Guest Editors' Preface

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At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are confronted by two entwined global developments: the resurgence of religion in the public sphere and the spread of audiovisual mass media. All over the world, religious movements and audiovisual media increasingly engage and overlap as part and parcel of attempts to address and captivate an ever-expanding public. As both religion and film—film understood here in a broad sense as audiovisual technologies, such as cinema, television, and video, which produce moving images—work together and act upon each other, it is increasingly difficult to differentiate the two as distinct fields of activity and meaning. Whether in Hollywood, Bombay, or Lagos, religion and film are involved in complicated and productive relationships. The boundaries between modern mass entertainment and sacred traditions such as Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity are continually being redrawn and blurred. That religion and filmic media are now so reciprocally implicated in such new and powerful ways calls for a more rigorous and nuanced scholarly engagement.

This special issue of *Postscripts* addresses the interface of religion and film by exploring both how religion is deployed through film and how film is utilized in service of religion.¹ While film can be seen as a kind of religious

1. This issue is based on a workshop, *Mediating Religion and Film in a Post-Secular World*, which we co-organized on June, 16–17, 2005 at the University of Amsterdam. The idea for this workshop was generated in the context of our research program, *Modern Mass Media, Religion and the Imagination of Communities*. The program has been generously sponsored as a so-called Pioneer program between 2000–2006 by the Netherlands Foundation for Scientific Research (for more information, see <http://www.pscw.uva.nl/media-religion>). The articles published in this special issue have been rewritten in the aftermath of this event. We would like to thank Ulrike Davis-Sulikowski, Anne-Marie Korte, Jeremy Stollow, Katinka van Heeren, and Elizabeth Castelli for their constructive input during the workshop. We are also especially grateful to Elizabeth Castelli for her generous and stimulating support in preparing the articles for publication.

practice and religion can be studied as a filmic text, this special issue refuses to reduce this complex and ongoing encounter to one side of the equation or the other. This interface cannot be contained exclusively within either film or religious studies. Although there is a long and rich history of religious material represented through filmic media, issues of religion have not received much attention within film studies.² This may be due to the fact that the cinema usually has been theorized from a modernist perspective as a technology of make-believe, which offers a kind of surrogate for religion in our increasingly secularized world.³ What little there is in the way of scholarship on religion and film has mostly been produced within the framework of religious studies. A great deal of this work has been devoted to addressing questions concerning the extent to which religious images on screen are in line with, or deviate from, established religious repertoires. All too often, this scholarship has confined itself to a Eurocentric framework privileging Christianity and Hollywood (in particular films relating to the story of Jesus).

This special issue seeks to explore the common ground shared by practices of filmmaking and religious institutions located within postcolonial settings and increasingly linked in global infrastructures. The articles presented here converge in combining theoretical reflections about the interface of film and religion with specific examples or historical and ethnographic cases. Written by authors with backgrounds in film studies, religious studies, and anthropology, the contributions to this multidisciplinary issue are based on two common, more or less explicit, points of departure. One concerns the realization that the actual entanglement of religion and film highlights the limitations of a modernist view proclaiming the retreat of religion from the public sphere as an inevitable consequence of the processes of modernization and secularization. In our perspective, the interface of film and religion can more fruitfully be addressed from a postsecularist perspective, which seeks to overcome the unproductive, teleological, and normative understanding that religion should be confined to the private sphere. As the contributions to this issue show, in contexts as diverse as India, Ghana, Nigeria, Brazil, and postsocialist Poland, the accessibility of modern mass media in conjunction with the politics of neo-liberalism actually facilitate the proliferation of religion in the public sphere.

This implies not only that religions may assume a strong public presence, but also that religion and entertainment are increasingly difficult to distinguish from each other. For example, as Maria José de Abreu shows,

2. An important exception is the volume, *An Invention of the Devil? Religion and Early Cinema*, ed. Roland Cosandey, André Gaureault, and Tom Gunning (Sainte-Foy, Canada: Les Presses de L'Université Laval, 1992). See also S. Brent Plate, ed., *Representing Religion in World Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

3. Rachel Moore has provocatively made this point in *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

the Catholic Charismatic priest, pop-singer, and film actor Marcello Rossi embodies this convergence. Not only has film become a prime medium of religious expression, films also often address a religious audience which in turn is seen to authorize audiovisual representations of the transcendent or divine as truthful and authentic. Ravi Vasudevan argues here how Hindu devotional films represented their own religious spectators as a kind of self-authenticating redefinition of the social with the divine. Whether this authorization actually occurs, as the articles by Birgit Meyer on Ghanaian pentecostally-oriented video-films and by Matthias Krings on Hausa videos in Northern Nigeria show, is a matter of an intense politics and aesthetics of persuasion that may or may not be successful. While in our era of globalizing media the condition of the possibility for religion to assume a public role appears to depend on the successful accommodation of filmic media, the incorporation of such media also threatens to transform religious practice into a form of mass entertainment. The fear of being made subject to superficial visual regimes, as the articles by Mattijs van de Port and Marleen de Witte highlight, may lead religious practitioners to be highly suspicious about the formats and styles that go along with audiovisual mass media.

In addition to this postsecular stance, the articles presented in this special issue also share a commitment to moving beyond the assumption of an ontological difference between religion as a domain of the transcendent, on the one hand, and film as a domain of neutral technology, on the other. In this regard, we prefer the notion of mediation as a more open-ended, non-determinist solution for exploring the multiple relationships between religion and film. For example, once religion is understood as a practice of mediation, media appear not as alien to the realm of religion, but as an inalienable element on which any attempt to access and render present the transcendental ultimately depends.⁴ By using "mediation" we hope to shift our emphasis away from religion and film as abstract substantialized essences towards a non-dualist emphasis on the relational and contingent practices in which film and religion overlap and engage each other. Brent Plate, in his contribution to this issue, coins the term "religious cinematics" to stress explicitly this point where religion and film merge through the embodied practices of the human senses. In various ways, the articles in this issue explore the multiple and constitutive encounter of religious and filmic mediation as a productive and dynamic mix of the sacred and profane, the private and the public, of reality and representation, and of the material and the imagined. Developing these themes, a number of articles also employ the notion of "remediation" so as to follow the transcription of

4. For further discussion on this point, see Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, *Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of "Religion" within the Limits of Mere Reason in Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Plate, *Representing Religion*; Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, eds., *Religion and Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

religious and filmic mediations beyond any reference to any unmediated and foundational origin. In this sense, there can be no unmediated experience of religion and film, but only remediation upon other religious and filmic mediation.

Tucson, Arizona. December 2003. Photo by Stephen Hughes

Precisely because mediation is intrinsic to religion, a given medium may be taken for granted as a natural means to authenticate religious experience and authorize religious authority. The introduction of new media, such as film, almost inevitably calls into question already-naturalized mediation practices. In this sense, as a number of articles presented in this issue show, the adoption of filmic media into existing practices of religious mediation can entail a sense of crisis, in that a medium such as film needs to be authorized as able and suitable to convey religious experience. For example, Esther Peperkamp, focusing on conflicts in postsocialist Poland surrounding the making and circulation of a new Catholic version of the well-traveled protestant film *Jesus* made by the evangelical movement Campus Crusade for Christ, highlights complicated politics of a religious authorization of film. The point is not simply whether to adopt or reject a particular medium such as film per se, but also concerns modes of representation, and ultimately, the question of representability. From the perspective of filmmaking, too, the efforts to appeal to a religious audience requires that filmmakers develop representative forms that are found to be in line with, for example, Pentecostal vision practices (Meyer), Muslim notions of the visual and representation (Krings), or popular images of

Hindu gods (Hughes, Vasudevan). Many of the articles presented highlight that any given medium makes possible *and* constrains the articulation and circulation of religious messages in particular ways.

Approaching religion as a practice of mediation and investigating the relationship between film and religion in terms of remediation is, of course, nothing more than a productive starting point from which to raise questions about the confluence of religion and film. While the first four articles (Meyer, Krings, Hughes, Vasudevan) approach the interface of film and religion by focusing on how religious materials are remediated or transcribed on screen, the last four articles (De Witte, Van de Port, De Abreu, Peperkamp) concentrate on how religious movements reinvent their mediation practices by accommodating filmic media, and the formats and styles implied by it. Brent Plate's article, located in between these two sets of articles, addresses a situation in which religion and film are inextricably entangled, reaching near-convergence as embodied through the human senses. If religion and media are co-constitutive, it makes little sense to claim that the one exists prior to the other. Still, the question of what constitutes an adequate approach to studying the relationship between religion and film ultimately cannot be postulated in the abstract or in advance. It will always be contingently specified in particular historical instantiations such as those presented in this special issue of *Postscripts*.