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A religion of film. Experiencing Christianity and videos beyond semiotics in rural Benin

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Chapter 5: The Life of Christian Videos

It is night. Jesus walks into the frame from the right to a shrine lit up by moonlight. Soft music is playing. Jesus briefly looks upwards, puts a cloth on his head, places his hands on the shrine and kneels down. He folds his hands and rests them on the shrine. A sideways close-up of Jesus portrays his face half hidden by the cloth. He says something and continues to move his lips while light suddenly appears on him and the shrine together with a swishing sound. Cut to a shot that shows a man-like figure clad in white surrounded by light and a voice says something. The scene turns back to the sideways portrait of Jesus kneeling by the shrine: He lowers his head again and the camera zooms in on the shrine while somebody is talking. The image now shows drops of blood appearing on the shrine.

This is a scene of the *Jesus Film* as some people in the Commune of Cobly might have seen it. Several viewers of the film recognised shrine entities and people presenting offerings and praying to them, including, in one instance, Jesus himself. One viewer perceived Jesus regularly praying to his ancestors, whom others visually identified in the film, for example in the form of the people who constantly surrounded him. Others interpreted Jesus' death as an offering to a shrine entity, as Jesus staunchly refused to submit to the authority of its priests.

Such examples of polysemic interpretations of the *Jesus Film* do not correspond with the hopes and expectations of the film's producers and distributors. For them, the *Jesus Film* as the Word of God on film is meant to have an immediate impact on its viewers by revealing the Gospel in a direct and unmediated manner (see Chapter 3). While such polysemic interpretations may not always constitute prominent and central phenomena, they nonetheless raise crucial questions around the problem of how audiences receive media products and how they make sense of them. In this chapter I shift my attention from the producers and distributors of *Jesus* (1979), *La Solution* (1994) and *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002), as discussed in Chapter 3, to the three films' reception by audiences in the Commune of Cobly of Benin. Rather than engaging in semiotic textual analysis of reception, I

am more interested in how presencing processes work for the viewers of these Christian films, thereby shifting the attention from meaning to action and “widening the frame of reception studies to include the whole of culture” (Spitulnik 2002b: 351).

My starting point is that “texts [and media products more generally] cannot determine their own reading” (Buckland 2000: 72). Examples that support this premise range from an essay on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in Nigeria (Bohannon 1967) to various studies of film (see, e.g., Jhala 1996; Kulick and Willson 1994; Larkin 1997; Liebes and Katz 1993; Martinez 1990, 1992). Indeed, polysemic interpretations are likely to be accentuated when media products are consumed in a setting different to the one that its makers originally had in mind. More generally, it has been widely acknowledged that the “context”, or, more specifically, people’s prior knowledge and experience, plays an important role in cultural interpretation.³⁶ In spite of the recognition that media are open and polysemic, and that they rely on the context in which they are consumed, I find that communication models only manage to address these issues in a limited way and are sometimes lacking in other areas I consider important (see, e.g., Carey 1989; Fiske 1987; Hall 1980; Jensen 1995; Morley 1992).

While people’s prior knowledge and experience clearly influence the way they engage in presencing processes, thereby contributing to polysemic interpretations, I stress that the nature of media and their associated technologies themselves also need to be considered as contributing to presencing (Ginsburg, *et al.* 2002: 19-21; Spitulnik 2002b). Building on the previous chapters, I am particularly interested in how the interplay of the transmaterial and semiotic presencing principles that people draw on are involved in the presencing processes. I count these different factors that potentially influence presencing as part of what has often been referred to under the catch-all notion of “context”, which itself is multifaceted and problematic (R. Dilley 1999).

³⁶ The importance of the “context” or the wider setting in which communication happens has, for example, been recognised in anthropology (Asad 1986; Crawford 1996; R. Dilley 1999; Fabian 1995; Kulick and Willson 1994), semiotics and communication more generally (Carey 1989; Gutt 2000; Jensen 1995), as well as in media reception studies (Ang 1996; Evans 1990; Fiske 1987; Friedman 2006; Liebes and Katz 1993; Mankekar 1999; Moores 1993; Morley 1992; Spitulnik 2002b). Marcus Banks summarises this recognition succinctly: “All visual forms are socially embedded” (2001: 79).

As in previous chapters, I need to go beyond Peircean semiotics (Peirce 1940; Short 2007), its more recent material extension (Keane 2003, 2005, 2007) and social semiotics (Hodge and Kress 1988; Iedema 2001; Jensen 1995; van Leeuwen 2005). Even though such newer approaches have moved beyond purely linguistic, structuralist and dichotomising discourses they are still by definition based on the atomistic assumption that signs are dualistically or triadically structured, making a difference between signifier and signified or sign and referent. This hinders coming to terms with the more experiential and transmaterial aspect of presencing whose resulting entities cannot always be qualified as structured signs.

On the other hand, semiotic approaches still can make a valid contribution to the understanding of presencing processes since they give attention to visibility and adopt versions of constructionism as a basic framework, allowing them to share a basis with contemporary anthropology. Accordingly, I build on Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model of communication and by extension the subsequent television reception studies that made use of it. The limitations of such studies are that they remain firmly rooted in conventional semiotics and that they are centred on Euro-American settings. Indeed, apart from the notable exception of Hortense Powdermaker (1962), it is only recently that scholars have started to take an interest in studying audiences in other parts of world too, such as Papua New Guinea (Kulick and Willson 1994), China (Friedman 2006), India and its diaspora (Gillespie 1995a, 1995b; Jhala 1996; Mankekar 1999, 2002; Srinivas 1998, 2002) and Africa (Akpabio 2007; Barber 2000; Bouchard 2010; Pype 2012; Schulz 2012; Talabi 1989; Touré 2006; Ukah 2005; Werner 2006, 2012).

In the first part of this chapter I discuss and elaborate theoretical aspects of reception theory that are pertinent to my study. In the second half, I discuss the three films *Jesus*, *La Solution* and *Yatin*, focusing on how people in the Commune of Cibly experienced watching them and what they made of them. The *Jesus Film* lends itself best to discuss the effects of the incongruity of film, by which I understand socio-cultural differences between a film and its receptors. If this incongruity is significant, as is the case in the *Jesus Film*, the resulting interpretive field needs to accommodate a more diverse plurality of meanings. *Yatin* is particularly interesting as the visual codes of Nollywood make it the least incongruous and therefore most accessible film to the viewers in the Commune of Cibly. While *La*

Solution can be placed between the two other films, its narrative stands out as many viewers could directly relate to it. Most people understood *Jesus* as a film about Christianity, similar to the message of the Bible, while the other two films often present themselves as audiovisual sermons to their viewers (cf. Pype 2012: 107, 121) as they help people think through problems they face that result from shrines and witches.

The reception study demonstrates that all of the research participants in the Commune of Cobby, who watched the three films with me, drew on their experience and previously held knowledge and assumptions to make sense of the films. This shows that their socio-cultural settings play a crucial role in presencing processes, inevitably leading to polysemic interpretations, or, as I prefer to call it, a broad interpretative field. Accordingly, I argue that films do not offer a message that is communicated and then either understood or misunderstood. Rather, they offer a presencing resource, whose potential the viewers try to exploit to the best of their abilities by using their knowledge and experience, and by employing the interplay of the two presencing principles to guide their interpretation. Filmic presencing results in an interpretative field of plural meanings that provides the potential for an experience to audiences that is enjoyable and that affirms and sometimes alters the way they perceive the world in which they live and with which they interact.

Presencing Beyond the Semiotics of Film

Semiotics has been highly important and influential in film theory, following both the Saussurean and Peircean traditions (see, e.g., Ehrat 2004; Stam, *et al.* 1992; Metz 1991 [1974]; Wollen 1972). Film semiotics analyses films as text, which involves the identification of signs and sign processes. I find that such secular analysis with structuralist leanings has something inherently ambiguous and even paradoxical about it, since the experiential and religious nature of film stays largely unaccounted for. On the other hand, when film analysis focuses on watching films as an immediate experience, the complexities of its production and textual existence typically associated with semiotics shift into the background. Furthermore, films often appear as credible and veracious, even though they are often artificial and fictitious. As for the materiality of films, it is clear that they

are essentially material by relying on material processes in their production and on technological commodities for their viewing. Yet, watching films is often more than material interaction and mediation, even though the exact nature of such film watching is difficult to capture in any other way than the admittedly vague term of “experience”.

This semiotic problem of “the dialectic of mediation and immediacy” (Eisenlohr 2009; see also B. Meyer 2011b) that film poses takes me back to where I started, namely to the discussion of stones, or shrine entities, in terms of semiotification and the dynamics of spirit and matter (Chapter 2). As already noted, some people in the Commune of Cobly consider these stones as live entities and beings in their own right. Their relational, experiential and above all transmaterial nature makes it difficult, if not impossible, to analyse them in semiotic terms. During recent decades, however, different processes of semiotification have become popular among some people. This results in them sometimes perceiving stone entities in terms of the separation of spirit and matter. Accordingly, stones cease to be transmaterially alive and can now be conceived of as material symbols of spiritual beings that, in turn, can exist independently of their material support. Such shrines that serve as abodes for spirits become accessible to semiotic analysis.

Similarly, films can generally be watched in an experiential and transmaterial way or they can be analysed in more semiotic terms. In Chapter 2 I argue that both ways can be captured through what I call presencing. This process relies on the interplay of presencing principles that describe how people make films, as well as other semiotic resources, present and how these resources come to function as entities in the world. I can thus describe the more experiential ways of watching films as drawing on the transmaterial presencing principle, while semiotic analysis requires a presencing principle that inevitably leads to the identification of signs and are thus iconic, symbolic or indexical in nature. Both the transmaterial and the semiotic presencing principles often co-exist to different degrees for different people. Especially when people watch films in other ways than for semiotic analysis, they can usually be described as involving the transmaterial presencing principle at least to some extent. During my reception research in the Commune of Cobly, the semiotic presencing principle only played a minor role

while virtually all viewers demonstrated that transmaterial presencing was central to the way they watched the three videos. This was not only the case for those who usually rely more heavily on transmaterial presencing, but also for those who are engaging with the processes of materialisation and spiritualisation of shrine entities, and for the few who clearly stated their awareness that films and videos are acted and made by humans, and sometimes enhanced by computers (cf. Lyden 2003: 4; Plate 2003a: 5).

Watching films, as well as seeing and listening more generally, is a multisensory activity, which relies on our bodies (Hirschkind 2006; Marks 2000; B. Meyer 2009a; Morgan 2012; Sobchack 2004). Accordingly, Brian Larkin characterises film as “something to be bodily experienced and lived” (2008: 186). In this sense I take films, as well as other interpreted presencing resources, as becoming part of the world people inhabit, especially when the presencing process has a strong transmaterial focus. Film, I claim, is not so much a communicative medium that conveys messages between different people and groups of people; it rather proposes itself as a presencing resource that can lead to the recognition of agentive entities that claim a presence in the world by interacting with other entities. Films like shrine entities, words, photographs or dreams, gain a life of their own and help to constitute the world by shaping what people make of it.

Zoë Crossland (2009: 73) argues that the power of photography lies in images retaining both an iconic and an indexical link to the depicted, an observation that I also see applying to film. It is this combination that gives films its “veraciousness”, as Katrien Pype calls the medium’s ability to portray “what might be real” (2012: 101; see also Werner 2012: 107-108). The notion of veraciousness expresses well how audiences relate films to their lived experience, thereby making it possible for them to watch films experientially and transmaterially. Generally speaking, the most popular films appear veracious and credible to their audiences to the extent that the mediating process involved in film watching shifts to the background. Filmmakers can achieve such veraciousness by providing footage with which people can easily identify, which builds on their prior knowledge and experience and which also contains ideas that stimulate their audiences’ interest (Plate 2003a: 7-8). In other words, filmmakers need to make their products as relevant as possible for specific audiences (cf. Gutt 2000; Hill 2006), usually by

combining how they perceive things to be with how they think they ought to be (Lyden 2003: 101-102). This renders filmmaking into an idealising enterprise, rather than a representative one to the extent that films can appear “more real than representations” (Morgan 2007: 166; see also Geraghty 2000). Films, then, do not so much represent the world, but rather create it (Carey 1989; Plate 2003a, 2008). In other words, films actually come to constitute and shape the world.

Film, then, has the ability to present itself to viewers both as an experiential event and as semiotic mediation (Plate 2008: 70). I can only account for this by moving beyond secular film semiotics to a more relational approach that is open to the religious and the possibility of epistemological ambiguity and plurality. I propose that this can be achieved through the process of presencing. On this basis I shift my attention to the study of audience reception.

Studying Audiences

Audience reception studies, especially of television programmes, became popular at the British Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies of the University of Birmingham, especially from the early 1980s. Scholars working in cultural studies soon recognised the importance of ethnographic approaches in their research on audiences (see, e.g., Ang 1996; Moores 1993; Morley 1992), thereby also catching the attention of anthropologists and contributing to the field of media anthropology (see, e.g., Eisenlohr 2011; Friedman 2006; Gillespie 1995b; Ginsburg, *et al.* 2002: 4-5; Kulick and Willson 1994; Lyons 1990; Schulz 2012; Spitulnik 1993, 2002b).

Hall (1980) provided a key theoretical approach through his encoding/decoding model first proposed in 1973. His model builds on semiotics and although critiqued and reformulated, has equally become highly influential.³⁷ The basic idea is that meaning is not fixed, but encoded in a message, for example, by the producers of a television programme, and then decoded by receptors. By default, media texts are open to be interpreted in different ways, thereby allowing for polysemic interpretations.

³⁷ See, for example, Ang (1996), Couldry (2004), Evans (1990), Fiske (1987), Liebes and Katz (1993), Martinez (1990, 1992), Moores (1993), Morley (1992), Spitulnik (1993), Srinivas (1998) and Tulloch (2000).

The Polysemy of the Interpretive Field

Polysemy is a notion that Roland Barthes (1977: 38-39) introduced to characterise photographs and is necessary if audiences are to accept visual media (Fiske 1987: 16, 84; Morley 1992: 83; van Leeuwen 2005: 50). Although arguments derived from Barthes (1977) and Hall (1980) help clarify why polysemic interpretations of media products exist, an explanation of polysemy in more theoretical terms is lacking. Hall (1980) and John Fiske (1987), together with other semioticians, have only been able to justify its existence within a semiotic framework. While polysemy is already implicitly present in Peirce's understanding of signs, structuralist semioticians often draw on Barthes' (1977) notions of denotation and connotation. They argue that signs evoke connotations, which then provide a kind of semiotic context in which meaning is produced. Additionally, Hall (1980: 134) sees codes as facilitating access to ideologies, which are part of the larger social setting in which communication happens. Such approaches do not, as a rule, go beyond the notion of the sign, and they are ideologically limited (Hall 1980, 1994).

Hall's (1980) particular merit stems from the fact that he recognised that audiences are actively involved in decoding a message and that their socio-cultural backgrounds also play an important role. These two areas, which I see as fundamental for explaining the existence of polysemy, continue to occupy semioticians and media scholars alike. Debates around the "active audience" include the extent to which audiences are in fact active and how such activity should be defined and understood.³⁸ When it comes to questions of "context", Peter Manning (1987: 68) queries semiotics' ability to properly account for it. Elizabeth Mertz (2007) observes that semiotic anthropologists have sometimes looked to pragmatics to address such limitations of their field (see also Buckland 2000), an area that Peirce was already interested in (Jensen 1995: 21-35). Rather than adding pragmatics to semiotics, however, I propose that moving beyond semiotics through the process of presencing can account for both semiotic and pragmatic aspects of filmic communication.

³⁸ Various scholars have written on the active audience (see, e.g., Ang 1996: 8-13; Evans 1990; Fiske 1987: 62-65; Liebes and Katz 1993; Martinez 1992: 134-135; Seaman 1992; Schulz 2012: 79; Spitulnik 2002b: 337).

Films, then, present themselves as presencing resources for their audiences (cf. Fiske 1987: 13-14). Presencing processes start with the identification of entities, whether they are words, images, material objects, or a combination of them. This happens when viewers decode a presencing resource by trying to make it relevant to their lives. They do so by drawing on their previously held assumptions and knowledge (cf. Parmentier 1994: 3), their access to specific cultural conventions, as well as their personal and social setting. I can best analyse entities as occupying an interpretive field in which they come to be connected to other entities. Effective presencing implies the establishment of new connections, as well as disconnections, between different entities (R. Dilley 1999: 37). The result of presencing processes, then, is a configuration and reconfiguration of an interpretive field. Viewed from this perspective, presencing processes do not so much lead to polysemic interpretations, but rather open up an interpretive field that constantly reconfigures the entities that populate it. Interpretive fields are part of the world, providing a space in which different and sometimes conflicting interpretations may coexist (cf. Jensen 1995: 75), thereby being able to account for a plurality of meaning in semiotic terms.

The Incongruity of Film

A crucial point of the encoding/decoding model is that Hall (1980) recognised that a producer's encoding and a receptor's decoding is not necessarily based on identical codes. Hall argued that when there is "symmetry" (1980: 131) or "correspondence" (1980: 136) between a producer's and a receptor's codes, a film acts as a relatively direct mediator between them. On the other hand, when there is "asymmetry" or "lack of equivalence" (Hall 1980: 131) – something that viewers can provoke by deliberately reading a film contrary to its intended meaning – the encoding and decoding processes result in mismatch between intended and received message.

Producers of media texts cannot and do not include everything that they would like their target audiences to understand. They only encode what they consider relevant to their target audiences, and thus bear a responsibility for doing so (Gutt 2000: 34, 190). When producers think that their potential receptors are able to draw on specific assumptions and implications that lie behind media

content, they are less likely to make them explicit (Morley 1992: 82, 84). This is why films, as any other media products, should be made for a specific audience, thereby maximising the possibility for equivalence between intended and decoded meaning, even though perfect equivalence can probably never be achieved. This was undoubtedly the scenario for which Hall (1980) developed his model.

Films are commonly watched, however, by audiences they were not intended for, leading Jayasinhji Jhala (1996) to speak of the “unintended audience”, which he illustrates with the example of rural Indians watching ethnographic films from the Amazon. Further instances of such unintended audiences include: different immigrants in Israel watching *Dallas* (Liebes and Katz 1993), audiences in the Copperbelt of colonial Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) watching cowboy films (Amler 2001; Powdermaker 1962), Tanzanian and Hausa audiences in northern Nigeria watching films from India (Fair 2010; Larkin 1997), Francophone West Africans watching Latin American *telenovelas* (Touré 2006; Werner 2006, 2012) and to a lesser degree undergraduate students watching ethnographic films (Martinez 1990, 1992). Indeed, it seems that the iconicity of film means that any human setting suffices to exploit a film’s presencing potential at least to some extent, a presumption with which the distributors of the *Jesus Film* work (Chapter 3; J. Merz 2010).

These examples demonstrate that the production and reception of films and other media can remain completely separate from each other. Filmmakers may never have a direct link to most of their audiences and conversely, a receptor of a film may never know anything about the makers and producers of a film (Buckland 2000: 69). For producers this means that they cannot directly control the presencing processes that receptors use for their media products. The only resource filmmakers have to influence what they intend their audiences to make of their films is through the careful design of the media product for a specific audience by accounting for their setting and potential prior knowledge and experience. Once screen media are released, they become independent of their makers and assume a life of their own. Often, receptors are not concerned about media production. They will make films present in a way relevant to their lives and then consider their interpretation as veracious (J. Merz 2010: 116; see also Gutt 2000: 33). For receptors of a film, the producer stands in the background and some

people, for example in rural northwestern Benin, may not even be familiar with how films are made.

For the purpose of studying film reception I propose that where there is a difference between the codes of producers and receptors films become incongruous to their audiences. Such incongruity is always present at least to some extent. This may not be very significant, as for example when Pentecostal Christians watch *Yatin* in southern Benin, or when the *Jesus Film* was shown to American evangelicals soon after its release. If *Jesus* is shown to contemporary rural Beninese audiences, however, the film's incongruity becomes pivotal.

While Hall (1980) described the incongruity of media mainly in ideological, political and institutional terms, it needs to be widened to include the whole "context" in which film watching happens. This means there can be incongruity with any part of people's lives, including various aspects of their social and cultural setting, their prior knowledge and experience, their view of materiality, or the interplay of presencing principles that people draw on. Accordingly, in order to make a reception study feasible, it needs to focus on some specific aspects of the incongruity of film. For the purpose of the study I present in this chapter, for example, I am mainly interested in epistemological and cultural incongruity of the three films and to a lesser degree in their materiality.

Whatever their incongruity may be, films can be popular and appealing, as well as veracious. The incongruity of film, then, does not affect presencing as a process, but it does affect the *result* of such processes, largely by affecting the configurative breadth of the interpretive field.

The Semiotics of Preferred Reading

Thanks to his concern for British television reception, Hall (1980) took an interest in the meaning audiences gained from media. For this purpose, he introduced the notions of "preferred reading" and "preferred meaning" (1980: 134), although he later acknowledged that he had not sufficiently elaborated them (Hall 1994: 261). Whereas "preferred meaning" seems to be more associated with the meaning producers try to convey, "preferred reading" appears more to be connected to the decoding process.

In view of my discussion so far, namely of understanding films as presencing resources that lead to interpretive fields, the notion of preferred reading does not propose any evident analytical advantages. Of course, viewers may very well try to understand films correctly and to try and figure out the intended meaning, but there is no guarantee that this leads to some sort of preferred meaning. Especially for entertainment films a preferred meaning does not seem particularly relevant, either to producers or receptors, as long as a film is successful for the benefit of the producer and entertaining for the receptor.

When it comes to Christian films, as well as documentaries or educational films, however, meaning *does* become important, since their makers and distributors try to convey a specific message. For such films misunderstanding or even aberrant readings become relevant (see, e.g., Martinez 1990). I see this view being based on a more critical engagement and interest in the meaning of films for which the transmaterial presencing principle on its own is not sufficient. Correct meaning relies on the awareness of the distinction between different components of signs, and, maybe more importantly, of a sign's correct structure. Those who fail or struggle to align their presencing of Christian videos with its expected meaning, notably by mismatching signs and referents, can then be labelled as misunderstanding the films. I need to describe viewers who develop a sense of right and wrong readings as also applying the semiotic presencing principle, usually together with the transmaterial one.

To talk of "preferred meaning", then, is only feasible when semiotics as part of presencing comes to play a role in filmic communication. The specific meaning of a film becomes associated with a dominant ideology, to use Hall's (1980) language, or, as I prefer it, with a limited or defined social group that acts as reference for preference. When viewers fail to come to a preferred reading that is maintained by a specific group of people, those who understand the preferred meaning can then blame those who do not for being either ignorant or stupid, since they fail to correctly compose recognised and accepted signs. The notion of preferred reading itself, I need to stress, is plural and should always be seen in a relational sense as the result of the interaction between people and media products.

Should distributors of a film take a special interest in the meaning their audiences gain from their product, that is if they want to promote a specific preferred meaning within a specific audience, the only possible strategy is to influence the various contextual factors. Alejandro Martinez (1990: 46, 1992: 153-155), for example, has come to the same conclusion by discussing how undergraduate students receive ethnographic films. In East and Central Africa, a popular way to encourage a preferred reading is narration (Krings 2013; Krings and Okome 2013: 8), during which professionals provide simultaneous interpretation and comments, thereby verbally guiding the viewers' watching experience. This can either be provided directly to audiences, or by adding commentaries to the existing video products, which then can be sold or shown on television (Pype 2013: 215-218). According to Matthias Krings (2013: 308, 316) this practice of running commentaries has its origin with missionaries, who started to show films while giving running commentaries during colonial times, and continues with showings of the *Jesus Film*.

Indeed, as I have described above (Chapter 3), global film evangelism using the *Jesus Film* has become an elaborate series of events, during which potential audiences are prepared for the screening and are followed up afterwards, while the main feature is often either simultaneously commented on, or stopped at key moments to explain the film's preferred meaning in more detail. A more recent strategy is to use additional audiovisual material to support the main feature, either through other Christian video films, such as *Yatin* or *La Solution*, or through the Jesus Film Project's recent five-part series *Walking with Jesus* (2011), that further explains the preferred meaning of the *Jesus Film*.

Control over media reception, however, primarily lies with audiences themselves and is largely experiential. As a result, the message that filmmakers try to encode into their products can in extreme cases change beyond recognition, especially in light of a heightened incongruity of films. On the basis of filmic presenting and the resulting transmateriality and life of films I continue by discussing the audience reception study I conducted in the Commune of Cobly, using the three films *Jesus*, *La Solution* and *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance*.

The Audience Reception Study

The biggest challenge of doing an audience reception study on Christian video films in the Commune of Coby are their sporadic, unpredictable and often informal showings (see Chapter 3). This is why I decided to be proactive with my research by imitating one of the venues of such films, the mobile video parlour that is well known throughout the Commune (see Chapter 1).

As sites for my research I chose the villages of Touga and Oroukparé (see Map 2), where I am well known and where I had done previous research. I also initiated contacts in Tchokita, a village with which I did not have any prior contacts. In the three villages, I approached the relevant authorities and explained my research project. They reacted positively to my suggestions and agreed to talk it over with the people of their community. I then met with those who were interested in participating and explained again my proposal. I made it clear that I intended to show Christian films that missionaries and churches have often used for evangelism, but that I only expected them to watch and discuss the films with me. I also stressed that participation was voluntary and that there would not be any financial gain for participation.³⁹ I then had a brief interview with each potential viewer to ascertain that they had understood my research project and were aware of the Christian nature of the films, after which I sought their verbal consent to participate. Since my fourth venue, the town of Coby, was too large and heterogeneous to involve local authorities, my research assistant and I approached potential individuals directly.

Not all of those who initially showed an interest in participating actually came to watch the films. I had a total of 104 participants who watched at least one of the films with me. For each of the three films I had a research audience of between 90 and 94. The voluntary participation resulted in a more restrictive sample with a clear bias towards Christians. 55 participants claimed church adherence, while only 15 stated that they had never set foot into a church. The other 26 research participants, including a Muslim, have attended a church at some point in their lives. Since explicitly Christian media are mainly consumed by those

³⁹ It has become customary for NGOs, and in rare cases even churches, to pay local participants for attending meetings and training events. It was important to me that people did not participate in my research because they expected financial gain.

already committed to Christianity (cf. Coleman 2000: 179), my sample may actually have been fairly representative and typical of current audiences of Christian films in the Commune of Cobly.

Just over half of the research participants said that they already had seen the *Jesus Film* at least once either in a church-related setting or during an explicitly evangelistic event. About 40% of the participants were already familiar with *Yatin*, while a quarter of the research audience had seen *La Solution* previously, making it the least known film. Eight participants claimed that they had never seen a film or video before.

Following commercial mobile video parlours, I used a 21-inch CRT television set and showed the films in the evenings (Figures 12 and 13). Since the purpose of my research was the presencing potential of the films themselves, I removed an advert for Cotonou harbour from *Yatin* and skipped the explicitly evangelistic pro-and epilogue of the *Jesus Film* that are later additions to the main feature.

Even though watching films and television in Africa is a collective activity during which viewers help each other to better understand films (Barber 1997; Bouchard 2010: 104; Touré 2006: 219; Powdermaker 1962: 256-270; see also Kwon 2010: 65, 178; Srinivas 1998, 2002), I tried to limit the influence of spontaneous “explainers” (cf. Jhala 1996: 216; Wollen 1972: 119) or “video narrators” (Krings 2013), by asking the audiences to allow people to discover the films for themselves. The main reason for doing so was to counter the real possibility that some of the keener Christians already familiar with the films would choose to provide a continuous and spontaneous interpretation (Bouchard 2010; Krings 2013; cf. Srinivas 2002: 170), as is typical for explicitly evangelistic screenings of such films. While it was evident that most audiences were verbally participating in the viewing experience through short comments anyway (Friedman 2006: 306; Liebes and Katz 1993: 82-99; Srinivas 1998: 336; Touré 2006: 219; Werner 2006: 182-183, 2012: 101), the extent of mutual help and influence of the active and engaging audiences was difficult to assess. During the one or two days following the screenings, while people continued to discuss the films among themselves in more depth (Ambler 2001: 99; Jhala 1996: 215; Werner 2006: 183-185, 2012: 102), I conducted individual semi-structured interviews. Following Marcus Banks’ (2001: 96) suggestion, I sometimes used stills of key events from the films when

discussing them in the three villages, while in the town of Cobby, where it is a lot easier to recharge batteries, I showed video clips of key scenes on a laptop computer.⁴⁰ The interviews varied greatly in length and depth, depending on the interviewees and their abilities to deal with the interviewing situation. The data gathered during the interviews has a strong qualitative nature and does not easily lend itself to quantitative or representative analysis.

Moving Image and Language

Initially, I intended to focus my research on the visual side of film, which for me is the defining feature of the medium (cf. J. Ellis 1992: 52, 128-129). Silent films, after all, existed long before talkies became available. Based on Birgit Meyer (2005: 278-279) I argue elsewhere (J. Merz 2010, 2014) that the images of film are especially important for West African audiences. This reasoning stems from various factors that affect film watching. In colonial times, the sound quality of old celluloid film copies that circulated in these parts of the world was usually significantly diminished and the noise of audiences sometimes made it impossible to understand the films' language anyway, even if viewers were familiar with it (Ambler 2001: 82, 2002: 128; Larkin 1997: 412; Powdermaker 1962: 259). More recently, the sound in Nollywood films was distorted, especially in their early years, making it at times impossible to follow the dialogue (Barrot 2008: 55; Larkin 2008: 237; B. Meyer 2005: 279). Besides, many Nollywood viewers across Africa do not have sufficient English to understand the dialogue (Pype 2013: 203). This meant that especially West African audiences got accustomed to focussing more on the image than the language of film.

On the other hand, I also recognise that the use of language can be crucial. How image and language relate to each other, partly depends on specific films. *La Solution* and *Yatin* have been made with West African audiences in mind, and the producers probably recognised the technical challenges of sound mentioned above. Accordingly, they do not contain as much dialogue and language as the

⁴⁰ Generally, I found that all people recognised the video clips, while especially older people could not always figure out what the stills were meant to show. By adding movements to images, which Powdermaker rightly described as "the essence of film" (1962: 259; cf. Sobchack 2004: 146), the medium provides an additional resource that significantly increases the presenting potential while narrowing down the range of potential meaning (Pinney 1992).

Jesus Film. In spite of this, they rely on lengthy language-focused scenes, since they both try to explain the basics of Christianity, something they both do not, and maybe cannot, visualise. The *Jesus Film* is different, since its use of language is such that it actually could be coherent without images. This is undoubtedly why the makers of the *Jesus Film* stress the importance of language and dubbing (see Chapter 3), thereby playing down the role of the images. The complex relationship between image and language in film thus kindled my interest and became a factor in my research as well.

Yatin and *La Solution* are only available in French. The *Jesus Film*, on the other hand, had already been dubbed into Ditammari, the main neighbouring language of Mbelime and I used this version in the villages of Touga and Tchokita. In Touga most participants understand Ditammari and it is the primary language for most of the women.⁴¹ I chose the village of Tchokita as one of the sites for my research, since Ditammari has become the people's primary language, even though they remain bilingual, meaning that we could conduct the interviews in Mbelime. In Oroukparé and Cobly, where hardly any of the viewers understand Ditammari, I showed the *Jesus Film* dubbed into French, Benin's national language.

During my reception research I did not notice significant differences in the overall understanding of the three films between those who understood the language of the films and those who did not. This indicates the validity of the observation that moving images in film are indeed important and that language deficiencies do not seriously hinder comprehension (Werner 2006: 176, 2012: 100). On the other hand, as I mention above, individual viewers are always part of larger audiences. People interact with each other through short remarks and more elaborate comments and interpretations during film watching, as well as by discussing the films afterwards (Bouchard 2010; Talabi 1989: 137; Touré 2006: 217-219; Werner 2006: 182-185, 2012: 101-102). Also, people who struggle with the language sometimes ask for interpretive help. Furthermore, the Christian bias and prior familiarity with the films meant that the audiences had significant knowledge that allowed them to compensate for the lack of linguistic understanding.

⁴¹ Touga's closest neighbouring village is part of a Ditammari-speaking community with which the people of Touga maintain extensive alliances, including marriage (see Chapter 1).

In spite of all this, several people complained that they did not understand the language, an argument they sometimes used to apologise pre-emptively for things they may have missed or thought they had interpreted wrongly and thus could hinder them from living up to my expectations during the interviews. This indicated to me that even though people may not *rely* on understanding the language of film, they do indeed value it, since it can render watching films easier and more interesting.

The language spoken in film, then, *is* important. Rather than defining film, however, it supports, clarifies and reinforces the images. In other words, language – and sound more generally – can provide additional details and help to limit the range of possible meanings of moving images. Language, especially when it interplays and reinforces moving images, thus plays an important role in the process of filmic presencing. It acts as a kind of meaning adjustment mechanism for images by filling in additional information that cannot be gained from images alone (Crawford 1996: 140; Ruoff 1993), similarly to how Barthes (1977: 39-41) describes the way captions limit the meaning of photos through what he calls “anchorage” (see also Geraghty 2000: 365-366). Language, then, significantly contributes to the experience of watching films.

Dubbing foreign films into local languages raises additional issues. In Tchokita, for example, after having shown the *Jesus Film* dubbed into Ditammari, the young farmer Evariste related: “We were astonished. We didn’t know that it could happen in this way. Later, we discussed it between ourselves but we haven’t found the solution. We don’t know how the child of God manages to speak Ditammari” (interview, 10 Apr. 2010). Mathilde expressed that “he [Jesus] masters our language and this is very interesting. This is why I have understood the film well” (interview, 10 Apr. 2010). Especially when viewers are not familiar with the technology behind dubbing, it can add an additional layer of ambiguity to the films, which is worthy of extensive discussion among audiences and can itself be meaningful.

Dubbing also leads to what Tom Boellstorff calls an “awkward fusion” (2003: 236) in which foreign content is made accessible in local terms (see also Werner 2012: 100). In other words, dubbing can make images of difference appear as more familiar, and this, I argue, can influence a viewer’s interpretation and

broaden the interpretive field. For example, people whose behaviour appears strange can be more easily accepted as different when they speak a foreign language. When their voices have been dubbed into a familiar language, however, it is more likely that this strange behaviour becomes significant and even offensive, since television viewers often “privilege the familiar over the strange” (Schulz 2012: 84).

Following my interviews about the *Jesus Film*, it became clear that viewers preferred a dubbed version into a language they understand, since it helps them to exploit better the presencing potential of the film, leading to a deeper experience. This, in turn, helps viewers to find moral lessons and to engage in film watching as a learning opportunity.

Learning from Film

As I have already demonstrated in Chapter 4, seeing with one’s own eyes provides people in the Commune of Coby with a reliable and veracious opportunity to learn. Similarly, audiences can learn from films and videos, often by identifying a moral lesson from which they seek to benefit, as Karin Barber (2000: 216-225) has discussed in some detail for the Yoruba travelling theatre.

The importance of West African audiences learning from films has been demonstrated by various scholars. This applies to *telenovelas* (Schulz 2012: 82; Touré 2006: 224; Werner 2006: 173, 2012: 105), the more recent Nollywood films (B. Meyer 2003b: 25; Ogunleye 2003c: 5; Ukah 2005: 307-308) and television more generally (Talabi 1989: 137). Jonathan Haynes quotes Ousmane Sambène, whom he reports as having said: “[C]inema is our night school” (2011: 68). B. Meyer (2001: 50) and Krings (2013: 313) trace this trend back to the educational nature of colonial cinema, while I also found that it is accentuated by the general preference for visual learning (Chapter 4; J. Merz 2014).

In the Commune of Coby, most of my viewers considered it important for children to watch television and films. Séraphin, an educated young Christian who owns his own television set explained:

... films educate. If we compare children who watch [films with those who don’t], they won’t be the same. What we see educates us. It allows someone to develop. With film, you can educate someone (interview in French, 11 Feb. 2011).

People often say that children copy what they see others do and what they watch on television. This becomes most visible when, for example, children learn martial arts from karate films and new dances (cf. Ambler 2001: 100; Fair 2010: 113-114), which they sometimes perform during public events, such as celebrating the end of an apprenticeship.

Watching television and films, people usually acknowledge, is by no means an adequate replacement for going to school, since children do not learn to read or write by watching television. Rather, television and videos provide an exciting and enriching additional experience for their learning. Some people, however, also recognise that watching too much television can be bad for children, either leading to bad behaviour or failure at school, as children are prone to neglect their homework (Amouzou 2003; Spigel 1992: 54; Talabi 1989: 138).

While especially the older generation is happy to leave television and films to the younger ones, adults too, often appreciate the learning potential of watching television and videos, especially if they have never had the opportunity to attend school. Valentin, the son of a Tigare owner, explained: “Television... gives us intelligence and raises our standard of living. ... If you’re ignorant you can become intelligent” (interview, 1 Mar. 2011). Elisabeth, a middle-aged new Christian, stated further: “You know, TV is for us who know nothing. We can watch it and become intelligent” (interview, 4 Feb. 2011).

The viewers usually watched the three Christian films according to these principles of finding an educational benefit, thereby making them relevant to their lives. Often, these moral lessons remained fairly general. By way of illustration, Christian viewers of the *Jesus Film* usually found some sort of principle that was beneficial to their current situation. These included: why being a Christian is advantageous, that being a Christian also involves suffering, or that the devil will never succeed in conquering God.

Those less interested in Christianity also found lessons in the film that were not explicitly Christian. For example, for the young Tigare owner Simon, the *Jesus Film* showed that “it’s not good to make people suffer” (interview, 19 Jan. 2011), while the old diviner Sambiénou, who had never been to church, said about the film: “To follow *Uwienu* [God], this is the lesson” (interview, 13 Mar. 2010).

Sometimes, viewers linked their interpretation of the film directly to a specific situation they faced at the time, making films even more relevant. A good example of this comes from Robert, who used to attend church. He linked the *Jesus Film* directly to his job:

I've seen how Jesus suffered and this resembles what I do as a village councillor. We arrange people's houses and families by following what God has said, but people are usually not happy with us. ... When they quarrel with each other, you'll go and separate them. Then, you tell the one in the wrong to forgive the other. I saw that the film speaks the truth (interview, 15 Mar. 2010).

Especially for the *Jesus Film*, which is marked by significant incongruity, such a direct application to specific life situations remained an exception. In the next section I continue to discuss in more detail how exactly the viewers watched the *Jesus Film*.

Watching the Jesus Film

For the viewers in the Commune of Cobly, the *Jesus Film* (1979) proved to be by far the most popular film among the three, even though it features the most explicit violence and suffering, parts which many did not particularly appreciate. I found that the main reason for the interest in the *Jesus Film* is the viewers' appreciation of Jesus as a fundamentally good and moral person. Especially his healings and miracles appealed to many viewers, as also Dong Hwan Kwon (2010: 183) found for Mangyan viewers in the Philippines. Even though Jesus did nothing wrong, as several pointed out, he suffered a lot, thereby adding pity to the viewers' admiration. More generally, viewers found the *Jesus Film* very instructive, since they felt that they could learn more about the teachings of Christianity (cf. Kwon 2010: 188-189; Mansfield 1984).

For almost all viewers, it was clear that the film was about Jesus, *uwien' biike*, the child of God. In fact, I found during the interviews that nearly all viewers who watched the film already had a good understanding of the main teachings of Christianity, including that Jesus was the child of God and that he died for the evils of humanity. This also applied to some people who had never been to church before, but who have Christian wives, children or neighbours. The old man Kom-betto, for example, exemplified this:

I learnt this [that Jesus is the child of God] from the people of prayer [Christians]. They talk about it, teach it and pronounce his name. This is why I know that he's the child of God. Yesterday, when I followed the film, other viewers called his name and I said to myself: 'Ah, the man they talk about, it's him. It's thanks to him that we have found life.' I could recognise him easily (interview, 13 Mar. 2010).

Indeed, exposure to Christianity provided the viewers with prior knowledge on which they could draw to understand the film. Philippe, an older farmer, explained: "I went to church some time ago. I went to church and this is why I know prayer. I've never seen the film, but yesterday I saw how it works and what it showed" (interview, 15 Mar. 2010). Many people explained how, in one way or another, the film helped them to understand better who Jesus was and what Christianity was about.

For some Christian viewers, who were well established in their church and who had seen *Jesus* before, the film gained deeper significance than the other two films, similarly to how the Bible has become the most important book for them (see Chapter 2). Without the *Jesus Film*, some argued, you could not have the other two films. Bernard, who had served as an elder for the *Assemblées de Dieu*, thought that the *Jesus Film* was important

because it treats a topic that the other two films only treat superficially. But the last film [*Jesus*] treats the actual source, the origin. I could say that the two other films [*La Solution* and *Yatin*] are based on the third [*Jesus*]... In other words, the *Jesus Film* is much richer than the others (interview in French, 17 Jan. 2011).

Similarly, for Yantékoua, the leader of a village church, "the film is something that resembles what God himself does. For example, God gave intelligence to humans, so that they would make the film and that it would help other people" (interview, 13 Mar. 2010). Salomon, a keen and Pentecostally inclined Christian, went even further in claiming that the *Jesus Film*

shows the true face of God. It shows us that God has sent Jesus. And it [the film] is direct. ... People have not made it. All the other films, we know that people of this country have made them. ... But for *Jesus*, when you watch it, even if they tell you that people have made it, you'll refuse. It's as if the film shows directly the birth of Jesus, Son of God, how he came to earth. ... It's direct; it's powerful (interview in French, 18 Jan. 2011).

The Incongruity of the *Jesus Film*

The popularity of the *Jesus Film*, especially among Christian viewers and those interested in Christianity, does not mean that there are no communicative issues worth discussing. Their prior knowledge of Christianity certainly helped the viewers in their presencing of the *Jesus Film*. At the same time, however, the heightened incongruity of the film that stems from the difference between its American producer and its viewers in Coby, resulted in the audiences recognising that the film was markedly different from their everyday experience of life. Most viewers did not perceive this as a hurdle for understanding the film. On the contrary, the cultural incongruity of the film made it sometimes more attractive. Moutouama, for example, an old man responsible for the shrine entity of his mother, commented: “I liked the film about Jesus because I’ve never seen a film like this before. ... The film was new for me. I already knew other films that have black people in them. It’s the one with the whites that I didn’t know” (interview, 26 Mar. 2010). The whiteness of Jesus further confirmed the prior knowledge of many that links Christianity with *upaanu* (the new times) and white people. This implicitly affirms that Christianity promotes and seeks a “break with the past” (B. Meyer 1998a), especially though diabolisation of the old ways.

For nearly all viewers it was clear that the Jesus of the film was white-skinned (cf. Kwon 2010). For some, Jesus’ whiteness was affirmed by his long hair, itself a symbol of the transnational visualisation of Jesus (Chapter 3), and, for viewers in Oroukparé and Coby, since he spoke French. Gnamou, a well-travelled old farmer with limited experience of Christianity, watched the film in Ditammari. In spite of this, he stated that Jesus

is a white man. ... His language, the way he greets and asks, made me realise that he’s indeed white. He can’t kill anyone. He wants to arrange the country, so that it will become good and everyone will see it. This is why I recognised that he’s white (interview, 12 Mar. 2010).

Many viewers also acknowledged that even though Jesus was white-skinned, he also stood out as being different from the other people that surrounded him in the film (see Chapter 3), which eclipsed his whiteness to some extent. They easily could explain this difference by recognising that Jesus is not an ordinary (white) human, but *uwien’ biike*, the child of God. Indeed, Jesus does not have a typical

mtakimε (identity). Ntcha, a young farmer who had attended a Protestant church for a while, explained: “*Uwienu* [God] took *mtakimε* [identity] and made it enter the belly of a young woman. This shows that she became pregnant through *uwien’ takimε* [God’s identity], *uwien’ bodikε* [God’s animating force]” (interview, 25 Mar. 2010).

Virtually all viewers noticed that the cultural incongruity of the film was most recognisable in the person of Jesus and exploited it for their benefit, thereby adding to the overall experience of film watching. Despite this, several Christian viewers acknowledged that this incongruity has also led to people rejecting the film. From their prior experience with evangelistic screenings of the *Jesus Film* they had learnt that some people, who are less well disposed towards Christianity, use the obvious whiteness of Jesus as evidence that Christianity is indeed a foreign and “white” religion. Paul, who is in charge of a small congregation of the *Assemblées de Dieu*, explained this in more detail:

They know very well what Jesus has done, what happened when he suffered and how he healed many people. Everybody sees it. But they see the *Jesus Film* as something that has come from the outside. It’s from a different country with different customs. You can see that they don’t like the film. But for the other films, it’s us who have made them and they show only blacks. It resembles what we do here (interview, 26 Mar. 2010).

Watching the *Jesus Film*, then, can help people explain why they have rejected Christianity. Since such people cannot be expected to watch Christian films voluntarily, I did not come across this issue during my reception research.

Based on my findings for the *Jesus Film*, then, I can confirm that people are aware of the incongruity of films (Fair 2010: 116; Larkin 1997; Schulz 2012: 83; Touré 2006: 223). The resulting perception of difference becomes a presencing resource to audiences that needs to be made sense of, thereby adding to the overall experience of film watching and their presencing. On the other hand, many areas of the cultural incongruity of films go unnoticed, especially when viewers do not have the necessary background knowledge of the production setting of a film that would allow them to assess the exact nature of differences. This raises issues of the epistemological incongruity between the film and its viewers. Audiences easily fail to presence entities that producers would consider important and view-

ers equally can recognise entities that were not intended. In between these extremes of presencing lies a broad field of entities that producers intended a film's viewers to make present, but audiences presence them in different ways than expected (cf. Werner 2006: 178). This often happens when viewers connect the presented entities in unexpected ways to other entities. All this variation in presencing, which is clearly accentuated by incongruity, inevitably leads to a significant broadening of the interpretive field.

Only a few viewers, especially older ones who had neither much experience of films or Christianity, struggled to follow the film, since they were not able to exploit sufficiently the *Jesus Film's* presencing potential. Sometimes they understood that it was about Jesus, of whom they had heard, but they could not always make sense of who he was, nor what he did. Gnamou (interview, 12 Mar. 2010), for example, missed that Jesus was resurrected and explained that he was killed because he encouraged people not to pay taxes. Gnamou probably based this on his parents' and his own experience of resisting colonialism and the modern state.

More interesting from the point of view of the plurality of the interpretive field are instances where viewers make sense of things that remain largely meaningless to those viewers in Europe or America for whom the incongruity of the film is minimal. During the scene of the Last Supper (Luke 22: 7-38), for example, Jesus passes the cup with his left hand to the person on his left, then breaks a flat bread which he passes to the right with his right hand and to the left with his left. It seems that the choice of hands was arbitrary to the makers of the *Jesus Film*, but may have been influenced by aesthetic considerations. In the Commune of Cobly, however, since normally people only interact with each other using the right hand, most viewers noticed that Jesus used his left hand and found it significant. Many interpreted from this that the people on Jesus' left were his enemies. This included Judas Iscariot, although I identified him sitting on Jesus' right side. Jesus used his left hand to show them that he knew of their plot and that this would not go unpunished. One viewer went further by musing whether those on Jesus' left were those who do not accept Christ and go to hell. A few also wondered whether Jesus used the hand the way he did simply because he was different, thereby ascribing this to cultural difference.

Questions of Powers

One of the central questions that the *Jesus Film* posed to viewers in the Commune of Coby was the nature of his extraordinary powers and achievements. Most viewers paid careful attention to this issue and nearly all concluded that his powers did not come from medicinal substances, since they did not see Jesus using them. Nobody suspected that he might have carried such power-giving things in the bag that he often has slung around his shoulders, as Hannes Wiher (1997: 70) reported it for Guinean audience. Mathieu, a middle-aged farmer who used to attend a Protestant church, explained:

If he [Jesus] wants to do something for somebody, I don't see him take anything. He doesn't dig up roots, or peel the bark off trees [both being typical medicinal substances], nor does he run to find other things [that he could use]. He just touches you with his hand and if you had a pain somewhere... you'll see that where he touched the disease will be instantly healed (interview, 27 Mar. 2010).

Most viewers, especially those well versed in Christian teaching, already knew before watching the film that Jesus' powers as Mathieu describes them came from God. They found this largely confirmed in the film. Some viewers, however, presented complementary and alternative interpretations.

A quarter of those who watched *Jesus*, linked his powers to some form of *uhɔɔhu* (transvisual power) that they qualified as either good or coming from God. Bernard, for example, claimed that during the scene of the multiplication of the bread and fish (Luke 9: 10-17) somebody loudly commented: "Really, he has good *sorcellerie!*" (interview in French, 17 Jan. 2011). Rachele, a devout Christian, who watched the *Jesus Film* at the same time as Bernard, further explained: "He has *uhɔɔhu*. When he took the baskets to pray, they were filled with fish. I could see that he wasn't a human like me. He's more powerful than me" (interview, 17 Jan. 2011). This more Christian and Pentecostalised sense of transvisual power is sometimes linked with the Holy Spirit. It implies the spiritualisation of *uhɔɔhu* (transvisual power), while maintaining its ambivalence by resisting its demonisation. In doing so, as I have argued elsewhere in more detail (J. Merz 2008), people equate transvisual power with what Christians often call the spiritual realm.

Other viewers assumed that Jesus must also have had the support of his ancestors in all he did, since otherwise, as some claimed, he could never have accom-

plished what he did. Martin, a young farmer who had never been to church, recognised Jesus' ancestors in "something that has come from above to cover" (interview, 25 Mar. 2010), referring to the descending cloud of the scene of the transfiguration (Luke 9: 28-36), while he also ascribed the darkness that fell after Jesus' death to his ancestors. Mathilde, who attended church in the past, saw Jesus' ancestors wrapping his body in white cloth and concluded that they helped him also to resurrect (interview, 10 Apr. 2010), probably referring to the angels that appear after Jesus was resurrected. The old man Moutouama undoubtedly drew on his assumption that films showed the dead (see Chapter 4): "Yesterday, I've seen people who walked next to him [Jesus] and I know that they were his ancestors. I didn't recognise any of the people that were in the film, but maybe they were his ancestors" (interview, 25 Mar. 2010). More generally, André assumed that Jesus' prayers were always addressed to his ancestors who then presented his petitions to God (interview, 24 Mar. 2010). It is interesting to note that all these viewers were not practicing Christians and have had only minimal exposure to Christianity. For such people, ancestors remain important in their daily lives and some even maintain an intimate relationship with their ancestors and could not imagine living without them (cf. Huber 1968: 205, 1973: 382-384). The viewers most involved in their churches, on the other hand, simply claimed that Jesus did not have any ancestors. Their view is undoubtedly influenced by church teaching that usually takes on an anti-material stance (see Chapter 2). Accordingly, ancestors are often identified as idolatrous, while some Christians also spiritualise and demonise them, thereby making them submit to more Pentecostalisated forms of Christianity.

The last area of interest of the cultural incongruity of the *Jesus Film* concerns viewers seeing shrine entities. The most striking example comes from G r me, a middle-aged farmer who used to attend a local Catholic church: "What I saw yesterday about Jesus, when he wanted to pray he usually went to a *ditade* [stone]" (interview, 15 Mar. 2010). G r me made reference to several instances where Jesus climbs up hills to pray. The stones and heaps of stones that are clearly visible on the hills, made him think of shrine entities. Jesus kneeling down in front of a rock on the Mount of Olives while praying before he was arrested (Luke 22: 39-45) further confirmed for him that Jesus was indeed praying to

shrine entities, such as the one shown in Figure 1. Emmanuel, also an ex-Catholic, identified this rock as a potential shrine as well, because it reminded him of a specific shrine he knows well. Contrary to G r me, however, he was less sure that the rock of the film was indeed a shrine. According to him,

... it may be difficult to identify *atenwiene* [shrine entities] in the film. Sometimes you may not recognise them because they don't resemble the shrines we have here and you can't recognise them. In this place [on the Mount of Olives], I'm not sure (interview, 17 Jan. 2011).

A few other viewers noticed stones and identified them as shrine entities, "just like the ones we have here in our village" (interview with Julienne, 10 Apr. 2010). H l ne, who recently started to attend church, also remembered seeing offerings being made to shrine entities. Although I cannot say for sure, this could have been during the scene of the feeding of the five thousand (Luke 9: 10-17), which takes place on a rocky hill:

Yesterday, I saw where they were sitting down to make an offering to *ditenwende* [a shrine entity]. ... The *ditenwende* was there and other *atenwiene* were planted everywhere. They placed themselves in groups at this place (interview, 10 Apr. 2010).

While the question of the origin of Jesus' power certainly raised many of the viewers' interests, the opposition he faced equally caught some viewer's attention. Accordingly, especially Pentecostally-orientated viewers understood the *Jesus Film* in terms of a battle between God and the devil, which they found visualised in the popular scene of the temptation of Jesus, featuring a confrontation between Jesus and the devil (Luke 4: 1-13). Ultimately, such viewers also held *disenpode* (the devil, see Chapter 2) directly responsible for Jesus' death.

The scene of the temptation of Jesus was also important in other more intricate ways. It starts with a voiceover that talks of the devil tempting Jesus, after which we see a snake slithering along, thereby implying an identification of the devil with the snake. This symbolism does not come from the Gospel of Luke, but rather has its origin in later Jewish and Christian literature, which explicitly identified the snake of Genesis 3 with the devil (D. B. Howell 2007: 13). The makers of the *Jesus Film* assumed that its audiences would be familiar with such Judeo-Christian symbolism. While this may have been true for many of the more

committed Christian viewers, it also opened the possibility for alternative interpretations.

Pythons are often significant to people in the Commune of Cobly and meeting them, as Jesus did in the film, is usually not considered a mere coincidence. Etienne, whose father Moutouama is in charge of a minor shrine entity and who had never been to church, recognised in the snake not *disenpode* (the devil) but a *ditenwende* (shrine entity) that presented itself to Jesus in the form of a snake (interview, 15 Mar. 2010; see also Chapter 2). For Etienne, although shrine entities remain important, they also restrain people from changing and from advancing in life. In this sense, his understanding of snakes and shrine entities fitted the snake in the *Jesus Film*, which tempted Jesus and tried to restrain him.

This interpretation of the snake as a shrine entity, and not as the devil, was particularly marked in the village of Tchokita, where the primary language is Ditammari and where I showed the *Jesus Film* dubbed into Ditammari. The Ditammari Bible (Alliance Biblique du Bénin 2001), which served as a basis for dubbing the *Jesus Film*, uses the word *dibɔ̀* to translate the devil. Its meaning is not totally clear and it does not seem to be an important notion outside the Bible. For Paul Mercier (1968: 128 n.133) *dibɔ̀* is any non-human power, which is ritually respected, while Dominique Sewane (2003: 62 n.61) refers to it as an altar to a hunted animal. In Tchokita, however, people consider *dibɔ̀* to be the equivalent of the Mbelime word *ditenwende* (shrine entity) and therefore also as being linked to snakes. At least in Tchokita, by using the word *dibɔ̀* to translate “devil”, the Ditammari translation of the Bible and the *Jesus Film* support an interpretation that favours people seeing snakes as shrine entities.

When viewers of the scene of the temptation of the *Jesus Film* interpreted the snake as a shrine entity, they also favoured an interpretation that directly opposes Jesus and shrine entities. This antagonism is further based on the missionaries’ anti-material legacy and the semiotification and demonisation of shrine entities that makes them increasingly a focus of spiritual warfare and deliverance, especially in Pentecostalised forms of Christianity. Several Christian viewers, whose prior negative experiences of shrine entities were similar to how the film *La Solution* portrays them (see below), interpreted the conflict Jesus was facing, especially during the scene of the temptation, in these antagonistic terms.

A few viewers in the town of Cibly, who had some experience of watching Nollywood films, identified the Roman soldiers who arrested, maltreated and killed Jesus as *atenwiene yanbe* (shrine entity people). In doing so they drew on their knowledge of Nollywood and other Christian videos (for example *La Solution*, Chapter 3), where the evil “fetish priests” are often clad in red and sometimes wear funny head dresses, in this case Roman helmets. These viewers were not the only ones who blamed the *atenwiene yanbe* for Jesus’ death. Especially those, whose knowledge of Christianity was limited, including new Christians, sometimes made this link. Nearly a month after watching the film, the old man Gnam mou, who had previously shared that Jesus encouraged people not to pay taxes (see above), claimed that Jesus urged people to abandon shrine entities, which then roused the anger of the *atenwiene yanbe* (interview, 8 Apr. 2010). According to the new Christian Elisabeth, the *atenwiene yanbe* incited people to hate Jesus, while Fatima, a woman in her fifties, held them directly responsible for his death, since “they wanted to cut Jesus’ throat and offer his blood to their shrine entity” (interview, 10 Apr. 2010). Fatima based her interpretation on widespread rumours that started in the 1970s that the owners of the then new Nkunde shrines needed to provide their shrine entities with human blood once a year (see Chapter 1).

These newer Tigare and Nkunde shrines that began to appear in the Cibly area as early as the 1950s became the backdrop on which many viewers understood the film *La Solution*.

The Shrines of La Solution

From early on in *La Solution* (*The Solution*, 1994) virtually all viewers identified the presence of shrines that were similar or identical to those they knew as Tigare and Nkunde. This led to a considerably narrower interpretive field as compared to the *Jesus Film*. Most viewers also understood that the shrine owner Nato economically benefitted from Ata and Akoua and did not live up to his promises. Many viewers drew their main moral lessons of *La Solution* from this theme of shrines, which ranged from the insight that one should never trust their owners to being reminded that Christianity is the better solution.

Generally, I found that viewers understood *La Solution* more easily than the *Jesus Film*, undoubtedly because the film's cultural incongruity is considerably less marked. Even though American missionaries made the film in Côte d'Ivoire, its story came from Marcus Minomekpo, a Togolese, who used his own experience as a basis for the plot. Both Tigare and Nkunde shrines are also known throughout Togo (see, e.g., Rosenthal 1998; Zwernemann 1975, 1993) and may have influenced Minomekpo's experience and the resulting story. This may explain why *La Solution* presents a scenario that was familiar to most viewers in the Commune of Cobly, either through experience within their own close families, or through rumours.

Failing Shrines

Nanhonga, an older Catholic woman, was reminded of the following story when she watched *La Solution*:

My son Kouagou had attempted to get the *baccalauréat* already two times. Now he wanted to go for his third time. So far he went to see people who have medicines and shrines [*atenwiɛnɛ*], but nothing worked for him. I tell you, he had money thanks to a job he had. It's with this money that he went to these people. One day he returned and he said: 'My mother'. I replied: 'Yes, my son'. The men had given him lucky soap, protective rings, amulets and calabashes to wash with. But nothing had worked for him. ... Then, he said: 'This year, if I return to Natitingou [to try the *baccalauréat* for the third time] I will start to pray. I want only God to help me this time.' He continued: 'The way I see it, God should help me, inspite of the medicines and shrines.' What my son experienced is exactly like what they showed in the film yesterday. When I thought about it and compared the man and the woman of yesterday with my son's situation, I saw that it was exactly the same. Later, when my son [had received his *baccalauréat* and] was satisfied with God, he returned home, collected all his things and threw them into the water (interview, 22 Dec. 2010).

This account corresponds with Ata's experiences, who initially turned to shrines to look for a solution to his problems. Such stories indicate that many who are not practicing Christians continue to seek help from *atenwiɛnɛ* (shrine entities), demonstrating that some people see shrines in a positive light. Among the viewers who watched *La Solution* with me, however, such positive views were underrepre-

sented. One exception was Tandjomè, an old widow whose experience of both films and Christianity is minimal. She seemed to have missed the film's clearly negative and critical portrayal of shrines and their owners:

I liked the whole film. I liked the *atenwiene yanbe* [shrine entity people] and the followers of God [Christians]. ... The *atenwiene yanbe* offered sacrifices, which was very good. My parents and my grandparents were just like this. I saw women in the film and they danced. It was very interesting and I liked it (interview, 11 Mar. 2010).

Other viewers, who also generally perceive shrine entities in a positive light, did not seem to be particularly bothered by the negative portrayal of shrines (cf. McCall 2012: 18). Simon, a young farmer who had only recently acquired a Tigare shrine from Nigeria, recognised that some shrine owners were not serious and that they could have limited powers: "There are people here like this [Nato]. They will tell you that they can help you. You bring them cows and goats, which they will kill to eat. In return they will only laugh at you. It won't work for you" (interview, 15 Jan. 2011). Simon, on the other hand, claimed that he had nothing to do with such people and that his shrine had never failed. Another viewer added that good shrine owners know their limits and refer patients to other practitioners or a local health clinic or hospital when appropriate.

A few viewers, who had experience of Tigare ownership, had come to see them more sceptically. Valentin is the son of one of the first Tigare owners in the Commune of Cibly and, together with his brother Yves and uncle, inherited the responsibility of the shrine after his father's death in 2008. While Yves has been involved with several different churches, Valentin had never attended church. They still felt responsible for maintaining their father's shrine, even though they had also become critical of shrines. Valentin explained:

If you go to a shrine owner, he will ask you for many things, he will make you pay. ... In the beginning, people often went to shrine owners. But today everybody knows what happens there. The shrines have led to quarrels that cause division among people. Anything could happen. If you get involved with the shrines, you will suffer, even you who are the owner of the shrine yourself (interview, 22 Dec. 2010).

Valentin made allusion to problems that also *La Solution* addresses, most notably the economic exploitation and accusations levelled at close family members. These seem to be the main reasons why in some villages owners of Tigare got rid of their shrines, even though they were very popular when they first arrived in the 1950s and 1960s. Some of the older inhabitants of such villages remember the regular public ceremonies that attracted large crowds.

Simon, the owner of a Tigare shrine, further explains that you need to be careful. If an owner cannot control his anger in front of his shrine and asks it to work against his enemies, the shrine entity will get a taste for murder and turn even against those who come to seek help:

Once it has killed, it becomes a habit and it will continue to kill. This is where the shrine turns against you. You will ask yourself who has done this to you. If people come to seek help such as witches, for example, the shrine will kill them (interview, 15 Dec. 2010).

Such a shrine will fail in the long run and become a burden to its owner. A further way for such shrines to fail, as other viewers explained, is that witches have found ways to gain the favour of Tigare shrines, thereby undermining their former power.

Contrary to the Tigare and Nkunde newcomers, stone entities in the Commune of Coby are well established and have long histories. Often they are seen as more important than the new shrines. Indeed, Tigare and Nkunde can only be installed after the stone entities have given permission through their priests. Stone entities, Tigare and Nkunde can all be referred to as *atenwiene* (shrine entities). Despite this, people see a difference between the older stone entities and newer shrines, as stone entities only demand an offering after they have successfully addressed the petition that people bring to them. On the other hand, the owners of Tigare and Nkunde demand payment before they begin their treatment.

While many viewers who watched *La Solution* with me recognised the advantages of the stone entities, including some older Christians, they also had become disillusioned with them, just as they had with Tigare and Nkunde. Many viewers claimed that stone entities do not respond as well as they used to in their parents' time. Some explained this apparent failure through people's behaviour since nobody gives the stone entities respect anymore. People now approach them in

Western clothing and sometimes with their shoes on and they no longer present their offerings in calabashes, but in metal or plastic vessels. Other viewers claimed that in recent times people pushed stone entities to harm others, thereby corrupting their former integrity.

Some ascribed the failure of shrine entities to the *atenwiene* themselves. The old man Moutouama (interview, 26 Mar. 2010), who is responsible for his mother's stone entity, explained that shrine entities sometimes betray people by seeking food for themselves. They abuse their position between people and God by cheating their petitioners, claiming the offering was for God, while they eat themselves.

While many people generally continue to make use of different *atenwiene* (shrine entities), their performance has become the subject of widespread discussions (cf. Geschiere 2013: 82-89). Especially Tigare and Nkunde shrines receive criticism not only due to their high costs and low efficiency, but also because they proved detrimental to relationships within the communities in which they operated. Some of the viewers, who felt that the owners of such shrines had exploited and abused them, turned towards Christianity, just as Nanhonga's son and Ata of *La Solution* did. Their negative experience of shrines then provides a fertile ground for church teaching that condemns and demonises any kind of *atenwiene* (shrine entities).

Christians and Shrines

Taouéma, an older and well-established Christian in one of the villages, drew a bleak picture of Tigare, Nkunde and stone shrines, as is typical among many Christians: “*Ditenwende* is the true devil. This is why *ditenwende* is evil. A shrine owner can go to his shrine and ask for help, but the shrine will kill him. If you followed the path of God, what could kill you?” (interview, 5 Mar. 2010).

Especially well-established Christians commonly dismiss and antagonise shrines by demonising them. “The *fétiche* is a demon”, Salomon laconically confirmed (interview in French, 22 Dec. 2010). This subsumes shrines under the devil's work, which actively opposes God and Christians. Even though *La Solution* does not explicitly demonise shrines, it nonetheless blames them for common social problems, such as economic failure, fraud, alcoholism and domestic vio-

lence. In doing so, the film attributes complex social issues to the work of shrines, which fits the common Christian understanding of their demonic nature. By reinforcing such views, *La Solution* correlates with the Pentecostalisation of Christianity in the Commune of Coby and with an increasing stigmatisation of shrine entities. Indeed, some shrine owners are becoming weary of the hostility they feel coming from Christians, while at least for the moment they remain much more pragmatic in their relationships to Christians themselves.

Some Christian viewers, especially those who have direct experiences of shrines, provided a more nuanced picture by accepting that some shrines really work, especially when owners are serious about their work. This may be the reason why many shrine owners claim to have Christian customers, who come to see them secretly. Some Christians openly admit that they seek help for health problems outside churches and Western medicine, but they are quick to stress that they only visit practitioners of herbal medicines and that they would never frequent the demonic shrines.

More generally, in spite of accusations of failure, shrines also continue to be attractive, as elsewhere in Africa (Geschiere 2013: 83). Many Christian viewers recognised that when people first get involved with them, shrines are novel and show a lot of promise.⁴² A few Christian viewers, however, thought that when shrines seem to be successful this is in fact only due to coincidence. Those who sought help would have found answers even without the shrines' intervention, since it was in their destiny. It was only at a later stage, several claimed, that it would become obvious that shrine owners cannot live up to their promises, thereby finally revealing their deception and fraud.

That *La Solution* is indeed a Christian film was less obvious and only became apparent to most viewers halfway through the film. Six viewers even completely missed that *La Solution* was about Christianity. As their experience of Christianity was not significant, the cultural incongruity of the film was higher as compared to Christian viewers. Those who recognised Christians in the film usually did so by hearing people talking about God and Jesus, something that necessitates a mini-

⁴² This seems to be a wider principle of the local economy. When people use a tailor or seamstress for the first time they are usually pleased. After subsequent visits to the same person, however, customers begin to complain about the quality of their work and begin to look for a new tailor or seamstress.

mal understanding of French. Sometimes, viewers also made comments to help other viewers. The young Christian Innocent remembered when he first watched *La Solution* at his church: “I have watched the film already and other viewers said: ‘Here’s the pastor and his wife.’ This is why this time I recognised the pastor and his wife” (interview, 27 Mar. 2010). It is interesting that while I was not able to identify pastors in the film, virtually all viewers did so. For them, a pastor is somebody who carries and uses a Bible (see Chapter 2) and is more generally associated with people who work for God (cf. Pype 2012: 51). Because of this, Evariste, a young farmer with little experience of Christianity, came to understand that Ata himself was a pastor:

There was a pastor. He went to see the people who have medicines and diviners who talked between themselves. If I understood correctly, his wife wanted to kill him. This is why he threw her out of the house. Then somebody came to talk to him about God’s Word. At the end of the film we saw that he became a good pastor again. ... He announced the Word of God and people listened (interview, 11 Apr. 2010).

The assumption that a pastor has a stable *mtakimε* (identity) from his birth led him to understand the film in more Christian terms than the producers could have anticipated, even though his view of what a pastor is and what he does could be queried from the producers’ perspective.

While *La Solution* is clearly meant to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity, for most viewers the film was in fact more about shrines, something that most complained about. Because of this, viewers in the Commune of Coby understood the film mainly in terms of their current discourse on the utility, efficiency and nature of shrines, and only secondarily as an argument for Christianity. It is true that especially the more committed Christian viewers did understand the film as a general condemnation of any form of shrine, but my findings equally show that the film does not necessarily discourage people from engaging with *atenwiene* (shrine entities). Watching *La Solution* largely affirmed what viewers already knew, namely that at least some shrines are not reliable and that at least some shrine owners’ main goal is to exploit.

Finally, most viewers also recognised that Christianity proposes an alternative path that some people choose to follow. *La Solution* comes to a climax when the

new Christian Ata challenges Nato, the shrine owner. At least from the Christian perspective as presented in *La Solution*, confrontation seems not only inevitable, but also essential to demonstrate the power of God, which marks a liminal event that leads to conversion with its promise of health, happiness and the prosperity of a modern life.

The Witches of Yatin

While *La Solution* focuses on the evils of shrines and their owners, the Beninese *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (*Yatin: Place of Suffering*, 2002) mainly addresses the problem of witches. Virtually everybody who watched the film with me knew something about witches and the threat they pose. In the Commune of Cibly, such knowledge is mainly fed by rumours about people who have become victims of witches or are suspected of using their powers in their attempt to harm others.

Most viewers, especially older ones, did not like the film and a few even found it difficult to watch, even though they also recognised it as highly veracious. While *La Solution* presents a problem that people usually bring on themselves, witches pose a more severe threat that could potentially manifest itself in anyone's life at any time. Mathieu, a farmer who attended church for a while, summarised: "I like *La Solution* because it only shows cheating. Nato cheats you, but he won't kill you. In *Yatin*, however, they kill people willy-nilly as if they were just chickens" (interview, 30 Mar. 2010). This gives *Yatin* a much more sinister tone, since it visualises and makes present the general threat of witches. While all viewers were already aware of the potential dangers of witches, many did not appreciate being reminded of it, especially by making it more concrete. On the other hand, many also found the film interesting, since *Yatin* offers an opportunity to learn more about the work of witches, making their usually hidden activities more accessible and understandable without the danger of getting personally involved in it (see also Geschiere 2013: 183-186; Henry and Tall 2008: 23). This mix of criticising films, while showing a keen interest in them at the same time, seems typical of Nollywood audiences (Akpabio 2007; Krings and Okome 2013; Okome 2010; Pype 2013). Films like *Yatin*, after all, are not only about the evils of witches, but also present hope by reminding viewers that there are solutions to

witches and that people can find relief from them. It is this point that makes *Yatin* watchable and interesting.

Yatin, as already discussed in Chapter 3, directly comes out of Nollywood and uses its cinematographic conventions and special effects. While especially younger people are at least somewhat familiar with West African video films, older people often are not. In spite of this, I found that *Yatin* presented the narrowest interpretive field of the three films, which I can explain by the film being the least incongruous, both in cultural and epistemological terms. Accordingly, only one old man, who generally struggled in making sense of all the films, did not pick up that *Yatin* was about Christianity while virtually all viewers identified witches in the film. A few especially older viewers were confused who exactly the witches were. While most thought they included the obviously evil people dressed in black, some interpreted these same people as either shrine people or devils.

In my interviews with two well-educated Christian Cobby residents, two important and distinctive points about *Yatin* became apparent. Bernard thought that “*Yatin*... reflects better local realities as compared to *La Solution*”, while François stated that “*Yatin*... doesn’t need to speak in order to convince” (interviews in French, 20 Dec. 2010). François makes reference to *Yatin*’s high level of visualisation, which allows even viewers who have difficulties understanding French to follow the plot sufficiently. It is these two points that I find characteristic of Nollywood as compared to the other two films. This shows that Nollywood’s cinematography is indeed well suited for West African audiences, who can easily exploit the presencing potential of such films and make them relevant to their lives (see also J. Merz 2014). I found in my research that even viewers who generally did not have much experience of films were able to presence *Yatin* noticeably better than the other two films.

Nollywood filmmakers, then, seem to have found an efficient and attractive way to portray topics that are typically difficult to address and visualise in film, most notably things not usually seen, such as witches or the effect of prayer. Accordingly, *Yatin*’s distinctive feature is its portrayal of the spiritual warfare that rages between the pastor and the witches.

The Pastor's War on the Devil

With its distinctly Pentecostal background, *Yatin*'s main narrative is centred on the continuous conflict between God and the devil, which it mainly visualises through the battle between the pastor and the witches. While God proves to be more powerful, which is also a lesson that some viewers gained, the outcome of the film remains uncertain to the very end. This does not only provide suspense for the plot, but also tries to demonstrate that Christians should constantly be on guard against the powers of darkness. Indeed, in order to succeed and prosper in life, *Yatin* can remind Pentecostal Christians that they need to keep their lives pure of any influence of the devil, demons and witches, by engaging in deliverance and spiritual warfare. Sometimes, this demands extraordinary courage, as the hero of the film, Pastor Philippe, demonstrates.

For François, who is an active church member of the *Assemblées de Dieu*, *Yatin* was important since it reminded him “that there are forces in this world” (interview in French, 19 Jan. 2011). David used to be a witch and continued to use his transvisual powers even after conversion and becoming a Pentecostal church leader (J. Merz 2008). With his firsthand knowledge of transvisual power and spiritual battles he upheld that “every night there's a battle. The witches fight against those who are not witches and the angels of Satan fight against the angels of God” (interview in French, 17 Feb. 2012). David recognised that engaging in these battles is not easy and a matter of constant uncertainty:

The pastor didn't believe he would live. No. He doesn't know where his life is, but he constantly confides it to God and his will. That's it. ... And the pastor accepted death with sincerity. He believed that he would die because of the people of Yatin, but God freed him (interview in French, 26 Jan. 2011).

Similarly, Pierre, a retired pastor of the *Assemblées de Dieu* who has some experience of working in difficult places throughout Benin, confirmed:

In [the village of] Yatin, the devil is really tremendous... It is a satanic village, dominated by evil powers. ... The pastor arrived with the power of God. During his encounters I was even afraid when the devil would manifest himself when the pastor did his things. He was not just any pastor, ... he had faith and he had the spirit of God in him. This is why he went to fight these powers and secured victory over the population (interview in French, 15 Dec. 2010).

More generally, virtually all viewers understood from early on in the film that Philippe was indeed a pastor. Like in *La Solution*, Pastor Philippe carries his Bible and uses typical Christian language, especially in his prayers, which contain copious shouts of “Hallelujah!” and “In the name of Jesus!”. Additionally, several viewers pointed out that Philippe also sang songs that they easily identify as typically Christian and that he often waved his arms and used other typically Christian gestures. Through this, as it is common in Nollywood, *Yatin* succeeds noticeably better than *La Solution* to convey the film’s Christian nature.

The war in the village of Yatin manifests itself often directly between witches and Christians. Pastor Philippe and other Christians can be seen praying while stretching out their arms towards their enemies. Thanks to special effects, electric sparks and sometimes fire flow from the palms of the raised hands of the praying Christians to destroy their enemies. While the purpose of these special effects seemed clear to most viewers, they were not always able to explain what the sparks were exactly. For some they stood for some sort of God’s power while others understood them more specifically as *uwien’ takime* (God’s identity, the Holy Spirit), *uwien’ daku* (God’s fire, energy) or *ntakidaku* (spiritual fire, energy). The idea that God sends fire to fight his enemies is common in West African Pentecostalist Christianity and can sometimes be heard in sermons and warfare prayers. Interestingly, Simon (interview, 15 Dec. 2010), the owner of a Tigare shrine, was the only viewer, who drew parallels between what he saw in *Yatin* and a local kind of specialist whom people can approach following a theft. The specialist then provides the victim with a medical substance without identifying the thief. The substance is supposed to cause lightning to strike the culprit (cf. Maurice 1986: 18). More generally, as in other parts of Africa (see, e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1937: 426), people often consider death by lightning as an indication that the victim was a thief. This indicates that the special effects of *Yatin* and other Nollywood films are not totally novel to people in the Commune of Cobly, which undoubtedly makes them more accessible and relevant.

Generally, the prayers of the Pastor and Christians are instantly answered in *Yatin*, demonstrating that their words are agentive and have an effect in the world. Especially during the night while Christians sleep soundly after having prayed, people dressed in white appear to protect them. Such a person covers the

sleepers with a “white cloth”, to use the language of most viewers, which makes them invisible to the witches. Another person in white more actively fights intruding witches. Again many viewers were not totally sure who these people were, although it was clear that God had sent them. Some identified them as *uwien' takimε* (God's identity, the Holy Spirit) or as *uwien' bodikε* (God's animating force, the Holy Spirit). For a few others, it was God himself who descended, while one viewer thought that Jesus had come to their defence. Only a few French-speaking Christian viewers in the town of Cobly identified these beings as *anges* (angels), a term that is often interpreted in Mbelime as flying or winged people. Since *Yatin* does not show such winged beings, those viewers that only speak Mbelime did not usually see any “angels”.

Scenes like these made it clear to virtually all the viewers that the power to fight witches comes from *Uwienu* (God). All viewers accepted *Uwienu's* supremacy and while they know that Christians are typically associated with him, *Uwienu* is not exclusively reserved for them. Viewers like Simon or Valentin and his brother, who have Tigare shrines at home, or Moutouama, who is responsible for a stone entity, equally claimed access to God through their *atenwiεε* (shrine entities). Although I do not know this for sure, it is probable that some of the viewers had medicinal substances hidden in their houses, which some people maintain as an effective protection against witches and whose power they would ultimately attribute to God (Huber 1973: 387). One viewer, who had abandoned all shrines and medicinal substances without ever having set foot into a church, did so because he wanted to follow *Uwienu* directly.

These examples show that one does not need to become a Christian in order to follow *Uwienu* (God) and to find protection from witches. Depending on the viewers' prior experience and knowledge, *Yatin* does not suggest that the only solution to the problem of witches lies in conversion to Christianity, as Christian viewers usually perceived it after watching the film. Rather, *Yatin* suggests to non-Christian viewers that protection comes from *Uwienu*. This includes approaching *Uwienu* through various shrines or the acquisition of medicinal substances that provide protection and can be understood as drawing their power from God. Christianity, too, can become a viable way to follow, especially when people have experienced other paths as ineffective, as I have demonstrated for *La Solution*.

Rather than being an argument for Christianity, then, *Yatin* presents itself to its viewers in the Commune of Cobly as a resource that helps them to think through the problems of witches, an issue that concerns everybody.

The Witches' Evil

Virtually all viewers recognised that witches wreaked havoc in the village of Yatin. The film starts with a lengthy public ceremony that most viewers identified as happening at a Tigare shrine. Central to this ceremony is Sika, an old woman who gets fed from a calabash, an act that turned her into a witch, as most viewers recognised, probably on the basis of what happens later in the film.

People in the Commune of Cobly often say that there are two ways of becoming a witch. While some are born as witches, others are said to actively seek such power, usually with the intent of harming others. Some stories also imply that people can become witches by accident, for example by eating from a pot of a witch without being aware of the danger this poses. This means that the beginning of *Yatin* made sense in local terms, even though people who are seeking to become a witch do not usually go to Tigare shrines. Maybe this was why at least one viewer thought that Sika did not actually want to become a witch, but fell victim to the evil schemes of the shrine owners.

What most viewers specifically commented on was the first meeting of the witches' coven that now included Sika. Alphonse, an older Christian, described this scene that proved to many that they were indeed witches: "They made the tree split in half so that they could come out" (interview, 27 Feb. 2010). The special effect of the splitting tree made a big impression on most viewers. People commonly associate trees with the places where witches meet and most know of evil trees that can harm people when they pass them, especially at night. That a tree could be the house of witches, however, was new to many, especially those who had never seen *Yatin* before. While some viewers seemed to accept that this was indeed how witches operate, several demonstrated a more nuanced perspective. Bertin, a councillor to a village chief, stated: "It's a kind of *uhɔɔhu* [trans-visual power] that is different from the one we have here. The witches we have here don't come out of trees, they don't come out of the ground and they don't come down from the sky" (interview, 5 Mar. 2010).

Similarly, many viewers found the witches' visual portrayal convincing, since it confirmed their evil nature. This includes their painted faces and black gowns, the way they talk and laugh and their long fingernails and moving arms that imply their desire to catch the people. "Their gestures, well, it's their style", commented Antonin (interview in French, 18 Dec. 2010), a young film lover. In its portrayal of witches, *Yatin* succeeds even better in exploiting the visual aspect of film than in its depiction of Christains, especially by drawing on conventions that have become characteristic of Nollywood.

The next important event in *Yatin* is Sika's attack of a young woman who had just passed her on a path. Sika turns round and in the witches' style raises her hands and sends two red bolts from her eyes into the woman's lower back. The result was, all viewers acknowledged, fatal. Even though this event takes place during the day when witches do not usually operate, virtually all viewers identified Sika's attack as an act of her evil *uhwɔhu* (transvisual power).

As I discuss in Chapter 4, many people in Commune of Coby consider the eyes of witches to be different, often by being the source of light that they use to detect and catch the *sibosi* (pl. of *kɛbodikɛ*, animating force) of people. It is thus significant that the red bolts come from Sika's eyes, which helped to confirm her as a witch. While not all viewers could name the things that came out of her eyes, some identified them as the witch's light or fire. Especially younger viewers sometimes understood them as bullets that Sika shot from her gun, while Christian viewers tended to see them as the witch's spirit (*uhua takimɛ*) or an evil spirit (*mtakitiɛ*), thereby drawing on the demonised view of transvisual power as is typical of Pentecostalised Christianity (see Chapter 3; J. Merz 2008).

Especially Christian viewers tended to link the witches' powers directly to evil spirits and *disɛnpode* (the devil), the opponent of God. Witches then can become victims of powers beyond their control and are turned into demonic agents who fight against God and his people. Marc, an older man who used to attend church, commented on this issue: "Well, it's those who have read the Bible that say it [*la sorcellerie*, transvisual power] is from the devil. But our parents said that it's from God. You see, there's confusion" (interview in French, 15 Dec. 2010). Marc's observation was confirmed by a significant number of viewers who shared his opinion that witches' power, whether good or evil, always comes from God. The

reason for this stems from the view that God predetermines the identity of people through their *mtakime* and that it is mainly this that decides whether one is a witch or not. While many older people shared this view, it can also be found among the younger generations and some Christians. Accordingly, evil is not played out in some sort of cosmic battle between God and the devil, but it is rooted in everyday life. People have to live with and deal with it to the best of their abilities by drawing on various sources, such as shrines, medicinal substances or prayers. Again, if *Yatin* is viewed from such a perspective, it still makes sense, even though it may miss the main point of the advantages of Christianity that the maker of the film wants to impart.

Whatever the viewers' take on *Yatin* was nobody liked to see the witches go about their evil work. Indeed, the producers of the film endeavour to present witches as the worst manifestation of evil and portray them as being responsible for common problems that people face, such as infertility, alcoholism, epilepsy, suicide and even murder. Despite this, Sanhonga, a middle-aged widow and active Catholic, was the only one to explicate this during the interviews:

What I watched yesterday, I'm not sure, ... but if this is all *uhɔɔhu* [transvisual power], the lady who urinated on the mat, the man with epilepsy and also the child who escaped school, then it is similar to what we find here. All this exists in our region (interview, 18 Dec. 2010).

Whether *uhɔɔhu* comes from the devil or is linked to a God-given *mtakime*, Sanhonga implies that “witchcraft” can easily become “the prototype of all evil”, as Evans-Pritchard (1937: 56-57) first described it for the Azande. Such negative and moralising views not only came to characterise many anthropological studies, many Christians throughout Africa have adopted them as well. In the Commune of Cobly, this view of evil witches is also becoming more popular. While *Yatin* can certainly support such views, it cannot be held responsible for promoting it. Even people who have never seen the film and who have never been to church can conclude that witches are evil. Bienvenu, for example, a young man, who only watched *La Solution* with me, shared: “The devil is what we call today the witch” (interview, 15 Jan. 2011); a statement that succinctly summarises what *Yatin* is about.

Experiencing Dreams and Films

Especially *Yatin*, and to a lesser degree the *Jesus Film*, visualise parts of the less visible world. In doing so, they make an implicit comparison to dreams, which is the most common way people experience transvisuality or seeing beyond the material world. As I have already established in Chapter 4, dreams and films are similar and have become intermedially linked (Förster 2013). This link became particularly noticeable when I continued to interview viewers about a year after discussing the three films with them. Yantékoua related the following experience:

I saw [Jesus] in my dreams and when I woke up I didn't see him anymore. I noticed that I was lying down on my own. Sometimes I dream of something bad and I call Jesus' name. Then I see that he comes. The one I called, it's him who comes (interview, 24 Jan. 2012).

Marthe, Yantékoua's wife, had a similar dream:

I dreamt after I gave birth to my daughter Pauline. My belly was painful every day and I had to remain lying down. I was asleep when Jesus came to touch my belly. He said: 'It's finished, my daughter, nothing will happen anymore'. The next morning my pain was gone (interview, 26 Jan. 2012).

The Catholic widow Sanhonga also shared one of her dreams with me:

I was asleep and during my dreams I was somewhere and I suffered. Somebody was chasing me. I started to run and I also called the name of God. Immediately I found myself in a church where somebody waited for me. This person had opened the door for me and he wore white clothes. I noticed that he was a man. This is where the dream stopped. I told myself that he was the child of God and that he had saved me (interview, 28 Jan. 2012).

These three accounts of dreams are significant, since they recall scenes of *Yatin*, where people dressed in white came to save those who had prayed or called Jesus' name. The three dreams are further important, since the dreamers were able to recognise Jesus. While only a few of the viewers claimed to have seen Jesus in dreams, these examples indicate a possible link between watching the *Jesus Film* and dreams (cf. Kulick and Willson 1994: 9), as Marie Gillespie (1995a: 363) and Purnima Mankekar (1999: 203) also showed for devotional viewing among Hindus. More generally, David Morgan (2012: 190-191, 238 n.127) argues

that there is usually a link between religious apparitions, visions and dreams and pictures that people have previously seen, even though people do not always recognise such a link. Some viewers, on the other hand, acknowledged that they recognised Jesus in their dreams thanks to his “photo” they knew from the *Jesus Film* and other images (cf. Morgan 2012: 206).

Marguerite, a middle-aged woman who used to attend church, told about seeing Jesus in her dreams: “I usually see Jesus just as I see him in the photos” (interview, 20 Feb. 2011). Catherine, a young Catholic attending secondary school, explained: “I slept and it was as if somebody came from the sky, he descended. ... I have seen photos of Jesus and now I saw that the person [in my dream] was similar to Jesus” (interview in French, 12 Feb. 2012). Correspondingly, Pierre, the retired pastor, regularly sees Jesus in his dreams:

It’s because I saw his photo. Otherwise, I couldn’t know. ... I see Jesus’ photo, I read his word... Now, maybe by thinking of his words, during the night, when I have read the Bible and as he speaks to me, I also succeed in seeing the photo I’d seen [of him] (interview in French, 8 Feb. 2012).

For these people Jesus’ visual presence has become real and his appearance in their dreams has made him directly relevant to their lives. Seeing Jesus in film as part of a public screening is certainly exciting, since it shows what he has done and what he can do, at least potentially. Experiencing him in dreams, on the other hand, renders him more intimate and personal. After all, people see and hear him intervening directly for them, just as they see it happening in *Yatin* for Pastor Philippe and his wife. The people whose dream experiences I present above easily recognise that Jesus healed or protected them, and maybe even saved them from death. As for the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea, then: “When Jesus appears to them in visions and dreams, they *see* proof that he exists” (Robbins 2004a: 144, italics in original).

People often experience both dreams and Christian films through similar, if not identical, presencing processes that make them part of the world of agentive relationality. Both dreams and films become transvisual technologies that necessitate further presencing of what they show, thereby allowing people to relate to the characters presented in them. Dreams and films not only relate to people, they also adapt to each other since they share similar traits. Different characters, such

as Jesus or witches, for example, are able to move between dreams and films and can appear in both. Dreams and film provide the characters they show with agency and the means to become visible and present to people, something that is not normally possible. The experiential nature of dreams and films, and the characters people meet through them, continually influences and shapes people's lives, similarly to how their interaction with other people and transmaterial beings continuously affects them and their position in the world of agentive relationality.

Most people in the Commune of Coby, however, clearly make a difference between dreams and films. When witches appear in dreams, rather than film, for example, they pose a real and immediate threat and people will usually investigate the situation and seek solutions. Furthermore, people know that dreams are experienced through one's *kebodike* (animating force), while films can be seen with one's own eyes. In spite of this, people see the content of dreams and films in a similar light. While dreams are film-like, especially Christian films adopt a dream-like quality, which is most notable in *Yatin*. This makes films credible and convincing, while seeing them with one's own eyes makes them appear even more veracious than dreams. This combination provides people with the feeling that the transvisual technology of film renders the less-visible part of the world more visible and more concrete. Through watching Christian films people feel that they can become more active in trying to intervene in the less-visible part of the world, and maybe even to gain some control over it, especially through Christian prayers.

Even when Jesus does not appear in dreams, seeing him in film already makes him more familiar and accessible in a relational sense. Watching the *Jesus Film*, then, provides audiences in the Commune of Coby with a different experience as compared to hearing the Gospel of Luke read to them, or reading it for themselves. The young farmer and Christian Innocent explained: "Yesterday I watched the film and I told myself that Jesus is the child of God. I saw this in the film. ... But I have never seen God's child with my own eyes" (interview, 15 Mar. 2010). As Kwon has put it for Mangyan audiences of the *Jesus Film* in the Philippines, "the actor, Brian Deacon, became an icon of Jesus in their religious experience" (Kwon 2010: 192). Elaborating the visual impact of the film, Honoré, a literacy teacher who used to attend church, explained:

I really saw that the Word of God is true. Before that, people just talked from books, but I hadn't seen with my own eyes. Now, I have seen with my eyes that it has happened. This is why I know that the film gave me the true words (interview, 13 Mar. 2010).

Similarly, for *Yatin*, seeing witches at work becomes important for some viewers, since it confirms their existence. Ntanki, an old man, for example, stated: "Our parents told us that *uhwɔhu* [transvisual power] exists, but it's only today that we see that it really exists" (interview, 6 Jan. 2011). Furthermore, viewers of such films can learn more about secretive activities that could be a threat to their lives. Tchanaté, a middle-aged farmer who has experience of Christianity, stated:

I'm not sure, but I can say we suffer from witches here [in the Commune of Cobly]. There are many of them, but I don't know what exactly they do to eliminate us. I don't know how they do it and I don't know where they meet. But I'm sure that they are here. In the film I saw them catching people and others simply died. We don't know what they do to kill people. Judged by what I saw yesterday in the film, it must be this that destroys us. What I saw yesterday, I'm sure that this is how they operate in the night (interview, 13 Apr. 2010).

Innocent, a younger Christian farmer, shared his view:

The witches you find here, they are around. People usually say that the diviner finds witches who catch people. But yesterday, we saw them falling from the sky and coming out of trees. They placed themselves in a nice line and there were many of them. I've never seen witches arranged in a nice line like this (interview, 30 Mar. 2010).

Such views confirm the importance of the dream-like quality of films that visualise and make present what is usually hidden, thereby making the less visible part of the world accessible to the eye. Through such "documentation[s] of the spiritual realm" (B. Meyer 2006a: 304), people not only find it confirmed that witches are indeed a threat, films also provide very concrete suggestions that people can learn and apply to their lives, both when awake and asleep. Antonin, a young Catholic film lover who attends secondary school, shared what he had learnt from *Yatin*:

You pass an old woman and maybe you continue and she can do something to you. But since I watched this film, when I pass an old woman and I don't like the way

she behaves, I watch my back to see if she continues her path... (interview in French, 18 Dec. 2010).

Laurent, a middle-aged farmer who has some experience of Christianity, applies similar principles to when he is asleep:

TV keeps the witches at bay. When you sleep and a witch approaches you, *kebodike* [animating force] has seen everything in films and now knows how to imitate what it saw. You'll be able to chase them away and you'll be safe (interview, 1 Jan. 2011).

When people suspect being attacked by a witch, they can actively seek a solution to this. Some resort to prayers, as they also see in the films. Antonin made this clear: "In order to avoid [witches], you need to pray to have the power to withstand their attacks. Otherwise, if you want to avoid a witch without praying, you can't" (interview in French, 19 Dec. 2010). More generally, watching films in the Commune of Cobly has become an important resource for some to learn about the dangers of life and to find solutions. Tchétékoua, an assistant at an Nkunde shrine who did not actually watch the films with me, summarised this point:

You can walk in the bush and see a danger; you can go somewhere and get into a fight with someone. Either way, you can strike back with your intelligence thanks to what you've learnt from the TV. ... You can strike back thanks to the TV and one day this will save your life (interview, 16 May 2011).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented the results of an audience reception study of the three Christian video films *Jesus*, *La Solution* and *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* as viewers in the Commune of Cobly watched them. I found that the films do not so much convey, propose or even impose a specific message that people either understand or misunderstand, but present a resource, which they seek to exploit to the best of their abilities. In doing so, films and their contents become identified as entities, thereby being ascribed a place in relation to other entities, such as people, shrines, television sets, dreams or photographs. Films gain agency and a life of their own and thus become active players in the world of agentive relationality.

I found that the viewers, regardless of their backgrounds, engaged in watching the three films as an experience by drawing on what I describe as the transma-

terial presencing principle. Even though the three videos are explicitly Christian and all have a strong Christian purpose, people did not necessarily understand them as intended by their makers and distributors. Rather, people watched the films as learning opportunities and as resources to think through issues that are directly relevant to their lives and to their surroundings. The *Jesus Film*, for example, does not need to be watched as a call for conversion to Christianity, but can address the value of following *Uwienu* (God), a topic that virtually all viewers found relevant in one way or another. Similarly, *La Solution* does not necessarily demonstrate the superiority of Christianity as undoubtedly intended, but can engage people to think through the problems and benefits of shrines, which is a current topic in the Commune of Cobly. Lastly, *Yatin* is mainly about the problem of witches and can teach viewers more about how they behave and pursue their evil ends. I also found that viewers were reminded of the importance of finding means to protect oneself against witches, be it prayers as demonstrated in the film or otherwise.

The incongruity of film, by which I understand socio-cultural differences in a wide sense between a film and its receptors, is an important factor that determines the configuration and breadth of the interpretive field. On the other hand, it does not necessarily affect the popularity and veraciousness of films, nor does it hinder people from watching and presencing films. Rather, incongruity allows for filmic interpretations that do not correspond with the expectations and intentions of producers. The example of *Yatin* showed that incongruity was small, thereby resulting in a narrower interpretive field. For the most incongruous film among the three, the *Jesus Film*, the interpretive field was broad, accommodating a plurality of meanings.

Sometimes viewers missed that the films were intended to arouse an increased interest in Christianity. None of the viewers, who have never attended a church, indicated in any way that they understood the films in this way. Several of those viewers, who had explained how they benefited from the Christian message of the films, did not demonstrate any significant change in behaviour during the year following the viewing, such as abandoning shrines or starting to attend a church. This corresponds with Cathy Lee Mansfield's (1984) conclusion who found in Zambia that the *Jesus Film* on its own, does not usually provoke a significant

decision or change of behaviour, and with Kwon's observation for the Mangyan of the Philippines that "the film showing was not persuasive enough to make any religious converts among audiences" (2010: 160; see also Chapter 3).

Christian videos, then, do not live up to the intentions and expectations of their producers and distributors, and sometimes even provoke antagonism towards Christianity. In spite of this, committed Christian viewers continue to believe in the potential and efficiency of showing them with the goal of conversion. Watching such films further affirms their previously held assumptions of the films' evangelistic efficiency. Salomon, for example, confidently stated: "If somebody doesn't believe and he follows this film [*Jesus*], I think that this will lead him to believe in [the Christian] God" (interview in French, 18 Jan. 2011).

This leads me to conclude that especially Christians have developed an ethos of a preferred reading of Christian videos that becomes their accepted and expected standard for watching them. In doing so, I can describe them as having accepted semiotic notions of correct sign interpretation that relies on the semiotic presencing principle. When viewers of Christian films fail to live up to the Christians' expected preferred reading, Christians can put this down either to the viewers' ignorance or to them falling victim to meaning-distorting demonic activity. Especially in Pentecostalisised Christianity, that constantly seeks purification from demonic contamination, showing films for the purpose of evangelism is also a spiritual activity and thus becomes part of spiritual warfare. Viewers need to be prayed for and encouraged in their understanding of the films. This necessitates evangelistic film campaigns, which go far beyond only showing films. Christians have learnt that they can increase the communicative potential of their films, at least to some extent, by teaching viewers how the films need to be watched and understood in order to get closer to their preferred meaning of the films.

Christian films themselves, as I show in this chapter, do not necessarily promote conversion to Christianity, but rather provide presencing resources for people. If viewers exploit their presencing potential, films can stimulate them to recognise the existence of agentive filmic entities that claim a presence in the world by interacting with other entities. In this way, films and their contents become entangled with the lives of their viewers and, together with other entities, such as shrines, witches or dreams, constitute and shape the world. Films, then,

mainly help people to think through issues and problems they face and to make better sense of their lives in a world of agentive relationality. Within Christian circles, on the other hand, films become part of the lives of Christians and help to perpetuate and develop their Pentecostalisised preferred reading. This contributes to a shift from biblical texts to Christian films as a foundation and expression of their faith. This shift from text to film lends itself to discussing the different strands and arguments presented so far and bringing this book to its conclusion.