



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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

Merz, J.

Citation

Merz, J. (2014, November 6). *A religion of film. Experiencing Christianity and videos beyond semiotics in rural Benin*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/29657>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/29657>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/29657> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Merz, Johannes Ulrich

Title: A religion of film : experiencing Christianity and videos beyond semiotics in rural Benin

Issue Date: 2014-11-06

Summary in English

In this thesis I discuss three Christian films that have become popular in the Commune of Cibly of today's Republic of Benin, not only as evangelistic tools among missionaries and pastors, but also among Christian audiences and the wider population more generally. Indeed, Christian films have become so important that I raise the question whether Christianity is shifting from a religion of the book towards a religion of film. The films under discussion are the American *Jesus Film* (1979), the American-Ivorian film *La Solution* (1994) and the Beninese video film *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002) that is a direct extension of the Nigerian video film industry now often referred to as Nollywood. I am particularly interested in how people receive and understand these films together with the digital video technology that has facilitated their recent success.

My theoretical starting point is semiotics, a theory that has been foundational not only for film, media and media reception studies, but more recently also for the study of materiality. As my main theoretical contribution I present a critique of semiotics, arguing that this theory, which has been foundational to Western science since Aristotle, is in fact too limiting. I demonstrate that semiotics, even in its Peircean orientation, cannot sufficiently explain how people in the Commune of Cibly understand shrines, film and media more generally, both through their material manifestations and interactively in terms of communication. I propose a process that I call presencing, which goes beyond semiotics and can explain better people's understanding of shrines and media.

The thesis is comprised of five chapters. In Chapter 1 I introduce the area of my study, the remote Commune of Cibly of northwestern Benin, by reassessing its alleged backwardness from a historical perspective. As the area has always been part of wider regional developments, including trans-Saharan trade that predates the arrival of Europeans on the West African coast and the transatlantic slave trade, Cibly has been involved with modernity for a long time. While early explorers of the late nineteenth century sometimes gained a romantic impression of the area, French colonialism with its civilising and modernising aims inverted its prior modernity. This resulted in the people of today's Commune of Cibly being

recast as the most backward colonial subjects, who came to occupy one of the remotest parts of the colony. I argue that colonial modernity had a deep impact on people, not only through ethnicisation, territorial reorganisation and increased security, but also on their self-esteem and self-image.

Following the colonial impact, people slowly regained their former dynamism, openness to strangers and high mobility as they adapted to the colonial imposition and the later postcolonial nation state. This process has accelerated, particularly since the 1990s, as Christianity, education and media have not only become more accessible, but are increasingly popular, especially among the younger generations.

I present the main theoretical argument of this thesis in Chapter 2 by focusing on how people in the Commune of Coby understand the materiality of shrines, the Bible and words. I found that people often do not make a difference between the matter and spirit of things. The stone of a shrine, for example, is not simply a stone, but rather a being in its own right that relies on the coexistence of spirit and matter. In this sense many people consider everything that exists as intrinsically alive, sharing and participating in a world of agentic relationality. While I characterise this view of materiality as “transmaterial”, I find it impossible to account for it in terms of Peircean semiotics. This is why I introduce the process of presencing, which extends semiotic meaning making to include more experiential and transmaterial presencing that stresses action. I thereby go beyond semiotics and its representational stance that is based on structured signs, which I find too limiting to account for the breadth of human experience. People engage in different ways in the complex process of presencing, which I describe through an interplay of two presencing principles. In order to account for transmateriality, I propose that many people in the Commune of Coby primarily use the transmaterial presencing principle. The semiotic presencing principle, on the other hand, accounts for more semiotic aspects of presencing and both complements and replaces transmaterial presencing to varying degrees; a process I call “semiotification”. The process of presencing results in entities, which can also include structured signs, that occupy the world of agentic relationality and then allow people, animals and things to interact with each other.

Colonial modernity, seen as a bundle of processes, affects the way people think of their world and how they live in it. Most importantly, semiotification results in the categorisation of beings according to their agency, which now becomes centred on humans. Things, on the other hand, are increasingly void of life and agency and become commoditised. I demonstrate that part of this development is that transmaterial beings, such as shrine entities, are both spiritualised and materialised, resulting in independent spirits that can now temporarily occupy the matter of stones or possess people. This view of shrines can be submitted to semiotic analysis through the shrine becoming the symbol in the Peircean sense of its associated spirit, thereby widening and reconfiguring the interplay of the two presencing principles. I end this chapter by showing that semiotification can never be fully achieved, but leads to a dynamic where spirit and matter are identified and detached from each other to varying degrees for different sorts of entities.

In Chapter 3 I shift the discussion to the three Christian films *Jesus*, *La Solution* and *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance*, which are all well known in the Commune of Coby where they are often used for evangelism. I analyse the films' content and place their production within the genealogy of different Christian films that go back to the advent of the medium. Jesus films have been among the earliest films made and are now recognised as a genre in their own right. Although the *Jesus Film* (1979) is part of this development, it can be distinguished from other Jesus films by its evangelical background and its prominent use in global evangelism. An important part of the success of the *Jesus Film* is its promotion among American evangelical Christians as the Word of God on film, which necessitates a combination and interplay of both the transmaterial and semiotic presencing principles.

While Christians have always made films, the 1940s saw a shift in American evangelical filmmaking towards more dramatic films, which were also produced for mission and evangelism. *La Solution* (1994) is an example of this filmic tradition, intertwining a modernising narrative with an evangelical one, thereby presenting what I call the aesthetics of colonial modernity.

The third film, the Beninese *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002), comes straight out of the Nigerian Christian film industry, which I trace back to church drama and American dramatic mission films. Contrary to *La Solution*, however, *Yatin*

comes out of Pentecostalisised Christianity with a strong focus on spiritual warfare that is visualised through special effects. More generally, *Yatin* draws on the conventions of Nollywood, which is now often accepted as its own unique form of video filmmaking.

Watching films is only possible through appropriate technology. In Chapter 4 I argue that such technology is never neutral and needs to be studied as part of the experience of film watching. Indeed, watching films makes people forget that the materiality of media also plays an important role. By studying the cultural biography and life of television sets and iconic images, most notably photographs, films and videos, I aim to fill this gap. Technology is further important since it allows people to see images with their own eyes, and learn by watching and imitating them. Consequently, film watching has become a popular and important part of people's lives in the Commune of Cobby.

Photographic images gain their power through iconically depicting and indexing people and things. While this can allow for the iconic trait of the semiotic presencing principle to become more prominent, photographs remain more than representations, since they can also make present what they show by providing depicted people and ancestors with material extensions.

Seeing photographs of ancestors and identifying their presence with the photographic image constitutes a kind of "transvisual" seeing. Generally, people have a keen interest in transvisuality, by which I mean seeing beyond the material. Dreams and visions are typical of transvisuality, since they allow people to gain access to the less visible parts of the world. I argue that witchcraft is also a form of transvisual power, because it not only allows people to perpetrate evil deeds in the less visible world, but can also be used to gain knowledge from the less visible world and engage in creative acts, such as making television sets. Some people explain that it is a television's transvisual power that allows it to work. For a significant number of people television sets become powerful or live entities that provide visual access to the less visible parts of the world just as dreams and visions do. Television sets thus provide a transvisual technology that people use to watch videos in order to gain a deeper knowledge of life in the more or less visible parts of the world of agentive relationality, which they inhabit.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I present and analyse the findings of my reception research for the three films. Since most audience studies have been done in Europe or America I find the current theory of film reception insufficient to account for film watching in Africa. Especially the American *Jesus Film* led to a wider variety of interpretations than the other two films made in West Africa, raising the issue of its incongruity, as I call it. Drawing on cultural and epistemological questions of the incongruity between the film and its audiences, I identify different ways that contribute to a broader interpretive field of plural meanings.

I argue that films should not be analysed as trying to convey a specific message. Rather, viewers use films as presencing resources, which they exploit by drawing on their prior knowledge and experience, and by drawing on the interplay of the two presencing principles to guide their presencing. This results in an interpretative field of plural meanings that can also account for why some viewers failed to recognise that the films were even Christian, watching them rather as directly relevant to their specific life situations. When watched by viewers who have no or limited knowledge of Christianity, I found that these films do not promote conversion to Christianity.

Films can only establish a preferred meaning for specific groups of people, who learn to watch the films in a specific way, usually by employing the semiotic presencing principle that accounts for correct sign interpretation. Accordingly, I contend that committed Christians in the Commune of Cobly have come to watch Christian films in similar ways. They discuss their preferred meaning among themselves and share this during film screenings through comments and running interpretations. Becoming Christian, then, means to adopt the preferred meaning of such films at least to some extent. The *Jesus Film* has become important to Christians because it is not only the Word of God on film, but actually becomes God's Film for some, similar to how the Bible is God's Book. Dramatic Christian films, on the other hand, work as visual sermons that allow people to learn from them according to their preferred way of visual leaning. It is especially due to the similarity of dreams and films that the latter become an important part of Christian life by gaining a life of their own and by becoming actors in the world of agentive relationality.

I conclude this book by returning to my overarching theme of the shift in Christianity from a religion of the book to a religion of film. I argue that such a shift is indeed happening at least among those who currently live and experience the kind of Pentecostalising Christianity that is found in the Commune of Coby of northwestern Benin.