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# “Praise the Lord”:

## Popular cinema and pentecostalite style in Ghana’s new public sphere

### ABSTRACT

In this article I examine the elective affinity between Pentecostalism and the vibrant video-film industry that has flourished in the wake of Ghana’s adoption of a democratic constitution. I argue that, as a result of the liberalization and commercialization of the media, a new public sphere has emerged that can no longer be fully controlled by the state but that is increasingly indebted to Pentecostalism. Pentecostalism and video-films come together and articulate alternative, Christian imaginations of modernity. Seeking to grasp the blurring of boundaries between religion and entertainment, I examine the *pentecostalite* cultural style on which these alternative visions thrive. My main concern is to investigate the specific mode through which Pentecostal expressive forms go public, thereby transforming the public sphere. [*Ghana, Pentecostalism, media, public sphere, video-films, popular culture, style*]

In the course of the last ten years, the place and the role of both popular culture and Christian religion have expanded in Ghanaian society. Once confined to a secluded, partially hidden, and elusive domain, Christianity—especially its Pentecostal variant—has become increasingly prominent in the media. This expansion has accompanied Ghana’s move toward democracy following adoption of the 1992 constitution, which entailed the liberalization of the media and the opening up of public space to the concerns and views of ordinary people. The Ghanaian video-film industry, which emerged in the course of the late 1980s and really took off in the early 1990s (undertaking more than 50 productions a year), was both facilitated by and an expression of the move toward democracy. Eagerly echoing the views and concerns of Pentecostal-charismatic churches, which became increasingly popular in the course of the 1980s, the video-film industry has contributed significantly to the emergence of a pentecostally infused—or better: *pentecostalite*—public culture.<sup>1</sup> With the term *pentecostalite* I seek to capture the media’s deliberate adoption of those expressive forms that signify Pentecostalism and the proliferation of those forms through various channels in the sphere of entertainment. My point here is that pentecostalite expressive forms are characterized by a distinct cultural style that crosscuts different artistic forms (such as music, popular theater, call-in radio programs, and video-films) and that testifies to the convergence of Pentecostalism and popular culture in the newly constituted public realm. This convergence is the key theme of this article, in which I investigate the emerging nexus of video-films, religion, and the public sphere and explore new links between these hitherto more or less disconnected fields.

Debates about religion, media, and politics in postcolonial societies have mainly focused on political Islam, especially in the Middle East (cf. Eickelman and Anderson’s pathbreaking 1999 volume on new Muslim public spheres and Hirschkind 2001a, 2001b on Egypt; see also Larkin 1997, 2000 on Nigeria), and on the rise of Hindu nationalism in India (e.g., Babb and Wadley 1995; Dasgupta 2001; Mankekar 1999; Rajagopal 2001). Considerably less attention has been paid to the public role of Christianity

in Africa (but see Gifford 1998; Haynes 1996) or to the link between Pentecostalism, the media, and popular culture that is generating a new mass-mediated public culture.<sup>2</sup> This new public culture is remarkably different from both political Islam and Hindu nationalism in that it does not deliberately tie into or reimagine long-standing religious traditions, for example, by affirming their relevance for national identity (at the same time discarding others as impure or syncretistic), but instead propagates the need to "make a complete break with the past" (Meyer 1998a). Indeed, Pentecostalism recasts modernity as a Christian project (cf. Coleman 2002; Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001; Van Dijk 2002) and thus finds itself in marked opposition to state politics of identity. The result is a field of tension in which the sometimes literally loud articulation of Pentecostal views evokes strong negative reaction, especially on the part of the educated elites.

The video-film industry, which was instigated by imaginative, film-loving, enterprising individuals, many of whom initially had little knowledge of filmmaking, remains very close—in complicated ways—to the ideas and experiences of the inhabitants of big cities like Accra, who are thrilled to see their own surroundings on screen. Taking as points of departure the latest rumors about individuals' illicit acquisition of wealth, confessions about the work of Satan and his demons, and—inevitably—testimonies about the miracles brought about by the Holy Spirit and by Pentecostal pastors, video-films are inspired by and woven into the texture of everyday life. They project pentecostalite mediations of popular culture onto the screens of big cinemas, small video centers in the suburbs, and domestic TV-VCRs.

These projections run counter to a state politics of identity, which thrived especially under the Rawlings regime (1981–92) and that—in an Nkrumahist tradition—emphasized the importance of "cultural heritage" for the enlightenment of the nation and the deployment of "African personality."<sup>3</sup> As Brian Larkin (2000) documented in the case of Nigeria, the Ghanaian state lost its control over the public imagination of community through the unexpected emergence of the video-film industry, which occurred behind the backs of both global media industries and the state. For, next to the images of enlightenment, national integration, and cultural roots featured by the state-owned Ghana Film Industry Corporation (GFIC) stood alternative images projected by independent video-film producers, who by and large propounded a Christian version of modernity. The sale of the GFIC to a Malaysian television company in 1996 marked the end of state-owned cinema and the beginning of a new era (Meyer 1999a, 2001; cf. Coe 2000) in which the representation of culture and identity became a matter of fierce public debate. Thus, with the liberalization and commercialization of the hitherto state-controlled media, the state-driven representa-

tion of the nation to its citizens was rivaled by alternative imaginations, geared more to global Christianity than to the national project.

The rise of pentecostalite expressive forms and the increasing electronic mediation of popular culture in video-films are aspects of a more general shift characterized by the increasing incapacity of the state to control media and society and by the emergence of a new "representational economy" rife with public conflict and contest (Keane 2002:65). Meant to "capture the ways in which practices and ideologies put words, things, and actions into complex articulation with one another" (Keane 2002:85), the notion of representational economy is useful to grasp tensions about the relations among and value of certain cultural expressions in Ghana's new mediascape. To understand the marked articulation of pentecostalite style in video-films and, for that matter, other forms of popular culture, it is necessary to take into account actual changes in the relationship between the postcolonial state and society (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2000), between politics and performance (cf. Gunner 2001). Such changes cannot be fully understood by recurring to earlier analyses of African postcoloniality, which were geared to a different historical configuration centered on the totalitarian one-party state and its power to force society into a shared living space (e.g., Mbembe 1992). My interest here does not merely concern the reasons behind the rise of Pentecostalism per se but focuses above all on the ways in which it is articulated in public: that is, its smooth and easy link with entertainment and the forces of commercialization, as well as its impressive capacity to push its expressive forms into a wider arena, reaching beyond the sphere of religious institutions.

How, then, can one map out this wider arena of pentecostalite impact, which, as a result of democratization and liberalization, is taking shape between the forces of the postcolonial state and those of the global market—without, however, being fully absorbed or left undisturbed by either? Provided that one moves beyond Habermas's (1990) all too narrow, normative understanding of *Öffentlichkeit* (cf. Calhoun 1992; Hansen 1991; Lee 1992; Warner 1992), any exploration of this arena, which may well be termed the "public sphere," must link up with debates about the place and role of religion in modern societies. Habermas (1990:67, 163), in his few remarks about religion, appears to take for granted that in the framework of the modern state religion has been reduced to the private sphere: Religious convictions only emerge in public debates as opinions, where they have to compete with other opinions in line with agreed on, rational discursive rules.<sup>4</sup> The inadequacy of this view, which is based on the assertion of the public decline of religion as an intrinsic feature of modernity—most succinctly articulated by the secularization thesis yet also

informing much theorizing in the social sciences in a more implicit, taken-for-granted manner—is patent. It is impossible to overlook how, on the one hand, religious groups all over the world successfully manifest themselves in the public sphere, often by making use of new and old mass media, and how, on the other hand, mass media offer a stage for religion. This public articulation of religion amounts to more than merely generating opinions to inform rational debate in the sense of Habermas or, conversely, expressing a conservative “reaction against unreachable modernization (be it capitalist or socialist), the evil consequences of globalization, and the collapse of the post-nationalist project” (Castells 1997:19). What is at stake is the genesis of new expressive forms, discourses, moods, and modes of debate.

At the same time, to grasp such evident public articulations of religion, it is not sufficient merely to address the “comeback” of religion as an “empirical given” (De Vries 2001:6–7) and to point out time and again the inadequacy of the secularization thesis. It is necessary to get beyond a modernist framework that takes for granted a distinction between the spheres of “politics” and “religion” (cf. Asad 1999; Van der Veer 2001) or between “public” and “private” (Casanova 1994), in which the latter forms the privileged space of religion, and to address the blurring of these distinctions and the emergence of new modes of communication and debate in the public sphere. In so doing, it is crucial to explore, both empirically and conceptually, how—that is, through which representational modes—religion goes public. In other words, emphasis needs to be placed not so much on the message of religion as such but, rather, on religion as a particular practice of mediation (see also Van der Veer 1999). Mediation creates and maintains links between religious leaders and followers by involving both parties in a relationship with the realm of the invisible or spiritual, which, although constructed and affirmed through mediation, tends to claim a reality of its own. Religion, I argue, cannot be analyzed apart from the forms and practices of mediation that define it. It is a resource generating distinct forms of expression that are not limited to the institutional sphere but that are articulated in, and partly (re)shape, the public sphere in the information age.

To grasp how Pentecostalism in Ghana has expanded beyond the confines of fixed institutions and gone public, it is necessary to explore how it is articulated on the surface of social life. At first sight this exploration may seem anachronistic, as Pentecostalism, and for that matter Protestantism, is usually held to privilege content above form and to employ the signs and symbols on the surface of social life as vehicles for underlying meanings. In a powerful critique, Talal Asad argues that interpretive, Geertzian approaches to religion, which “insist on the primacy of meaning without regard to the processes

by which meanings are constructed” (1993:43), do not offer a universal definition of religion but instead reproduce a distinctly modern, Protestant understanding that narrows religion down to a question of belief. This critique implies a tremendous challenge for students of religion in general, especially for students of Protestantism. For example, Pentecostal discourse in Ghana teaches that all that meets the eye is mere surface, still to be vested with meaning—a process accomplished through the study of the Bible or through direct intervention of the Holy Spirit. The notion of being “born again” is continuously evoked and described as a complete change of the inner person, the culmination of true belief. “Superficiality” and “hypocrisy”—behaving as if one is born again yet actually missing this deep inner change—are condemned as major sins, as they appear to undermine the image Pentecostalism draws of itself. Especially because an interpretive approach seems to accommodate this image so easily, it is difficult for a researcher to create and maintain a reflexive distance between Pentecostal discourse and anthropological analysis. And, yet, the point here is to refrain from uncritically adopting an interpretive approach on the level of analysis, while at the same time taking into account as an empirical given that Pentecostal self-representations privilege content above form, meaning above symbols, inside above outside, and that they view the physical as a mere vehicle for the spiritual. I propose to meet this challenge by focusing on Pentecostalism as a particular practice of signification in which the emphasis on being born again and the need to produce meaning by relying on God feature prominently. The alleged disregard of surface, to put it somewhat crudely, is part and parcel of the articulation of Pentecostalism on the surface of social life.

To grasp this articulation and thus go beyond Pentecostalism’s self-representation, I propose to employ the notion of style. Although in the field of art history and criticism this concept has been subject to much debate (e.g., Lang 1987), I still find the notion appealing because it enables one to discern overlaps and links between different expressive forms and, at the same time, to grasp how a certain stylistic complex differs from other styles. Style thus serves both as a marker of distinction and as a means of including or even absorbing various expressive forms channeled through different registers, such as sermon, film, music, theater, popular painting, or oratory. In this sense, style crosscuts genres. The possibility of determining key features that make an expressive form identifiable (as, for instance, pentecostalite) is what style is all about. Style, as Gombrich (1960) has argued, works to reduce the complexity of the world. In the same way that meaningful expression depends on the systematic ordering that defines style, style also imposes its own regulations and constraints on its users (and in this sense comes

close to Foucault's notion of discourse; see also Layton 1997:209–210).

For the purpose of my argument, it is important to get beyond an understanding of style as a more or less abstract organizing principle. Benedict Anderson's statement that "communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (1991:6) highlights the importance of style in constructing and maintaining particular sociocultural formations. Within the confines of this article, it is impossible for me to discuss how, in the social and cultural sciences, style has been employed to understand the genesis of new communities of taste, sentiment, and other markers of inclusion. I would, however, like to briefly introduce two authors, the Africanist anthropologist James Ferguson and the microbiologist and philosopher Ludwik Fleck, who both have used the notion of style imaginatively outside the confines of aesthetic theory.<sup>5</sup> Their thoughts are of immediate relevance to my attempt to develop a notion of style as integral to Pentecostal practices of mediation in the context of Ghana's new representational economy.

In his study of urban culture in the Zambian Copperbelt James Ferguson (1999) advocates the concept of "cultural style." Inspired by the work of Dick Hebdige, Anthony Cohen, and Judith Butler, Ferguson rejects a simplistic view of style as a "secondary manifestation of a prior or given 'identity' or 'orientation' which style then 'expresses' " and emphasizes that style is a "performative competence," a "form of practical signifying activity" (1999:96). Importantly, this notion goes against common-sense understandings of style as opposed to content—of manner versus matter, so to speak. Far from simply reversing the emphasis on content by attending to style, Ferguson questions the simplistic opposition of content and form, essence and surface, in which style is reduced to a mere vehicle for an underlying essence. Style, in his understanding, mediates between content and form. Ferguson calls anthropologists to leave behind their interpretive bias in favor of a performance approach (see also Fabian 1990) and, thus, to move "away from the quest to locate underlying 'real' identities and orientations that 'lie behind' or are 'expressed in' styles, and ... towards the enacted, performed surface of social life" (1999:97). He asserts that "in the study of style, the how is all-important, and the old idea of culture as the ideational content of expressive behaviour is inadequate. For although style always involves knowledge, it is a practical kind of knowledge: more 'knowing how' than 'knowing that' " (Ferguson 1999:98).

From this perspective, it is possible to investigate the emergence and proliferation of pentecostelite expressive forms outside the confines of churches without taking for granted that those participating in common stylistic practices all share an underlying inner disposition (such as

being born again), morals, and doctrine. Rather, the focus is on the stylistic devices that articulate Pentecostal views of what the world is about. Emphasizing the need to grasp the "what" *through* the "how," the notion of style is useful for studying Pentecostalism as a practice of mediation. The use of this notion allows one to avoid the pitfall of an interpretive approach, which, in the study of Protestantism, as I have argued, tends to be self-fulfilling and tautological. It facilitates a fresh look at the public presence of Pentecostal-derived forms by enabling observers to discern how those forms differ from other forms and to determine the extent to which Pentecostalism is being signified in various channels of expression, linking up religion, popular culture, and even (cultural) politics.

To grasp the power of style to bind people, it is useful to briefly turn to Ludwik Fleck. In 1935, he developed the notion of "*Denkstil*" (style of thinking), which he circumscribed as the "preparedness for focused perception and corresponding processing of the perceived" (Fleck 1980: 187). This preparedness to perceive, think, and speak in the framework of a certain style, Fleck argued, is not a question of mere individual, rational choice or an immediate reflection of truth. Rather, it stems from the particular mood (*Stimmung*) prevailing in a certain *Denkkollektiv*, that is, a sociological structure of knowledge production that incorporates yet surpasses individual participants and offers them a distinct *Denkstil*. Although Fleck examined the emergence and operation of "styles of thinking" in the field of modern science (and thus inspired Thomas Kuhn to develop the notion of scientific paradigms), he emphasized that "styles of thinking" also exist outside the confines of science.<sup>6</sup> Importantly, Fleck insisted that what links people to a *Denkstil* is not that style's capacity to make true statements about the world but, rather, the mood it radiates. Style, by putting things in a certain way, speaks to, as well as evokes, emotions. Employing an ensemble of recurring key terms and conventions, style makes people feel at home in, as well as confident with, a particular discourse. In the analysis that follows, this proposed link between style and mood is important, because it highlights that the "how" is what binds people together and ascertains allegiance. Pentecostalism's articulation in the public sphere, then, is not a question of merely exposing views but also a matter of expanding a certain mood from churches into wider society—introducing a new "atmosphere" in the public sphere.

To summarize, in this article I examine the conditions that make possible the articulation of a pentecostelite style in video-films, the reasons for such films' appeal, and the debates and contestations they evoke. I take as a point of departure that the emergence, proliferation, and attraction of these films depend on significant changes in state–society relations. In the same way that religion no longer remains confined to the place assigned it by the state, film can no longer be used to assert the state's control over



visual forms of representation. I argue that Pentecostalism and video-films come together and contribute to carving out a new public space for the articulation of alternative imaginations of modernity. To grasp the blurring of boundaries between Pentecostalism and entertainment, in this article I offer a close investigation of the cultural style on which these alternative visions thrive in the context of a new representational economy. The focus here is not so much on religious content per se—and certainly not on an increase of Pentecostal religiosity (conceived in a narrow sense as belief)—but, rather, on the public presence of mass-mediated religion, brought about by practices of signification that affirm a new cultural style. My main concern is to investigate the specific mode through which Pentecostal expressive forms go public, thereby transforming the public sphere. As a particular, highly visually inclined mode of mediation, Pentecostalism links up as easily with visual technology as the latter parasitically appropriates the former. What emerges is a blurring of Pentecostalism, popular culture, and politics—a new configuration in which Pentecostalism is no longer fully contained in a distinct, bounded sphere but is an ever expansive mode of signification.

### **Pentecostalism, popular culture, and the state**

Before turning to the pentecostalite style propounded by video-films, it is important to assess the popularity and position of Pentecostalism in Ghana. Because fission is part of its logic, which also emphasizes individual encounters with the Holy Spirit, there are a huge number of Pentecostal-charismatic churches. Indeed, as David Martin has remarked, the appeal of Pentecostalism in general stems from the fact that it “is not a church or any kind of system, but a repertoire of recognizable spiritual affinities which constantly breaks out in new forms. This repertoire generates endless schisms as well as self-help religiosity, expressed in many thousands of micro-enterprises” (2002:176). By its very nature, Pentecostalism lends itself to being recast over and over in new forms; at the same time, however, these forms are similar enough to present themselves as Pentecostal or as charismatic.

One characteristic feature of Pentecostalism is its successful incorporation of local ideas and practices pertaining to old gods, witchcraft, and new spirits such as Mami Water (the Indian or European-looking female spirit at the bottom of the ocean who promises wealth in exchange for love). At the same time that Pentecostalists confirm the existence of local supernatural entities, they regard them as demons in league with Satan. In contrast to the orthodox mission churches, which regarded such local ideas as irrational “superstitions” to be left behind by converts, or at least to be overcome by education, Pentecostal churches took these views as a point of de-

parture. In Pentecostal deliverance sessions, for example, the exorcism of demons holds a central place. One could argue that people’s fascination with such sessions stems not only from the fact that they are rituals through which demons are eventually exorcised, but also from the fact that the sessions allow demons to manifest themselves through their—initially, often unaware—hosts, thereby juxtaposing mirror images of traditional and neotraditional forms of possession (Meyer 1998a, 1999b). In short, to a very large extent, Pentecostalism’s popularity stems from the fact that it takes seriously popular views about spirits and thus ties into a popular understanding of modernity as enchanted. The relationship between Pentecostalism and popular culture should be viewed in dialectic terms: The former feeds into the latter, thereby transforming it, and vice versa. Pentecostalism’s appropriation of popular culture is not confined to the level of ideas. Whereas the state does not offer a viable infrastructure for artistic production, Pentecostal-charismatic churches run commercial recording and editing studios and printing facilities, thereby drawing many artists who previously would have described themselves as “secular” into the realm of Pentecostalism (cf. Collins 2002).<sup>7</sup> At the same time, private, independent newspapers and films, whose producers depend for their financial success on appealing to broad audiences, increasingly echo Pentecostal views, thereby contributing in important ways to the emergence of a pentecostalite public culture. In this sense, privatization of media facilitates the expansion of pentecostalite style.

Whereas Pentecostalism’s capacity to absorb and recast popular culture appears to be one of its remarkable and enduring features, its relationship to the Ghanaian state has changed considerably in the course of the last two decades. In fact, during that period the state itself was transformed considerably, from a military dictatorship devoted to socialist ideals and the creation of a civil society in its own image to a more or less democratic state granting freedom of expression of critical views in a public sphere by and large uncontrolled by the state, yet highly influenced by the global market. In the course of the 1980s churches became alternative avenues for Ghanaians’ material success, as the state, quite contrary to the spirit of Rawlings’s “revolution,” failed to live up to its citizens’ expectations. Initially, the Pentecostal-charismatic churches were content to operate within a strictly religious sphere. Far from seeking to contest Rawlings’s legitimacy, as was the case with the former mission churches represented by the Christian Council and the Catholic Church, the Pentecostals concentrated on the propagation of individual success, health, and wealth (Gifford 1998)—quite an attractive program in the eyes of ordinary Ghanaians experiencing severe economic problems—and were politically quiescent (Akyeampong

1996). Relatively self-contained, they did not assume any significant role in relation to the state and politics.

Despite the implementation of IMF Structural Adjustment policies by the end of the 1980s, which resulted in a steady flow of global commodities into the country after an extended period of scarcity, most ordinary Ghanaians still suffered economic hardship (whereas those close to Rawlings were said to become richer and richer). During that period, the regime still sought to control civil society fully and to prevent the expression of criticism in public (Gyimah-Boadi 1994). Far from drawing an absolute boundary between religion and politics, the regime emphasized the importance of "traditional religion" for generating "national pride" in what became reified as "the African heritage." In so doing, the regime was geared toward both assigning a place to traditional authorities and recasting the diverse local religious and cultural traditions in one encompassing frame, in terms of a "national heritage."

The separation of the spheres of politics and Pentecostalism lasted until the early 1990s, when Pentecostals started to move beyond their sole focus on church affairs and the private lives of church members and ventured into debates about the state of the nation. They developed a distinct dualistic political theology that asserted that Ghana would only prosper and progress under a God-fearing leader (Gifford 1998:85) but that the country would be brought down by a leader relying on occult forces. Not only did Pentecostals start to partake in discussions about the (im)morality of power, but, even more importantly, their marked presence in the political arena also significantly influenced the terms constituting the debate about the state of the nation as such (Meyer 1998b:28 ff.). Here Pentecostalism certainly did not enter the newly evolving space of public debate as "opinion," but it rearticulated the terms of political debate in a new manner: casting Ghana as in dire need of purification through the Christian God. The fact that Pentecostals were able to successfully mobilize Christian discourse as a resource for political debate indicates the extent to which the public perceived the political repertoire of the state as exhausted and morally corrupt. In the course of the 1990s, Pentecostalism became a force in the political arena that those in power could no longer neglect. Already in the wake of the 1992 elections, Rawlings himself showed a much more accommodating stance toward Pentecostal-charismatic churches than he had before. The reason for this, in my view, lay in the fact that he realized the tremendous social importance of these churches and their ability to mobilize people on a mass base. Pentecostal-charismatic churches' negative attitude toward "tradition" and "African religion" notwithstanding, Rawlings certainly preferred cooperation with their populist leaders to having to rely on the elite clergy of the mainline churches (Gifford 1998:70–71).<sup>8</sup>

The government's positive attitude toward Pentecostalism continued in the wake of the 1996 elections, when both government and opposition tended to represent Ghanaian politics as a battlefield between the powers of God and Satan. Not only did the electoral commission distribute a poster juxtaposing an image of the devil as a symbol of corruption with that of an angel as a symbol of good citizenship (Meyer 1998b:16), but those involved in political campaigns and debates also made the responsibility for the future of the nation dependent on individual believers, on their prayers and votes, and on the moral standards of politicians. During the elections in December 2000, which resulted in the defeat of Rawlings's NDC, the Pentecostals continued the political strategies they had begun at the beginning of the 1990s. Pentecostal-charismatic churches organized prayers for the nation and sought to keep the electoral process peaceful. Detailed research on the relationship between Pentecostalism and nationalism would be productive; even without such research, it is clear that Pentecostals viewed good citizenship and Christian virtues as two sides of the same coin. In other words, in their view, nationalism without Christianity would do the country no good (cf. Van Middendorp 2001). The Pentecostal view thus offered a perspective on nationalism that clashed with the state view of the nation as rooted in "tradition" and "heritage."

Moreover, Pentecostals were very quick to understand the implications of the liberalization of the media, which entailed a shift from state ownership of and control over radio, TV, and the serious press to privatization and commercialization of these outlets (cf. Hackett 1998). Their eagerness to use mass media stemmed not only from the obvious fact that broadcasting their message through radio and TV to mass audiences was the perfect way to proselytize, but also, as I show in more detail below, from the elective affinity between the Pentecostal emphasis on "vision" and the new audiovisual technologies. Numerous Pentecostal-charismatic churches have become relatively well-to-do organizations, both because they belong to a global network and maintain links with similar churches in the United States and South America and because they successfully urge their members to contribute money to them. Therefore they can easily buy airtime and broadcast their activities through radio and TV. Nowadays, early in the mornings, virtually all Ghanaian radio stations offer zealous sermons by Pentecostal preachers who advertise their powers of deliverance and seek to attract more people to their church, and especially in the evenings, in addition to a wide variety of Christian programs, television viewers encounter a string of trailers advertising particular churches and their crusades. Their easy adoption of mass media reveals that Pentecostals have as few concerns about marketing their religion as they do about endorsing the prosperity gospel (Coleman 2002; Maxwell 1998), and

they have broadened their practices of mediation to mass audiences whom they address as potential followers. In this sense, the marked articulation of Pentecostalism in the newly commercialized and liberalized mass media is an integral feature of a distinct historical moment, characterized by a transformed relationship between Pentecostalism and the state and the loud voice assigned to Pentecostals in Ghana's new representational economy. At the same time, in their competition for audiences, private media easily and eagerly link up with Pentecostal views.<sup>9</sup> This is especially clear in the case of the video-film industry.

### Video-films as new mass entertainment

My first encounter with Ghanaian films took place in December 1991 in Accra, when I was still involved in my research on local appropriations of Christianity. I encountered a billboard, placed at Sankara Circle, that depicted a snakeman and advertised the film *Diabolo* (1992), to be shown at the Rex Cinema, an open-air cinema in the center of town, close to the coastal road and Makola market. The film was about a man who transformed himself into a snake and entered the vaginas of prostitutes, making the women vomit money (cf. Meyer 1995; see also Wendl 2001). Seated in the midst of an excited audience that continuously commented on and at times directly addressed the characters on the screen and that at times shrieked with horror, I realized that *Diabolo* was a hit. Viewers were thrilled to see this sort of local, popular imagery on screen. The film became the talk of the town. What fascinated me most was that the film depicted a story of snakes, money, and the perversion of reproduction, themes I had encountered in various versions many times in the context of prayer sessions in Pentecostal churches and during interviews with church members. Although the similarity of the issues addressed in films like *Diabolo* and in church sermons is truly striking, an important difference between these two forms of expression lies in the fact that Ghanaian films are a form of mass entertainment enjoyed by a vast audience that includes many who are not members of a Pentecostal church.

The popularity of video-films is a mass phenomenon encompassing the urban lower and (aspiring) middle classes and—because the main language spoken in most films is English—cutting across ethnic divisions while at the same time assuming a certain level of education. Women are especially fond of watching films, and they often take the initiative in convincing their boyfriends and husbands to go to the movies or to buy a particular home video. Because films usually portray the character of the pious mother and wife, many women encounter significant role models, and even more importantly, regard video-films as educational devices that will teach good moral lessons to their partners. Ghanaian films address

new audiences eager to spend part of their leisure time in cinemas and video-theaters and to absorb the mixture of Christian entertainment, morals, horror, and magic that characterize them. In this context, it is important to keep in mind that the late 1980s marked the end of a decade of political instability during which curfews were a recurring feature. A relationship certainly exists between the thriving of new leisure activities, such as going to the movies to watch the latest film, and the gradual return to democracy leading to the constitution of new publics. The contrast with the preceding “culture of silence” (Nugent 1996) could not be more marked.

Although popular in certain circles, from the outset video-films evoked strong protests from film critics, established filmmakers, and intellectuals, because these films allegedly affirmed outdated superstitions and drew an all-too-negative image of Ghanaian religious and cultural traditions (Meyer 1999a). Although at first sight, it may appear that the correct representation of “culture” and “traditional religion” forms the main bone of contention between the video-filmmakers and their critics, a closer look at the conflict reveals that the representations of the two factions do not offer mirror images of a “traditional culture” and “religion” still alive within Ghanaian society. Whereas the state-trained filmmakers closely followed the Nkrumahist perspective of the state, the video-filmmakers gave vision to popular ideas of “traditional religion.” The conflict came to the fore clearly during a May 2000 conference on religion and the media in a debate between filmmaker William Akuffo and representatives of the neo-traditional movement Afrikania, which had been closely affiliated with the Rawlings regime.<sup>10</sup> When Afrikania representatives accused Akuffo and his fellow filmmakers of misrepresenting “traditional religion,” Akuffo retorted that it was not filmmakers’ intention to provide correct images of priests and rituals but, rather, simply to visualize ordinary people’s views on “traditional religion.”<sup>11</sup> These views, as Akuffo admitted, were heavily influenced by Pentecostal representations (which, of course, are reifications of “traditional religion” in terms of diabolization). Yet, Akuffo asked, were not filmmakers free to create images as they pleased? Did they always have to make sure that what they brought to the screen matched reality? If that was the case, Akuffo asked provocatively, why should U.S. filmmakers be allowed to make movies in which the United States wins the Vietnam War, whereas everybody knows that this is not true?<sup>12</sup> To Akuffo, film was meant to invent imaginary spaces and should not be subject to a regime of truthful representation. On one level, this perspective on film, which deliberately loosens the referential relationship between image and reality, appears to clash with the state perspective, which claims to represent reality and thus vests the image with truth.<sup>13</sup> On another level, however, Akuffo’s stance exposes the latter perspective—all claims of



truthful representation and documentation notwithstanding—as also engaging in “imagining and re-imagining tradition” (Ranger 1993). For the state’s claims are part and parcel of a particular mode of representation rather than a reflection of an existing reality “out there” and thus produce a favorable depiction of “traditional religion” in line with the state’s cultural policies. On closer examination, then, it appears that both factions produce their own reifications of “traditional religion” and “culture,” vest them with value, and launch them into Ghana’s new representational economy.

Video-film producers, who usually also write the scripts, select the actors, and direct the films, are highly conscious of and seek to meet audience expectations because they cannot afford to have a film flop. The costs for one production vary from \$5,000 to \$15,000, and the money invested has to be gained back through the sale of cinema tickets, the sale of exhibition rights to TV companies, and, increasingly, the sale of home videos. Producers usually inhabit the same lifeworlds as their audiences, and they keep their ears and eyes open to what happens around them, always eager to come up with new stories. In this sense, video-filmmakers act as mediators of popular culture.<sup>14</sup> Their products have more in common with the soap operas, Indian films (Larkin 1997), and Nigerian video-movies (Haynes 2000) that started to enter the Ghanaian market in the late 1990s than with those expressions of “African cinema” that reach Western movie screens; they are certainly not auteur films conveying a distinct director’s view but feature everyday life and affirm prevailing moods and structures of feeling. Films have to be easily accessible and consumable, however, without being boring. Reflecting as they do the banal and the ordinary, they require a little extraordinary twist—often realized through special effects. At the same time, to be popular, a film is expected to raise a relevant social issue, which viewers will then subsequently discuss in all sorts of contexts, from taxi to market or even on the radio—as well as with an inquiring anthropologist. This sort of debate always leads to considerations beyond a particular film, right into the realm of everyday experience. The strong popularity of Nigerian video-films since the late 1990s has put additional financial pressure on Ghanaian producers. The fact that audiences started to prefer Nigerian films for their more explicit depiction of evil and violence made Ghanaian producers seek effective ways and means to compete. This resulted in more emphasis on transgressive behavior, occult forces, and special effects.

Although producers are aware that films are popularized by women—and hence make sure that films feature the female role models women cherish—they consciously seek to address a broad audience constituted by different “classes,” from the semiliterate fish mongers and fishermen in the suburbs, who often do not speak English

fluently, to the drivers, traders, market-women, and seamstresses of the middle classes, and to the teachers, secretaries, nurses, and doctors who are viewed as people of “high class.” To cater to the expectations of all “classes,” films often combine slapstick humor (usually involving a houseboy from the north who mocks his master), horror, action, and romance. There is virtually no differentiation into distinct genres—the only difference is that between films primarily focusing on “occult forces” and those that focus on “family drama”—and the main narrative structure is melodramatic, albeit not entirely in the sense of Western melodrama theory (see the overview by Gledhill 1987). The point here is not to press Ghanaian films into Western categories. Yet, at the same time, one has to acknowledge that these films do not evolve from scratch but have absorbed and blurred different cinematic genres and cultural forms. Thus, they should not be seen as authentic representations of locality simply emerging from below but, rather, as located at the crossroads of, and acting as mediators between, local and global aesthetic forms. In the following section I explore how existing work on melodrama can help to illuminate how Ghanaian films, as an aesthetic form, link up with modernity. This investigation, I hope, will also contribute to a broader, truly global understanding of melodrama as a genre.

### Melodrama and modernity

In *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), Peter Brooks has argued that melodrama emerged at a moment characterized by the checkmate between church and monarchy in the aftermath of the French Revolution. As a literary genre that creates drama out of the stuff of everyday life, melodrama conveys a distinctly modern aesthetics that is engaged in “the effort to make the ‘real’ and the ‘ordinary’ and the ‘private life’ interesting through heightened dramatic utterance and gesture that lay bare the true stakes” (Brooks 1976:14). Asserting that the ordinary and banal deserve attention, melodrama sets out to reveal the underlying forces that govern what happens on the surface of everyday life. Thus, melodramatic writers posit the necessity “to go beyond the surface of the real to the truer, hidden reality, to open up the world of spirit” (Brooks 1976:2). In melodrama, the forces operating beneath the surface are what Brooks calls the “moral occult, the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality. The moral occult is not a metaphysical system; it rather is a repository of the fragmentary and desacralized remnants of sacred myth” (1976:5, see also 20). Importantly, the realm beneath the surface is rendered in moral, rather than individual, psychological terms: Inner conflicts are depicted as a Manichean struggle between good and evil (Brooks 1976:19 ff.)—a struggle bemoaning the loss of the

sacred that once formed the backbone of society and that stood central in the arts. Melodrama, in Brooks's view, makes up for the loss of religion that characterizes modern society (a point to which I return below).<sup>15</sup>

To avoid misunderstandings, it is important to emphasize that Brooks does not argue that melodrama simply reveals an already existing underlying realm of meanings waiting to be uncovered. The point is that, as a distinctly modern aesthetic form, melodrama is involved in creating such a realm as part of a new, modern mind-set. Based on the notion that insight depends on penetrating the surface, melodrama thus underpinned, popularized, and still maintains—by its spread into other artistic forms, for instance, soap operas—the interpretive stance that Talal Asad (1993:65 ff.) identified as typical of a modern perspective on the self and the world. Here, too, the emphasis on uncovering meaning is a key feature of melodramatic style.

Although analyzing a different era, place, and art form (i.e., the novel), Brooks's notion of melodrama highlights some important features of Ghanaian films. Melodrama, I suggest, became easily globalized because it is a distinctly modern aesthetic form able to articulate and address new experiences that are difficult to contain by existing, local expressive forms. Its popularity stems from its basis in the banality of everyday life and from its promise to lead readers (in the case of popular novels) and spectators (in the case of, for instance, soap operas) beyond the surface of the immediately visible; it seduces by promising knowledge through revelation. Ghanaian films are melodramatic in that they feature a world rife with conflicts between the "modern" and the "traditional," are structured by conflicting kinship relations, and are based on a bipolar (and in this case explicitly Christian) Manichaeism making it easy to distinguish the good from the bad and privileging morals above intricate psychological ambiguities. In these films the social world boils down to the microcosm of the family.

Yet, quite contrary to Brooks's association of the emergence of melodrama with the attempt to recover the loss of security caused by the breakdown of traditional certainties (to a large extent provided by religion) and social hierarchies, Ghanaian films do not strive for a nostalgic recuperation of things lost; rather, they demonize the past and strive for a modern future. And rather than a "form for secularized times" offering "the nearest approach to sacred and cosmic values in a world where they no longer have any certain ontology or epistemology" (Brooks 1976:205), melodrama in Ghana asserts and feeds on Pentecostal religion. This, as I will argue in the remainder of this article, is due to the strong resemblance between melodrama as an aesthetic form and Pentecostalism. Film and Pentecostalism can easily converge because they are similar practices of signification with a shared cultural style.

Inspired by Brooks, Ravi Vasudevan argued with regard to Indian commercial films that "the melodramatic mode has, with various indigenous modifications, been a characteristic form of narrative and dramaturgy in societies undergoing the transition to modernity" (n.d.:3). Vasudevan's argument also is highly suggestive with regard to Ghanaian popular cinema and its link with Pentecostalism. Although I prefer to leave aside the term *transition to modernity*, which evokes the somewhat evolutionary teleology of modernization theory, and I view melodrama as *mediating* modernity, Vasudevan's argument that melodrama invokes a specific spectatorial subjectivity by offering a particular cinematic mode of address and thus "outlines new forms of subjectivity on the grid of the culturally recognizable" (n.d.:7) is well taken. It informs the following analysis of the ways in which Ghanaian films promote but also criticize, appropriate, and recast modernity and lay bare its inherent ambivalences. The uncanny that thrives on these ambivalences is represented in Ghanaian films in the spectacular mode reminiscent of the notion of a "cinema of attractions" developed by Gunning (1986) and elaborated by Vasudevan (n.d.:8).

### Pentecostalite style and the interface between religion and video

A significant starting point in exploring the entanglement of Pentecostalism and video-films is that they literally share the material space of the cinema. This cohabitation, as I have argued elsewhere (Meyer 2002), pinpoints an appropriation by religion of a key emblem of colonial modernity. Used in colonial times to convey the message of "civilization" and "modernization" (see also Morton-Williams 1953), the cinema served as a temple to a progressive vision, testifying to the superiority of Western knowledge and the legitimacy of colonial rule and at the same time creating a new space for entertainment.

Transforming the space of the cinema into a church, Pentecostals appropriated the symbolism of the cinema hall and of film. In that space they started to propagate their distinct vision of Christian modernity—a project evoking yet going beyond older colonial and state-driven versions of modernity. The video-film industry, as intimated above, also appropriated the cinema: From the outset, video producers presented their films as viable substitutes for celluloid technology; their films occupied the cinema screens, offering a form of enlightenment quite different from the rationalistic use of vision that characterized the colonial and state-controlled cinema, and one indebted to Christianity.

Recently, video producers have started to market their films mainly as home videos and for broadcast on TV, and many Pentecostal congregations have been striving to move out of the (potentially immoral) space of the

cinema and to build their own churches.<sup>16</sup> Both groups, however, still share what could be called a cinematographic perspective, that is, a distinctly modern mode of penetrating the seemingly chaotic, indeterminate surface of images to reveal an underlying order. Reminiscent of U.S. popular Protestantism, for Pentecostalism, "the act of looking itself contributes to religious formation and, indeed, constitutes a powerful practice of belief" (Morgan 1998:3). Vision, as I explain in more detail below, plays a key role in Pentecostal practice and forms the base of power. Experienced in a dream or as the "spirit of discernment," vision is seen by adherents as an extension of the Holy Spirit who grants the eye of God to his faithful servants. Sermons and prayer sessions are replete with statements by both pastors and church members that they have seen certain spiritual things that in the course of everyday life normally remain invisible. In this sense, even prior to the easy accessibility of new visual technologies, vision was central to Pentecostal practices of mediation, and this, in my view, facilitated Pentecostalism's appropriation of, as well as by, video and TV.<sup>17</sup>

If sermons are confined to oral discourse emphasizing the necessity of vision, films are able to mimetically reproduce vision itself. It is certainly no coincidence that Ghanaian films are cast in a melodramatic form; for as I have just emphasized, one of the key characteristics of melodrama is its assertion of the need to go beyond the surface of the visible to reveal the hidden reality underneath. In Ghanaian films, Pentecostal concerns merge almost naturally with melodrama as an aesthetic form. The convergence between video-films and sermons, I argue, is due to the fact that both thrive on shared practices of signification, a shared pentecostalite cultural style. It is apparent from Akuffo's statement—that video-films simply depict how people imagine "traditional religion"—that the filmmaker was highly conscious of what audiences expect to see. At the same time that he made the statement, Akuffo also emphasized how tired he was of constantly representing "all this Pentecostal crap," and, yet, he had to do so to make films that would not flop. In the same vain, Socrate Safo, another eminent video-film producer, shared with me how much he wished to produce a film that would be successful at the Festival Panafricain du Cinéma et de la Télévision de Ouagadougou (FESPACO), the prestigious biennial festival of African film in Burkina Faso; and yet, because Ghanaian audiences would simply not appreciate the type of film he wanted to make, he would have to continue giving them what they liked: films with titles such as *Satan's Wife* (2000) that are replete with demons. Likewise, Hammond Mensah, one of the most successful producers and a Muslim (belonging to the Ahmadiya order), asserted that to survive in the video-film business one had to make Christian films. Irrespective of whether they defined themselves as believers or not, video-film producers felt pressed by audiences to

employ a Christian way of visualizing a narrative, that is, to deliberately recur to a particular style.<sup>18</sup> Even though producers were always inclined to experiment and were eager to come up with something new, they felt the power of the dominant style. Time and again, the blockbusters that became the talk of the town (often, films imported from Nigeria that featured a strong emphasis on the defeat of evil spirits by God) seemed to prove that a reasonably sure way to make a profitable film was to consciously appropriate Pentecostalism's stylistic repertoire. Many producers sought to achieve this by sitting with audiences, frequenting public places, and, above all, listening to their own wives.

The first time I realized the pressure audience expectations may put on producers and directors was in the fall of 1996, when I watched a video entitled *Beast Within* (1993) with a group of youngsters. This film chronicles the mishaps befalling the managing director of a big company and his family, who struggle to get things right again—the wife, in particular, continuously prays to Jesus—but to no avail. The youngsters with whom I watched the film were scandalized by the last scene, in which the fetish priest from the village found the spiritual source of all the troubles that had befallen the film's main protagonist, revealing that a *juju*, or charm, had called a troublesome spirit into the house. Furthermore, the *juju* was hidden behind the image of Jesus before which the family had so often prayed in despair (cf. Meyer 1999a). In the youngsters' view, it should have fallen to a man of God to put things right again rather than to a native priest who, viewers asserted, was himself in league with the powers of darkness. Because of its ending, I was told by the youngsters, the film, produced with much care and a substantial outlay of money, had flopped. This experience, more than any other, made me realize that the popularity of films depends on the directors' skillful use of various stylistic features. Through further screenings and interviews with audience members, I realized that the sure way for a director to avoid a flop was to avoid making any negative statements about Christianity.<sup>19</sup> The safest formula for success, however, lay in fulfilling at least three basic, interrelated requirements, which turn out to be key elements of pentecostalite style and that resonate with melodrama as a modern aesthetic form: (1) depicting modernity as the context of everyday life, replete with seduction and temptation and, so, in need of redemption; (2) creating a narrative structure that opposes God and the devil; and (3) offering a kind of vision that combines, if not almost fuses, Christianity and film, religion and technology. Audiences would feel attracted to and be prepared to say that they "got something out of" a film that successfully incorporated these features. Such a successful adoption of style resonates with structures of feeling. This resonance is reflected in audiences' reactions: If a film appeals and people are brought into the right mood, they

become morally involved with what they see on screen: shouting at the bad guys, praying for the weak, clapping for the heroes. Watching in this way is not merely a matter of seeing through the eyes but is a total bodily experience (cf. Verrips 2002) that evokes and matches a certain mood also communicated in Pentecostal-charismatic events.

### *Christian modernity*

As enumerated above, to be successful video-films must first feature and extol recognized markers of modernity: beautiful, well-furnished houses; fancy clothes; nice restaurants, hotels, and bars; fashionable boutiques; posh cars driving through the modern infrastructure of the city. But they must also feature modern notions of personhood, successfully played out in the nuclear family, the cradle of modern life that is set up in opposition to the extended family, which is associated with tradition, backwardness, and evil (cf. Meyer 2002). Modernity, it should be noted, is not represented in these films as an option to reject or adopt, but as a context of urban life. It is depicted—indeed, presented as a picture to be viewed—as a surface structure that can only be understood by laying bare its hidden dimensions. Just as film certainly in the colonial period was the central medium of modernity, both video-films and Pentecostalism also mediate their own version of (Christian) modernity through a shared pentecostalist style in which vision holds a central place. Of course, this convergence between film as a medium of modern vision and the city as the key social and cultural form of modernity has been a central theme for theorists of modernity from Simmel and Benjamin onward (cf. Donald 1995). Ghanaian films, in particular, take as a point of departure a moral geography that draws sharp contrasts between bright and dark sites: between the metropolitan zones with their highways and skyscrapers and the bush and the outskirts of the town where the spirits dwell.

Both video-films and sermons represent many aspects of modern life as ultimately desirable and as harbingers of happiness. Both also address the temptations of modernity and the destructive impact such temptations may have on people's lives. Video-films propound a "morally-controlled materialism" (Marshall-Fratani 1998:282) yet also point out that modernity abounds with temptations and seductions, which mainly operate through the desire for sex and that generate immoral, selfish ways of achieving wealth. The wife and the pastor are featured as heroes, but husbands usually appear as weak: Once men achieve a bit of success in their business (often with the financial help of their faithful wives), they give in to hedonistic pleasures and, albeit unconsciously, submit themselves to occult forces. The higher men climb in terms of power and wealth, the less able they are to exert self-control and discipline, and they finally end up empty-handed. The problem, as the films emphasize, is how to handle modernity's promises

and temptations, and the answer is clear: Men must adopt Christian disciplines or techniques of self-control. Proclaiming a distinct, Christian version of modernity, video-films may be viewed as a laboratory for the investigation of pentecostalist regimes of subjectivity and modes of conduct (in the sense of Max Weber's *Lebensführung*).<sup>20</sup>

One notices an interesting shift in video-films' representation of subjecthood over time. In many of the earlier films, evil tends to befall or to press itself on a person, making him or her behave in an unacceptable way. Evil or bad behavior, in this perspective, is not so much a question of individual choice and responsibility as it is a result of the presence of spiritual forces taking hold of a person, occupying his or her inner space, as it were. The question then becomes how to get rid of these forces and allow the inner space to be filled by divine power—a task to be accomplished by Pentecostal prayer and the intervention of the Holy Spirit. Recently, I have noticed, films place more emphasis on the possibility of choice. The film *Mariska* (2001), for instance, depicts several scenes in which a person is positioned between two doubles or alter egos, both of which tell her or him what to do (cf. Meyer 2002). This visual depiction of a tension between two inner voices, of course, evokes the notion of conscience and affirms personal responsibility for actions taken. At the same time, such a depiction evokes the notion of a split person, whose double is subject to occult forces and thus is not autonomous but defined in the context of a power relation. In *Mariska*, one of the main characters is Mawusi, who leaves his wife for her mischievous girlfriend. Mawusi only realizes his fault when he discovers that the girlfriend keeps his double, in miniature form, under a calabash in her bedroom. Forced to realize that he is dominated by a witch, he develops a new constitution characterized by two inner voices and himself as silent listener.

The models of the person visualized in popular video-films are remarkably congruent with those promulgated in the preachings and prayer sessions of Pentecostal-charismatic churches: Although deliverance prayers are, above all, meant to exorcise evil spirits and fill a person with the Holy Spirit (evoking the notion of the empty inner space or void), sermons increasingly emphasize personal responsibility and moral subjecthood. This emphasis, of course, harkens back to the point, reiterated in vain by 19th- and early-20th-century orthodox Protestantism, that sin is a matter of personal responsibility rather than a force coming from outside—sin is the voice of the devil, as many early African Protestant converts put it (Meyer 1999b). The fact that Pentecostalism currently echoes long-standing Protestant concepts of the person is ironic, because the implausibility and unacceptability of these concepts for converts at least partly explains the popularity of Pentecostalism, which initially offered a notion of the person that came closer to local views. Yet



Pentecostalism's gradual shift toward classical missionary notions of the subject testifies to the extent to which this religion has become a mediator of modern forms of being. Pentecostalism has achieved this role through the visual and verbal deployment of a discourse on the modern self in the context of a representational economy in which "Protestantism and modernity (and, one might add, capitalism) *alike*, even *conjointly*, seek to abstract the subject from its material and social entanglements in the name of freedom and authenticity" (Keane 2002:81). This attempt at abstraction is what is shared by both melodrama, characterized as cinematic form mediating modernity, and Pentecostalism. It will therefore not come as a surprise that churches often screen films, letting young people, especially, feel through images what pastors talk about in their sermons.

### *God and the devil*

Second, successful films need to take as their basic narrative structure a strict dualism between God and the devil. Thus, films usually evolve around a struggle between "the powers of darkness," on the one hand, with their firm grip on irresponsible husbands, loose girls, selfish businessmen, greedy mothers-in-law, bad friends, or ritual murderers, killers, and members of secret cults and, on the other hand, divine power, which always supports the pious housewife, the innocent child, and, of course, the Pentecostal pastor (for examples of particular films, cf. Meyer 1999a, 2003a, 2003b). In the end, in such films good must overcome evil just as in Pentecostal sermons God is asserted to be stronger than the devil. Reminiscent of Brooks's analysis of melodrama, films posit that "the world is subsumed by an underlying manichaeism, and the narrative creates the excitement of its drama by putting us in touch with the conflict of good and evil played out under the surface of things" (1976:4). Hence, as sermons and deliverance prayers do in words, films hunt down with the camera all those evil forces hampering a person's well-being. Those forces, which may be shown as deriving from local religious traditions or as crystallized in selfish, utterly antisocial desires, are not simply written off as matters of the past but are, rather, recast as forms of enchantment that are integral to modernity. In other words, those forces constitute the uncanny that thrives in modernity's shades. The films claim to reveal and indeed capture or overcome such enchantment through the power of divine vision.

Often films are framed as confessions or testimony, thereby echoing a distinct genre of Pentecostalist speaking. Such films either start or end with an epigram like "Thank you, Jesus!" "This film is dedicated to God Almighty," "Praise the Lord!" or a biblical reference. The film *Time* (2000), the first Ghanaian–Nigerian coproduction, for example, takes up the well-known story wherein

an individual exchanges the life of a beloved person for money (a theme already featured in *Diabolo*). A desperate man, who has lost all of his money through his brother-in-law's treachery, is lured into an exchange with a cruel and demanding bush spirit and its eccentric priest and is asked to sacrifice his wife (i.e., summon and kill her spirit, causing her physical death) in exchange for new wealth—an offer he cannot refuse. After his wife dies, the man keeps her dead body in a closet in his bedroom, where she vomits banknotes. As the story unfolds, one evil and violent act follows another, until almost all of the man's family is dead. In the last scene, the man's friend, who has also come under the power of the bush spirit, takes the man's daughter Sarafina, who is a virgin and a born-again Christian, to the bush spirit's shrine to sacrifice her. Tied to a pole, Sarafina calls the name of Jesus in despair, and fire erupts and destroys the whole shrine—the Holy Spirit causes hellfire to destroy the sanctuary. The film ends with a biblical quote (Tim. 1:6–9; the film erroneously attributes it to Tim. 2) condemning the selfish accumulation of riches.

By introducing a film as a "true story" based on an individual's experiences with greed, selfishness, and occult powers prior to his or her conversion, or by framing a film as an illustration of the truth of a biblical text, video-film-makers vest their products with divine authority. The occult matters they depict, the films assert—much in line with Pentecostal practice—can only be visualized because they have already been overcome by divine power. Reminiscent of one evangelist's assertion that "when the knowledge of Jesus increases, then the knowledge of demons also increases" (Meyer 1999b:162), Ghanaian films point out that the revelation of occult matters depends on access to the all-seeing eye of God. An important similarity with Pentecostal discourse here is that much time is devoted to a voyeuristic encounter with the "powers of darkness," and the films make ample use of special effects in this regard. Diverging markedly both from the agenda of colonial cinema to do away with so-called superstitions and to educate the masses and from the agenda of postindependence state-driven cinema to cherish "tradition" as a "cultural heritage" and to "enlighten the nation," popular films support—and to some spectators even prove—the existence and evil nature of all those invisible forces that are central in Pentecostal discourse as well as in popular experiences. Thus, films are populated by witches, marine spirits such as Mami Water, and elemental spirits and their bush shrines, and they feature different types of magic, all of which testify to the diabolical nature of local religious traditions. This fascination with the depiction of occult forces leads right into the perceived ambivalence of modernity: According to popular understanding, modernity evokes the sorts of demons that are believed to prevent the better life that Christian discourse promotes. Indeed,



the impossibility of a smooth transition to modernity, to which discourses of conversion and development pertain, is crystallized in demons, which embody the massive contradictions to which the project of modernity gives rise in the practice of everyday life (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1997; Meyer 1999b; Thoden van Velzen 1995). They embody the uncanny, which “has represented the internal limit of modernity, the split within it” (Donald 1995:82) and that continues to fascinate audiences who find in demons the reasons their dreams of good life do not (fully) materialize. Far from confining spirits to the realm of mere rumors—the main cultural form through which narratives about the occult circulated before the emergence of popular cinema—video-films give spirits public exposure, thereby turning popular culture into mass-mediated public culture. In this sense video-films match Gledhill’s observation that melodrama’s “enactment of the continuing struggle of good and evil forces running through social, political and psychic life draws into a public arena desires, fears, values and identities which lie beneath the surface of the publicly acknowledged world” (1987:33).

#### *Vision: Miracle and special effects*

Third and last, to be successful, films must offer a form of vision similar to the one that Pentecostal pastors usually present as their source of power and, indeed, authority. Thanks to the already mentioned “spirit of discernment,” pastors are able to penetrate the invisible powers of darkness, which mess up people’s lives without ever manifesting themselves visibly. Thus, both popular films and Pentecostalism trade in a particular mode of vision, claiming the power to reveal that which remains invisible to the eye yet determines the course of life. Moviegoers are positioned in such a way that they share the eye of God, technologically simulated by the camera. Indeed, audiences are made mimetically to share the super vision that enables God to penetrate the dark; they are addressed as viewer-believers and even as voyeurs peeping into the otherwise forbidden. Far from exposing the nonexistence of invisible forces, in popular film the eye of the camera zooms in on the operations of such forces and projects them onto the screen, thereby creating the illusion of offering firsthand views deep into hell. In this way, the work of representation that constitutes film, as well as the visual technology on which such representation depends, is mystified—*mise-en-scène* appears as a revelation of the invisibly real.<sup>21</sup> Thus, filmmakers, like Pentecostal pastors, engage in certain forms of make-believe, constructing otherwise invisible powers of darkness through speech, images, and special effects and vesting these visualizations with divine authority.<sup>22</sup>

The technology involved in film production is not immune to the workings of occult forces. Many actors told me that they found it difficult to play roles of evil persons,

especially witches and native priests, because they were afraid of inadvertently invoking occult powers. It was even dangerous to create a shrine with one’s own hands in the corner of an ordinary living room or under a tree at Aburi Gardens to film a particular scene. The fact that the shrine was just part of a movie set did not mean that it could not become a refuge of occult powers. Some actors who agreed to play evil characters—after all, to fight evil, evil had to be depicted—told me that beforehand they had sought the advice of their pastors, who had then supported the actors with prayers to fortify them so that the forces invoked would not harm them. Producers told me that it was always difficult to find actors for occult roles because of opposition from the actors’ families, especially from in-laws.<sup>23</sup> Conversely, not all actors were happy to perform in film scenes in which pastors prayed over them, fearing to be touched by the Holy Spirit and concerned that this would reveal the presence of evil spirits (cf. Meyer 1998a). A video-filmmaker told me that once after he had finally convinced an actress to allow herself to be prayed over for a scene, she fell down and was actually possessed: The mimetic reproduction of deliverance prayers for the purpose of the film had thus turned into the real thing. Moreover, certain scenes were difficult to film for ostensibly technical reasons. Akuffo, for instance, told me that he once tried to film a scene on the beach in which a spirit was shown emerging from the sea. During the filming, Akuffo’s equipment repeatedly failed, and, in the end, the scene had to be shot on another day. Many actors saw this as an indication that the devil did not like his machinations to be revealed on film, and he thus disturbed the smooth working of the necessary technology. Technology is thus not merely seen as a neutral device used to visualize figments of the imagination, but as something able to invoke rather than merely depict occult and divine forces. Technology thus partakes in the reality that it creates for the screen.

The way in which pastors’ and filmmakers’ make-believe is mutually supportive became very clear to me when Socrate Safo told me about a phone-in radio program, in which callers defending the claim of a Pentecostal pastor that witchcraft was real made references to film. Safo stated that most viewers regard film as a representation of reality in all its complexity, as revealing that which remains impenetrable to the naked eye. Special effects, although deliberately created by computer programs, are often seen as real magic. Although visual technology and Pentecostal discourse may at first sight seem to belong to ontologically opposed forms of knowledge production—and, in fact, in colonial times the main message of visual technology was the superiority of Western rationality over magic and superstition—a closer look reveals that the relationship between the two is more complicated. In this instance visual technology, the camera, in particular, does

not serve as simple technology, enabling people to see better, but is made to function in the register of religion and to mimetically reproduce vision (cf. Turvey 1999).

As Hent de Vries has eloquently shown, miracle and special effect, magic and visual technology "come to occupy the same space, obey the same regime and the same logic" (2001:28); instead of taking as his point of departure a binary opposition of religion versus technology, he advocates exploration of the interface between them. As religion depends on mediation to articulate its message, it requires certain techniques or even technologies to make accessible the transcendental or invisible. Indeed, "mediatization and the technology it entails form the condition of possibility for all revelation—for its revealability, so to speak" (De Vries 2001:28). I argue that the slippages between video technology and the invocation of occult forces, between special effects and magic, testify to the fact that video technology and Pentecostalism inhabit the same structure and act in support of each other. In so doing both emphatically put revelation in the service of dramatizing transgression into evil, thereby adopting one of the most striking figures of pentecostalite style: the "spectacularization of the spectral" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999:21). Although it would be too simple to equate filmmakers with pastors, because those in these roles operate in different, yet increasingly intersecting, arenas—the sphere of commercial entertainment and the sphere of religion—there certainly is an elective affinity between their two spheres, which are linked through a shared cultural style.

### **Conclusion: Religion's public presence**

To capture the growing disjuncture between state and society and to explore the arena emerging between state and global market, it is useful to turn to the notion of the public sphere, provided that ethnographic exploration is not hampered by a normative and narrow understanding of that notion. Ghana's newly evolving public sphere is as much a product of particular historical power constellations as it thrives on new audiences' eagerness to make public what hitherto has been silenced and denied access by state-controlled media. I have tried to show that where the state has lost the power to control the media, and thus the production and circulation of images, there is a space for the expression of alternative imaginations. Given that a state-driven construction of Ghanaian national identity, with its emphasis on "tradition" and "cultural heritage" appears to lack popular appeal and that the state itself lacks credibility and the confidence of its citizens to implement "development," Pentecostalism's public presence is not surprising.

Pentecostalism has not only embraced the prosperity gospel but also advertises itself in the media, and, at the

same time, its cultural style is at the center of commercial popular culture. Pentecostal churches are run as businesses, and Pentecostal views are mass reproduced and commodified in popular culture. This blurring of spheres, of course, evokes debate in Pentecostal circles about the nature of Pentecostalism as religion. Within churches, as bounded religious institutions, those who wield authority emphasize the depth of religious experience and the importance of being born again. Among Pentecostals there are concerns about the danger of corrupting religious content as a result of its mediatization and commercialization. Such concerns are often, but not always, raised in reference to other denominations than one's own, but they indicate the extent to which mediatization and commercialization have transformed Pentecostalism as an institutional form as well as in terms of its place and role in society. The emphasis on being born again and on deep inner change certainly has to be seen as partly produced in reaction to the increasing dissemination of Pentecostal signs in the public sphere, which is carried on by a whole spectrum of people, from staunch believers to cultural entrepreneurs. The point is that the successful public presence of Pentecostalism depends much less on depth of belief than on surface imagery.

Pentecostalism appears not only to be able to attract masses of believers but also to be so successful in incorporating and recasting popular culture as to have had its style taken up in the field of cultural expression, resulting in typically Christian entertainment in the fields of film, music (cf. Collins 2002), popular theater (Gilbert 1998), and painting.<sup>24</sup> In this way, pentecostalite style offers the narrative structure—and the mood that underpins it—into which lifeworlds and experiences can be inserted; this structure enables audiences to give a place to experiences, hopes, and anxieties that cannot be easily anchored in a state-driven imagination of identity and the lifeworld (geared to the village) underlying it. Thus, rather than merely contributing to an increase in religiosity, understood as an inner process, and rather than simply drawing viewers into the confines of Pentecostal institutions, pentecostalite Ghanaian films publicly picture alternative, melodramatic imaginations of lifeworlds and communities that are appealing because they are able to encompass a wide range of experiences, echo a certain mood typical of Pentecostal circles, offer a moral perspective, and at the same time allow for a voyeuristic indulgence in those occult matters that apparently run counter to the Christian project of modernity yet are constantly reproduced by it.

If in Habermas's analysis the public sphere emerged after religion was privatized, the Ghanaian case pinpoints conditions under which the public sphere appears in a postcolonial context. In Ghana, Christianity, Pentecostalism in particular, plays a specific role, in that it offers a

stable and long-standing structure for imagining an alternative cultural style. The fact that churches are able to offer a more viable technological infrastructure than that offered by the state for expressing and spreading this cultural style certainly contributes to their public appeal. The emergence of a pentecostalite style testifies to the mass-mediatization and commercialization of Pentecostalism itself. The forces of commercialization and the easy accessibility of visual technology, vital in the opening up of the public sphere, have reshaped both popular culture and Pentecostalism and facilitated a liaison between the latter and popular film. This liaison is not incidental but stems from the fact that the followers of Pentecostalism, compared with Catholics, orthodox Protestants, and Muslims, have been much more inclined to adopt and effectively use electronic media and more prone to incorporate popular culture into the religious sphere. The fact that Pentecostalism appears to be almost everywhere in Ghanaian public space, however, should not be interpreted simply in terms of an increase in Pentecostal believers and religiosity. The point is that the blurring of church and cinema, religion and business, sermon and film, makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish between the spheres of entertainment and Christian religion. Pentecostalism proliferates as it is taken up by cultural entrepreneurs producing and endlessly repeating a vast repertoire of images and formulas in the public sphere. If Pentecostalism appears to conquer the public sphere, it does so as a cultural style disseminating its forms of representation and affirming existing moods. It proliferates in space like a film of oil, losing depth, yet dispersing into wider and still wider realms—pentecostal-lite, indeed.<sup>25</sup>

In a number of respects, the developments described here are remarkably similar to the intersection of religion and popular culture that occurred during the course of the 19th and 20th centuries in the United States, most markedly following the rise of the cinema. Laurence Moore (1994) has argued that the successful public presence of religion, rather than its confinement to a particular, culturally bounded niche, depends on religion's ability to locate itself in the marketplace of culture; this argument is relevant to the Ghanaian situation. From this perspective, commodification makes possible the public presence of religion in modern society, a presence that is realized in the sphere and mode of entertainment and through style. The similarity between the U.S. and Ghanaian situations is not a matter of sheer coincidence, but—at least in part—a result of actual contacts between U.S. televangelists and Ghanaian Pentecostals. Whereas in both the United States and in Ghana, the intersection of entertainment and Christianity evokes criticism on the part of some believers, who lament the watering down of religion, it is equally clear that Christian entertainment is able to bind together large numbers of people and to instigate the rise of new

communities of sentiment, taste, and style that go far beyond congregational particularities.

That the success of religion in modern societies appears to depend on its ability to locate itself and spread in the marketplace of culture raises important questions about how to conceptualize religion. The centrifugal processes that characterize Pentecostalism's spread in the public sphere seem to indicate a significant transformation of previous practices of mediation. Talal Asad (1993) was certainly right in emphasizing that the definition of religion in terms of belief, so long taken for granted in the study of religion and affirmed by the master narrative of modernity asserting religion's public decline, was shaped on the basis of the modern view of Christianity as private (1993; see also Van Rooden 2001). This personal, belief-based definition of Protestantism, globalized on a massive scale as part of Protestantism's self-description, is at the same time undermined through processes of missionization. As I have sought to make clear in this article, such a definition is of little use in seeking to comprehend the diffuse, public presence of religious forms and elements and the ways in which they parasitically feed on and reproduce existing concerns in a new framework.

This shortcoming, however, does not imply that this modernist definition would be more suited to analysis of Protestantism prior to its articulation in Ghana's new mediascape, at a time when the state was more or less successful in assigning a certain place to Christianity. There is good reason to wonder whether Protestantism's self-definition in terms of belief and a deep change in the inner self has ever been fully realized in practice. The talk among Ghanaians about superficiality of belief and the lamentation that many churchgoers are just nominal Christians is as old as the missionary enterprise. Thus, processes of conversion could easily be described in terms of a shift to a new cultural style—a source of serious misgivings on the part of religious leaders who expected converts to change their inner being. In this sense, the modern ideal of Protestantism (and for that matter, religion) as belief has always been subject to subversion in concrete historical situations.

What is new in the situation described in this article is that church authorities find it more difficult to contain Pentecostalism once it goes public, even if Pentecostalism claims to mimetically copy long-standing religious concerns and even though Pentecostal leaders themselves partake in visualizing this religion in line with televisual and video formats. As public Pentecostalism spills over into the spheres of politics, technology, mass consumption, and entertainment, it becomes more diffuse and elusive, increasingly difficult to grasp. Lamentations about the loss of substance are evoked by, as well as testify to, the extent to which Pentecostalism has become subject to mass mediation by newly available visual technologies.

Perhaps the operation of this sort of public religion can be likened to what Derrida (1998) called a "tele-technoscientific machine," producing an overwhelming, dazzling number of images and pressing its distinct cultural style into the public sphere without being able to control what its signifying practices will be thought to mean (thereby risking the loss of the very essence entailed by the notion of being "born again"). Analysts need to reconceptualize "religion" in the context of its expansion into the public sphere, that is, in a context in which the claimed referential relationship between outward practice and inner state, sign or symbol, and meaning, although still at the core of religious discourse itself, cannot be taken for granted, and notions like form, style, and surface call for fruitful exploration.

## Notes

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1. According to the last population census, 24.1 percent of the whole population regards itself as Pentecostal-charismatic. In the Accra region the figure is 37.7 percent. Pentecostals make up 45.8 percent of all Christians in Greater Accra (Ghana Statistical Service 2000). The popularity of Pentecostalism has had a strong impact on the more orthodox churches, which themselves have given room to pentecostally oriented prayer groups, in the case of the Catholic Church to the Charismatic Renewal. Consisting of a plethora of churches and prayer groups, Pentecostalism thus has become a major force that far exceeds its statistically proven position.

2. The difference between popular culture and public culture is flimsy and by no means absolute. Here I use *public culture* to indicate a new historical moment, brought about by the shift toward an increasing use of mass media such as TV, radio, and film. By using the notion "public culture" I seek to capture the fact that popular culture has become part and parcel of local media industries geared to a mass public.

3. Flight Lieutenant J. J. Rawlings took power through a military coup twice: in 1979 to enforce elections and hand over power to a new democratic government and again in 1981, to end corruption and undertake a "house cleaning exercise" (cf. Nugent 1996). In 1992 and 1996 he stood for elections and became the president. His party lost the elections of 2000, and the oppositional NPP (New Patriotic Party) took over, with John Agyekum Kufuor as president.

4. Commenting on Hobbes's concept of a state based on the *auctoritas* of the king alone, independent from the ideas of the ruled, Habermas says, "Confession is a private matter, private conviction; without consequences for the state: it assigns as much value to one as to another, conscience becomes opinion" (1990:163, my translation).

5. I would like to thank Stephan Khittel and Gerd Baumann for drawing my attention to Ludwik Fleck.

6. As the possibility to perceive and make statements about the world depends on the existence of distinct "styles of thinking," there is no essential difference between a Denkkollektiv devoted to science and one devoted to religion. To observers, who are captured by their own, to them apparently logical, style of thinking, another style may look fantastic and arbitrary.

7. John Collins (2002) has argued that Christian churches have become key actors in the production and promotion of music. Because the state has put high taxes on importing instruments and a 10 percent VAT on entertainment, musicians and companies running "concert parties" (i.e., popular theater), have found it increasingly difficult to survive in the sphere of secular entertainment. Churches are exempt from taxes, and many artists have therefore shifted to the churches, working within them and producing Christian Gospel music.

8. Gifford's (1998) assertion that the Pentecostal-charismatic churches generally supported Rawlings is too simple. Rather, churches attempted to forge certain alliances with those in power. Initially, one charismatic church especially, the Christian Action Faith Ministries led by Bishop Duncan Williams, openly supported Rawlings and prayed for him in public. During the course of the year 2000, however, relationships between this church and Rawlings's NDC (New Democratic Congress) government became more strained. This certainly had as much to do with the fact that the government openly considered the introduction of taxes for churches, which have increasingly turned into vital commercial enterprises, as with a general, public dissatisfaction with the NDC. Another charismatic leader, Dr. Mensa Otabil of the International Central Gospel Church, openly supported the opposition. Once elected to power, the new NPP government appointed Otabil a member of the National Commission of Culture, hitherto understood as the backbone of the traditionalist faction.

9. In the meantime, orthodox Protestant churches and the Catholic Church, as well as Islamic groups and the Afrikania movement, have started to buy airtime. But the Pentecostal voice is much louder than that of any other group.

10. This conference, organized by the International Study Commission on Media, Religion and Culture, was held May 19–27, 2000, in Accra. I am very grateful to the organizers for inviting me to participate in debates and present the results of my research.

11. In turn, Afrikania has undertaken a sort of recasting of traditional religion, above all, in Protestant terms, that is, with much emphasis on the Word. See also Van der Veer 1999 with regard to a similar development in the context of Hinduism.

12. Although the point Akuffo sought to make is clear, it is nevertheless important to note that he overstated his case. To my knowledge, there are no such films.



13. Of course, Akuffo (and video-filmmakers in general) would only adopt such a perspective in certain critical arenas. Most video-filmmakers present their films as “confessions” or true stories, which links them with the truth claims of Pentecostal pastors.

14. Against this background, Spitulnik’s (2000) plea to “de-essentialize” the audience and widen the frame of reception studies is well taken; the study of media certainly has to get away from “subject-centric” approaches, which focus on reception as if audiences existed in isolation, to what Spitulnik calls “sociocentric” ones, which take into account how media create social spaces and merge with them. See also Barber 1997.

15. I have reservations with regard to this part of Brooks’s argument. The point is not that religion vanished with modernity, but that it was rearticulated. Looking at Max Weber’s Protestant Ethic, for instance, one can certainly discern significant elective affinities between melodrama and the new modern mind-set propounded by Protestantism.

16. Pastors regard the cinema as potentially immoral, because they suppose that all sorts of sexual encounters take place among youngsters in the dark. Whenever I visited the cinema with a group of young Pentecostal girls, they always prayed to God to keep them clean, and they also closed their eyes during sexually suggestive advertisements and clips before the main film.

17. See De Witte 2003 for a thorough analysis of the media practices of the Ghanaian International Central Gospel Church, which runs its own media studio.

18. Several video-filmmakers told me that they understood themselves as full Christians and that they regarded films as a way to convey the Christian message. Some filmmakers also insisted that they saw their ability to produce films as a gift from God, and they emphasized that they first saw the plot of their next film in a dream or as a vision projected on a wall; the source of their stories, in their view, was God (cf. Meyer 2003b). Such visions and the belief that God was directing them in some way, often prompted individuals to enter the film business; thus, filmmaking did not depend on education alone (as was the case with state-trained filmmakers), but it was also a “calling,” the result of “having a vision.”

19. Eager to present something new, some producers have started to produce so-called epic films, which are set in villages long before the advent of colonialism and missionary activity. In this way, an opposition between Christianity and tradition is deliberately avoided.

20. Many films, especially Nigerian ones, also tell stories about a person’s deliberate pact with occult forces that make him or her indulge in ritual murder and crime. Such films reflect increasing concerns about personal safety in the big city, with its numerous dark, immoral spaces. Some films also address the much-heard criticism that certain pastors run churches to make money—a criticism that, interestingly, is also fueled by many exponents of prosperity gospel, who assert that they are not fake pastors but genuine. Certainly such criticism opens up a space to express second thoughts about Pentecostalism’s actual success in guiding people toward heaven on earth and about the actual efficacy of prosperity gospel.

21. As Rachel Moore (2002) has argued, it is exactly here, in the invisibility of the technology and the technological devices that go into the production of a film on the screen, that the “magic of cinema” lies.

22. Ghanaian video-film producers have always been keen to produce special effects. Until recently, this was not an easy task, given that they worked with VHS video-cameras and edited films by copying all scenes in sequential order from one tape to another. To produce a special effect, they thus had to copy two different

films, one exactly over the other to achieve an effect such as a spirit leaving a body or a person transforming into an animal. The Nigerian films (cf. Haynes 2000) that entered the market on a massive scale in the late 1990s featured elaborate special effects produced through computer programs, primarily at MAD-House Studios in Lagos. Nowadays, special effects can also be produced through digital editing in Accra, for instance at Nankani Studios. Filming is increasingly done with digital cameras, but Betacam is still used.

23. I have heard of several actresses who declined roles involving occultism and sex (usually only suggested and not really shown, apart from feet and faces) because, had they accepted the roles, their fiancés’ families would have objected to their marriages.

24. See the work of the painter Kwame Akoto, alias Almighty, as it is presented in the film *Future Remembrance* (1998) by Nancy du Plessis and Tobias Wendl.

25. With thanks to Thomas Spear for this pun.

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