If images are life-forms, and objects are the body they animate, then media are the habitats or ecosystems in which pictures become alive. (Mitchell 2005: 198)

Situated in an approach of religion in Africa that stresses the need to move beyond essentializing oppositions of Africa and the West, this article focuses on the Christian popular culture that has emerged in Ghana in the aftermath of democratization, enabling the unprecedented public presence of Christianity, in particular Pentecostal–Charismatic Churches, in the public sphere. Analysis of this Christian popular culture compels us to acknowledge the relevance of the
material dimension of the Christian imagination, and, in so doing, to address the genesis of a Christian environment with powerful pictures that involve people into a particular religious aesthetics. My key concern is to show how Christian pictures, though thriving through modern possibilities of reproduction, ultimately refuse to appear as “mere” representations and tend to retain the somewhat excessive potential to partially merge with the divine—and above all satanic—power which they depict, calling for adequate action.

OVER THE COURSE of the last two decades, the anthropology of religion in Africa has shifted from a focus on distinctly African cultural symbolic repertoires that were conceptualized as “authentically” African, toward a keen interest in the place and role of religion in the context of modernity and globalization. The study of Christianity in Africa was thoroughly reconfigured in the process (Meyer 2004a). In its wake, anthropologists are struggling to grasp the appeal of Christianity, especially in its Pentecostal guise, throughout the African continent. Having moved beyond an essentializing opposition of Africa and the West, the study of Christianity in Africa has become a thriving field of research that can yield insights in the dynamics of Africans’ incorporation and agency in global economic, social, political, and religious structures. Countering the still widespread idea of Africa as an isolated continent marked by essential cultural alterity, current anthropological work on Christianity in Africa explores the genesis and dynamics of religious encounters that involved Africans and Westerners in a long, albeit unequal, conversation (e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; see also Chidester 1996).

In my own research in Ghana, I have moved from studying historical encounters between western Protestant missionaries and Africans, to the rise of African Independent Churches and the more recent popularity of Pentecostal–Charismatic Churches (PCCs), to the emergence of a deliberately Christian, popular culture in the aftermath of the country’s turn to a democratic constitution in 1992 (Meyer 1998a, 1999, 2004b). As in many other places in the world, this entailed the rise of a mass mediated audiovisual culture and an enhanced presence of Christian pictures (and sounds) in the public sphere (De Witte 2003, 2005;

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1 It should be noted that this shifts the conceptualization of conversion processes beyond a focus on Africanization or inculturalization (which emphasizes continuity). Instead, the solicited, though never entirely successful, and thus partly imaginary “break with the past” and the adoption of a new mobile identity now receive far more attention (Meyer 1998a; Van Dijk 1998; Martin 2001; Engelke 2004).
Asamoah-Gyadu 2004, 2005). PCCs in particular have seized on these new opportunities to publicize their views, especially as Ghana’s turn to democracy entailed the commercialization of hitherto state-controlled mass media. Compared with the historical Protestant and Catholic Churches, PCCs stand out by their closeness to popular views about the reality of local gods and spirits that are recast as Christian demons, as well as their embracement of new media, especially radio and television. Surfing along with the popularity of these churches, individual cultural entrepreneurs in the sphere of popular painting, print, music and video-film have contributed to the rise of a popular Christian culture, in which the boundaries between religion and entertainment have become increasingly blurred. This Christian popular culture has quite successfully colonized public space, most certainly in the South of Ghana where Christianity reigns supreme, and where Christian signs—spread via posters, songs, and radio, TV and film programs, and victorious mottos on shops (“Pray without ceasing. Don’t give the devil a chance.” Shito and Yam, Image 1), cars (“God never fails”), and stickers (“Your miracle is one the way!”)—create an all pervasive Christian environment (Meyer 2004b).
Two salient issues stand out in this popular Christian culture. One concerns the obsessive, highly repetitive emphasis on the “spiritual war” between God and Satan that allegedly goes on in the realm of the invisible, and that is visualized repeatedly in pictures, posters, and films. Echoing longstanding oral narratives that are rooted in traditional understandings of the world of spirits, these cultural products attribute people’s troubles in the world to “the powers of darkness,” and in particular the devil. The second feature concerns the quite unstable relation between pictures as representations, on the one hand, and embodiments of a spiritual presence, on the other. Although the new possibilities of mass media allow for an excessive reproduction and circulation of pictures that visualize the popular Christian imagination, this does not necessarily imply that pictures are on the safe side of “mere” representation. In particular, pictures of evil forces may easily slip into evil pictures, objects that merge the representation with its referent and become an unsettling presence.

This Christian popular culture offers a fascinating field of research, and calls for an investigation of this ongoing concern with occult forces. Imaginations of evil such as demons, the devil, witchcraft, and other occult forces have received quite a lot of attention in recent scholarly work (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, 1999; Geschiere 1997; Meyer 1999; Moore and Sanders 2001; Frankfurter 2006). Far from anchoring such forces in “traditional,” “typically African” modes of thought, and seeking to avoid exoticization, scholars have approached images of evil as embodying “all the contradictions of the experience of modernity itself” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993: xxix). It follows from this understanding that exactly those occult forces that western media often take as evidence for Africa’s Otherness are found to evolve from or speak to situations of contact between Africa and the West.

Although I am sympathetic to this understanding, I find that the notion of imaginaries and the imagination on which it thrives remains too abstract. Despite the emphasis placed on the importance of imaginaries and the imagination, so far actual practices of depicting and looking, and the implications of the material presence of pictures, have largely been neglected by Africanist scholars (including myself, e.g., Meyer 1999)—as if imaginaries would be confined to the province of

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2 This interest in the imagination and imaginaries has been much inspired by Anderson’s path-breaking work on the nation as imagined community (1991), Appadurai’s claim that globalization entails an unprecedented potential for the democratization of the imagination (1996), and Charles Taylor’s work on modern social imaginaries as a way in which people imagine their collective social life (2004).
the invisible, involving a dream-like inner state. Importantly, recent research in the aftermath of the “pictorial turn” (Mitchell 1994, 2005; Pinney 2006) yields a more material attitude toward pictures, which are understood as materializations of more abstract images. Grappling with the power that pictures appear to wield over people, scholars in this field emphasize that pictures embody ideas and materialize in a particular kind of tangible environment that addresses and involves us in compelling and puzzling ways.

In this article, I propose to approach religious imaginations from such a material angle.

Certainly in our era of technological reproducibility, in the course of which diverse religious groups increasingly draw upon and use modern audiovisual media to articulate their public presence (Meyer and Moors 2006), it is fruitful to cross-fertilize the study of visual culture and the study of religious images (as suggested by Morgan 1998, 2005; Plate 2003; Pinney 2004; Probst forthcoming). Bridging the distance between the human world and the invisible world of spirits via particular material forms (including pictures), religion is one of the fields in which relations between pictures and their beholders are being organized. Indeed, it is one of the key characteristics of religions that they generate and affirm particular dispositions in religious practitioners that shape their attitudes toward pictures. This entails specific views about the limits and potential of representations of the sacred (as that which is set apart at the center of social life) and induces particular moods and (ritual) practices vis-à-vis these representations. In my understanding, such dispositions and practices related to material forms are rooted in and affirmed by a particular religious aesthetics. Aesthetics here is not understood in the narrow Kantian sense of the beautiful, but in the more encompassing sense of aethesis, i.e., “our total sensory experience of the world and our sensitive knowledge of it” (Verrips 2006: 27; see also Pinney 2004; Meyer 2006a). Religious aesthetics govern believers’ engagement with, and imagination of, invisible forces, and each other, via concrete forms. The point, then, is to discern how the popular Christian aesthetics of Southern Ghana materialize in a concrete, Christian environment and invest pictures with the potential

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3 Mitchell understands pictures as material concretizations of images. Images are more abstract—“that what can be lifted off the picture”. To Mitchell, “the picture is the image plus the support; it is the appearance of the immaterial image in a material medium” (2005: 85). In this article, I follow his distinction. In German, my mother tongue, the same word Bild refers to both dimensions.

4 When Morgan and other talk about religious images, they refer not so much to the abstract but rather to the concrete, material dimension, which Mitchell calls “picture.”
to become real, mystifying their constructedness, and inducing in spectators experiences between pleasure and fear, and a sense of the sublime.

Exploring Ghana’s current popular Christian culture, my key concern is to show how Christian pictures, while thriving through modern possibilities of reproduction, ultimately refuse to appear as “mere” representations and tend to retain the somewhat excessive potential to partially merge with the divine—and above all satanic—power which they depict, calling for adequate action. It will be shown that this excessive power emerges through a paradox: while depicting such a power entails a process of delineation or framing, it is at the same time asserted that this power by its very nature eschews human representation. This paradox is at the core of the production of the sublime as an ultimately ungraspable and incomprehensible, yet all the more exciting, representation that occurs in the context of a popular Christian aesthetics affirming distinct—though endlessly repeated—pictures, practices of depiction, and modes of looking.

Stressing the importance of reflecting upon the material dimension of religious imaginaries, I seek to contribute not only to current debates in the study of Christianity in Africa, but also to speak to more general issues concerning the power of religious pictures that have emerged in the interface of religious studies, anthropology, and visual culture. While these more general issues are certainly relevant to Africanist scholarship, I also hope to make clear (especially to scholars of religion) that religion in Africa today is not an isolated phenomenon, but reflects as well as organizes Africans’ position in the world.

SURO NNIPA (WIASE YE SUM): FEAR HUMAN BEINGS (THE WORLD IS DARK)

Public space in Southern Ghana brims with the tremendous popularity of Christianity, especially the Pentecostal–Charismatic brand. Pentecostalism is characterized by a remarkable capacity to tie into, absorb, and imprint itself on popular views and narratives (especially with regard to the devil and all kinds of evil spirits, see Meyer 1999). Not only have PCCs become the largest variant of Christianity but contemporary popular culture also purports a Pentecostal mood and adopts a Pentecostal style of representation (Meyer 2004b). This style of representation powerfully shapes everyday life, materializing in a host of similar pictures which refer to each other and assure the rightfulness and truth of Christianity (as opposed to traditional religion and, to some extent, Islam). As in many other African countries, the newly
available possibilities of mass production allow for an overwhelming public presence of Christian pictures and other material forms that far exceed the numeric strength of this type of church.

As an entry point into this particular popular culture, I would like to introduce a poster. One side, with a calendar for 2004, is titled “Jesus’ agonizing prayer” and depicts a side view of Jesus and a biblical text in the upper half, and a reprint of a version of Leonardo Da Vinci’s Last Supper (painted in Milano in the last decade of the fifteenth century)—one of the key images of Christian popular culture all over the globe (Image 2). The back side features the 2005 calendar at the bottom, and is titled Suro Nnipa (Wiase ye Sum), a text in Twi which means “Fear Human Beings (The world is dark)” (Image 3). This side presents, not unlike a comic strip, a sequence of images and brief texts telling the story of the exchange of a beloved wife for money. Each image is a reproduction of an originally hand-painted picture, resembling popular posters advertising “concert parties” (e.g., popular theatre, Gilbert 1998), video-films (Woolfe 2000; Wendl 2004), and other popular art works. Many offices and homes in Ghana display this kind of posters which are produced and marketed by popular painters, capitalizing on the attraction of Christian imagery.

The narrative, which is reprinted in the center of the poster under the heading “True Life Story” runs as follows:

The family was highly indebted and poor.
The father decides to look for spiritual assistance for the family.
The Spiritualist, Said it will cost him a very dear one, whose image will appear in the calabash or he risks going mad!
The wife’s image appeared and the man had no choice but to kill her for the ritual. (Image 4)

The man returns home with a huge snake which vomits millions of cedis [the Ghanaian currency, BM] every hour.
With the million, he builds a mansion for himself and purchases a Mercedes and begins to live a luxurious life, but without wife.
…But the man offended the spirits, and was killed in an accident.

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5 Presumably the painter who, as the signature in the last image states, runs (or works for) a workshop called Master J.M.Art at Ashaiman (Accra) has experience with these related genres.
6 In a very interesting photo essay, Doran Ross showcases popular art studies in Ghana. He notes that “[w]ith the rising popularity of Evangelical/Pentecostal [sic]/Charismatic churches in Ghana, Christian subject matter has become increasingly prominent on studio facades” (2004: 72).
Be Sober, be Vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring Lion, Walketh about, seeking whom he may Devour 
1 Peter 5:8
IMAGE 3. POSTER (BACK): FEAR HUMAN BEINGS.
After death, he was punished severely with over 5000 lashes day and night! (Image 5)

Far from offering something new, this narrative, though appearing incredibly spectacular to outsiders, is well-known in Ghana. It has been circulating, in some variations, throughout the twentieth century. There are good reasons to assume that this narrative comments, in the registers of the fantastic, on the introduction of capitalism’s new possibilities of making quick profits and acquiring sudden wealth (Meyer 1995). Far from being understood as part and parcel of the logic of capitalism, which claims that capital reproduces itself, wealth is represented as the outcome of a secret exchange of money for life (see also Taussig 1980, 1995; Thoden van Velzen and Van Wetering 1988; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993). This reinforces indigenous understandings of the intrinsic power of blood and human parts, the reproductive power of snakes (a notion that has become increasingly entangled with the Christian equation of the snake with the devil) as well as understandings of witchcraft as a spiritual
cannibalistic attack on a person’s life force. In the blood money narrative, indigenous notions of occult powers and the Faustian devil contract merge into a modern “occult economy” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). Variations of this narrative circulate not only as a rumor, whispered into a person’s ear when discussing a rich person’s sudden, accidental death, but they have also made their way into popular theatre (Gilbert 1998), popular literature (e.g., Kwame Osei-Poku’s Blood for Money (1989), cf. Newell 2000: 118ff) and, last but not least, Ghanaian and Nigerian video-films,7 the focus of my research over the last decade.

In this sense, the Blood Money narrative, now pictured as a True Life Story on our poster, is a “remediation” in the true sense of the term (Bolter and Grusin 1999; see also Meyer 2005). The notion of remediation is useful because it refers to processes of continuous repetition and

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7 Such as Diabolo (African Motion Pictures), Time (Djoh Mediacraft/Miracle Films), and Stolen Bible (Idikoko productions) with regard to Ghanaian films (cf. Meyer 1995, 2003), and for instance Living in Bondage, the paradigm for this type of films in the case of Nigerian films (Haynes and Onookome 2000).
rearrangement of already existing pictures and other material forms in new discursive formations and through new media channels. A remediated image of evil is partially new because it is placed in a new discursive context and expressed through a new medium, but also because it retains a connection with its past forms. The intensity and “thickness” of Ghana’s Christian popular culture is due to constant processes of remediation, which entail recycling, repurposing and actualization of existing materials.

In what follows I offer a brief analysis of this calendar poster by, first, discussing the importance of the Christian worldview which it depicts, secondly, tracing the notion of the devil back to earlier and contemporary Christian discourses, and, thirdly, seeking to understand the specificity of such a picture in the context of Christian attitudes toward pictures, practices of depicting, and modes of looking. My concern here is not an analysis of the poster as a unique piece of popular art; I rather use it as a suitable entry-point into contemporary Christian popular culture, in which the possibilities of mass reproduction and different layers of remediations of evil come together in fascinating ways.

THE WORLDVIEW

The Suro Nnipa side of the poster can only be understood if the opposite side, reminiscent of devotional posters circulating in the context of popular Christianity (Morgan 1998), is taken into account. It presents a picture of Jesus who is made to state, in his “agonizing prayer”: “Be Sober, be Vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring Lion, Walketh about, seeking whom he may Devour (1 Pet. 5:8).” This warning echoes popular Christianity’s concern with the devil, the tricky enemy, whose evil machinations can only be eschewed through permanent vigilance and by dismissing money-mindedness. Especially in the PCCs, the urge to be vigilant and the notion of the devil as a roaring lion are recurring templates.

The depiction of Judas with a money bag in his right hand which has just spilled a glass of wine (the blood of Jesus) in the reprint of Da Vinci’s painting of the Last Supper underscores the implications of the devil’s evil plans. Well versed in the Bible, most Ghanaians readily know about Judas’ despair about having sold Jesus for thirty silver coins.

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8 Nevertheless many Pentecostals endorse the so-called Prosperity Gospel, which views wealth as a divine blessing. The devil is supposed to activate the Spirit of Poverty. As wealth may stem from God or the devil, the point is to be careful and make sure that the former is the case. The possibly evil sources of wealth very much speak to the imagination and give rise to numerous rumours about the true reasons behind big people’s riches.
and his subsequent suicide. The Bible quote attributes his evil deal with the Pharisees to the power of the devil who sought to destroy not only Jesus, but ultimately Judas as well. The poster’s back side situates this tragedy in everyday life. The man who sacrifices his wife turns to the Spiritualist out of despair over his poverty.\(^9\) He enjoys his riches—symbolized by two key tropes of wealth: the Mercedes and the white mansion surrounded by a high fence—for a short time only, until he dies in a car accident and is shown to be punished by demons with lashes day and night. The biblical reference to Isaiah 28:18–19 authorizes this punishment, stating that it is impossible to make a contract with death and hell, because they will turn against those aligning themselves with these powers and make them suffer.

The outcry “Fear Human Beings” addresses viewers as potential victims of those to whom they are close or even love. As the world is such that even a husband may give up his wife in exchange for money, one has to be “vigilant” all the time. One not only needs to be wary of actively (if involuntarily) linking up with the devil as was the case with Judas and the untrustworthy husband,\(^{10}\) but also to be suspicious of the intentions of those who are close. This is reminiscent of the understanding of witchcraft as the “dark side of kinship” (Geschiere 1997). In this understanding, witchcraft refers to the potential danger that may emerge in intimate relations, and hence is a source of much personal worry. The fear of witchcraft expresses open or hidden tensions within as well as between persons (Meyer 1995).

Starting and ending with a biblical quote, the narrative of the exchange of the beloved person for money is placed in a Christian worldview which opposes Jesus and the devil. One could also say that the poster entails a particular mode of address and suggests a particular mode of looking: viewers are told to “be vigilant” and to “fear” human beings all the time, yet are at the same time assured that those tormenting their fellow human beings will end up in hell. As one cannot see the devil with one’s naked eyes, there is need for the power of divine vision so as to reveal what happens underneath the surface of life. Being vigilant (an excessively recurrent expression in sermons and

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\(^9\) The assertion that the family was Highly Indebted seems to be a tongue and cheek reference to the fact that Ghana’s President Kuffour placed Ghana on the list of Highly Indebted countries (HIPIC): how poverty can lead people astray.\...

\(^{10}\) All this has a fatalistic undercurrent. In a sense Judas’ deed is unavoidable so as to make possible the salvation brought about by the death of Jesus. See also the newly discovered evangel of Judas (supposedly originating in the second century AD). Likewise the devil, though viewed as God’s counterpart, seems to have been assigned a particular role in God’s master plan (linking up with Old Testament traditions of Satan as tester, as in the book of Job).
everyday life) describes exactly this attitude, which characterizes Pentecostalism’s ideal Christian subject as always being on the alert, seeking to discern the presence of evil and stay protected from it.

Until now, I have used the term worldview rather loosely. It is an apt term also in the literal sense. Ever since Protestant missionaries introduced Christianity to Africa, much emphasis was placed on the ability to look behind the mere appearance of things. For example, the lithograph of *The Broad and the Narrow Path*, that played a key role in the Protestant nineteenth century Awakening and is still popular can certainly be understood as offering a didactic device for a biblical perspective of the world that seeks to assign meaning to appearance by referring to the biblical text (Meyer 1999: chap. 2). The present poster, at least in certain respects, undertakes a similar operation, in that it shows that it is wrong to trust mere surface appearances, stresses the need to look underneath, and assures Christianity’s empowering capacity to achieve a kind of divine super-vision. In this sense, the poster endorses an understanding of Christianity as a *worldview*, i.e., a particular mode of looking at the world that claims to lay bare a hidden, underlying dimension. The world needs to be penetrated through practices of looking that are able to uncover what remains concealed to the innocent, naked eye.

**THE DEVIL**

The image of the devil has been quite appealing to African converts ever since the spread of the Gospel by nineteenth Protestant missionaries. While liberal theologians, following Schleiermacher (1861) and others, struggled to do away with the notion of the devil as a personified reality, this was different in the rural areas, from which many of the German missionaries who were active in (what later became) Ghana originated. There the devil and demons were still experienced as powerful realities who could possess and trouble people (as Blumhardt’s *Krankengeschichte der Gottliebin Dittus* [1978] also illustrates). The missionaries of the Basel and Bremen Mission, who stood at the cradle of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, took the notion of the devil with them to Africa. Positing that “the gods of the heathens are demons,” and that Africans actually worshipped Satan, albeit unknowingly, the missionaries diabolized indigenous religious traditions. This view was communicated via sermons, gospel tracts, church hymns, and the translation of the Bible into the vernacular. By the same token, however, they affirmed the reality and power of local gods and spirits, now recast as Christian demons.
operating under the auspices of Satan. African converts took over this view quite eagerly. Hitherto more ambivalent invisible forces were now reframed as entirely evil and devilish. As I showed in more detail in Translating the Devil (1999), the dualism of God and the devil lay at the basis of a popular grassroots understanding of Christianity that was obsessed with the reality of occult forces.

The strong emphasis on the devil entailed not only the diabolization of pre-Christian religion, but also of new demonic forces, such as Mami Water. This is the spirit of a white Indian woman with a fishtail, who is held to preside over a consumer paradise at the bottom of the ocean, Satan’s most seductive demon who tries to get people under her control via attractive goods (Wendl 1991; see also Meyer 1998b). The understanding of new and old demons as really existing and powerful, and only to be overcome by the Christian God, is a characteristic and enduring feature of Christianity in Ghana, and for that matter in Africa (Meyer 2004a: 454–458). While the theologically trained leadership in the mainstream churches sought to dismiss the devil as an outdated superstition and to develop a theology that was more positive toward indigenous religion and culture, the link between Satan, local gods, and witchcraft remained strong at the grassroots. African Independent Churches and PCCs owe their popularity at least in part to the fact that they easily link up with such popular understandings, and allow for an understanding of traditional gods and witchcraft as powerful, though worrisome realities from which people seek to be delivered, yet which continuously threaten to repossess their bodies and minds. The notion of the devil allows one to access those gods and spirits from which good Christians are supposed to “break away,” yet who are still perceived to interfere in their lives in unexpected ways—hence, the need to be vigilant and assure that one is filled with the Holy Spirit.

The necessity to fight evil forces because of their ongoing presence—it is said that in the period prior to the Second Coming of Christ the devil will do his best to convince as many people as possible to follow him, preferably through seduction and temptation—is a key topos not only in Pentecostal–Charismatic sermons and prayer sessions, but also in popular culture. In this respect, the poster discussed here is just one among many crystallizations of people’s longstanding obsession with the power of demonic forces. As the poster also shows, the notion of Satan, once having been introduced by nineteenth century missionaries, proved to be sufficiently elastic to encompass a host of demons, from local gods and witchcraft to new types of spirits associated with money and success in capitalism, just as has been reported with regard to
other parts of the world, including the West (e.g., Clough and Mitchell 2001).

**PICTURING EVIL**

Protestant Christianity did not only introduce a dualism of God and Devil as a conceptual structure but also a particular iconography of the main protagonists. The Second Commandment notwithstanding, the mission’s biblical story books contained illustrations of Jesus, God, and the devil. In contemporary Ghana, pictures of Jesus, the devil, and, above all, witchcraft are on display in public and private spaces. How can such pictures be approached conceptually and against the background of Protestantism’s alleged suspicion *vis-à-vis* images?11

In his seminal book *Visual Piety*, which offers a history and theory of mass reproduced popular religious images (again: he uses “image” in the sense of “picture”, see note 4) in American Protestantism, David Morgan challenges facile (self)understandings of Protestantism as iconoclastic and textual (1998, see also 2005). Arguing that visual religious images are central to practices of visual piety, Morgan understands religious images as seeking to make present the sacred. The sacred is the elusive realm of the divine that resists being revealed in an image (as the Second Commandment states), yet depends on mediation so as to appear in the world (De Vries 2001; Plate 2003; Stolow 2005). Religious images thus play a key role in attributing reality to divine representations, making it seem as if the picture possesses “its referent within itself” (Morgan 1998: 9). Yet, images are not convincing by themselves, but work in the context of particular grammars and traditions of usage which induce particular dispositions and practices toward them. Far from resembling Kant’s disinterested beholder of an aesthetic object,

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11 It would be very interesting to undertake a genealogy of attitudes toward pictures (both religious and secular ones) in Ghanaian Christianity. On the basis of my own earlier research, I would like to propose that a focus on conflicts over the ontological status and supposed power of the picture is crucial to understand clashes between indigenous cults and missionary Protestantism. On the one hand, Protestant missionaries attacked the worship of “idols,” which they found not only in traditional religion but also in Catholicism. They strongly dismissed the idea that the Christian God could be represented in a man-made object or picture. Yet, they still attributed power to what they called idols, a power associated with the devil’s capacity to deceive. On the other hand, devices such as the *Laterna Magica* were used so as to illustrate to Gospel to their illiterate audiences. The command over such technologies was presented in magical terms, as if this command was an effect of divine power. So, in a sense, the missionaries were caught up in the very power of the picture that they critiqued so fiercely. The more recent adoption of audio-visual media, above all TV and video, by Pentecostal churches marks another moment in which the adoption of new audiovisual technologies for the spread of the Gospel invokes debates about the Protestant attitudes toward pictures (see De Witte 2003).
religious believers look at images from a particular perspective and expect them to mediate the sacred in a process that miraculously vests human-made images with divine presence. Morgan points out that looking at religious images is inscribed in particular Protestant understandings of vision and acquired practices of looking which ensure a religious perspective on and experience of divine images. This religious perspective is both prior to and affirmed by such images, thereby implicating the spectator in a particular worldview. Therefore, “believers return to the same imagery over and over precisely because it reaffirms what they want to take for granted about the world” (1998: 17), assuring them through a deep sensual experience of divinity that can barely be expressed in words.

This approach is useful for understanding the power of religious pictures in Ghana, although here pictures of Jesus are usually accompanied, if not outnumbered, by pictures of the devil and other evil forces, a dimension which is virtually absent in Morgan’s work. For many believers, Satan is not simply a conceptual container, but a real spirit, with a particular appearance and the capacity to bind potential followers through intimate encounters and seduction with money and wealth. A great number of booklets circulate in which Born-Again Christians recount their actual encounters with the devil in places such as the bottom of the ocean (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004). Such books, as well as accounts of personal testimonies about the involvement with the “powers of darkness” prior to one’s conversion, form a source of inspiration for popular materializations of these more elusive and vague notions and experiences in concrete pictures of evil. In the same way as our poster, such products claim to throw light into the world’s darkness, a term hinting at both moral decay and the incapacity to penetrate people’s secret evil operations with the naked eye.

The dazzling amount of pictures of evil in public and private space notwithstanding, depictions of evil as such are considered potentially dangerous. During a research trip in 1996, my Pentecostal friends responded strongly to a painting of Mami Water at the wall of our living room that we had commanded from a roadside artist. They called “Jesus!” and closed their eyes for a quick silent prayer. Then they urged me to take the picture away immediately because the power

12 I saw pictures of Jesus in many homes (similar to the one depicted on the poster), as well as on car stickers, key holders, etc. These items work as powerful naturalizers of Christian belief and organize practices of visual piety in everyday life.

13 He is supposed to have been sent away from heaven, dragging along all kinds of fallen angels who became evil spirits populating the sea, the earth, and the sky.
represented would ultimately refuse to be contained in the frame of what I naively (from their perspective) categorized as “popular art” (Meyer 2004c). My insistence, the Mami Water painting was “just a picture,” was refuted on the basis of a particular Christian epistemological apparatus that problematizes representations of evil because they are held to be easily overtaken by their referent, and thus become evil, rather than merely depicting it for the sake of entertainment or art. Later, also an elder from the Church of Pentecost passed by asserting the girl’s stance and admonishing me to take the picture away.

This picture appears to invoke different responses than those analyzed by Morgan. Rather than inducing visual piety, the Mami Water painting is perceived as repelling. Requiring a powerful and immediate refutation of the spirit depicted, this picture calls for a ritual performance of Christian power. Invoking Jesus is a verbal act of ritual protection in that calling his name is considered the best possible weapon in the ongoing spiritual war between God and Satan and his agents. It seems that sensing the presence of the satanic in a picture—or more precisely, fearing that it will operate beyond the picture’s frame—my friends mobilized their Christian worldview so as to neutralize Satan’s power by calling upon God. Such a picture thus addresses Christian spectators in such a way that they immediately come up with the adequate response, and experience the power to counter the potential power of an evil image. In the course of my research, I encountered numerous similar examples, and I had many conversations with people who warned me that certain pictures, and for that matter occult objects from the realm of traditional religion, were dangerous. A good Christian should do away with these (a practice that echoes the burning of so-called fetishes and statues so as to mark a traditional priest’s conversion to Christianity—as if only a material act can undo the occult spiritual force of its reality), and when encountering one, a quick prayer calling for the presence of Jesus is the right thing to do.14

Such fears of evil pictures, however, do not put an end to picturing evil. On the contrary, pictures depicting evil, such as the poster discussed above, are tremendously popular. Through the Ghanaian and

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14 This iconoclastic attitude toward religious things resonates not only with Protestant fears of pictures, but also with traditional conceptualizations of the relation between spirits and their material dwelling places. It is important to realize that the physical realm of things is a necessary vehicle for spirits to become manifest. This suggests an understanding of the physical and spiritual realms as irretrievably entangled. Although missionary Protestantism stressed the need to abstain from pictures and other religious things, it still recognized the power of traditional religious objects via diabolization.
Nigerian video-film industry, movies visualizing evil forces—the devil, *Mami Water*, witches, and other “demons”—are excessively on display on TV and (video)cinema screens. Many movies surf along with the popularity of Pentecostalism and visualize the spiritual war between evil and divine forces. There are plenty of films featuring scenes in which pious Christians appear able to save themselves from hopeless situations such as being killed by a ritual murderer. Calling the name of Jesus in the very last minute is shown to invoke instantly the fire of the Holy Spirit so as to destroy a Christian’s opponent. This is much to the pleasure of the audiences who enjoy witnessing the defeat of the “powers of darkness.” Still, many spectators would view such films not as mere movies, but as inscribed into a Pentecostal project of revelation which asserts the power of the Christian worldview (Meyer 2004b).

In the course of my research on set and interviews with filmmakers, actors, and technicians, I understood that pictures of evil and the spiritual powers attributed to them (which were represented through spectacular special effects) tend to mess up representations of evil. Although, for the sake of film, evil forces and their abodes have to be constructed on location, I often discerned mixed feelings concerning their representation. Producers and actors have the persistent albeit vague idea that the devil dislikes being exposed, and hence seeks to sabotage the production of certain scenes which reveal his machinations. So it may happen that the camera refuses to work when certain scenes depicting evil forces are to be filmed, that actors feel spiritually troubled when playing the roles of witches or spiritualists, that set designers and directors are afraid to employ original materials when setting up a shrine. In all these instances, pictures of evil (and some of the related paraphernalia) are not on the safe side of “mere” representation, but tend to allow for the actual manifestation of the represented evil powers: an uncanny blurring of depiction and referent in which what starts as made up may eventually become real (see also Meyer 2006b). The only way to prevent the forces unleashed through representation is the power of prayer—a conviction asserted also by video-films. In this way, video-films and what happens on set are part and parcel of the same life world.

The point is that evil needs to be visualized so as to be revealed, but this has to happen in the confines of a Christian dualistic structure, which leaves no doubt about the power of the Christian God to overcome the “powers of darkness.” As explained above, if this is not the case Christian spectators often articulate this structure themselves by invoking Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. That is also why, as many Pentecostal pastors told me in conversations about the
intersection of video-movies and Christianity, it is important to viewing a movie that visualizes the powers of darkness from beginning to end (rather than stopping just after a heavy occultic scene). Only in this way it can be ensured that viewers would not miss the Christian framework, without which such scenes would be just horrific and potentially detrimental to spectators’ peace of mind. One could even say that the Christian dualistic structure allows for excessive portrayals of the operations of occult forces, thereby turning spectators into prurient witnesses of the forbidden and hidden. Christian popular culture allows for voyeurism and fun, yet at the same time asserts the real danger of evil, once it is not encountered in a Christian perspective and held in check by the power of Jesus.

**CONCLUSION**

The thriving popular Christian culture that stands central in this article testifies to a strong process of cross-fertilization between indigenous and Christian ideas, so much so that it is no longer possible to describe both sides of the encounter in clear, bounded terms. The point is not that Christianity has been Africanized or inculcated, and thus accommodated into “traditional” modes of being. Rather, the incorporation of old and new spirits into the elastic category of the devil who is found to engage in a spiritual war with God, has yielded a particular, dynamic imaginary that reflects a long, and complicated history of Africans’ incorporation in global structures, speaks to experiences of poverty and despair, and invokes dreams of wealth and hope. It needs to be emphasized again that these categories—the notion of the devil and the idea that the gods and spirits of the heathens are demons—were introduced by Western missionaries. People’s fear of and fascination with Satan should therefore not be simply relegated to a particular rootedness in indigenous systems of thought. Africans’ understandings of Christianity, in other words, are not just about “them”, but offer a mirror in which scholars of general religion may be able to discern another, otherwise less easily visible image of Christianity, that may pinpoint gaps in contemporary Western understandings.

This being so, an analysis of this Christian popular culture is particularly revealing because it urges us to acknowledge the relevance of the material dimension of the Christian imagination, and, in so doing, to address the genesis of a Christian environment with powerful pictures. This can help us counter the widespread tendency to dematerialize modern religion (cf. Chidester 2000), according to which Protestant and Pentecostal dismissals of image-making, “worship of idols” and
“outward rituals” are taken at face value, and systems of ideas and belief are privileged as prime foci of study if not as the locus for true piety (see also Keane 2007). My plea to look at Christianity as offering a particular aesthetics is, indeed, an attempt to reverse this dematerializing stance so as to acknowledge the relevance of objects, pictures, the religious attunement of the senses, and the body as crucial to religious experience.

Therefore, I argue that it would be mistaken to write Africans’ concern with pictures of evil and evil pictures off as evidence for their ongoing rootedness in “traditional systems of thought,” and thus assert an essential difference between African and Western modes of thinking and being. Such a view would not only privilege a dematerialized understanding of western Christianity as the norm, but by the same token affirm a particular western attitude that maintains a strict split between representation and presence, and is at pains to deny the “power of images” (Freedberg 1989) over the modern subject.\(^{15}\) Exactly this attitude has been called upon over and over in western encounters with indigenous populations as a mark of distinction, in the sense that animism and fetishism were held to belong to non-western “primitive” people, testifying to their incapacity to distinguish between mere objects or images and living beings, and to their difficulty of becoming genuine Christians. However, as Pietz (1985–1988) and Fabian (2000) argued, the notion of the fetish is not rooted in African systems of thought, but emerged at the heart of the encounters between Africans and Westerners, thus implicating the latter instead of setting them apart (see also Spyer 1998; Verrips 1994; Mitchell 2005; Keane 2007).

It is all too facile to claim that modernity, and the representational modes associated with it, have put an end to the power of pictures. It seems that Walter Benjamin’s idea that the original piece of art would loose its aura through mass reproduction and serialization (1978) is thwarted by salient processes of (re)sacralization through which copies are recast as powerful pictures with their own will and desire—as suggested by the title of Mitchell’s last book *What do Pictures Want?* (2005). If Westerners long ago attributed such a stance toward pictures to Africans, it seems that we have now come full circle. Still, a view of pictures as potentially fetishistic can only be the first step into an exploration of their apparent power in particular settings. In conclusion,

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15 Though there are important counter currents, for instance, the Peircean notions of the icon and the index, in contrast to the symbol, allow for conceptualizing the partial presence of the represented in the representation.
I would like to put forward two points that can highlight the role of pictures in Ghana’s popular Christian culture.

First, what is particularly striking in the Ghanaian situation is the fact that, through processes of recycling and remediation, the popular Christian imaginary is affirmed, extended and actualized in public and private space. Modern mass media, far from entailing a kind of disenchanting attitude, are of great help in the phenomenal multiplication and spread of Christian signs (Meyer 2004b). There has emerged a forest of pictures and sounds, through which a thoroughly Christian environment—or “eco-system”—emerges. It should be noted that this environment is a result of the combination of the upsurge of the public presence of Christianity and the increasing accessibility of modern mass media, which allow for endless reproductions. I invoke the metaphor of the forest on purpose, so as to indicate that this Christian environment features as a kind of second nature that naturalizes the presence of Christian signs. Importantly, people’s exposure to the Christian imaginary is not confined to particular, religious places, such as churches, but occurs everywhere, as they are involved in this “eco-system.” Although this entails a high level of repetition and cross-referencing, it still seems that Christian imagery has so far not succumbed to banality. By virtue of moving about, people are enveloped into Christian imaginaries in one way or the other. The point is not that every person responds to the forest of Christian signs in the same manner. What can be said, however, is that this forest of Christian signs draws upon as well as triggers a widely shared Christian aesthetics, and thus addresses and interpellates people, rather than being merely on display and subject to disinterested gaze. People are situated in a heavily Christian environment, understood as a material space or “sensuous geography” (Rodaway 1994) that induces particular aesthetic experiences. The great popularity of calendar posters such as the one discussed in this article, next to a host of other pictures, Christian Gospel songs, and books and video-cassettes on the spiritual war testifies to the pervasiveness of Christian signs. The example of the young girls, who reprimanded me for putting a picture of Mami Water up for the sake of mere display, shows how this aesthetic is mobilized in perceived situations of danger in everyday life when people encounter pictures that are, to invoke Mary Douglas, “matter out of place.”

This brings me to the second point, the fear that depictions of evil may become alive. This fear, of course, thrives upon a material attitude toward pictures that does not reduce them to objects of mere gaze. In contrast to Western ideas about pictures that tend to stress, as Freedberg argued, the rift between representation and presence (though,
as we noted, this is more an ideology prone to be mobilized regarding other people’s attitudes toward images, than a reality), in the Ghanaian context the visceral dimension of pictures is more readily acknowledged. This again, reflects particular understandings of the role of depiction in the fight against evil. In Ghana, I have often encountered people who claim to have had a true encounter with evil spirits, or even the devil himself, prior to their conversion. By being Born-Again, suitable devices are at hand to let these earlier experiences materialize in pictures and textual descriptions, again in line with the logic of remediation. Given that problems of suffering and evil are intrinsic to human experience, in my understanding religions owe at least part of their appeal to the way in which they address the problem of mishap and evil. In the Ghanaian context, as we have seen, Christianity has introduced a strong dualism of God and devil (and good and evil). Christian representations of evil are inscribed into a popular understanding that presumes that the power of vision and revelation are practical, individually empowering devices in the struggle against evil. That is why the devil, it is said, does not like to be represented and prefers to act in secret. Interestingly, the urge to depict and thus delineate and frame evil forces is part and parcel of Christian practices of diabolization, whereas in the context of indigenous cults, which are now despised as demonic, powerful forces were not subjected to such processes of delineation (in fact, as people would insist, traditional powers resist being trapped in pictures or photographs; hence, one should not take cameras to shrines, (Meyer 2006b)). In the context of Christianity, picturing occurs with the aim of fighting evil through a strategy of visualization that seeks to trap evil in a frame, thereby undoing it of its power. As the examples discussed in this article show, however, visualizations of evil are perceived to be at the risk of rendering alive and powerful that which is supposed to be defeated. The representational frame appears too weak or porous to contain the represented evil, and hence engenders a sense of a sublime evil power. In other words, evil is fought by way of depiction and framing, yet at the same time tends to burst out of the frame. In this sense, pictures of evil have a strong excessive potential.

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