WORDS AS THINGS
Language, Aesthetics and the Objectification of Protestant Evangelicalism

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Abstract
Evangelical Protestant worship is frequently characterized as involving the manipulation of language rather than objects or images. However, this paper argues that a coherent aesthetic sensibility rooted in positive attitudes to the material world exists in evangelical practices. It traces the ways in which sacred language and religious experience are believed to be objectified in the body, the physical environment and the mass media. Such means of objectification, often partially controlled by evangelical elites, are shown to aid the reflexive presentation of a unified, imagined community of believers on both a local and global level.

Key Words • aesthetics • Christianity • evangelicalism • language • media

INTRODUCTION: BEING AND BECOMING

There is an apparent paradox involved in writing about the aesthetics of Protestant evangelicalism. Such Christians commonly define themselves precisely through their attempts to achieve unmediated and inspired access to the divine. From this perspective, the cultivation of sensuous expressions of worship – and in particular religious art – represents an idolatrous emphasis of material form over spiritual meaning. Given that continued and personal revelation is seen as integral to valid religious experience, a concentration on elaborate physical forms runs the risk of symbolizing an ossified state of being rather than a continually changing and developing process of becoming [see Patterson, 1982]. Communication
with God must ideally emerge not from fixed liturgies but from means of expression that can incorporate apparently spontaneous movement: dance and gesture combine with oratory and song to make up a choreography of inspiration.

Social scientific accounts tend also to describe evangelicalism as a religion of the word rather than the object or image. Martin (1990: 163–4) characterizes Pentecostalism as a system of communication in which personal and wider transformation can be achieved through such verbal forms as tongues, testimonies and song. Harding (1987: 169) emphasizes how Baptist services and revivals are stripped of imagistic and sacramental material as a means of intensifying and focusing religious rhetoric. Goethals (1985: 151) refers to the way the expressive power of architectural settings and material artefacts is minimized in evangelical contexts, in deference to the persuasive functions of words. All these examples provide a powerful contemporary echo of the iconoclasm of original Protestant reformers who abhorred the base circumscription and materialization of the sacred on the grounds that it contaminated divine prerogative (Freedberg, 1989: 62).

Amongst those Christians I have studied in Sweden, members of the ‘Word’ (or ‘Faith’) Movement, faith itself is commonly defined (with implicit reference to Hebrews (11: 1)) as a ‘conviction concerning things one does not see’. Divinity is apparently to be interiorized, appropriated within the self rather than an object or place. Thus a Bible school student, describing how she has deepened her knowledge of and reliance on Christ, uses a visual metaphor – but one with a characteristically evangelical twist: ‘The Holy Spirit painted such a beautiful picture of Jesus for my inner-person’ (Word of Life Newsletter, March, 1988: 14). The inspired picture is imprinted not on canvas but on an internal space that forms her religious consciousness.

Despite these initial remarks, I shall argue that a powerful ‘aesthetic’ sensibility, a coherent system of recognizing the presence of divinity in the visual and the material, does exist among such evangelicals. It is not a conventional type of aesthetic awareness, since it is concerned with an appreciation of the ways in which language – contained in the Bible, prayers, sermons and tongues (glossolalia) – fulfils its sanctified function by being converted into visual and physical forms, thereby permeating the total fabric of religious life (cf. Forrest, 1988). Sacred words to these Christians are not passive receptacles of meaning confined to the pages of a book, but performative statements, inspiring the healing touch of the preacher or the phrase that will provide the sinner with salvation. As we shall see, evangelical beliefs parallel those aspects of Austinian speech act theory that describe how discursive practice can produce that which it names (see Butler, 1993: 13). Genesis might pronounce ‘let there be light’, but a member of the Faith Movement is more likely to ‘lay claim’
to better health or even a more prosperous bank account. The Word can be made to ‘live’ by being translated into a material indication of its efficacy, as signs of language are turned into physical signs of the presence of sacred power.

Such practice thus contradicts the definition of faith mentioned earlier: conviction may apparently be based on things one cannot see, but in fact believers actively seek concrete proofs of the presence of God. Weber of course noted how ascetic Protestant reformers were eager to discover intimations of God’s grace and personal salvation in this world. However, groups such as the Word of Life illustrate how former concerns with salvation and self-denial have been transformed by many contemporary evangelicals into an equal or greater concern with self-realization in economic and social, as well as spiritual, terms (see Lears, 1983: 4). Secular creeds of progress have combined with a shift from broadly Calvinist to more Arminian doctrines, with the latter giving the believer confidence to see salvation as potentially open to all, and the self as a representative of ‘the Word made flesh’ (see Campbell, 1987: 108, 135).

Just as the successful self is valued as an embodiment of divine force, so can other containers of the sacred be eagerly sought after – those which, like humans themselves, can both mediate divine power and indicate the effects of such power. Contemporary evangelicalism has embraced modern media of communication: radio, cassettes, videos (a prime focus here), satellite and cable television programmes. Such media do not in themselves indicate the efficacy of language – they obviously cannot be used as signs of God’s grace in the same way as a body that has been healed – but they contain language that itself can be used to affect circumstances. Neither the relic nor the conventional icon can be used by evangelicals as tangible, portable vehicles for the sacred; however, the video most certainly can.

Through examining evangelical aesthetics, then, I shall also trace the processes whereby evangelical experience – embodied in the physical self, located in the immediate environment, or represented in electronic media – becomes objectified and commodified. Influenced by Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Miller (1987:12) sees objectification as ‘a series of processes of externalization (self-alienation) and sublation (reabsorption) through which the subject of such a process is created and developed’. Miller (1987: 17–18) therefore argues that consumption or sublation can act in positive ways, helping society to reappropriate its own external forms in a mutually constitutive process of development. In Tilley’s words (1991: 155), objectification in this sense involves ‘a process of externalization, whereby individuals or groups consciously or unconsciously are in a state of “becoming”. Through their material/praxis and cultural representations people project themselves’. In contrast, the Marxist view sees objectification as a process whereby a product under
conditions of estrangement becomes alien to its maker, taking on a reified external reality divorced from its origins of production (Miller, 1987: 39–44).

In the following, we shall see how the process of becoming socialized into evangelical practice involves learning to see personal and group experiences as objectifiable resources, available to be packaged and reconsumed by others or even oneself. Ultimately, I shall argue that both Hegelian (as described by Miller) and Marxist senses of 'objectification' are relevant in describing the different ways in which individual evangelicals respond to such socialization, since positive and negative forms of alienation will be shown to be evident.

THE ‘FAITH’ MOVEMENT

The ‘Word’/‘Faith’ movement has played an active part in the global revival of conservative Protestantism. My research has concentrated not so much on the movement’s place of origin, the USA, but rather on one of the areas to which it has spread, Sweden, where since the early 1980s local Christians have been active in establishing congregations which currently involve perhaps 20,000 people. My fieldwork was carried out in the centre of this revival, the Word of Life (Livets Ord) Bible Centre. This organization was set up in an industrial zone of Uppsala in the early 1980s by Ulf Ekman, a former priest in the Lutheran State Church. Ekman had attended Kenneth Hagin’s Bible School in Tulsa in 1980–1. Today, he heads an extensive operation, run by pastors and administrators, including members of his own family.

To study such Christians far from the nodal points of evangelical revival might seem to involve a perverse focus on the ethnographically marginal. Sweden, after all, is commonly characterized as a heartland of secular modernity. However, the movement has acquired particular resonances in public debate in Sweden for much of the past 10 years. As a kind of transnational cultural broker, managing the flow of American-style revivalism between the USA and Sweden (see Coleman, 1993), the Faith movement has become emblematic of wider cultural shifts in the country. It has been perceived as embodying a form of right-wing, yuppie gospel, a principle of anti-state entrepreneurialism, and the dangers of foreign influences at a time when both the continuation of the social democratic state and the role of Sweden as a neutral haven of self-sufficient, prosperous democracy have been placed in some doubt. Ekman and his aides have been portrayed as charismatic dictators, brainwashing the many young people attracted to his services.

An aspect of Word of Life reaction to such aggressive scrutiny has been the characteristically sectarian one of dismissing negative publicity as a sign that Satan is scared of 'the truth'. However, most of the group’s
activities aim not at the consolidation of a self-enclosed community of faith, but rather strive to maintain a sense of permanent 'becoming'. The centre contains a congregation of some 1500 members, primary and secondary schools, and a newly started university. It claims to have the largest Bible school in Europe, training many hundreds of people a year, and includes classes in English to cater for an international clientele.

The Faith movement as a whole is constituted by a shifting, global network of Bible centres that maintain media businesses selling books, videos and cassettes available in a wide variety of translations. Members gain access to an imagined, translocal community (see Anderson, 1983) of Christians engaged in a world-wide project of evangelization, and their imagination is sustained by constant flows of personnel and commodities through an internal economy of evangelical culture. The imagined community is therefore also an imaged community – in publications, satellite programmes and videos. We are led back to an examination of the role of the aesthetic, of commodified containers of sacred language and experience, in sustaining particular forms of religious commitment.

LANGUAGE AND EMBODIMENT: 'EATING' THE WORD

In common with many evangelicals of North American origin, Faith Christians combine Pentecostalism with positive-thinking. Adherents are supposedly provided not only with charismatic gifts, but also a God who is perfectly predictable. Access to the Holy Spirit given to the born-again believer unites such a person with the ultimate source of truth in the sense that believers do not regard themselves as interpreting the Bible or inspired sermons, but as receiving them, gaining determinate understandings that can be shared by all who apply so-called 'spiritual' ears and eyes to sacred words. Such words are signifiers whose signifieds are supposedly assured in the context of the community of fellow evangelicals. The symbolic, ambiguous character of language is played down, just as it is denied that mere emotions can play any part in the perception of supernatural truth since they belong to 'the natural' (det naturliga) – the unpredictable, idiosyncratic world of mundane humanity that incorporates the fallible flesh and mind. As Ekman puts it: 'With [God's] eternal words in your Spirit you can't go wrong, because your mind is renewed. You think God's thoughts and only want what God wants' (Word of Life Newsletter, July, 1984: 1). The logic of this is that the mind and body of the believer are to be colonized by the transcendent world of the Spirit, with sacred language as the mediating vehicle between the two.

When this view concerning the fixed nature of religious meaning is combined with the notion that words have performative power, inspired language comes not only to be regarded as an objective source of communication, it is also seen as capable of being objectified in tangible form.
In verbal acts labelled ‘positive confessions’, words come to create the very reality that they purport to describe. Words of joy create happiness, and those of defeat result in despair. Books are published by Faith preachers with titles like *The Tongue: A Creative Force* and *You Can Have What You Say*.

We begin to see why some of the opponents of Faith Christianity summarize its theology in the phrase ‘name it and claim it’. These beliefs appear to collapse distinctions between the symbolic and the real, the metaphorical and the material. In the process, words are seen to take on many of the qualities of things. People talk of ‘walking on the Word’, as if it were a solid foundation for physical as well as spiritual support (see Forstorp, 1990: 161). It is said that to repeat sacred words is not to render them banal but rather to give them more potential to influence the world, as if one were accumulating quantities of a given resource. During services, congregations collectively direct tongues towards written prayer requests that are held up on stage for all to see. Such verbal utterances are often accompanied by the pointing of the hand, as though words could act like arrows with magical powers (see Tambiah, 1968), affecting the lives of those Christians linked to the prayer requests. Frequently, statements of faith on hand-written or shop-bought signs are placed in houses or cars and perceived as protective devices. The Bible itself can act as a kind of talisman, a ‘spiritual weapon’, as many adherents put it, to be carried with them wherever they go.

Parallels can be drawn here with other faiths, in particular those that have a bias against anthropomorphic representation. According to Starrett (1995: 53), labourers and shopkeepers in Cairo attribute the protective value of displaying or carrying Koranic verses to the latters’ innate power as utterances of God. Solomon (1994: 152) notes how Kabbalistic Jews have gone so far as to place cards with divine names before themselves as they prayed. Aniconic tendencies in Islam and Judaism can also be related to their compensatory tendency to encourage sacred calligraphy. Amongst the evangelicals under discussion, however, language is not so much rendered beautiful on the page as endlessly processed and reproduced through contemporary technological forms.

Perhaps the most striking example of how the Word is invested with physical qualities is evident in the way many Faith adherents describe the process of reading the Bible as a form of ingestion akin to eating. One can ‘hunger’ for or ‘get filled’ with the Word, while the following are the comments of a youth pastor in a sermon:

Jesus said ‘Our daily bread’ and he meant it physically ... you can’t desist from spiritual breakfast for a single day ... you’ll come in to heaven like a spiritual bodybuilder ... God wants to give you spiritual nourishment, and when you’re newly born you get milk ... when you grow you get a little bread ... but then when you’ve eaten for a sufficiently long time when God
knows that you can eat... he gives you a real ox... you go around like a giant... like a Sumo wrestler, you become the biggest when you eat God's Word... ("Four Keys to Your Bible Reading" Word of Life Cassette No. LOS10 1991)

Eating is an especially powerful image because it evokes a notion of internalizing truth, bypassing the distorting effects of both social context and intellect. As with the image of Christ painted on the inner person, the sacred is intimately appropriated to the self—a powerful idea in a faith based upon a doctrine of the Incarnation.

From an outsider's perspective it might be argued that what is actually being expressed is merely a metaphorical relationship to the divine: eating the Word or having an image of Christ embedded in the self appears to be powerful ways of describing religious experience, but are not to be taken literally. However, Word of Life discourse reflects a fundamentalist mistrust of overt verbal artistry, of language as 'playful' representation. Fernandez (1986: 13-17) observes that metaphor bridges otherwise separate domains of classification, so that inchoate experiences can be linked to more concrete, easily observable realms. In the same way, Word of Life language seems to make religious experience easier to comprehend by describing it in material terms—the supposed fixity of religious language is expressed well by stating that the Word can be walked on, eaten, etc.—but it does much more than this, since such language is believed not only to describe experience, but also to constitute it and cause it to occur.

In this ideological context, it is not surprising that adherents stress the need to learn Bible verses off by heart, transferring them from the page to personal memory, or countenance the possibility of healing through linguistic means. A woman witnesses to her being cured from hay fever in the following way:

I went round the room, and... I who've had such difficulties in learning Bible words, I am after all 51, but just think, they came plopping out from my Spirit and I just shot them out. I went around the room and peppered Satan. [Word of Life Newsletter, July, 1984: 4]

She witnesses here a new-found sense of empowerment, a previously inaccessible facility with words. But it seems telling that the words she describes apparently have an autonomous life of their own; they are like objects located within her, to be brought out and used as powerful ammunition in the fight to control the material world. (The act is then itself converted into a dramatic narrative attesting to the power of deploying anointed words.)

Such appropriation of powerful verbal forms is believed by some adherents to have clearly visible effects. Some claim that a diligent reader becomes better looking, while a teacher at the Word of Life Bible school talks of her recovery from a serious car crash, invoking a vernacular...
FIGURE 1 Christ as ‘spiritual bodybuilder’

version of the Pauline body as temple:

I was so conscious of my inner person that I saw the body as a house that needed to be repaired. And . . . I said to one part of the body after the other to begin to function: ‘Leg, in the name of Jesus, walk! . . . Hand, in Jesus’ name, function! You are under God’s blood! You are healed in the name of Jesus. . . .’ We rule from the inside. We are in a position of rule over our body. (Word of Life NewsLetter, April, 1985: 6)

As with the woman who describes her cure from hay fever, collectively sanctioned language, having been internalized by the individual person, is externalized by that person to act back on an undesired aspect of the self. The adherent learns to see her ‘essential’, ruling self as made up of Spirit and personal will, and in the process perceives herself as sufficiently separated from her body to view it as an object to be worked upon. Once healed, the body is no longer regarded as an alienating (in the negative sense) image of failure, but rather can be re-assimilated as a representation of the power of sacred language.

In a context where people provide visual evidence of the effects of divine force, Christ himself can be seen as the supreme example of the Word made flesh (the phrase ‘Word of Life’ is a reference to Jesus, from 1 John 1). Occasionally, Word of Life members talk of receiving visions of the living Christ in their dreams or waking lives. Such immaterial images represent for evangelicals a form of viewing that is inspired and intensely personal. Their immediacy and evanescence illustrate how Christ has chosen to reach into the moment, into the particular situation of the individual person.

Pictures of Christ located on paper or canvas are rare. In the hall where services take place, no such images, and not even a cross, are to be seen. The most significant objects are a transparent lectern and television cameras. Admittedly, children’s literature may illustrate biblical scenes in pictures, and may include Jesus himself (usually depicted as an ordinary man). It seems that such imagery, when used for educational purposes amongst the young, is acceptable. Depictions of sacred forms are also sometimes produced in private. The marginalia inscribed in notebooks
given to me by former Bible school students contains, alongside lecture notes, doodles of Bibles and crosses incorporating stylized depictions of the energy emerging from such objects – an energy also seen in the powerful image of Christ shown in Figure 1. This framing of a sense of movement is even indicated by the photographs contained in Word of Life newsletters and magazines. Many of these are of well-known preachers, frozen in attitudes of motion as they speak and embody the Word of God.

Only on one occasion have I seen a painting of Christ publicly displayed at the Word of Life (Figure 1), and, significantly, this was merely a temporary decoration in an office corridor. Yet the painting is perhaps as close as one can get to an evangelical icon. The picture recalls the youth pastor’s image of the spiritual bodybuilder, as the viewer sees the results of verbal nourishment. Christ both constitutes the Word and indicates the physical effects of its internalization, with a body as firm and unambiguous in its boundaries as the apparently objective and objectified language of sacred speech and text.

Like much conservative Protestant ideology, the picture is constructed out of opposition. The artist explained in an accompanying note that he was tired of seeing depictions of a crucified Jesus embodying an attitude of defeat. A crucifixion represents a literal if temporary fixing of divinity, but here we see instead a triumphalist Christ whose posture appears to embody movement and who looks directly at the viewer in evangelical exhortation. The arms are held aloft, and the whole body seems to be emerging, perhaps into the light from darkness, or at least exalting in physical and spiritual power.

Despite the above, I do not wish to suggest that Word of Life members are turning into a congregation of evangelical bodybuilders – even if a leading Faith preacher, Ray McCauley, is indeed a former bodybuilder and Mr South Africa. However, if, as Harré (1989) notes, in bodybuilding one’s physical form becomes a psychologically detached art object whose individual parts can be isolated and worked on according to rational principles, Word of Life believers display the same kind of attempt to subordinate nature, conceptualized as the flesh and the mind, to a calculating, quantifying faith.

Underlying these attitudes is a kind of Foucauldian technology of the self (see Mansfield and McGinn, 1993: 52) whereby inner and outer states are objectified and monitored in order to maintain a socially derived ideal. The result is the creation of a view whereby the Spirit and sacred language represent principles of collective faith and truth whose function is to colonize the rest of the person: it is as though the idea is to turn oneself into a living icon. This process of decentring but also apparently empowering one’s person is echoed in the way ordinary adherents sometimes choose to model themselves not only on Christ but also on a preacher they particularly admire.
The emphasis on constructing a powerful and positive image is evident further in believers' body language. It is considered important to present a successful face to others through smart clothes and a positive demeanour. Such forms of representation have a similar ideological foundation as the use of words: by evoking the signs of a given state, that state may itself be made to occur. A claim on the world is being established through a form of visible, rather than verbal, 'positive confession'.

It might seem that some of these ideas are likely to have particular resonances in Sweden, given that ethnologists have traced the processes whereby powerful notions of disciplining the body and the will have emerged in the country since the late 19th century. Frykman (1987) summarizes the conclusions of much of this work in arguing that Oscarian bourgeois culture marked itself off from the peasantry and working classes through the extensive control of body functions. As corporeal rituals symbolizing a new, progressive life-style were diffused nationally, 'domesticating' the lower orders, so ideas of order, hygiene and efficiency became generalized. While these developments probably reinforce Faith tendencies to see the body as a mechanical system, their significance should not be exaggerated. Equally or more important are North American influences – those which assert the virtues of youth and the power of personal will over physical matter through positive thinking. In addition, the ritual evocation of spontaneity during services seems precisely to evoke a lack of decorum that would have been anathema to Oscarian ideals, and which indeed are characterized in media coverage of the group as indicating a loss of self-control. As I have argued elsewhere (e.g. Coleman, 1993, 1995), Word of Life beliefs and practices form a powerful package that presents charismatic Christianity as a paradigm for anti-institutionalization on personal, religious and political levels in contemporary Sweden. The notions of empowering the self, as well as exercising personal responsibility for one's physical and financial state, can easily be read as criticisms of paternalist forms of social democracy that have been dominant in the country over the past 60 years. The radicalism of the group's message, on personal and political levels, appeals particularly to the young and those in early middle age, although older people may also see the Faith Movement as taking up the mantle of revival seemingly abandoned by the previously vigorous but increasingly compromised Free Churches.

For some, however, the rigidity of the group's insistence on a Goffmanesque presentation of an omnicompetent evangelical persona becomes a source of considerable inner conflict – one might say negative alienation from the iconic self-image produced for one's own and others' consumption. An ex-Bible school pupil I interviewed abandoned her course, feeling unable to cope with the disjunction between her worsening physical condition and the ideology of the group. Other former pupils
I spoke to had left, describing themselves as 'split', unable to reconcile a private inner life of failure and self-reproach with the manufacture of an exterior image of happiness and success. In these cases, the division of the self between a Spirit (colonized by sacred language) and a partially alienated body or mental state proves unsatisfactory, not least as the body and the mind prove able to resist the rule and will of the divinity within the person.

FROM BODY TO SPACE

Ideas about the relationship between the body and language illustrate connections between two core themes in Word of Life discourse: internalization of language as involving the unproblematic reception of the Word, and growth or healing as the automatic response to such ingestion (often after words are deployed and reconsumed by the same individual). Word of Life adherents seek to materialize the sacred not only within themselves, however, but also in their immediate environments. While bodies can be treated as objects, inanimate objects can possess the same relationship to supernatural principles as living humans. After the collapse of the communist bloc, the group placed 100 video players in the larger towns of the former Soviet Union. These machines were 'blessed' at the group's 1989 conference by the laying on of hands, much as one would bless a person. At an early stage in the construction of the group's new building, adherents walked around its base, speaking tongues into the ground. They thus appropriated the space for evangelical purposes, and the subsequent rise of the building (Figure 2) could then be regarded as a literally concrete and collectively produced manifestation of the power of sacred language.

Above all, the size of the building was presented by pastors as an indication of evangelical ambition. Besides containing numerous offices,
classrooms and a television studio, it incorporates a hall with space for some 4000 people. An American preacher invited to speak at the opening ceremony in the summer of 1987 stated: 'The Holy Spirit has already come into this building. Our God is a big God!', indicating in effect that the construction could be seen as the architectural equivalent of a spiritual body-builder, striving for a perfectionist aim of maximum exaggeration.

Most significantly, however, the ambitions the Word of Life building represented were not perceived as being satisfied by its completion. Such a view would have indicated the acceptance of a fixed state rather than a striving for continued development. Soon after moving into the new building, Ekman pointed to the empty seats in a hall that was now too large for its normal congregation, claiming that they represented future converts.

The construction is not only very large, it is also unlike the architectural styles of conventional churches. Nevertheless, it blends easily into its immediate environment, that of an industrial zone on the periphery of the city, and evokes the classic modernist style of sustaining a limited number of ideas throughout a massive space. It also corresponds in visual terms with some of the assumptions of Faith ideology. The 'beauty' of the building lies for evangelicals both in its size and in the way it expresses ideals of maximum efficiency in the spreading of the group's message. It is a fitting container of state-of-the-art communications technology, a technology whose presence not only indicates material success but also allows the Word to be broadcast to unprecedentedly large numbers of people.

TECHNOLOGIES OF REPRESENTATION

The Word of Life parallels many North American evangelical groups in its propagation of the view that the eternal truth of the Christian message is indicated by its easy adaptation to modern forms of mass media (evangelicals also extensively exploited radio in the early years of this century). In a *Word of Life Newsletter*, Robert Ekh, the second pastor of the congregation, states:

> Video will be something big! … What is today’s market square? The television! … God … will come to people where they are. He will save them, heal and set them free in their living rooms! We’ve already received many reports about what those videos already produced have meant. Groups of up to 40 people have gathered in front of the television and had a meeting! [Word of Life Newsletter, May–June, 1987: 5]

In practice such novel means of spiritual communication are valued because they materialize words and experience in a very particular way. Central to such use of the media is the view that sacred words, as performative utterances capable of objective meaning, take on a semi-autonomous existence. Once recorded on tape, they retain their power to
affect the material and spiritual world. The notion is commonly invoked that 'sowing out' the Word by whatever means is guaranteed a rich harvest, even if the size of such a harvest is usually left to the imagination, given the one-way direction of media communication.

Such media also provide a powerful means of resolving the tension between states of being and processes of becoming as mutually contradictory embodiments of the divine. Videos fix the Word in physical, predictable, repeatable form yet also reproduce the appearance of inspired spontaneity. They provide a new way, complementary to that of sacred texts, of storing, transporting and scrutinizing language (see Goody, 1977), but unlike writing retain a record of the original 'event' of verbal creation in time and space (see Ong, 1991: 75). The sacred words of the sermon and the service keep their place within the flux of evangelical experience while also offering the distant viewer or listener the opportunity vicariously to sample such experience. The excitement and sensuous quality of the oral and the visual are retained yet also objectified, made portable and removed from their original context of production but still regarded as capable of producing powerful responses in their consumers. The workings of such media have affinities with a religion whose roots, despite its stress on the centrality of the biblical text, lie in an oral, participatory culture. In adapting to the cassette and the video, evangelicals provide a potent combination of the pre- and the post-literate; a sort of mixture, as David Martin (1990: 165) puts it, of Lévy-Bruhl and Marshall McLuhan.

The use of such media also has the potential radically to transform what it means, spatially and temporally, to participate in worship, since watching a service is not considered to be necessarily inferior to actual participation. Visual media are especially good at creating the illusion of personal contact between preacher and viewer ('parapersonal' contact in Bruce, 1990: 130–3). North American televangelists may, for instance, urge audiences to place their hands on the television screen, as if they could literally touch the preacher whose healing image is projected in front of them. One Word of Life pastor describes an occasion when the main hall was too crowded to accommodate all of the congregation: '... God's Word was powerfully present even in the side-room where over a quarter were forced to watch the service on screen' (Word of Life Newsletter, May–June, 1987: 7). Following Baudrillard (1981), one might perceive this as the substitution of signs of the real for the real itself, as words spoken by a preacher directly to the congregation are transformed into a sermon simultaneously reproduced in a contiguous space. However, the evangelical theory of language claims that the essential power and therefore 'reality' of the Word are retained.

In the process of taping, words and actions are framed by the constraints of the material forms that contain them. If revivalist ritual is
ultimately about the focused dissemination of a message (see Harding, 1987: 169), videos and tapes extract the spiritually significant elements of the original event, editing out unnecessary distractions. Following Sontag (1977: 3), one can remark that such technology renders experience into a mental object to be worked upon. The use of videos even opens up the possibility for ordinary participants to turn themselves into iconic objects of contemplation by being ‘inscribed’ into the official representation of a service. As participation is converted by the camera into the depiction of inspired worship (members of the audience, when filmed, are often speaking in tongues, praying, being healed, etc.), adherents are enabled to see themselves as embodying idealized, generic images of enthusiasm. Personal experience becomes collective representation, and, moreover, one that can be reconsumed by the person as they buy and watch a service in which they have taken part. Furthermore, the taping of services facilitates their rational classification as objects of knowledge (see Chaney, 1993: 99): when they are marketed, different tapes are presented as being particularly efficacious for different social, spiritual or physical problems, depending on the contents of the sermon.

Such technology, then, has a kind of democratizing effect in the sense that experiences are made widely if vicariously available (see Sontag, 1977: 7). The easy diffusion of divinely inspired messages in a video becomes a televisional counterpart to the original Protestant reformers’ concern to bring together a vernacular Bible and widespread literacy. At the beginning of many video tapes sold at the Word of Life, Ekman attempts to create the context of viewing with the following words:

Before you go on I suggest you switch off the tape and take a moment, whether you’re on your own, with your family, in a prayer-group or with your congregation, and pray that the Holy Spirit will lead you to the truth. It’s important for you to expect that God will speak to you personally through His Word, that His Spirit will reveal itself to you.

So the viewing of a video can become a consecrated act. The service can be relocated within individualized space and time, sanctifying the domestic context of the viewer or listener.

The use of such videos of course varies, and some consumers treat them as casually as one would a Hollywood film. Yet they are also integrated for instance into ‘cell-group’ meetings – weekly gatherings of perhaps 10–15 believers. Among the testimonies I have seen or heard, one adherent compares their home-viewing with the experience of participating at the Bible school itself. To another person, a film involving intercession and healing has proved useful in promoting healing in their own living room, so that the timing of the domestic attempt to apply spiritual power coincides not with the real event but its image reproduced on the screen. More broadly, the watching of videos has become the
subject of miracle discourse, ranging from personal self-realization, 'The video led [me] from defeat to victory', to an appreciation of the transformation of language into images, 'Fine to see God's word in pictures'.

Benjamin (1970) famously claimed that the mass reproduction and democratization of a work of art removed its sacred aura, an aura derived from being firmly located in time, space and tradition. More recently, Gell (1992: 49–51) has argued that the photographer is typically less valued than the artist in the West, not least because processes of artistic production are so much more mysterious for the viewer to imagine. (To honour a retiring director of the London School of Economics, a portraitist rather than a photographer is hired to capture the director's powerful essence, or mana.) In this evangelical culture, however, the photo has more power than the portrait precisely because of the nature of photographic representation. Tapes can provide apparently direct replicas of reality to a potentially unlimited audience.

Videos of services tend not to draw attention to their authorship or social relations of production. No list of credits appears on screen, and techniques of representation are unobtrusive. The camera focuses mainly on the stage, although reaction shots of the audience are included. These observations are reinforced by the comments of employees of Kenneth Copeland, a leading North American Faith preacher. A member of his stage crew argues that distortion in the sound equipment used on preaching crusades is to be avoided at all costs; indeed it is a moral issue:

> Our objective is to provide the [right] kind of atmosphere ... so that the Word can flow unhindered. ... All it takes is just a small thing to disrupt the flow ... a buzz or a hiss, a little feedback - that's all the devil is looking for. (Copeland Ministries Newsletter, 1986, 14(6): 5)

A producer of cassette tapes, meanwhile, thinks of his work as a calling:

> '... when we have anything to do with a cassette tape – from duplicating it to putting it in the binder – in God's eyes, it's just as if we taught that message ourselves' (Copeland Ministries Newsletter, 1986, 14(4): 7). The worker will not glean the celebrity of a preacher, but he expresses here the evangelical idea of being able to appropriate or 'receive' fully the message of another person so that it can then be reproduced without error.

Something similar can occur in translations of sermons. At a 'Youth' conference in 1986, an American pastor swayed around, describing in words and embodying the notion of being 'drunk' in the Spirit. In repeating the words and actions of his American counterpart, the Swedish translator made himself a vehicle for both the inspired language of the sermon and its performative effects. Like a video, he 'faithfully' attempted to absorb and replicate the sounds and movements of another person.

These techniques of publicly objectifying, disseminating and consuming images and words are repeated in minor ways by ordinary
adherents. Participants commonly photograph services, for instance, while a former student at the Bible school explained to me how, as she fell asleep in bed, she would play tapes of her own prayers and readings back to herself. She thus indicated the ability both to exteriorize her own inspired words on tape and to reconsume these words - 'living' yet also objectified - as she listened to them again and again.

Writing in the conclusions to a paper describing seances among the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea, Schieffelin (1994: 38) (responding in part to Bloch's (1974) discussion of formalization in ritual) notes how ritual participants work creatively to adapt ritual performances to the contingencies of the present: '... texts and genres must be accommodated to historical situations ... they are submitted to some determination by history. Otherwise rituals could be effectively enacted simply by playing recordings of them on video-tape'. We see above how the taping of a 'ritual' was carried out by the former student because she valued the possibility of replicating sacred experience and rendering it into easily accessible form. The technique worked for her because each replaying of the tape recontextualized a fixed passage of powerfully charged speech or action within her own experience of the moment, giving it new significance. The creativity mentioned by Schieffelin emerged not through novel ritual performance but rather in the way the fixed words on the tape could be shown to 'speak' to all situations.

In contrast a former follower, writing negatively of his experience of Faith practices, described how, whenever he attempted to pray, set phrases would appear in his mind like a motor set in motion (Swartling, 1988: 33-9). Here, the image of the machine seemed to have invaded his internal consciousness and, instead of providing access to a predictable source of inspiration, was perceived as a form of disturbing self-alienation. Instead of being able to re-appropriate and de-commodify the phrases by applying them to his present circumstances, he felt that they were appropriating him instead. To the woman described previously, the use of tapes evoked a state of dynamic development or 'becoming', despite their fixed form, because their use could constantly be adapted to changing circumstances. However, to the disillusioned former adherent described here, tapes had ceased to provide any sense of tapping into a dynamic source of power. His sentiments seem similar to those of adherents, mentioned earlier, who described themselves as 'split': the iconic, object-like nature of sacred language is perceived in such cases as a threat to the self, rather than helping to constitute it in a new way.

These contrasting approaches to the objectification of sacred language express in microcosm positive and negative forms of alienation offered by group practices. Adherents may come to view their lives as positively transformed by the externalization and reabsorption of the performative effects of sacred language, not least as such language is brought
to bear upon a range of different circumstances, taking on fresh resonances (therefore both constituting and being constituted by such circumstances). On the other hand, adherents may be unable to see how circumstances are transformed in this way. Instead, the words and iconic images produced cannot be reabsorbed into a unified sense of self, and remain external to the desires and consciousness of the person.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: CENTRES AND PERIPHERIES

Contemporary evangelical practice not only involves a search for visible embodiments of the sacred, but also extends and transforms ritual practice through its use of the material culture of communication. Horsfield (1984) comes close to accusing such Christians of producing a form of fetishized Protestant sacramentality [cf. Goethals, 1985: 149–53] in which idolatry is transformed into ‘technolatry’. Horsfield’s judgement is a product of his own denominational preferences but the point is still valid that videos and cassettes act like relics from other, older traditions, transcending spatial divisions by diffusing the sacred from centre to periphery. Relics – themselves constituting both persons and objects – were often divided and parcelled off in the Middle Ages, helping to create ramifying relationships between donors and receivers [Geary, 1986: 183]. Even when bought and sold as commodities, such objects might well have gone through processes of local appropriation and contextualization. Contemporary media, meanwhile, democratize the process of diffusing divine power, creating as many sacred centres as there are video or cassette players. Like relics, they are sold and subjected to the vagaries of local interpretation and use, but in addition they funnel money towards a single central organization to which the purchaser may feel a particular attachment – in this case, the Word of Life.

As with many relics, tapes are sanctified through their contact with a charismatic personality, retaining a kind of social substance in the form of their inspired words. In both, the authority of the personalities involved is enhanced through the apparent production of signs of divine approval. Just as a medieval pilgrim who reports a cure becomes a walking advertisement for the saint and the site in possession of their bones, so a modern viewer or listener who receives similar benefits will enhance the reputation of the preacher whose sermon is being replayed. However, with videos the connection established between object and believer is not merely the metonymic one of the relic but also a broader form of aural and visual reproduction. We have seen how the accuracy of such reproduction is a key factor in denying the fixed, ‘object-like’ characteristics of taped media and implying instead a real, living presence to which the believer can respond.

In their production and use, evangelical vehicles for the sacred can
be compared with objects drawn from very different ethnographic contexts. Tambiah (1984), for instance, describes how Thai amulets are seen as containing the sedimented presence and power of Buddhist saints. The process of sanctifying such objects involves them being impregnated with the sacred words of a holy figure. By circulating around the country, spreading the efficacious and protective energy of saints, amulets also help to bridge the gap between parochial and national traditions, thus reducing differences between religious centres and peripheries. Such objectification of sacred power echoes evangelical practices, not least in the way the charisma of individuals becomes converted into a more generic public good available for purchase, but important differences between the two traditions also exist. The look and form of amulets are important in their own right, not only because they depict holy figures but also because they can become precious items to be stored in a museum or private collection. Videos and cassettes, however, are hardly aesthetically pleasing as objects, and derive their value merely from their function as the means to an end: the replaying of a sacred event. Thus, over the years, items of electronic media are unlikely to gain their own histories as treasured objects of exchange and display.

Parallels can also be drawn with the transformation through media technology of other contemporary rituals. Crain (1992) discusses how pilgrimage in Andalusia becomes not an occasion for participation but an object of consumption through the purchase of a video. Driessen (1992), discussing celebrations in the same region, argues that the selling of such rituals on tape desacralizes them by removing them from their weekly and daily cycles. Unlike these two cases, however, at the Word of Life the use of videos and cassettes is explicitly incorporated into an ideology that sanctions and welcomes their use. The revivalist form of Word of Life services is not linked to the changing rhythms of the ecclesiastical year or the passing seasons, but acknowledges rather the importance of present enthusiasm. Community or even communion through communication is not seen as necessarily linked to spatial contiguity, given the supposedly performative power of words to reach a person's Spirit. Believing does not appear to depend on belonging (see Davie, 1990), and much contemporary conservative Protestantism encourages the attempt to create a translocal religious consciousness not tied to any particular institution or national culture (see Hoover, 1988: 150, 214). Both the participants at and the locations of services are rendered generic and usually easily able to be accommodated within the assumptions of the evangelical consumer, since watching a service on tape frames and focuses attention on the stage and stereotyped responses from the congregation. Even if one were not to understand the language being spoken, the images could possibly speak for themselves.

Such use of the media corresponds well with a form of space–time
distanciation associated with modernity, whereby social interactions between people separated in time and space appear to be on the increase (see Giddens, 1990). The process is further enabled by 'disembedding mechanisms . . . symbolic tokens and expert systems which lift social relations out of local involvements' (Urry, 1995: 16). An earlier work on aesthetics and modernization (Peacock, 1968) also refers to the issue of disembedding consciousness: *ludruk* (Indonesian, proletarian drama) 'seduces' kampung dwellers into concerns beyond local society, emphasizing such principles as universalization and rationalization on a national level. Faith principles take such mechanisms a step further by stressing the notion that the cultural expressions of evangelicalism can be appropriated on a global scale. The main requirement for obtaining a book, cassette or video produced by the movement involves the possession of a universal medium of exchange: money.

Electronic media can therefore help adherents to articulate a sense of place or belonging within a potentially infinite community of believers. Not only can they regard the whole world as a potential market for their products, but can also come to regard their own actions as having far more than parochial significance. An essential part of Faith ideology is that each nation has a 'calling' both to convert its own citizens to the faith and to missionize on a global scale (see Coleman, 1993). Every 'sender' of the evangelical message is therefore also a potential 'receiver' of it from elsewhere; the Word of Life regularly entertains North American preachers at its conferences, but Ekman as a 'worldwide man of God' also has a role to play in the USA, and so on.

Thus the boundaries between spiritual centres and peripheries appear to be dissolved, just as even the most outwardly mundane contexts can be sanctified by the material culture of evangelicalism. Such apparent democratization of the divine also carries with it the potential to extend the influence of a Bible centre such as the Word of Life. The influence of Faith ideology is felt by many adherents in Sweden to be a virtually omnipresent force. Since the body and Spirit of the person act as indices of one's spiritual state, a sense that all is not well in these areas of life might lead to a decision to leave the group. It might equally well encourage the believer to assume that he or she is being attacked by demonic forces - personalized as 'spirits' of criticism or doubt - and therefore should redouble his or her efforts at collective worship and self-monitoring. Even when adherents regard themselves as empowered by their faith and manipulation of sacred language, they are likely to think of such empowerment as a decentring of the idiosyncratic self in favour of an externally derived spiritual language that is part of them yet also has an autonomous existence. As Butler (1993: 13) (influenced by Derrida) points out, speech act theory might assume that a subject can produce a phenomenon through the act of naming, but performative utterances...
often rely for their apparent power on the fact that they are citations – formulae invoking an authority beyond the individual speaker. In speaking in tongues yet echoing phrases drawn from the glossolalia produced by Ekman, in ‘demanding’ worldly success in phrases derived from Word of Life preachers, and in surrounding themselves with sacred words contained in signs on the wall, books on the shelf or videos on the television, believers gain spiritual sustenance but also reminders of the ubiquity of God and the authority of those who appear to embody his spiritual principles. In broadly similar fashion, Starrett (1995) notes how the streets of Cairo are permeated by reminders of the name of Allah, while Geary (1986:183) argues that one by-product of the diffusion of relics was the placing of reminders of papal authority in every Christian region.

Most importantly, the Faith notion that sacred words are signifiers whose meanings are fixed is served well by objectifying practices through which the possibility is removed of challenging ‘official’, collectively articulated depictions of sacred experience by means of idiosyncratic responses. I am not arguing that the ideal of creating a translocal communion of Christians through the unproblematic, hypodermic-like broadcasting and reception of images and words is anything other than an ideal. However, evangelical beliefs and social arrangements undoubtedly lessen the possibility of mounting challenges to such an ideal from within the system. The Faith ideology of perfect consensus is reinforced by the perceived need to present an external, iconic image of the self, which supposedly mirrors an equally controlled inner state. To participate in a service at the group itself is an experience not dissimilar to viewing it as a spectacle on the television screen in the sense that the responses of the congregation-cum-audience are mostly limited to conventional words of assent. Beyond the group, in the living rooms of far-flung individual consumers, varieties of response are uncontrolled, but are given no voice, no representation in collective contexts unless they witness to the power of the mediated word and image. The creation of a distanced congregation, vicariously sampling its services, allows the Word of Life to maintain its reflexive presentation of a unified body of believers, whose sense of affiliation is extended to a community of the imagination located far beyond the borders of Uppsala.

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