideration. What we seem to be witnessing might be understood as a double "deal." On the one hand, the priestesses, living icons of *baianidade*, are lending their auratic power to authenticate these celebrities as truly Bahian. On the other hand, these media stars are lending their celebrity status—their "media aura," if you will—to the priests/esses, authenticating *their* claims to be publicly recognized as the true voice of Candomblé. By unpacking this "auratic exchange"—and the authenticating processes implied in it—I argue that the articulation of religious leadership in the public sphere has come to depend on media discourses of celebrity.[9]

The *Terreiro*: Production Site of *Baianidade* and Celebrity Meeting Ground

Let me start my exposition with a brief exploration of the changing public role of Candomblé in Bahian (and more broadly, Brazilian) society. Many authors have already drawn attention to the fact that in recent decades,

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8.   Yvonne Maggie, *Medo do Feitiço: Relações entre magia e poder no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Arquivo Nacional, 1992).

9.   Speaking about a "deal" between priests and stars certainly does not mean I take these relationships to be "merely" a well-calculated and instrumental kind of window dressing. The findings of Yvonne Maggie's brilliant study of the relations between Candomblé and the Brazilian judicial system are confirmed by my own: many celebrities take the magical power of Candomblé deeply seriously.

Candomblé—with its long history of marginalization, persecution, and public invisibility—has become the "trade-mark" of the Bahian state. Bahian culture politics—in close alliance with the tourist and entertainment industries—have turned Candomblé into a veritable "symbol bank" from which symbols, rhythms, myths, and aesthetics have been brought into circulation in ever-wider arenas of Bahian society.

Beatriz Goís Dantas, among others, has argued that it was the emergent cultural nationalism of the 1930s that initiated this development. Members of the intellectual and cultural avant-garde sought to cut the umbilical cord with Europe and propagated a re-imagining of the Brazilian nation as a unique mix of the European, African, and Indian races. All over Brazil, a renewed interest in the Afro-Brazilian heritage, including the Afro-Brazilian cults, becomes visible from this time on. Subsequent generations of Bahian intellectuals and artists—the great majority of them white—were particularly eager to explore this heritage, as Bahia's overwhelmingly black population, long considered to be a sign of regional backwardness, could now be transformed into a source of regional pride.[10] The *terreiros* of Salvador, in particular the great houses of the nagô tradition, became the main sites where the African heritage in Brazil was located, sought, and found.[11]

If the public transformation of Candomblé into a metonym for *baianidade* provided the ideological justifications and motives for non-practitioners to overcome their reservations and publicly associate themselves with the cult, it was the simultaneous aestheticization and intellectualization of Candomblé that made the actual approximation possible. For one of the first things that is immediately noticeable about the public representation of Candomblé is that this Candomblé-of-the-media is a thoroughly aestheticized and "stylized" rendition of the cult. Candomblé has become a thing of beauty, of culture, and tradition. We see spotless white dresses, beautiful exotic jewelry, solemn rituals, enchanting rhythms, handsome people, and profound wisdom. The ramshackle and malodorous temples that one encounters in earlier ethnographies, or indeed, on the periphery of Salvador, are hard to find in the mediatized versions of Candomblé in Bahia's cultural circles. The "bloodier" aspects of initiation and animal sacrifice, the phenomenon of possession, or the various foulmouthed and vulgar "lower" spirits that inhabit the Afro-Brazilian religious universe are pretty much absent from public representations. Consequently, Bahian elites can now discuss the fact that *chanteuse* Maria Bethânia is *feita* (initiated) in

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10.   Beatriz Góis Dantas, *Vovó Nagô e Papai Branco. Usos e Abusos da África no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Graal, 1988).

11.   See Jocélio Teles dos Santos, *O poder da cultura e a cultura no poder: A disputa simbólica da herança cultural negra no Brasil* (Salvador: Edufba, 2005); Mattijs van de Port, "Candomblé in Pink, Green and Black: Re-scripting the Afro-Brazilian Religious Heritage in the Public Sphere of Salvador, Bahia," *Social Anthropology* 13 (2005): 3–26.

Candomblé, without having to imagine her with a shaved head and covered in the blood of sacrificial animals (as initiation requires), or entering in the spasmodic convulsions of possession trance.

Having said all this, we should not be blind to the fact that subsequent generations of Bahian artists and intellectuals have found themselves attracted to the world of Candomblé and continue to explore the cult's expressive potential. This gives reason to believe that there is more to Candomblé imagery then a mere collection of pretty icons with which to represent the Bahian state, its inhabitants, and its way-of-life. It may be all spotless white dresses or beautiful black smiles that meet the eye; the power and appeal of such images is first and foremost rooted in what they bring into *resonance.* All Bahians will have some idea as to what was so meticulously excluded from these images: the hardships of poverty, the cathexed figure of the *mãe preta*, the shocking reality of animals bleeding to death, the lusts and passions of "the people," the timelessness of tradi-tion, the black rooster on someone's doorstep, the mystery of the occult, the pains and inflictions of slavery, the brooding and somehow unfathom-able gaze of one's black *empregada* (maid), caught off-guard, the violence and dangers of urban Brazil. And it is because of these more tacit under-standings of the Candomblé universe that images of the cult evoke a powerful cocktail of roots, carnality, passion, earthliness, impulse, violence, blood, suffering, ecstasy, and fear. One is tempted to say: the "stuff that life is made of."

Small wonder, then, that next to indexing *baianidade*, Candomblé imagery is constantly put to work to produce "authenticity," made into a magic potion that promises to breathe life into the settings of high moder-nity in which it appears. Whether it is the Candomblé-inspired lyrics of a Margareth Menezes song, the glossy Bahian cookbooks of Dadá, Jorge Amado's novel *Jubiabá*, or the recent exposition of the work of photographer and ethnographer Pierre Verger, the invocation of the Candomblé universe promises to provide a link with "life-as-it-really-is." Take, for instance, the following report on the fashion show of a Bahian designer during the yearly São Paulo Fashion Weeks:

> Amidst the drumming of Carlinhos Brown [the Bahian musician and mega star], the chanting of priestesses from Candomblé, and the statues of the gods, the breathtaking models of the Bahian fashion designer M. Officer showed his new winter collection, which in fact had little to do with winter. Sensuality, deep décolletés and transparent fabrics characterized the show on the catwalk… Escaping all rules and conventions, Carlos Miele—the designer of the label—stated he sought to show how Brazil really is (*quis mostrar o que o Brasil tem de real*), and for that reason he choose the long marginalized cult of Candomblé as his theme. Carlinhos Brown considered it an honor to participate in the show. "We loved to

show the authentic music of Brazil. The country needs to know its music," Brown pointed out.[12]

Looking for "*o que Brasil tem de real*" in the realm of Candomblé, one cannot but notice a certain "bohemian" motif in the attempts of all those Bahian artists and intellectuals as they move towards the margins of Bahian society to establish links with Candomblé temples, hoping to find their muses among the *orixás*. Writer Jorge Amado; song-writer Dorivall Caymmy and Vinicius de Moreas; artists such as Carybé and Rubem Valentim; musicians such as Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso, Maria Bethânia, Gal Costa, and Carlinhos Brown; filmmaker Glauber Rocha; not to mention the many politicians and intellectuals who publicly display their links with the world of Candomblé: in Bahia, Candomblé became something of a celebrity meeting ground.

A ILUSTRE GALERIA DE FILHOS E SIMPATIZANTES DA CASA
Artistas, políticos, esportistas, publicitários, jornalistas... A comunidade, de baixa renda, recebe a elite

Gal Costa   Caetano Veloso   ACM   Jorge Amado   Pelé   Getúlio Vargas

Filhos-de-santo: Belisa Ribeiro, Caetano Veloso, Gal Costa, Gilberto Gil, Maria Bethânia, Maria Zilda Bethlem, Nizan Guanaes... **Simpatizantes e eventuais freqüentadores:** ACM (grande amigo e de ligações profundas com a casa), Cássia Eller, David Zylbersztajn (esteve na reabertura), Duda Mendonça (freqüentador), Getúlio Vargas, João Baptista Figueiredo, João Goulart, Jorge Amado (filho do Axé Opô Afonjá, mas grande amigo do Gantois), Leda Nagle (amiga da casa), Pelé, Pierre Verger (grande amigo da casa), Washington Olivetto (lá esteve recentemente)...

Figure 1. The 'illustrious gallery' of initiated and 'sympathizing' celebrities frequenting the temple of Gantois. Among them singers, politicians, writers and soccer players (courtesy of © cartacapital)

This new framing of the world of the *terreiro* brings its own dynamic into being, as is well illustrated in a recent reportage in *Vogue Brazil*,[13] a glossy and expensive fashion magazine. Under the title, "*O que a Baiana tem?*" ("What is it that the Bahiana has?," which is a famous line from a popular song), it features pop singer Ivete Sangalo, showing Candomblé-inspired haute-couture by the Brazilian designer Fause Haten and Chloé, an expensive international fashion label. The photographer is another upcoming celebrity: Christian Cravo—the son of the famous photographer Mario Cravo Neto. The setting of the photo shoot is a Candomblé temple, Ilê Axé Opô Aganju, led by a priest called Pai Balbino. Balbino is a colorful figure, who often appears in wildly baroque African garments, wearing lots of jewelry. His is a very "stylish" temple, founded with the help of the French photog-

12.   http://www.terra.com.br/istoe/Reportagens/fashion.htm.
13.   No. 37 (2005).

rapher and ethnographer Pierre Verger (in fact, some of my informants disliked this temple for being too much "like a museum" and lacking "soul"), and it has often been used for the photographic projects of the Cravo family.

The opening photo of the reportage shows the black hands (and many glittering rings) of Pai Balbino, making an opening gesture as if to embrace a somewhat hesitant looking Ivete Sangalo and lead her into his temple. Undoubtedly, the readership of *Vogue Brazil* will immediately understand this setting as "authentically Bahian." We see immaculate whitewashed walls and beautiful white lace draperies decorating the sacred bamboo bushes. In some photographs, Sangalo takes a contemplative pose, as if to signal that she is aware of being in the realm of black spirituality; other photographs capture Sangalo in a whirling, trance-like dance, going barefoot over the naked earth of the *terreiro*'s compound. Little details seek to communicate that the singer—for all of her fame and fortune—is still in touch with "how Brazil really is." Her relations with the people from the *terreiro* come across as warm and easygoing. In one picture the photographer has contrasted Sangalo's white and perfect aerobic-trained appearance with the "real" initiates, who are black and plump and wear unfashionable spectacles, but produce friendly and welcoming smiles. In another picture, we see motherly black hands readjusting Sangalo's turban.

Anyone who is at least a bit familiar with Ivete Sangalo will not miss the subtext to this reportage. The singer, who made it big with a popular carnival group called Banda Eva, has been trying to project an image of being a singer of the genre that is called MPB (Musica Popular Brasileira) and that is ranked many steps higher on the cultural ladder. Thus far, however, this attempt has not been very successful. Most certainly, Ivete Sangalo's public demonstration of entertaining links with the Candomblé universe aims at more than to confirm her as a "true Baiana." She is first and foremost presenting herself as the last in a long line of cultural icons who have made it to the *terreiro do Candomblé*. In other words, this media performance not only marks her as a celebrity, but as a "celebrity artist." This same motive might also explain the recent flirtations with Candomblé by Daniela Mercury, Rogerio Santoro, Zeca Pagodinho and a great number of other pop singers and telenovela actors who have acquired fame, but whose status as cultural icons is uncertain.[14]

If celebrities have sought the Candomblé temples to communicate both their being an *artiste* and their being in touch with "*o que Brazil tem de real*," temples have been keen to accommodate such elite longings, and keep accommodating them. Which raises the question of why they should want to do so.

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14. There are also those black artists such as Carlinhos Brown and Margareth Menezes, who can profitably play out their "real belonging" to the world of Candomblé.

Celebrity Politics, Bahian style: The *Ogã*

In the vast ethnographic literature on Bahian Candomblé, the presence of important people from outside the Candomblé community in the temples has, of course, not gone unnoticed. The analysis of these relationships, however, often gets stuck in an overall tendency to describe the cult "from within" and understand its institutions and organization within a "traditional," i.e. "African" framework. It is thus that contacts between the Candomblé universe and the world outside the temple walls are usually discussed in chapters, articles, or passages that concern the honorary office of the *ogã*.[15]

The *ogãs* are temple dignitaries who are elected during public ceremonies when the *orixás*, incorporated in their mediums, "chose" them from the audience. *Ogãs* may have special functions within the temple such as drumming (*alabé*), slaughtering the sacrificial animals (*ogã-de-faca*), or decorating the house for celebrations (*ogã-de-sala*) and have been described as the "right arm" of the priestess "in all issues not directly linked to the cult itself."[16] One of their responsibilities concerns the "external relations" of the house. Given Candomblé's troublesome history of persecution by state and church authorities, it is not surprising that priests and priestesses would attempt to concede the title of *ogã* to people of social standing and influence who could negotiate favors from the authorities, protect temples from police raids, and/or raise some money to finance the elaborate and costly religious ceremonies. Thus, Artur Ramos, one of the early ethnographers of Candomblé, already noted that "the ogã is nearly always white, a gentleman that is respected by the Negroes, who consider him to be the protector of their temple."[17]

15.   See Nino Rodrigues, *O animismo fetichista dos negros baianos* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1935 [1900]); Ruth Landes, *The City of Women* (New York: MacMillan, 1947); Roger Bastide, *O Candomblé da Bahia: Rito Nagô* (São Paulo: Editora Schwarcz, 2000 [1958]); Vivaldo da Costa Lima, *A Família de Santo: Nos Candomblés Jejes-Nagôs da Bahioa: Um Estudo de Relações Intragrupais* (Salvador: Corrupio, 2003); Renato da Silveiro, "Pragmatismo e milagres de fé no Extremo Ocidente," in *Escravidão e Invenção da Liberdade: Estudos sobre o Negro no Brasil*, ed. Jõao José Reis (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Brasiliense, 1988), 166–97; Julio Braga, *A Cadeira de Ogã e outro ensaios* (Rio de Janeiro: Pallas, 1999).

16.   Edison Carneiro, *Candomblés da Bahia* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2000 [1958]), 113.

17.   Arthur Ramos, *O Negro brasileiro* (Recife: Fundação Joaquim Nabuco/ Editora Massangana, 1988), 51. Julio Braga, however, argues that whereas temples ideally would have *ogãs* of social standing, more often *ogãs* were from the lower classes, because temples either did not succeed in accessing the higher classes, or because they preferred someone who was more knowledgeable with the religious universe of Candomblé (*A Cadeira de Ogã*, 46–47).

As I have made clear, however, Candomblé is no longer the persecuted and marginalized cult it used to be, and is eagerly sought by outsiders who want to show their connections with (and involvement in) the Candomblé universe. This new situation calls for a revision of the role and functioning of the *ogã.*

The importance of the *ogã* within the temples has certainly not diminished. In fact, one may point out that some Candomblé temples have sought to broaden the office of the *ogã* so as to "absorb" ever-more influential and affluent outsiders into the religious community. With mild irony, Julio Braga labelled the people who took up a position in the *hierarquias honoríficas* of a temple "*ogã-de-fama*," to distinguish them from *ogãs* with ceremonial tasks, such as de *ogã-de-faca* or the *ogã-de-sala.* Vivaldo da Costa Lima, using the Yorubá vocabulary that is currently politically correct, comments that these "friends of the house" came to be called *oloiês* or *ojoiês*:

> In Bahia, these titles are conceded to *ialorixás* [priestesses] and old *ogãs* of the house—whose status and prestige in Candomblé circles thus increases—as well as to friends and sympathizers of the house, who make up a broad social spectrum, including writers, deputies, painters, university professors, merchants, industrials, medical doctors and foreigners who live in Bahia.[18]

Important as the office of the *ogã* may be for an understanding of the ways that Candomblé seeks to organize and institutionalize its links with the world outside the temple walls, a narrow focus on this traditional office alone cannot but produce a very partial view of the relations between priests and celebrities as described above. The number of celebrities who at present take an interest in publicly showing their affinity with Candomblé far exceeds the number of *ogãs* on offer in the "celebrity temples." This is particularly true for the prestigious temples that have obtained a veritable celebrity profile: Gantois, which is still exploiting the fame of Mãe Menininha and keeps attracting media stars, and Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, the temple of Mãe Stella, who works hard to maintain a more "learned" and "intellectual" profile and attracts academics and intellectuals. Moreover, many of these "sympathizers" do not want the kind of religious commitment that *ogã*-ship implies, but seek a far more casual relationship with the cult. For such reasons, a great variety of ties between priests, politicians, and celebrities have come into being that can no longer be adequately discussed in terms of the office of the *ogã*.

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18.   Da Costa Lima, *A Família de Santo*, 101. He further notes that these *oloiês* are not obliged to fulfill the great many rituals and ritual obligations of the *filho-de-santo* to re-establish and confirm their "mystical links with the supernatural world" (ibid.), but should participate in at least one celebration a year (*festa do padroeiro da casa*).

Priests Going Public

Another sensible framework for discussing the relationships between celebrities and temples is the fact that we are dealing with media performances, which address the public sphere and speak to new audiences. This move of Candomblé priests marking their presence in the public sphere is a recent development and can most certainly be understood as an attempt to establish themselves publicly as the one and only "true voice" of Candomblé. As stated earlier, the cult is found to be doing its signifying work way beyond the temple walls. Writers, journalists, anthropologists, philosophers, and other intellectuals and academicians; artists, musicians, filmmakers, and photographers; state officials, black militants, gay activists, and environmentalists have all made public their particular interpretations and understandings of what Candomblé is, can be, or ought to be. What this means is that Candomblé's public face was largely the product of the outsider's imagination. Certainly, Candomblé priests and priestesses have always sought to have their say on representational matters behind the screens—and they have been quite successful in this respect.[19] But they have long refrained from actively and openly participating in the politics of representation surrounding Candomblé's public presence.

Today, one cannot but notice a changing attitude. A growing number of priests and priestesses have overcome their media shyness and sought access to the public sphere. They have, of course, a number of motives for entering the public sphere. Some seem to fancy the prestige that being in the public eye produces. Others may have financial gain in mind, or the competition with other *terreiros* on the highly competitive market of salvation. Yet there is a pervasive sense in the Candomblé community that representational matters should be in its own hands, and priests and priestesses openly claim to be the authoritative and authentic voice of Candomblé. Hoping to correct what they perceive as "erroneous" images of the cult, Candomblé temples are now publishing books, launching CDs with ceremonial music, producing informative videos, delivering speeches, giving interviews, opening websites, and inviting the media to report on all kinds of political, social, and cultural programs initiated by members of the *terreiro*.

Yet whatever their reasons and motives for "going public" may be, all of the priests who have gone public are now struggling to inscribe themselves in the communicative and expressive modes of modern mass media. One of the more complicated issues they are facing is *how to establish their authority as religious leaders in terms that will speak to the "public at large."* The resources available to priest/esses to put together a convincing

19.   Roger Sanci-Roca's work on the statues of the *Orixás* on the Dique de Tororo is a case in point: see his *Art, Religion and the Public Sphere in Bahia, Brazil* (Working Papers Series WPS-010, autumn 2001; Chicago: Center for Latin American Studies, University of Chicago, 2001).

performance of religious authority *within* the religious community add up to little in the public sphere. A mass audience is not informed about the weight and importance of such traditional resources of priestly authority as "seniority" (in terms of the initiation process); the "standing" of one's religious forebears; the accumulated power of *axé*, Candomblé's notion of a beneficent life-energy, as it is manifested in the pomp and splendor of ceremonies; as well as the terms of address, the ritualized salutations, and the thousand-and-one little do's-and-don'ts through which the temple hierarchy comes into being. Claiming authority in the public sphere has thus forced these priests/esses to find new modes of address. They now have to speak a language and employ a vocabulary and imagery that will serve their claim to be recognized as "the authentic and authoritative voice of Candomblé."

Part of what they have to realize is "public intelligibility." In Bahia, priestesses (more than priests, and this is an important gender dimension that merits further discussion than these pages allow me to do) can of course seek to embody the iconic representations already present in the public sphere, and this is in fact what many of them do. But we also find that priestly power gets somehow "translated" in the terms of (powerful) others. It is thus that the *ialorixá* (high priestess) or *babalorixá* (high priest) comes to be likened to a catholic priest, and initiation is said to be "just like the seminar."

The example of Mãe Stella is most instructive. Mãe Stella is priestess—or *ialorixá* as she would prefer to be called—of one of the most prestigious houses in Salvador, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá. She has always been a staunch advocate of the recognition of Candomblé as a *religion* in its own right, and even in her old age she is crusading against earlier understandings of Candomblé as a "cult," "sect," "animistic practice," or "negro folklore." She also dismisses all forms of syncretism with Catholicism as "a relic of the past," that may have been necessary to help the cult survive under slavery but is no longer useful in the present time. A restoration of the "African purity" of Candomblé is what her temple is after. Mãe Stella seems to be well aware that the public sphere is the arena where this fight for recognition has to be fought, and although a visibly media-shy figure, she does seek publicity to pursue her politics. She has published a number of books, gives public speeches, and appears on TV and in the newspapers. One can only conclude that her politics have been highly successful—her understanding of Candomblé has become pretty much the dominant voice of Candomblé in the public sphere—but this success comes at a cost. This is well illustrated in the following *laudatio* for Mãe Stella that I found in a Bahian newspaper. The text mentions, among other things, that

> …the priestess was chosen by the United Nations to represent the tradition of the Orixás in Rio de Janeiro, next to the most diverse religious leaders such as the Dalai Lama of Tibet and Rabbi Henry Sobel. As a

recognition of the utmost importance of the cultural and social work that Mãe Stella has done in Bahia and in Brazil she has been invited to conferences at universities and international institutions such as the Brazilian Contemporary Arts in London, Harvard University in Washington [*sic*], and the Caribbean Institute in New York. The priestess also received the medals "Maria Quitéria" and the "Ordem do Cavaleiro," the trophies "Esso" (a prize for black writers) and "Clementina de Jesus," and a great *homenagem* by the Bahian people in 1995… To foreground her dedication and activities to strengthen the Candomblé religion with its traditions of thousands of years, Mãe Stella has now received from the Federal Government the medal of the "Order of Cultural Accomplishment," and will see her temple of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá be declared to be part of the National Historical Patrimony.[20]

I can hardly think of a better demonstration of how the simple fact that Candomblé has accessed the public sphere profoundly changed the symbolization of priestly authority—indeed, how Mãe Stella became dependent on *public* criteria to argue her authority as a religious leader beyond the walls of her temple. In Candomblé ethnographies (as well as in Mãe Stella's own publications) the sources of sacerdotal power and prestige—and consequently, authority—are always explained in religious terms. We thus learn that in Candomblé, religious knowledge can only be obtained by going "through the motions" of the ritual cycle, year in, year out, and it is only with the passing of time that the embodied knowledge the cult seeks to install in its adepts "sinks in." Within the temple walls, the length of someone's initiation is therefore the prime criterion of religious authority: authority is with "*os mais velhos*"—"the oldest," i.e., those who are in the know.[21]

In the public sphere, however, the authority of the priestess can no longer be solely based on her having lived up to such religiously defined criteria. If a priestess like Mãe Stella wants to be *publicly* recognized as an authoritative voice, she needs to have recourse to a form of "impression management" that stresses values that a much wider audience is able to recognize and appreciate. And thus we are served this "cocktail of fame" which mixes "worldwide recognition" (Mãe Stella's election by the United Nations, and invitations to travel to places around the world) with academic prestige (invitations to conferences at Harvard and other universities), state decorations, and the full weight of Culture. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of Mãe Stella with the Dalai Lama and Rabbi Henry Sobel is another clear instance of the "aura snatching" that I have discussed before. What the *laudatio* makes visible, then, is that the resources to construct a *public* notion of Mãe Stella's authority differ hugely from those that make up the

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20.   *Tribuna da Bahia*, 20 November 1999.

21.   See Da Costa Lima, *A Família de Santo*; Lisa Earl Castillo, "Entre a oralidade e a escrita: percepções e usos do discurso etnográfico no candomblé da Bahia" (Ph.D. diss., Instituto de Letras, Universidade Federal da Bahia, 2005).

display of authority in her own temple: in the *laudatio*, the priestess comes to represent ethnic, traditional, cultural, and socio-political values, rather than religious ones.

It is hard to miss the irony in all of this. More than anything, it was Mãe Stella's vision to "restore" Candomblé to its status of "African religion" that drove her to the public sphere. Out in the public sphere, however, she had to mobilize all kinds of extra-religious qualities so as to create a publicly recognizable profile of authority: what we find, then, is that her authority as a religious leader is rooted in the culture politics of the Bahian state, in her representing Afro-Brazilian culture, and—more and more—in her being simply "famous."

Yet intelligibility is not the only issue to be dealt with when a public authorization of being the one-and-only authentic voice of Candomblé is on the agenda. What priests-going-public need to accomplish is *public credibility*, and it is this issue that takes us *linea recta* to the murky meeting ground of religious and mediatic imaginaries. For when the credibility of a religious leader is to be realized in a media performance, new standards come into play: standards that may have little to do with the religious notions as developed and understood within the confines of a particular religious community, but all the more with the cultivated modes of perception and appraisal with which modern media consumers judge media performances.[22] And with these new standards, new authoritative voices gain prominence: the voices of media experts, artists, designers, people who know about "looks" and media "appeal," and most of all, the people who embody the successful mix of all these things: celebrities.

Attaining Credibility in the Media:
The Discourse of Celebrity

An example of how celebrities come to back up public statements about religious power is a leading article in *Carta Capital,* a prestigious Brazilian monthly. The article was titled "The Power of Candomblé" and reported the re-opening of Gantois—a famous Candomblé temple in the Bahian capital Salvador that had been closed for four years awaiting a successor for the deceased priestess.[23]

In a separate text-box, the article contained a series of photographs of famous people under the title "the illustrious gallery of initiates and supporters of the house." We see pictures of such mega stars as singers Gal Costa and Caetano Veloso, next to the Bahian leader ACM, writer Jorge Amado, soccer player Pelé, and the former president of the republic, Getúlio

22.   See Hirschkind, "The Ethics of Listening."
23.   *Carta Capital*, 12 June 2002, 14–20.

Vargas.[24] Underneath the photos are written the names of a great number of other celebrities who visited the Gantois temple, or may be considered "*grandes amigos* of the house." Fame is the common denominator of this heterogeneous collection of individuals, and it is the fact that *famous* people frequent Gantois that should convince the reader that the temple has access to a tremendous reservoir of occult powers. In other words, the logic being followed in this rhetoric suggest that Gantois is a powerful house because that is where the celebrities go.

The rhetoric of this article is effective because in Bahia—like just about anywhere else in the world—more and more people imagine that the locus for ultimate self-realization is a spot in front of a television camera and that "a worthy life" is a life that is taken to be noteworthy by the media. When my Bahian friend Xandra had asked her six-year-old niece what she would want to become when a grown-up, the little girl had instantly answered that she wanted to be "*famosa*"—famous. "She didn't even know to say famous for what!" Xandra exclaimed. "In *our* days we wanted to be medical doctors, or teachers, or stewardesses! But now everyone just wants to be a celebrity. Even a six-year-old can't think of anything else!" I came across many similar stories. Luis, a recent migrant to the city, contemplated writing a letter of admission to the reality show *Big Brother Brazil*, as a daily appearance on the O Globo network would surely mean a ticket out of poverty. Gean was convinced that some spectacular suicides attempts, kidnappings, or particularly gruesome murders were first and foremost attempts by the perpetrators to have their "five minutes of fame." And Christina, who was about to visit Rio de Janeiro for the first time in her life, dreamed not of such highlights as Pão de Açucar or Corcovado, but of the possibility to visit to the O Globo studios, where she could hope to meet the stars as they went to work.

I also found a whole media industry catering for the dreams and desires that the notion of "fame" engenders. Gossip magazines, weekly celebrity talk shows on TV such as *Show de Fama*, society columns in the newspapers, fan clubs and websites dedicated to this or that *celebridade,* TV shows such as *Big Brother Brazil* or *Princeza de Um Dia*, and several *Shows de Caloures* ("talent scouting" shows) provide a concrete avenue to the much-desired fame and make the promise that "you too can be famous" seem to be ever more realistic. This cult of the *celebridade* in Brazil is such a pervading and ubiquitous facet of contemporary social life that it is regularly mocked in television comedy, portrayed in a recent telenovela (called *Celebridade)* and discussed in bestsellers with titles such as *The Divine Comedy of Fame: Purgatory, Paradise and Hell for Those who Dream to be a Celebrity*[25] and *Smile, You are Being Filmed!*[26]

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24.   The accuracy of this enumeration is disputable.
25.   Xico Sa, *Divina Comédia da Fama: Purgatório, paraíso e inferno de quem*

Michel de Certeau, in a chapter of *The Practice of Everyday Life* that is called "Believing and Making Believe," has offered some interesting thoughts on how to understand the appeal and success of the celebrity discourse.[27] Certeau observes that people's capacity to believe, to invest certain propositions or institutions with their "belief-energy" (as he conceptualizes it), is no longer directed towards the domains of institutional politics and institutionalized religion. The places, objects, and propositions deemed worthy to invest with our capacity to believe, Certeau maintains, are found in the cinema, the football stadiums, sports in general, the arts, concert halls and pop festivals, and more generally, the leisure activities in which we engage. These are the areas where heroes and idols are made, and it is in these areas that the projects can be found to which lives are devoted. One cannot but notice that these areas where Certeau finds belief-energy concentrated are also the "natural habitat" of the stars.

In Bahia, much of this is immediately visible. Numerous scholars have pointed out that in all of Brazil, the religious field is characterized by the crumbling hegemony of the once all-powerful Catholic church, and what has followed is a "fluidity" of belief and religious "nomadism."[28] The political field, given overall corruption and a state that continues to fail as a provider, goes from one credibility crisis to the next. Football, music, TV-drama, dance, carnival and other street festivals, however, are vital strong-holds of belief-energy. And this is where the celebrities come in. Through what must be a complex trafficking of emotions and fantasies—cinematic experiences that make themselves felt in the field of politics; the thrills of the concert hall that become relevant to the sphere of religion; standards for what makes a convincing performance by an actor, musician, or sports-man being employed to judge the performance of the politician or the religious leader—media idols are made into receptacles of our belief-energy. This, I would say, might explain why celebrities have become so crucial in the public articulation of authority and leadership. For it is their capacity to enchant, to make us believe—wholeheartedly—in their art, what political and religious authorities are after when displaying their connected-ness to the "stars," or when casting their public personas in the celebrity model.

This line of reasoning might explain why priests like Pai Balbino over-come their media shyness and open up their *terreiro*'s for the cameras to

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sonha ser uma celebridade (Rio de Janeiro: Objectiva, 2004).

26.   Ana Beatriz Barbosa Silva and Eduardo Mello, *Sorria, você esta sendo filmado* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Gente, 2004).

27.   Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

28.   The term comes from Maria Lucia Montes, "As Figuras do Sagrado: Entre o Público e o Privado," in *História da Vida Privada no Brasil. Contrastes da Intimidade Contemporânea*, ed. Lilia Moritz Schwarcz (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998), 63–173.

show the world how celebrities have come to their premises to look for "*o que Brazil tem de real*"—just as it explains all those jointly media performances of Candomblé priests with the fine flowering of Bahian society. What the priests get out of these media performances is public credibility. How that works is best illustrated in a discussion of a new media figure: the celebrity *pai-de-santo*.

The Emergence of the Celebrity Priest

Augusto César is an interesting example of a Candomblé priest whose public authority seems to rest on the exploitation of the "celebrity" discourse. This priest was initiated in Gantois, and runs a very posh temple in Lauro de Freitas, a neighboring town of Salvador. He frequently appears in the society columns of newspapers, celebrity magazines, and on-line gossip sites. In all the articles that I found, the priest is portrayed as a curious mixture of the "chic" of high modernity and the "primitivism" that Candomblé still evokes. "His Candomblé has nothing to do with *pretos velhos* [the spirits of old slaves]," is how one of the articles opens.[29] "To the contrary, the *babalorixá* is a spiritual guru for artists, socialites and businessmen of the high society in Rio. His consultations cost a fortune, but the *beau monde* thinks it's worth the value."[30] César's fame is constructed in several ways. There is certainly great stress on his being a native from Bahia (considered to be the cradle of Candomblé and therefore a source of authenticity: in one of the articles, the readership is informed that César has all the ingredients he needs for his Rio de Janeiro clientele directly flown in from Bahia, *terra dos orixás*). The fact that he is from the "line" of Mãe Menininha, the legendary Bahian *mãe-de-santo* who died in 1986, is equally highlighted.[31] In one of the articles, an "old lady" is quoted as saying, "I just *love* Candomblé. Augusto is noble, he is from the line of Mãe Menininha. He follows the traditions, but at the same time, he is so sophisticated!"

It is this juxtaposition of tradition and contemporary chic that dominates all reports on the priest: the journalists obviously cannot resist the ticklish effects of the incongruities that the story of Augusto César holds in store (nor, admittedly, can I…). "Given his fear of flying, César sits in a plane with amulets in one hand, and a strip of Lexotan in the other." Or: "one will never find him smoking a *charuto* but a package of Carlton is always close at hand." Or an article goes on and on about César having been to the art

29. *A Tarde*, 13 March 2003.

30. The fact that Bahian Candomblé does not worship Preto Velho was apparently lost on the writers of the article.

31. For an analysis of the fame of Menininha, see Jocélio Teles dos Santos, "Menininha do Gantois: a sacralização do poder," in *Caminhos da Alma: Memória afro-brasileira*, ed. Vagner Gonçalves da Silva (São Paulo: Selo Negro, 1998), 133–53.

academy; César going to France at least once a year; César being addicted to Veuve Cliquot champagne; César wearing only Armani suits; César using only the most expensive of African fabrics for his priestly attire; and César having had a face-lift at least five times with high-society plastic surgeon Paulo Müller. Yet after this lengthy enumeration of high-society characteristics, the article abruptly concludes that his followers in Rio de Janeiro need not to worry: while it is true that in Bahia, César asks his clients for the sacrifice of an ox, goats, or ducks, the sacrifices for his Rio clientèle are *mais light*—"lighter." Again, the idea is invoked that right under the perfume and champagne hover scenes of bloodshed and primitive ritual.

Most important in the media construction of César as the celebrity priest (and here, the tongue-in-cheek undertones of the previous examples are considerably less audible), are the enumerations of celebrities that visit him for consultation and advice. *Revista Oi*,[32] for instance, knows that "among his clients there are people like singer Zeca Pagodinho, actress Maria Zilda, socialite Lilibeth Monteiro and producer Flora Gil, wife of minister Gilberto Gil" and "it has been said that he had an affair with actress Sônia Braga, which he neither confirms nor denies." Then, as if to save César's authenticity, it is hastily added that "…obviously, in his house in Portão, close to Salvador, he also receives lots of people who are not so famous."

The fact that César initiated Flora Gil, the young wife of the aforementioned Gilberto Gil, is what probably added most to his public fame. Here, then, in a nutshell, is the triangular relationship between politicians, celebrities, and priests that is under discussion in this article, and it shows how complicated the play of aura-snatching may become: Gilberto Gil, the songwriter and pop-star who became a politician; his wife, who became a celebrity by being "the-wife-of'; and the famous couple making sure that the world will know about their intimate relationship with a Candomblé priest Augusto César (who was *padrinho* at their wedding, and is said to have moved with the Gils to Rio de Janeiro where he was given an apartment in the same condominium in Gavea as where the Gils have set up house).[33] The dependencies are certainly mutual. Gilberto Gil, black, Bahian, made famous because of his involvement with the 1970s counter-culture of the Tropicália movement, needs a public display of intimacy with a Candomblé priest, as it signals his continuous involvement with Afro-Brazilian realities—even now that he has made it all the way up to far-away Brasília. In interviews, he somewhat off-handedly explains his links with the Candomblé universe. Although raised in a popular neighborhood in Salvador, his contacts with Candomblé only came much later, as his parents were devout Catholics. The following quote, in which Gilberto Gil explains the VIP treatment he received in the *terreiro* of Mãe Menininha, is self-explanatory:

32.   www.revistaoi.com./br/nova/augusto_cesar.asp (accessed 10 August 2005).
33.   http://www.anablogada.blogger.com.br/2003_07_01_archive.html (accessed 29 November 2004).

> Mãe Menininha didn't think it necessary that I entertained a "confessional" link with the cult. She told me: "Every once in while, if you wish, give a present to the saint that reigns your head. And if someone tells you you will have to be initiated, tell them that's a lie. Tell them Menininha from Gantois told you to say that this is a lie!" And thus I was liberated. I created a cultural link, more than a religious one, with Candomblé. I came to appreciate the cult due to my artistic activities and due to the natural interest I have in it in relation with the theme's I address in my work.

Interestingly enough, the religious link is established through his wife Flora, who—although white—has gone "all the way" and got herself initiated. This is how Gil Gilberto talks about his wife's involvement in an interview:

> She really likes the community stuff, the historical mode of Bahia. She feels deeply attracted to all of that. Candomblé, without doubt, is her way to relate with those sentiments. She loves it. The most important moments for her are the "obligations" (*obrigações*), this thing of going there, stay the night [in the temple], to wake up in the morning and to go and fetch water from the well, to go to the kitchen to do her things, clean vegetables and kill the animals. All of that, she loves intensely.

Yet let us stay focused on the relationship of the Gils with Augusto César. In the following excerpt, Flora Gil explains how César had sent her to a famous diviner (*babalao*) in Rio de Janeiro to find out the "master of her head." What is most striking, however, is to see how Flora Gil, the famous "wife-of," is in the business of producing religious authority:

> I was preparing to be initiated (*fazer meu santo*) in a Bahian temple, when, to my surprise, I had to come to Rio de Janeiro to obtain absolute certainty as to who is my orixá. My priest, Augusto César do Portão, asked me to play [the cowry shells] with Father Agenor, a very trustworthy person. I thought I would meet up with a strong black man, tall, and with a heavy Bahian accent. However, I found myself in the company of a white gentleman, thin, small, and with refined manners. The occasion really made me want to cry, but he said "hush-hush, you're from Euá, just like me." From then on, there grew a deep friendship which up to this day installs me with pride, love and thankfulness. It was he who talked to my priest, instructed him about my obligations, explained everything, took care, gave me attention, calmed me down and gave me his friendship, which I take to be a treasure. Well, it is difficult to talk about my father Agenor. He is all goodness.

Again, one is struck how in the public eye, César's (and Pai Agenor's) authority comes to depend on the authoritative voice of celebrity. It would not have done to ask any old *Candomblézeiro* about the qualities of Augusto César as a religious authority and to report it in the press. It would not have done to report Augusto César's praise of the old *babalao* Pai Agenor. Most likely, people would have shrugged their shoulders. It is only when confirmed by a public celebrity that the public authority of these religious leaders comes about. Even when explicitly delegating praise and respect to

both her religious guides, it is her own voice, the voice of Flora Gil, the voice of fame, that matters in the public sphere. She is authoritative in that she has the power to indicate what has value and what has not. Augusto César's display of celebrity behavior, without any doubt, may be read as an attempt to capture the authoritative voice of fame.

A last example of how public articulations of religious authority come to depend on the voice of celebrity is an article in the on-line version of a celebrity magazine called *Istoé Gente*.[34] The article introduces Theo Carnavali, a 43-year-old *pai-de-santo* who was hired as a consultant for a prime-time telenovela from O Globo, called *Porto dos Milagres.* The storyline of the telenovela was loosely based on a novel by Jorge Amado and situated in an imaginary Bahian coastal town—inevitably, it had a lot of references to the universe of Candomblé. According to the article, it was the priest's task to make sure that the scenes that had Candomblé in it were executed correctly.

Carnavali's fame is constructed in ways that are similar to those of Augusto César. Apparently, Carnavali was indicated to the producers by the temple of Gantois in Salvador, or as the article puts it in the vocabulary of fame: "he was indicated by the temple of Mãe Menininha of Gantois, in Bahia." The real proof of his power, however, is to be found in the opening line of the article, where it reads that the priest was able to "make a difference" in the world of the telenovela: "He never worked for TV before, but already managed to change scenes for the primetime novela from O Globo." Within the Brazilian discourse on celebrity—where the telenovelas from O Globo are the Valhalla of fame—this indeed may be labelled miracle work! From the interview we learn that, right from the start, he introduced collective prayers on the set, involving all the actors and technicians. He would also regularly throw the cowry shells (a divinatory practice in Candomblé) to learn how "bad currents" (*maus fluidos*) could be avoided during the filming. Furthermore, he demanded that the goddess of the deep seas would be called Iemanjá—her Yorubá name—rather than Janaína, as the script writers had called her. Keeping in line with the Candomblé orthodoxy as propagated by Mãe Stella and her followers, he stated that "*Janaína é uma mãe d'água da cultura indígena*" (Janaína is a water goddess of indigenous culture). But his single most important claim to fame was the fact that the producers actually accepted his advice to work with a stand-in, rather than with leading actress Zezé Motta, in a scene where she was to become possessed by Iemanjá (the reason why this had to be done are not entirely clear, but it is suggested that Motta, a black actress, and confessed "believer" would be possessed for real). As stated, the change resulted in a serious delay in the production, as a stand-in had to be sought and trained.

The examples that I have given are suggestive of the ways in which the

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34.   *Istoé* online, 4 June 2001 (www.istoé.com).

authority of religious leaders comes to be dependent on "celebrity status." They make clear that while priestly authority may be unchallenged within a *terreiro do Candomblé*, any wish on the part of priests to mean something in the public sphere creates a dependency on the voice of celebrities. Religious specialists not only have to show that they are in close contact with celebrities, but they have to live up to celebrity status themselves by mimicking "star" behavior, creating media appeal, displaying their services to the stars, or even show that they have an influence on media production.

Conclusions

Whereas all that I have written should be primarily understood as the production of religious authority in the media, these developments clearly are not without repercussions for the performances in the temple. Indeed, the whole point of moving into the murky meeting ground of religious and mediatic imaginaries was exactly to argue that it is seriously misleading to maintain a strict separation between the Candomblé of the temples and the Candomblé of the media. So let me conclude this essay with a brief exposition of how an awareness of the inextricable entanglement of religious and media imaginaries can help us to look beyond the performance of "tradition" in Candomblé temples and get a hold of what this performance instructs us *not* to see.

All major ethnographies of Candomblé maintain that the authority of the priest or priestess within the temple is absolute.[35] During the great public ceremonies of the cult, this is made visible in what struck me as a highly convincing performance: in Gantois, for instance, drums fall silent and everybody rises (while initiates drop on their knees) when the priest/ess enters the ceremonial hall. Initiates, when asking the priest/ess's blessings at the beginning of a religious ceremony, have to prostrate themselves, their full face on the floor. Temple dignitaries higher up in the hierarchy can only address the priest/ess on their knees, and they, just like the initiates, should not hope to have much of a response, as the main act of priests and priestesses is to try to look as uninvolved as possible in what goes on around them. The *ogãs* too are equally obliged to perform acts of submission during public ceremonies—regardless of whether they are university professors, politicians, artists, or the adolescent boy from the neighborhood. Now, this whole performance underscores the absolute and unquestionable authority of the priest/ess, and one might say that *within the temple community* the description of the priest as an "absolute ruler" is adequate.

Nonetheless, it is clear that "public" criteria for authority trickle through into the inner realm of the temple, as social realities do not follow neat anthropological distinctions between public and private realms. Initiates of

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35.   See Da Costa Lima, *A Família de Santo*; Carneiro, *Candomblés da Bahia*.

Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá or other people who wanted to convince me of the power and importance of Mãe Stella, for instance, would always refer to her fame and worldwide recognition. Hardly, if ever, would they mention her religious qualities. Visitors to the small museum on the compound of her very own temple are shown a video of her fiftieth birthday—showing the coming and going of important people to pay their respect to the cele-brant—which again may be seen as an indication that public notions of fame are now an integral part of the construction of Mãe Stella's authority as a religious leader.

The public aspirations of the priests even affect the very performance of authority in their temples. As we have seen, many celebrities do not want the kind of religious commitment that *ogã*-ship implies, but seek a more casual relationship with the cult. What this means is that the presence of these powerful outsiders in the world of Candomblé is no longer institu-tionalized through the office of the *ogã*, and these sympathizers can no longer be neatly inserted into the internal hierarchies that structure power relations in the temple.

In a cult where—to quote Mãe Stella—"hierarchy is all: beginning, middle and end,"[36] the emergence of the famous aficionado does not remain with-out consequences. During the public ceremonies in which the absolute authority of the priest is made visible, the presence of these "sympathizers and friends of the house" has created an odd differentiation between those pertaining to the religious hierarchy, who have to go through all the pre-scribed prostrations, and those who are "honorable guests" or "sympathiz-ers," who shake hands or even hug the priest—suggesting a notion of equality that contradicts Candomblé notions of hierarchy. As we have seen, Gilberto Gil apparently received his "initiation *light*," a VIP treatment that according to some was also given to Maria Bethânia. (When I asked some initiates whether indeed Bethânia was shaven and all, they immediately made me understand that the rules do not count for people like Bethânia.) The latest gossip in Salvador is that the granddaughter of Mãe Carmen from Gantois, a young woman with beautiful thick and straight hair, was the only one out of eight initiates in a *barco* (the group of initiates that goes out) who was not shaved.

The new significance of Candomblé in the public sphere and the aspira-tions of the Candomblé priesthood to be recognized as the authentic and authoritative voice of their cult have triggered a complex reconfiguration of power relations: priestly authority is no longer solely made in the interior of the temples. Increasingly, that authority comes to depend on—and needs to adapt itself to—the authoritative voices of the media.

36.   Maria Stella de Azevedo Santos, *Meu Tempo é Agora* (São Paulo: Editora Oduduwa, 1993).

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Breathing into the Heart of the Matter: Why Padre Marcelo Needs No Wings*

Maria José Alves de Abreu

Abstract

This article addresses the distinctive spiritual qualities of aerial movement. Taking as a point of departure the feature film *Maria, Mãe do Filho de Deus* (2003) played by famous Brazilian Padre Marcelo Rossi, it argues for an engagement with cinematic images in terms of aerial dynamic imagination. It will be shown that the "inspired breath" of Padre Marcelo organizes the universe and affects the constitution of subjects and space in the film according to the Scriptures. The same aerial dynamic applies to his other contexts of performance such as Byzantine praying techniques and their relation to space. Subsequently, the article explores underlying analogies between electronic technology, acoustic environment, and pneumatic spirituality within common practices of embodied experience.

An angel passes through the text. The text is a script for the film that I will be analyzing in this article, but it is also a version of a story from Scripture; both script and biblical version coexist within a common space of filmic articulation. This article is about the different trajectories of an angelic figure named Padre Marcelo Rossi. The film that such an angel traverses is called *Maria, Mãe do Filho de Deus* (2003). Padre Marcelo Rossi is not only the author of the script upon which the film is based but he is also a performer in it. My main purpose here is to analyze *Maria, Mãe* as the enactment of a principle of motion that recalls Gaston

Bachelard's "aerial imagination."[1] In this regard, even if films imply motion, my main concern is not to carry out a formal analysis of how motion is visually apprehended by the cinematic apparatus. Rather, what I wish to explore is how the film is itself imbued by a dynamic energy that, blowing from elsewhere, propels its images and turns them into the material expression of a higher spiritual reality. In turn, the rich sensuousness of the medium's imagery also contaminates the idealized inspirited nature of images. In some respects, the present exercise may be understood as an attempt to apprehend how within a particular medium, in this case film, the ideal and the material, as well as form and content, invariably contaminate each other so that neither may be said ever to stand on their own.

Bachelard's concept of "aerial imagination" has been helpful for me to think about the inextricable relation between film and spiritual motion. He uses this expression to describe the interrelation of the materiality of imagining and the imagining of the material as primarily a kind of motion. Referring to the mechanical forms of motion such as the cinematic, Bachelard refers to it as "simply the transporting of an unchanging object through space" whereas his purpose is rather to consider objects that move themselves in order to change.

> …if we want to study objects that truly produce motion and that are truly the initial causes of movement, we may find it useful to replace a philosophy that deals with kinematic description with one that studies dynamic production.[2]

In what follows, I address the film *Maria, Mãe* in terms of the intersecting relation between imagination and the materiality of film. Having as a background the pneumatic ideology Padre Marcelo borrowed from Catholic Charismatic spirituality, I show how film images are supposed to emerge as aerial expressions of dynamic imagination, which are simultaneously reflected on the materiality of film. To reinforce this kind of dynamic production between matter and aerial motion in the film, I will refer to other contexts of performance by Padre Marcelo. Having as a source the creational breath of the Spirit of Pentecost according to the Scriptures, I show how the same dynamic as the inspired "breath" of Padre Marcelo, which organizes the universe and affects the constitution of subjects and space in the film, applies to other instances of performance. Thus, an analysis of Padre Marcelo's daily praying techniques of the Byzantine rosary as well as his greatly popular "aerobics of Jesus" will contribute to underline the relation between technology, spirituality, and

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1.   Gaston Bachelard, *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, trans. Edith R. Farrell and C. Frederick Farrell (Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture Publications, 1988 [1943]), 255–69.
2.   Ibid, 256.

the constitution of subjects, which we see in the film. A subsequent account of Padre Marcelo's dynamic engagements with space will highlight the parallels between all those elements as resonant with one another.

The daily appearances of Padre Marcelo Rossi on the airwaves of Brazilian media since the mid-nineties call for a reassessment of the nature of icons in an age of electronic technologies. Padre Marcelo has been strongly influenced by the ideas of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) regarding the importance it gives to pneumatic spirituality. Imported from America to Brazil in the early seventies by two American Jesuit priests, the CCR has since then evolved into a variety of different groups with different expressions, facets, and "charismas," reflecting the will to transcend any fixed forms. From the outset, the CCR argued for the dispensation of Catholic icons, describing them as frozen visual materializations of the sacred. It suggested instead that the body of the believer ought to be understood as a space of indwelling for divine utterance, *animus*, or breath. Meanwhile, the extraordinary fame of Padre Marcelo Rossi is complicating CCR's conceptions of iconography. A former teacher of physical education and obsessed body builder, young Padre Marcelo Rossi found in the dynamic attitude of the CCR a way to combine his passion for movement and aerobics with his vocation as a priest. Paradoxically, however, the enormous fame he gained in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America for his lively liturgies and media marathons, threatens to turn him back into the kind of frozen icon of idolatry that he wanted to avoid from the outset.

Brazil has a dazzling media industry of celebrity cults.[3] Fame is ephemeral and stars are rapidly trashed as models of the past. The fleeting quality of media has determined the short-lived character of stardom. Padre Marcelo, however, did not perceive the intrinsic qualities of media as a vehicle for exposure that would eventually fossilize him. On the contrary, he envisioned the repetitive qualities of media as a means for pacing and honing particular physical respiratory and cardiovascular activities. Thus conceived media techniques would enhance the liveliness of the subject, not simply because the latter was moving on the screen, but because technology could be embodied in articulation with spiritual techniques.

Yet, Padre Marcelo Rossi not only embodies spiritual techniques. He organizes these techniques so that others can use them as well. His performance in the film as a narrator shows how voice can stand for the power of creation in people's imaginations. As an archangel, Padre

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3. See, in this volume, Mattijs van de Port, "Priests and Stars: Candomblé, Celebrity Discourses, and the Authentication of Religious Authority in Bahia's Public Sphere" (pp. 301–24).

Marcelo is both an embodied manifestation of voice and a messenger through whom others may also embody his spiritual techniques. *Maria, Mãe* depicts the desire to transcend personal identities as well as spatial enclosures according to a universal history or the holy Script(ures). To do this, the film uses special computer effects such as morphing techniques and juxtaposed milieus in ways that materially challenge the ontology of cinema.

Finally, since my interest is in the subtle abilities of matter to cross borders between worlds and in the morphemic incarnations of subjects and space, one of the outcomes of my analysis will be to problematize some of the ideas traditionally linked to the sense of vision. The underlying point is precisely to question some associations with vision such as causal linearity, sequential thought, and static ideas of representation and to propose instead a more dynamic perspective of imaging, which relates more to acoustic modes of experience.[4]

Maria, Mãe do Filho de Deus

As the title suggests, *Maria, Mãe* tells the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary is promised to Joseph when the angel Gabriel visits her to announce the advent. Mary informs her disbelieving father that she is bearing the Son of God. He doubts her until the moment she miraculously cures the son of her cousin Elizabeth. After this, Mary's father informs Joseph about her pregnancy. Joseph cannot believe his own ears. While Joseph is in despair, the angel Gabriel returns to confirm to him the divine provenance of the child. The story unfolds showing the most important moments of the life of Jesus, from his birth in Bethlehem to his death on the cross and the resurrection.

The story of Mary and Jesus is given to us in flashback, cross-cutting with another narrative. The film starts in the present, in a small village in the Northeast of Brazil. Maria Auxiliadora is a mother who fears for the poor health of her six-year-old daughter Joana. On her way to the doctor, she takes Joana to the local church and asks the priest to look after her while she gets the diagnosis of Joana's sickness. This priest is Padre Marcelo Rossi. To entertain Joana, Padre Marcelo decides to tell her a story about a "very special mother" whose name, just like Joana's own mother, is Maria. As Padre Marcelo starts telling the story, in voice-over, we see the walking feet of Maria Auxiliadora turning into the feet of Mary, the future mother of Jesus. At the same time, the road and landscape of the Brazilian Northeast becomes that of Galilee. We are thrown

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4.   Stephen P. Hughes, "Tamil Cinema as Sonic Regime: Cinema Sound, Film Songs and the Making of a Mass Culture of Music" (keynote address, South Asia Conference at the University of Chicago, *New Perspectives on the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*, Chicago, Ill., February 24–25, 2005).

into another time and another place. Gradually, the voice of Padre Marcelo is replaced by the voice of the characters, until it rises again to remind us of the present and of his function as a narrator through whom we delve back into the past. The result is a non-linear narrative structure where disjointed pieces of the past and present run parallel. In the present, Padre Marcelo goes on telling the story to Joana while visiting the prisoners and the sick. As Padre Marcelo tells the story to Joana, she imagines its characters as people from her familiar world. Thus, her mother becomes Mary, Jesus is the local sweets vendor, the jail guard is King Herod, the hospital doctor is one of the Magi, the boy they visit at the hospital is the young Jesus, and finally Padre Marcelo himself becomes archangel Gabriel (See Fig. 1). In the end, the two narratives come together in a juxtaposition of the resurrection of Jesus and Maria Auxiliadora entering the church with a redemptive smile on her lips. A miracle has happened. Joana has been mysteriously cured.

Figure 1. The announcement scene from *Maria,*
Mãe do Filho de Deus (Columbia TriStar do Brasil, 2003)

When people say, "I went to see the film of Padre Marcelo," they emphasize that the film is about him narrating a story to a little girl and that she imagines the past both through his words and her present references. The trailer of the film also invites us to see the film "through the imagination of a small girl who awaits a miracle." Indeed, as Padre Marcelo goes around fulfilling his parochial duties in the present, he animates the narrative by description, tone, and inflections of the voice, all of which influence the way Joana imagines the story. Thus, every time Padre Marcelo talks to someone else in the present, there is an interruption in Joana's imagination and we return to the present. Thus, the film

rolls along as if images are neither supporting nor supported by the narrative but rather as if Padre Marcelo's voice is the source out of which images come to exist as a distention of Joana's own imagination.

As Padre Marcelo speaks, Joana's mind's eye creates the embodied emanation of his voice as an angel, which we could describe as a vocalic body.[5] Moreover, by envisioning Padre Marcelo as an angel, Joana's imagination expresses the role of the angel as the entity that circuitously organizes the entire process of transference of the subject's identities and references of her surrounding into the past. Voice is, therefore, the air element (sometimes rendered in the film as a wind) that generates all the motion through which the entire universe of the film is structured. Subjects and spatial references change by means of aerial imagination. As mentioned above, to underline this dependency between voice and imagination, every time Padre Marcelo interrupts the narrative, we are suddenly back in the present. Joana's imagination is suspended. Yet, the very nature of Padre Marcelo's interpersonal interactions in the present will subsequently integrate into her imagination. For example, the slight disagreement between Padre Marcelo and the prison guard triggers Joana to imagine the latter as the evil King Herod.

Thus, rather than simply conceiving the image as cinematic movement imprinted on celluloid, it is as if the images we see are condensations of air fashioned out of voice. The angel, who, as we saw, is both a kind of aerial-electrical entity and a kind of voice-body, invites us to be more aware about the electronic presence[6] of the film, on the one hand, and of the audio character of imagery, on the other. There is a conceptual relation between these two aspects. Marshall McLuhan refers to the notion of "acoustic space" as something that is intrinsically associated with electronic technology.[7] Rather than reducing acoustic space solely to the realm of sound, McLuhan argues that electronic technologies have the power to create an environment that envelops the subject in ways that are much more identical to the diffusive character of sound than to the linearity of vision. McLuhan also suggests that, unlike the sequential linear character of visual space (and perhaps here we could say of cinema), the kind of sonic space created by electronic technologies tends to be non-linear, multidirectional, marked by juxtaposition and drawn according to patterns of resonance. In my view, aerial imagination is,

5.   Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

6.   See Vivian Sobchack, "The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic 'Presence,'" in *Materialities of Communication*, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, trans. William Whobrey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 83–106.

7.   Marshall McLuhan and R. Bruce Powers, *The Global Village: Transformations in the World Life and Media in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

not unlike angels, an expression of electrical energy. That explains why, in order to show Joanna's imaginary conversions of subjects and spaces technically, the film uses computer manipulated morphing techniques as electronic devices to transfer one image into another. Moreover, the back and forward cutting in the film, the parallel appearances of sites and subjects, the cutting and pasting of Joana herself into scenes in the past (every time the angel appears), and the lack of gravity of the characters are all aspects that mimic the very mechanical conditions of electronic media such as VCR, DVD and Internet. Lastly, because images seem to appear out of modulated voice, the film gains a living quality, as if images would be at one with breath itself; that is to say, as if what we see is the process of forming the form, comparable to cloud motion, which stands for a kind of historical unfolding of the Spirit. The images we see comment upon their own making. Yet, this again recalls the "making of" attributes pertaining to DVD technology.

The merging of Padre Marcelo and archangel Gabriel makes the relation between voice and embodiment apparent. But as suggested above, this relation reveals the principle of breath as the creator of new subjectivities and spaces as part of a larger "script." This means that Padre Marcelo is a kind of ambassador who, from mid-air, organizes the embodied spiritual improvisations to be experienced by his devotees. Further, the fact that Padre Marcelo chooses to play both himself and an archangel says something about the frameless character of the film. More like a condensation of air currents, *Maria, Mãe* breaks into the daily perambulations of Padre Marcelo taking place in real life, just as his real life makes its way into the film. It expresses a desire to cross borders, like angels and sound do, while allowing those who in one way or another come into contact with him to partake from the same state of lightness and effervescence. To illustrate this we must now look at other contexts outside the film. As we saw, this is not exactly an outside, since what we are looking at is precisely the kind of entity that transcends the separation of an inside from an outside, in favor of a circulation between both. Just as the inspirited "breath" of Padre Marcelo organizes the universe which affects the constitution of subjects and space in the film, we will see how a similar dynamic applies to his religious routines of engagement with body and space: the daily prayer of the Byzantine rosary, his liturgical aerobics, and his many permutations in space and eventually of space itself. Before that, however, we should turn attention to the more earthly details standing behind the élan of Padre Marcelo.

Padre Marcelo Rossi

Marcelo Mendonça Rossi was born in May of 1967 into an Italian middle-class family in a neighborhood north of São Paulo. He became a priest in

1994, at the age of 27*,* in a parish called *Nossa Senhora do Perpétuo Socorro* located in the southeastern region of the city. Since his appearance as a public figure, the number of parishes under the dioceses grew from 35 in 1994 to 69 in 2001.[8]

> The Masses of Deliverance of Padre Marcelo happened on Thursdays, in the morning, afternoon and night as well as on Saturday afternoons… Thousands of devout would arrive from neighborhoods and peripheral areas of the Metropolitan Region, in search of cure and other graces, the street would turn into an extension of the church and most of the times the celebration would partially take place on open air. The devout would close up the street and listen to the music through the sound boxes. The basis of the Parish was located in *Jardim Prudência*, a typical middle-class neighborhood, with many residential buildings around the church. Together with the followers there was a whole horde of merchandisers that ended up leaving the streets in a filthy state, despite the effort of the team of the parish to clean and organize the occupied space. Besides, the transit around became rather congested and the residents had problems in driving into their own condominiums. Disturbed and arguing against the devaluation of their properties…the neighbors protested, threatened to raise a petition followed by judicial action, would the Masses of Padre Marcelo not be removed to somewhere else.[9]

As everybody knows, Padre Marcelo used to be an athlete in his youth. He worked in a beauty parlor for a while and later became a teacher of physical education. At the age of twenty-one, he confronted the death of a close cousin in a car accident and the diagnosis of cancer of his aunt. These two incidents played a role in his decision to become a priest. Around the same time he followed a TV documentary series about the life of John Paul II. In this series Padre Marcelo learned that the pope had been an actor and an athlete in his youth. Eventually, when the pope came to Brazil in 1997, Padre Marcelo made a vow. As the crowd waved at John Paul II, Padre Marcelo silently promised to make use of all existing media in order to bring the lost sheep back to the Church. According to a newspaper article, Padre Marcelo exclaimed then: "from now on I will only do trainings for God." He started with radio, television, CDs, books, a magazine, and a personal Internet site. Now, cinema and DVD are the latest laps of a spiritual media marathon performed in order to fulfill his promise to the pope.

Padre Marcelo emerged in the public arena in the mid-nineties. He co-opted the dynamic style of celebration introduced by the CCR. The debut of the CCR in Brazil was directly affected by the context of a military dictatorship between the years 1964–1985. Backed by the United States,

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8.   *UOL-Imprensa*, January 11, 2001.

9*.*   Ricardo Souza, "A Renovação Popularizadora Católica," *Rever* 1, no. 4 (2001): 46–60.

the military regime was strongly opposed by the local intellectuals as well as by the Church's liberal expression, Liberation Theology. CCR's particular emphasis on spiritual matters directly clashed with the social orientations of the progressive Church. The latter accused the CCR of having ties with the state regime. The CCR criticized Liberation Theology for its excessive concerns with temporal matters, involvement in politics, and in particular it resented its alleged "preference for the poor." In the view of CCR, Liberation Theology not only disregarded spirituality but also moreover reduced Christian salvation to a class phenomenon. Liberation Theology saw the CCR as one more "demon coming from the north,"[10] arriving from the United States under the same migratory fluxes of capital, technology, expertise, and televangelism. Conversely, to the CCR it seemed a contradiction in terms that Liberation Theology existed for the socially excluded while it went on excluding others in the name of religion.

Liberation Theology's concern for the marginalized reached the poorest isolated areas of Brazil. However, São Paulo represented the most active centers of confrontation between both Catholic movements. Indeed, not only was the mega archdiocese of São Paulo under the leadership of legendary activist Frey Paulo Evaristo, but also—and this was surely directly related—the state of São Paulo was the place where the CCR established itself with greatest expression (as it is the case still today). Maintaining that spirituality and politics do not mingle,[11] the CCR recalled the prime distinction between the things from God and the things from Caesar as its guiding truth. Not able to prevail over it, the CCR saw in the climate of resistance offered by Liberation Theology the possibility of developing an alternative ideology of martyrdom that would

10.   This phrase became classic after Délcio M. Lima, *Os Demónios Descem do Norte* (Rio De Janeiro: Editora Francisco Alves, 1987).

11.   There is evidence, however, that in more recent years, especially in other areas of Brazil, a growing interpenetration of the Liberation ideals with those of the CCR is taking place. See Marjo Theije, "A caminhada do louvor; ou como carismaticos e católicos de base vêm se relacionando na práctica," *Religião e Sociedade* 24, no. 1 (October 2004): 37–46. In São Paulo, there is the phenomenon of *Toca de Assis*. *Toca de Assis* is one of the many facets of the CCR Movement that was found by Padre Roberto Jose Lantielli after the religious model of St. Francis of Assisi. Although sharing the spiritual dimension of the CCR and even its middle-class background, the members of *Toca de Assis* consist mainly of young boys who join one of the many humble-setting communities spread throughout urban Brazil upon vows of obedience, chastity, and poverty. The influence of St. Francis on them is evidenced by their brown long robes, brown sandals, wooden crucifixes, and Franciscan hairstyles. Their main task is to collect and help the outcast and the poor on the streets as part of a program called *pastoral de rua* (street pastoral). At the same time, they often appear on the Catholic Charismatic media like *TV Canção Nova* with songs and choreographies and have their own Internet Site: www.tocadeassis.org.br.

imitate the first Christian martyrs. Evoking the restrained kind of environment of the first apostles, the first prayer groups used spaces like private condominiums, garages, or spaces outside the city ring, in nature. Thus, rather than shattering their morale, sentiments of persecution were all the more enhanced because of how they fostered a sense of identification with the authentic origins of Christianity.[12]

From another angle, the CCR's discrimination legitimized a position of distinction from which to validate itself that was at once socio-economically oriented, spatially delimited, and spiritually justified. Early CCR members were mostly well-educated people from the upper classes who had been involved in other church lay groups such as Opus Dei or the Cursilhos. The yearning for distinction created a field of articulations between the forces involved. If, on the one hand, the CCR opposed liberal Catholicism as its constitutive other, on the other hand, it struggled to distinguish itself from the military forces in power, which it nonetheless ideologically supported. Thus, even though it was itself a product of the political ties between the regime and the United States, the CCR's Christian elites abhorred the new mass popular movements and cultural industry promoted by the regime. The sector of media and communications had been the prime vehicle for a politics of development during the military years (1964–1985). While such incremental measures backed the CCR's future plans to use mass media for purposes of evangelization, among the religious elite these politics of development raised a sentiment of anxiety about being swallowed by a new middle-class urban phenomenon. As part of its campaign, the state distributed TV sets and fostered celebrity cults in the form of talk shows and publicity tabloids.

At the same time, the infusion of new media technologies invited a more reflective attitude about the status of fame. Audiences started to realize their role and that of technology in the making of celebrities and thus to question an earlier and more organic view of fame. To balance this new audience awareness, stars activated a strategy of transparency, which consisted of articulating fame with the exposure of a true inner authentic self. In this way stars incorporated a discourse that enhanced their human ordinary selves in articulation with their celebrity. The truth, however, is that such politics of unmasking was meant to serve two main purposes. One was to provide the star with a kind of self-compensatory immunity against new audience demands: the exposure of the ordinary human side of the star neutralized and naturalized celebrity-making technologies. The other purpose concerned the need by the state to mask its own authoritarianism and lack of transparency. As a consequence, the

12.   See also Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) for specific analyses of how persecution works in the creation of religious sentiments through an idiom of victimization.

belief that Liberation Theology was "persecuting" the CCR dovetailed with the CCR's desire to "withdraw" from the larger state-regulated mundane sphere. If the feeling of persecution brought the CCR closer to its martyr origins, the withdrawal from the sphere of state regulation provided the movement with a compensatory model of fame according to the Pentecostal mythical parable of talents or charisma. In this space of antagonistic articulations, as Laclau would phrase it, by thriving on the limits imposed by its constitutive others, the CCR created its own sense of Christian identity.[13]

The re-establishment of democracy in 1985 catapulted the CCR from being relatively hidden into the visible spaces of media. The arrival of democracy dissolved the old antagonisms between left and right, and the old resistances were replaced by greater tolerance. This meant the restructuring of the field of articulations described above. Especially after the collapse of the Eastern bloc, Liberation Theology's progressive ideas became outmoded. Internally, the breakdown of the right-wing regime questioned Liberation Theology's *raison d'être*. Consequently, the idiom of persecution that had been reinvigorating the CCR's sense of identification with the first Christians also diluted. The new sense of freedom left a part of the membership of the early CCR with an insecure feeling. They feared that the gradual dissolution of opposition upon which their identity has been anchored would eventually mean the end.

For others, however, the new state of democracy represented an entirely new stage of the CCR. Inside the Movement there has always been a strong pro-media lobby. Key figures like Padre Jonas Abib, the founder of what became a worldwide media network called *Canção Nova*, understood that, rather than corrupting the inner value of the CCR, media offered an excellent opportunity to bring the ideal of "fame in the likeness of Jesus" into a higher level. He recalled that the purpose behind the distribution of charismata by the Holy Spirit was that the apostles would go out into the world, to testify and activate their charismas for evangelization. Besides, media exposure would allow believers to undergo the same predicament of fame as Jesus who, according to the Christian kenotic principle, was able to empty himself in the moment of exposure.[14] In the view of the main media supporters, it was not that

13.　Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolutions of our Times* (London: Verso, 1990).

14.　On the aspect of the kenotic and "fame of Jesus," see Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of the Renown: Fame and Its History* (New York: Vintage, 1986), 150–89. In terms of the visual, see Jenny Slatman, "Tele-vision: Between Blind Trust and Perceptual Faith," in *Religion and Media*, ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 216–26, and Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds., *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image of Wars in Science, Religion and Art* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 2002).

inward fame meant spatial confinement, but rather that the very possibility of exposure opened a perilous void which could be actively restored by the believer. In other words, spiritual inwardness became dependent on exposure (rather than on seclusion) and media became a privileged space of cultivation of moral virtues,[15] such as humility as well as a frame to recall the moral duty that drove Jesus and the apostles to fame. Although exposed, Charismatic TV media actors became popular for how they developed all sorts of strategies of self-denial in view of reinforcing the spiritual source of their "charisma."[16] The very ambiguity standing behind the word charisma, which can mean both charm and charity, contributed to blur the boundary between media and religion.

Those who went on pursuing the cooption of media, however, could hardly predict the arrival of Padre Marcelo nearly a decade later. Padre Marcelo has not been through the CCR's early ordeals. He emerged on the public scene in 1994, the year when the Brazilian Catholic Church finally officially acknowledged the CCR.[17] His exceptional impact on the Church and Brazilian society at large was such that he was instantly patronized by the bishop of Santo Amaro, who is also the president of the southern Episcopal region under the CNBB and one of the most influential bishops in São Paulo. A strong adept of the CCR and an expert on old Patristic texts, Bishop Figueiredo reassures the hierarchy that he keeps Padre Marcelo under observation. The success of Padre Marcelo, however, is baffling. There had been moments when both liberal Catholics and Catholic Charismatics agreed that Padre Marcelo really "is beyond." The paradox is that there is nothing motionless about Padre Marcelo, and yet no one is as endangered of becoming into a "frozen" icon of stardom.

From 1997 onwards, Padre Marcelo has moved around other communal arenas (especially media amphitheatres); participated in metropolitan parades; inaugurated new sporting premises; organized his own "Carnival of Jesus"; launched a propaganda campaign under the banner, "I am happy to be a Catholic," a local version of the American "honk if you love Jesus"; celebrated in football stadiums; opened up important football matches; made a religious version of the national anthem; hit the sale

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15.   Charles Hirschkind, "The Ethics of Listening: Cassette Sermon Audition in Contemporary Egypt," *American Ethnologist* 28 (2000): 623–49.

16.   Zé D'Abreu, "Charisma, Mediation & Broken Screens," *Etnofoor* 15, no. 1/2 (2002): 240–58.

17.   The Church of Brazil was the last within all of Latin America to officially recognize the CCR. This is striking with respect to the productive nature of persecution posed by the establishment, since that despite opposition, the Brazilian CCR has become by far the most vigorous expression of all of Latin America, if not the whole world. See R. Andrew Chestnut, "A Preferential Option for the Spirit: The Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Latin America's New Religious Economy," *Latin American Politics and Society* 45, no. 1 (2003): 55–85, at 75.

record of the Brazilian CD industry;[18] baptized TV stars in the waters of the river Jordan; exchanged musical hits with the most famous singers of Brazilian popular music, always in his immaculate, if sweaty, clerical vestments. Because the radio was the first medium in Padre Marcelo's media career, his voice has really penetrated the imagination of thousands of Brazilians. His radio program *Momento de Fé* (Moment of Faith), broadcast on a daily basis between 9:00 and 10:00 a.m. on Radio America brings up the same kind of excitement among "audiences" as the primetime evening *telenovela* does.[19] People adjust their daily schedules so as to listen to Padre Marcelo's program and prepare to place their petitions "on the lap of Jesus," as he religiously invites them to do. Some say that Brazil is witnessing an unprecedented "miracle of the multiplication of audiences."[20]

The Aerobics of Jesus

In Charismatic rituals, time is closely associated with one's body through the rhythm of breathing. The more one prays with one's body, the more valuable the prayer is. The efficacy of one's prayer is dependent on the knowledge one has about the songs and the rhythms of the dance. Knowledge, then, leads to experience, just as reproduction to production. There is a kind of kinesthetic of breathing that always situates reality in the present—one breath, and another, and another—even if the effectiveness of that breathing is dependent on an embodied knowledge of how to ritually execute it, a task facilitated by the mass communal distribution of media products.

In line with Catholic Charismatics, Padre Marcelo developed his own stylized practical techniques. One is the daily prayer of the Byzantine rosary, which one may access on his personal Internet site, and the other is his very popular creation known as the "aerobics of Jesus." The Byzantine rosary was used in prayer in the seventh-century eastern tradition. Compared to the western rosary's fifty-nine stones, the Byzantine rosary is a smaller rosary made of only ten-pearled stones. This rosary adjusts prayer to the rhythms of one's breath. While inhaling, the believer thinks, for example, of the words "Lord Jesus Christ," when exhaling he thinks "have mercy on me." These sentences, which are repeated ten times and which are also called ejaculatory prayers, are pondered for ten minutes. This practice implies that, through the repetition of the same verse, the voice and the body work together towards increasing immateriality and purification of one's self. As the site slogan of Padre Marcelo puts it: "The Online Byzantine rosary, the simple prayer to heaven."

18. In 1998, his CD *Músicas Para Louvar o Senhor* sold 2.2 million copies in just 56 days, according to *Noroeste News*, December 9, 1998.
19. See www.marcelorossi.org.br.
20. *Magazine Veja*, November 4, 1998.

> For those ten minutes, I feel like ascending on a cloud, lost to the world. We repeat with Padre Marcelo the sacred words and the name of Jesus rises up in me a sentiment of warmth escalating in my body, I do not know exactly how…it is like a Spa, a massage from God… I feel rejuvenated, praise the Lord![21]

This same form of pneumatic technology is deployed during the popular masses of Padre Marcelo, which he has branded as the "aerobics of Jesus," also known as the Mass of Liberation (*Missas de Libertação*). Performed four times a week at his *Santuário Rosário Bizantino,* the aerobics of Padre Marcelo involve about 20,000 people for each mass. The aerobics consist of choreographed songs composed, sung and danced, combined with traditional liturgical procedures. The song *Erguei as Mãos* (Raise Your Hands), for example, Padre Marcelo's biggest-ever musical hit,[22] is sung in harmony with a whole sequence of body movements. This song alone has three techno-sounding remixes. As in the aforementioned praying techniques of the Byzantine rosary, there is a correlation between breathing and praying, which is paced by the repetition of verses. One sings and dances *Erguei as Mãos* (Raise Your Hands) and one sings and dances *E Dai Gloria a Deus* (Praise the Lord)*.* The length of the verses determines the amount of air supply necessary for it to be sung according to the composition. The act of inhaling is imprinted on the first verse as an ascending process. In turn, the second verse descends on the musical scale, accompanied by exhaling. This up-and-down dynamic is an empirical association that is probably based on the sound one makes when breathing and that determines the volume of the lungs. That is to say, there is a correlation between the flow of air within the body and the mechanical movement of the body itself. Both are paced by the synchronized repetitive tempo of a techno beat and the heartbeat, as techno sound is converted into cardiovascular acoustic energy, which fits with the up-tempo of music (often varying between 125 and 140/bpm).

Padre Marcelo's repertoire has covered as many musical styles as possible including romantic love, synthesized hymns, gospel polka, or Ska style. Most of these songs are choreographed "sing-alongs" in which recurrence is a common feature. Like a coach, Padre Marcelo tells the crowds how to move and sing (see Fig. 2).

21.   Interview with Alzira Coelho, May 2001.

22.   Many Brazilian pop groups have made cover versions of *Erguei as Mãos*, like the *Axé* in Salvador, *Ara Ketu*, *Cheiro do Amor*, *É o Tchan* e *Asa de Aguia*. It has also been integrated in the Carnival parades all over Brazil. Costume shops made replicas of Padre Marcelo's clerical vestments printed on the image of the CD, which includes the hit *Erguei as Mãos*. The three remixed versions of *Erguei as Mãos* became one of the best disco dancing hits, played ten times a day in each of the 33 radio stations of TransAmerica within Brazil. *Magazine Veja*, October 17, 1999.

Figure 2. Wall paper from Padre Marcelo's website,
www.padremarcelorossi.org.br, downloaded October 24. 2005

While singing, the crowd hears and gets in contact with itself, conver-
gent and conjunctive. There is a feeling of vertigo created by the eleva-
tion of voice that holds the multitude together in the same moment. The
best expression of this voice that speaks through the body is perhaps
given by the multi-folded manifestations of extreme commotion that
happen during the songs: the sweat, the frequent tears, the throbbing
chests, the trembling lips no longer able to sing, the long sighs, the
strong inhaling, the beatings on the chest, the strain of agonized
happiness, and the very common goose pimples effect. The body is
vocalized, and in that sense, the body hears not only through the ear but
also through the skin, through resonance as manifested also by the
action of clapping. In any case, what is important to notice is that the
very qualities of religious embodiment—namely, repetition and beat,
which are the quintessential qualities of breathing and thus liveliness and
motion—are themselves embodied in new electronic reproductive tech-
nologies. Not only do these create a sense of active participation by
pacing the act of breathing, they also provide the subject with a sense of
reflexivity of being-in-the world. For if, on the one hand, the subject
punctuates his or her individual existence through breath, on the other,
he or she ascends out of it by climbing on his own breath as a spectrum
abstracted from its local, specific identity. Just as in *Maria, Mãe,* Padre
Marcelo changes into an angel, in that the pneumatic qualities of the
Byzantine rosary and aerobics interact with technology so as to bring
into tension the relation between the material individual existence of

things and the more subtle qualities of movement that allow such existence to happen in terms of a flow or dynamic. Ultimately, this flow is the movement of the Holy Spirit and the many re-enactments of an original myth, which relate the real grounded identities of subjects and the living narrative or script flowing *through* them.

A(ir)coustic Space

> When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues of fire disturbing them… And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues as the spirit was giving them utterance. (Acts 2:1–4)

This passage describes the original moment of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostolic community followed by the downpour of charismata. For Catholic Charismatics to recite this passage of Acts 2 is like inhabiting a place inflated by utterance. At the same time, it is also to be inhabited by utterance. That is, body and building are related on a continuum. Interestingly, this same relation between body, house, and utterance displayed by "speaking in tongues" is recapitulated yet inverted in the story of the Tower of Babel: the former as the space in which all spoke in different languages and all could understand, the latter as the space from where all attempted to speak one language and no one managed.[23] Then, there is the word "utterance" given by the spirit, which means ventilation, expelling, declaring, finding expression, or voicing but also to "vent up," which again means to emit from a confined space, to let out or expose to air. The space in which the original community was confined is historically given by the word cenacle (translated from the Latin word *coenaculum)*. In architectural terms it consists of a niche, walls, floors, and foundations incorporated into a building. The exact meaning of the word is blurred by historical imprecision which either refers to it as the place of the Last Supper, or as the residence of Pentecost generalized as "the Church of the first apostles." According to the narrative, the breath of the Holy Spirit not only turned fearful men into courageous and outspoken disciples, but also the *walls* enclosing them changed from heavy and sturdy into supple and resilient, just like their bodies.

As the expression "bodybuilding" suggests, the body is regularly thought of as a kind of building or abode with its different alleys and functional compartments, its ins and outs, its vent-up niches, aqueous ducts, and vitreous facades. Bodybuilders are encouraged to be strong

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23.   Steven Connor, "Building Breathing Space" (lecture, Bartlett School of Architecture, March 2, 2004), http://www.bbk.ac.uk/english/skc/bbs/.

and yet as light as possible. The same ideal is patented in the decoration spaces of many of the multiplex gym spaces and fitness halls proliferating all around us today. Likewise, its central concept is based on the assumption that there is an ecological correlation between body and space; that what one inhales is the "building" one is in whilst one keeps on "embodying" breathing space.

Three-dimensional imagery materializes the border between body and building. A saint's image is a building in the shape of a body. Even so, the solemnity of the church space with its pious images, ornamental details, and Romanic decoration style was out of tune with Padre Marcelo's "aerobics of Jesus." The increasing amount of people outside following the ceremony from the loud speakers overflowed the borders of the chapel. The media joined the event, and fulfilled Padre Marcelo's deep aspirations (literally) to break through beyond the confinements of his parish. Not only did he subsequently start to appear on religious media channels but also, more industriously, on commercial big media networks. Sunday talk shows disputed his presence under fiery oral and financial transactions. At the same time, Padre Marcelo started to celebrate in gyms, stadiums, and, as the crowds went on multiplying, in the Grand Prix arena of Interlagos, where according to the main press in November 2, 2001, he gathered a total of 2.4 million people. Here was a religious man whose body was conceived of as a living temple, so that anywhere he went, his physical presence constituted a place of worship. Fame came to Padre Marcelo intimately associated with his vocation as a priest. As such, unlike other famous people, he could never lose it. But precisely such privilege had to be cautiously managed and so Padre Marcelo and his bishop thought it would be wise to anchor him, like any other priest, to one defined place of worship. In 1998, Padre Marcelo moved to a new space, a former hangar for musical shows with room for 20,000 people situated within the same southeast region of São Paulo. A few months later, he found another space, an old factory with a total area of 20,000 square meters with room for 40,000 people, and 900 working volunteers were hired to keep the place, which he baptized as *Santuário do Terço Bizantino* (Sanctuary of Byzantine Rosary). There never seemed to be enough room, however, and Padre Marcelo maintained that he wished to celebrate with open doors. In addition, the old complaints of noise, traffic, and messiness were back. Consequently, Padre Marcelo was forced to leave this space as well. On the threshold of the millennium eve, according to the media, Padre Marcelo was "a priest without a temple." Forbidden to celebrate with open doors, he preferred not to celebrate at all. In 2001, Padre Marcelo acquired a new space also in the vicinities of the parish of Santo Amaro. This *Santuário* offers good accessibility for both private and public transports, and a lot of space for the merchandise away from the residential areas. Before the Mass

begins, the inside of the sanctuary is "uninhabited." Like most walls in the city of São Paulo, the sanctuary's walls are made of concrete material: a hard aggregate substance made of cement, lime, crushed rock or sand, and other ingredients. The stage is about three meters above the floor, with about sixty square meters total area. Just as with the previous building, the new space has a high-tech system of ventilation, which connects the entire ceiling area. The thin water sprinkled from little valves has a stimulating impact: it cools the hot temperatures down by six degrees while inducing a mystical foggy atmosphere. By the gates, a team of forty volunteers controls the flows of people, noise, and visibility.

Visitors to the *Santuário* do not behave with the same kind of reverential attitude they have in traditional church spaces. There is no saint by the door (or anywhere) towards whom one bows, makes a promise, or pays a petition; no urn containing blessed water for ablution; and no aisle at the center leading to an altar. The only permanent image is the big Byzantine-style panel printed on the background of the altar, which depicts the Holy Trinity. The naturalist and weightless features of the panel sharply differ from the sculpted adorned Western imagery of the previous church. The absence of an aisle organizing the visual field of the churchgoer towards a central altar image, the lack of lateral corridors and side altars as well as benches and kneelers according to the Romanic principles of space organization give away to blankness and vacuity. This spatial definition affects the body language of the devout from the moment they enter inside the sanctuary. They walk into the space and occupy the area homogeneously, not unlike in a pop music concert. If one wants to move forward to be closer to the stage or backward to go out, one has to force one's way. The blankness of the sanctuary suggests uniformity, interaction, and echo. When the voice of Padre Marcelo takes off, the place gains a new expression. Sound becomes sculpted by the tone of his voice, which is amplified by the several sound boxes around the space. The bareness of the place not only affects the way voice spreads and resounds in space but also the ways in which it hits the ear of the listener. The aforementioned subtraction of sculpted imagery together with the surfaced echoic character of the space practically reduced to its four walls, invites the believer to look inwardly, that is, to be more in touch with interiority while at the same time impelling the self to project into space. In sum, the rhythm of the voice and of the music, the kinds of spectral characterizations endowed by electronic music, as well as the spatialization of sound through the microphone into the speakers, all contribute to a particular sense of immersion of subject and space.

Thus, rather than linear and detached from the body—in the sense described earlier regarding the implicit bodily economies of the visual—space is embodied to such an extent that it becomes the body. Like in

Maria, Mãe, the visual links to the aural envelop the subject. The repetitive tempo in the song *Erguei as Mãos,* to go back to our example, creates a continuum between temple and body as two spaces of spiritual indwelling. Bodybuilding is building the body. At stake is an intrinsic cosmogonic generative principle described in terms of breath, which acts not only in bodily terms but also architectonically. The "aerobics of Jesus," we have seen, is predicated on repetition. The synchrony between the repetitive beat of electronic music and heartbeat collapses the border between inside and outside, focusing instead on circularity and contamination between both, so that ideally, the sanctuary has the same acoustic sensitivity as the hearing heart. The common saying "walls have ears" used to express the traveling of sound is here vigorously dramatized. Electronically oriented Protestant/Pentecostal hymns are changing Catholic repertoires in Brazil. They reflect a spatial change towards visual simplicity and flatness, which favors the conception of acoustic spaces. Thus, for example, the windy sound pressures of the organ found in Protestant churches, which evolved into the more expressive electro-pneumatic sound fabricated in the early twentieth century as patented in the Æolian–Skinner productions, were gradually replaced by electronic equipment.

Padre Marcelo's sanctuary is imagined as a space where both bodies and building are described as practical utterances of the air. As if to emphasize this idea all the more, as I write, Padre Marcelo prepares to move to a new sanctuary. This time, however, he himself placed the first brick, which he also blessed. The new sanctuary, scheduled to be inaugurated on December 8, 2005, will no longer be called *Santuário Terço Bizantino* but rather *Santuário Theotokos Mãe de Deus* (Sanctuary Theotokos Mother of God), underscoring the theotokian ("god-bearing") message in the title of his feature film *Maria, Mãe.*[24] The project is in the hands of Japanese architect Ruy Ohtake, one of the most prestigious urban architects in contemporary Brazil. The temple *Mãe de Deus* incorporates the new tendencies of contemporary religious architecture characterized by ample spaces imbued with contemplative simplicity and transnational features, predominance of organic forms, and induced feelings of movement crafted into curvaceous lines, undulation, and juxtaposition. The prevalence of white and ethereal blues strongly suggest an experience of heavenly bliss and ecstasy. In Ohtake's own words, it will be a space for "inspiration, worship and meditation."[25] The stage will be ultra-simple with one single white cross, visible from all

24.   *Theotokos* is a Greek word, which means Mother of God, or, more literally, "bearer of god." It emphasizes Mary as the mother of the divine Jesus against the notion of *Christotokos*, which stressed that Mary was merely the mother of a human Jesus.

25.   See www.verbonet.org.br.

sides of the sanctuary and mediated by a number of screen monitors. The walls will be perforated with some openings favoring simultaneity and multi perspective. But undoubtedly the most visceral impact of the future sanctuary will be given by its movable walls, which will allow room to expand and to contain from 30,000 up to 100,000 visitors.[26] Like bodies, the walls of the new sanctuary will adapt to experiential happening.[27] As in the story of Pentecost, the design seeks to establish a continuum between motional breathing bodies and motional breathing space. The doors of the sanctuary are designed so that the altar with its fifteen meters of height and half-moon shape can be seen from various sides within the sanctuary, and at last, from the outside too.[28]

Padre Marcelo's new sanctuary is therefore a kind of pneumatic living structure: a space of indwelling that, just like in the film *Maria, Mãe*, affects and is intimately affected by the "breath" of the subjects in it. Subjects and space are mutually constitutive because of how the body is both contained within the temple and perceived as a temple. Just as the ears respond to sound and walls inbuilt on it "through their own ears," the spirit responds to resonance in a way that recalls the scripted myth of creation. As we saw earlier, this resonant effect has been recreated in the voice and narrative of Padre Marcelo in *Maria, Mãe* and in the prayer and aerobic dance of Byzantine liturgy. It is not surprising that his new sanctuary bears the same name as his first film: *Maria, Mãe*. If the film provides a space that is at the same time a body, and if the bodies of subjects engaged in aerobic prayer are simultaneously spaces of spiritual indwelling, the sanctuary is a space, the walls of which expand and contract on the body like a second skin. These different areas are connected through patterns of resonance created by the reverberations of voice airing the scripts.

Lord, Put Your Angels Here

So, what do air, angels, sound, and electronic technology all have in common? I would like to suggest that more than anything else it is the capacity they share to cross borders in a non-linear form, diffusing into all sorts of directions. There is a ritual enacted by Catholic Charismatics

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26.   In this, it by far exceeds the size of the National Basilica of Our Lady of Aparecida, the patron saint of Brazil situated in Aparecida-São Paulo.

27.   Recalling the pneumatic environments of the sixties like Woody Allen's trips inside the human body. Nowadays these kinds of environments are reappearing, for instance, in MTV contexts such as Missy Elliot's inventive rap songs, in which viewers see that whatever she does affects the whole screen (world) around her. Another example may be found in the liquid environments in cartoons such as in "Sponge Bob Square Pants."

28.   *Isto É*, January 4, 2005.

in different parts of the year and different places that illustrates this proposition. For seven consecutive days, organized prayer groups go in vigil around the main churches of São Paulo, praying, singing, and clapping in allusion to the biblical myth of the breaking of the walls of Jericho by the blasting sound of Joshua's seven ram's horns (Joshua 6:20). Many times, the walls—chosen to signify obstacles, rigidity, and "petrification"[29]—included those of important church buildings like the Cathedral of Sé located at the center of São Paulo. Hence, the preference Catholic Charismatics have for tents rather than churches lies in the fact that tents, like sound and air, are signs of precariousness and of traveling from place to place. The tent's malleable material suggests adaptation to what it contains. It also has the ambiance of a portable chapel. In turn, Catholic Charismatics equate the Holy Spirit with the Greek word *pneuma,* which stands for air or lungs. Thus, Catholic Charismatics make frequent reference to the "breath of the Spirit." The Holy Spirit is also associated with voice, in the sense of creation, which is related to the Latin term *animus*. Finally, the Holy Spirit is often compared to a global electric generator of virtues, just as believers are compared to antennas of re-transmission. In sum, voice, breath, and electronic technology are deeply interrelated in Charismatic cosmology.

Padre Marcelo's impersonation of archangel Gabriel matches the fame he has among Catholic Charismatics as a special emissary of the Holy Spirit. According to popular notions, the angel is the embodied archetype of traveling sound *par excellence*. Thus, many refer to Padre Marcelo as the *Kerygma*, which is the Greek term for "predication," "proclamation," or "announcer." It is an irony that the celebrations of Padre Marcelo are a cause of stress to those who live by the sanctuary. The sanctuary is meant to be a therapeutic space. The insistence to keep the doors open during celebrations is not caused simply by the lack of space. It is also because Padre Marcelo conceives his space as a microcosm, which extends beyond its walls, onto the street, into every household and onto the radio, thus conforming to the lyrics of yet another musical hit called "Lord, Place Your Angels Here" (*Senhor Pôe Teus Anjos Aqui*).

Padre Marcelo and his bishop understand the productive encounter between the urban sphere, spirituality, and most relevantly the luxuriant pneumatic cathedral, the Amazonian Forest. His "aerobics of Jesus," just like his Byzantine rosary, seeks to provide the working classes[30] with

29.   Metaphorically, recalling the opposition between St. Peter and St. Paul equivalent to that between institution and charisma, respectively.

30.   One of the most obvious outcomes of the media exposure of the CCR emphasized by the appearance of Padre Marcelo has been the expansion of the Movement beyond the upper middle class into a mass phenomenon. Even though Padre Marcelo is invited to participate in other events of the CCR, there are observable differences in social status between those who go to Padre Marcelo or to other communities of the CCR.

alternative means for dealing with increasing levels of stress, depression, and pollution and moreover to compete with the growing number of gyms, spas, hairdressers, homeopathic clinics, and beauty parlors, not to mention the ongoing recrudescence of religious movements focusing on the body/mind/spiritual trilogy. The daily haste of the city, the pressure to keep up in a competitive job market, are made all the more difficult by the enormous commuting distances, the chaotic traffic, the stray bullets, the summer heat, the rush hours, in sum, the constant receding of a better future inspiring an ever more desperate search for fast solutions, which are at once physically and emotionally effective. Especially since the forties, São Paulo has become a city of frenzied mobility, not only because of the mass migration of those who came in search of better job opportunities, but also because of the inner dynamics and life style of Paulistanos. Nothing about the city seems to last for very long. There is a breathtakingly fleeting quality about the cityscape. Architectonically, the city is a tribute to iconoclasm. Structures are constantly erected and destroyed. Neighborhoods are reorganized. Except perhaps for football shirts, fidelity to which seems markedly stable, people constantly move on to other credos, other political flags, indeed, to other dreams. Job mobility has become extremely high. Fashion and media advertisements set the pace for the temporalities of the place, and, what is more, seem to reflect it. Even the atmosphere of the city is continuously in circulation because of its location on a hill, which evens out the heavy amount of carbon dioxide. As a whole, Padre Marcelo has come to personify this transitory quality, this desire and pressure to cross borders without however losing oneself, to be spiritual yet wholesome nurtured and healthy.

> [It] transpires health and hope. I take his songs everywhere I go with me around the city. It is in my head. In a city as dangerous and big as São Paulo, where everybody is on the run somewhere you have to stay alert for what comes but his voice protects me, like the sweet voice of a guardian angel telling me I am not alone, speaking inside my head. All this chaos and complication which we Paulistanos face every day becomes bearable…his voice goes with me everywhere, I walk faster and lighter, the sky hidden by the buildings gets wider and my body seems to float.[31]

> The bottles…one I drink right here, it helps to purify my inside. The others I take home for my spiritual diet… Padre Marcelo says that one can get obese in a physical sense but also in a spiritual sense, right? What I am is spiritually obese, not in body, as you can see. But the body stops, it is tired, dirty,… This water helps cleaning... Look, so one I drink here freshly blessed, two others I use for my morning coffee and for cooking my meals, another I use in my body, anointing some parts when it hurts, and the other one, I just pour it into a glass

31.   Interview with Ana Maria, June 2001.

letting it evaporate into the atmosphere of my house, until the next Saturday.[32]

There is a tendency nowadays to argue that space is no longer something measurable by foot but by the speed of light. In other words, technology is disembodying us. Yet, as Steven Connor suggests, technology can suggest disembodiment because of how the body itself imprints on the medium its basic organic capabilities.[33] Technology effectively sets the pace for the body because of how it itself has borrowed from the experience of how the body functions. As the aerobics of Padre Marcelo show, even such actions that we regard as highly spontaneous such as heart beat or breathing have a technique. As we saw earlier, the film *Maria, Mãe* has an "electronic presence" that is configured in the angelic Padre Marcelo: not only can we *hear* archangel Gabriel *voicing* the good news to Mary, we can also *see* an aura of *light* emanating out of his *body* as he *speaks*. Yet, Padre Marcelo does not only "act" as an angel but also as Padre Marcelo. That is, existentially, he embodies the film as an angel but as he does so, he also asserts within that very material existence his very earthy being as Padre Marcelo. It is precisely because this is so much at the "heart of the matter," that it is so hard to say when Padre Marcelo is representing or presenting. When appearing in the film as Padre Marcelo or when *being* the film as an archangel?

Conclusion

In an article called, "Incidents of the Breath: In Pneumatic and Electronic Ventriloquisms," Steven Connor argues that the use of pneumatic technologies depends upon two associated identifications.[34] One is sound as the movement of air (sound is thought as something fashioned of air). The other is the identification of sound as a kind of life-force, a sounding breath. The archangel in *Maria, Mãe* is an illustration of pneumatic technology. Just as Padre Marcelo's inspirited breath enabled subjects and spatial items to be transformed into other subjects and other places in the film, this also happens in the context of his other spiritual routines. The fact that Padre Marcelo acts in the film as himself is part of an attempt to make a cross-reference between film and reality. At the same time, his role as an archangel also suggests an association between important references of voice, air, and electronic technology

32.   Interview with Lurdes M. Silva, November 2001.

33.   Steven Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost: Spiritualism, Technology and the 'Direct Voice,'" in *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History*, ed. Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (London: Macmillan, 1999), 203–25.

34.   Steven Connor, "Incidents of the Breath: In Pneumatic and Electronic Ventriloquisms" (lecture, Ruskin School of Art and Drawing, Oxford, February 17, 2004), http: www.bbk.ac.uk/english/skc/incidents/.

that is simultaneously enacted during the prayer of the Byzantine rosary and the aerobics of Jesus. In turn, this angelic figure is also spatialized because of the principle according to which body and temple are related in building up a certain breathing "atmosphere." The connection between film, aerobics, and space is given by the fact that these are particular aerial universes that resonate with each other, because of how they are ultimately united and anchored on a common mythical origin, or breath, which as we saw, is the Script in the script. The idea is to go into increased lightness, suppleness, bounded to a desire to cross borders. That is, to be extramural, just like angels and sound are.

Gaston Bachelard proposes that if we are to really understand motion, we must consider its materiality and thus see how matter is involved in the dynamic of motion. According to him, unlike the mechanical form of motion of the cinematic image, which he considers linear and conceptual, "aerial imagination" is a kind of image that is at the cause its own movement. This article has tried to apply Bachelard's idea of dynamic motion to a cinematic context by suggesting that the film *Maria, Mãe* has a kind of aerial-electrical existence. It is curious that, when the director of the film *Maria, Mãe* offered Padre Marcelo wings for him to play his role as an angel, he refused it. According to Bachelard, both cinematic movement and wings have in common the fact they imply a partial, mechanical and conceptual reading of movement. Padre Marcelo needs no wings because that would mean that his body is static rather than the cause of its own motion.

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Being a Christian the Catholic Way: Protestant and Catholic Versions of the *Jesus* Film and the Evangelization of Poland*

Esther Peperkamp

Abstract

This article examines how the American evangelical film *Jesus* has become adopted in a Polish, Catholic context. The film was first introduced into Poland in 1980, but since 2000 it functions together with another edition that is claimed to be "Catholic" which is understood as more faithful to the Bible, more "true." Starting from the exploration of the historical trajectory life of the film *Jesus* in Poland, this article will address the question as to why there is now a need for a Catholic version, and how this dimension of "Catholicness" is defined. It will be argued that "Catholicness" is not the property of the film itself, but the result of embedding the film in a Catholic context. The case of the Catholic version shows that truth claims depend upon exterior authority, which authorizes the film to be watched as faithful to the Gospel.

Recently, many publications have appeared discussing Jesus films.[1] Most of them are written by theologians, historians, or scholars of communication

    1.   Kathleen E. Corley and Robert L. Webb, eds., *Jesus and Mel Gibson's The Passion of The Christ: The Film, the Gospels and the Claims of History* (New York: Continuum, 2004); Roy Kinnard and Tim Davies, *Divine Images: A History of Jesus on the Screen* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1992); S. Brent Plate, ed., *Re-viewing the Passion: Mel Gibson's Film and its Critics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Richard C. Stern, Clayton N. Jefford, and Guerric Debona, *Savior on the Silver Screen* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1999); W. Barnes Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the first Hundred Years* (Sonoma, Calif.: Polebridge, 1997); Richard Walsh, *Readings the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film* (Harrisburg, Penn: Trinity, 2003).

studies, and they focus solely or primarily on the value of the films themselves, the ways they represent the historical or biblical Jesus, or their relative aesthetic merits. Much less attention has been paid, however, to the local contexts for these these films and their reception and appreciation. "What requires study," Arvind Rajagopal says, "is how social and media events unfold and interact in historical time, in diverse and unforeseeable networks of action."[2] Thus, it is not film itself that should be the subject of research and analysis, but the interaction between film and historical processes, institutional contexts, and cultural meaning. This article will examine these in the case of the reception of the film *Jesus* in Poland.

The film *Jesus* according the Gospel of Luke, produced in 1979 in the United States by John Heyman in cooperation with the evangelical movement Campus Crusade for Christ, is without doubt one of the best-known Jesus films. Its explicitly evangelical premise set the film apart from other Jesus films and resulted in a "translation" project to "bring the Gospel" in visual form to as many people as possible. The film has been dubbed into several hundred languages. Polish was among the first.

The film *Jesus* was introduced to Catholic Poland in the tense years of the early 1980s—the heyday of the struggle of Solidarity—by the priest Franciszek Blachnicki. This ambitious priest had founded *Oaza* ("Oasis"), a Catholic movement for children, in the 1950s in order to counter the aggressive secularism of the communist regime. *Oaza* (now renamed the "Light–Life Movement," but popularly still known as *Oaza*) exists to this day and involves 50,000 children, teenagers, and adults all taking part in yearly retreats. The emphasis of the program is turning oneself into a "true," "authentic" Christian, one for whom religion has consequences in their daily life.[3]

Blachnicki introduced the film *Jesus* to Poland for the purpose of evangelization in cooperation with Campus Crusade for Christ. He chose this particular film because of its assumed faithfulness to the Gospel. Twenty years after Blachnicki brought the film to Poland, however, the daily newspaper *Życie* accused the film of giving a distorted picture of the Gospel and called the organization that distributed it (the Polish branch of Campus Crusade) a sect. In the light of this critique, it is worth noting that a "new edition" of the film has been recently released, which is propagated as a "Catholic" version. Starting from an exploration of the historical trajectory of the film *Jesus* in Poland, this article will address the question of why there is now a perceived need for a Catholic version, and how this "Catholicness" is defined. It will be argued that "Catholicness" is not the

2.   Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 128.

3.   Esther Peperkamp, "Being a Christian—Being the Same Everywhere: Teenagers on Religion, Self, and Society in Post-Socialist Poland (Ph.D. diss., University of Amsterdam, 2006).

property of the film itself, but the result of embedding the film in a Catholic context. This authorizes the film to be watched as faithful to the Gospel.

Religion, Film, and Evangelization

The Roman Catholic Church recognized the significance of film at an earlier stage than most Protestant churches, which were more concerned about the appropriateness of portraying Jesus.[4] The Catholic hierarchy was more concerned about the moral consequences of the medium, which in America resulted in efforts by Catholics to develop a Production Code in 1930.[5] The Legion of Decency, in which Catholics pledged not to attend motion pictures that offended Catholic moral principles, was established in 1933. In this way, Catholics seemed to move more quickly and decisively to distinguish between moral and immoral films than Protestant liberals.[6] Soon afterwards, in 1936, the encyclical *Vigilanti Cura* appeared, addressing both the potential moral danger of "bad motion pictures" and the capacity of "good motion pictures" to exercise a profoundly moral influence:

> Everyone knows what damage is done to the soul by bad motion pictures. They are occasions of sin; they seduce young people along the ways of evil by glorifying the passions; they show life under a false light; they cloud ideals; they destroy pure love, respect for marriage, affection for the family. They are capable also of creating prejudices among individuals and misunderstandings among nations, among social classes, among entire races.
>
> On the other hand, good motion pictures are capable of exercising a profoundly moral influence upon those who see them. In addition to affording recreation, they are able to arouse noble ideals of life, to communicate valuable conceptions, to impart a better knowledge of the history and the beauties of the Fatherland and of other countries, to present truth and virtue under attractive forms, to create, or at least to favour understanding among nations, social classes, and races, to champion the cause of justice, to give new life to the claims of virtue, and to contribute positively to the genesis of a just social order in the world.[7]

Despite the double emphasis in this early period, the Church tended to emphasize the potential negative influence of movies. Later on, the more elaborate encyclical *Miranda Prorsus* (1957) is more appreciative about film

4.   A. Dronkers, *De Religieuze Film: Een Terreinverkenning* [*Religious Film: An Exploration*] ('s-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum N.V., 1961).

5.   Stephen Vaughn, "Morality and Entertainment: The Origins of the Motion Picture Production Code," *Journal of American History* 77 (1990): 39–65.

6.   Laurence R. Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

7.   Encyclical *Vigilanti Cura* by Pope Pius XI, June 29, 1936, http:// www. vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_29061936 _ vigilanti-cura_en.html.

(and other media).[8] The appreciation of modern communication technologies culminates in the figure of Pope John Paul II, the "media-pope." Nevertheless, ambivalence towards modern media still characterizes the contemporary Catholic Church. This ambivalence is possible to a large extent because of the assumption of moral imitation: the assumption that people act upon what they see. For them to act in a moral way, people have to be presented with moral images. Whereas such a perspective creates an opportunity for the Catholic Church, it also—and even more so—suggests a danger, since in contemporary society "immoral" images seem to abound. Catholics have emphasized this danger in later publications. Thus, one of the manuals used in Oaza quotes from a French book, which argues that films can cause agitation, because "The pictures, that move before our eyes, give a fragmented view of the world, and sometimes a really perverted amoral and immoral understanding of life." In other words, these images can be "harmful," especially for teenages.[9] Similar opinions on the danger of film abound in rephrased versions in contemporary Poland.[10]

Despite this ambivalence, the idea of using film as a tool of evangelization has occurred to Catholics in Western Europe, in particular when it came to societies where, because of the obstacle of illiteracy, images were the most important way to communicate.[11] Yet this recognition has not resulted in a widespread initiative to evangelize through the use of film, as happened in the case of the film *Jesus*. American evangelicals have been much less hesitant to use film quite explicitly as a marketing tool for their convictions. In general, as Laurence R. Moore observes, they—like their Protestant liberal counterparts who in the beginning of the twentieth century had been the innovators in the marketplace of culture—felt much more at ease in the marketplace.

Evangelical engagement with modern media technologies stems from the 1950s, when the Production Code associated with Catholics was on its way out, and the Protestant liberals had given up battling over movies.[12]

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8.   Encyclical *Miranda Prorsus* by Pope Pius XII, September 8, 1957, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_08091957_miranda-prorsus_en.html.

9.   The quotation is taken from Fabienne van Roy, *Toi qui devienes femme, deja!* (Tournai: Casterman, 1964 [1955]), 167–68, 175–81.

10.   It should be said that the conservative attitude to the medium of film did not hinder the production of religious films in general, or in Poland in particular. In Poland in 1960 the film *Matka Joanna od Aniatów* (Mother Joanna from the Angels) appeared, in which the abbess is possessed by the devil. Such a film is hard to imagine in contemporary Poland, however, since it would certainly be the object of fierce protest by ultra-Catholic groups. These groups also succeeded in 2001 in closing down a gallery where a piece of art was exhibited portraying genitals on the cross.

11.   See R. Ludmann, *Cinema, foi et morale* (Paris: Cerf, 1956).

12.   Moore, *Selling God*, 220–37.

Moore describes how "postwar Christian conservatives looked out on America's culture industry and did not see their mark upon it."[13] As a result, they undertook efforts to master the skills necessary to take over the leading role in "aggressive religious advertising."[14] Among these theologically conservative Protestants was Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ. Apparently, by the end of the 1940s, Bright already had thought about using motion pictures to spread the Gospel, but he was not able to convince any producers. Bill Graham, by contrast, had launched World Wide Pictures in 1952 (*The Restless One, The Hiding Place, Joni*).

Bright started Campus Crusade for Christ on the UCLA campus in 1951, after which it quickly spread to other campuses and countries. The opportunity to make a film came when Campus Crusade was in the middle of a national media campaign.[15] John Heyman (the producer of *Jesus*) had already produced a filmed version of 22 chapters of Genesis as well as the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke for his expansive project, the New Media Bible. The project was costly, however, and together with Bright he sought a sponsor to make a film based on the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel of Luke was chosen since it was regarded as the most complete in relating events from Jesus' life.[16] Only the introduction to the film, as well as the reflection inviting to accept Jesus as one's Lord and Savior afterwards, use quotations from other scriptures, such as the Gospel of John and the letters of Paul. The film was eventually released in 1979 with the help of a rich Texas couple. The initial assumption was that revenues would be shared between Heyman and Campus Crusade, so that each could pursue their own goals. However, the film never recovered its cost, and Heyman even filed a suit against Campus Crusade in 2001 after Campus Crusade had released a shortened version for children, for which Heyman challenged Campus Crusade's distribution rights.

For Campus Crusade, the explicit objective of the film was to evangelize people. To this end, Campus Crusade initiated the Jesus Film Project, which undertook the effort of dubbing the film into many different languages.[17] The issue of translation is a significant one and can be placed in the context of broader developments in both Protestant and Catholic Christianity where the Bible was translated for individual reading, and—after the Second Vatican Council—also the Catholic mass came to be celebrated in the vernacular. With the emphasis on textuality and scripture came an implied accompanying emphasis on understanding, and perhaps a diminishment of the experiential, ritual performance dimensions of religious observance.

13.   Ibid., 244.
14.   Ibid.
15.   John Dart, "The Making of Jesus: An Evangelist and an Unhappy Producer," *Christian Century*, June 6–13, 2001, 26–31.
16.   Paul A. Ehleman, "The 'Jesus' Film: A Contribution to World Evangelism," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 26 (2002): 68–72.
17.   See www.jesusfilm.org (accessed 15 November, 2005).

The reason for such translation was to facilitate an understanding of the Gospel through presenting it in people's native language. Translation made it easier for people to convert, since it was presumed that this was the only logical thing to do when having been confronted with "the truth." Although the director of the Jesus Film Project Paul Eshleman presents the film as a *Christian* film aimed at providing every person with access to "God's truth,"[18] the film is also distinctively American evangelical Protestant. This served later as an argument for Catholics to make their own "Catholic" version and present *their* "God's truth." As I will argue, "truth" and truth claims do not exist outside a social context.

The film claims to be a literal rendering of the Gospel of Luke and to show the story of Jesus precisely as it happened two thousand years ago.[19] The dialogue in the film is literally taken from the Gospel according to Luke, and not "made up." Furthermore, the film was shot in Israel, and involved the exact reconstruction of attributes and dress. Ideas about faithfulness are important in the appreciation of a film, and they will return in the reception of *Jesus* in Poland, too. The claim of "faithfulness" to the "original" text cannot, of course, be upheld. Inevitably, some stories of the Gospel have been included while others have been left out or reduced in scope.[20] Indeed, claims of authenticity in films producing a "literal transcription" are in general easily refuted, as biblical scholar and literary critic George Aichele makes plain in his reading of Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*: "The movie," he observes, "rewrites the gospel."[21] I propose here that the relevant question in relation to *Jesus* is not the assessment of faithfulness, but how faithfulness comes about through processes of framing and authorizing, thereby remediating the mediation of the Bible.

Jesus in Poland

Polish was one of the first languages into which the *Jesus* film was translated in 1980, after which many other languages followed. The film entered Poland through the priest Blachnicki, the founder and leader of the religious youth movement, Oaza. Blachnicki was a very ambitious priest. He maintained contacts with a variety of other religious groups and movements, from which he derived his inspiration for the program of Oaza. He himself participated as a child in the Scout movement, and Oaza can be considered

18.   Eshleman, "The 'Jesus' Film," 72.
19.   The film *Jesus* is not the only film that uses the Gospel as script. In 1964, the Italian director Pier Pasolini produced *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, and in 2003 director Philip Saville and the Canadian media company Visual Bible International released *The Gospel of John*.
20.   Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies*, 167.
21.   George Aichele, "Translation as De-canonization: Matthew's Gospel According to Pasolini," *Cross Currents* 51 (2002): 524–34 at 527.

as the religious counterpart of the Scout movement (although the Scout movement in itself was closely related to Catholicism). Also the Second Vatican Council was a source of inspiration. Nevertheless, perhaps the most significant influence derives from American evangelicalism. Many features of the Oaza program can be traced back to the American evangelical organization Campus Crusade for Christ.

The contacts between Campus Crusade for Christ and Oaza, in particular in the person of Blachnicki, seem to have been intense. *Christianity Today* describes how a Polish American exchange student, Joe Losiak, initially attended one of the Oaza retreats in 1975. He belonged to Campus Crusade for Christ and told Blachnicki about it, after which a meeting was arranged between Bud Hinkson, the Crusade's director for Eastern Europe, and Blachnicki. They agreed that a delegation of about ten Americans would join the Oaza summer retreats in 1976. "Impressed by Crusade's staff and systematic curriculum, Oasis leadership invited Crusade to return and help revise their entire level-one retreat program," according to David Scott in *Christianity Today*.[22] Others who write this history, such as Maria Paluch, describe the introduction of "evangelical truths" (Campus Crusade for Christ's four evangelical laws) and the acceptance of Christ as one's personal Lord and Savior, without mentioning the contacts that existed between Oaza and Campus Crusade for Christ. Rather than situating the story of evangelization in its immediate historical context, Paluch reaches back into the ancient history of the church, quoting the second-century North African church father, Tertullian ("nobody is born a Christian, we have to become Christians") in order to explain the drive toward evangelization.[23] This particular rendering of history in itself is a sign of the times, as I will argue in more depth later on. Meanwhile, in the *Christianity Today* narrative, Campus Crusaders returned the following summer with thirty staff and trained student leaders to lead the morning sessions, so that "when 27,000 Oasis pilgrims showed up for their retreats the next summer, what they experienced was a strange unabashed mix of Polish Catholicism—Marian devotion included—and American evangelical revivalism."[24]

The contacts between Campus Crusade and Oaza resulted in the early 1980s in the distribution of the film *Jesus* in Poland. Apparently, the evangelical-Protestant origin of the film did not bother Blachnicki. He received one hundred copies of the film, about fifty projectors, and othermaterials to screen the film.[25] This gift can be seen in the larger context of international

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22.   David Scott, "The Pope we Never Knew: The Unknown Story of how John Paul II Ushered Campus Crusade into Catholic Poland," *Christianity Today,* May 2005, 35.

23.   Maria Paluch, *Zarys Historii Ruchu Światło–Życie* [Outline of the History of the Light–Life Movement] (Lublin—Kraków: Światło–Życie, 1998).

24.   Scott, "The Pope we Never Knew," 36.

25.   Dariusz Cupiał, *Na Drodze Ewangelizacji i Ekumenii: Ruch Światło–Życie w Służbie Jedności Chrześcijań* [On the Road of Strategy and Ecumenism: The Light–Life Movement in the Service of Christian Unity] (Lublin: KUL, 1996), 82.

help to Poland in this period, in which in particular Scandinavian Protestant Churches played a key role. Contacts between Sweden and Blachnicki had existed since 1973, and in the early 1980s these Protestant communities sent food, clothes, and medicines to Oaza in particular and Poland in general. A peculiar initiative was the printing of Bibles, of which there was a shortage in Poland at that time. Swedish Protestants supplied Poland—through Blachnicki—with Catholic Bibles in an action called "A Million Bibles for Poland." The Bibles found their way into Oaza, but also into places where Solidarity members were kept prison.[26] The Bibles served a similar purpose as the film for Blachnicki: literally, to bring the word of God to as many people as possible in these turbulent years.[27]

The actual projection of *Jesus* took place in parishes, universities, and in the workplace—in short, in places where opposition could be organized. It was unthinkable to release the film in Polish cinema, which was to a large extent under the control of the state.[28] Blachnicki was extremely ambitious in organizing film screenings. He planned to show *Jesus* in every church in Poland, and he calculated that, out of Poland's total population of 36 million, more or less 20 million would attend the accompanying evangelization retreats.[29] Blachnicki's ambitious goals resembled those set by Campus Crusade for Christ to bring the Gospel to as many people as possible. Indeed, Campus Crusade's ambitions mirroring his own must certainly have been appealing to Blachnicki.

The film project initiated by Blachnicki signals a change in religious emphasis. Oaza de-emphasizes participation in ritual as such while simultaneously attributing more importance to understanding, which would supposedly lead to a "deeper" faith that would have repercussions for daily life. According to this movement, participation in rituals without a proper understanding of their meaning is reprehensible. The Oaza program thus signaled a fundamental change in Polish Catholicism that is reminiscent of the American evangelicalism of Campus Crusade. The film screenings, however, also displayed some peculiar Polish aspects, such as the attention devoted to the problem of alcoholism.

The choice for evangelization through the use of film was motivated by Blachnicki's idea that film appealed to all the senses: words connected to

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26. Ibid., 113

27. Not all Protestants taking part in this action thought it a good idea to print Catholic Bibles, as a result of which there arrived bibles without certain books (ibid., 113).

28. David A. Andelman, "Contempt and Crisis in Poland," *International Security* 6, no. 3 (1981): 90–103 at 99; Alexander Remmer, "Note on Post-Publication Censorship in Poland 1980–1987," *Soviet Studies* 41 (1989): 415–25.

29. Franciszek Blachnicki, *Ewangelizacja według planu Ad Christim Redemptorem* [Strategy According to the Plan of Ad Christum Redemptorem] (n.p.: Światło–Życie, 1988). His guide to the evangelization of Poland, *Ad Christum Redemptorem*, appeared in 1988, but draws on texts from the early 1980s.

images would make a stronger impression. Furthermore, the choice for this particular film was motivated by the view that the film *Jesus* "is character-ized by its faithfulness to the Gospel, there is no fiction in it, no scenes invented by the makers of the film."[30] The idea that the film seemed to have no invented scenes, an observation that can be contested,[31] seems to account for its power in the perception of all who appreciate the film. This appreciation suggests that the proponents of the film consider the film to constitute the Gospel in its pure form: the Gospel on the screen. It also suggests that the proponents do not regard the Gospel as having been distorted by the medium of film; such a view suggests an understanding of religion and religious texts as previously unmediated, an assumption that has been rightly challenged.[32]

The screening of the film, however, also raised ambiguities that have been present in official Church documents since the invention of film as a medium. For example, it became important, when showing the film, to eliminate a "cinema atmosphere" in order to underline the extraordinary character of the film.[33] In practice, the film has indeed been shown in a number of parishes and other places, but it never succeeded in reaching the masses as Blachnicki envisioned. Also Blachnicki himself soon realized that this project would take much more than the one to two years he had calculated. Moreover, from the second half of the 1980s up till the late 1990s it was not Oaza, but *Ruch Nowego Życia* ('New Life Movement'), the Polish branch of Campus Crusade for Christ, which showed the film *Jesus* in schools, parishes, and during festivals.[34] This detachment of the film *Jesus* from Oaza had much to do with the disruption of the cooperation between Oaza and Campus Crusade. The initial cooperation between Oaza and Campus Crusade for Christ waned after Blachnicki left Poland. When martial law was announced in 1981, Blachnicki happened to be abroad, and he settled in Germany where he died in 1986. The contacts between Oaza and Campus Crusade (and other Protestants organizations for that matter) were to a large extent the result of Blachnicki's work, and his co-workers did not feel up to the task of continuing these contacts in his absence.[35] The con-tinuation of this cooperation was further hindered by the negative attitude of the Catholic clergy, as exemplified by this observation by a Catholic priest, quoted in Dariusz Cupiał's study of the Light–Life movement:

> Although in the message of our separated brothers no contradiction with
> the Catholic doctrine was observed…the whole of the printed materials

30.   Ibid., 195.

31.   Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies*, 172.

32.   Birgit Meyer, "Religious Revelation, Secrecy and the Limits of Visual Representation," under review at *Anthropological Theory*.

33.   Blachnicki, *Ewangelizacja według planu*, 69.

34.   Although Campus Crusade has operated in Poland since the second half of the 1970s, its official Polish branch *Ruch Nowego Życia* was registered only in 1991.

35.   Cupiał, *Na Drodze Ewangelizacji i Ekumenii*, 87.

prepared by them, conversations, the atmosphere, had a Protestant overtone, that in some instances were alien to Catholic tradition. This could cause unrest. For young people who relished their originality and novelty it could subconsciously even cause the rejection of certain Catholic traditions, for example, forms of spirituality, prayers, the transmittance of the truths of faith.[36]

Such fears were exacerbated by actual conversions to Protestantism and the founding of new churches (even if both developments actually concerned a very small number of people), as well as by the attempts at evangelization that Campus Crusade undertook in Poland without consultation with Oaza.[37] The end of the cooperation between Oaza and Campus Crusade caused the film *Jesus* to be temporarily lost as a tool of evangelization for Polish Catholicism.

The Need for Evangelization after Socialism

Although the film *Jesus* had just been lost as a tool of evangelization for Polish Catholicism, Catholics continued to see a need for evangelization after the end of socialism. Post-socialism brought its own reasons to engage in evangelization: the introduction of a market economy with its concomitant culture of consumption and the growing competition with other proselytizing groups on the religious scene. From the historical outline offered by Paluch, one can conclude that the religious scene had become much more crystallized since the beginning of the 1980s: the cooperation between Oaza and Campus Crusade for Christ has long been forgotten and is not even mentioned in the historical outline. It seems something had irrevocably changed since the early 1980s.

Oaza itself also saw an increasing need for evangelization, inspired by the papal program "evangelization 2000," meant as a preparation for the 2000 jubilee. Not only the pope, but also the Polish context was key in developing ideas about the necessity of a new evangelization:

> In our Polish reality there can be observed a growth of secular influences, the weakening of the role of religion and the Church through propaganda. We were called to give testimony about the authenticity of religion, to greater zealousness and courage.[38]

It is significant that the highly politically charged word "propaganda" is used to describe a post-socialist reality. It suggests that nothing has really

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36.   Ibid., 88.

37.   Also, the Secret Services have played a significant role in delegitimizing the contacts between Oaza and Protestant organisations (Cupiał; Andrzej Grajewski, "Oskarżony ks. Franciszek Blachnicki" [The Accused rev. Franciszek Blachnicki], *Więź* 5 no. 511 (2001): 112–28.

38.   Paluch, *Zarys Historii Ruchu Światło–Życie*, 118. Paluch paraphrases here documents that Oaza produced in 1991.

changed since the end of socialism. Evangelization in the new context, however, has acquired another dimension:

> Looking for ways to evangelize, the Light Life Movement discovers a new, more difficult climate in proclaiming the message of Christ. Evil has no ultimate limitations and is presented in very attractive ways. Good can hardly be distinguished from evil, because the borders between them have faded.[39]

The fragment sounds like a critique of postmodern relativism, but bears direct relevance to the political context in Poland: it had seemed indeed much easier to distinguish between good and evil when there was still a clearly defined enemy to blame for the existence of evil, at least in the minds of some people.

The worries expressed in Paluch are exemplary for a more general concern in Polish Catholic circles, and they come to serve as a call for action. The form these actions should take—and in particular the use of media—remains much debated. In Poland recently, discussions have begun about whether to "advertise" Jesus through using images. The use of modern media technologies has now become a mainstream topic for the Church, which was only possible after the end of socialism, when the state-monopoly on the most important communication technologies disappeared, opening up the way for their employment by the market economy as sites for advertisements, but also by the Church as a means of communication. "Does God Need Advertising?" is the title of an article that appeared in 1995.[40] In 2005, the same question was raised in another magazine.[41] Individual clergy and laity have developed initiatives using modern communication technologies: there are radio and TV stations (though these are not very popular in Poland), the Internet, and religious billboard advertising. The ambivalence about these communication technologies remains, however, as the 2005 article on "advertising God" documents. The authors emphasize the distinction between "transferring faith with the help of various, new audiovisual techniques" on the one hand, and "advertisements that serve to persuade," on the other. The difference between them is that "[i]n advertisements the idea of "truth" hardly exists." "Truth" had been the criterion to accept the film *Jesus* as a tool of evangelization in the first place. In contemporary Poland, the answer to the question about the use of modern communication technology also depends on the question of "truth." It is the "lack of truth" associated with them that prevents modern media from being regarded as suitable for purposes of evangelization.

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39.   Ibid., 145.

40.   Jankowska, "Czy Pan Bóg potrzebuje reklamy?" [Does God need advertising?] *Więź* 11 (1995): 87–92

41.   Gołąb and Legutko, "Czy Bóg potrzebuje reklamy?" [Does God need advertising?] *Gość Niedzielny* 8 (25 February 2005): 30–31.

The idea of "truth," and the need for "truth," is a persistent one in recent Polish history and in other areas of public life. Its relevance has to be understood in the context of specific post-socialist circumstances, where the truth about the socialist past and persons playing key roles in this past, is still the subject of many debates and investigations. Furthermore, the market in itself seems to raise questions about "truth," since products embody promises they cannot live up to.[42] Simultaneously, the Polish concern for truth resonates with a more general concern for truth to be found with conservative Christians. In the realm of film, W. Barnes Tatum has argued that evangelical or conservative Protestants in particular have been concerned with the faithfulness of Jesus films to biblical text.[43] This approach to film became once again clear in the case of Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ." Only the idea that this film presented "biblical truth" legitimated the film's graphic violence for evangelicals who usually condemn violence in films.[44] It is therefore not surprising to learn that some evangelists considered employing Gibson's film in a similar way as the 25-year-old film *Jesus*.[45] The film *Jesus* had a similar truth claim to it, although it realized this truth claim by different means. Also Campus Crusade for Christ itself has received Gibson's passion positively.[46] It would be wrong, however, to relegate concerns about "truth" solely to Protestant evangelicals. A similar concern can be discerned in certain Catholic circles. That faithfulness more generally became an issue in the case of "The Passion" can be seen in the controversy surrounding the claim that pope John Paul II—whose person certainly added an authoritative voice—had purportedly responded to the film with the statement that "it is as it was." It is not surprising to see that the film *Jesus* is supported in Catholic circles precisely because it is regarded to be a literal version of the Gospel of Luke, or because, as Blachnicki put it in the early 1980s, "there is no fiction in it."

The claim of faithfulness alone, however, is apparently no longer sufficient in contemporary Poland, as the "new edition" of *Jesus* suggests. The need for Catholic framing stems largely from the feeling that the presence of other religious groups in Poland poses a threat to Catholicism. Although sectarian Protestantism had perhaps been a concern for some even in the early 1980s, this concern was voiced more strongly and in a more public voice in the 1990s, in large measure because of the public

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42.   Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987). This argument has also been made for post-socialist societies by Milena Veenis, "Consumption in East Germany: The Seduction and Betrayal of Things," *Journal of Material Culture* 4 (1999): 79–112.

43.   Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies*, 197.

44.   Neal King, "Truth at Last: Evangelical Communities Embrace *The Passion of The Christ*," in Plate, *Re-Viewing the Passion*, 151–62.

45.   Ibid., 161.

46.   Darren J. N. Middleton, "Celluloid Synoptics: Viewing the Gospels of Marty and Mel Together," in Plate, *Re-Viewing the Passion*, 71–84 at 80.

presence of these "sects" and their efforts to evangelize. Especially after the end of socialism, the missionary field had become enlarged with non-Catholic groups proselytizing in the streets of larger cities. But the imagination about "sects" reaches beyond religious groups proper as the reference to Herbalife (a method for weight loss) on a Polish website on "sects" reveals. The characterization of *Ruch Nowego Życia* as a "sect" in the magazine *Życie* betrays a more general attitude in contemporary Poland toward phenomena that cannot be easily classified.

In the light of such concerns, it has become important for Oaza to distinguish itself from Protestant groups and to de-emphasize the Protestant origin of much of its program. The striking resemblances between Oaza and Campus Crusade has led critics to point out the Protestant character of this Catholic phenomenon, provoking in turn indignation and objections on the part of the apologists of Oaza. These do not try to justify the Protestant influences, but instead single out the distinctive Catholic sources of inspiration for the Oaza program.[47]

The distrust of Protestant influence, in particular in its Pentecostal form, is further aggravated by the fear that some people might leave communities such as Oaza and Renewal in the Holy Spirit (a Catholic Charismatic movement in Poland) to join another Church altogether.[48] Ideally, Oaza would protect teenagers from these "sects." But others have perceived Oaza itself as threatening to provide an opening for people to become engaged in "sects." The engaged laity from the Catholic Church—from Oaza or other religious groups—seem to be over-represented in these new religious communities, as priest Siemieniewski notices, despite the "maturity of faith" they supposedly derive from Oaza or other Catholic movements.[49] The communities about which Siemieniewski speaks often develop out of charismatic communities, which is a reason for leaders not to support charismatic trends in Oaza.[50] Oaza, while owing much of its program to Protestant groups, as a Catholic movement had to be set apart from these groups as

47.   The discussion can be found at http://apologetyka.katolik.net.nl (accessed 9 May 2005), a site created in 2000 to defend the Catholic faith.

48.   It has indeed happened that individual believers left the Catholic Church to enter Pentecostal communities, and even whole communities split off from the Church. Recently a national newspaper wrote about such a community in Racibórz (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, March 28, 2004).

49.   Siemieniewski: "Przyjąłem Jezusa i narodziłem się na nowo" (I accepted Jesus and I was reborn), at http://apologetyka.katolik.net.pl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=832&Itemid=52, accessed May 5, 2005.

50.   The popular imagination about "sects" informed the practices of Oaza. In order not to create the impression that Oaza was a sect, too, priests and teenagers alike carefully distinguished between practices deemed appropriate for Oaza, and those considered to be characteristic of sects. For example, a boy was reprimanded for proposing to the others to just shout "Jesus" as a form of prayer.

much as possible.[51] The real question, however, is not whether Oaza is Catholic or Protestant, but whether it is a problem for Catholic groups to resemble Protestantism too much. The answer in Poland is decisively "yes," and the drive toward a Catholic re-make of the *Jesus* film needs to be understood in this context.

Jesus 2000: The Catholic Version

In the light of the ambiguity among Catholics in Poland about the use of modern media technologies to propagate religion, it is perhaps not surprising to learn that ICPE, the Catholic evangelical organization distributing a new version of the film *Jesus*, originates not in Poland, but in Malta (and like Campus Crusade for Christ possesses local branches all over the world).[52] In the 1990s, ICPE founded Millennium Films International for the purpose of producing and distributing a Catholic edition of a success formula, all with explicit permission of the distributor of *Jesus*.

> On the 21st April 1999 in San Clemente, California, an agreement was signed between Inspiration Films and the ICPE Institute for World Evangelisation. Through this agreement the ICPE Institute for World Evangelisation took on the enormous task of adapting the "package" of the film "JESUS" to suit the doctrinal requirements of the Catholic Church, prepare and provide accompanying literature, facilitate and organize follow-up and make available this tool of evangelisation worldwide.[53]

As with the original version, Polish was one of the first languages for which the film was "adapted," and the issue of the Catholic character of the film seems to be especially relevant in Poland. A closer look at how the film *Jesus* was remade into a Catholic film will reveal the issues at stake.

Information about the Catholic version of the film *Jesus* can be found on a website with the name www.filmjezus.pl. The similarity of the name of the website of the original (www.filmjezus.org.pl) and the Catholic "new edition" of the film is not coincidental and points to the subtle competition that takes place between the films in Poland. Until recently, the layout of the websites was different. The complexity of the Catholic website was striking in comparison with the old version of the original website. The website of the original film, however, improved in the second half of 2005, and it now can compete with the Catholic website. Also the website for the

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51. Although Załęcki has noted the presence of more charismatic Oaza-communities in Poland in general: Paweł Załęcki, "Between Spontaneity, Institutional Church and State Politics: Oasis Movement in Poland," *Polish Sociological Review* 2 no. 110 (1995): 183–91.

52. ICPE was founded in Malta in 1985 by Mario Capello. With evangelization as its focus point, it organizes mission schools and mission centers. ICPE is active in Poland since 1998.

53. Website of Millennium Films International: www.millenniumfilms.org (accessed 15 November, 2005).

Catholic version was revised in the meantime, adding a guest book, forum, and a more detailed overview about when the film was broadcast on television, and how many people had watched it. Providing (impressive) numbers had always been a key element in the promotion strategy for the film, and this strategy has been taken up by the Catholic version of the film in Poland.

Significantly, the Polish website of the Catholic version does not deny the existence of the original version, but rather describes how the film has been made to remain faithful to the Gospel. It only mentions the name of the producer John Heyman, however, and not the involvement of Campus Crusade for Christ. It also proudly mentions that the Catholic version has received a prize at a Catholic film festival in Poland (Grand Prix Niepokalanów) in 2000, which implies that theirs is a new film. Meanwhile, the website of the original version as well as the website of *Ruch Nowego Życia* itself mentions that the film was originally distributed by Oaza, and the website of *Ruch Nowego Życia* even provides texts by Blachnicki (and fragments from Cupiał's book).

The distribution patterns for both films in contemporary Poland are also markedly similar. In both cases, the distributing organizations often attach a DVD of the film to a magazine or local newspaper.[54] Such editions usually cost just a few extra złoty, or involve no extra cost at all. Both ICPE and *Ruch Nowego Życia* organize sessions on-demand for schools, parishes, and even prisons (at least in the case of the Catholic version), as well as during religious festivals. Furthermore, both distributors show the film in (small) cinemas in cities throughout Poland. The websites characterize these screenings as great successes, conveniently not mentioning the free admission to all screenings. Both websites make sure to mention occasions on which the film was shown, but references to screenings can be found throughout the Internet. Thus, the website of the city Krotoszyn announces in 2002 that the Pentecost Church together with *Ruch Nowego Życia* organized a screening in the cinema. In May 2003 a "Week of Christian Culture" was organized in Chełm, during which the film *Jesus* was part of the program. In November 2003 a screening was organized in the *Dom Kultury* ("House of Culture") in Sośnicowice. Furthermore, it was shown during the Christian "For Jesus" festival in July 2005 in Piekary Ślaskie, along with the new film about Franciszek Blachnicki. And on 19 March 2005 there even was a premiere of the Kaszub language version (only available from *Ruch Nowego Życia*) in Gdynia.

The existence in Poland of two versions of the film *Jesus* recalls the debates over the translation of the Bible. As a result of this controversy, Catholics and Protestants have their own versions of the Bible, and therefore

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54.   It has to be noted that the technology of DVD itself makes copying and re-framing of films much easier than is the case with celluloid. It opens up the possibility of "piracy-practices" (Brian Larkin, "Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds: Nigerian Video and the Infrastructure of Piracy," *Public Culture* 16 [2004]: 289–314).

the effort of Swedish Protestants to print Catholic Bibles was very much appreciated in Poland. In a similar way, a Catholic version of the film *Jesus* has been produced for Poland.[55] That there is seen to exist a need for a Catholic film in contemporary Poland is in a sense awkward: recently, an ecumenical Bible translation has come out in Poland that is accepted by both the Catholic Church and many Protestant denominations.

What makes for the Catholic character of the film? There seem to be several dimensions of this presumed Catholic character. The first dimension is that the website promises a more "truthful" dialogue according to the (Catholic version of the) Gospel, and new voice-overs.[56]

> Millennium Films International prepared a new Polish version of the film "Jesus". New dialogues are edited, more truthful to the Gospel according to Luke in the translation of *Bilbia Tysiąclecia* [the Polish Bible translation].[57]

Renowned Polish actors are mentioned as having contributed their voices to the film (although the DVD in fact does not show any changes at all in comparison to the original). As was the case with the original version, the film is promoted as the "Gospel on screen." The claim is that the film is a literal reproduction of the Gospel of Luke. By emphasizing this dimension, the importance of the ability to read the Bible is also stressed. Originally a primary concern of Protestants, the availability of the Bible for personal reading and study has become increasingly important to the Catholic Church as well. For example, the website of the Catholic *Jesus* draws on a presumed Catholic tradition of the reading of the Bible when writing that "[a]lready St Jerome said that not knowing the Bible is not knowing Christ himself."[58] The importance of the literalness of the Bible in the film *Jesus* indicates crucial changes within the Church in Poland and the emphasis it began to place on knowledge of the Bible. As the importance of the content of belief grew, over against traditional emphasis on ritual performance, so too did the perceived need for knowledge of the biblical text. This idea appears most explicitly in the program of Oaza, but is also found in Catholic circles in Poland more generally. The perceived lack of knowledge bothers

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55.   And not only for Poland: like the original film, the Catholic film is also the subject of a translation project. The website of Millennium Films International mentions translations into fourteen languages (www.millenniumfilms.org, accessed 15 November, 2005).

56.   Also the quality of the new edition is emphasized. The film itself was subjected to a process to improve its quality and was put in digital format. The sound of the new edition was processed by a company that—according to the booklet with the film—also took care of the sound in famous films in Poland. This claim of better quality, however, cannot be maintained when watching the DVD.

57.   From website of Catholic version of *Jesus*: www.filmjezus.pl (accessed 15 November 2005).

58.   At www.filmjezus.pl, opening page, April 2005—the quotation has since disappeared from later versions of the website.

religious leaders, and they refer to it as "functional illiteracy."[59] In such circumstances—whether they are imagined or real—the film *Jesus* comes to be extremely relevant. The film seems to provide an easy and attractive way to have people "read" the Bible.

When watching the film, however, it becomes clear that the Catholic version of the film is ultimately the same as the original evangelical one. The voices are exactly the same, and the dialogues (at least in the DVD version ordered in Spring 2005) do not derive from the Polish Bible translation. It is true that the Catholic version leaves out some scenes at the end of the film, including the ascension of Jesus. Whereas the original version ends with ascension, the Catholic version ends with resurrection. A scene in the original film that—as Tatum has noticed—has no basis in the Gospel of Luke, however, has remained in the new film. The scene concerns a meeting between Pilate, Caiaphas, and Annas, in which they discuss the mass appeal of Jesus. Pilate appears dissatisfied and says to Annas and Caiaphas that he will blame them if Jesus goes on to disturb the peace. The scene was added to avoid the implication that all Jews bear responsibility for his crucifixion. As a result, the role of Pilate is magnified.[60] Thus, what is different in the new film is not that it is more "truthful" to the Gospel as its website claims. Claims of truthfulness in general can be easily refuted, but in the case of this particular Catholic edition there are no changes that would at least give the impression that the film has become more "faithful" to the Gospel. But it is the claim itself that deserves attention. The question needs to be asked about the basis on which this claim is being made. I propose that the answer to this question lies in the framing of the film.

What *is* different is the introduction to the film, and the reflection on it afterwards. The reaction of *Ruch Nowego Życia* to the new version of the film indeed points to—besides the improvement of the sound—the replacement of the frame of the film:

> The Catholics improved the sound quality by adding a new sound tape, and this way a more modern version was created. Furthermore they changed the commentary at the beginning and the end of the film, which is why it can be said to be a Catholic version.[61]

The original version starts with a quotation from the Gospel of John (John 3:16–17). The Catholic 2000 version starts with a much longer reflection on knowledge and understanding in contemporary society, and hereby puts the film into a larger context, which makes clear the necessity of religion. Also, the epilogue places the film in a larger context. Whereas the original version shows stills from the film (thus, since faithfulness to the Gospel is assumed, scenes from the Bible), the Catholic version shows a range of

59.   Rector of a seminary in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 22 February 2005.
60.   Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies*, 173.
61.   Private correspondence with the author.

pictures from contemporary history, combining images of large gatherings of people, the pope, poverty, and war. In this way, the film appeals to the idea of a new millennium, looking back at the previous one, and looking forward to the next one, which can be the beginning of a new era—that is, if people will accept Jesus.

The reflection in the Catholic version starts with an image of the globe, after which images from the film are alternated with pictures from the contemporary world described above. This suggests that religion does not—and should not—exist in a social vacuum: religion should relate directly to the larger world. The original version of the film is devoid of such references. Although the Catholic version still embodies an invitation to a private, personal faith, unlike the original version it more firmly puts the story of Jesus in a larger social reality, whereas the original version seems to fit more Richard Walsh's characterization of Jesus films produced in America after the 1960s as offering "retreats from, not engagements with, larger society."[62] The double emphasis of the film is also visible in a movement like Oaza, which emphasizes both a personal relationship with Jesus and the social consequences that should follow from this relationship. Nevertheless, the focus on the personal relationship with Jesus has become extremely important within Catholicism (not only Polish Catholicism) over the past decades and will remain so despite putting additional emphasis on the social dimension of religion.

Both the old and the new versions end with a prayer, but the content of the prayer differs, even though the new one is clearly inspired by the old one. What was present in the old prayer, but significantly absent in the new prayer, is the reference to Jesus as one's Lord and Savior. This is a distinctly evangelical reference, although the "native" Polish movement Oaza has adopted it as well. Furthermore, the Catholic version stresses the sinfulness of humanity so that the prayer can be seen as an act of remorse. The Catholic prayer mentions resurrection, which is absent from the prayer after the original film.

Despite the differences I described above, I contend that the most important distinction does not concern the film's content but rather its appropriation by Catholic religious groups and their insistence on the fact of the film's difference. Authority and claims to authority are crucial here: on its website, Millennium Films, for example, proudly features the meeting that took place with Pope John Paul II; by implication, the film is authorized by the Catholic Church and appropriated as a Catholic medium. The new film insists upon its independence from its Protestant predecessor and seeks to disconnect itself from Protestant allusions and ambitions. In such a rendering that I propose here, the content had to be adapted to make the

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62.   Richard Walsh, *Readings the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film* (Harrisburg, London & New York: Trinity, 2003), 13.

release of a "new edition" credible: something had to be new. More impor-
tant than the changes that have or have not been made, however, is the
relocation of authority. It is the predicate lent to the film by a Catholic
environment that seems to count most, which also ironically coincides with
the aims of the original film. The original film's objective was to tell people
around the world about Jesus by speaking to them in their own language.
The success of this idea has resulted in a Catholic version, that presumably
"speaks" even more in the native language. The films distributors argue
that the texts in the new version are more truthful to the Gospel, but it can
also be argued that a Catholic re-make as such is an attempt to "translate"
the film into Polish, by giving it a "Polish" (in the sense of Poland being
considered a Catholic country) flavor. This is not achieved by changing the
film itself, but by framing it differently, after which the authoritative voices
of Church representatives give, as it were, their *imprimatur*. That the film
can now be considered to be Catholic is more important than the accurate
representation of the (Polish translation of the) Gospel that is propagated.

The importance of the label is not uniquely Polish. Like the Polish
website itself, the website of Millennium Films International hosts a number
of "endorsements" by archbishops, cardinals, and pope John Paul II. This
was not at all the case with the original version. For Paul Eshleman, who
since 1981 directed the Jesus Film Project of Campus Crusade for Christ,
the issue of labeling does not seem to be problematic at all. He mentions
that over thirty-five versions of the film have been produced in order to
adapt to local needs and understandings. Thus, there are editions with a
"Muslim-sensitive introduction," others with "Asian introductions" on "why a
Hindu or Buddhist should learn about Jesus," a "World Cup edition" (with
introductory testimonies of nine soccer players), and so on. He continues:
"The biggest users of the 'Jesus' film so far are the Church of the Nazarene,
the Southern Baptist International Mission […] World Vision, Operation
Mobilization, and the *Roman Catholic Church.*"[63] He dismisses the debates
over who may use the film.

> The Jesus Film Project has never tried to prevent anyone from buying or
> showing a videocassette, which has caused some difficulty in countries
> where two different Christian groups (often Catholics and Protestants, or
> Charismatics and noncharismatics) have the film. Each may be afraid of
> losing people to the other confession or tradition. We have been accused
> of selling "arms" to both sides.[64]

Eshleman dismisses any worry over the competition between Protestants
and Catholics, or other religious group, precisely because he assumes that
the Bible embodies a universal truth that only needs to be made under-
standable for different groups of people. It is the assumption of a universal

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63.   Eshleman, "The 'Jesus' Film," 70 (my emphasis).
64.   Ibid., 72.

truth that has been questioned by Catholics, and resulted in a "new edition" of *Jesus*. In reaction to my question to people from *Ruch Nowego Życia* it became clear that they were displeased by the sudden appearance of a Catholic re-make:

> When it comes to the "Catholic" version: we are aware of its existence. Catholics asked in the West for the right to distribute the film and received this right. Nobody contacted us in this matter, so we didn't have any influence on it.[65]

The existence of the Catholic version of the film is therefore not uncontested. Some people raise doubts on the recently revised Polish website of the Catholic *Jesus*. The majority of reactions in the recently added guest book do not mention the Catholic character of the film, but simply confide they liked it. There are, however, also other voices. Ireneusz writes:

> Dear all! The film is of course beautiful, because it truthfully presents the love of Jesus and the largeness of God's grace for people. Let's just say openly, that the film has been produced on the demand of the Christian interfaith community Campus Crusade for Christ, that once worked together with rev. Blachnicki, the founder of Oaza. Currently *Ruch Nowego Życia* is the Polish branch of Campus Crusade for Christ and this organization disposes of the full, original version of the film. Besides, the international organization of ICPE uses the English version in accordance with the original. Why is it necessary in Poland to accentuate that you have a special Catholic edition?[66]

Other reactions ask a similar question, and one person explicitly asks why the introduction and epilogue of the original film have been changed in the Catholic version. None of these questions received (as of yet) an answer on the website.

Many people in Poland, however, seem not even aware of the existence of two versions. It is not always clear if the original or the Catholic version is used during, for example, religious festivals. Even the fact that an event is organized by Roman Catholic clergy and laity does not necessarily determine which version of the film is used. A notable exception is the website of the city of Krotoszyn that announced in 2002 that the Pentecost Church together with the Movement of New Life organized a screening in the cinema. It adds that there are two websites where more information can be found on the film: "the site of the **original** version" and the "site of the **Catholic** version" (bold in original). For sure, the webmaster must have been an insider in these matters, since even within Oaza itself not everyone is aware of the existence of two versions, as the magazine *Oaza* proves. A magazine from 2000 announces the new release of the film. The author writes that the film *Jesus* has "come back to us"—suggesting that is has been away—and that this is a "joyful, though unexpected gift." The author

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65.   Private correspondence with the author.
66.   At www.filmjezus.pl (accessed 15 November, 2005).

furthermore refers to the website of the Catholic film. Three years later, in an Oaza-magazine from 2003, a priest tells about his action to show the film in Silesian cinemas. At the end of the article, the link to the website of the *original* film is given, and the Catholic version of the film—by then available for three years—is not even mentioned.

Conclusion

The original film co-produced by Campus Crusade for Christ was quickly transformed into a translation project, which went on to dub the film in several hundred languages. The Catholic version of the film *Jesus* that came out, not coincidentally, in the "Jubilee year" 2000 can be regarded as a "translation" in itself. The Catholic version is a translation not into a local language, but into "Catholicism," and into the local Polish context, in which the dimension of truth has come to the forefront after the end of socialism. Whereas there exists an agreed-upon need for strategy, the question is how to employ modern media technologies without making concessions to "truth." The debate over using media technologies takes place in the Catholic Church in general, and in Poland in particular. There are discussions about the possibility of confession through the Internet, and when it comes to strategy, the question arises as to whether religion—or God—can and should be advertised. The distribution of a Catholic remake of the film *Jesus* is an attempt to deal with the ambiguity of media technologies by ruling "illusion" out by presenting a filmed version of the Gospel that is "faithful" beyond doubt.

The supposed faithfulness to the biblical text is key to understanding the significance of the production of a Catholic version of the film *Jesus*. American evangelicals and Polish Catholics alike appreciate and value the dimension of faithfulness. This claim of being true to the Gospel, however, also suggests that the Bible is the only source of authority, independent of other, exterior authoritative sources, and that the film can thus exist and make truth-claims on its own. The existence of the Catholic version shows that this assumption that truth can exist without exterior authority has to be questioned. Faithfulness can only be claimed when it is preceded by a claim of authority. Despite the assumed faithfulness of the film to the Bible, and the ensuing appreciation of the film as a tool for evangelization, the film needed to be reframed as a Catholic film in order to link it to the local social context. The Catholic version seeks to render the film independent from its Protestant predecessor and to disconnect it from the allusions and ambitions of Protestant groups that are contested in Poland. "Catholicness" is not the property of the film itself, but the result of embedding the film in a Catholic context by providing a different introduction and epilogue. Furthermore, it is the authorizing voice (of bishops and the pope supporting the Catholic version) that opens the way for Catholics to watch the film

Jesus as a faithful translation of the Gospel. It is only because of this authorization that the film can be claimed to be faithful to the Gospel in the first place. For truth to be Truth, authority is indispensable. Thus, "faithfulness" is as little an intrinsic property of the film as is "Catholicness." Both claims need to be understood in the context of the interaction between the film and historical processes, institutional contexts, and cultural meanings.

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Notes for Contributors

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