CHAPTER **17** # Mediation and Immediacy: Sensational Forms, Semiotic Ideologies, and the Question of the Medium

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When research on religion and media took off some fifteen years ago, they initially were approached as two separate entities, each with their own logic, the question being how both related to each other. The question reflected a sense of puzzlement about the unexpected relation between religion and media. By now many scholars, certainly within anthropology, approach the religion–media nexus in a new way. Media are understood as intrinsic, rather than opposed, to religion, playing a role in broader practices of religious mediation that link humans with the divine, spiritual, or transcendental. This is a stimulating new perspective that helps us to grasp the new place and role of religion in our time. Showing that the use of electronic and digital media actually shapes the transformation of religion (de Vries 2001), recent work in this field critiques facile views of religion as being in danger of corruption by the forces of mass mediatization, entertainment, and the logic of the market, and argues that the adoption of media is key to the manifestation of religion. In order to convey a sense of what is at stake, let me present three vignettes that show different aspects of the use of media in lived religious practice.

One: In early January 2008, during a short field trip to Ghana, I attended a prayer service – Jericho Hour – organized by Action Chapel (Christian Action Faith Ministries) in Accra. This prayer service takes place every Thursday and attracts a large number of people, most of whom are members of other churches yet feel drawn to this powerful event, in the course of which pastors promise "showers of blessings"

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Figure 17.1   Jericho Hour, Christian Action Faith Chapel, Accra.

that materialize in health, wealth, visa and other much wanted matters (Meyer 2007) (Figure 17.1). While prayers were on, suddenly the electricity broke down. Through this the importance of microphones became obvious. Everything came to a standstill, and prayers could only continue when the generator was switched on – indicating the importance of the "generator" not only in generating electricity, but religious experience. Loudness – to such an extent that participants' bodies vibrated from the excess of sound – and also pastors' use of microphones in rhythmic sayings induced a certain trance-like atmosphere that conveyed a sense of an extraordinary encounter with a divine force that was experienced to be present, and that could be reached by opening up and stretching out one's arms.

Two: In August 2008, together with Maria José de Abreu, I visited the premises in São Paulo of Padre Marcello Rossi, who is famous for what he calls the "aerobics of Jesus" and has become a Catholic media celebrity with his own TV show, music CDs, movies, and publicity stunts. While I had read about his activities in the context of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal through the research of de Abreu (2005, 2009), the visit to the location was truly intriguing. The service more or less followed the liturgy of the Catholic mass. What was so special about it were the sweeping songs sung by the swirling, enthusiastic priest and his band, with which people joined in with all their hearts, and how this paced their mode of breathing (Figure 17.2). Singing and moving the body made people participate not only by listening, but with all their senses. The most amazing moment occurred when Padre Marcello invited the participants to "recharge their battery." He asked all of us to rub our hands so as to produce energy, and then touch our neighbors to experience a kind of electric sensation, or shock. The experience of shock was mimetically reproduced by him shouting "brroom brroom," making skillful use of the microphone. This suggests that technologies of sound amplification and the metaphor of electricity may well be harnessed to generate a sensation of the immediate presence of the Holy Spirit among those present.

Three: When I visited Ghana in the summer of 2009 to pursue my research on the Ghanaian video-film industry (Meyer 2004), there was quite a craze about sakawa. Sakawa-boys, it was said, seek to gain spiritual powers in order to be able to

Figure 17.2   Mass celebrated by Padre Marcello Rossi, São Paulo.

Figure 17.3   Poster advertising a movie about sakawa.

lure unsuspecting victims into all kinds of internet fraud ("419"). While some actu-
ally get rich, others do not make it through the initiation ritual – for instance,
sleeping in a coffin for a number of days – and die or reemerge mutilated, for
instance with a dog's head. Once rumors were out about these practices, which
associate sites of utmost technological development and global connectivity such as
internet cafés with secret spiritual powers, a host of spectacular posters, newspaper
articles, and films came out that reported the phenomenon (see Figure 17.3).

Eventually, the reality and danger of sakawa was asserted by pointing at these media products. Movies, in particular, were cited as being true insider revelations, thus lending visual credibility to what initially started as vague rumors: "It is true: I saw it in that movie!"

These vignettes from Ghana and Brazil point toward an intriguing set of relations between new (or rather, newly available) media and religion. While the first vignette reveals – via the detour of technological failure – the relevance of sound amplification for creating a powerful prayer event, the second invokes a deliberate analogy between technology and what belief is all about, and the third mobilizes the medium of film to lend credibility to what started as a rumor about some hidden, spiritual acts. Taken together, these vignettes are a fruitful starting point to reflect on the role and place of new media in practices of religious mediation. While media, by virtue of their technological properties, play a central role in bringing about such links, to the participants they are not present "as such." These media rather seem to vest the mediation in which they take part with some sense of immediacy, as if the use of microphones or film would yield some extraordinary experience that brings people closer to the divine.

In a special issue of *Social Anthropology* on "What is a medium?" Patrick Eisenlohr invited the contributors to address the salient paradox that ensues from placing media in a broader framework of mediation: the more we recognize mediation as being central to social-cultural life, the less we can offer a straightforward answer to the question of what a medium is (2011: 1–5). Eisenlohr's suggestion to explore this paradox by taking as a starting point "the propensity of media to erase themselves in the act of mediation" (2009: 9) is well taken.

The point here is not to invoke a universally valid media theory that accounts for this propensity of erasure,[1] but to call for an analysis of the social processes through which media become so entangled with what they contribute to mediate that they are not visible as such, at least not for those who are partaking in mediation. Practices of religious mediation appear particularly able to invoke a sense of the immediate presence of the divine, as in the case of the first two vignettes in which the Holy Spirit is invoked, or to incorporate the medium of film in such a way that it can be harnessed so as to produce an actual religious revelation. Thus, though it may be counterintuitive in the first place, the vignettes suggest that mediation and immediacy do not belong to two opposing realms, but are intertwined. This entwinement is the angle from which I will address the paradox signaled by Eisenlohr.

My reflections are based on, and have been generated within, a large comparative research program, titled "Modern mass media, religion and the imagination of communities," which I convened between 2000 and 2006.[2] First, I will document the already mentioned shift from a dualistic opposition to an encompassing notion of mediation in our research program. I argue that this shift requires a fundamental critique of approaches to religion that oppose media and immediacy. Second, based on this critique I propose to combine the notions of "sensational form" (Meyer 2006b) and "semiotic ideologies" (Keane 2007); these notions are helpful to conceptualize how achieving a sense of immediacy and divine presence depends on authorized mediation practices. Third, I argue that the attribution of qualities such as "mediated" or "immediate" to certain forms and experiences depends on particular, authorized views through which media may "disappear," be present and contested

or "hyper-apparent" and relate these modalities to religious transformation. In conclusion, I turn to the question "what is a medium?"

FROM "RELIGION AND MEDIA" TO "MEDIATION"

In the mid-1990s, in the aftermath of Ghana's return to a democratic constitution and the liberalization and commercialization of hitherto state-controlled media, I started to be interested in the relation between Pentecostalism and (at the time wildly popular) Ghanaian video-movies (e.g. Meyer 2004). Struck by "born again" pastors' skillful use of electronic media such as cassettes, television, and radio that allowed them to be extremely present in the public sphere – both visually and orally – and conversely, by the appropriation of Christian modes of vision and "looking practices" into popular cinema (Meyer 2006a; see also Morgan 1998, 2005; Pinney 2004), I got intrigued by the relation between religion and media. This is what prompted me to design a larger research program. Its aim was to investigate how religions transform by adopting mass media and, conversely, how public (media) culture draws on religious repertoires. Focusing on modern mass media, such as television, radio, cassettes, and film, as well as information and communications technology (ICT), the overall concern of the research program was to scrutinize how the (new) availability of such media in the aftermath of media liberalization and the ICT revolution transformed the role and place of religion in the public sphere.

Initially, we did not think much about the question of what is a medium. We simply took the answer for granted, as our focus was on modern mass media. However, as we ventured deeper into our respective research locations, our notion of media became more encompassing, also including bodies and things. Our understanding of media moved from a view of media as defined by particular modern technologies toward a broader view of media as transporters of content that connect people with each other and the divine. Shifting from a technological to a social view of media as bridging between people and levels went along with stimulating debates about the mediated nature of social life (Mazzarella 2004) and the potential of media to act as "mediators" that shape and effect the content which they transmit, rather than merely acting as tools of transmission or "intermediaries" (Latour 2005: 39–40). This prompted us to move beyond a narrow and present-centered view of modern mass media as bringing about something entirely new, and instead to place the adoption of new media in a historical framework of longstanding practices of religious mediation that transform over time by negotiating newly available technologies.

Even though it is important to acknowledge that properties of media technologies constrain and facilitate particular mediations and modes of communication at the expense of others, it would have been reductive to ground our approach of media in a deterministic view of technology (see also Verbeek 2005). In fact, technological determinism itself locates technologies within a particular vision of society in which technologies are instrumental and ultimately disenchanting. Examples such as those invoked by the vignettes, pointing at the embeddedness of microphones and movies in religious practices and beliefs, spotlight that it would be beside the point to adopt a view of media as neutral technologies that act according to their own logic.[3]

The point is that technology never "comes in a 'purely' instrumental or material form – as sheer technological possibility at the service of the religious imagination" (van de Port 2006: 455), but is to be embedded in the latter through an often complicated negotiation process in which established authority structures may be challenged and transformed (see also Eisenlohr 2006; Kirsch 2008; Larkin 2008; Schulz 2003, 2006).

The conceptualization of religion as mediation was a major step in our research program because it alerted us to a barely acknowledged, implicit bias against media in the study of religion (see also Meyer and Moors 2006). As mentioned already, scholarly interest in the relation between religion and media was generated by an initial puzzlement about the interaction between these fields that were not only imagined as separate, but also as belonging to entirely different registers. I would like to argue that this puzzlement refers back to Protestant views of religion, echoed by scholars such as Max Weber (Weber 1970) and William James (1982), that place personal experience and immediate encounters with the divine at the core, and regard form and (church) structure as secondary. Meaning, content and inward belief are privileged above media, form and outward behavior. Such a view reflects post-Enlightenment Protestant self-descriptions as developed in reaction to Catholicism's emphasis on sacraments and the use of images. The Protestant charge of iconoclasm can fruitfully be analyzed as a clash between competing visions on media. Importantly, the Protestant critique of the power attributed to media in the Catholic Church and its own emphasis on reading the Bible did not simply yield a plea for substituting one medium (icons) for another (biblical text). At stake was a move out of media, toward immediacy. The Protestant vision dismissed religious media as human-made and hence misguided for getting close to God. Only by reading the Bible – the living word of God – could believers achieve a personal and immediate link with God without the interference of church authorities.

This is an intriguing media theory by itself that should, however, not be taken at face value by scholars. The tension between the Protestant emphasis on an immediate encounter between believers and God, who is found to resist being represented via human-made forms, on the one hand, and the actual dependency on some kind of mediation so as to get in touch with Him has been captured by Matthew Engelke (2007) as the "problem of presence." This problem of presence ensues from the concomitant denial of mediation and the striving for immediate encounters with God that demand mediation of some sort. This contradictory stance is coupled with Protestant misgivings toward "mere" form, and the search for "real" content located beyond form (Meyer 2010a).

As stated already, the suspicion of media does not only pertain to Protestantism, but also shaped the (early) study of religion as a modern discipline. Regarding the biblical text as a medium that distorts original content, the "father" of religious studies Max Müller (1893; see also Fox 2009: 4–9), for instance, called for appropriate modes of interpretation that lead back to the immediate origin of what has been stored imperfectly in the textual form ("word" becoming "flesh" again, the concern of "biblical hermeneutics"). Here immediacy is typically understood – and privileged – as being prior to mediation. Richard Fox (2009) has argued that this view is still echoed in many contemporary media theories that distinguish between form and content, or medium and message, and privilege the latter above the former as being

more genuine. I agree with Fox that, certainly in commonsense understandings, media are still often understood as means to make up for the lack – or even loss – of immediacy. In such a perspective, media are defective, in that they can only convey a second-rate, mediated experience. By contrast, one of the central theoretical concerns in recent research on religion and media is to critique and transcend this problematic perspective, according to which media – understood as instrumental tools or vehicles of content – compromise and alienate by definition.[4] From the perspective of mediation that has already informed much recent work on the religion and media nexus, media are understood as taking part in effecting the divine or transcendental. They produce belief (see also de Certeau 1984; Derrida 2001).

Sensational Forms and Semiotic Ideologies

In order to grasp how the divine or transcendental is effected through mediation, I have coined the notion of "sensational form" (Meyer 2006b). Sensational forms are relatively fixed modes for invoking and organizing access to the transcendental, offering structures of repetition to create and sustain links between believers in the context of particular religious regimes. These forms are transmitted and shared; they involve religious practitioners in particular practices of worship, and play a central role in modulating them as religious moral subjects and communities. Pleading to reconsider the importance of "form" as being a necessary condition without which "content" cannot be conveyed, I stress that for me "form" does not stand in opposition to "content," "meaning," or "substance." Such an opposition reproduces a problematic, Protestant understanding of religion that dismisses form as an "outward" matter, and privileges content and "inward" belief instead (Meyer 2010a; see also Asad 1993). As argued in the previous section, it is high time to acknowledge that this understanding enshrines a particular, historically situated religious media theory that certainly demands analysis but should not be an unquestioned starting point in research on the religion–media nexus. Including all the media – broadly understood as mediators – that are used in linking up with the sphere of the transcendental, the notion of sensational form is meant to explore how mediation conveys a sense of that sphere.

It needs to be stressed that the notion of sensational form does not assume the primacy of senses as harbingers of religious experience, but calls for a focus on authorized forms that organize such experience. Here lies a significant difference with regard to approaches (developed within the anthropology of the senses, for instance) that posit a rift between the registers of language and the symbolic, on the one hand, and experience, on the other, and according to which the latter is more direct and genuine than the former. In my view, addressing the paradox of mediation and immediacy requires developing a new synthesis of approaches that stress the importance of the senses and experience with those stressing the forms and codes that are at the basis of cultural and religious systems.

Of particular relevance here is Webb Keane's notion of "semiotic ideology." If the notion of sensational form points at the organization of religious experience, "semiotic ideology" is helpful to get a clearer understanding of the status that is being attributed to words, things or images, from the perspective of a particular, historically

situated religious tradition. He developed this notion in his study of the encounters between Dutch Protestant missionaries and the Sumbanese in Indonesia so as to better grasp the different ways in which both sides construed the power and value of, for instance, words and things. Keane grounds this notion on the concept of "language ideology," that is, "what one believes about language" (2007: 16) or, in the words of Michael Silverstein, "sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use" (quoted in Keane 2007: 16). Ideology is used here not in the sense of a false consciousness, but in order to stress "the productive effects of reflexive awareness" (Keane 2007: 17), the point being that such ideologies are not confined to the level of immaterial representation, but always require objectification in the material world. Linguistic ideologies, understood in this sense, feature in concrete material settings that are inhabited by people. Invoking "semiotic" rather than "linguistic" ideology, Keane seeks to encompass other semiotic domains than language alone. Especially important here is the Peircean distinction between icon, index, and symbol, which offers a more complex theory of the relation between signs and the world than Saussurean linguistics, that presume a split between representation and reality. Semiotic ideologies thus identify significant categories of signs and define their relations to reality in particular ways that organize the material world.

The usefulness of the notion of semiotic ideology with regard to exploring the attribution of value and power to modes of speaking and expression in practices of religious mediation is obvious. In his ground-breaking research, already mentioned, on the Friday Masowe Apostles (Engelke 2004, 2007), who regard the Bible as a distractive thing that stands in the way of "real" contact with God and can therefore as well be used as toilet paper, Matthew Engelke reveals an ultra-iconoclastic semiotic ideology that regards things as problematic because of their "thingliness," while at the same time accommodating the use of substances such as sticky honey. Although from an outsider's perspective such a substance might be identified as a "thing," the crux of the matter is that, from an insider's perspective, honey is coded as being beyond materiality. This is a particularly intriguing example, because it shows that the dismissal of things does not exclude recurrence to what we would identify as matter – the point being that what qualifies as matter from the outside may well be framed as "spiritual" within a particular semiotic ideology.

While for the Friday Masowe Apostolics the Bible is thus unsuitable to link them with God, they consider honey as a viable harbinger of God's spirit. Achieving a sense of immediacy that goes hand in hand with marking honey as "spiritual," and thus as a medium that becomes one with the substance it conveys, obviously depends on framing honey on the basis of a particular semiotic ideology and casting it as a particular sensational form. In an intriguing alternative case of an African Pentecostal Church in Zambia, Thomas Kirsch (2008) has shown that the use of written biblical texts and liturgies need not stand in the way of, but rather prepares for an immediate encounter with the Holy Spirit, thereby challenging the usual opposition of oral and written, and Spirit and Letter, that still informs much scholarship.

These ethnographic cases suggest that what a medium is and does is not intrinsic to the medium itself, but subject to social processes that shape religious mediation and authorize certain sensational forms as valuable. As Patrick Eisenlohr (2006) also has argued, with regard to his work on the authorization of religious cassettes among

Muslims on Mauritius, the acknowledgment of the capacity of new technologies to mediate, and even convey immediacy, does not depend on these technologies themselves, but is rooted in broader notions and practices that attribute certain capacities to these technologies. In this sense, there is no radical distance between substances such as honey, the Bible, or modern mass media, as they can all be harnessed as mediators that operate within authorized sensational forms.

Synthesizing the notions of sensational form and semiotic ideology bridges between two epistemological approaches that have hitherto been taken as distinct, and yet need to be brought together in order to understand how and why semiotic codes are taken to be foundational of a certain religious tradition or perspective of the world. In other words, such a synthesis allows us to grasp how semiotic forms become persuasive, and are experienced as ultimately real and immediate (see also van de Port 2011).

Modalities of Media and the Transformation of Religion

One of the questions around which my reflection about the findings in our research program evolved was how new (or newly available) media impact on established sensational forms and relate to the semiotic ideologies that are characteristic for particular religious regimes.[5] The issue of the adequacy of old and new media to mediate spiritual power may give rise to vehement disagreements and contestations, but also make that media "disappear" or become what I would like to call "hyper-apparent."

"Disappearing" Media

In many of the research settings we encountered, we noted that in established practices of mediation no clear separation was drawn between medium and message, or form and content, on the level of religious practitioners. For example, for the Ewe, a legba statue is not understood as consisting of a mere material object that has a spirit behind it, but as an actual embodiment of spirit power (Meyer 2010b), just as, in Catholicism, icons convey a sense of God (their dismissal as human-made "idols," pointing at the sheer materiality of the icon, is a typically Protestant critique of Catholic mediation). Similarly, even though the question whether it is appropriate to use radio for public readings from the Qur'an involved complicated negotiations among Muslims in colonial northern Nigeria (Larkin 2009; see also below), once a positive decision was taken, such readings formed a virtually natural part of public life in which Islam is omnipresent. All these examples, and the vignettes presented at the beginning, show that what can be identified as "media" from an outsider's analytical perspective (such as ours) may be perceived as being fully embedded in religious practice.

This leads us right into the heart of the issue of the "disappearing" medium. The media that are involved in invoking and getting in touch with some divine power, and in binding and bonding believers, are made to "disappear" through established and authorized religious sensational forms that mark these media as genuine to the substance they mediate. In this way, media are authenticated as being

part and parcel of the very transcendental that is the target of – and from an outsider's perspective: invoked by – mediation. In other words, mediation itself is sacralized (see also Chidester 2008) and attributed with a sense of immediacy through which the distance between believers and the transcendental is transcended via particular sensational forms and semiotic ideologies (see also van de Port 2011: 81).

Thus, media tend to "disappear" when they are accepted as devices that, naturally as it were, "vanish" into the substance that they mediate. This phenomenological "disappearance" stems from the fact that medium and message, form and substance, are not split up analytically. Conversely, they "appear" if this synthesis is cracked. This is often the case when the appropriateness of the medium to transmit a particular content is contested (and of course also in scholarly analysis). The point here is that the "appearance" and "disappearance" of media are socially produced and depend on authorized perspectives of what media are and do, or are not supposed to do, in a broader practices of mediation.

Contested Media

Media are most explicitly marked and subject to debate when the (in)appropriateness of a particular medium is questioned or when new media become available and the question arises whether and how they could be incorporated.[6] By contrast, as argued in the previous paragraph, once they are fully embedded in practices of mediation they are not likely to be acknowledged explicitly and thus tend to "disappear." I have already invoked the Protestant iconoclasm as a contestation of existing media and of Catholic practices of media use, generating new sensational forms (bible reading) and semiotic ideologies (devaluing icons, upgrading text). Also in the contemporary world, religious groups struggle with how to deal with the omnipresence of mass media. Until long after television had become available, orthodox Protestants in the Netherlands shunned this technology and expected their members not to watch. By contrast, now there are special channels catering to these audiences, showing that evangelical Christianity and televised Christian spectacles, such as pop concerts, may go together well (van der Stoep 2009).

In Ghana, since the liberalization and commercialization of press, film, radio, and television, the neotraditional Afrikania movement in Ghana has struggled to rescue "African Traditional Religion" (ATR) from the assaults of Pentecostal churches that have become hegemonic in Southern Ghana. Comparing the media practices of Afrikania and the Pentecostal-Charismatic International Central Gospel Church (ICGC), Marleen de Witte (2008) shows that Afrikania finds it difficult to accommodate to the predominance of visibility that prevails in Ghana's current public sphere. While Afrikania seeks to master its own representation in the mass media, paradoxically the traditional priests whom it claims to represent wish to maintain an aura of secrecy, insisting that the gods and their abodes do not lend themselves to being captured through the eye of the camera, and reproduced on screen, as this will entail a loss of spiritual power. Another intriguing, related case forms Mattijs van de Port's (2009) study of how Candomblé, even though becoming a significant presence in the public sphere of Bahia, manages to engage in "the public performance of secrecy," asserting that modern visual media such as television and film are not able to capture the real thing Candomblé is about. Brian Larkin (2009) showed how the

availability of print and radio, which were coded as prime media of colonial moder-nity, became central to conflicts about the modalities through which Islam was supposed to be present in public. He argues that the embracing of these modern media by Sheik Abubaker Gumi was part of reformulating Islam, a project through which Islam was aligned to a more rational religious practice that fits in with the modern, secular state.

The point is that the availability of new media may cause critical deliberations about their potential to generate and sustain genuine spiritual experiences and forms of authority within existing religious traditions. As message and medium, content and form only exist together, the central question is how earlier mediations are trans-formed by being remediated via new media (Bolter and Grusin 1999; Meyer 2005; Hughes 2009; see also Oosterbaan 2011), and whether and how these remediations are authenticated as acceptable and suitable harbingers of religious experience, modes of communication, and ways to express public presence.[7] Debates and conflicts about media, and the new forms of public presence allowed by them, are central to religious transformations and hence a fertile starting point for studying religious dynamics.

"Hyper-apparent" Media

While the examples just given point at hesitations regarding the adoption of new mass media, it is often the case that new audiovisual media are being incorporated eagerly into religious mediation practices, generating new sensational forms. Maria José de Abreu (2009) shows that for the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR), television is regarded as a modern technology that is suitable to render present the Holy Spirit. Analyzing charismatics' richly somatic experiences of contact with the Spirit, she discerns a telling homology between the Holy Spirit and an "electricity generator" that "infuses energies," and the association of the bodies of believers with "antennas of retransmission." Here, television is not considered as a *Fremdkörper* (alien element), but as exceptionally suitable to screen the message of the CCR to a mass public. The medium thus becomes hyper-apparent, in that it is celebrated as a technological realization of already existing religious modes of looking and visual-ization. The medium is sacralized as a fulfillment of a religious project that transcends mediation and produces immediacy. A similar idea of direct transmission underpins Rafael Sánchez's (2009) analysis of Pentecostal squatters in Caracas who have their bodies seized by the Holy Spirit as Its prime medium and, in turn, seize whatever houses or goods the Spirit tells them to take. Sánchez analyzes Pentecostal church services in the Monarchical Church in Caracas as a "televisual context" in which participants raise their arms, not unlike a "forest of antennas," eager to transmit "live" the power of the Holy Spirit. These examples suggest remarkable elective affinities between religious modes of representation and new audiovisual technologies (see also Pinney 2004; Stolow 2010).

At stake is, in other words, a confluence of new media technologies and the spirit that they claim to make accessible. In this sense, spiritual power materializes in the medium, and is predicated to touch people in an immediate manner. Instead of vanishing into mediation, media here become hyper-apparent. As Bolter and Grusin (1999) have shown, often the introduction of new media, as for instance mobile phones, stresses the capacity of the new medium to enable immediate communication

(see also van de Port 2011: 82–84). Both the "disappearing" medium and the "hyper-apparent" medium suggest complete consonance between medium and what it conveys, thereby blurring "form" and "substance." In this sense, a "hyper-apparent" medium gains another kind of appearance than is the case when we refer to media in terms of particular technologies.

Elective Affinities between ICT and the Holy Spirit: Immediate Connections

So far I have looked at the ways in which new media are negotiated and possibly embedded into practices of religious mediation. However, the negotiation of media by religious groups does not occur in a void. In many settings, including Ghana, media liberalization and commercialization signaled a significant shift with regard to the capacity of the state to monopolize and control access to mass media such as film, radio, television, and the press. This shift occurred within a broader process of democratization and neoliberalization, through which the state retreated from directly controlling the public domain and the market. As the "availability" of media depends on policies, access to and use of media are political.

Importantly, in such settings media are not simply available as neutral technologies, but convey particular visions of the world. While the sakawa vignette presented at the beginning of this essay points at anxieties and desires unleashed by the possibility of engaging with people far away via the internet, it is all the same clear that in Ghana new information and communications technologies and the vision of the world that they convey have a strong appeal. During recent stints of fieldwork, I noticed that the advertisements of mobile phone and ICT companies reveal a concern with spatial and social mobility, connectivity, and immediacy (see Figure 17.4). Global connections and immediate contact is what these technologies promise to bring. In other words, they invoke a particular vision of the global. The global is not "up there" and far away, but is promised to be realized in immediate connections between living people who have the appropriate technologies. Being positioned in the right network implies not only instant communication, but also having a grip on the world, as the recent advert by the new Glo network suggests, using the faces of known artists and boldly promising: "Rule your world" (see Figure 17.5). These technologies are placed in global technological infrastructures that are partly controlled by states, but also elude such control, whilst promising some degree of control to the users.

In my view this vision of worldwide connectivity via new technologies that allow for "direct" and "life" encounters has an elective affinity with the Pentecostal project of linking believers into global born-again networks and its broad vision of the world as connected via techno-religious circuits that are powered by the Holy Spirit. The idea of "ruling" one's world and the Pentecostal vision of individual spirituality that is severed from spirits that embody traditional social ties – with the wider family, or the village (Meyer 1998) – clearly resonate with each other. At least in the Ghanaian setting, Pentecostals have shown themselves to be very successful in seizing the newly available media technologies and incorporating them into particular sensational forms that bring about immediate encounters with the Holy Spirit, with which born-again believers are to be filled.

Figure 17.4   "Experience immediate connection": Vodaphone advert, Accra.

Figure 17.5   "Rule your world": Glo advert, Accra.

The striking similarity between Pentecostal renditions of the Holy Spirit, for instance in terms of electricity, and the global vision of immediate connections propounded by ICT adverts shows once again the shortcomings of a mere technological definition of media. The ICT adverts spotlight that these media themselves are socially embedded into particular mediations that link the local and the global. In analyzing

such elective affinities, the point is not to reduce religious projects and visions of the world to mere technologies, but to explore the extent to which the logic of religious outreach and the lure and world vision that goes with media technologies confirm each other. Media offer new possibilities for religious transformation.

Conclusion: "What Is a Medium?"

A while ago, I gave the manuscript of an article in progress to one of my Masters students in anthropology, a young Ghanaian with a Pentecostal background. In line with the argument advanced above, in that article I sought to show that the particular use of media in Pentecostal services is sanctioned by specific sensational forms, through which media are sacralized and thus are prone to "disappear" or become "hyper-apparent," thereby conveying a sense of an immediate encounter with God. He commented: "On page 14: you wrote: 'This is not to say that media are just called upon to make up – not to say fake – the presence of the Holy Spirit, but to indicate the inextricable entanglement of media in religious communication' . . . *Honestly the preceding descriptions actually sound you are really saying so. May be you may rephrase.*" I did not follow his suggestion "to rephrase." Although I seek to understand the dynamics through which media are incorporated into mediating the Holy Spirit in such a way that they virtually "disappear," this does not mean that these media are no longer there. "Disappearance" is achieved through certain acts and shared per-spectives. Seeking to explain the incorporation of media into a particular religious sensational form, so as to grasp how by virtue of being sacralized they convey a sense of immediacy, I approach media on two levels. Those partaking in a sensational form through which a medium is rendered invisible may dismiss my analysis as problematic, because it spotlights the work invested into producing this invisibility, through which immediacy occurs. This implies that the strength of such an analysis depends on an alternative perspective that sees media present where, in the framework of the semiotic ideology within which they operate, they have vanished.

Here we touch upon an intriguing paradox: Although throughout this essay I have stressed the importance of identifying from within the specific sensational forms and semiotic ideologies that underpin mediation and establish immediacy, my analysis still requires a standpoint that is external to the very sensational forms and semiotic ideologies that I identify as central to engaging media. This raises questions about our own semiotic ideologies that underpin our own thinking about media as schol-ars. I am suspicious of grand, universally applicable theories of media and mediation that seek to establish in general or even universal terms what a medium is and how it works. Though presented as universally valid, such theories, as I argued in the first section above, may still bear traces of semiotic ideologies that are indebted to modern Protestantism. In order to avoid this, our own media theories need critical attention.

In my view, anthropology has much to contribute to this project. The fact that the concomitant "presence" and "disappearance" of media seem to show up when semiotic ideologies clash with each other – be it in the context of an encounter between different traditions, in shifts in mediation practices that mark a process of transformation in relation to the availability of new technologies, or as part of

scholarly analysis – suggests that the possibility of knowing what a medium is, and how it works, always requires both distance and affinity. Because what a medium is can only be identified by adopting a perspective that is external to the semiotic ideology within which it operates and which makes the medium "disappear" in the first place, any answer to the question "what is a medium" is necessarily both distorting and revealing. For this reason, this question cannot be answered in a straightforward, objective sense. The point is that it can most fruitfully be addressed by placing at the center of our inquiries the paradox of mediation and immediacy around which this essay evolved.

NOTES

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1   This brings to mind Niklas Luhmann's point that in any mediation process, the medium itself is rendered invisible (Luhmann 1997; see also Krämer 1998). Taking as a point of departure that mediation is constitutive to all communication (in that a distance is overcome), Luhmann's constructivist approach characterized a medium as a repertoire of loose elements, which remains invisible yet able to produce a broad variety of fixed forms. My approach to the invisibility of media differs from Luhmann's in that I explore invisibility on another level. Instead of taking invisibility as intrinsic to mediation on a universal level, I am interested in the actual social processes that may make a medium "disappear" or "appear."

2   This research project was made possible thanks to a grant from the Netherlands Foundation for Social Science Research. Besides myself, nine researchers (five PhD students, Maria José Alves de Abreu, Marleen de Witte, Francio Guadeloupe, Lotte Hoek, and Martijn Oosterbaan, and four postdocs, Stephen Hughes, Brian Larkin, Rafael Sánchez, and Mattijs van de Port) conducted research in West Africa, South Asia, Brazil, and the Caribbean. The project also facilitated short-term visits by international fellows (Meg MacLagan, Charles Hirschkind, and Jeremy Stolow). See Meyer 2009.

3   A new instance of such a stance is the mediatization thesis recently launched by the Danish sociologist Stig Hjarvard (2008a, 2008b), who argues that in our time modern mass media impress their own logic onto cultural expressions. Understood as a metaprocess that occurs on the same level as individualization and commercialization, mediatization refers to the power of "the media" (understood as "agents of religious change") to frame religion in high modern societies, entailing the rise of what he calls "banal religion." Especially among Scandinavian media scholars, Hjarvard's theory has raised much debate about the degree of agency attributed to modern media. The fact that he himself stresses that his theory pertains to secularized northern Europe, and thus is not applicable globally, suggests that this approach is of limited use for our research. Nonetheless, even with regard to the northern European setting I doubt the usefulness of his framework in helping to understand and explain the role of media in the transformation of religion. For a very illuminating, critical discussion of mediatization see Lovheim 2011. It is useful to distinguish between "hard" (including Hjarvard's) and "soft" (including Hepp 2009; Lundby 2009) versions of mediatization developed in media studies. The "soft" versions emphasize the importance of taking into consideration the social use of media.

4   However, I do not agree with his quite harsh and polemical critique of recent work on religion and media as still being grounded on this view. Unfortunately, he neglects recent work in anthropology (to which he only refers in a footnote) that critiques such media theories. This again underlines the importance of bringing anthropological insights into broader debates.

5   Some of the examples given in this section are based on my introduction to *Aesthetic Formations* (Meyer 2009).

6   So far, as Michelle Rosenthal (2007) has also pointed out, research on the relation between religion and media has mainly concentrated on the adoption of new media. However, the rejection of certain media, and the discourses around this, are also a very intriguing topic for further research. This is also the point made by Engelke (2007), who argues that the explicit rejection of certain media is central to religious mediation. See also Spyer (2001), who argues that the insistence that "the cassowary will not be photographed" enhances its aura.

7   In this sense, the negotiation of new media technologies may well be approached as "technological dramas," e.g. as theatrical plots situated in the midst of social-religious power structures through which technologies – broadly understood – are shaped (Beck 2009).

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