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**Impossible Representations. Pentecostalism,
Vision and Video Technology in Ghana**

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Impossible Representations. Pentecostalism,
Vision and Video Technology in Ghana[1]

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See also www.pscw.uva.nl/media-religion, for more visual material see www.askmedia.org (gallery-Praise the Lord!)

Introduction

This essay seeks to unravel the nexus of religion and media by taking as a point of departure an understanding of religion as a practice of mediation (e.g. De Vries 2001), creating and maintaining links between religious practitioners as well as between them and the invisible, inaudible, untouchable, or simply, spiritual realm which forms the center of religious attention. This realm is constructed by mediation, yet – and here lies the power of religion - tends to assume a reality of its own which renders problematic its very representability. If ideas are necessarily reworked through the particular technologies of transmission intrinsic to books, spirit mediums, film, radio, TV, video or the computer, the question arises as to how the accessibility of a new medium transforms existing practices of religious mediation and speaks to the question of representability (cf. Morris 2002). While a crude separation of medium and message, which makes it seem as if the message is an essence existing irrespective of a particular medium, is untenable, it is equally problematic to attribute a deterministic and message-overruling capacity to media, as implied in McLuhan's famous dictum 'the medium is the message'. Both options have in common that with their narrow focus on either message or medium they remain stuck in partial aspects of practices of mediation without being able to fully grasp these practices themselves. There is need to move forward and assess how the accessibility of new media gives rise to new practices of mediation, and how these practices stem from and impinge on changing power relations, between followers and leaders, as well as between politics and religion. Hence the need to investigate religious change, and the

changing place and role of religion in society, in relation to the possibilities and limitations of new media technologies. I wish to address the question of changing practices of religious mediation through a detailed investigation of the new public appearance of Pentecostalism in Ghana, where this brand of Christianity has become increasingly present in the public sphere since the turn to a democratic constitution which implied the liberalization and commercialization of hitherto state-controlled and state-owned media.

What is at stake can be powerfully evoked by a sign board advertising the shop of a roadside artist located at the Winneba-roundabout, Gilbert Forson Art, which captured my immediate attention when my colleagues Peter Pels, Marijke Steegstra and myself passed through on our way from Elmina to Accra in early January 2003 (Fig. 1). Whilst driving along the bumpy road, I was trying to sketch as poignantly as possible my research findings and thoughts on the apparent convergence of religion and visual technologies, as well as the dissonances arising when Christianity is processed through a video camera. The image at the roadside condenses what, albeit in a less articulate and coherent manner, is all over the place and forms the key concern of my research (Fig. 2). It depicts a young man, dressed in a yellow shirt, who holds a video camera in his left hand without, however, looking through, and rather, I am tempted to say, gazing in the sky, in a trance-like state. The camera is placed in the middle of the picture and directed toward an image of Jesus Christ, fair colored with his eyes closed and sunken in prayer, not willing to be disturbed, let alone to look back. This somewhat old-fashioned image strongly evokes earlier traditions of mediating Jesus through painting, a representation reminiscent of the image of Jesus in Catholic and Protestant popular prayer books and illustrated new testaments. Around the image of Jesus there is some strange ethereal stuff, something like smoke, foam or a cloud which is reminiscent of painted representations of divinity. Interestingly, however, here this substance does not seem to belong to Jesus as attribute of his supernatural state, but to emanate from the camera in operation, targeting and at the same time blurring the image of Jesus.

While the man behind the camera is unable to see Jesus as the medium blurs his image, the whole scene is clearly visible to the outside observer. Jesus' partial invisibility is overcome, as it were, by the painting itself, which grants the onlooker a full view on both sides of the smoke-screen separating the medium for and target of vision. The shop itself being a space where all sorts of representations – photographs of persons like Kofi Annan, Nelson Mandela, the former Ghanaian President J.J. Rawlings and his successor John Agyekum Kufuor, images from TV, posters, religious icons – are re-represented in the medium of popular painting, this is a prime location from which to start a reflection on how the accessi-

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bility of a new medium as video impinges on practices of mediation, and gives rise to new forms of spectatorship. Indeed, the picture offers a painted comment on the recent common use of video in order to depict the divine – and, of course the demonic - as objects of mass spectatorship. When I asked the young man in charge of the shop why he had painted this image, his answer was firm and quick: 'I painted it because it is impossible.' Thus, he told me, passers-by would be attracted to the shop just like us; many people had come and commented that by all means it was 'impossible to make a video of Jesus'.

What fascinated me most in this picture is indeed its suggestion of the impossibility to represent the divine through the medium of video. This impossibility is visualized by recurring to painting, as if the limitations of video cannot be revealed by itself, but only by another, more archaic medium. Indeed, the painting makes visible to the outside observer what remains invisible from the perspective of the cameraman. We see what the cameraman can't see, and what cannot be captured by the camera itself, and thus not be seen by the spectators of the film thus recorded. To be *in* the picture, as a subject seeking to visualize the divine, does not generate any true understanding of this practice of mediation; understanding, the painting suggests, can only be achieved by the observer who is positioned *outside* the picture (cf. Weber 1996: 86).

The most intriguing part of the picture is the ethereal substance emanating from the eye of the camera, which makes it impossible for the man in the picture to see Jesus, but which appears to the outside observer like a smokescreen hiding the image of Jesus. To me, the picture comments upon – or at least can be made to speak to - the question of Christianity in the era of electronical (and even digital) reproducibility, popularized through the easy accessibility of video technology. It makes a painted statement on the aspirations and flaws of video and the new practices of religious mediation and forms of spectatorship to which it gives rise. Assertively depicting the camera as a mystifying device, the image states that the longing to see through the camera as the ultimate instrument of modern vision and the impossibility to do so are flipsides of each other. Depicting the camera as a new visual technology bumping up against the divine, the painting shows that the camera actually seems to conceal that which it sets out to picture. Interesting in this context is the absence of any pastor or institutionalized mediator. All that is, is the video-camera, engaged in a new way of mediating Jesus – as opposed to the old medium of painting - and creating a new form of public religiosity hovering around a camera-derived mystification.

It seems fruitful to me to link up the public appearance of Christianity with the question of technical reproducibility so brilliantly discussed by Walter Benjamin, and to ask in

how far there may be an analogy between the fate of the work of art and the seeming decline of its aura and the fate of religion and the problem of the representability of the divine. In any case, in ways similar to the aura, understood as 'the unique appearance of distance' (Benjamin 1978), camera-mediated representations of the divine seem to capture the divine in or even *as* an image, and yet at the same time appear to fail to represent it. Exactly this possibility and impossibility of representation is condensed in the smoke. Although Benjamin insisted that it is impossible to depict the aura as such, I would like to suggest that in our painting the smoke depicts the aura of the divine, thereby tying into old representations of divinity marked by some cloudy substance around them. Of course, it is not visible as such to the subject *in* the picture, who seems to witness 'the appearance or apparition of an irreducible separation' from the divine (Weber 1996: 87), but only to the outside observer, who is made to see that the aura here actually is a product of the camera, thus vesting divinity with its own mystifications. In this sense one may say that the picture condenses the full complexity of representing the divine, as well as the demonic, in the era of the electronic or digital moving image.[2]

Of course, I have not brought up this fabulous image as a prelude to an aesthetic analysis confined to the sphere of popular art (cf. Wolfe 2000), but as a critical comment on the interplay of Pentecostalism, popular culture and new visual technologies. In fact, picturing the process of videoing Jesus makes a statement about the representation of divinity and, by implication, the demonic in Ghanaian (and Nigerian) video films, which have become increasingly popular in the course of the last decade and which deliberately tie into Christian views (Meyer 2002). Even though, according to the painting, the camera only produces smoke, it is compelled to produce images. These images are not shown in the painting itself, but are all around on TV and in the cinemas. Thus the painting is not a finished piece of popular art by and for itself, but leads the viewer outside of its own frame right into what may aptly be called Ghana's new image-economy,[3] characterized by new infrastructures of exchange and exhibition of audio-visual products evoking contest and conflict, speaking to and feeding on people's imagination, and highly dependent on apprehensive audiences. A key feature of this image-economy is the fact that much attention is paid to visualizing the divine and its negative, the demonic, leading to the articulation of a new public Pentecostalism, in

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[2] In the confines of this essay it is impossible to go deeper into an iconographic analysis of this picture and the way it links up with images of divinity in popular art.

[3] This notion is inspired by Webb Keane's notion of representational economy, which is meant to 'capture the ways in which practices and ideologies put words, things, and actions into complex articulation with one another'(2001: 85). I wish to highlight the complex articulation of images - painted, audio-visual, or photographed - with each other, hence the term image-economy. The notion of economy is important because it draws attentions to the fact that these articulations depend on the logic of demand and supply in the market.

which the camera challenges existing forms of religious authority and gives rise to new forms of spectatorship.

The main theme of this essay, then, concerns the ways in which Pentecostalism, with its distinct practices of mediation, features in this new image-economy. This image-economy, I contend, plays a crucial role in designing a new public sphere replete with Pentecostal Christianity. My understanding of the public sphere is inspired by Negt's and Kluge's (1974) critical formulation of an alternative to Habermas' all too narrow, elitist and normative understanding (1990[1962], see Introduction). While Negt and Kluge (like Habermas) developed their theory with regard to Western societies, characterized by a high level of industrialization and, as a result, the penetration of the forces of production into the public sphere, their plea for a broader understanding of the public sphere, in terms of a 'social horizon of experience' (1974: 18), is well taken and enables us to go further than a rather narrow focus on the political public sphere and to include the realm of the imagination or popular culture (cf. Bolin n.d.). Importantly, Negt and Kluge insisted that in order to grasp 'what is of concern to everybody and only realizes itself in people's heads' (ibid.: 18) it is necessary to pay attention to fantasy. Fantasy, in their view, is all too easily dismissed as 'the gipsy, the jobless among the intellectual capacities' (1974: 73, translation BM), especially by intellectuals who tend to emphasize rationalism.

Thus, my main concern is to pinpoint how, as a result of changes in state-society relations in Ghana, a new sphere emerges, which is not dominated by the state but rather critical about state politics of representation, which encompasses people irrespective of ethnic and denominational affiliations,[4] in which Pentecostal religion plays a key role in that it draws upon as well as informs the popular imagination, and which gives rise to new forms of consciousness and participation. Focusing on the nexus of Pentecostalism and new audio-visual media, I will address two interrelated issues. One concerns the position of Pentecostalism in the public sphere and will focus on how changes on the level of media policy, incited by the turn to a democratic constitution, have facilitated the public articulation of Pentecostalism, yet at the same time turned it into a lucrative resource for popular entertainment, as is the case with the popular video-film industry. The second issue focuses on this video-film industry, and addresses the changes stemming from the adoption of new visual media, especially video, on Pentecostal practices of mediation. At stake here is the question of attitudes towards representing God and his counterpart the Devil, the alleged impossibility of representation, the emergence of new forms of spectatorship, and the threat which the actual presence of new

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[4] In Ghana, ethnicity certainly plays an important role in the politics of belonging (Lentz and Nugent 2000), the point is that Pentecostalism crosscuts ethnicity.

audiovisual media poses to established forms of religious authority. It will be argued that in the era of electronic/digital reproducibility, facilitated through video, Christianity is reconfigured. Its marked public appearance goes hand in hand with the genesis of new Pentecostal practices of mediation, which thrive on distraction, in that they imply mass spectatorship and draw Pentecostalism into the sphere of entertainment, all attempts at recasting distraction as devotion notwithstanding.

Pentecostalism in the Public sphere

In the course of the last decade, the place and role of Pentecostalism has changed tremendously. As intimated above, 1992 formed the watershed between a long period of military rule in which the state dominated the media and society, and the turn to a new democratic constitution, which led to the gradual liberalization and commercialization of radio, TV, film and the press. Thus a situation evolved in which the state no longer fully determines the public expression of cultural and political forms and characterized by new market-like infrastructures which thrive on the visualization and commodification of these forms and imply competition for audiences. The aim of this section is to get a clearer idea of the way in which this new sphere is shaped, and the role of religion and the market therein. In this context, it is important to realize that the turn to democracy occurred under the condition of neo-liberal global capitalism, which granted market forces much more influence on domains hitherto managed by the state than ever before, and significantly curtailed its power and capacity to deliver the goods to its citizens (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). One implication of these developments, particularly relevant to this essay, concerns the incapacity of the state to fully control religion and media, and thus the politics of representation. Whereas, until 1992, the state could easily employ the media in support of its cultural policies favoring what became reified as 'our African heritage', the situation got more diverse thereafter, when these cultural policies became increasingly contested by the Pentecostals, who promote a 'complete break with the past' and tend to demonize local cultural and religious traditions (Meyer 1998).

In order to grasp the implications of these changes, it is useful to take as a point of departure a very concrete reconfiguration of urban space which pinpoints how Pentecostalism takes over hitherto secular realms: the conversion of state-owned as well as private cinemas into churches. One Sunday morning in late September 2002, when I had just returned to Ghana for a last stint of fieldwork on Ghanaian video-films, my friend and colleague Kodjo Senah and myself went on a car ride through Accra. On our route, unhampered by traffic jam which makes circulation dreadful on a weekday, we passed by virtually all cinemas in Accra:

Olympia at Labadi, Regal at Osu, Rex, Opera and Globe in Central Accra, Roxy at Adabraka, Orion at Kwame Nkrumah Circle, Oxford in Newtown and Dunia in Nima. All cinemas were used by Pentecostal-charismatic churches, except Oxford which has been transformed into a department store. Already from afar, one could hear the preachers display their virtuosity and eloquence in preaching the Word, the congregation pray in tongues or the church's music band play some swinging Gospel Highlife. In all this, loudspeakers were crucial mediators of the divine message, used not simply to reach the congregation inside, but above all to communicate one's presence to the world outside. The fact that apparently 'being heard' means 'being there' indicates how Pentecostalism seeks to capture public space not only through images but also through sound.

Whilst driving on, Kodjo told me how, as a child, he went to watch films at Olympia, Regal and Opera, often without the consent of his parents, using his lunch money for a ticket instead. He explained to me that this marked appropriation of the space of the cinema by churches and their noisy presence was quite recent and had come about as part and parcel of Ghana's recent turn to democracy. Although in the course of the 1980s especially Pentecostal churches had become increasingly attractive, under the regime of J.J. Rawlings (1981-1992) they had more or less existed in a niche in society, not audible and visible as was the case now, but just confined to their places of worship. On the other hand, as a result of the spread of TV and, more recently, video, the cinemas had gradually lost their appeal to the audiences and were run down and ill-attended most of the time.

The appeal and public impact of these churches is only partly revealed by the last population census, which shows that 24,1% of the whole Ghanaian population regards itself as Pentecostal-charismatic, whereas the figure is 37,7% in the Accra region (and among all Christians in Greater Accra, the Pentecostals form 45,8%, Ghana Statistical Service 2000). However, even the orthodox churches have sought to accommodate Pentecostal views and practices in order not to lose members (cf. Meyer 1999a). As most Protestant churches run prayer groups and the Catholic Church institutionalized the charismatic renewal, it may safely be stated that Pentecostalism has become the main current in Ghanaian Christianity, and, at the same time, has started to advertise itself outside the narrow confines of churches and congregations.

Significantly, Pentecostal views, characterized by an uncompromising attitude towards local religious and, to some extent, cultural traditions (Coe 2000; Van Dijk 2001), have become increasingly important in shaping the political public sphere, i.e. the realm in which politics and the state are being discussed. In many ways, in the wake of turning to a democ-

ratic constitution, Pentecostal-charismatic leaders started to assert the necessity for Ghana to become a Christian nation (Gifford 1998:85), and this entails the need to discard traditional religious practices, such as the public pouring of libation, as well as corruption. Difficult as all this may be from the perspective of politicians, it is clear that Pentecostalism is a power which cannot be neglected. In order to be elected, individual politicians from all parties struggle to show their commitment to Christianity and their being Born Again, and many are not wary to appear in one of the big charismatic churches to publicly profess their faith, address the believers and receive the blessings of the church leader.

Yet the presence of Pentecostalism reaches much further than political debate in the narrow sense in that it speaks to as well as articulates new social horizons of experience by linking up with popular culture as the prime arena for the work of fantasy. The churches' take-over of the cinema buildings is symptomatic of this broader development, instigated by the gradual liberalization of the media which implied the (albeit partial) commercialization of press, radio, TV and cinema and thus the retreat of the state from these media and an increasing fragmentation and privatization of the media scene. A case in point is the sale of the formerly state-owned Ghana Films Industry Corporation (GFIC) to a Malaysian television company in 1996 (Meyer 2001: 70). This sale was the result of the financial breakdown of the GFIC, which had been unable to produce a celluloid feature film for years, even at the time when it was under full state control. Film production, as well as importing suitable foreign films and maintaining the state-owned cinemas, appeared to be much too costly for the Ghanaian state, who spent a great deal of the limited media budget on TV. Also private cinema owners, e.g. the Lebanese Captan family, found it difficult to maintain its cinema houses (all those cinemas mentioned above beginning with an 'O'), partly because of the increasing accessibility of TV and video in private homes, partly because of years of curfew in the early years of Rawlings' military regime which prevented people from going out in the night. Even when the turn to democracy formally ended the previous 'culture of silence', the old cinema industry was not revived again. Rather, its place was taken by the medium of video, which can be projected on both cinema and TV-screens.

When the Ghanaian video-industry emerged in the late 1980s, the producers, usually self-trained persons who had been associated with the cinemas as film distributors, operators or just as keen spectators, sought to mimic the celluloid-format, thus insisting that they made 'Ghanaian *films*', not just videos. They fought for being accepted into the world of cinema, which was dominated by the old artistic elites associated with the GFIC and NAFTI, the National Film and Television Institute. As these groups were more or less in support of the state

cultural policies, the centrality of Christian images, and the demonization of local gods and spirits in video films became a continuous bone of contention (Meyer 1999b). Eventually, Ghanaian video-films were screened in the cinemas, as well as new smaller video-centers set up in the neighborhoods, with the help of beamers. Yet in the late 1990s, a shift occurred and for commercial reasons videos are now increasingly marketed as home videos and after some time shown on TV. As a result, the cinemas got increasingly run down and empty, featuring as silent witnesses of a time when cinema still played a key role in structuring modern public space (cf. Larkin 2002) and offering access to a new public culture in colonial and early independent Ghana.

The Pentecostals were quick to assert their presence by occupying the deserted cinemas and buying airtime, thereby contributing to the emergence of a new public sphere characterized by the retreat of the state and the public presence of Christianity. Many of the big Pentecostal-Charismatic churches run their own media ministries, as for instance Dr. Mensa Otabil's *International Central Gospel Church*. Otabil preaches on the Malaysian TV-station TV3 every Sunday evening, broadcasts his views on Radio Gold every weekday between 2.00-3.00 pm, and produces and sells a broad range of audio and video-tapes (De Witte 2002, 2003). Other pastors run prayer programs early in the morning or late at night. If one just zaps through what is up on radio and TV, it is impossible to miss the pentecostally oriented programs, from talk-shows to playing music. And if one drives through town, one is struck by the omnipresence of posters on walls and stickers on cars advertising one or the other Pentecostal-charismatic church or event; some bigger churches, such as the Royal House Chapel, even advertise themselves by large posters (depicting, among other things, Jesus looking up in the sky) put up at bus stops, thereby suggesting an homology between Coca Cola, one of the major adverts in bus stops, and Christianity (Figure 3).

Pentecostal-charismatic churches owe much of their appeal to the fact that they easily, and as it seems effortlessly, tie into popular understandings, and, in particular, take seriously anxieties about the evil machinations of demons and witches, whom they represent as vassals of Satan. These churches have in common that they project a notion of Christian modernity, which acknowledges the reality of all those matters, especially demons and other so-called superstitions, which a good Christian is supposed to 'leave behind'. In this way, they mediate between frustrations and anxieties and the wish for a better, more prosperous life. With God, it is said, all things are possible and this cry underpins Pentecostalisms' claim to offer access to Christian modernity (Meyer 1999a: 141ff, 2002).

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The diffusion of Pentecostal views into other, not strictly religious arenas, and its omnipresence in public space also affects the realm of popular culture. Not only does Pentecostalism tie into, affirm and recast popular notions, even formally independent media practitioners – from journalists to film makers, from painters to musicians - have adopted Pentecostal representative forms. Recently, for example, the famous Ghanaian Highlife singer Kodjo Antwi publicly announced that he has been Born Again, and feels attracted to the church of Mensa Otabil, and in his new album he included a number of Gospel songs.[5] Similar public conversions occur regularly, often after an artist's reputation has been damaged by one or the other scandal. While such a shift does not necessarily entail that artists truly perceive themselves as Born Again believers, it certainly indicates the crucial role of Pentecostalism in shaping Ghana's new image-economy. Likewise, many video-film producers recur to Pentecostal views and attitudes, although they may not consider themselves as Born Again believers (or even are Muslim) as they know that taking up and affirming Pentecostal notions is a sure alley to making a lucrative film. Films thus usually thrive on an opposition of God and the Devil, in which the latter is shown to be powerful, yet is eventually overcome by the Holy Spirit; the ideal is a Christian version of modernity, centered on the nuclear family and new notions of the subject separated from the extended family; and much use is made of spectacular special effects, granting a voyeuristic view into the realm of darkness as well as the divine.

This recurrence to Pentecostal notions does, in my view, not necessarily index an increase of religiosity in terms of deeply rooted inner belief, but rather an expansion in space, on the surface of social life. Pentecostalism appears to conquer the public sphere through a centrifugal dispersion of visual and audible signs, and thereby purports a certain mood, which binds people and to which they feel attracted because it connotes Christian norms and values. Of course, the commodification of Christian religion in the sphere of entertainment, and the proneness of Pentecostalism to thrive on this process, is not entirely new, nor confined to Ghana (cf. Moore 1994; Forbes and Mahan 2000). There are good reasons to agree with Lawrence Moore's suggestion that the successful presence of religion in modern societies depends on the ability to locate itself in the marketplace of culture. Indeed, Pentecostalism assumes a key role in feeding Ghana's new image-economy, both by putting into circulation distinctly Pentecostal audio-visual signs and by contributing to the emergence of new infrastructures – religious programs on TV and radio, Gospel Concerts, sale of music cassettes and sermons - along which these signs are diffused. In getting ingrained with this new image-economy Pen-

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[5] According to John Collins (2002), in the course of the last fifteen years, Highlife music has been highly christianized. Whereas many of the secular bands, which dominated the scene in the early 1980s, have collapsed, there is a host of Christian groups, merging Christian lyrics and Highlife tunes into 'Gospel-Highlife'.

tecostalism spreads all over the place, like wildfire (a preferred image for signifying the Holy Spirit), but above all in terms of a presence to be seen and heard, not so much as a deeply felt state of being Born Again.

Pentecostals themselves express concerns about the devastating impact which the adoption of new audiovisual media technologies and their association with an entertainment format may have on Pentecostal religiosity. Do people using Christian stickers on their cars or shops, or watching and listening to all the Christian stuff in the media really are born again Christians?, is a question of much concern. Some of the pastors I interviewed were quite critical of popular video-films, because they fear that people just watch them to be entertained, and fail to devote themselves to prayer and change their lives. In a similar vein, pastors are at pains to admonish their congregation that attending church on Sunday entails more than showing off in lavish clothes, as what really matters is the change of the inner person. This fear that surface may be captured at the expense of depth signals that the public articulation of Pentecostalism, shaped by the exigencies of new media such as video and the urge to publicly profess one's faith to the world, entails a risk of inflation of meaning. As Pentecostal religion becomes available outside the confines of churches, believers are addressed as audiences and consumers and this, albeit to some extent, recasts religious experience (cf. De Witte 2003). I hasten to emphasize that I do not want to argue that there is no such condition as being Born Again, but that Christianity itself is being transformed in going public because it makes use of formats and forms which are not of its own making and which can never be fully contained (cf. De Witte 2003; Van de Port n.d.). My point is that the public articulation of Pentecostalism goes beyond the sphere of religion in a narrow, modern sense (in terms of an individual inner belief, as Asad has argued 1993), and dismembers the message into mediated religious forms and elements displayed everywhere in public urban space. Pentecostalism, by going public, thus recasts Christianity as distraction, both in the sense of deliberately taking up the format of entertainment and in the sense of dispersing the message all over the place, leaving it to people themselves to bring together the elements and thereby, albeit partly, undermining religious authority over practices of mediation. Distraction or *Zerstreuung*, as Samuel Weber explained in his reflection on Benjamin's use of the much more complex German term, is part and parcel of mass culture in the age of reproducibility (1996: 92ff).

The camera, Pentecostalism and the production of vision

In the same way as Pentecostalism adopts more and more entertainment features – by representing itself through the format of talk-shows on radio and TV or by employing top music bands in church – the sphere of entertainment parasitically thrives on religion. But still,

on the level of experience, devotion and distraction, so to speak, do not smoothly translate into but also rub against each other, in the same way as church and cinema still belong to two separate, albeit increasingly entangled, spheres. The transition from one to the other requires deliberate action: a cinema always has to be cleansed literally -through brooms- and spiritually -through prayers- before being fit for use as church.[6] This section seeks to examine the nexus of Pentecostalism, distraction and mass culture by focusing on pentecostally oriented video-films. The key concern is to show how video-films confirm, lay bare and to some extent destabilize Pentecostal, and for that matter Protestant, practices of mediation, especially with regard to vision.

In order to understand how the medium of video relates to existing practices of mediation, it is important to briefly consider Protestantism's complicated attitude towards images and its strong emphasis on the Word, both in the sense of the written Bible and oral preaching. Of course, it would be mistaken to take at face value Protestantism's alleged disregard of the image and iconoclastic inclination, which serves to express its difference vis-à-vis Catholicisms' high regard of the image as a site of devotion (cf. Latour 2002).[7] As David Morgan (1998) argues in his work on visual piety in America, 'the act of looking itself contributes to religious formation and, indeed, constitutes a powerful practice of belief' (ibid.: 3). He shows that certainly in popular Protestant practice images have a central role in that they reconfirm in a visual mode what people believe and think. Popular protestant aesthetic, to use his terms, 'pivots on seeing as real what one has imagined' (ibid.: 26).

Morgan's plea to devote attention to looking as a practice constituting belief in Protestantism, is well-taken. While it is impossible in the framework of this essay to delve into a genealogy of looking in Ghanaian Christianity, it is useful to briefly turn to the way in which mid nineteenth-century Protestant missions introduced looking as specific Pietist practice. While the churches were kept sober and empty and the missionaries were at pains to condemn local practices of idol-worship, they introduced new religious images to converts' living rooms. For instance, they brought to Africa the famous lithograph of *The broad and the narrow path*, which belonged to the popular culture of the Awakening and was cherished among African converts (Figure 4). This lithograph, still popular in Ghana and re-printed in numerous actualized versions, presents a very interesting relationship between image and word, as I

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[6] For instance, I witnessed and filmed how the House of Faith Ministries church, who used Opera cinema, transformed the place of worship back into a cinema, by taking away all sorts of lights and decorations such as plastic flowers and plants and the screen which rendered invisible the cinema toilets. Clearly, for the members of this church the cinema as such was a smelling, dirty and immoral place, and it cost some energy to transform it.
[7] Usually this critique is backed by the Second Commandment's admonishment not to make images. What also comes to mind is 1. Cor. 13,9.

have explained in detail elsewhere (Meyer 1999a: 31ff). Juxtaposing images and biblical references, the lithograph solicits a particular spectator, who is made to look at the image and at the same time look up the biblical reference in order to understand the former. Its first lesson is that the eye of God, depicted at the top of the image, sees everything and is able to penetrate the surface of the hidden. In order to be able to adopt His perspective, one has to submit oneself to His visual regime which entails that in order to see one has to be seen. Here vision depends on divine surveillance. The second lesson is based on the juxtaposition of images and references to biblical texts and shows that, as images may evoke plenty of confusing associations, it is only possible to determine their meaning by recurring to the Bible. Thus, as there is little confidence in the power of the eye to really understand as such, the lithograph offers a didactic device to practice the Protestant way of seeing the world. Here, the Bible is presented as a key to allegorical interpretation, and thus set in to limit the interpretative freedom stemming from the image. At the same time, the lithograph, after all an image by itself, acknowledges that the Bible alone is unable to create meaning, there is need for images in order to affirm the power of the Bible to explain.

While converts found many new notions introduced by missionaries difficult to appropriate or even unacceptable, it seems that they adopted Protestantism's popular visual culture and its looking acts quite easily. At the same time, viewing the world as an image to be understood by recurring to the Bible alone was not enough for African Christians who were much more inclined than missionaries to get access to the realm of the invisible and have visions. This urge to see, of course, links up with local religious traditions, which considered dreams and trance as means of getting access to the invisible world. The task of local priests was to communicate what they saw spiritually to those who were in need of support and could not see by themselves. The quest for visions which allow to peep into what remains hidden to the naked eye (into the 'spiritual world') and thereby make sense of the 'physical world' led to numerous conflicts between missionaries and African converts, and lay at the base of the foundation of African Independent Churches (see Meyer 1999a: 113ff).

In Pentecostal-charismatic churches, both vision and the Bible hold a central place. Pastors claim to have visions, or even the Spirit of Discernment through the Holy Spirit – often this is the base of their power, and even the reason why they broke away from another (more orthodox) church to found their own – and refer to biblical passages in order to interpret what they saw in such a way that it becomes a revelation. In these churches pastors and believers invoke through their visions and dreams a huge imaginary space, the otherwise invisible realm of the powers of God and the Devil. The Bible is cited and called upon all the

time, in a highly eclectic manner, in order to turn these visions (which are never confined to mere seeing, but also imply hearing) into divine revelations and thus vest them with authority. In contrast to the more sober didactic of the act of looking taught by the lithograph, which teaches that the visible can only be understood by recurring to the Bible, here everything is geared to the production of vision itself, and the Bible is called upon to legitimate these visions. For instance, in September 2002, I attended a Crusade organized by the *World Miracle Church* on the campus of the University of Ghana on three subsequent evenings. This church advertises itself as able to produce instant miracles on the basis of the leaders' capacity to see, and to hear messages from the Holy Spirit. As expected, night after night the Crusade drew a huge number of visitors, who all eagerly awaited for the church leader, Bishop Agyen Asare, to perform a spectacular deliverance – e.g. prayers meant to free a person from indwelling spirits, cf. Meyer 1998 – on stage. Self-confidently he would announce that 'Holy Spirit just told me that there are twenty people in need of healing, come forward and I pray for you', and indeed he would not rest until all those twenty persons had stood up so that his vision had proven right (even if he had to threaten that one time a person who had been called by the Lord did not stand up, and died in an accident right after the service). People would run forward, howl and throw themselves on the ground, thus participating in a complex spectacle of publicly casting out evil spirits. While other Pentecostal-charismatic leaders may be a bit more moderate, they all have in common a strong emphasis on prophecy and vision and frame church service as a spectacular performance where the presence of the Holy Spirit can be witnessed.

Interestingly, many video-films also tie into this particular way of looking, as the central practice of Pentecostal mediation. Such movies are usually framed as confessions or testimonies, and make ample reference to biblical texts, either in the beginning or at the end, or state something like 'To God be the Glory'. Video-films are often presented as *revelations*, thereby parasitically feeding on Pentecostal notions of vision. Films construct spectators as Christians in need of vision, and seek to please them by offering them the privileged perspective of the omniscient eye of God, through a camera-mediated mimesis. This means that, by and large, there is only little thrill in Ghanaian films, as the films themselves usually show that and how something remains hidden to the main protagonists while it is already revealed to the spectators. Because of assigning this subject position to the spectators, some people find the films predictive and boring. However, for viewers with a strong Pentecostal inclination, especially women, the films offer visual extensions and supplements to the Sunday sermon, and they are truly touched by what they see on the screen (Verrips 2002). Many fans of

Ghanaian and Nigerian film told me, over and over again, that a good film would definitely offer more than mere fun and distraction: it was not enough to laugh and clap and amuse oneself, certainly there needed to be some hidden truth revealed and some morals to be taught, or affirmed. Indeed, I noticed over and over that such a film would generate much audience response in the practice of viewing and trigger moral engagement. People would shout, and sometimes even pray, in support of the good, and curse the bad with much vigor, and thus practice 'devotional viewing' (cf. Gillespie 1995). Such a film would then be discussed among friends, or referred to in situations of trouble between friends or spouses ('don't behave like this, haven't you seen film X?') and thereby popularize Pentecostal notions of the subject and family life.

Some Pentecostal-charismatic pastors whom I asked about their opinion on video-films were concerned about the power of the image by and in itself; they feared that people might not even watch the film until the end and thus fail to notice the biblical quote, and be seduced by the power of the image as such and hence not realize the Christian orientation. In other words, people would watch without adopting a Pentecostal way of looking and for the sake of fun, merely aestheticizing the invisible with its witches, ghosts, evil spirits and an occasional angel. However, most of them appreciated the medium of Christian film as such for offering powerful support to their sermons. One female pastor, Akua Adarquah-Yiadam, whose *House of Faith Ministries* hired the Opera Cinema for its Sunday and some occasional weekday services, related to me that while she somewhat disliked Ghanaian films, because of their strong emphasis on occult forces (although in her church, too, pastors preached quite a lot about demons and the Devil), she certainly liked film as a medium. Some time ago, she had shown a film to the congregation which depicted how a dead man was raised from his coffin, which his widow had taken to the Crusade of a famous preacher in Nigeria. Such films, in her view, were able to really document the power of God, and thus highly suitable to support one's faith with visual evidence.

Another Pentecostal pastor, Rev. Edmund Ossei Akoto of the *Fifth Community Baptist Chapel* (Madina, a suburb of Accra) was much more in favor of Ghanaian films. He explained to me that the Pentecostal-charismatic churches had initiated a new mass movement, in which the key word was 'mass participation', as opposed to presenting Christianity to the congregation as a mere 'program', as was the case with the orthodox churches. As Pentecostals seek to reach further than the mere confines of the church service and to turn their members into full time Christians, in his view there is need to reach out into the sphere of popular culture and the arts. Mass Pentecostalism requires all round participation, and thus mass culture.

Before he was appointed as a pastor, he and his wife would visit the Ghana Films cinema, and now he watched a lot of Ghanaian and Nigerian films on TV. In his view films 'reveal the operation of the powers of darkness. They give ideas about how demonic forces operate, how to counteract evil forces with the blood of Christ, how to apply faith to counteract.' Yet, the forces should not only be portrayed, but it should be made clear that God overcomes these forces. Thus, 'to me, the ending [of a film] is the message. From here I make my own assessment and judgment'. He therefore had no problems if there was much depiction of occult forces, if only in the end it was made clear that they were evil. When I asked him how he knew that the images of the demonic would indeed reveal what happens in the invisible world, he emphasized that in his view, about 80% of these visualizations were correct. He knew this, as he himself was much engaged in deliverance; he saw how evil forces manifested themselves through people, and also heard people confess, and 'what they say matches with what the films show'.

Thus, when his old school mate, the producer, director and actor Augustine Abbey (alias Idikoko) asked him to play the role of a pastor in the film *Stolen Bible (Secret Society) I and II* (Idikoko Ventures 2001/02), he accepted the role. *Stolen Bible* features a struggle between a secret society consisting of members who owe their wealth to a (spiritual) sacrifice of a beloved person one the one hand, and divine power, embodied by a staunch Christian woman and a strong pastor, on the other.[8] The deliverance scene is intense, powerful and highly realistic, and Rev. Akoto was at his best. He let himself go, as he usually does when he is in church. Knowing that many people would watch the film, he wanted to really preach a message. Yet this time it went even better than otherwise, because normally when he does deliverance he is tense, fearful and very cautious. In this situation, however, there was no fear and thus he could perform very well. For him it was 'great fun to cast out devils!'

Thus, the power of a film seems to derive from the extent to which it is able to appear as real, as a documentation of the spiritual realm, rather than just fiction. It has to make viewers forget that they merely watch a film (indeed, if people express their dislike of a film they say that it is 'too artificial'). In other words, a good film depends on effacing all traces of the

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[8] Stolen Bible is about a man, Ken, who is jobless, and his loving and beautiful wife Nora. At the moment Ken is desperate about his situation, he meets his old friend Ato, who is fabulously rich and takes him to a secret society, Jaguda Buja, whose members got their riches by sacrificing the person they love most in life – an ongoing theme in Ghanaian and Nigerian films (cf. Meyer 1995). Ken tries to sacrifice another woman, Dora, who got into prostitution out of poverty, instead of Nora, but his plan fails, because Dora calls the name of Jesus in time. When he has been forced to sacrifice Nora in a spectacular scene involving special effects such as a snake coming out if her mouth, he starts to get rich, and even gets a high position in his church. Yet, when the pastor is about to honor him in public, Nora's spirit arrives and turns Ken mad – 'you cannot go to haven with a stolen bible' - and makes him lose his riches. One day Dora, who now works for the Lord, finds him in the street and takes him to a deliverance session, where a Pastor (Rev. Akokoto) prays over him until the evil spirit has left him and all the other members of the secret cult.

fact that it is made up and successfully featuring as a revelation, thereby bridging what happens in the visible and invisible realm with the help of the camera. Reverend Akoto's statement captures nicely the predicament of video-film production. While films are organized as revelations of the struggle between divine and demonic forces, obviously, they cannot simply record what goes on in the invisible realm. Rather, as Rev. Akoto's statement shows, they have to set up, and in a sense fake the real thing in order to make it seem as real as possible. As the camera is a machine compelled to visualize (to construct, to use Heidegger's expression, the 'world as picture', cf. Weber 1996:76ff), it reproduces any matter and experience as an electronic or even digital image and turns everything, even those matters that may resist visual representation, into moving images.

Exactly this gap between the camera as an image-producing device and its object is depicted by Figure 1, which suggests that the camera, in attempting to capture the divine, mystifies rather than visualizes. The video-camera cannot help but construct images of the divine, and thus mediates Christianity's invisible in line with the logic of film-production, yet these images can never be consonant with it. And thus, the painting seems to comment, video-films market their own visions, legitimize them with some biblical quote or Christian slogan and vest them with a new aura, but all this amounts to is a camera-produced mediation of the invisible which is in no way superior to older attempts to mediate the invisible, such as devotional art. The impossibility of true representation notwithstanding, impossible representations are made all the time, yet carry with them, as their shadow, the problem of representability. A poignant, somewhat disenchanting comment on Ghana's pentecostally loaded image-economy.

At the same time, by depicting the aura as a product of the camera, the painting draws attention to the link between technology and enchantment. For there is more at stake than the realization that even the video-camera is not the ideal medium of Pentecostal mediation that it claims to be, and just creates images by virtue of its technology and parasitical relation with Pentecostalism. The point is that the relationship between camera and its visual object is more complicated. While for Rev. Akoto the fact that there was no real exorcism at stake made him act even more powerful and realistic, Augustine Abbey who played the role of the occultist to be exorcised experienced the scene as more diffuse and strange, almost as if something actually was to be cast out. What added to the confusion was the fact that the snake, supposed to be made visible through the power of the Holy Spirit in the film, got missing on location, which made people panic. This experience echoes the fears and experiences of actors and oth-

ers involved in film production when they are engaged in the work of camera-mediated revelation.

During my last trip to Ghana, I went on location with the crew and cast of the video-film *Turning Point*. This film is about a woman who gradually becomes a Born Again Christian and thus is saved from her bad boy friend, an occultist who wants to kill her as a sacrifice to his bloodthirsty god. When I talked to Nina Nwabueze, the artist responsible for creating the occultist's shrine for the film, I quickly realized that any distinction between fake and real shrines did not make much sense. Her job, she told me, required from her to visit the very same 'fetish markets' that real native priests would also attend. She would look carefully at all the things for sale so as to memorize their outlook, buy some rather innocent objects, and then build the major part of the shrine from other materials. Even when she built such a made-up shrine, she would go through fasting and prayers before, and through deliverance afterwards. She explained to me that spirits would roam about in the air, always seeking another 'image' (here used in a broad sense, encompassing paintings, pots and statues) to dwell in. Hence there was need to be careful about any image, and especially about images which would look like shrines, even if they were built with very different intentions and just served as props. To be sure, all these things were manufactured to reveal the machinations of the Devil and evil spirits. But exactly because of that one had to be extra careful, as the Devil would do what he could to disturb those who acted in or produced films which intend to show how he operates. When on the next day we arrived at the place where the film-shrine was to be set up, we heard some drumming outside, which was immediately identified as coming from a 'real fetish-shrine' next door. I jokingly remarked that the shrine scene could now be filmed with the sound of real fetish drums in the background. The actor who was to play the occultist retorted vehemently that he was not prepared 'to get into the real thing', as that would be dangerous.

Later on, I talked about these observations with other video-film makers. I learned that spirits may even impact on the camera, which was as such a neutral technological device, yet could be disturbed in its operation by spiritual forces. Certain things simply refused to be shown, in the end one never got the shots one had intended, or even nothing at all (cf. Spyer 2001). Another video-film producer and director, Michael Akwetey-Kanyi, also explained to me that even if a shrine was set op for fake, one never was at the safe side of mere copying, as spirits could enter the film-shrine. He would make sure to use as little original materials as possible in depicting the shrine and the rituals attached to it – water instead of alcohol, red color mixed with starch instead of blood – after all, he remarked: 'film is make-believe, so

people will still take all this as a real thing'. This statement captures nicely how video-films claim to reveal what really happens in the conjuncture of the physical and spiritual realm, yet cannot base these 'revelations' on the use of original materials because this is considered dangerous and thus have to recur to fake representations, but even these may be affected by occult forces. As there is no clear-cut boundary between reality and fiction, in the process of shooting a film, simulation always entails the risk of mimesis, thereby affecting those who seek to represent 'the spiritual' for the sake of revelation (cf. Taussig 1993).

This complicated relationship between fiction and reality, and the insistence that in order to make statements about the latter one has to recur to the former also reveals an important aspect of Pentecostal vision practices. For, in a sense, quite similar to the make believe that is characteristic of video-films, Pentecostal pastors too, with their strong emphasis on vision as a sign of the Holy Spirit and source of authority, need to develop techniques which make available visions in public at the right time. A successful Pentecostal service, as explained above, depends on a particular format: the Holy Spirits is to come down here and now and to get into the pastor and give him visions which will turn the service into something spectacular, something that will lead more people to the church. Clearly, public visions are the product of a sophisticated set of spiritual and practical techniques, constituting pastors as seers with a hotline to the Holy Spirit, and thus as quite similar to a camera, and audiences as witnesses and, to remain in the imagery of cinema, spectators.

Hent de Vries has advocated to dismiss the binary opposition of religion versus technology, which seems to make sense at first sight yet is rendered dubious once one seeks to delve deeper into public religion, and to explore the interface between them. As the possibility of religion to articulate its message depends on mediation, it requires certain techniques or even technologies to make accessible the invisible. Indeed, 'mediatization and the technology it entails form the condition of possibility for all revelation – for its revealability, so to speak' (2001: 28). He has eloquently shown how miracle and special effect, magic and visual technology 'come to occupy the same space, obey the same regime and the same logic' (ibid.). In my view the slippages between video technology and the danger of haphazardly invoking occult forces testify to the fact that video technology and Pentecostalism inhabit the same structure, and act in support of each other. As pastors and filmmakers both depend on techniques to mediate the Christian invisible in order to 'make-others-believe', there is no ontological difference between miracles and camera-produced effects, between revelations in services and in films, between believers and spectators. In this sense, video-films lay bare the operation of Pentecostal mediation, with its emphasis on vision

and spectacle. The fact that video technology is extremely suitable to bring out the techniques which constitute the act of looking in Pentecostal circles suggests that Pentecostalism thrives on a cinematographic mode of representation. The linkage between Pentecostal vision and video-films is thus by no means coincidental, but implied, and I even dare to say prefigured, in Pentecostal practices of mediation.

Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to show how, by taking as point of departure an understanding of religion as a practice of mediation, Pentecostalism has increasingly 'taken place', so to speak, in the public sphere as a result of Ghana's turn to democracy and the liberalization and commercialization of the media. Relatively undisturbed by the state, but all the more indebted to the emerging image-economy, Pentecostalism has spread in space, disseminating signs and adopting formats not entirely of its own making, and been taken up by popular culture. In the entanglement of religion and entertainment new horizons of social experience emerged, thriving on fantasy and vision and popularizing a certain pentecostally oriented mood. This movement of spatial extension, as I tried to show, is at times criticized from within, as pastors and believers fear to loose control.

Yet, the fact that, on the level of experience, distraction and devotion are kept apart cannot be summoned in defense of an ontological difference between cinema and church, entertainment and religion. At the same time it would be too easy to simply write off the public appearance of Pentecostal-derived images as mere entertainment, as if the format of entertainment would completely absorb the religious and, in a sense, put an end to religion. The point is that in Ghana, Pentecostalism is alive and kicking exactly because it casts religion in a new (postmodern?) form (cf. Martin 2002), which is geared to mass spectatorship and part and parcel of *Zerstreuung*. *Zerstreuung* is meant here in the sense of 'the dispersed, centrifugal structure of mass phenomena' (Weber 1996: 94) which, as Benjamin showed, is condensed in the technology of film as it blows apart the prison of metropolitan space by 'the dynamite of the tenth of a second' and offers adventurous travelling among the ruins (1978: 236), and puts together its imaged elements under new laws, which require new ways of reception that parallel the process of recording (and indeed, in German both processes are described as *Aufnahme*). The lamentation that devotion is opposed to distraction pinpoints the sense of loss evoked by the alleged impossibility of true representation, that is part and parcel of religious mediation, be it in church or in the cinema. This problem of representability is depicted by the smoke in our painting which intrigued me to write this essay.

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