

Editorial

Inspired by a workshop held at the University of Zurich in November 2014, we inaugurate the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* (JRFM) with a special issue dedicated to methodology. The field of media and religion is characterised by a multitude of approaches to both religion and media. The choice of communication paradigms and analytical procedures to be used in an investigation of the intertwined relationship of religion and media depends on the sources, the questions we seek to answer and the cultural context. This issue of JRFM presents a range of methodological procedures by highlighting three selected communication models: the first part considers a model that defines communication as an overlap of spaces that mediates meaning-making processes; the second part looks at the employment of a gender lens for investigation of the relationship between media and religion; the final part analyses the interaction between media and religion in the context of various contemporary art productions. While these models have been drawn from a broad range of possible topics, those selected share a common concern: they involve reflection on methodological steps used to analyse interactions always characterised by non-linear and multi-causal relations. Each of the three main sections contains a key article and two responses, with the methodological questions addressed by invited contributors commented upon, discussed critically and developed further by members of the mentioned research groups.

JRFM'S ACADEMIC CONTEXT

JRFM is a project situated at the intersection of a number of research teams that are working on aspects of the interaction of media and religion: *International Research Group Film and Theology*,¹ *Media and Religion*,² *Commun(icat)ing Bodies*,³ and *International Exchange on Media and Religion*.⁴

For two decades the *International Research Group Film and Theology* has been undertaking research in an interdisciplinary setting that encompasses theology, the study of religion, cinema and media, and educational sciences. With a membership

1 <http://www.film-und-theologie.de> [accessed 21 September 2015].

2 <http://www.religionswissenschaft.uzh.ch/medien> [accessed 21 September 2015].

3 <http://communicating-bodies.net> [accessed 21 September 2015].

4 <http://media-religion.net/> [accessed 21 September 2015].

that includes scholars from a number of European countries, this research group is responsible for the book series *Film und Theologie*, published by Schüren Verlag in Marburg, Germany, and focuses mainly on feature films. In recent years, greater attention has been given to the reception contexts for fiction films and for other genres such as television series. Furthermore, as a broader discussion of the impact of audiovisual media on religion has been sought, theoretical and methodological questions have increasingly been put at the centre of this exchange. The second team is the research group *Media and Religion*, based at the Centre for Religion, Economy and Politics at the University of Zurich. Its research, which has been running since 2004, has explored religion from the perspective of communication theory, with a particular interest in images, feature and documentary films, music, popular culture and the body. On a theoretical level, the group explores the possibilities for the implementation of theories of communication, of image and seeing, of reception and performativity, and of space and gender within the study of religion. Finally, from 2009 to 2014, scholars from the universities of Graz, Zurich, Hull and Villanova as well as from the Fondazione Bruno Kessler in Trento, Italy, worked together intensively in an investigation of the body and clothing as media that interact with religion. The results of this network, called *Commun(ica)ting Bodies*, have been published in a number of books and articles.⁵ The exchange has been continued through the formation of the *International Exchange on Media and Religion*. These four interdisciplinary teams, which all study the medial dimensions of religion and the religious dimensions of media, provide stimulating contexts in which to engage in deep intellectual exchange on particular aspects of the field. They have organised projects by addressing specific subjects, theories or methodological questions and have shared and continue to share the results of those efforts in various formats.

After several years of multi-layered cooperation, the need for a platform to display the results generated by other research projects and produced by individuals interested in similar questions was apparent. JRFM is an initiative open to researchers in any discipline that deals with the interaction of media and religion. The journal emphasises, in particular, inter- and transdisciplinary debates on mediality and the mediatization of religion, and also the interaction of (audio-)visual and material representation with religion in both past and present.

THREE COMMERCIALS AS A STARTING POINT

The participants at the mentioned workshop held at the University of Zurich in November 2014 were asked to present methodological reflections in relation to three commercials. The three commercials advertised Coca-Cola, Pepsi and the Catholic

5 A list of publications can be found on the network's website, see communicating-bodies.net [accessed 21 September 2015].

Church in the United States.⁶ These commercials are outlined below as an introduction to the articles by Roger Odin and Mia Lövheim in this issue; Sigrid Schade responded to the selected commercials with a discussion of a video performance by Vera Frenkel who reflects on the impact of commercials in general on everyday life.

The commercials by the two soda producers can be classified as “media using religious communities,” whereas in the third commercial the Catholic Church uses media for its purposes as a religious community. Nevertheless, all three ventures pursue a single goal, be it religious or solely commercial: to activate consumers.

To that end the Coca-Cola commercial HAVE A GREAT BREAK⁷ depicts a highly sexualised masculine figure (fig. 1) whom a young and equally erotic women (fig. 2) observes as he walks out of the water at a secluded, Caribbean-like beach. While opening and drinking from a can of Coke Light, the woman takes the man for an available sexual object (fig. 3). As he dresses and puts on a clerical collar, it becomes evident that he is a presumably celibate priest. The only body contact between the two actors consists of the priest’s placing of the sign of the cross (fig. 4) on the woman’s forehead using her drink as holy water or balm.



Fig. 1: Sexy priest, HAVE A GREAT BREAK, film still (00:00:09).

- 6 The commercials can be viewed in the Internet. The date of production of both commercials is probably between 2004 and 2008.
- 7 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6mygZNxUL8> [accessed on 29 September 2015].



Fig. 2: Sexy women with Coke can, HAVE A GREAT BREAK, film still (00:00:20).



Fig. 3: Delighted observing women, HAVE A GREAT BREAK, film still (00:00:27).

The Pepsi commercial KUNG FU PEPSI CRUSH⁸ (fig. 5–8) tells the story of a rite of passage in a Buddhist monastery where all the monks wear the same enigmatic sign on their foreheads, a sign that also adorns the entrance to the monastery. The child novice

8 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nMYFboWPK> [accessed on 29 September 2015].



Fig. 4: Sign of a cross, HAVE A GREAT BREAK, film still (00:00:41).

is seen entering the monastery, preparing for life as a monk, at first failing and later, when older, passing tough tests in kung fu. As the final step in his education, he must crush a Pepsi can with his head, inscribing the mark of the pull tab on his forehead. Both commercials play with surprise effects, in which, with a twist in the narration, something unexpected happens. Humour is used to engage the audience and cause



Fig. 5: The sign at the front door of the Buddhist monastery, KUNG FU PEPSI CRUSH, film still (00:00:09).



Fig. 6: Rehearsing Kung Fu, KUNG FU PEPSI CRUSH, film still (00:00:09).



Fig. 7: The master, KUNG FU PEPSI CRUSH, film still (00:00:21).

them to remember the relevant product. Religious symbolism within the narration makes connections to well-known symbol systems and specific values. Furthermore, both commercials refer to conventionalised film forms: the HAVE A GREAT BREAK commercial refers to music videos and the KUNG FU PEPSI CRUSH commercial to martial arts films.



Fig. 8: Crushing Pepsi can with forehead, KUNG FU PEPSI CRUSH, film still (00:00:09).

The CATHOLICS COME HOME video is something different. Its purpose is to move North American Catholics to engage actively in church life. On a visual level the commercial shows a large number of typical Catholic references such as rituals (fig. 9), architecture (St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, for example), art (Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine Chapel, for example) and a number of popes (fig. 10). The narration highlights



Fig. 9: A Catholic mass being performed likely somewhere in Africa, commercial CATHOLICS COME HOME 2009, film still (00:01:10).



Fig. 10: Pope John Paul II visiting what is probably Africa, commercial CATHOLICS COME HOME 2009, film still (00:01:28).

the ancient, contemporary and global heritage of the organisation by referencing its charitable (fig. 11), educational and health programs.



Fig. 11: Charity worker with a crucifix around his neck bringing goods to poor children, commercial CATHOLICS COME HOME 2009, film still (00:00:24).

CATHOLICS COME HOME, a series consisting of several commercials, was produced by a private initiative led by Tom Peterson, a North American media professional, with its

goal the “evangelization” of Catholics, according to the homepage of that initiative.⁹ Peterson’s organisations Virtue Film and Catholics Come Home call the commercials “evangomercials.” They were aired, for example, during major college football games and on television (CBS and NBC) in 2011.

These three commercials have been distributed through the Internet on platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo and organisations’ homepages. Therefore, their transmission can be seen in light of Marshall McLuhan’s “global village” in contemporary culture. All three commercials are products of the US market that can be received worldwide. The values and norms formed in the narration are transmitted within the global Internet community. This network functions, however, in effect as one-way communication, from the United States and to the rest of the world, while the global village McLuhan had in mind was probably more balanced, as a product of information exchange. Nevertheless the three commercials provide fruitful examples for thinking about methods in the field of media and religion.

THINKING METHODS IN MEDIA AND RELIGION

The first section of this first issue of JRFM, entitled *Religion, Media and Communication*, deals with spaces of communication in the field of media and religion. Analysis of a particular communication presupposes a specific approach to the spaces in which that communication takes place. Production, representation and reception/consumption are all considered here as fundamental aspects of communication theory, but with a particular interest in the interaction of production and reception/consumption.

In his contribution, *Religion and Communication Spaces. A Semio-pragmatic Approach*, Roger Odin opens the section by noting the basic distinction between mental and physical spaces of communication. People’s ideas and expectations are mental spaces based on experience, whereas the physical spaces of media are found in real places where films are received, such as cinemas, homes or schools. The institutional framing crucially influences reception processes. The experience of watching a film with friends at home differs from the experience of watching that same film surrounded by strangers, and thus alone, in the cinema. With this distinction in mind, Odin seeks to understand how religious spaces of communication operate. In her contribution *Documentary Media and Religious Communities* Marie-Therese Mäder discusses methodology by considering four spaces of communication in the context of religious communities’ use of media, with people as active participants in each space, in production, distribution, representation and media communication. In *Methodological Challenges by (New) Media. An Essay on Perspectives and Possible Consequences* Christian Wessely identifies the need for an altered approach to media literacy in an

9 <http://www.catholicscomehome.org/invite-tom-to-speak/> [accessed 21 September 2015].

age when linear reception of media is no longer the norm, with interactivity now common in the everyday experience of digital communication.

The second section looks at the interaction of media and religion through the lens of gender. Two aspects are crucial in this section: media often use religion to subvert or reiterate gender roles, and religion is also understood as a fundamental aspect of gender identities. The section also considers the link between analysis of media and religion and the embedded concept of religion.

In the main contribution in this section, *(Re)Making a Difference. Religion, Mediatization, and Gender*, Mia Lövhelm analyses the representation strategies of two of the commercials, those produced by Catholics Come Home and Coca-Cola, in light of the mediatization of religion. She shows how gender roles are transmitted and reinforced in these processes by challenging traditional and conventional understandings of religion. In *Staging the Dead. The Material Body as a Medium for Gender and Religion* Anna-Katharina Höpfinger describes how the dead body and the clothing in which it is placed can be used to mediate binary gender schemes, which can also be subverted by death rituals involving the handling of the mortal remains in a Roman Catholic context. Bärbel Beinhauer-Köhler's contribution, *Mediality and Materiality in the History of Religion. A Medieval Case Study about Religion and Gender in In-Between Spaces*, focuses on religious infrastructure donated by women in twelfth-century Cairo, and in reconsidering textual and archaeological findings, Beinhauer-Köhler questions the paradigm of the male hegemony over the definition of public space.

The third section, with its interest in contemporary art, considers how art refers to religious motives and constellations not only in single works but also in exhibitions and installations. In contemporary society, religion plays a central role within various branches of artistic production. From a theoretical perspective, the specific relationship between religion and media in contemporary artistic production and reception leaves us to wonder whether religious symbols in contemporary art, in performances and in author films are used for social criticism and whether references to religious traditions might even constitute a new form of religion. What methods might be used to explore this relationship?

In the main contribution in this section, *Religion, Belief and Medial Layering of Communication. Perspectives from Studies in Visual Culture and Artistic Productions*, Sigrid Schade analyses a case of medial layering of communication. Working on visual culture, she explores Vera Frenkel's performance *THIS IS YOUR MESSIAH SPEAKING* (1990) in which Frenkel criticises consumption culture and generates a media criticism through religious references. In *Cross-Media Transmission Processes. Marian Figures in TODO SOBRE MI MADRE* (Pedro Almodóvar, ES 1999) Natalie Fritz elucidates how religious concepts and motives are transmitted through films, with meaning-making processes shifted and the dominant reading questioned. Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati's contribution, *Approaching Religious Symbols in the Public Space. Contemporary Art and Museums as Places of Negotiation?*, considers the function of religion as displayed in works of art

in exhibitions, analysing the methodological implications of the interaction between the work of art and its audience when the latter is invited to engage actively in the reception process.

By addressing methodology, the editors of the first issue of JRFM intend to encourage and support interdisciplinary scholarly work in which both media and religion are understood as broad and diverse cultural fields with manifold interactions.

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