

Picturing the Invisible

Visual Culture and the Study of Religion

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Abstract

An understanding of religion as a practice of mediation has great potential to open up new methods and theories for a critical study of religion. Leading beyond the privileged medium of the text, this understanding approaches religion as a multi-media phenomenon that mobilizes the full sensorium. The central point of this article is that forms of visual culture are a prime medium of religion, and studying them offers deep insights into the genesis of worlds of lived experience. Pictorial media streamline and sustain religious notions of the visible and the invisible and involve embodied practices of seeing that shape what and how people see. Discussing the implications of the “pictorial turn” for the study of religion, I argue that a more synthesized approach is needed that draws these fields together. The methodological and theoretical implications of this approach are exemplified by turning to my research on video and representations of the “spiritual” in Southern Ghana.

Keywords

mediation – form – video – visual regimes – Ghana

I would like to thank art historian Christiane Kruse for introducing me to the exciting field of German visual studies; our ongoing conversations have been a source of inspiration for this essay. This essay is situated in the framework of my involvement in the HERA-funded project *Iconic Religion* and based on my keynote lecture delivered on 12 May 2014 at the conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions in Groningen. I am grateful to Lotte Knotte for practical support, to Daan Beekers, Daniel Dubuisson and Christiane Kruse for commenting on an earlier version, and to Mitch Cohen for language correction.

I Introduction

The title of this article, “picturing the invisible,” may appear paradoxical at first glance: after all, doesn’t the invisible necessarily remain outside of view, while the visible already presents itself as an object of our gaze? With the choice of this title, I want to signal an encompassing understanding of pictures as involving both visibility and invisibility. As Daniel Dubuisson put it in the *Call for Papers* that triggered this article, “[T]he visual is often not just what is on show and what strikes the eye, but also something that represents or depicts something else (...) and evokes, prescribes or commands it in an almost performative manner.” He alludes here to the specific capacity of a picture to re-present—and thus to somehow render present—what is invisible and absent through a performative act. While pictures in general have the capacity to re-present something else, this plays out even more explicitly in a religious setting. Robert Orsi felicitously circumscribed religion as “the practice of making visible the invisible, of concretizing the order of the universe, the nature of human life and its destiny, and the various possibilities of human interiority itself, as these are understood in various cultures at different times” (Orsi 2012: 147; see also Meyer 2012: 24). In this sense, religion may well be analysed as a “medium of absence” (Weibel 2011: 33) through which a sense of spiritual presence is effected for—and by—its users. Understood from this angle, studying religion involves studying multiple media—not just texts—that generate presence in the framework of an authorized cosmological order with its particular conceptions of visibility and invisibility and concomitant prescriptions for pictorial representation.

Especially in the context of Christianity, pictorial media have been subject to constant debate and contestation; they are at the centre of more or less authorized forms of devotional piety as well as targets of violent aggression, as in the iconoclastic controversies in the 8th- and 9th-century Byzantine empire, in the Calvinist iconoclasm in the aftermath of the Reformation, or in the frontier areas of Western colonial outreach, where 19th-century missionaries dismissed indigenous worship as idol worship and fetishism. The repercussions of this dismissal, made in the name of the Second Commandment and fed by the notion that the fetish is a scandalous attribution of life and will to a dead object, are still felt in contemporary Southern Ghana, where I have conducted research over the past twenty-five years. Notwithstanding the marked presence of discourses of fetishism and idolatry, there is also a plethora of pictures with spectacular representations that refer to matters held to be normally invisible. Mass-produced posters of Jesus and other devotional pictures as well as representations of evil spirits—ghosts of the dead, mermaids, witches and

other “powers of darkness”—are prominent parts of a sparkling visual culture that is deeply indebted to Christianity, but also harks back to indigenous cults. Initially, I took such pictures portraying the invisible merely as illustrations of underlying ideas and meanings, but gradually I came to realize the importance of such pictures, and visual culture at large, in condensing a world of lived experience.

For a scholar of religion and anthropology like myself, such pictures and the ideas and practices around them are fascinating objects of study. Pictures operate in the context of embodied, habitual practices of looking, display and figuration—a visual regime. In this process, there is a prime role for religion, involving notions of heaven and hell, good and evil, the beyond and the here and now, the “spiritual” and the “physical,” as well as a pantheon of spiritual beings and practices of revelation and concealment, in shaping visual regimes. Being prompted to take pictures seriously as—literally—impressive and constructive religious media, I noted the conceptual and methodological limitations that are ensued by the predominant focus on texts in the study of religion. The “textual gaze” (Stordalen 2012: 521) privileged a meaning-centred analysis and an overall mentalistic bias preoccupied with immaterial ideas—imagined as “hovering above pages and ink” (Morgan 2013: 248). As a consequence, the role of things, pictures, sounds, bodies and other material forms in religious modes of world-making was overlooked.

This article has four parts. First, I will highlight the theoretical and methodological potential of the conceptual framework of mediation for the study of religion at large. Second, I will address the implications of the “pictorial turn,” arguing that we need a more synthesized approach that draws religious studies and visual studies together. Third, the potential of this approach will be exemplified by turning to my research on video and representations of the “spiritual” in Southern Ghana, spotlighting the specific dynamics involved in picturing the invisible. Lastly, in a brief outlook, I will point out possibilities for further inquiry into religion as a multi-media phenomenon, paying special attention to the circulation of religious images across time and space.

II Material Mediations

The guiding assumption on which this article is based is that an approach to religion as a practice of mediation to which media are intrinsic has great potential for developing new concepts and methods for a (self-)critical study of religion. Before explaining this point, a brief remark about my use of the term religion is in place. Of course, I am aware of the problems involved in

defining it. Indeed, “religion is not a simple, obvious phenomenon of which it suffices to say that it exists *sui generis* as one of the fundamental characteristics of humanity” (Dubuisson 2003: 189); in its dominant current use the concept goes back to a 19th-century Western scholarly construct that objectifies religion from an outside perspective. The modern study of religion is predicated on a post-Enlightenment legacy that constructs religion in mentalistic, “Protestant” terms (Asad 1993; Meyer 2012: 8–14), according to which it prioritizes belief and meaning, held to be located in the inner self. This notion of religion has not only long informed scholarly research; it has also been projected on other people in the course of Western colonial expansion and is still mobilized as a normative template in political debates about the public manifestation of religion, especially Islam, in European societies.

The fact that any definition of religion is necessarily historically situated undermines, paradoxically, its usefulness for a comparative study of diverse religious phenomena across different cultures that required such a definition in the first place. And yet, to argue that the term religion has no reference in the world is equally problematic, and—when voiced from scholars of religious studies—even potentially self-defeating. In my view, scholars of religion could best opt for a pragmatic attitude and spell out what the terms religion and religious refer to—in the awareness that there can be no definite definition, that all scholars can do is to speak about religion self-reflexively, from a standpoint and a quest to know that is historically situated. In short, I plead for a stance that takes the permanent tension between conceptualization and empirical study as the motor that moves scholarship further.

This calls not for a closed definition that could simply be applied to religion as a phenomenon in the world, but for an open attitude. Indeed, as Hent de Vries argues: “[O]nly by willing to move beyond the concept as we (think we) know it can we open ourselves up to a phenomenon or set(s) of phenomena whose simultaneous density (‘thickness’) and elusiveness (‘thinness’) belong to the ‘heart’ of its ‘matter and constitute its references in their very ‘essence,’ that is to say, their logic and grammar” (2008: 5). From this vantage point, speaking about religion is doubly complicated, in that it involves a negative concept that seeks to access a phenomenon that is elusive by nature, involving something “other” or “alter” that exceeds the ordinary (Csordas 2004: 164) or, in short, alludes to “the-rest-of-what-is” (van de Port 2010). This is why I opt for an understanding of religion as a medium of absence, that posits and sets out to bridge a gap between the here and now and something “beyond.” It is in this sense that religion, in “making visible the invisible,” involves “multiple media” for “materializing the sacred” (Orsi 2012: 147). Here media are understood in the broad sense of material transmitters across gaps and limits that are central to practices of mediation, encompassing modern mass media as well as other

and older media. One of the advantages of an understanding of religion as a practice of mediation is that it no longer takes the practices, objects and other forms through which religion becomes manifest in the world as secondary to beliefs, meanings and values, but as necessary forms through which the “beyond” becomes accessible or the “invisible” is “shown.” While, from a mentalistic perspective, outward forms are mere expressions of an already existing inward content, a focus on mediation opts for an understanding of these poles as entangled and mutually constitutive.

It needs to be stressed that mediation is not necessarily an emic concept. Religious practitioners, certainly in Calvinist circles, may not be prepared to acknowledge the central role of media made and handled by humans in effecting a sense of divine presence and, on the contrary, may claim immediate access. Indeed, an effective genesis of such presence often comes about because the medium on which it depends becomes partly invisible (Eisenlohr 2009: 274-277); this is the reason why immediacy should be understood as not being prior to, but as a product of mediation (Meyer 2011: 27-29). For me, the value of mediation as a scholarly concept lies in its sensitizing capacity to spotlight otherwise easily overlooked aspects of religious practice and to allow for comparison. Understanding religion as a practice of mediation that implies multiple media—and thus approaching the history of religions also as a history of media cultures (Uehlinger 2004: 50)—brings together the hitherto separated fields of the study of religion and media studies. This raises intriguing questions that challenge the long prevailing “dualism of material medium and spiritual ideas” (Morgan 2013: 348). What are the various media employed in practices of religious mediation and how are they authorized? How do they differ from and relate to each other? What kind of communication, along vertical and horizontal axes, do they make (im)possible? How does the availability of new media with their particular affordances impinge on longstanding modes of religious mediation, accounting for both historical transformations and the rise of similarities between so far rather different religious traditions? Asking about the multiple media used within and across religious traditions (Lundby 2013; Meyer 2009) functions as an eye-opener through which limitations in the past study of religion, such as the predominance of the textual gaze and the mentalistic bias, become apparent and new directions for (comparative) research can be envisioned.

Seeking to advance a detailed study of religious mediation, in my work over the past years I pleaded for a rehabilitation of form.¹ Shaping what is indeterminate and not yet differentiated into a *Gestalt*, a form, is a necessary condition

1 My phrasing in this paragraph remains close to how I explained the concept of sensational form in Meyer 2010a: 751 and 2012: 26.

for the articulation and indeed, formation, of content, meaning and its repetition. Thinking about form as productive in constituting a world of lived experience, I coined the concept of sensational form in my material approach to religion. Authorized as harbingers of what lies “beyond” in a particular religious context, sensational forms have the double aspect of streamlining or shaping religious mediation *and* of achieving certain effects by being performed: I call this the genesis of a sacred surplus. Thus, sensational forms are “formats,” in that they direct those who partake in them how to proceed, and induce “performance,” in that they make present what they mediate. Playing a key role in implementing a particular religious aesthetics through a process of religious socialization that occurs over time, sensational forms include body techniques as well as sensibilities and emotions that become embodied dispositions in the habitus. As explained earlier, I understand aesthetics in the sense of *aisthesis* (Meyer 2009: 6–11; Meyer & Verrips 2008; see also Mohn et al. 2012; Prohl 2010; 2013) as a sensory engagement with the world that tunes the senses, induces feelings and structures perception in a specific and selective manner.² Pictures and, more broadly, items of visual culture are material media that can fruitfully be analysed as sensational forms.

III Religion and Visual Culture

Over the past twenty-five years, the study of visual culture has been thriving, within and across different hubs and nodes in the Anglophone, Francophone and German-speaking worlds. In the aftermath of the “pictorial” or “iconic” turn, emphasis shifted from a focus on aesthetic artworks to actual pictorial practices in all spheres of life. Visual culture encompasses an assemblage of visual artefacts (including buildings, paintings, posters, photographs, films and videos), their producers and beholders, practices of figuration and imagination, modes and degrees of sensory engagement (including but not limited to looking) and visual regimes that govern practices of display, revelation and concealment. Situating such artefacts in the broader field of visual culture is to ask how they are embedded in shared, often longstanding practices of figuration and use, and how attitudes towards them are embodied through specific, learned and transmitted modes of viewing that characterize specific (audio-)visual regimes.

2 In Germany, scholars of religious studies have long developed aesthetic approaches to religion. For more information about basic ideas and literature, see the site of the *Arbeitskreis für Religionsästhetik*: <http://www.religionsaesthetik.de> [accessed on March 9, 2015].

So far, there is still little synergy between the broader field of visual culture studies and art history in particular, on the one hand, and emergent research on the visual in religious studies, on the other. This may be partly due to the different disciplinary trajectories and foci of art history and religious studies: artworks and religious texts seem to be worlds apart. In the light of the history of both disciplines, this cleavage has its own irony. Art history emerged as a modern custodian of images “before the era of art” (Belting 1994), reframing them as instances of fine art that appealed through their aesthetic beauty. Conversely, the modern study of religion was grounded in philological research with little regard for images from the Christian past. This entailed an intriguing switch of religious images from the sphere of religion to the sphere of art. Their reframing as artworks implied that they were abstracted from the earlier worlds of lived experience in which they had been embedded and aestheticized.³ The critique of the taken-for-granted primacy of the category of art as a frame for the analysis of images was one of the driving forces of the “pictorial” turn in art history. The rise of visual studies or *Bildwissenschaft* implied an extension of the scope of images from high art to popular visual materials. Asking about their “power,” “life” and “agency” (e.g., Belting 2001; Bredekamp 2010; Freedberg 1989; Gell 1998; Kruse 2003; Mitchell 2005), scholars in visual studies grapple with the apparent capacity of images to appear as animated and enchanted.

Terms denoting “bad objecthood” (Mitchell 2005: 188), such as the “totem,” the “idol” and the “fetish,” once used to refer to problematic human-picture or human-object relations associated with a primitive or neurotic mindset, are now reclaimed to analyse how humans fall under the spell of images. Asking about the “wants” of pictures in a general way, rather than in relation to supposed primitives or neurotics, W.J.T. Mitchell challenged the idea that modern subjects became emancipated from devotion to pictures, relics and powerful objects in the course of the process of rationalization held to typify modern society. Breaking the logic of distinction, according to which modern subjects are immune to the destabilizing lure of pictures and objects, he opened up a general, cross-cultural approach to visual culture. The restoration of forms of “bad objecthood” launched by this approach signals the readiness to finally

3 It would be important to undertake a detailed study of the transforming relation between the spheres of art and religion from a historical perspective, from the rise of modern art history up to the present in specific national/regional settings. Of special interest here is the Romanticist concern with so-called *Kunstreligion*, e.g., the understanding of art as a substitute for religion, involving a cultic engagement with the artist as genius.

recognize the Western world in the distorted mirror used for so long to project the imagined primitive Other (see also Latour 2010: 35; Meyer 2012).⁴

In my view, the shape of the current field of global visual culture calls for a deeper conversation and collaboration between scholars with a background in art history or visual studies, on the one hand, and religious studies and anthropology, on the other. At stake is a rethinking of the nexus of religion and images as a matter of concern for all disciplines involved. Clearly, it makes no sense to maintain a modern, secularist teleology according to which religion is bound to disappear. Next to the remarkable resilience of iconographic traditions and pictorial genres from the European religious past (Kruse 2014) and of longstanding categories of objecthood rooted in religious discourses vis-à-vis images, there is a host of new religious images while various religious visual regimes still, and again, shape people's attitudes towards them. In the remainder of this section, I will present some prolegomena for a joint, post-secularist approach of religion and/as visual culture that is inspired by developments in German visual studies.

"Visible Religion"

Let me start by calling attention to an early, exceptional initiative that assessed the relevance of the iconological approach developed by Erwin Panofsky (who was in turn inspired by Aby Warburg, see below) for the study of religion: the—alas short-lived—*Visible Religion. Annual for Religious Iconography* (7 volumes between 1982 and 1990), conceived and edited by Hans Kippenberg (see Uehlinger 2006 for an appraisal). Though written more than twenty years ago, the contributions to the volumes still appear fresh and timely, resonating strongly with current works in the emergent (Anglophone) study of religious

4 The fact that thinkers like Mitchell develop a global perspective that challenges a longstanding modernist teleology is a symptom of a broader opening up of the humanities to the study of culture as praxis. This implies a new position for anthropology, which can no longer be reduced to the study of non-Western societies out there, about which other disciplines—such as comparative literature, art history, and philosophy—need not bother. However, I am hesitant to follow Mitchell in retaining the notions of fetish, totem and idol as part of our vocabulary in analyzing the power and life of pictures. These notions betray fundamental misunderstandings of human-object and human-picture relations in frontier zones of Western outreach that need to be deconstructed in the sense of taken apart (see Meyer 2012). Regarding the notion of the fetish, for instance, I agree with Bruno Latour's (2010) point that it stems from a misrecognition of the human involvement in the fabrication of entities—factishes rather than fetishes—in which they believe. Of course, as a problematic category of bad objecthood, the use of the notion of the fetish calls for further investigation, but its use as a concept in investigating a particular aspect of human-object relations is limited.

visual culture. Central to the project of Visible Religion is the assumption that, far from being mere representations of underlying concepts and ideas, images play a central role in shaping religion and communicating religious meaning. It gave central stage to the historically and culturally situated practices through which humans engage with images in a religious setting. Special attention was paid to pictorial genres (asking about the status and value attributed to images and distinguishing between devotional, cultic and historical genres—Barash 1990) and culturally transmitted and authorized modes of looking, so as to grasp the particular dynamics through which visual forms achieve an aura and, in the experience of their beholders, become alive or extraordinary.⁵ To understand the specific aesthetic effects of pictures (as compared with words and texts), Kippenberg (1990: xi) invoked the Geertzian notion of the “aura of factuality” through which visual representations were prone to be experienced as real. Just like texts and words, but operating in different ways, pictures were understood as being embedded in particular “traditions of seeing” (Assmann 1990: 4) that shape the visual—and hence what is visible and invisible—in a world of lived experience. There was a strong interest in developing conceptual tools that would allow scholars to overcome their own visual bias and grasp how pictures are looked at in other settings. As Kippenberg stated in his introduction to the volume devoted to iconology: “Different cultures developed different schemes for identical objects and identical schemes for different objects. We believe we recognize likeness but in fact we only recognize stereotypes well known in our own culture. (...) How to describe the way other people see their images? Where lies the border between an arbitrary play of association and a more objective perception? If iconology is to take seriously the beholder’s share it must solve this problem” (1985/86: VIII).

Unfortunately, in the 1980s the study of religion at large was not yet ready to embrace this initiative in a serious and sustained manner. As Christoph Uehlinger (2006: 171–174) pointed out, a major reason for the discontinuation of Visible Religion was the keen ambition of its protagonists to, as one of the authors put it aptly, “compensate in theory and practice the partiality that results from the scientific preference for written sources” (Witte quoted in Uehlinger 2006: 171).⁶ Taking visual media seriously amounted to a challenge

5 Intriguingly, Jan Assman proposed nothing less than to develop a theory of the “picture act” (“Bildakt”, see Assmann 1990)—twenty years before Horst Bredekamp’s *Theorie des Bildakts* (2010).

6 The last volume was devoted to genres in visual representations and engaged with, among other things, Benjamin’s notion of aura, understood as stemming from the experience of beholders of works of art that “dead objects (are) coming to life” (Kippenberg 1990: xi). On

to the conceptual foundations of the study of religion with its strong focus on texts, entailing the use of visual materials as mere illustrations, rather than as artefacts in their own right, the analysis of which requires special theoretical and methodological competences derived from iconology. This was a bridge too far at a time when many scholars in religious studies were still working in a philological framework or were concerned with social science approaches to the role of religion in modern societies that foregrounded abstract ideas and norms. At the same time, Visible Religion was too short-lived and experimental to develop a sustained, systematic theoretical ground for the place of visual culture in the study of religion.

In the meantime the role of visual culture in religious settings has gained much more attention, especially among Anglophone scholars (and, alas, more or less apart from the Visible Religion initiative). To mention four prominent, ground-breaking authors who pointed out new directions for the study of visual piety: the work of David Morgan on the “looking acts” through which American Protestants engage with mass-produced images of Jesus (1998); Allen Roberts and Polly Nooter Roberts’ work on the blessings conveyed by an endlessly reproduced photograph of the Mouride Sheikh Amadou Bamba in Senegal (2003); and Chris Pinney’s work on mass-produced lithographs that feature as “photos of the gods” and are engaged within the devotional visual mode of *darshan* in India (2004). Currently, much compelling work is done at the interface of religious studies, art history, American studies and anthropology. The recent American-based initiative for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religions (MAVCOR) (<http://mavcor.yale.edu>) offers a platform for new research, directing attention “to those places where sensation and materiality engage each other and where both concern religion,” and presents an archive and a gallery that showcase religious objects. There are strong—albeit so far not yet well recognized—resonances with the earlier studies conducted in the context of Visible Religion; these merit being spelled out and pursued in developing a stronger, conceptually based synergy between the fields of visual culture and the study of religion. In the following, I would like to sketch the importance of the work of Aby Warburg, Ernst Cassirer and Hans Belting for a visual-culture approach in the conceptual framework of religious mediation.

the whole, Visible Religion can serve as a compelling example to illustrate a more general point: the importance of an archaeology of knowledge production in the study of religion so as to discern possibilities that ultimately did not make it at the time, and yet need to be acknowledged and re-membered as resources for fleshing out new paths for the future (see Brunotte 2013: 87; Meyer forthcoming).

“Symbolic Forms”

In the search for a common theoretical ground for the study of religion and visual culture, the work of art historian and cultural studies scholar Aby Warburg (1866-1929) is a productive starting point (see also Uehlinger 2006: 174-177). Annoyed with the art history of his time, which he dismissed as aestheticizing (Gombrich 1970: 118) and as unsuited to grasp the force of images, Warburg showed a strong interest in the operation of symbols (astrological signs, the snake) that he regarded as part of cultural memory. Or better, he understood culture as an external storage space for longstanding symbols and images that he sought to document in his *Mnemosyne Atlas* project. He was interested, in particular, in documenting the “afterlife” (*Nachleben*) of classical antiquity in European culture. His notion of pathos formulae (*Pathosformel*)—emotionally charged visual representations that have a strong effect on the beholder—was born out of his interest in a historical psychology of human expression. The resonance between this notion and current scholarly debates about “the power of images” and the “wants of pictures” is obvious (Brunotte 2013: 119-123). Taking recourse to evolutionary thinking, still en vogue at the time, Warburg assumed similarities between classical antiquity and late 19th-century American Indian culture. In his detailed account of the snake ritual among the Pueblo Indians,⁷ he laid out his view of symbols as grounded in the will to capture and influence natural processes through affective, magical registers (such as the mask dance). Religion, for him, implied a “conjunction of human beings and something Other” (1995: 52, translation BM)⁸ with very real, symbolic effects. In the course of cultural evolution, this conjunction became increasingly conceptual, culminating in an understanding of the “something Other” as a mental, invisible symbol. In short, he noted a transition from embodied symbolism to mental symbolism, from devotional space (“Andachtsraum”) to conceptual space (“Denkraum”) (1995: 56). However, in Warburg’s understanding, mental symbols and conceptual spaces still retained some degree of their groundedness in concrete material forms and sensorial experiences (rather than being in principle arbitrary, as a Saussurian take on signs would have it).

7 Warburg developed this account during his treatment in a psychiatric hospital in Bad Kreuzlingen, where he presented his ideas in the form of a lecture (on 21 April 1923), so as to prove to his doctors that he had regained his senses and was ready to be discharged. An English version of the lecture was published in the *Journal of the Warburg Institute* in 1938; the first German version appeared in 1988 (reprinted in 1995).

8 Orig.: “Verknüpfung zwischen Mensch und fremder Wesenheit.”

Warburg's ideas and vocabulary (he also coined the notion of iconology) inspired many of his contemporaries, including Walter Benjamin, Erwin Panofsky and Ernst Cassirer. The latter developed the notion of "symbolic form," understood as "that energy of the mind through which a meaning is tied to a concrete sensorial sign and becomes an intrinsic part of it" (Cassirer 1923: 15, translation BM).⁹ And so: "A world of self-created pictures faces what we call objective material reality and affirms itself with regard to that reality in autonomous fullness and primal force" (Cassirer 1923: 15, translation BM).¹⁰ In other words, symbolic forms, pictures included, constitute a buffer between the objective world and humans that achieves a reality of its own. For Cassirer symbolic forms—encompassing ritual, images and language—were material, sensorial artefacts and practices that constitute a phenomenological world. The appeal of this "anthropological" (in the broad sense of human) approach for current visual studies is obvious. Focusing on the entangled relation between humans and visual objects, the latter are neither framed as agents with their own, independent wants, nor reduced to being mere representations that are objects of their beholders' gaze. Instead, they are conceptualized as material and sensorial signs that constitute—with vigour and force—a world through and for humans. They are signs that are *present* by virtue of their features and point to an *absent* signified. Particularly promising in this regard, as highlighted already, is the understanding of symbolic forms as not merely referential, but as substantial and productive. Obviously, this take on symbolic forms as what I would call world-making mediators, and of religion as a practice of conjunction, reverberates with my notion of sensational form. It is in line with my proposition to analyse religion as a practice of mediation to which visual artefacts are intrinsic and that constitutes reality. As an aside, I would like to point out that I regard my relative ignorance about this literature when I developed this notion not only as a personal shortcoming, but also as a symptom for cleavages between German-language and Anglophone academic literature as well as between art history, religious studies and the anthropology of religion. This essay can be read as an attempt to catch up and help cast a wider net.

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- 9 Orig.: "... "jene Energie des Geistes (...), durch welche ein geistiges Bedeutungsgehalt an ein konkretes sinnliches Zeichen geknüpft und diesem Zeichen innerlich zugeeignet wird."
- 10 Orig.: "Eine Welt selbstgeschaffener Bilder tritt dem, was wir die objektive Wirklichkeit der Dinge nennen, gegenüber und behauptet sich gegen sie in selbständiger Fülle und ursprünglicher Kraft."

“Picture Anthropology”

In pursuing further the question how visual artefacts are made to operate in a religious context and mediate the invisible through visible symbolic forms, it is fruitful to turn to the “picture anthropology” developed by Hans Belting (2001; 2011), which resonates strongly with my ideas about mediation and sensational forms. I find his approach helpful for a detailed ethnographic analysis, because, as the next part will show, it alerted me to various facets of the complex relation between pictures and modes of seeing. Distinguishing between mental images in the internal imagination and external physical pictures, Belting argues, “[T]he picture is the image with a medium” (2011: 10; see also Mitchell 2005: 85). In other words, the externalization of mental images as pictures requires the use of a medium through which these images achieve a physical *Gestalt*. While images originate in, and feed back into, the personal imagination, they can be perceived only via media that transfigure mental images into pictures and vice versa. The distinction between image and medium “is rooted in the self-experience of our body. The images of memory and imagination are generated in one’s own body; the body is the living medium through which they are experienced” (Belting 2011: 11). As material carriers, media give a body to (Belting uses the term *Verkörperung*) images that are, in turn, incorporated by and at the same time form their beholders and shape their habitus. In this sense, the incorporation of fixed mediated images into the personal imagination is part of the process of what I call “aesthetic formation” (Meyer 2009).

Media, in this broad sense, refer to all those historically and culturally situated devices—such as a painting, sculpture, photograph, film or website—that make an image visible and tangible under the conditions of their particular technological properties and affordances. Images require media so as to assume a physical presence as pictures, and this is also the condition under which they can be shared. At stake here is an understanding of pictures as interfaces between the mental and the material, as well as between the personal and the social. In this sense, pictures stem from as well as streamline how and what people imagine in a particular world of lived experience. I would like to emphasize that this is an issue of power. Authorized pictures that are looked at and approached in the context of established political-aesthetic practices are central to the creation and maintenance of shared imaginations and imaginaries (Meyer 2014b); conversely, new pictures have the potential to disturb such shared imaginations and imaginaries and become harbingers of new perspectives, visual regimes and modes of being.

Pictures, Belting points out, are characterized by a fundamental ambiguity that evolves around the gap between what they represent and the audio-visual

codes mobilized for the sake of representation, between absence and presence. In other words, a picture is a medium that, by virtue of its technological affordances, renders present a mental image or figure in the imagination. Bridging this gap—which is at the heart of mediation—is an intricate process, because:

[T]he presence of the image (as perceived by beholders, BM) (...) entails a deception, for the image is not present the same way its medium is present. It *needs the act of animation* by which our imagination draws it from its medium. In the process the opaque medium becomes the transparent conduit for its image. Thus the ambiguity of presence and absence extends even to the medium in which the image was born, for in reality it is not the medium but the spectator who engenders the image within his or her self. (Belting 2011: 20, italics BM)

Remarkable in Belting's phrasing is that the image "needs the act of animation" so as to be perceived as being present, making spectators look through—or even overlook—the medium. To see is not to simply gaze at what meets the eye, but a participatory, embodied act in which the beholder partakes in making something visible and present through an act of animation. Taking animation as a basic aspect of the perception of pictures, however, is just a first step. Perception cannot be reduced to a mere individual, biological faculty through which the invisible image is extracted from the visible picture; it is organized by culturally and historically situated media. In the German version of his book, Belting aptly circumscribes media as *Wahrnehmungsformen*, a term that is difficult to translate (and for that reason may not have made it into the English text) and that I would render as "forms for perception" or, indeed, as "sensational forms."

Authorized sensational forms, including pictorial media, tune and organize perception in a particular way, in line with prevailing sensibilities and political-aesthetic modalities of sensation. Pictorial media streamline and sustain religious modes of figuration and embodied practices of seeing, which make the invisible visible in one way or the other. They shape what and how people see, involving them in acts of animation without which nothing would be seen at all. This being so, the study of (still and moving) pictures can in turn serve as an entry point into religious modes of picturing and seeing the invisible and into the dynamics of world-making at large.

IV What Pictures Show and How People See: Christian Visual Culture in Southern Ghana

Pictures are nodes in worlds of lived experience and their specific audio-visual regimes that organize and streamline, as well as resonate with, the personal imagination and collective imaginaries. Neglecting pictorial media in the study of religion implies foreclosing potential insights. However, what pictures show (and conceal) is often taken for granted by insiders and not obvious to outsiders. So, to repeat Kippenberg's question: "How to describe the way other people see their images?" Turning to my research on Christianity and audio-visual media in Southern Ghana, in the following I will reflect on how I grappled with this question. My main purpose is not to present an extensive ethnography *per se* (for this see Meyer 2004; 2010b; 2015), but to spotlight theoretical and methodological aspects of my research that I deem important for studying religious visual culture in a more general sense.

Let me start by noting that it took me some time to realize the importance of pictorial media, vision and visual regimes. Studying Christianity in Ghana in a long-term perspective, from the early encounters between local populations and Protestant missionaries in the mid-19th century that resulted in local mission posts among the Ewe to the current popularity of Pentecostal-charismatic churches (Meyer 1999), I explored the rise of African ways of engaging with and interpreting Christianity (in the sense of what I called an "Africanization from below"). Privileging the study of texts and processes of translation and vernacularization, I initially paid little attention to the ways in which conversion to Christianity implied new ways of seeing and impinging on the sensorium. Of course I noted that the Protestant missionaries themselves were dismissive about the sculptures and figures used by the Ewe to encounter their gods—with hindsight I see these as powerful pictorial media that effect the presence of the spirits among the living human beings. Typically, these were despised as "fetishes" and "idols"; in the same vein, representations of Catholic saints and relics were also rejected as distracting, potentially dangerous artefacts; at the same time some of these objects were introduced into the sphere of the (ethnological) museum where they came to represent primitive religion. The attitude towards such items, which obviously fall into the category of bad objecthood, can aptly be characterized in terms of Latour's notion of the "iconoclasm" (2002): fought and despised, they were vested with power rather than being neutralized and becoming irrelevant, and they continued to play a—negative—role in the Christian imaginary. It was thanks to my research on Pentecostalism, with its expressive forms of worship, that I came to realize the importance of the sensorium in general, and vision in particular;

this instigated me to coin the concept of sensational form in the first place. In Pentecostal services, there was a constant reference to the superiority of Christian vision, understood as the capacity to look into what is hidden for the naked eye, right into the spiritual realm that is the site of a battle between the proverbial demonic “powers of darkness” and the Christian God. Here I realized the importance that followers attributed to a superior vision, that is, to an extraordinary gaze circumscribed as the Spirit of Discernment that was associated with experiences of seeing in dreams and daytime trancelike situations. Also, the ability to spot and describe, in a highly figurative manner, the machinations of demonic spirits in testimonies and sermons was taken as evidence of a person’s spiritual power. Much of what matters in the world, I was made to understand, was concealed and needed to be revealed; hence the need for superior vision to look deep and to be alert all the time.

Eye-openers

To convey a sense of the Christian visual regime I encountered in Southern Ghana, I will introduce three pictorial artefacts that acted as eye-openers for me. Making possible a kind of reflexive meta-commentary on a visual regime otherwise taken for granted and barely talked about, my encounter with these artefacts had a revelatory function for my research. This was due to serendipity rather than method; it is only with hindsight that I realize the potential of pictorial media to present themselves as unexpected harbingers of insights about how people see.

Firstly, I would like to draw attention to a partly damaged mortar (fig. 1),¹¹ painted in light apricot, and featuring eight more or less big eyes together with the following text, which is scattered over the whole object: The Supernatural eyes of God the Father / Sees all things / So we must be extra careful / When you go under the sea, the great eyes have seen you / I am afraid of the eyes of God / If you hide under a mortar God have seen you / God saw you be careful. This piece was made by the painter Kwame Akoto, alias “Almighty” (a name he chose so as to express his link with God after becoming born-again); he runs a roadside workshop at Juame Junction, Kumasi, where I bought it in May 2010. The object intrigued me because it offers a creative, personal take on a widely shared understanding of the omniscience of the eye of God, according to which nothing and no one can escape from his penetrating gaze. Hence the

11 See also my essay in the MAVCOR object narratives: <http://mavcor.yale.edu/conversations/object-narratives/kwame-almighty-akoto-supernatural-eyes-god> [accessed on March 9, 2015].



FIGURE 1 Artist Almighty aka Kwame Akoto and *The Supernatural Eyes of God* (photograph Birgit Meyer).

need to be careful in one's whereabouts. This is terrifying, but also comforting, as the divine gaze can also protect a staunch Christian from spiritual assaults. I had heard many people talk about the divine gaze in this manner, and I immediately recognized the theme when I saw the mortar. In this piece, Almighty very much emphasizes the impossibility to hide; even a mortar with its thick walls is no refuge. According to Christians, one is not only subject to the divine gaze, but may also partake in it actively. There was a constant concern with the need to "be vigilant" and to be able "look deep" so as to be alert to potentially destructive acts secretly masterminded by one's enemies. In popular Christian understanding, God offers those who follow him the Spirit of Discernment, which involves a particular capacity to look into the spiritual dimension of the material world, the "physical." The "physical" and the "spiritual" are held to be entangled, but the extent to which one can know how the latter impinges on the former depends on one's capacity to see.

This desire to see, and the Christian promise to be able to reveal what eludes ordinary vision, is central to current religious dynamics. Placed in my office at home, this artefact is a powerful reminder about the nexus of vision, power and control in Southern Ghana.



FIGURE 2 *Mami Water*, Just Farkira Art (photograph Birgit Meyer).

The second artefact is a picture of a mermaid or Mami Water figure (fig. 2). I did not bump into it by chance, but commissioned it from a roadside artist—Just Farkira—in Teshie (a suburb of Accra) in the course of my research back in 1996, asking him to make a picture of Mami Water as he imagined her. Obviously inspired by the Hollywood movie “*Splash*,” the mermaid is a white topless woman with a red fishtail, relaxing on the beach. The use of this motif to picture Mami Water, a much talked-about spirit held to exist at the bottom of the ocean, testifies to the openness of the popular imagination to incorporating and appropriating foreign visual materials, as they circulate through Hollywood or Bollywood movies. At the time the painting was made, in Christian circles there was intense anxiety about the demonic activities of Mami Water spirits. Regarded as Satan’s most attractive demons, these spirits were held to seduce people in their dreams, luring them into an underwater empire of luxurious commodities and eroticism. Placed in our living room, the painting gave rise to misgivings in some of our visitors, who shrieked with horror when they saw it for the first time (see also Meyer 2006; 2008). As young born-again Christians, they heard about the dangerous actions of Mami Water spirits in their church, via radio preachers, popular movies and rumours, all the time. They found that such a painting was entirely unsuitable to be displayed. In their view, the painting depicted Mami Water, who, they feared, could easily come to life and do harm to me and to my family. In their view, it was not an innocent instance of popular art, but instead a potentially demonic object. This minor event alerted me to a local way of seeing a picture in a way completely different from how I do: what I took as a nice—and, given its indebtedness to

Hollywood, rather flat—instance of street art, my interlocutors regarded as an uncanny object hosting a spirit that might burst out of its frame.

Clearly, to take up Belting's distinction between picture and mental image, my interlocutors and I "animated" the external picture in quite different ways: while the mental image I drew from the picture was a depiction of the mermaid from *Splash*, they saw a potential demon. This shows that the process of animation that occurs between seeing a physical picture and reproducing it as a mental image is shaped by culturally specific modes of seeing. In the case of my interlocutors, a second-level animation occurred, through which the picture was perceived as demonic—and hence as a representation of a normally invisible yet real spirit that could, however, become present by virtue of being depicted. The best thing to do was to close one's eyes and pray, so as to prevent such an image from entering one's imagination and becoming a source of internal affliction.

I came across this stance many times. Even pictures of Jesus were not raised above suspicion and were held to easily operate as a kind of mask from behind which a dangerous spirit would work in secret, often by making use of the depicted being's eyes (Meyer 2010b). And also on the film set of popular video movies, actors were often concerned about the potential danger incurred in setting up fake shrines or dressing up as demons and monsters for the sake of a movie. They took intense prayer as a remedy to nullify the potential destructive effects. Of course, this stance is reminiscent of the dismissive, yet at the same time enchanting attitude towards artefacts circumscribed as "idols" and "fetishes." Here a painting or object operates as a dangerous, demonic medium that renders present a normally invisible, spiritual force by virtue of depicting it. Picturing and displaying a normally invisible being—be it an evil spirit or an effigy of Jesus—is a potentially risky affair, an instance of a picture looking and striking back. Pondering this stance made me realize the power attributed to pictures that depicted invisible spirits; exactly because such pictures were held capable of rendering present what they represent, a careful attitude was required, ranging from looking away to refusing display, and calling upon the protective potential of prayer to hold the potential agency of a picture towards its beholders in check. Seeing certain pictures could be dangerous.

The third artefact (see fig. 3) is a poster that is part of the collection of hand-painted movie posters of Hollywood, Nigerian ("Nollywood") and Ghanaian movies of Dutch collector Mandy Elsas, who bought a great number of them. Showcasing spectacular scenes—often involving special effects—the posters are designed to persuade people to come and watch; in so doing they offer clues about audience expectations. Take for instance the poster used to advertise the video movie *Babina* (Part 2, Aak-kan Productions, 2003). Painted on a former

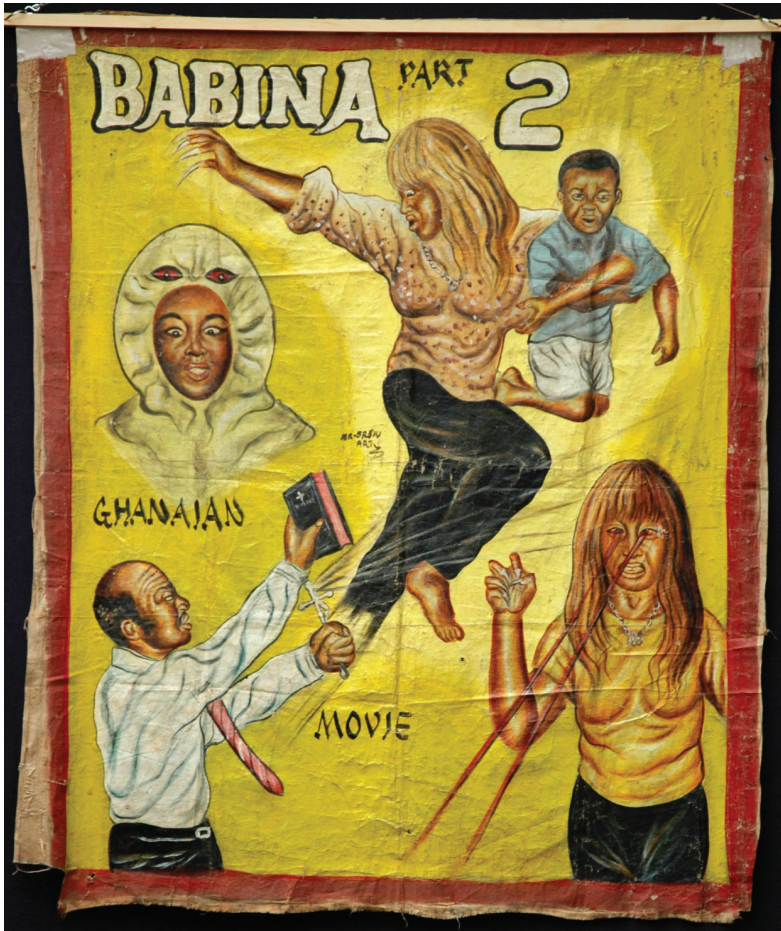


FIGURE 3 *Film Poster Advertizing Babina (collection Mandy Elsas).*

wheat flour sack, the poster (made by “Mr Brow Art”) spotlights central features of this movie, which is about an evil woman who terrorized her husband and environment with her terrible gaze, bringing about mishap, sickness and death. The poster offered me deeper insight into the danger of the gaze. There is an indigenous priestess with a second pair of red eyes, showing her capacity to look into the spiritual realm and do evil. Red signals danger. Red streams spreading from her eyes also represent Babina’s evil visual power. Moreover, at the centre of the poster, a pastor holds a Bible in his right hand and a cross in his left, from which streams of power emanate that attack Babina. The use of coloured streams emanating from eyes and powerful objects is central to the visual language employed in depicting spiritual power in film posters, as well

as in special effects in movies. The gaze is a potential harbinger of evil, which is to be countered by artefacts—such as the Bible or a cross—that represent and are expected to render present divine power.

Taken together, these artefacts capture key aspects of the Christian visual regime in operation. Pondering what they reveal about how people see, we can identify three interlocking strands, each entailing a dualist structure: the longing for superior vision so as to see into the spiritual realm *and* the awareness of being seen (by God as well as by indigenous spirits, recoded by Christians as demonic); the distinction between a positive, protective *and* a negative, destructive gaze; the urge to look deep into what remains invisible and barred from the naked eye *and* the fear that pictures of spiritual beings may become animated and act on their beholders.

Video Film and the “Spiritual Eye”

The quest for vision also underpinned the popularity of successful Ghanaian video movies. Run by independent cultural entrepreneurs with no formal training in filmmaking, the video film industry started to thrive thanks to the deregulation of hitherto state-controlled media in the aftermath of democratization and neo-liberalization in the early 1990s. Depending on the approval of paying audiences, video film producers stayed close to and audio-visualized broadly shared imaginaries that resonate with the appeal of popular Christianity, with its dualism of God and Satan and its striving for a modern way of life. I was prompted to study this video-film industry because I was struck by the similarities between oral narratives about the operation of Satan and demons that circulated as testimonies, sermons and rumours, on the one hand, and the movie plots with their exuberant pictorialization of the occult, on the other. Initially my approach to video movies was textual, focusing mainly on the narratives conveyed. Gradually I realized that the aspect of the movies that appealed to their audiences was not the stories per se, but the fact that they offered a point of view that resonated with that offered by Christian preachers. Getting to know this point of view was key to getting a sense of how “people see their images.”

What pictures showing the invisible—those used for personal devotion so as to invoke the transcendent presence of God or those depicting terrible and terrifying demons—are good for, and how they should be apprehended and employed, are issues of at times fierce debate in Southern Ghana (Meyer 2010b). This debate is fuelled by and extends to the sphere of video movies. Embedded in the prevailing visual culture, these movies appear to an outsider like me as screens that show the working of the popular imagination, which is heavily indebted to Christianity in myriad ways. Through my research, in the

course of which I watched countless movies with audiences in various venues (including cinemas, video parlours and television sets in people's homes), I was alerted to the specific ways in which people engaged with what they witnessed on the screen: a playful, visceral, interactive endeavour. Video movies offer telling narratives about people's struggle to sort out moral behaviour in a world of temptations and seductions that they imagine could lead them astray; a good movie is expected to act as a pedagogical device, suitable for audiences to "get something out of it." Here I do not want to pursue a content analysis of *what* people (like to) watch, but rather concentrate on *how* they watch and what they take film to be offering them in terms of vision.

While still pictures of invisible forces are prone to generate suspicions, film is likened to a superior mode of looking that can reveal what happens in the spiritual realm (see also Behrend 2013: 238). I was often told that God, and Satan, make a "film" about a person's life, recording all he or she did. Importantly, Christian vision stands in a dualistic opposition to indigenous cults, but is also linked to traditional divination practices. For example, priests with their proverbial "second pair of eyes" or "third eye" are held to see what is otherwise invisible on the surface of water in a calabash. Representations of the calabash as a kind of mirror or camera (not unlike a crystal ball) can be found in various media, including narratives, posters and of course movies. Often movie plots are framed as a struggle between two kinds of vision power, in which divine vision is analogous to traditional vision, but ultimately shown to be superior. This superiority involves two steps: pulling what remains concealed in the spiritual realm into the light of Christian vision by making the invisible appear, and then defeating it in a spiritual battle.

As I show extensively in my ethnographic work, many movies are framed as revelations that offer a voyeuristic glimpse into the spiritual machinations of demonic powers, including witches, Mami Water spirits, local gods and the magic employed by native priests. I noted that a film is found compelling if it persuasively offers a superior kind of vision that allows audiences to see more clearly. Through techniques of montage that suggest a bridging of the "physical" and the "spiritual," audiences are invited to look beneath the surface, deep into people's minds and into their hidden operations and secret interactions with spirits. At crucial moments, the camera invites audiences to mimetically partake in the all-seeing "eye of God," for whom nothing is hidden from view (see also Pype 2012: 118). As noted, the possibility to partake in this divine vision involves both becoming the object of divine supervision and control and receiving the gift of the "spiritual eye." Indeed, I was often told that a good film would not only offer a viable moral message, but also represented what was imagined to happen behind the surface of appearance—in the spiritual

realm and in people's minds—in a realistic manner: films reveal what is real “spiritually.”

Video movies are modern audio-visual devices that have been remarkably easily incorporated into an existing Christian visual regime, which is still symbiotically entangled with what from a Christian perspective are “heathen” demons vested with satanic visual power, but which also claims to surpass it: an issue of analogy and difference. It took some time until I realized that films themselves may well be analysed as a kind of “actors” that project the normally internal imagination inside out, on a big screen. Externalizing mental images in the personal and shared popular imagination, movies re-produce as visible pictures what is imagined to happen in the spiritual realm. Offering moving pictures of the invisible, video movies mediate—and thus express and shape—the religious imagination. While at first sight one might think that video movies rely on a foreign audio-visual technology that is worlds apart from already established Christian (as well as traditional) ways of seeing, my research made it clear to me that this technology could easily be appropriated. Far from adhering to a logic of its own, this technology could be put to use effectively in pictorializing a spiritual realm about which there was much talk, but that could not be seen as such. In this sense, video movies that use the revelation format were held to prove the reality of the invisible.

V Outlook

An understanding of religion as a practice of mediation that involves multiple media opens up a plethora of archives, including texts, things, sounds and pictures that call for consultation and scrutiny in our research. I do not plead for narrowing down the study of religion to pictorial media, let alone to a sole focus on vision and the gaze at the expense of other senses. The point is that the turn to visual culture is instructive both empirically and theoretically, because the ambiguity of presence and absence that Hans Belting found to be enshrined in the picture-image relation epitomizes a fundamental dimension of religion as a medium of absence that effects some kind of spiritual presence. Making the invisible visible and tangible, in ways that may be experienced as comforting or frightening by their beholders, religious pictures do not merely represent an absent signified, but also operate as symbolic forms that mediate that signified and in so doing constitute reality. Therefore, a detailed focus on the political-aesthetic practices through which pictures are figured, used and experienced as being more than mere depictions raises intriguing conceptual issues about the fabrication of a sense of sacred surplus, of something material

and yet elusive. This genesis of presence is what fascinates me in the study of religion (Meyer 2012), and the study of visual culture is a productive focus to show how this genesis works step by step.

As I have sought to substantiate with the example of my research on the nexus of Christianity and visual culture in Southern Ghana, pictures address beholders in a different, more direct and visceral manner than texts address their readers. Pictures operate in the context of (often divergent, yet partly overlapping) visual regimes that organize how and what people see and sense and what value they attribute to it. Analysing a picture leads beyond its sheer physicality, involving its invisible dimension. This pertains to the mental image and the more or less shared imaginary which it mediates, but also to the authorized visual regime and particular ways of seeing and not seeing. As pictures mediate and condense a world of lived experience, it is of central importance to develop approaches and methods at the interface of visual culture and religious studies that help us to grasp how other people treat and see their images and what their images “do” to them. At the same time, as pointed out, it is important to be alert to unexpected eye-openers that give a glimpse of ideas about vision that are normally taken for granted and about the status of pictures and can be unpacked in further research.

With pictures circulating on a global scale, involving dynamics of remediation and recycling, and religious groups increasingly incorporating all sorts of audio-visual forms into their practices of mediation, visual culture presents itself as an urgent focus for research. This is a thriving field. While the speed with which pictures are reproduced is dazzling, it would be mistaken to see this process as entirely new. On the one hand, it is intriguing to note the easy appropriation of new media technologies into established practices of religious mediation, as the example of Ghanaian video movies in the revelation format also showed. This cautions against a mere technology-centred take on new audio-visual media as implying a loss of aura, the question rather being how the new media involved in processes of remediation and recycling implement a sacred surplus.

On the other hand, it is important to note that many of the pictures reproduced via new technologies can be traced back to longstanding religious archives. For instance, Pompeo Batoni's *Sacred Heart of Jesus* (Morgan 2012: 111–136; Napolitano 2007; Woets *fc*), Da Vinci's *Last Supper*, Rafael's *Transfiguration of Christ* (Butticci 2013) and the lithograph of *The Broad and the Narrow Path* (Meyer 1999: 31–35) have achieved a status of “global icons” that signal an “after-life” (in the sense of Warburg) of Renaissance and Baroque Christian art in our time (Haustein 2008). Similarly, medieval images of the occult—including witches and demons—are endlessly recycled in various formats (also in

Ghanaian movies, Meyer forthcoming: Chapter 5). At the same time, terms referring to particular human-object and human-picture relations, such as the “fetish” or the more positive notion of the “icon,” still inform current everyday and scholarly attitudes towards pictures. In the face of the plethora of pictorial motifs, recycled through ever new media, and resilient attitudes towards pictures, scholars in the study of religion and of visual culture face a huge task of tracing the processes of circulation and remediation of materials from, for instance, the Christian symbol bank and the contestations evolving over categories of “good” and “bad” objecthood into various local settings where they are negotiated and made to signify in specific ways. I hope this this article contributes to clearing a common ground for this endeavour.

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