MATTIJS VAN DE PORT

(Not) Made by the human hand: media consciousness and immediacy in the cultural production of the real

Taking its examples from the realm of popular religion and popular culture, this essay shows how sensations of im-mediacy are sought and produced in a great number of fantasy scripts. Some of these scripts seek to undo media-awareness: concealing or denying the involvement of the human hand they produce the sensation that one's imaginations are not human fabrications at all, but immanent to the world. Other scripts, however, flauntingly reveal the mediation process and the workings of the human hand in it. Yet on closer inspection, these latter scripts oftentimes throw into relief the moment where – all the awareness of the medium notwithstanding – the mediation process is transcended. The cases discussed help the author to ponder the place of the medium in what he calls 'the cultural production of the really real'.

Key words mediation, immediacy, aesthetics, the really real

The Greek term *acheiropoieta* means 'not made by the human hand' and refers to a quality attributed to many sacred icons (Latour 2002: 16). These icons, so their worshippers believe, have not been crafted by human beings. They fell from heaven without any intermediary, or came into being spontaneously – 'just like that'. And it is exactly the absence of any human involvement in their making that greatly enhances their power. As Bruno Latour stated, if one were able to show that these icons had been made by 'a humble human painter', this would be 'to weaken their force, to sully their origin, to desecrate them' (2002: 16).

I'm intrigued by the chagrin over mediation that informs the notion of *acheiropoieta*. For 'chagrin' is what it seems to be about: a discontent over the fact that mediation is 'all we have' to render present the world of our imagination. To say that the involvement of the human hand in the making of an icon weakens its powers is to say Man's great accomplishments as a mediator of ideas, visions, sentiments and sensations are nothing but 'a way of making do'. It is to say that Velasquez' paintings, Mahler's symphonies and the blue mosques of Isfahan are mere approximations of transcendent Truths. It is to say that our dependence on media keeps us from knowing 'the real thing'.

This quest for the 'real thing' has been on my research agenda for a long time, and it is within that framework that I will ponder the chagrin over mediation. I share the puzzlement of Michael Taussig and many others over the fact that the anthropological truism that realities are culturally constructed does not prohibit people (including anthropologists) from behaving as if this were not the case. As Taussig phrased it: 'We act

and have to act as if mischief were not afoot in the kingdom of the real and that all around the ground lay firm' (1993: xvii). Wondering how indeed we manage to do so, I have been studying what I call the 'cultural production of the real': the rhetorical, performative and aesthetic practices through which people seek to upgrade the reality calibre of the stories-they-live-by. Elsewhere I have discussed how the cultural production of the real tends to bring irrefutable facts ('incontestables') into play, which have powerful reality effects (van de Port 2004, 2005). The absolute truth of death; the incontestable factuality of loss; the undeniable experiences of the sensuous body; the impenetrable mystery that baffles the observer with the incontrovertible truth of his not-knowing; the sublime dimension of the artwork 'that knocks you out'; the irreducibility of pure desire; or the solid materiality of stones, in the face of which all human attempts at sense making seem futile: to evoke these 'incontestables' in rhetoric, performances and aesthetics is to evoke the limits of human sense making. At those limits, people become aware of a transcending, supra-human order of being that is beyond such qualifications as credible/incredible, true/untrue or real/unreal.

In this essay, I will discuss the notion of *acheiropoieta* as yet another aspect of the cultural production of the real. Or rather, the cultural production of the real is the framework within which I will pursue my interrogation of the chagrin over mediation, and the accompanying dream that if only we could do *without* media an encounter with the real of our imaginations would be possible.

Media scholar M.T.J. Mitchell provides a good starting point to ponder the notion of im-mediacy, and the reality effects it accomplishes. In his thought-provoking study *What do pictures want? The lives and loves of images* (2005), he has pointed out that the dream of immediacy is a direct result of the awareness of mediation. The moment we recognise the medium for what it is, '[it] constructs a corresponding zone of immediacy, of the unmediated and transparent, which stands in contrast with the medium itself' (2005: 214). William Mazzarella makes a similar point when stating that 'mediation always also produces a fiction of premediated existence' (2004: 357). What both these scholars mean to say is that once the Velasquez' painting comes to be seen as 'a depiction of something other', the Mahler symphony as 'a musical expression of something other', or the blue mosques in Isfahan as 'an architectural representation of something other', it becomes possible to think that the 'something' that these artists sought to depict, express, and re-present might be accessed directly, head on, without further detours through paint, strings and blue glazed tiles.

This is a powerful fantasy indeed. History provides innumerous examples how 'zones of immediacy' came to be imagined as repositories of a 'really real', of transcendental truth and authenticity, the dream destination for truth-seekers, for wavering-believers-in-need-of-a-confirmation-of-their-creed, for the vision quests of prophets and artists. For it was the dream of immediacy – or so we have been told – that spurred on the riotous bands of Theban women to rip apart 'the veils of illusion' and face 'the depths of Being' in their Dionysian cults (Otto 1998). It was the dream of immediacy that underlay the iconoclast's conjecture that his religious imaginations could do without images, and the Dadaïst's and Surrealist's attempts to break down language to the phonetic components of words, films to the abstract play of light and shadow, sculptures to mere objects and paintings to arbitrary combinations of colour and lines (Van Spaendonk 1977). Called 'the unsymbolization of the world'[1] it

---

1   The expression is ascribed to 'zen scholar' R.H. Blyth.

is the dream of immediacy that makes the Zen Buddhist close his eyes and enter into meditation. Called 'Reality TV' – 'staging a TV show as if it was not a TV show' – the dream of immediacy seduces the millions. Called 'pain', it is what drives ever more teenage girls to cut themselves with razorblades.

The reason that I keep qualifying 'zones of immediacy' as *dream*-destinations is to stress their illusionary character. In cultural analysis we can only subscribe to the proposition that there is no such thing as an unmediated knowing of reality. The dream of escaping media is unattainable. However, to declare the notion of immediacy a 'mere fantasy' and leave it at that, would be to miss out on the tremendous motivational power of fantasy in people's lives – or as philosopher Slavoj Žižek (1997) puts it: fantasy is always at work to sustain the subject's sense of reality. Moreover, it would be an underestimation of people's ability to make possible the impossible in fantasy scripts. I will therefore explore how this dream of im-mediate access to the object of one's imagination is scripted by asking the question: how do people go about the paradoxical attempt to mediate immediacy? What are the cultural forms that signify the absence of cultural formation? And how are the sensations that are thus produced put at the service of 'the cultural production of the real'?

I will proceed by distinguishing two major modes of mediating immediacy. In the first mode the medium is 'naturalised' to the extent that it is no longer experienced as a medium. In the second mode, the mediation process is flauntingly revealed and highlighted for what it is. Contrary to what this second mode seems to be doing, I will argue that this 'unmasking' of the medium produces its own sensations of immediacy.

Is a mirror a medium?

One of the best examples of a 'naturalised medium' – that is, a medium that is no longer experienced as such – is the mirror. As we have all direct and intimate knowledge of the mirror, it is a good starting point for a discussion of the mediation of immediacy.

When asking whether a mirror is a medium, my first impulse is to say: yes of course. If we take a medium to be, in the broadest possible understanding of the term, 'a carrier of information', then surely a mirror is a medium. And yet, on second thought, there is something very un-medium-like about mirrors. This special quality of the mirror comes clearly to the fore when comparing the encounter with oneself in a mirror with the encounter with oneself on a photograph or portrait painting. In the latter case, it is instantly understood that what one is looking at is *re*-presentation of oneself. After all, photographs and portraits have been made, and this making involved a particular medium, with all of its possibilities and limitations, just as it involved a particular artist, with all of his or her talents (or the lack thereof). Responding to these images by saying something like 'that is not a flattering photograph of me' or 'the likeness of the portrait is striking' is perfectly possible. Not so with one's mirror image: it makes no sense to say that one's mirror image is 'not very flattering' or 'absolutely striking'. What's more, it is very difficult to conceive of one's mirror image as an image at all. Just go to the nearest mirror and try for yourself: you will not succeed to look at your face *as if* it were an image. All that you will see is you yourself. Apparently, what we see when we look in the mirror is not something we conceive of as 'being made' or involving a medium. We somehow manage to think (and experience) that the mirror shows us the truth about ourselves, 'the way we really are'.

In his thoughtful discussion of the difficulty to conceive of the mirror as a medium, and our mirror image as a mediated version of ourselves, Patrick Stokes stated that

> The mirror represents the paradigmatic experience of self-recognition, where the self is literally seen, and where awareness of 'what I look like' is generated and altered in an immediate way. Obviously, the experience *is* mediated on a physical level ... but on the subjective level, the experience is immediate. We do not, under normal circumstances, stop to consider whether the mirror is accurate, or whether imperfections in its construction distort the image in it. We typically do not even notice that the image in the mirror is precisely that, a 'mirror image', inverted along its vertical axis ... In the usual, unreflective run of things, we simply *see ourselves*, rather than an *image* of ourselves ... (2007: 77)

This 'real' or 'truth' of the mirror image has been played with and elaborated in all kinds of ways in the human imagination. From the Evil Queen's 'Mirror, mirror on the wall, who in the land is fairest of all' to Diego Velasquez's intricate use of the mirror in his famous painting *Las Meninas*[2]; from New Age 'mirror gazing therapy' ('just watch the mirror and feel what comes up'[3]) to the folk belief that a vampire can be recognised because he does not reflect in the mirror; and from the 'merciless mirror' in the beauty parlour that sustains the cosmetic industry to the many mirror metaphors in the philosophy of Kierkegaard: the mirror has been understood as a 'truth-telling' device. Even the skin-over-bone anorexia patient who told me that in her worst days she would go up to 40 times a day to the mirror to watch herself being fat, used the truth-telling qualities of the mirror to confirm her delusive self image.

The understanding that the mirror shows 'reality as it is' hinges in large part on the mirror's un-media-like qualities: the seeming capacity of a looking-glass to bring us to ourselves without the interference of a medium. The mirror image qualifies as *acheiropoieta*, not made by the human hand, and therefore speaks the truth.

Clearly, this vanishing of the mediation process not only happens with mirrors. Patrick Eisenlohr observed that 'media have the propensity to erase themselves in the act of mediation' (2009: 8). Jacques Derrida commented on the vanishing medium in his famous statement about the impossibility to see television *as* television:

> No matter how alert we may be, we still look at television as though it were presenting us the thing itself.... No critique can penetrate or dissipate this structural 'illusion'.... Even if one were to regard everything on television as being a fiction, such vigilance would not exclude a certain waking hypnosis or a fascinated quasi-hallucination: one perceives, without perceiving it, the ghostly noema of the thing itself – *as if* it were the thing itself .... The critique of televisual mystifications does not prevent them from operating, and from doing so in the form of the spectral noema of 'making present'. (Derrida, in Stolow 2005: 126)

Other examples that attest to the fact that we manage to conceive of the medium as *the thing itself* are plentiful. A well-written novel makes us forget that we are reading a book; entering a cathedral, mosque or temple, we are likely transported to the awesome

2   In this famous painting, representing a painter behind his canvas, engaged in the act of painting, a mirror in the back of the depicted room reveals the true subject of the painting: the royal couple that are being depicted. Cf. Snyder and Cohen (1980).

3   http://www.emoclear.com/mirrorgazing.htm

realm of the sacred without ever being aware of how the particular architectural structuring of space produces that effect; the 'willing suspension of disbelief' on the part of audiences is a pre-requisite for the magic of a theatre production to occur; and – as Rachel Moore phrased it – 'popular film is a medium whose making is crowded with technology, but that emerges without a trace of its own construction' (2002: 161).

The question that presents itself is what the erasure of the medium from consciousness accomplishes. My preliminary answer would be that the vanished medium produces a condition whereby subjects are no longer distinct from that which is meaningful for them; where the world and the way the world has been imagined are inseparable and one; where meaning is immanent to the world, and where the world is immanent to meaning. This condition – one might say – allows for the sensation that meaningfulness is 'a state of being'.

Three religious fantasy scripts through which the medium vanishes

Unsurprisingly, this dream that one's imaginations do not involve human design but are immanent to the world is particularly strong in the realm of religion. As Birgit Meyer put it, 'all religions assume a reality that is transcendental to, rather than demonstrable in, the material world' and they all face the task to find ways to render present this 'absent presence' that is the Divine (Meyer 2006; cf. Stolow 2005; de Vries 2001). In other words, mediation must be considered to be constitutive of religion, and religion can therefore not be analysed outside the forms and practices of mediation that define it. Yet as much as mediation must be considered 'a practice of mediation' from an analytical point of view, religious practitioners tend to shy away from this insight, and it is in religious settings that the mystification of the medium takes on a particular urgency. After all, to be aware of the role of mediation is to be aware of human agency; which, in the particular instance of religion, may undermine the conceptualisation of the Divine as that which transcends the human imagination. The great variety of religious scripts and scenarios in which people have sought to realise their fantasy of im-mediate access to the divine might thus be explained. In the following I will distinguish three scripts that are often reported in the anthropological literature.

Spontaneous icons

A first cluster of such scripts centres on the notion of *acheiropoieta* discussed above: the denial of human agency in mediation processes. A recent example is a newspaper article that recounts the story of Aziz Dudhwalla, a butcher from Leicester, who found the name of Allah written in a cut of lamb-meat. He was just in the business of cutting the meat, and there it was, unpremeditated, unsolicited, yet unmistakably: the name of God. Not a re-presentation of the Divine, but His immediate presence: 'the living imprint of the living God exclusive of any artistic workmanship' (Debray 1995: 544). Several of the customers who had flocked to Aziz's butcher shop to witness the miraculous cutting declared that the occurrence had greatly boosted their faith.

On the Internet, a great many varieties of this type of imagery can be found, showing how believers go about the paradoxical attempt to represent the absence of mediation. The image of a cloud that appeared over Mecca and writes the name of God (and which is said to emanate 'spiritual blessings'); the name of Allah appearing on the inner surface of cut tomatoes and melons; on the hide of a cow; in the folds of the auricle of a newborn infant; in the particular outgrowth of a tree; and even on an aerial photograph of the ocean waves caused by the Tsunami that wrought such havoc on Asian coasts some years ago: these are all examples as to how 'spontaneous icons' produce the sensation that the world is completely 'at one' with one's religious convictions. Christianity produces its own share of 'spontaneous icons', and regularly, the miraculous apparition of the face of Jesus or the Virgin Mary is reported – in clouds, fried tortillas, broken TV-sets, and 'the asbestos wall of a hen-house at Billsdown farm, St. Ives' (Michell 1979: 89). In these fantasy scenarios too, the world is scripted as an agent that brings the believer's convictions and beliefs back to him.

The denial of the involvement of 'the human hand', and the accompanying sensation of God's immanent presence in the world, is certainly not limited to this kind of imagery, but pervades religious thoughts and practices in all kinds of ways. On Youtube, there is a little video clip showing a corvine bird sitting on what looks like the gutter of a suburban English house, calling the name of Allah three times. Another sonorous variety of spontaneous icons is the practice of glossolalia ('speaking in tongues'), whereby non-sensical utterances start flowing from the mouth of the believer. Prioritising non-sensical utterances over meaningful words in one's communication with God, says Thomas Csordas about this phenomenon, is calling into question all man-made conventions of truth, logic and authority. His informants considered glossolalia to be pure communication, incapable of uttering any wrong words. Csordas takes glossolalia to be 'a verbal gesture with immanent meaning', as against a notion of 'speech as a representation of thought' (1990: 25).

The body speaks

Another cluster of fantasy scripts in which mediation is denied hinges on the mobilisation of the body and the sensorium. In the social sciences, there is of course a long tradition to point out how the biology, the materiality, as well as the here-and-nowness of bodies have been mobilised to upgrade the reality calibre of social and cultural classificatory systems (Mauss 1973; Douglas 2002; Bourdieu 1990; Csordas 1990). Michael Lambek summarised the perspective adequately by saying that 'we project our social categories onto nature and then use nature to justify our social categories' (1995: 276). Yet whereas analysts may discuss the body as a medium – and thus as an instrument of culture – the fantasy scripts that mobilise the body for the cultural production of the (religious) real often deny this.

The denial that the body is a medium seems to be grounded in sensations of pre-reflexive, bodily awareness: the body 'speaks' in ways that the mind cannot grasp, and with an immediacy that precedes all opinionating. Again, the notion that bodily sensations are 'not made by the human hand', grants them their role in the cultural production of the real.

Stigmata, the spontaneous occurrence of wounds on the body of a believer, are the obvious example, and might be seen as the bodily equivalent of the spontaneous icons

and the 'speaking in tongues' discussed above. The Italian stigmatic and 'contactee' Giorgio Bongiovanni (who developed his wounds during a visit to the shrine at Fatima, from whence on they are said to have been bleeding almost daily) stated in an interview that

> these signs are powerful because they can sensitize people's consciousness. People in the world need to see the evidence that something extraordinary is taking place. They want to see, to touch something, to believe. It signifies that things like spirituality and the existence of other spiritual beings are real. It is to show people that these matters are a reality, not simply a matter of opinion.[4]

Less spectacular, but equally centred around the sovereignty of the human body, are the bodily manifestations of Divine presence that Thomas Csordas (1990: 27ff.) discusses in his study of Catholic Charismatics in the US. Shivering, swooning, shaking, sweating, spontaneous laughter and crying, rapid fluttering or vibrating of hands and arms, dizzyness, goosebumps, flushes of heat and convulsions are all taken to be signs of Divine presence (just as bodily compulsions and cravings for 'forbidden fruits' are taken to be signs of demonic presence). Ian Miller (1997), in a book-length discussion of the bodily sensation of disgust, makes a similar argument about the use of the body in the cultural production of the real: it is exactly the lack of responsiveness to the will that endows disgust with the power to make fully real social and cultural boundaries. In my own research on the Bahian spirit possession cult candomblé, informants would always point to the physical transformation of people possessed by spirits – their convulsions, their foaming, their turned-up eyeballs, but most of all, their different posture – as evidence of Divine presence.

Once more, I want to stress that the examples just given are about the recruitment of the body and the sensorium in *fantasy scripts* that are to produce a sensation of the real. Indeed, in Bahian candomblé there is an acute awareness that bodily states can be – and are – faked (Birman 1995), which destabilises the whole idea that what 'speaks' in bodily manifestations is a supra-human register of sense-making, something that does not involve the 'human hand' (and mind). This suspicion that even the body may be revealed as a medium, an instrument in human sense-making might help to explain that most intriguing fantasy that Rosalind Morris found circulating among spirit mediums in Northern Thailand. The fantasy has it that

> somewhere in Central Thailand, there is a spirit (*phii*) of such extraordinary power that it need not incarnate itself in order to be heard. It speaks in a language that does not require any human to lend its voice. It emanates from a room where mortals may go to be addressed, but it has no bodily location. And it leaves no trace. Or so the mediums of Chiang May say. (Morris 2002: 383)

This story, says Morris, not only 'envisions the absolute effacement of mediation, the withholding of the sign in the moment of signification', but should be understood as 'an ambivalent fantasy of modern possession performance, a fantasy in which mediums themselves are surpassed' (2002: 383).

---

4 http://www.shareintl.org/archives/appearances/ap_ml2ndcoming.htm, accessed 24 September 2006.

The Divine medium

A third fantasy script that produces this sensation that one's religious imaginations are immanent to the world attributes the medium itself with sacred qualities. Birgit Meyer's (2006) discussion of the camera as an instrument of Divine vision in Ghanaian Pentecostal popular film provides an illuminating example: time and again, Ghanaian video productions stage the camera as the equivalent of the all-seeing Eye of God, able to penetrate the surfaces of what is presented to the mortal's eyes, and reveal the hidden powers of darkness lurking behind the surface. Clearly then, in this example the medium is no longer an obstacle to divine immanence, but an instance of it.

The same can be said of the 'polaroids from Heaven' which are made by the thousands in Bayside, a site in New York where Our Lady of the Roses is said to have appeared, and which has become a major site of pilgrimage. The images that appear on these 'polaroids from heaven' contain written messages in light, the so-called 'balls of redemption', glowing crosses, images of the Virgin Mary and the like (see Wojcik 1996: 130).

In leaflets distributed among pilgrims that visit the site, it is stated that these images are 'so unique and so unexplainable that experts can only shake their heads in wonder' and that they are 'deemed inexplicable by the Polaroid Company' (see Wojcik 1996: 130). Moreover, pilgrims are informed that the 'Eternal Father' is making use of modern technology to communicate with 'a fallen generation', 'whose hearts are so hardened, and eyes so blinded, that they need some type of physical proof of the supernatural to attest to the authenticity of the Bayside visions' (1996: 130). It is furthermore declared that 'Our Lady has directed that the pictures should be taken with Polaroid or other kinds of instant self-developing cameras, since these pictures develop "on the spot" and therefore eliminate later accusations of tampering with the negatives' (see Wojcik 1996: 132). Here too, a fantasy script presents the medium as a Divine agent, which contributes to the sensation that God's presence in the world is immanent.

This attribution of supernatural qualities to media is greatly facilitated by the fact that in contemporary media societies mediatic and religious imaginaries are already inextricably entangled. Hent de Vries, for example, has pointed out how the sophisticated special effects of contemporary cinema have forever changed the religious notion of the 'miracle'. With all the computer-animated scenes that viewers have watched in the movies – people flying, people running around invisible, people losing limbs then putting them back on to continue walking, people transmuting into whatever life form one can think of – a miracle can only be imagined as something like a special effect (de Vries 2001: 19ff.). And that is, indeed, how some of my Bahian informants sought to communicate the miraculous apparitions they had seen. 'It was exactly as in *Ghosts*', one woman told me about her encounter with a spirit called Maria Padilha (*Ghosts* is a Hollywood production that is available in all the local video stores). 'She appeared and faded away!' In her study on Charismatic Catholics in São Paulo, Maria José de Abreu (2005) reports that, at mass gatherings, Charismatic priests instruct believers to be like 'antennas' to receive the Holy Spirit, and believers have learned to embody this idea, as they raise their hands high up in the air and report 'electric tinglings' in their fingertips. TV pastors from neo-Pentecostal churches argue that, at times of communal prayer and worship, their temples emanate 'vital fluids' (*fluidos vitais*) that may be picked up by radio and TV receivers. They therefore urge their viewers to put a glass of water on the

TV set during live broadcasts of prayer meetings to be a receptacle for the Holy Spirit, which infuses the water with curative power (Campos 1999).

In the three religious fantasy scripts of the vanished medium, the erasure of the medium from consciousness allows for the sensation that one's religious imaginations are immanent to the world, rather than human fabrications. 'The human hand', the sign of human involvement, is understood as a hand that soils, that corrupts, that draws beliefs into the realm of the fabricated, the made-up, and thus, the deceitful and the mendacious. This is not, however, necessarily the case, as my discussion of another set of examples of the mediation of immediacy will show.

Alternations of mediation and immediacy

Let's return to Mitchell's remark that the dream of immediacy is a direct result of the awareness of mediation. Immediacy, one might say, becomes a *concern* – an object of desire – the moment that an earlier fantasy script that had allowed for the sensation of 'direct access to the real of one's imaginations' failed. What this means is that all the scripts that were discussed above are already a response to some failure, some disturbing crack in the cultural production of the real. This observation brings such static categories as 'mediated' and 'im-mediate' into movement, and to get a better idea of these alternations of mediation and immediacy it is useful to take a closer look at exactly those moments when an awareness of the medium arises.

The introduction of new media technology on consumer markets provides many examples of such moments. I vividly recall how the introduction of music CDs instantly transformed my understanding of vinyl records. Having bought my new CD player, which smoothly and soundlessly swallowed the silvery discs to perform unseen magic on them in its inaccessible interior, I could not but wonder how for all of my life I had been content with this most primitive technology of 'scratching a needle over the surface of a turning disc so as to produce music'. The commercial campaigns through which High Definition Digital TV (HDTV) was put on the market show how media industries capitalise on such experiences. The producers of HDTV sought to fuel a desire for this new product by revealing the older, analogous TV as 'nothing but' a crude piece of media technology. On websites where the new product was advertised, consumers were bombarded with meticulous technical explanations as to how 'that old SD (standard definition) television displays a resolution of 480 pixels from the top of the screen to the bottom, interlaced so that only half of them (odd or even pixels) are shown at one time' which is why 'you can see black lines flickering across your TV screen if you look closely'.[5] In advertising, time and again the old analogue TV is exposed as a primitive medium:

> HDTV programs are still made up of pixels, but instead of rectangular, they are square. Plus they are 4.5 times smaller. This means you're getting four times more detail – so it's almost like comparing printouts from an old dot matrix printer to a laser printer.[6]

5   http://www.canadafreepress.com/2006/bray041106.htm, accessed 24 September 2006.
6   http://www.jgstudiohd.com/hd_info.html, accessed 9 July 2010.

> Digital TV is fast becoming the current standard. Currently ... as many as two million HD-capable television sets have already been sold in Canada, with the number growing daily. So just like 8-track tapes, record players and wood-panelled station wagons, analogue TV will eventually fade away.[7]

Interestingly, these explicit attempts to break the mystery of the older, analogue TV systems ('how could you have ever been content watching black lines flickering across your TV screen?') only serve to introduce a new mystery, that of the new technology. In line with Mitchell's finding that 'a new medium is, paradoxically, often associated with immediacy and the unmediated' (2005: 214), consumers are told that the great advantage of HDTV is that you are no longer aware of watching TV. It is thus that HDTV-sets are advertised with slogans as 'a ready-made source for transcendent experiences in front of the tube!'[8] and 'with HDTV ready Pioneer Elite PRO1120HD, TV can now look like real life!'[9] Sharp Digital Industries promises instant access to 'events that matter' as it writes 'Just imagine experiencing the booming roar of the crowd, and crisp detailed image of the game winning home run from the comfort of your home with your Sharp digital television!'[10]

On an Australian website,[11] customers discuss the pros and cons of HDTV, saying things like 'It felt like I could just crawl into the monitor it looked so real' or 'it is just like looking out of a window'. The one discussant who stated that 'looking at HD pictures is great but is it really life-like? I think not!' got a prompt response: 'The problem is obvious, your eyes are analogue, you need an upgrade to take advantage of this new technology'!

Apart from such demystifications of existing media to push new media with greater immediacy effects on the market, the breakdown of the invisibility of the mediation process also occurs when a medium is introduced in an arena where it had hitherto not played a (significant) role. This new medium may fail to become invisible, because people may consider it 'unfit' for what it seeks to render present. One might think for instance of Bach's fugues and toccatas played on the accordion or Hammond-organ, of electrically lit fireplaces, or Catholic websites offering on-line confession. Following this line of thought, the visibility of the medium also occurs when users of the medium lack the skills to operate it (think of bad acting and B-movies, or that ridiculous clothing item that your mother had enthusiastically stitched together on her sewing machine, and you could not refuse to wear for not hurting her feelings); or the shift in media may imply a shift in the senses that are being addressed (think of the difference between being physically present at a ritual, or watching that ritual on TV; or the great upheaval when the passion of the Christ was turned into (what some took to be) Mel Gibson's 'pornographic snuff-movie' *The Passion of the Christ*).

Lastly, the breakdown of media's invisibility may occur due to their being considered matter-out-of-place in certain settings. Anthropologists have collected by the dozen the images that highlight a certain incongruousness of modern media technologies and realms considered to be 'traditional'. From Papua's listening to gramophone's to huge TV-sets in destitute slums, and from radio sets made of junk

---

7   http://www.canadafreepress.com/2006/bray041106.htm, accessed 24 September 2006.
8   http://electronics.howstuffworks.com/hdtv.htm, accessed 9 July 2010.
9   http://www.dealtime.com/xPOPureVision-Pro-920HD, accessed 9 July 2010.
10   http://www.showroom411.com/dir/home-entertainment/tvhdtv.html, accessed 9 July 2010.
11   http://www.dtvforum.info/lofiversion/index.php/t26932.html, accessed 24 September 2006.

metal to the somewhat clumsy rendition of modern media in African popular painting, media appear as agents of modernity, that stand between and disrupt the deeply rooted assumptions about 'primitive people's' closer harmony with the natural order of the world. Beth Conklin has pointed out that the designation of peoples and places as 'authentic' and 'traditional' often leaves 'little room for intercultural exchange or creative innovation, and locates "authentic" indigenous actors outside global cultural trends and changing ideas and technologies' (1997: 715). This portrayal of media as intrinsically alienating again boosts the fantasy of immediacy, both among disenchanted spectators from 'civilized' places, as among 'authentic indigenous actors' who have adopted these narratives about themselves, and turn hostile towards the presence of new media technologies in their surroundings (1997: 715).

Producing immediacy by revealing the involvement of the human hand

Let me now move from the denial of the medium and the involvement of the human hand to its all out exposure. If the mirror is emblematic of the vanishing medium, Plexiglass apparatus such as the see-through PCs, see-through phones and see-through radios are emblematic of what might be seen as an alternative road to immediacy (Figure 1).

Transparency, not mystification, is the keyword in these aesthetic forms. Rather than to hide, deny or naturalise the medium, the medium is here revealed for what it is, in all of its human-made, technically-put-together manner. This Plexiglass aesthetics, in a rather screaming way, calls attention to the technology of the mediation process, and thus to the inescapable human involvement in all forms of mediation.

There are interesting performative equivalents to these Plexiglass objects. For instance, in the Japanese *bunraku* puppet-play show, puppet-players do not hide behind the panes of the puppet theatre, but are out on stage. Every puppet is moved by three puppeteers, who perform in full view of the audience. They usually wear black robes, but in the genre that is called *dezukai*, one puppet-player makes no attempt to hide himself whatsoever (Barthes 1971). The more familiar example from the world of theatre would be Brechtian theatre, with it constant disruptions of the stage illusion and its instructions to the audience to remain critical and not to give in to the willing suspension of disbelief. Other examples of the flaunting display of the involvement of the human

Figure 1 Plexiglass aesthetics

hand are the many media pilgrimages that have been described and discussed by media sociologist Nick Couldry (2003): organised tours to TV studios, film sets or outdoor locations where famous scenes from the Sopranos or Sex-in-the-City had been shot. These pilgrimages allow people to face the 'real' of the movie or TV show in all of its technological, staged and produced quality, and expose the process of mediation as make-belief. A similar idea underlies the documentaries that follow the format of 'The making of . . .' in which the viewer is taken behind the scenes and on the set of a major film production to be instructed how the movie was fabricated.

The question to be asked, of course, is what these particular scripts seek to accomplish. What is their 'take' on the fact that mediation is 'all we have' to render present the world of our imagination? Are they examples of the absolute opposite of the quest for immediacy discussed before? Are they an all out attack on what Mazzarella called 'the fiction of premediated existence' (2004: 357)? A move towards the really real of media awareness?

Plexiglass aesthetics – in both their material and performative dimensions – undoubtedly resonate with MacCannel's discussion of the authenticity of the back-stage (1999), the idea that fronts are all about make-belief, and that one has to move to the back-stage to encounter the real thing. However, to say that these aesthetics would merely replace the real of the im-mediate with the real of media technology – 'technology is all there is!' – would be a very partial understanding of the effects brought about by these aesthetics. In their own way, these forms are expressive of the fiction of premediated existence mentioned by Mazzarella, or those zones of immediacy that Mitchell pointed out. And what's more, in their own way they contribute to the cultural production of the real. For Plexiglass radios and computers, *bunraku* puppet players and visits to TV studios may reveal the technology behind the wonder of mediation, this revelation only serves to baffle the observer further with the incomprehensibility of the mediation process. For technically uninformed people (such as myself), revealing the interior technology of the telephone promises transparency of the mediation process yet only moves the mystery of its workings to another level. Similarly, the presence of the puppet player in *bunraku* plays in no way prohibits the magic of a puppet that 'comes to life'. Here too, revealing the medium is not to opt for the real of mediation practices ('mediation is all we have'), it is to enhance the mystery of the immediate, to produce a sense of its superior power and truth.

One last example to clarify this real that comes into being in the act of revealing the mediation process: the master-class for, let's say, opera singers. The master-class is of course a staged rehearsal. They cast the expert (the Grand Dame of the opera, for instance, or the Celebrated Tenor), the gifted student and the audience. The script of the master-class genre always follows the same format: the student is invited to sing the aria that has been studied for the occasion, but is soon interrupted by the master, who is unsatisfied with diction, character, tone, technique, expression, the handling of the text, tempo and whatever else comes into the singing of an aria. After instructions by the master – who searches out every nuance – the student tries again until another obstacle to the sublime is encountered.

Clearly, the master-class is all about revealing what goes into the making of Great Voices. And yet, if the master-class makes visible that opera singing is technique, struggle, work, discipline, in brief, dependent on and the result of utterly human activity, this revelation only adds to the wonder of that one moment where the notes come out perfect, and a voice is able to open the skies.

In conclusion

Sensations of im-mediacy are sought and produced in a great number of fantasy scripts. Some of these scripts seek to undo media-awareness: veiling or denying the involvement of the human hand, they produce the sensation that one's imaginations are not human fabrications at all, but immanent to the world. These scripts cater to what Terry Eagleton, referring to the Althusserian notion of ideology, called 'a form of imaginary misrecognition, in which subject and object, or self and world, seem tailor-made for one another' (2009: 10); a state where the world takes on the aspect of a familiar place, 'conforming obediently to our desires and bending to our motions as obsequiously as one's reflection in the glass' (2009: 10).

Other scripts flauntingly reveal the mediation process – and the workings of the human hand in it. Yet whereas these scripts underscore the fact that we can only access the world of our imagination through the process of mediation, it is exactly this media awareness that produces, to quote Mitchell once more, 'zone[s] of immediacy, of the unmediated and transparent, which stands in contrast with the medium itself' (2005: 14). Examples such as the Japanese puppet play *bunraku* or the master-class showed that revealing the involvement of the human hand may in fact serve to aggrandise the moment of its transcendence, and in that way brings about a sensation of im-mediacy as well. These scripts are reminiscent of Michael Tausig's intriguing finding that in many magical performances

> the real skill of the practitioner lies not in skilled concealment but in the skilled revelation of skilled concealment. The mystery is heightened, not dissipated, by unmasking, and in various ways, direct and oblique, ritual serves as a stage for so many unmaskings. Hence power flows not from masking but from unmasking which masks more than masking does. (Taussig 2003: 273)

Of course, the neat opposition that I have created between a veiling and a revealing of the medium serves the clarity of my argument, yet leaves many complicating issues to be addressed. For instance, if one maintains that there is a key dividing line between manifestations of reality that can be attributed to a 'human hand' and those considered beyond the range of such agency, the question presents itself how one should proceed one's analysis in situations where boundaries between human and non-human agency are contested and shifting? And what is the 'human hand' in complex and less obvious forms of human agency, such as in African and other traditions of witchcraft, or the circum-Mediterranean 'evil eye', where someone can act as a witch or cast the evil eye without one's own intentionality or even knowledge of the act? Leaving the pursuit of these questions for a future fine-tuning of the arguments here presented, I will return to the question how these different scripts play their role in the cultural production of the real – or rather, how an awareness of these scripts may help the cultural analyst to interrogate such productions.

As stated, to study 'the cultural production of the real' (or to use the term that is currently en vogue: 'processes of authentication') is to study the rhetorical, aesthetic and performative practices through which people seek to upgrade the reality calibre of their reality definitions. My quest is not so much the philosophical question what is real, but the anthropological question how sensations of the 'real' (or rather, *a* real) come into being. The 'real' that my analysis seeks to bring out is what we might call 'a hunch': the

sensation that one's reality definitions are infused with the actuality of the world, a felt authentic grounding to visions and beliefs, the kind of grounding that allows a person to use the expression 'get real!' wholeheartedly, without a shadow of doubt. Studying the cultural production of the real is to ask how people seek to uphold (or impose) the truth of their beliefs in a situation characterised by a plurality of truths and beliefs; how they seek to maintain (or impose) the incontestability of their certainties in a situation of heterogeneity that threatens to degrade all certainties to the status of mere 'opinions'. It is to take serious Jean Baudrillard's observation that

> when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths or origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience . . . and there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential . . . (1983: 12–13)

Fantasies of im-mediate access to the world of one's imaginations signal that mediation – more in particular the involvement of the 'human hand' – is a complicating factor in the cultural production of the real. I have argued that the fantasies of immediacy that are centred around the 'vanished medium' produce sensations of the real by fostering the notion that cultural meanings are 'immanent' to the world; indeed, these fantasy scripts enlist 'the world' (or the 'natural' body) as an agent that brings the believer's convictions and beliefs back to him. They thus reduce the distance between the world and what we make of it. As stated, other fantasy scripts take a radically different road to im-mediacy, highlighting the mediation process. Following my example of the master class, these scripts produce an awareness that mediation – and the 'human hand' therein implied – does not prohibit the emergence of a transcendent real that escapes our grasp. In these fantasy scripts sensations of the real are grounded in what I referred to as 'the incontestable real of not-knowing', 'the inexplicability of the mystery' and 'the indescribable awe of the sublime' (for those readers who are allergic to such Zen-ish expressions, I am referring to the sensation of certainty that comes with *not* knowing the answer to the million dollar question).

The finding that the cultural production of the real – as it came to the fore in the quest for immediacy – leads to such radically different scripts requires further investigation. For one really wonders what it is that makes people opt for either the veiling of the medium or the revealing of it. What might explain the persuasiveness of the one script or the other? How do these particular rhetorical, aesthetic and performative practices resonate with the particular histories and biographies of persons and groups? How are these different takes on the mediation process historically and socially embedded?

The pursuit of these questions requires a return to the historical specificities and particularities of the social setting, and thus to the ground work of anthropology. Some preliminary observations, however, can be made. The scripts that I have been discussing, and that I have been illustrating with loose examples from a wide variety of settings, may 'cluster' to make up *styles*. Classical and Romanticist styles, for example, display a clear preference for the veiling of the mediation process. Nothing in a classical statue invites you to ponder its being made by the human hand, nothing in the romantic English garden spurs you on to contemplate the fact that is was designed. These styles seek to effectuate an unmediated immersion into the conceptual order which they propose, and through that effect, endow that order with the sensation of being fully real. By

contrast, the Hellenistic period of antiquity, the Baroque or, in our own epoch, styles such as 'punk' or 'camp', reveal the artificiality of man-made orders. In these latter styles, the sensation of the real does not come about in immersion, but is bound up with the experience of an ever-receding realm of transcendence.

Looking at styles (and their aesthetic reworking of the mediation process) is to look at the interface of subjective experience, collective expressive forms and the forces of history and the social. It is at that interface that the cultural production of the real takes place. For undoubtedly, the persuasiveness of a style – its ability to pervade the world-making of a whole group or epoch, its capacity to endow man-made worlds with an aura of the really real – must be linked to the fact that aesthetic styles, as Clifford Geertz put it, 'materialize a way of experiencing' (1983: 99). Which is to say that the celebration of artifice in the Baroque (to take an example with which I am familiar), and the equally baroque yearning for moments of ecstatic transcendence, resonated with the experiences of people who inhabited a tumultuous world of religious schisms and wars, where, as Michel de Certeau had it, 'convictions . . . oppose and relativize each other' (2000: 6); where 'entire groups are no longer sure about "obvious facts" that . . . were previously taken for granted by a social order and an organization of values' (2000: 2); and where a taken-for-granted-God seemed to be retreating to an inaccessible plane. Or to take that most typical example of the production of immediacy through immanence, the English landscape garden: it has been pointed out that the rejection of the centralised perspective of the French garden models coincided with the advance of liberalism and the control of parliament over the monarch; and that the preference for the 'natural' occurred at a time when the industrial revolution was drastically transforming the English countryside (cf. Egbert 2002). Real-life experiences shape notions as to what is convincing and persuasive, which also translates in the aesthetic preferences that make up a style; but styles also direct and orient the perception of real-life experiences, and ultimately make these experiences. It is by taking up the study of aesthetic styles at the interface of subjective experience, collective expressive forms and the forces of history and the social that a study of the cultural production of the real can expect to move ahead.

References

Barthes, R. 1971. 'On Bunraku', *The Drama Review* 15: 76–80.
Baudrillard, J. 1983. *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(e).
Birman, P. 1995. *Fazer estilo, criando gêneros. Possessão e diferenças de gênero em terreiros de umbanda e candomblé no Rio de Janeiro*. Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará.
Bourdieu, P. 1990. *The logic of practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Calabrese, O. 1992. *Neo-Baroque: a sign of the times*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Campos, L. Silveira 1999. 'A Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, um empreendimento religioso atual e seus modos de expansào (Brasil, África e Europa)', *Lusotopie* 9: 355–67.
Conklin, B. A. 1997. 'Body paint, feathers, and VCRs: aesthetics and authenticity in Amazonian activism', *American Ethnologist* 24: 711–37.
Couldry, N. 2003. *Media rituals: a critical approach.* London: Routledge.
Csordas, T. J. 1990. 'Embodiment as a paradigm for anthropology', *Ethos* 18: 5–47.
de Abreu, M. J. 2005. 'Breathing into the heart of the matter: why Padre Marcelo needs no wings', *Postscripts* 1: 325–49.
de Certeau, M. 2000. *The possession at Loudun.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
de Vries, H. 2001. In media res. Global religion, public spheres and the task of contemporary comparative religious studies, in H. de Vries and S. Webber (eds.), *Religion and media*, 3–42. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Debray, R. 1995. 'The three ages of looking', *Critical Inquiry* 21: 529–55.

Douglas, M. 2002. *Purity & danger*. New York: Routledge.

Eagleton, T. 2009. *Trouble with strangers: a study of ethics*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

Egbert, M. 2002. 'Patriotic islands: the politics of the English landscape garden'. http://webdoc. sub.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/eese/artic22/egbert/egbert.html (Accessed 20 December 2010).

Eisenlohr, P. 2009. *What is a medium? The anthropology of media and the question of ethnic and religious pluralism*. Inaugural lecture, Universiteit Utrecht.

Geertz, C. 1983. *Local knowledge. Further essays in interpretative anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.

Lambek, M. 1995. Choking on the Quran: and other consuming parables from the Western Indian Ocean front, in W. James (ed.), *The pursuit of certainty. Religious and cultural formulations*, 258–85. London: Routledge.

Latour, B. 2002. *Iconoclash*. Cambridge, MA: ZKM.

MacCannel, D. 1999. *The tourist. A new theory of the leisure class*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mauss, M. 1973. 'Techniques of the body', *Economy and Society* 2: 70–88.

Mazzarella, W. 2004. 'Culture, globalization, mediation', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33: 345–67.

Meyer, B. 2004. 'Praise the Lord. Popular cinema and pentecostalite style in Ghana's new public sphere', *American Ethnologist* 31: 92–110.

Meyer, B. 2006. 'Religious revelation, secrecy and the limits of visual representation', *Anthropological Theory* 6: 431–53.

Meyer, B. and P. Pels 2003. *Magic and modernity: interfaces of revelation and concealment.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Michell, J. 1979. *Simulacra. Faces and figures in nature*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Miller, W. I. 1997. *The anatomy of disgust*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Mitchell, W. J. T. 2005. *What do pictures want? The lives and loves of images*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Moore, R. 2002. 'Re-enchanted enchantment. Watching movies in the movies', *Etnofoor* 15: 161–76.

Morris, R. C. 2000. *In the place of origins: modernity and its mediums in northern Thailand*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Otto, W. F. 1989. *Dionysos. Mythos und Kultus*. Frankfurt a. Main: Vittorio Klostermann.

Snyder, J. and T. Cohen 1980. 'Reflexions on Las Meninas: paradox lost', *Critical Inquiry* 6: 429–47.

Stokes, P. 2007. 'Kierkegaard's mirrors: the immediacy of moral vision', *Inquiry* 50: 70–94.

Stolow, J. 2005. 'Religion and/as media', *Theory, Culture & Society* 22: 119–45.

Taussig, M. 1993. *Mimesis and alterity: a particular history of the senses*. New York: Routledge.

Taussig, M. 1999. *Defacement: public secrecy and the labor of the negative*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Taussig, M. 2003. Viscerality, faith and skepticism: another theory of magic, in B. Meyer and P. Pels (eds.), *Magic & modernity. Interfaces of revelation and concealment*, 272–306. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

van de Port, M. 2004. 'Registers of incontestability. The search for authenticity in academia and beyond', *Etnofoor* 17: 1–24.

van de Port, M. 2005. 'Circling around the really real. Possession ceremonies and the search for authenticity in Bahian Candomblé', *Ethos* 33: 147–79.

van de Port, M. 2006. 'Visualizing the sacred: video technology, "televisual" style, and the religious imagination in Bahian Candomblé', *American Ethnologist* 33: 444–61.

van de Port, M. forthcoming. *Ecstatic encounters. Bahian Candomblé and the quest for the really real*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Van Spaendonck, J. 1977. *Belle-Époque en Anti-Kunst. De Geschiedenis van een Opstand tegen de Burgerlijke Cultuur*. Amsterdam: Boom.

Wojcik, D. 1996. 'Polaroids from heaven: photography, folk religion, and the miraculous image tradition at a Marian apparition site', *Journal of American Folklore* 109: 129–48.

Žižek, S. 1997. *The plague of fantasies*. London: Verso.