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Religion in the Age of Digital Reproduction

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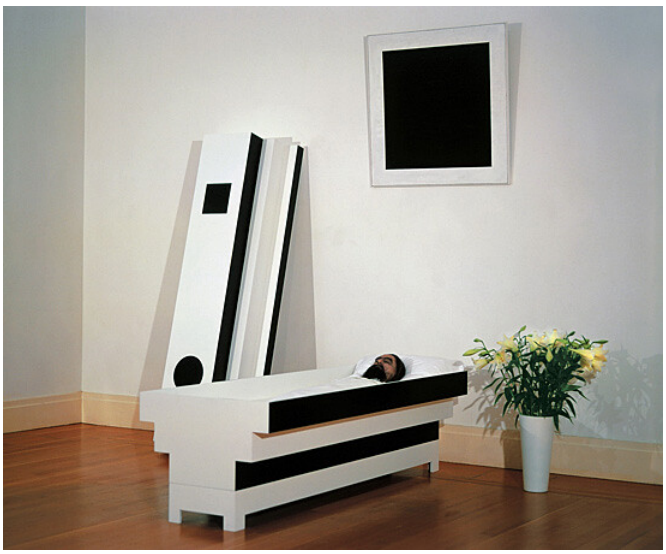
The general consensus of the contemporary mass media is that the return of religion has emerged as the most important factor in global politics and culture today. Now, those who currently refer to a revival of religion clearly do not mean anything like the second coming of the Messiah or the appearance of new gods and prophets. What they are referring to rather is that religious attitudes have moved from culturally marginal zones into the mainstream. If this is the case, and statistics would seem to corroborate the claim, the question then arises as to what may have caused religious attitudes to become mainstream.

The survival and dissemination of opinions on the global information market is regulated by a law formulated by Charles Darwin, namely, the survival of the fittest. Those opinions that best adapt to the conditions under which they are disseminated will, as a matter of course, have the best odds of becoming mainstream. Today's opinions market, however, is clearly characterized by reproduction, repetition, and tautology. The widespread understanding of contemporary civilization holds that, over the course of the modern age, theology has been replaced by philosophy, an orientation toward the past by an orientation toward the future, traditional teachings by subjective evidence, fidelity to origins by innovation, and so on. In fact, however, the modern age has not been the age in which the sacred has been abolished but rather the age of its dissemination in profane space, its democratization, its globalization. Ritual, repetition, and reproduction were hitherto matters of religion; they were practiced in isolated, sacred places. In the modern age, ritual, repetition, and reproduction have become the fate of the entire world, of the entire culture. Everything reproduces itself—capital, commodities, technology, and art. Ultimately, even progress is reproductive; it consists in a constantly repeated destruction of everything that cannot be reproduced quickly and effectively. Under such conditions it should come as no surprise that religion—in all its various manifestations—has become increasingly successful. Religion operates through media channels that are, from the outset, products of the extension and secularization of traditional religious practices. Let us now turn to an investigation of some of the aspects of this extension and secularization that seem especially relevant to the survival and success of religions in the contemporary world.



IRWIN, *Corpse of Art*, 2003–2004. Mixed media installation (wood, textile, wax, hair, vase, flowers).
Courtesy Galerija Gregor Podnar, Berlin / Ljubljana. Photo: Jesko Hirschfeld, 2007.

1. The Internet and the Freedom of Faith

The regime under which religion—any religion—functions in contemporary Western secular democratic societies is freedom of faith. Freedom of faith means that all are free to believe what they choose to believe and that all are free to organize their personal and private lives according to these beliefs. At the same time, however, this also means that the imposition of one's own faith on others in public life and state institutions, including atheism as a form of faith, cannot be tolerated. The significance of the Enlightenment was not so much that it resulted in the complete disappearance of religion, but that religion became a matter of private choice, which then resulted in the withdrawal of religion into the private sphere. In the contemporary world, religion has become a matter of private taste, functioning in much the same way as do art and design. Naturally, this is not to suggest that religion is precluded in public discussion. However, the place of religion in relation to public discussion is reminiscent of the place of art as outlined by Immanuel Kant in *The Critique of Judgment*: religion may be publicly discussed, but such a discussion cannot result in any conclusion that would become obligatory, either for the participants of this discussion or for society as a whole. Commitment to one religious faith or another is a matter of sovereign, private choice that cannot be dictated by any public authority—including any democratically legitimized authority. Even more importantly, such a decision—as in the case of art—need not be publicly argued and legitimized, but rather publicly accepted without further discussion. The legitimacy of personal faith is based not on the degree of its power of persuasion, but on the sovereign right of the individual to be committed to this faith.

In this respect, freedom of faith is fundamentally different from, let's say, the kind of freedom represented in scientific research. In the context of a scientific discussion every opinion can be argued for or against, but each opinion must also be substantiated by certain facts and verified according to fixed rules. Every participant in such a discussion is undoubtedly free—at least theoretically—to formulate his or her position and to argue in its favor. However, one may not insist on a scientific opinion that is not subject to justification, and that would contravene all proof and evidence to the contrary, without introducing any argument that would otherwise make one's position plausible and persuasive to others. Such unyielding resistance to the obvious, such blindness toward the facts, to logic and common sense, would be regarded as bordering on the insane. If someone were to refer to his sovereign right to insist on a certain scientific opinion without being able to legitimize this insistence by rational argument, he or she would be excluded from the scientific community.

What this means is that our contemporary, Western notion of freedom is deeply ambiguous. In fact, discourse on freedom always pivots on two radical types of freedom: an unconditional freedom of faith, that sovereign freedom permitting us to make personal choices beyond all public explanation and justification, and the conditional, institutional freedom of scientific opinion, which depends on the subject's ability to justify and legitimize this opinion in accordance with pre-determined, publicly established rules. Thus, it is easy to show that our notion of democratic, free society is also ambiguous. The contemporary notion of political freedom can be interpreted in part as sovereign, in part as institutional: in part as the sovereign freedom of political commitment, and in part as the institutional freedom of political discussion. But whatever may be said about the contemporary global political field in general, one thing remains certain: this field is becoming increasingly influenced, or even defined, by the Internet as the primary medium of global communication. And the Internet favors private, unconditional, sovereign freedom over scientific, conditional, institutional freedom.

Rabih Mroué, *On Three Posters. Reflections on a Video Performance*, 2006.
Video (color, sound), 18 min.
Courtesy Sfeir-Semler Gallery. Photo: Lina Gheibeh.

In an earlier age of mass media—newspapers, radio or TV—the only possible assurance of freedom of opinion was an institutionally guaranteed free access to this media. Any discussion revolving around freedom of opinion, therefore, centered on the politics of representation, on the question as to who and what should be included, and who and what should be excluded from standard news coverage and public political discussion. Today, all are free to create their own websites without the need for discussion and legitimization. Freedom of opinion, as practiced on the Internet, functions as the sovereign freedom of private commitment: neither as the institutional freedom of rational discussion, nor as the politics of representation, inclusion and exclusion. What we experience today is the immense privatization of public media space through the Internet: a private conversation between MySpace (www.myspace.com) and YouTube (www.youtube.com) today substitutes for the public discussion of the previous age. The slogan of the previous age was, The private is political, whereas the true slogan of the Internet is, The political is private.

Obviously, this new configuration of the media field favors religion over science, and sovereign religious politics over institutionalized secular politics. The Internet is the space in which it is possible for contemporary, aggressive religious movements to install their propaganda material and to act globally—without recourse to any institution for representation, or application to any authority for their recognition. The Internet provides these movements with the means to operate beyond any discursively obtained legitimacy and with full sovereignty. In this sense, the contemporary return of religion can be seen as the return of sovereign freedom after many decades or even centuries of the dominance of institutional freedom.

Accordingly, the surge in religion may also be directly connected to the growing, sovereign freedom of private consumption and capital investment on a global scale. Both are dependent on the Internet and other digital communications media that transgress the borders of national democratic institutions. In any case, both practices—religious and economic—presuppose the functioning of the media universe as an arena for private, sovereign acts and decisions. There is, moreover, one further significant similarity between capital investment and religious commitment: both operate through language, though, at the same time, beyond language—where language is understood as the means of (self-)explanation, justification, and legitimization.

Paul Chan, *1st Light*, 2005. Digital video projection (color, no sound), 14 min., loop.
Courtesy Greene Naftali Gallery, New York. Photo: Jean Vong.

2. Religious Ritual and Mechanical Reproduction

Religion is often understood to be a certain set of opinions, associated with whether contraception should be permitted or whether women should wear headscarves. I would argue, however, that religion—any religion—is not a set of opinions but primarily a set of rituals, and that the religious ritual refers to a state in which there is a lack of opinions, a state of opinionlessness—a-dox*a*—for it refers to the will of the gods or of God ultimately concealed from the opinions of mortals. Religious language is the language of repetition, not because its subjects insist on any specific truth they wish to repeatedly assert and communicate. Here, the language is embedded in ritual. And ritual is a re-enactment of the revelation of a truth ultimately impossible to communicate. Repetition of a certain religious ritual celebrates the encounter with such an incommunicable truth, the acceptance of this truth, being answerable to God's love and maintaining devotion to the mystery of revelation. Religious discourse praises God, and praises God in such a way as is supposed to please God. Religious discourse operates not in the opposition between truth and error, as scientific discourse does, but in the opposition between devotion and blasphemy.

The ritual, as such, is neither true, nor false. In this sense it marks the zero point of freedom of opinion, that is, freedom from any kind of opinion, from the obligation to have an opinion. Religious ritual can be repeated, abandoned, or modified—but not legitimized, criticized, or refuted. Accordingly, the fundamentalist is a person who insists not so much on a certain set of opinions as on certain rituals not being abandoned or modified, and being faithfully and correctly reproduced. The true fundamentalist does not care about fidelity to the truth, but about the correctness of a ritual, not about the theoretical, or rather, theological interpretations of the faith, but about the material form of religion.

Now, if we consider those religious movements especially active today we observe that they are predominantly fundamentalist movements. Traditionally, we tend to distinguish between two kinds of repetition: (1) repetition of the spirit and in spirit, that is, repetition of the true, inner essence of a religious message, and (2) repetition of the external form of a religious ritual. The opposition between these two types of repetition—between living spirit and dead letter—informs all Western discourse on religion. The first kind of repetition is almost always regarded as true repetition, as the authentic, "inner" continuation of a religious tradition—the continuation that presupposes the possibility of a rupture with the merely external, conventional, historically accidental form of this tradition, or even requires such a rupture. According to this spiritualist interpretation of the religious tradition, the inner, spiritual fidelity to the essence of a religious message gives to a believer the right to adapt the external, material form of this message to the changing historical milieus and contexts without betraying the inner truth of this message. A religious tradition capable of transforming and adapting itself to changing circumstances without losing its inner, essential identity is usually praised as a living, spiritually powerful tradition capable of maintaining its vitality and historical relevance. On the other hand, "superficial" adherence to the mere letter, to the external form of religion, to the "empty" ritual is, as a rule, regarded as symptomatic of the fact that the religion in question lacks vitality, and even as a betrayal of the inner truth of this tradition by the purely mechanical reproduction of its external, dead form. Now, this is precisely what

fundamentalism is, namely, the insistence on the letter as opposed to the spirit.

Joshua Simon, *Shahids*, 2003–2008. Video collage (colour, sound), 20 min., loop.
Courtesy Joshua Simon.

It is for this reason that religious fundamentalism has always possessed a revolutionary dimension: while breaking with the politics of spirit, that is, with the politics of reform, flexibility, and adaptation to the zeitgeist, it goes on to substitute for this politics of spirit the violent politics of the letter. Thus, contemporary religious fundamentalism may be regarded as the most radical product of the European Enlightenment and the materialist view of the world. Religious fundamentalism is religion after the death of the spirit, after the loss of spirituality. Should the spirit perish, all that remains is the letter, the material form, the ritual as event in the material world. In other words, difference in the material form of religion can no longer be compensated by identity in spirit. A rupture with the external form of the ritual cannot be compensated by the inner, spiritual fidelity to the religious truth. A material difference is now just a difference—there is no essence, no being and no meaning underlying such a formal difference at a deeper level. In this sense, fundamentalist religious movements are religions after deconstruction. If meaning, sense, and intention cannot be stabilized, the only possibility for authentic repetition is literal repetition, mechanical reproduction—beyond any opinion, meaning, sense, and intention. Islam would be an especially good case in point. While notoriously forbidding the production of images, it does not forbid the re-production and the use of already existing images—especially in the case of so-called "mechanically produced" images, such as photography or film. While it has meanwhile become banal to say that Islam is not modern, it is obviously post-modern.

In his book *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze speaks of literal repetition as being radically artificial and, in this sense, as being in conflict with everything natural, living, changing, and developing, including natural law and moral law.1 Hence, practicing literal repetition can be seen as initiating a rupture in the continuity of life. In his remarks on the philosophy of history, Walter Benjamin also describes the genuine revolution as a break with the continuity of historical evolution, as a literal repetition of the past in the midst of the present. He also refers to capitalism as a new kind of religion reduced to ritual and so devoid of any theology.2 Literal repetition, however, is not only a revolution effectuated by capital or against it; that is, it is not only an act of violence against the flow of historical change, and even against life as such. Literal repetition may also be seen as a way toward personal self-sacralization and immortality—immortality of the subject ready to submit him- or herself to such a repetition.

It is no mere accident that the working class has performed the repetitive, alienated, one might say, ritual work in the context of modern industrial civilization, sacralized, in certain ways, by the socialist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whereas an intellectual or an artist—as embodiments of the creative spirit of change—remained profane precisely because of their inability to repeat and to reproduce. Nietzsche had already made reference to literal repetition—the eternal return of the same—as being the only possible way to think immortality after the death of spirit, of God. Here, the difference between the repetitiveness of religious ritual and the literal reproduction of the world of appearances disappears. One might

say that religious ritual is the prototype of the mechanical reproduction that dominated Western culture during the modern period, and which, to a certain degree, continues to dominate the contemporary world. What this suggests is that mechanical reproduction might, in its turn, be understood as a religious ritual. It is for this reason that fundamentalist religious movements have become so successful in our time, for they combine religious ritual with mechanical reproduction.

For Walter Benjamin, of course, mechanical reproduction entails the loss of aura, the loss of religious experience, which he understands as the experience of uniqueness.3 He describes the religious experience as, one might say, a unique spiritual experience. In this respect, his evocation of the experience of being enchanted by an Italian landscape as an example of an authentic experience (of happiness, fullness, and the intensity of life) lost in the reproduction process is particularly characteristic. But, one might argue, true religious experience is actually the experience of death rather than the experience of life—the experience of death in the midst of life. Hence, precisely because mechanical reproduction may be understood as the lifeless repetition of the dead image, it can also be interpreted as a source of the truly religious experience. In fact, it is precisely the loss of aura that represents the most radical religious experience under the conditions of modernity, since it is in this way that a human being discovers the mechanical, machine-like, repetitive, reproductive and, one might even say, dead aspect of his own existence.

3. The Digitalized Religion

However, as mentioned above, the new religious movements operate primarily through the Internet, by means of digital rather than mechanical reproduction. During the last decades video has become the chosen medium of contemporary religious propaganda and is distributed through different TV channels, the Internet, commercial video stores, etc. This is especially so in the case of the most recent, active, and even aggressive religious movements. The phenomenon of suicide-bomber confession videos and many other kinds of video production reflecting the mentality of radical Islam have meanwhile become familiar to us. On the other hand, the new evangelical movements also operate with the same medium of video. If one asks those responsible for public relations in these movements to provide information, one is initially sent videos. This use of the video as the major medium of self-presentation among different religious movements is a relatively new phenomenon. Traditionally, the standard medium was a script, a book, a painted image or sculpture. The question then arises as to what constitutes the difference between mechanical and digital reproduction and how this difference affects the fate of religion in our age.

At this point, I would argue that the use of video as the principle medium by contemporary religious movements is intrinsic to the message of these movements. Neither is it external to the understanding of the religious as such, which underlies this use. This is not to suggest, following Marshall McLuhan, that here the medium is the message; rather, I would argue that the message has become the medium—a certain religious message has become the digital code.

Boris Groys, *Medium Religion*, 2006. Video lecture (color, sound), 25 min., loop. Courtesy Boris Groys.

Digital images have the propensity to generate, to multiply, and to distribute themselves almost anonymously through the open fields of contemporary communication. The origin of these messages is difficult, or even impossible, to locate, much like the origin of divine, religious messages. At the same time, digitalization seems to guarantee a literal reproduction of a text or an image more effectively than any other known technique. Naturally, it is not so much the digital image itself as the image file, the digital data which remains identical through the process of its reproduction and distribution. However, the image file is not an image—the image file is invisible. The digital image is an effect of the visualization of the invisible image file, of the invisible digital data. Only the protagonists of the movie *The Matrix* (1999) were able to see the image files, the digital code as such. The average spectator, however, does not have the magic pill that would allow him or her, like the protagonists of *The Matrix*, to enter the invisible space otherwise concealed behind the digital image for the purposes of directly confronting the digital data itself. And such a spectator is not in command of the technique that would enable him or her to transfer the digital data directly into the brain and to experience it in the mode of pure, non-visualizable suffering (as was able the protagonist of another movie, *Johnny Mnemonic*). (Actually, pure suffering is, as we know, the most adequate experience of the invisible.) Digital data should be visualized, should become an image that can be seen. Here we have a situation wherein the perennial spirit/matter dichotomy is reinterpreted as a dichotomy between digital file and its visualization, or "immaterial information" and "material" image, including visible text. In more theological terms: the digital file functions as an angel—as an invisible messenger transmitting a divine command. But a human being remains external to this message, to this command, and thus condemned to contemplate only its visual effects. We are confronted here with the transposition of a divine/human dichotomy from a metaphysical to a technical level—a transposition that, as Martin Heidegger would argue, is only possible by virtue of this dichotomy being implicitly technical from the outset.4

By extension, a digital image that can be seen cannot be merely exhibited or copied (as an analogue image can) but always only staged or performed. Here, the image begins to function like a piece of music, whose score, as is generally known, is not identical to the piece—the score being not audible, but silent. For the music to resound, it has to be performed. One could argue that digitalization turns visual arts into performing arts. To perform something, however, means to interpret it, betray it, destroy it. Every performance is an interpretation and every interpretation is a misuse. The situation is especially difficult in the case of an invisible original: if the original is visible it can be compared to a copy—so the copy can be corrected and the feeling of distortion reduced. But if the original is invisible no such comparison is possible—any visualization remains uncertain in its relationship to the original; or one could even say that every such performance itself becomes an original.

Sang-Kyoon Noh, *Twin Jesus Christs*, 2001. Sequins on polyester resin and fiberglass, 267 x 265 x 78 cm. Courtesy Sang-Kyoon Noh. Photo: Eun-Kyung Yeom.

Moreover, today information technology is in a state of perpetual change—hardware, software, simply everything. For this

reason alone, the image is transformed with each act of visualization that uses a different and new technology. Today's technology is conceived in terms of generations—we speak of computer generations, of generations of photographic and video equipment. But where generations are involved, so also are generational conflicts, Oedipal struggles. Anyone attempting to transfer his or her old text or image files to new software experiences the power of the Oedipus complex over current technology—much data is destroyed, evaporating into the void. The biological metaphor says it all: it is not only life that is notorious for this, but technology as well, which, supposedly in opposition to nature, has now become the medium of non-identical reproduction. Benjamin's central assumption in his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"—namely, that an advanced technology can guarantee the material identity between original and copy—was not borne out by later technological developments.5 Real technological development went in the opposite direction—toward a diversification of the conditions under which a copy is produced and distributed and, accordingly, the diversification of the resulting visual images. Were technology to guarantee the visual identity between the different visualizations of the same data, they would still remain non-identical due to the changing social contexts of their appearances.

The act of visualizing invisible digital data is thus analogous to the appearance of the invisible inside the topography of the visible world (in biblical terms, signs and wonders) that generate the religious rituals. In this respect, the digital image functions like a Byzantine icon—as a visible representation of invisible digital data. The digital code seems to guarantee the identity of different images that function as visualizations of this code. The identity is established here not at the level of spirit, essence or meaning, but on the material and technical level. Thus, it is in this way that the promise of literal repetition seems to acquire a solid foundation—the digital file is, after all, supposed to be something more material and tangible than invisible God. However, the digital file does remain invisible, hidden. What this signifies is that its self-identity remains a matter of belief. Indeed, we are compelled to believe that each act of visualization of certain digital data amounts to a revelation of the same data, much as we are obliged to believe that every performance of a certain religious ritual refers to the same invisible God. And this means that opinion about what is identical and what is different, or about what is original and what is copy, is an act of belief, an effect of a sovereign decision that cannot be fully justified empirically or logically.

Digital video substitutes the guarantees of spiritual immortality allegedly waiting for us beyond this world with the technical guarantees of potentially eternal repetition inside this world—a repetition that becomes a form of immortality because of its ability to interrupt the flow of historical time. It is this new prospect of materialist, technically guaranteed immortality that the new religious movements de facto offer their adepts—beyond the metaphysical uncertainties of their theological past. Placing human actions in a loop, both practices—ritual and video—realize the Nietzschean promise of a new immortality: the eternal return of the same. However, this new technical guarantee remains a matter of belief and sovereign decision. To recognize two different images as copies of the same image or as visualizations of the same digital file means to value immortality over originality. To recognize them as different would be to prefer originality in time to the prospect of immortality. Both decisions are necessarily sovereign—and both are acts of faith.

Category
Religion & Spirituality, Technology, Internet, Image, Data & Information

Subject
Rituals & Celebrations, Mass Media & Entertainment

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This text will be published in the catalog for the exhibition "Medium Religion," curated by Boris Groys and Peter Weibel, showing at ZKM, Karlsruhe, from 23 November 2008 to 19 January 2009. Images in this article feature works from that exhibition.

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