
Mediating Absence—Effecting Spiritual Presence: Pictures and the Christian Imagination

Author(s): Birgit Meyer

Source: *Social Research*, Vol. 78, No. 4, The Image (WINTER 2011), pp. 1029-1056

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23349842>

Accessed: 10-01-2020 15:29 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Social Research*

Birgit Meyer

Mediating Absence— Effecting Spiritual Presence: Pictures and the Christian Imagination

Pictures always presume belief, and still today the necessary belief of our look.

—Hans Belting (1994)

THE RISE OF “VISUAL CULTURE” AS A MULTIDISCIPLINARY FIELD of study over the past 20 years or so signals a pressing concern to better understand the relation between human beings and images. From the outset, the “power of images” over their beholders has been the guiding theme in this field, raising questions about the logic of animation through which the latter get hooked to the former (Freedberg 1989; Gell 1998). Questioning a taken-for-granted relation between images and beholders, in which the latter control the former through the gaze, implied a thorough rethinking of vision and its relation to other senses. Recent work in the field of “visual culture” has moved beyond taking modern ocularcentrism at face value. Adopting a broader sensory approach, the materiality of images—their tangible presence and their capacity to engage the senses and touch the beholder—has been recognized.¹

Images are both material presences and figments of the imagination. In order to stress this double aspect, W. J. T. Mitchell draws the illuminating distinction between image—“that what can be lifted off the

picture”—and picture—“the image plus the support; it is the appearance of the immaterial image in a material medium” (Mitchell 2005: 85; see also Mitchell 2008: 16–18). This distinction calls our attention to exploring the circular relation between inner, mental images and their at times overwhelming pictorial manifestations that speak not only to the sense of vision, but also involve hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting. An intriguing gap exists between the dazzling presence of pictures, ever more enhanced through digital technologies of reproduction, and our understanding of their origin, message, and role. Caught in a mix of fascination with and distrust of pictures, we wonder, as Mitchell (2005) put it provocatively, “what do pictures want?”

Vesting pictures with a will—and even life and love—Mitchell’s question challenges the familiar teleological narrative, according to which humanity emancipated itself from devotion to pictures, relics, and powerful objects in the course of the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the rise of modern society. As part and parcel of this development, art history, as Hans Belting pointed out in *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image Before the Era of Art* (1994) arose as a discipline that reframed these objects under the banner of aesthetics, implying a central focus on the artistic genius. (The German original was published in 1990 with the far more clear title *Bild und Kult* [Image and Cult.]) As the custodian of pictures originating from the time before “the era of art”—de facto the European religious past—art history domesticated them. Severed from their original embeddedness in a world of lived experience, pictures that had once been operating as animated bodies within a medieval Christian setting had now become pieces of art with their own mode of appealing through registers of artistic beauty. Placing pictures in art museums and recasting them as “fine art” implied not only a new phase in the “social life” of these things: they were now being showcased as unique masterpieces that induced aesthetic pleasure in their beholders (Appadurai 1988). It also entailed a sharp separation between art and aesthetics on the one hand, and religion on the other. As a consequence, pictures were appreciated and interrogated for their aesthetic qualities and the genius of

their makers, while the issue of their power and agency, as well as broader philosophical questions regarding the constitution of the relation between persons and pictures and the role of religion, tended to be marginalized, albeit in mainstream art history up to at least the late 1980s.²

The “pictorial” or “iconic” turn was born out of a strong dissatisfaction with this *state of (the) art*, stressing the urge to reinvent art history by a critical reflection about the conditions of its establishment and the conceptual stance toward pictures ensued by it. Those championing the study of “visual culture” stress the need to acknowledge actual pictorial practices both within the sphere of art—museums—and in popular settings in everyday life: including movies, news, or advertisements. What drives their queries is the recognition that actual pictorial practices digress from mainstream theories about pictures—and objects at large—that insist on a hierarchical relation between beholders and the objects of their gaze. The aesthetic artwork that induced pleasure in the disinterested beholder was opposed to the scandal of the “fetish” that, though made by human hands, was worshipped by people to achieve certain ends. The critique of the teleological narrative—out of which art history arose in the light of the stunning presence and appeal of pictures in our time—has opened up an exciting intellectual space. The engagement of scholars from different disciplines such as art history, literature, media studies, cinema studies, religious studies, and anthropology saw the emergence of a forum for a broad conversation that cuts across problematic distinctions between “us” and “them,” “here” and “there,” and the study of art/aesthetics and religion.

As an anthropologist working on Ghana for about 20 years (with Ghana being the “home” of the notion of the “fetish” as it emerged in the fifteenth century in the exchange between Western and African traders), I am intrigued by Mitchell’s question (Latour 2011; Pietz 1985–1988). It encapsulates a radical challenge of conventional ideas about modern human-picture relations, according to which human beings are agents wielding control over pictures, and objects at large. In the light of this challenge and the suggestion of a reversal of the power

relation between people and pictures, the possibility of drawing a distinction between modern persons and those worshipping “totems,” “idols,” and “fetishes” breaks down. In other words, from the perspective of the critical study of “visual culture,” such concepts can no longer serve to sustain claims of modern supremacy by discarding the behavior and attitudes associated with them as a matter of our “religious past,”³ a symptom of a psychological disorder (as in Freud’s idea about similarities between primitives and neurotics), or an instance of “false consciousness” (as in the Marxian notion of commodity fetishism).

People seem to easily get under the spell of pictures, engaging them via a logic of animation. Understanding how this logic operates—how to explain the “lure of images”—is one of the main concerns in the study of “visual culture” (Morgan 2007). The point here is not a simple reversal—which would imply a concept of pictures as intrinsically animated human-like “agents”—as a superficial reading of Mitchell’s question might suggest. Recognizing ourselves in the mirror of terms such as “totem,” “fetish,” or “idol” that attribute agency and power to things and that have been mobilized to support Western superiority claims with regard to the presumably irrational, animistic Other, is a revealing eye-opener. However, to simply recuperate such terms for our analysis is problematic, because they are predicated on a derogative view that discards them as instances of “bad objecthood,” which is, albeit implicitly, contrasted with a proper, rational understanding of the human-object (and picture) relation (Mitchell 2005: 188). At stake is our understanding of this relation itself.

The central issue here is to balance the universal and the particular. In short, I take it that the inclination to externalize the inner imagination through pictures is a feature of our shared humanity (Belting 2001).⁴ Since pictures derive from the human imagination, they have human features. Here, in my view, lie the roots of animation. However, the human imagination is not “free,” and the pictures with which people engage are usually not, to paraphrase Marx, of their own making. Pictures are powerful not simply by virtue of animation, but by being harnessed into social-political power structures. What is

needed is the development of an analytical framework that helps us grasp the specific mechanisms of animation and enchantment through which pictures are vested with power via practices of relating to them in particular settings. The power of pictures, in other words, cannot be understood by a sole focus on pictures, but needs to be based on a relational and contextual approach that probes into the constitution of human-picture relations through broader politics of representation, modes of governance, and practices of animation at specific times and places.

So far, the main focus of key works in the study of “visual culture” has been the Western world. As an anthropologist I plead for a broader perspective that thoroughly “globalizes” the field. This is not a question of simply bringing in case materials from other cultures far away—showing how “they” deal with pictures. A great deal of anthropological research concentrates on actual historical and contemporary “frontier zones,” such as the already mentioned historical setting of the coast of West Africa where the notion of the “fetish” arose (Keane 2007). A focus on such zones is fruitful for a critical study of “modernity” at large and human-picture relations in particular. Otherwise, implicit understandings and attitudes on the part of Western actors are brought out in contestations over, for instance, the value and use of pictures or, more broadly, things. Important here is the dimension of religion in general and Christianity in particular. Agents of globalization *avant la lettre*, Western missionaries were key actors in such frontier zones. For many local people, the first Western pictures they encountered were Christian ones. Missionaries organized the circulation of pictures into their mission fields, vesting them with value, contrasting them with “fetishes” and “idols,” deploying devotional practices, and giving rise to diverse contestations (also between Protestant and Catholic missions).

Thus, once we take a broader, global perspective, the importance of Christianity (as a world religion with its own universalizing logic) in spreading and shaping pictorial practices becomes apparent. This spread entails clashes with pictorial practices deployed in other “world religions” and local religious traditions in the context of which terms

such as “fetishism” and “idol-worship” have served to dismiss such practices in favor of Christian ones. Studying the global circulation of Christian pictures, this essay argues, not only produces rich and insightful case studies of specific pictorial practices and dynamics of change in the course of their circulation and transition into new settings, but also is important on the conceptual level. If the cleavage between actual pictorial practices and the established modes of theorizing pictures is what moves and shakes the study of “visual culture,” we need to take into account the role of Christianity, and religion at large, as a prime organizer, if not animator, of human-picture relations. By examining the role of pictures in the Christian imagination in historical perspective and offering a brief sketch of the circulation of the *Sacred Heart of Jesus* and its deployment in Ghana, I want, in this essay, to emphasize the enduring and globalizing role of Christian religion in shaping pictorial practices in everyday life.

PICTURES IN THE CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION

What strikes me with regard to attitudes toward pictures in secular Western settings—so far the main theoretical point of reference and focus of research on “visual culture”—is not only the provocative idea of humans being responsive to pictures’ demands, as posited by Mitchell’s question, but above all the sense of puzzlement entailed by it. In a setting characterized as secular, it appears to be difficult to come to terms with the apparently unceasing, as it were “magical,” power of pictures as well as the regimes within which they operate on the levels of common sense and scholarship. Who knows what pictures “want” and how to deal with them? How to know? What could a critical theory of animated pictures look like that does not rely on the by now deconstructed fiction of the supremacy of the modern subject with its all too simplistic idea of a hierarchy that places persons above pictures?

One way to address these questions, I propose, is to acknowledge that attitudes toward pictures in secular Western settings are indebted to long-standing Christian repertoires that require far more scholarly attention than they received so far. Contemporary Western societies

inherited an ambivalent stance toward pictures—a mix of love and hatred—that harks back at least to the “image wars” within Christianity in the context of the Protestant Reformation and Protestant assaults of Catholic paraphernalia, aptly characterized as “icono-clash” by Bruno Latour (2002), and further back into the Middle Ages. Popular movies, soap operas, and advertisements, in particular, make prolific use of Christian pictorial repertoires. Once one is alert to the presence of pictures in the public arena, one can only be struck by the frequency of the appearance of pictures with Christian motifs, especially Jesus. But also on the deeper level of attitudes toward pictures it is not difficult to find echoes of earlier forms of devotional piety and awe, as well as, of course, iconoclastic inclinations.

Therefore, instead of taking at face value a break in Western attitudes toward pictures in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the rise of a separate domain of art and aesthetics, it is important to question the assumption of a unilinear development from powerful pictures to art works, from a devotional to a disinterested aesthetic attitude, that underpins modernist teleological narratives. Such a narrative is predicated on the idea of secularization, according to which the public role and importance of religion declines. While it is true that with the rise of religion as a modern category it became subject to interiorization—a matter of belief and a domain for meaning making—it is problematic to assume that religion vanished from the public sphere. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we cannot help but notice that religion still is very much alive, in a broad array of ways, including devotional practices within religious organizations, the mobilization of politico-religious concerns, more individualized quests for spirituality (New Age), or in popular culture. The “religious past” is present in the public domain in myriad ways that cannot be contained by the simplistic notion of decline, processes of unchurching notwithstanding.

Regarding our understanding of pictures, it is important to acknowledge the long-standing religious roots of contemporary pictorial practices. This seems to be more easily said than done, however,

as art and religion occupy different domains. Religion is hardly a serious theme in art history (Elkins and Morgan 2009). Operating within a broader religious imagination that informs their production and use, pictures also condense and transmit this imagination—even implicitly and imperfectly—long after the ideational worlds out of which they were born broke down. Indeed, as Hans Belting noted: “Concepts of belief survive in pictorial concepts, and pictorial practices once started as belief practices” (2006: 7; author’s translation).⁵ The point is that in order to understand the intricacies of contemporary engagements with pictures, it is necessary to depart from their embeddedness in a world of lived experience and the discourses and debates about them (including, of course, the ongoing mobilization of terms as “idol” and “fetish”) within Christian—Catholic and Protestant—traditions. While Belting points at the Christian roots that survive in pictures (and our attitudes toward them), I would like to stress that even today Christianity—and other religions—to a large extent organize and shape pictorial practices in a direct manner, both in the supposedly secular West and beyond.

My approach to Christian pictures is grounded in an understanding of religion as mediation that necessarily requires media (De Vries 2001; Meyer 2008, 2010a). Instead of taking the divine as self-revealing—as claimed, especially, in Protestant ideas about God as the wholly Other—my focus as a scholar is on how religious mediation is able to convey to religious practitioners in a persuasive manner a sense of being in touch with the divine or transcendental. Media, here, are understood in a broad sense that surpasses a narrow definition in terms of mass media. Authorized as suitable conveyers of the divine within a religious regime (as for instance the medieval Christian Church), media make the religious imagination materialize in the world through things, bodies, texts, sounds, and pictures. Imagining a “beyond” that demands a special mode of access, religion itself may well be characterized as a “medium of absence” that renders present what is not “there” (Weibel 2011: 33). Acting as “mediators” that shape the content which they transmit, rather than merely acting as tools of transmission or “intermediaries,” media are the forms through which

religion matters and happens (Latour 2005: 39–40). I use form not in opposition to content, but as the necessary condition for expressing it as well as a modality for repetition. Indeed, religion is defined by structures of repetition that require particular forms (Meyer 2010b; Groys 2011: 25). In order to stress the multisensorial channels through which these forms address and shape religious subjects, I have coined the term “sensational forms.”⁶ Negotiated and authorized within religious traditions, these forms are central to generating religious sensations through which what is not “there” and “present” in an ordinary way can be experienced—over and over again—as available and accessible. Evolving around sensational forms, religions entail their own modalities of make-believe that produce belief.

Pictures operate within sensational forms that mediate the Christian imagination and shape belief in particular ways (as also suggested by the quote by Belting used as a motto to this essay, 2006: 176, author’s translation). Rather than having intrinsic power and agency, people learn to approach, value, treat, and look at pictures in specific ways, ensuing a process of animation through which pictures may (or may not) impress themselves on their beholders. Religions, in my understanding, entail quite explicit—and hence observable—regimes that stipulate the nature and status of pictures, establish modes of control and proper use of pictures, determine what to expect from them, and organize practices of approaching them, including devotional acts of looking (Morgan 1998). It is important here to take into account the socio-spatial setting in which pictures are placed next to other paraphernalia within architectonic structures. Taken as a whole, pictures and their entourage have a multisensorial appeal, invoking particular sensibilities among believers (James 2004).

Notwithstanding the Second Commandment, since the sixth century Christianity has deployed a positive, albeit continuously contested, attitude toward pictures as apt to render divinity present in the world. As Belting pointed out in *Das Echte Bild* (“the true/authentic picture”), religious pictures, including those of Jesus, are media that stand in for an absent body: “Where the body is absent, the

picture takes its place” (Belting 2007: 67; author’s translation). From this perspective, pictures and other media (for instance, relics) are indispensable to express—indeed, materialize—the religious imagination and its inner, mental images, yet are at the same time vested with insecurities and anxieties about their capacity to re-present truly and truthfully.

As Belting explains, taking the body of Jesus as a medium of divine presence—“the Word becoming flesh”—was the distinctive feature of Christianity—in contrast to Judaism and Islam, which emphasized the medium of writing. (Still, it would be a mistake to assume that there is no room at all for pictures in these religions.) Understanding—and eventually depicting—Jesus as the incarnation of the Word, Christianity moved back from text to the body and its pictorial representation. Rendering visible what is absent through the medium of painting, Jesus pictures entail a paradox of concomitant presence and absence, of the human hand and divine revelation, of life and its mediation. This is not only a question of how to relate the materiality of the picture to the principal impossibility to represent the divine through the human hand. Since pictures of Jesus depict as well as conceal (by merely standing in for his absent body)—acting as a “veil of the invisible” (Krüger 1997)—they invoke the question of truth. How to know whether a picture of Jesus is a true representation or a mere deception? If it is not only the face, but also a veil or mask, what does a picture of Jesus show and hide? How is the authenticity of the picture authorized, and on what grounds?

While contestations about the status of pictures as media that crystallize the Christian imagination in a complicated process of showing and concealing have always accompanied pictorial devotional practices, they gained a new momentum in the context of the Protestant Reformation (Kruse 2003). However, it should be kept in mind that, notwithstanding the occurrence of iconoclastic assaults, pictures retained importance within Protestantism. Disturbed by the violent destruction of pictures through the hands of revolting peasants, Luther stressed the importance of a pure *inner* religious imagination that was

to be cleansed by God. Rather than calling to abolish pictures per se, he proposed a new attitude toward them. Pictures were to be made subservient to the Word, thereby reduced to illustrations and signs (Belting 2007: 162–167). Combining pictures and biblical quotes through which the meaning of the former can be accessed, the popular lithograph of the *Broad and the Narrow Path* is a wonderful example of this typically Protestant attitude (Meyer 1999, chap. 2). The world, as it meets the eye, is confusing, and in need of the biblical text to be interpreted: pictures are signs that require texts to be understood. Here lie the grounds for a semiotic approach of pictures that no longer takes them seriously as presences in their own right. It is exactly this approach to pictures that is subject to fundamental critique in current research on “visual culture.”

These significant transformations regarding the role and place of pictures in the Christian imagination that entailed a reduction of pictures to some kind of signs and symbols notwithstanding, devotional pictorial practices remained important for Christian believers, Catholics and Protestants alike until deep into the twentieth century, including even in secular Northern Europe. In our contemporary world, religious imagery is flourishing on a global scale. Since the nineteenth century, Catholic and Protestant mission societies spread Christian pictures and their views about proper and improper attitudes toward them in the course of evangelization. There is a process of dazzling circulation and recycling of Christian imagery throughout the world that has been enhanced with the rise of digital technologies of mass reproduction. The relative dearth of studies of the spread and circulation of Christian imagery outside of the West—so far mainly done by anthropologists (for example, Napolitano 2007; Spyer 2008, both on Jesus pictures) does not do justice to the importance of Christianity as a resource of contemporary “visual culture.”⁷ Whether we like it or not, Christianity, and religion at large, is a factor that—still, and probably for a long time to come—shapes worlds of lived experience in which pictures, and the practices and debates which they generate, have a strong positive or negative presence.

PICTORIAL DEVOTION

Let me illustrate this by taking as an example the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a Catholic devotional cult that was exported across the world in the course of missionization, especially by the Jesuits. Pompeo Batoni's *Sacred Heart of Jesus* painting (1767), placed in the Jesuit Il Gesu Church in Rome, became the prime pictorial model around which this devotion spread (Morgan 2008, forthcoming 2012). Recycled in numerous versions, it circulated and still circulates via prints, posters, and, recently, devotional websites and online shops. Differences between these versions have to do with the gestures of the hands, the color of the clothes (also often seen is a white dress with a red or green mantle), and the position of the head (in Battoni's painting, Jesus slightly turns his head away from the beholder, others show a frontal perspective), and the gaze (in some pictures Jesus involves the beholder in a penetrating gaze, in others he contemplates, looking "through" the beholder).

Harking back to a long-standing mystical devotional tradition around the heart of Jesus, the modern cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is heavily indebted to baroque spirituality. This grand-scale devotional cult started as part of a broader Catholic project of recapturing believers through a highly tangible and visceral aesthetics of persuasion grounded in the spectacular "visual culture" of the baroque. It is important to note that the pictorial representation of Jesus pulling aside his mantle and pointing at his heart, fixing the beholder with a penetrating gaze (as painted by Batoni) is grounded in the visionary experiences of an encounter with Jesus by French nun Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647–1690). As a result of intense prayer and contemplation that generated strong feelings of an intimate, bodily encounter with Jesus, Alacoque saw and experienced him as "the divine spouse of my soul" (Morgan forthcoming 2012: 2). Batoni's painting, and the numerous variations to which it gave rise, does not stand alone. Especially in the nineteenth century, Alacoque's vision spoke to the imagination of Catholic artists and this brought about a number of paintings that depict Jesus appearing to here (for example, the *Santa Margherita Maria Alacoque e la devozione al Sacro Cuore* by Rodolfo Morgari's [1827–1907]).

As David Morgan pointed out, rooted in Alacoque's vision, the well-known picture of the Sacred Heart re-presents what she "saw," and what believers following in her footsteps are also able to "see." Embedded in everyday religious practice, the picture is placed in the midst of beholders' engagement with Jesus: "an image through which the devout saw and were seen by their Savior" (Morgan forthcoming 2012: 11). Morgan analyzes the picture as embedded in a broader religious practice that, though taking the gaze as a starting point, is deeply visceral. In other words, instead of taking vision for granted, Morgan argues that religious practice shapes modes of looking, hence allowing to "see" what is not "there" in an ordinary manner. Believers engage with the picture through learned "looking acts" (Morgan 1998)—that is, religiously authorized and transmitted modes of engaging with pictures, through which the presence of Jesus and God is experienced. In short, the picture is the locus for a spiritual encounter in which the presence of the divine is effected through practices of "visual piety." It is a medium that effects divine presence.

Despite being contested from the outset within the Catholic Church on the part of those in favor of a more rational theology that was grounded in the Enlightenment and that looked with a suspicious eye on the centrality of devotional pictures (Morgan 1998: 13), the Sacred Heart of Jesus devotion retained its popularity. Since the mid-nineteenth century, it has been circulating throughout the world, with Batoni's painting being taken as the canonical representation, producing a variety of recycled forms. Stressing its popular character, however, does not imply that the devotion existed in the margins. At the height of the *Kulturkampf*, in 1875 the Catholic Church consecrated all Catholics—and in 1899 the whole world—to the Sacred Heart. The intensification of the devotion also showed in the naming of chapels, such as the famous Basilique du Sacré Coeur in Paris (consecrated in 1891 and fully completed in 1914) as well as many other churches throughout the Catholic world. It is still one of the key instances of worldwide popular Catholic piety, but also has become popular outside of the Catholic Church.



Figure 1: Jesus pictures in a stall in Accra (Photo: Birgit Meyer)

Here I would like to turn to Ghana, the location of my research on appropriations of Christianity over the past two decades, where the Sacred Heart of Jesus has also touched ground. While I have long concentrated on Protestant missions and the African churches that came out of them (Meyer 1999), as well as the rise of Pentecostalism, I have more recently developed a strong interest in Catholic material culture. This is part of a larger project of developing a “material” approach toward Christianity and religion at large (Meyer and Houtman forthcoming 2012; Morgan 2010). Catholicism itself had a long history in the area known as the Gold Coast and Slave Coast (called Ghana since independence was gained in 1957), pointing back to the building of trading posts and military bastions since the fifteenth century. Catholic missionary proselytization geared toward local populations only started in the late nineteenth century, at the height of the Sacred Heart of Jesus devotion in Europe. Though detailed research still has to be done, it is clear that this devotion was brought to Ghana by Catholic missionaries, many

of whom came from the southern parts of the Netherlands and had a background in rural popular Catholicism with its well-developed visual religious culture. In these settings, academic theology had a limited impact. Religious experience evolved within a devotional practice to which pictures were central. In this setting, the picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was placed in many homes, functioning as a center of daily prayers and a refuge in times of danger (as for instance lightning and thunder storms) (Harrie Leyten, pers. comm.).⁸ Coming from rural areas in which popular Catholic devotional practices thrived, missionaries promoted the Catholic material culture with which they had grown up in the mission fields. This yielded a dazzling array of material forms around the worship of saints. Striving to modernize the church, Vatican II (1962–1965) stressed the centrality of Christ in order to curtail this wild growth (the purpose of the Second Vatican Council was to adapt Catholicism to the modern world and open up ecumenical dialogue). Favoring Acculturation, the council also stimulated designing pictures and sculptures in line with local cultural-aesthetic forms. However, this did not put an end to previous forms of devotion, such as that of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In Ghana, a number of chapels are dedicated to and contain pictures and sculptures of the Sacred Heart.

Together with my colleague Rhoda Woets, I am presently engaged in research on Jesus pictures in Accra, exploring the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus within the ambit of the Catholic Church and beyond. The picture and devotion are not confined to, let alone controlled by, the Catholic Church. Thanks to technologies of mass production, the picture—in different versions—has a dazzling presence in Ghana's capital city of Accra, where Christianity is dominant. While the Sacred Heart is the most prominent picture of Jesus, other Jesus pictures are around, including reproductions of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* (1495–1498), Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ* (Morgan 1998: 2), and numerous other motifs (including Jesus holding a sheep) (see figure 1). Offered for sale in roadside stalls, these pictures are placed in offices, shops, hairdressing and beauty salons, and private homes. Stickers and small sculptures can be found in cars,

while the Jesus motif nowadays is also popular as a canoe decoration. Importantly, pictures of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and other Jesus pictures are employed not only by Catholics, but also by Protestant and Pentecostal believers. This is remarkable because at the leadership level, Protestantism and Pentecostalism have long deployed a heavily iconophobic stance, according to which Catholics are likened to “heathen” worshippers of “idols” and “fetishes.” The Sacred Heart of Jesus is widely popular and omnipresent in public space, yet at the same time subject to contestation.

Before turning to the appeal of and anxieties invoked by such pictures, let us have a look at wayside artist Gilbert Forson with his painting of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (see figure 2). Attracted by the display of a Jesus picture that made use of the motif of Mel Gibson’s movie *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) in his open air atelier in Accra, Rhoda asked him to make a painting of the Sacred Heart. Forson, she told me, immediately took his mobile phone to look at his picture gallery where he stored a number of pictures he had downloaded earlier. In his practice as a popular painter, like his colleagues, he often copied pictures according to the wishes of his clients, taking pride in his ability to reproduce likeness between copy and “original” (Woets 2011: 372). Jesus is a prominent motif for these painters, who seek to arouse interest in customers by displaying their capacity to copy well-known faces, thereby re-mediating digital pictures as paintings. In this setting, copying and creativity go well together, as copying here is a practice that harnesses global pictures into the local realm. Forson opted for a version of the Sacred Heart of Jesus that goes back to Batoni’s.

While Jesus, in many of the reproductions of the Sacred Heart of Jesus that circulate in Ghana, has brown eyes and a white skin, Forson’s Jesus has blue eyes and a slightly darker skin. Still, the blue eyes mark him as a foreigner. In the course of attempts after Vatican II to Africanize Christianity under the banner of acculturation, some Ghanaian painters have produced pictures of Jesus with a black skin. Nonetheless, among the ordinary people there is a strong popularity of pictures of a white Jesus. In interviews, Rhoda and I were told that in any case,

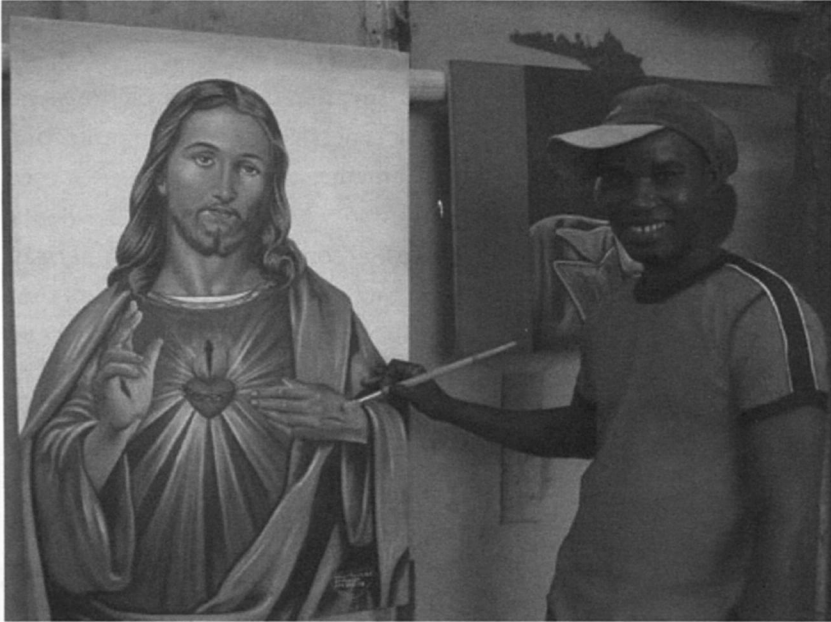


Figure 2: Gilbert Forson and the Sacred Heart of Jesus (photo: Rhoda Woets)

since Jesus had lived in Palestine, he would have been white, not black. This betrays a search for a true representation. While the issue of race certainly plays a role in processes of conversion, I am wary at trying to reduce the appeal of Christianity for African converts to submitting themselves to white racial superiority. Though this may appear counterintuitive at first sight, insisting on the foreignness of Jesus, which is signified by the color of his skin or eyes, may be regarded as grounded in an Africanized understanding of Christianity. As I found in my work on early conversion to Christianity (Meyer 1999), the attraction of Jesus as a foreign powerful figure stands in line with local ways of accessing spiritual power through cults from afar.⁹ The appreciation of Jesus for his foreign features, as represented in devotional pictures, signals a rootedness in traditional cosmologies that were not rendered obsolete through conversion but still shape local Christianity. Certainly, at a time when people eagerly seek to link up with the wider world, striving to get passports and visas in order to migrate, the picture of a foreign

Jesus is appreciated as a suitable medium for bringing about such a link. Such pictures mediate global connectivity.

Against this backdrop it is not surprising that the pictures and sculptures of Jesus are placed in work spaces so as to assure protection and success. Put inside or on a taxi, a picture or sticker of Jesus is used to ward off passengers with an evil mind who might cause accidents. Painted on a canoe, a picture of Jesus, accompanied by the American flag, promises protection and a good catch in the risky business of fishing far out at sea (figure 3). In work spaces, especially hairdressing and beauty salons where employees are in intimate contact with strangers, the presence of Jesus by virtue of his picture is found to be consoling and protective. Next to the use of the picture for the sake of protection and progress, people also invoke his name. As Ghanaians put it, “there is power in the name of Jesus.” Numerous accounts circulate of people calling the name of Jesus just in time to prevent sickness, death, and disaster. Being “covered by the blood of Jesus” is another often heard expression, also found on stickers, that highlights how Jesus is rendered present through media such as stickers and words.

Through formal interviews and more casual conversations, we learned that people develop a personal relationship with their own picture of Jesus through prayer. While these pictures are available on a mass scale in all kinds of versions and bought as commodities, they are, as it were, singularized through personal practices of visual piety. Praying repeatedly in front of a picture of Jesus in the home generates a deep relationship between beholder and picture that can no longer be contained in a simple person-picture dualism. At stake is a logic of animation, in which beholder and picture merge through a mutual look (similar to the devotional Hindu practice of *darshan*, where the eye operates as “an organ of tactility”) (Pinney 2004: 193). Addressed through prayer, Jesus looks back at those who worship him. Rhoda noted some intriguing testimonies made in a Pentecostal-charismatic church—where there is much room given to testimony (for example, speaking about divine miraculous interventions). One incident included a middle-aged woman who stated that it was thanks to the presence of

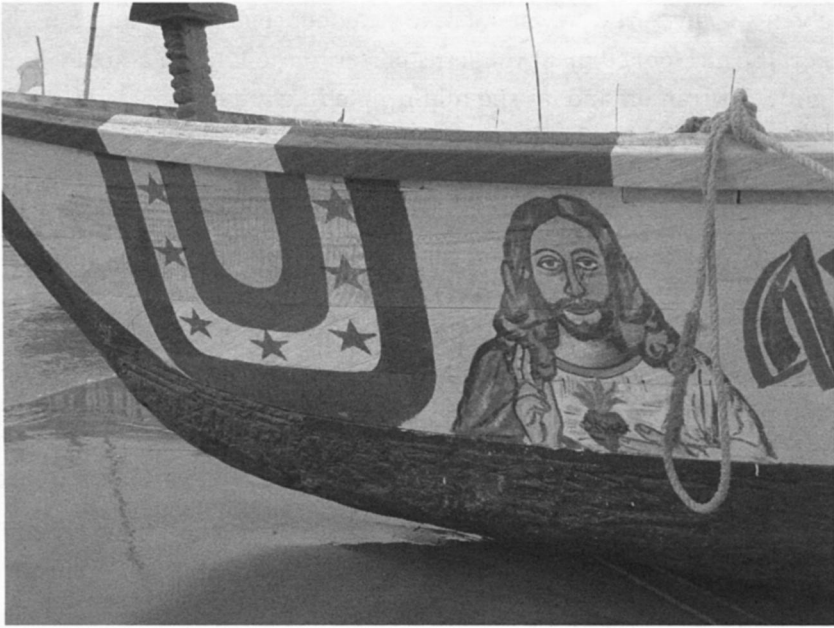


Figure 3: Scared Heart of Jesus on a canoe (photo: Birgit Meyer)

three posters of Jesus in her living room that an attempt by thieves to break into her house had not been successful. She also explained that she once saw Jesus weep when she told him about her agonies. This example shows how even a mass-produced picture can easily be loaded with some kind of aura (rather than losing it, as suggested by Walter Benjamin) so that it operates in a way reminiscent of late medieval pictorial practices around weeping or bleeding pictures (Bynum 2011) and Alacoque's visceral visionary encounters with Jesus. Taking a mass-produced picture as a medium to reach out to Jesus, he is perceived to be somehow present in the picture, though, as people keep on insisting, this does not mean that they would worship the picture itself. In this understanding, Jesus uses the picture representing him to state his presence and power in the face of believers.

This is not confined to expressions of mere sympathy. The picture may also play a more active role. One man running a lottery booth told Rhoda that he heard a testimony in a Pentecostal-charismatic church

about a young girl who was about to steal food. Pulling the lid from the pot, the girl looked up at the Jesus poster in the kitchen and saw him smile. She ran off and, as she told people in church, she would never steal food again. In a recent movie, *Love and Sex* (dir. Socrate Safo, 2010), there is a scene in which a prostitute visits her former boyfriend and tries to seduce him. Seated on the sofa in the living room, the man sheepishly allows her to open his trousers and start kissing him. All of a sudden, however, the picture of Jesus that hangs above the sofa is shown to come alive and act. A kind of arrow emerges from the picture that enters the man's body from the head down to his genitals, making him push the woman away. Jesus, the scene suggests, sees everything and has an eye on the people in the house so as to prevent them from going astray.

Importantly, the pictures of Jesus and their animation through devotional practice echoes traditional ways of dealing with spirits. According to traditional cosmologies, it was the task of human beings to create abodes in which spirits would dwell (Meyer 2010c: 108–112). Also, as Susanne Preston Blier shows in detail in her work on African *vodun* (that is, the gods of the Ewe and Fon), sculptures representing spirits were loaded with power in a process of mutual engagement that involved spitting, spilling of blood, drinks and so on, addressing people “at the rawest sensorial level” (Blier 1995: 76). The point here is that humans engage with invisible forces via particular (human-made) media in which spirits become present through practices of animation. Such practices of animation are also being deployed with regard to Jesus in the context of popular Christianity.

Here lie the reasons for the contestations, already alluded to, of Jesus pictures as a medium. This position is mobilized on the part of many—though not all—Protestant and Pentecostal leaders and staunch church members. Though many Protestant and Pentecostal leaders stress the problem of idolatry in their rejection of Jesus pictures, thereby reiterating the typically Protestant iconoclastic stance, in the face of the exuberant presence of Jesus pictures, some of them appear to develop more positive attitudes. A number of Pentecostal pastors

would stress that though it is wrong to use a Jesus picture as an “idol,” it might still be possible to use it as a “symbol,” the point being that no power would be attributed to the picture per se (Meyer 2010b: 114, 118). Therefore, the popular devotional practices around these pictures are not rejected because they are found to be silly superstitions (that is, beliefs in nonexistent entities). On the contrary, the power of these pictures and, in particular, the alleged capacity of the eyes of the depiction of Jesus to see everything, are acknowledged. This echoes nineteenth-century strategies of diabolizing indigenous gods and spirits that were recast as “Christian” demons held to operate under the auspices of the devil on the part of Protestant missions. Using the terms “idol” and “fetish” interchangeably, Protestant missionaries fought both “heathen” and Catholic uses of pictures, statues, and all kinds of other paraphernalia. In their perspective, these material religious items had to be replaced by an inner, Christian conviction. Interestingly, though, the strong assaults with regard to the materiality of traditional cults (and Catholicism) did not diminish the power attributed to religious things, but heightened it.

A similar logic is at play in the contestation of Jesus pictures. Those opposing their use insist that praying in front of such pictures reiterates a “heathen” religious attitude that vests a picture with power. The only change, many pastors argue, is that indigenous sculptures are exchanged for Christian pictures, with the inner image still being the same: an “idol.” Many opponents pointed out that it is not the eyes of Jesus, but the eyes of the devil who capture the beholder in their gaze. As one young woman, an actress called Roberta, explained to me (Meyer 2010c: 121–123), such pictures, though depicting Jesus, were prone to being hijacked by Satan, the “master of deception.” He would use the picture as a mask. Therefore, those who directed their prayers to Jesus in front of his picture unknowingly addressed the devil, loading him with power through their prayers, and subjecting themselves to his gaze. This is also the theme of a movie, *The Beast Within* (dir. Nana King, 1993) in which a Sacred Heart of Jesus poster, placed in the living room, is unmasked as acting like a screen behind which a traditional reli-

gious spirit operates, hidden and undisturbed (Meyer 2010c: 119–120). There are numerous similar stories that call for an anti-idolatric religiosity that discards the use of pictures. How to feel the presence of the divine if pictures and other objects are banned as potentially devilish is a difficult question that involves “the problem of presence” of the divine (Engelke 2007). In Pentecostal circles, calling the name of Jesus is much stressed, as well as the experience of being “filled with the Holy Spirit”—an experience in which the believer’s body is held to function as prime medium, and index, of divine presence. But even the fiercest criticism of devotional pictures and their rejection as satanic does not move beyond the recognition of the power of pictures. Whether they are found suitable to reach God through Jesus or prone to be an abode of the devil who misuses the picture of Jesus, for proponents and critics, pictures of Jesus are perceived as animated and alive.

TO CONCLUDE

By focusing on the spread, use, and attitudes toward the Sacred Heart and other Jesus pictures in southern Ghana, it has not been my intention to introduce a marginal or even exotic case, but to stress the global and religious dimensions of “visual culture.” Interesting in a setting like Ghana is the high occurrence of explicit “picture talk”—involving devotion as well as contestation—through which it is possible for researchers to get a clearer understanding of the pictorial practices within which pictures do things for and want things from people. This kind of research allows us to witness the logic of animation, through which humans engage with pictures, in action. Clearly, the fascination of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and other Jesus pictures appears to lie in its visual and visceral appeal through which believers are invited to relate to Jesus through a mutual, chiasmic look (seeing and being seen). While the pictorial practices surrounding Jesus pictures echoes attitudes toward figures of local gods, at least part of the popularity of the former is the promise of global connectivity. At stake is a heavy involvement on the part of human beings in making religion “happen” through devotional, pictorial practices.

Seeking to extend the ways in which the question of the power and agency of pictures is discussed in the study of “visual culture,” I propose to approach pictures as placed in particular traditions of looking, upon which the sensorial engagement between people and pictures is grounded, and through which pictures may (or are deliberately denied to) assume a particular sensuous presence and mediate what remains invisible to the eye. Demanding “the belief of our look,” pictures do not command belief “by themselves.” It is practices that make believe—though belief is always haunted by doubt, just as claims of truthful representation have at their flipside the fear of deception. Therefore, instead of focusing on the picture itself, I advocate a relational approach of the ways in which human-picture bonds are constituted, thereby opening up a broader field in which attitudes toward pictures are organized. Made to mediate absence and effect spiritual presence, religious pictures—that is, pictures authorized and authenticated to act as a medium of the divine—are key in invoking religious sensations. Exactly for that reason, such pictures should not be analyzed simply as single items, but as part and parcel of broader sociopolitical processes that organize the visual and make it possible for pictures to be “seen” and “show,” as well as conceal, something in the first place. Religious pictures, in other words, are part of the cultural construction of seeing and not-seeing, or what Jacques Rancière calls “the distribution of the sensible” (Meyer 2010b: 754–755). Therefore, the “power of pictures” can only be grasped by bringing to the fore the structures of power that organize what and how we see and do not see.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea for this essay has been developed in the context of the research program *Creativity in a World of Movement* (CIM). In this program, funded by Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA), I am directing a subproject that explores the spread of Christian imagery in Ghana (Rhoda Woets and myself) and Brazil (João Rickli). Furthermore, my affiliation as a fellow of the Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin has enabled me to delve into scholarship in “visual culture,” especially

the German *Bildwissenschaften* (visual culture studies). I am grateful to Christiane Kruse for her stimulating guidance, and Rhoda Woets for sharing her research materials. I would like to thank Harrie Leyten, David Morgan, Jojada Verrips, and Rhoda Woets for comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper.

NOTES

1. Here we face a limit of the designation “*visual* culture.” Even though vision is explored as socially embedded and multi-sensorial, I regard this designation as provisional, waiting to be transcended by a more suitable term.
2. And even in the modern study of religion, the main concern became the systems of meanings that underpin belief. Only recently, scholars of religion turned to questions of materiality and started to take pictures—and religious things at large—seriously (e.g., Meyer and Houtman forthcoming 2012).
3. My ideas about the role of the religious past have been shaped by acting as a member of the committee of the Dutch research program “The Future of the Religious Past” (see De Vries 2008).
4. The idea that the human-picture relation entails a universal dimension is deployed into different directions. Next to philosophically oriented approaches, as developed by Belting or Bredekamp (e.g., his theory of the “picture act,” 2010), there also is a neuro-aesthetic research line that looks for the universal at the level of the brain (Freedberg and Gallese 2007).
5. Interestingly, this book offers a critique of his earlier view, as developed in *Likeness and Presence*, of a linear history of the picture according to which religion is left behind in favor of aesthetics (Belting 2007: 217).
6. According to Meyer (2010a: 751):

Sensational forms are authorized modes for invoking and organizing access to the transcendental that shape both religious content (beliefs, doctrines, sets of symbols)

and norms. Involving religious practitioners in particular practices of worship and patterns of feeling, these forms play a central role in modulating practitioners as religious subjects. Thus, sensational forms are part of a specific religious aesthetics, which governs a sensory engagement of humans with the divine and each other and generates particular sensibilities. Religions operate through historically-generated sensational forms that are distinctive and induce repeatable patterns of feeling and action. Sensational forms emerge over time and are often subject to contestation and even abandonment (as in the shift from image to text in the Reformation). They are thus an excellent point of entry into processes of religious transformation.

7. So far, in historical and ethnographic research on Catholic and Protestant missions, little attention has been paid to the circulation of pictures and other “things of faith” (Kasprzycki 2006). This is the concern of the research project on the circulation of Christian imagery on which this essay is based.
8. Leyten is an anthropologist and former Catholic priest who was active in Ghana in the 1960s. He later studied anthropology and became the Africa-curator at the Royal Tropical Museum in Amsterdam. He was my teacher of museum anthropology when I studied anthropology in the mid-1980s.
9. In my area of research among the Ewe, spirit cults that came from afar were particularly appreciated for their power. In pre- and early colonial times, until the British colonial administration deployed measures to ban the spread of such cults, numerous cults swept through the country that owed their attraction to the fact that they came from the north, an area associated with superior spiritual powers.

REFERENCES

- Appadurai, Arjun, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

- The Beast Within*. Directed by Nana King. Accra: Astron Productions, 1993.
- Belting, Hans. *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- . *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*. München: Fink Verlag, 2001.
- . *Das echte Bild. Bildfragen als Glaubensfragen*. München: C. H. Beck, 2006.
- Bredenkamp, Horst. *Theorie des Bildakts*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2010.
- Bynum, Catherine Walker. *Christian Materiality. An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*. New York: Zone Books, 2011.
- De Vries, Hent. "In Media Res: Global Religion, Public Spheres, and the Task of Contemporary Religious Studies." in *Religion and Media*. Eds. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001: 3–42.
- . "Introduction: Why Still 'Religion'?" *Religion: Beyond a Concept*. Eds. Hent de Vries. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008: 1–98.
- Elkins, James, and David Morgan, eds. *Re-enchantment*. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Engelke, Matthew. *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.
- Freedberg, David. *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Freedberg, David, and Vittorio Gallese. "Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Esthetic Experience." *TRENDS in Cognitive Sciences* 11:5 (2007): 197–203.
- Gell, Alfred. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Groys, Boris. "Religion in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Medium Religion. Faith. Geopolitics. Art*. Eds. Boris Groys and Peter Weibel. Köln: Walther König, 2011: 22–29.
- James, Liz. "Senses and Sensibility in Byzantium." *Art History* 27:4 (September 2004): 522–537.
- Kasprzycki, Sylvia S. *Die Dinge des Glaubens: Menominees und Missionare im*

- kulturellen Dialog, 1830–1880. Wien, Berlin: Lit-Verlag, 2006.
- Keane, Webb. *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.
- Krüger, Klaus. *Das Bild als Schleier des Unsichtbaren. Ästhetische Illusion in der Kunst der frühen Neuzeit in Italien*. München: Fink Verlag, 2001.
- Kruse, Christiane. *Wozu Menschen malen. Historische Begründungen eines Bildmediums*. München: Fink Verlag, 2003.
- Latour, Bruno. “What Is Iconoclasm? Or Is there a World Beyond the Image Wars?” *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art*. Eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, Karlsruhe: 2km/Center for Art and Media and Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002: 14–18.
- . “Fetish-factish.” *Material Religion* 7:1 (2011): 42–49.
- Love and Sex*. Directed by Socrate Safo. Accra: Movie Africa Productions, 2010.
- Meyer, Birgit. *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana*. IAL-Series. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.
- . “Religious Sensations. Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion.” *Religion: Beyond a Concept*. Eds. Hent de Vries. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008: 704–723.
- . “Aesthetics of Persuasion. Global Christianity and Pentecostalism’s Sensational Forms.” *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Special Issue on Global Christianity, *Global Critique* 9 (2010a): 741–763.
- . “The Indispensability of Form.” *The Immanent Frame*. 2010b <<http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/11/10/indispensability-of-form/>>.
- . “‘There is a Spirit in that Image’: Mass-Produced Jesus Pictures and Protestant Pentecostal Animation in Ghana.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52:1 (2010): 100–130.
- Meyer, Birgit, and Dick Houtman. “Material Religion—How Things Matter.” *Things—Religion and the Question of Materiality*. Eds. Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer. New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. *What Do Pictures Want? The Loves and Loves of Images*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

- . “Four Fundamental Concepts of Image Science.” *Visual Literacy*. Eds. James Elkins. New York: Routledge, 2008: 14–30.
- Morgan, David. *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998.
- . *The Lure of Images*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007.
- . “The Sacred Heart of Jesus: The Visual Evolution of a Devotion.” *Meertens Ethnology Cahier 4*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press and University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- . *Religion and Material Culture. The Matter of Belief*. Eds. David Morgan. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- . “Rhetoric of the Heart: Figuring the Body in Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.” *Things: Material Religion and the Topography of Divine Spaces*. Eds. Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer. New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming.
- Napolitano, Valentina. “Of Migrant Revelations and Anthropological Awakenings.” *Social Anthropology* 15:1 (2007): 71–87.
- Pietz, William. “The Problem of the Fetish.” Part I *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9: 5–17; Part II *Res* 13: 23–45; Part III *Res* 16: 105–23 (1985–1988).
- Pinney, Christopher. “‘Photos of the Gods’: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India.” London: Reaktion Books, 2004.
- Preston Blier, Susan. *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Spyer, Patricia. “Christ at Large: Iconography and Territoriality in Postwar Ambon.” *Religion: Beyond a Concept*. Hent de Vries, ed. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008: 524–549.
- Weibel, Peter. “Religion as a Medium—the Media of Religion.” *Medium Religion. Faith. Geopolitics. Art*. Eds. Boris Groys and Peter Weibel. Köln: Walther König: 30–43.
- Woets, Rhoda. “What Is This? Framing Ghanaian Art from the Colonial Encounter to the Present.” PhD Diss., VU University Amsterdam, 2011.