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Sigrid Schade

# Religion, Belief and Medial Layering of Communication

## Perspectives from Studies in Visual Culture and Artistic Productions

### ABSTRACT

The paper analyses the relationship between religious practices, belief and the media based on the medial layering of communication. The arguments are situated within the fields of studies in visual culture and cultural studies, reflecting on the role of art as a specific medium in the Western religious tradition. Vera Frenkel's video *THIS IS YOUR MESSIAH SPEAKING* (1990) is reviewed as a critical inquiry into religious practices and the media structures of communication.

### KEYWORDS

studies in visual culture, cultural studies, art religion, contemporary art as critical inquiry, medial layering of communication

### BIOGRAPHY

Sigrid Schade is head of the Institute for Cultural Studies at the Zurich University of the Arts since 2002. She studied Art History, Empirical Cultural Studies and German Language in Tübingen in the 1970s. She finished her PhD on the representations of witches in the 16th century in 1982, and her Habilitation in 1994 at the University of Oldenburg. She has taught as a professor at the Humboldt-University Berlin, the Universities of Tübingen, Zurich and Bremen, at the last mentioned from 1994–2005 (Homepage: <http://blog.zhdk.ch/sigridschade>).

## STUDIES IN VISUAL CULTURE(S) – NEITHER A DISCIPLINE NOR A METHOD

Studies in visual culture – in which studies of the media and film within religious contexts should have their place – represent not a discipline but a transdisciplinary field

of approaches towards an analysis of visual cultural practices, production and circulation.<sup>1</sup>

“Visual studies” or “studies in visual culture” are terms that until recently have been used mainly in Anglo-American academia, in which they were institutionalised much earlier than in the German-speaking countries, where even now only few exceptions have found a place within academic institutions. One of the Anglo-American representatives of studies in visual culture often quoted would be, for example, W.T.J. Mitchell.<sup>2</sup> Contradictory arguments and the different concepts of visual (culture) studies circulating in the United States will not be discussed in this paper.<sup>3</sup>

Since the term “visual culture” signifies the subject of an approach as well as the approach<sup>4</sup>, Silke Wenk and I decided to use the term “studies in visual culture(s)” as a description of the research activity and its German translation within the academic community in the German-speaking countries.<sup>5</sup>

Most authors involved, including those who are Anglo-American, have defined their research field as a form of cultural studies within – and sometimes extending and transcending – the traditional academic discipline of art history. They acknowledge that “art”, understood as artistic production, is not a separate element but belongs to a wider concept of visual production that overlaps and is superimposed on other forms of visual culture. They could draw on social art history (or new art history), which elaborated on the processes of transfer, translation and reading of images through histories and societies as can be found in iconological and iconographical approaches (Erwin Panofsky) and in the ideas of a repertoire of images and of cultural memory (Aby Warburg).

Over the last five to ten years discourse connected with studies in visual cultures has developed that in German academia today usually falls under the term “Bildwissenschaft” or in the plural form “Bildwissenschaften”.<sup>6</sup> It does not yet exist in a comparable sense in English, although representatives of picture or image theory sometimes also are subsumed under “Bildwissenschaft” by German colleagues, whereas in the Anglo-American academic community, they might be considered part of visual culture studies or visual studies. The German debate around “Bildwissenschaften” shows

1 Parts of this article are based on the book *Studien zur visuellen Kultur. Einführung in ein transdisziplinäres Forschungsfeld* (Studies in Visual Culture. Introduction into a Transdisciplinary Field of Research), which I wrote together with my colleague Silke Wenk, Professor at the University in Oldenburg. Schade/Wenk 2011.

2 He is one of the authors who critically reflects on the discussions within the field of visual studies including his own concept and argument for a “pictorial turn”. See Mitchell 2005, 336–365, in which he summarises his earlier comments and a lecture which he gave in the context of a conference held at the Clark Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts in 2001.

3 Other terms that have been used were “visual theory” (Bryson/Michael/Moxey 1991), and “picture theory” (Mitchell, 1994). A summary of methodological approaches can be found in the article by Silke Wenk with Rebecca Krebs (2007, 3–13).

4 Mirzoeff 2002, 3–23; also generally Elkins 2003; Cherry 2005, 3–23; Dikovitskaya 2006.

5 Schade/Wenk 2011, 56–57.

6 The main protagonists are Gottfried Böhm and Hans Belting (2007).

a belated reaction to the transdisciplinary opening of the field of “art” and claims to transgress traditional art history, dealing not only with art but also with popular and mass media. Yet, this perspective is mainly motivated by installing “Bildwissenschaft” as the new dominant academic paradigm or discipline over other disciplinary fields which are accused of lacking the “essence” of images and their specific qualities. This also implies that “Bildwissenschaften” focus on the meaning of the single, singular image and its author, the artist, instead of on series of images or the moving images that nowadays usually circulate in mass media.<sup>7</sup>

At least in the German academic community, art history has been one of the disciplines most resistant of challenges raised by cultural, gender and postcolonial studies, the movements behind or accompanying the concepts of studies in visual cultures. Yet some of the questions concerning the basics of structural analysis of possible elements of visual culture(s) – “artwork” being just one of these – are now being raised also in art history. It is influenced by other disciplinary as well as interdisciplinary discourses that deal with the cultural meaning and power of images/pictures in the age of globalisation and digital image circulation, such as visual studies, film studies, media studies, and image or imaging sciences.

Within the discourse of studies in visual culture questions are being asked that address the relationships between word and image and between image and gaze as well as the interrelations of image(s), bodies, subjectivities and culture(s) and their visible and invisible relationships with other signifying systems. Last but not least, they address the methodological relationships between literature, or language studies (to which the linguistic turn is ascribed), and art history’s and aesthetics’ legacies.

Gender studies, and its aims, perspectives and theoretical debates, have changed extensively the world of academic disciplines during at least the last 25 to 30 years. It is exactly these issues – relationship between word and image, and between image and gaze as well as the interrelations of image(s), bodies, subjectivities and culture(s) – that have been, and still are, at the centre of attention in gender studies since they are crucial concepts in constructing and repeating, but also with the potential to change a gendered world.<sup>8</sup> It comes as no surprise that one of the focuses of gender studies has become the discussion of the visible and the invisible within the structures of signification and showing. Questions have arisen concerning the powerful effects of showing and at the same time making invisible. The reflection on signifying practices has proved that it is not possible to identify a “visual culture” as a culture of the visible only. Therefore, a critical reflection on studies in visual culture would always assume that the danger in talking about visual culture(s) lies in implicit essentialism, a criticism which has been formulated for example by Mieke Bal. She argues that stud-

7 Schade 2008, 31–51; Schade: Bildwissenschaften and the Absence of Women: [http://blog.zhdk.ch/sigridschade/files/2013/07/Bildwissenschaft\\_and\\_the\\_absence\\_of\\_women\\_27\\_7\\_09\\_000.pdf](http://blog.zhdk.ch/sigridschade/files/2013/07/Bildwissenschaft_and_the_absence_of_women_27_7_09_000.pdf) [accessed 27 September 2015].

8 See Härtel/Schade 2002, 9–16.

ies in visual culture seem to promote “[...] a kind of visual essentialism that either proclaims the visual ‘difference’ – read ‘purity’ – of images or expresses a desire to stake out the turf of visibility against other media or semiotic systems.”<sup>9</sup>

So the approaches of studies in visual culture(s) have to be aware and take into account that their subject is embedded in a wider field of cultural practices, not because they have to reflect on other practices and their interrelations with other signifying systems as well, but in order to include approaches appropriate for analysing the interrelated effects. Therefore, Silke Wenk and I refer in *Studies in Visual Culture. Introduction into a Transdisciplinary Research Field*<sup>10</sup> to Mieke Bal’s criticism regarding the idea of a given methodology or of a methodological toolbox: “[...] by selecting an object, you question a field. [...] its methods (are not) sitting in a toolbox waiting to be applied; they too, are part of the exploration. You do not apply one method; you conduct a meeting between several, a meeting in which the object participates, so that, together, objects and methods can become a new, not firmly delineated field.”<sup>11</sup> For her, this procedure is adequate with regards to interdisciplinary approaches: “[...] interdisciplinarity in the humanities, necessary, exciting, serious, must seek its heuristic and methodological basis in concepts rather than in methods.”<sup>12</sup> Thinking in and with *Traveling Concepts in the Humanities* – the title of her book,<sup>13</sup> – offers the reflective flexibility needed within such research:

[...] concepts can become a third partner in the otherwise totally unverifiable and symbiotic interaction between critic and object. This is most useful, especially when the critic has no disciplinary traditions to fall back on and the object no canonical or historical status. Concepts can only do this work, the methodological work that disciplinary traditions used to do, on one condition: that they are kept under scrutiny through confrontation with, not application to, the cultural objects being examined, for these objects themselves are amenable to change and apt to illuminate historical and cultural differences.<sup>14</sup>

Mieke Bal’s concept of working with travelling concepts within cultural analysis instead of with methods takes into account that the approach is always affected by the object and its material and vice versa. Her and Norman Bryson’s plea for such an approach can be subsumed under “semiological inquiry” in which studies in visual culture participate.<sup>15</sup>

9 Bal 2003, 5–32.

10 Schade/Wenk 2011.

11 Bal 2007, 66–67.

12 Bal 2007, 2.

13 Bal 2002.

14 Bal 2007, 4–5.

15 Bal/Bryson 1991, 176–208.

## CULTURAL STUDIES AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Cultural studies (in German one would speak of “Kulturwissenschaften”) or cultural analyses – in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century – has become a field for studies in cultural practices concerning habits in daily life, cult rites, low and high cultures, on artists’ productions, consumer culture and mass media.<sup>16</sup> Since the term “culture” has itself been identified as a problematic concept promoting an essentialist reading, cultural studies have aimed to prove the imaginary structure of such a concept in which an Other is always constructed, often more implicitly than explicitly, from the point of view of the dominant discourse. So the use of the term “cultural practices” takes into account that definable “cultures” are always effects of changing processes in the structure and the “cultural imaginary” of the discourses they rely on.<sup>17</sup> When we consider the transcultural effects of migrations of people, the circulation of material and news in the consumer culture and the Internet in a globalised economy and a world of multiple wars, it is even more absurd to speak of cultures as defined entities.

From the perspective of cultural studies, the frames and conditions for constructing religious communities are no different from those for building communities on the grounds of other imaginary concepts (nations, societies, groups, families, “gender”, class, “race”). The point of departure for modern and contemporary cultural studies or cultural analysis – elaborated in detail by feminist and postcolonial studies – was the acknowledgement that all these categories were never naturally given but had been used as essentialist naturalisations of cultural conventions and constructions. The results of this research matched and inherited ethnological methodological approaches towards religious practices in diverse cultures.

Moreover, research in cultural studies has shown that cultural fields such as politics, work, economy, public or private life, religion, leisure and others can be separated or analysed separately only hypothetically because they continuously overlap in daily life. Practices from these different fields are usually intertwined and interlinked. A practice within a specific field transferred into another will be part of continually ongoing and changing signification processes.

The claim of a cultural studies’ perspective would be that religion(s) – religious rites, cult(s) or culture(s) – are subcategories of culture(s). Religious practices obviously are part or specifications of other cultural practices. With other cultural practices, they have in common ways of including or excluding members in order to constitute communities to which they might want to belong or to be able or allowed to belong or not. And secular cultural practices have in common with religious ones that belief in the benefits of whatever these practices promise is essential for inclusion.

Religion(s) is a term comparable to others such as society, art or subjectivity. They all have in common that they are abstract ideas which can be observed and analysed

16 Schade/Wenk 2011, 57–56.

17 Schade/Wenk 2011, 58.

only by diverse facets: institutions, habitudes, conventions, rituals, symbols, practices, images, prayers, and by the discourses they might produce and by their effects. The term “religion” seems appropriate only in the sense of a systematised concept claiming to include the entirety of symbols, codes, practices, beliefs, rites, liturgies and narratives that constitute a specific religion. Considering how Christian religion functions in Western culture, it must be admitted that not a single individual who has been raised as or calls themselves a Christian can be considered to be participating in the whole set of such facets or its complete knowledge. The access to holy and spiritual wisdom is/was often limited or restricted to specific mediators, such as priests, and the consistent practising of religion in fact usually is/has been deficient. Consistent practice is not necessary for belonging to a religion and this is even more true in secularised versions of religions nowadays.

The elements of such practices are based on processes of repetition, convention, habits, imagination, identification and belief. These processes cannot be analysed without a concept of how imagination and communication function in constituting relationships between individuals and communities, thus processing subjectivity and the feeling of belonging or not belonging to communities (of believers).

## MEDIA IN RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS, RELIGION AS A MEDIUM, ART AS RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Visual culture in the West has been strongly linked to religious rites. The academic discipline of Western art history and its debates on the meanings and functions of visual culture and visual practices within Christian religion and its facets cannot be summarised appropriately in a short article.

I refer to a few of its topics only, like Christian iconography and symbolism, which formed an elaborate theological system of representation in the Middle Ages. The use of (audio-)visual culture within religious contexts led to liturgies synthesising staging, listening, preaching, singing etc., and sculpted and painted images in churches constructed in symbolical forms, reflecting the narratives of the holy texts and the codes of liturgies. Mediating theology, belief and the power of the church, the practices of Christian religion can be regarded as a refined composite of media – a term used nowadays in media studies. Images are subject to medial layering or re-mediation throughout their use. Their final reference is God, the holy and/or the spiritual, in themselves concepts that can be grasped and represented only through allegories and metaphors and their diverse mediatisation. Visual culture is an integral part of religious practices. It is also a medium of religion, the holy or the spiritual (as is everything else) and refers to meanings beyond what it shows.

Thinking about strategies for making others believe takes into account that communication is always rooted in medial structures. Knowledge or experience (of the world) can only be accessed through language and media, which, however, are never

quite sufficient for the task. Yet the deep longing for and the belief in an immediate access to knowledge or experience (or in most cases a mixture) is also embedded in the media, as they usually make themselves invisible or unremarkable, thus suggesting a natural and direct access to meaning in the act of communication.

Some media seem to be more powerful than others. The Christian church has always included rituals and rites in its practices, for example using relics or suggesting concepts like transubstantiation, which from a philosophical and ethnological perspective can be defined as a form of contagious magic.<sup>18</sup> From the perspective of semiology, one could classify them as signs with an indexical quality, a term introduced by Charles Sanders Peirce<sup>19</sup> which in media studies would be applied to analogous media that have stored traces of the original object represented (as in analogue photography or sound recording). These medial characteristics are related to strategies producing “evidence”.<sup>20</sup> Signs or media promising a contagious contact with their objects, holy or not, can be described as media to which a corporeal mark of the symbolised is attributed.

Altogether the media composites the churches impose on their audiences in order to turn them into believing communities are models for all kinds of medial strategies and formats that overwhelm the senses. Nowadays audiences are addressed by digital visual culture and the circulation of signs – be they images or words or moving images, or films – on the Internet. Churches make use of them as they always have made use of the newest media technologies – starting with illuminated books and illustrated printing. Churches nowadays also adopt the strategies and aesthetics of video clips and commercials.

“Art”, on the other hand, is a specific concept of visual culture in the West, having been conceptualised no later than the Renaissance with references to Neoplatonic authors of antiquity, lasting until today. Art in this sense has become a religion in itself. Throughout Western art history (as a field of research), religious concepts of art have developed, such as the idea of the artist as *alter deus* and the artwork as a parallel creation.<sup>21</sup> The concept of an art religion – as it was conceived in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>22</sup> – shows its effects even today when art markets rely on groups of believers and “stakeholder” artists are celebrated as or stage themselves as priests or martyrs of their religion.<sup>23</sup> Art has become a field in which the audience is promised access to spiritual experiences directly through artworks. The spiritual in art – a main objective for example of modern abstract art – has, thus, become an ersatz religious

18 Walker 2000.

19 Peirce 2000.

20 Schade/Wenk 2011, 98–104.

21 Feminist art history has clearly shown that this concept is gendered.

22 Auerochs 1999.

23 Bättschmann 1997.



concept.<sup>24</sup> Translated into modern technical or media terms, artists are considered to be “mediums” – seismographs or other technical recorders of the spiritual.<sup>25</sup>

ART AS CRITICAL CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE PROMISES  
OF MEDIA AND RELIGION, AND THEIR EFFECTS:  
VERA FRENKEL’S VIDEO THIS IS YOUR MESSIAH SPEAKING (1990).

Unlike to art production, which sees itself in the quasi-religious tradition, modern and contemporary artists have developed artistic practices as critical means of inquiry into the functioning of powerful discourses of culture(s) and into the structures of communication which remain unknown to the individuals subjected to them. Using the means, the materials and the medial tools of art – itself part of the communication processes – their research and inquiry take forms other than in the humanities, yet their practice also can be regarded as a conceptual and methodological approach to analysis of (visual) culture(s). Medial self-reflection makes it possible to question the unconscious interactions between image and gaze, self and other, not only on the level of technical apparatus and machines but also on the level of the mental apparatus of perception, in the context of the long tradition of applying to body images in visual art the meanings of gestures, miming, movement etc. “The body” is affected by such productive mechanisms even in those aspects that (in retrospect) cannot be completely grasped medially. Media technologies and their applications (in correspondence with technical and social implications) are always also objects and locations of fantasy and desire – thus creating another field for media-related artistic interventions.

In the following paragraph I will introduce the video THIS IS YOUR MESSIAH SPEAKING (1990) by the Canadian artist Vera Frenkel<sup>26</sup>, an example of such interventions, which represents a reflection on the history of media as a history of its linguistic associations, as a history of the failure or betrayal of its messianic promises, and, finally, as a challenge to viewers to arrive at a clear understanding of these relationships.

Frenkel created the videotape and the first installation of THIS IS YOUR MESSIAH SPEAKING while an artist-in-residence at Newcastle Polytechnic in 1989/90.<sup>27</sup> The decisive factor in the concept was a new shopping mall – the “Metrocentre” – built on a former industrial site outside the town. The Metrocentre was made up of theme parks – Little Greece, Little Italy, Little England – that simulated urban representations of local and immigrant cultures; it also featured Disneyland-like amusement parks. In the Metroland amusement park, Frenkel found carousels, clowns, and artificial palm trees provided for children accompanying their shopping parents. Queues of people lined

24 Schade 2009, 146–167.

25 Schade 2011.

26 Schade 2013, 120–153.

27 The video is available on DVD: OF MEMORY AND DISPLACEMENT: VERA FRENKEL COLLECTED WORKS (Toronto, 2005), <http://www.vtape.org/>.

up in the main atrium to view a World War I fighter plane, as a Salvation Army band played alongside. A “Redemption Store” completed the ensemble. This mall’s blend of war glorification, religion, consumerism, profiteering, and promises of eternal salvation prompted the conception of the video and later the installation.

I read the 1990 video as a history of media condensed to nine minutes and fifty seconds and encompassing sign language and spoken language, the handwritten and the printed word (with elements of both the narrative and the poetic genres), music, sounds, and moving pictures (both with and without sound). Along with gong strokes, footsteps and other such noises, children’s crying, and music, the entire video is accompanied by a voice-over.<sup>28</sup> Whatever the setting, those who watch and listen to the video undoubtedly feel they are being addressed directly: “This Is Your Messiah Speaking”.

The video begins with a dual image. The viewer sees or looks down on what is possibly a blackboard (the limited field of vision prevents identification until later in the work, when the surface becomes recognisable as a floor) on which English words handwritten in white paint are running from the bottom to the top of the screen; superimposed on this first image is a transparent overlay with more handwriting. Two hands appear at the upper edge of the screen, as if holding the board or the overlay, or as if pointing towards the text. It is only subsequently that the viewer might make the association with the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, especially when the text, which is rhythmically divided into stanzas, ends with the imperative: “Do shop around.” Simultaneously, a voice can be heard speaking, apparently from a face (Frenkel herself) shown in a frontal shot. Throughout the video, the mouth of this face moves in synch with the voice-over; both slow down occasionally as the video shifts into slow motion. Later in the video, the voice and the face are dissociated. The video begins by addressing its viewers both orally and in a written text – “Don’t worry. No one will ever force you to do anything you don’t want to do” – in an almost hypnotic repetition. A chime sounds (a modulated piano) and the spoken and written words are then translated, like a refrain, by a sign language interpreter who appears on the screen.

The video continues with a view of legs clothed in trousers and boots walking across the lettered blackboard/floor, while the spoken text is translated into sign language and/or displayed as written captions or subtitles – stylistic elements that evoke silent film. The interpreter’s face is usually seen from the front, directly facing the viewer, while her facial expressions – integral components of her communications in sign language—are supplemented by the gestures she makes with her hands. The interpreter’s face and hands are brightly lit, while her body, clad in black, is almost entirely absorbed by the black background (fig. 1 and 2).

28 The voice-over text is published in Schade 2013, 131–133.



Fig. 1 and 2: Vera Frenkel, THIS IS YOUR MESSIAH SPEAKING, video stills, 1990, ASL signer Norah Kennedy © Vera Frenkel.

Frenkel employs a number of tactics to dislodge what is ordinarily considered a natural connection between speaker and what is spoken. The pairing of the voice (speaking in a phonetically perceptible language that lends itself to literal interpretation) with the sign language of the deaf (a silent, visually perceptible language) is a brilliant means of dissociating the body from language. Speech, paradoxically, is illustrated visually, while at the same time, it is not.

The elementary equality of linguistic expression in sign and in spoken language forces the viewers of the video to constantly shift their mode of reading according to the media of expression combined. Moving between listening and looking, it becomes evident that the two modes of perception interact and interfere with one another, insofar as an aural sign is always already linked to a visual representation, while a visual sign evokes phonemes; otherwise, they would not be signs, in Ferdinand de Saussure's sense of the concept.

In the case of the "talking face", the narrative voice-over can be only provisionally assigned to it or to the mouth as the source of the articulation. This is due to the fragmentation, the disruptions, and the close-up enlargement of the face, rendered anonymous and androgynous by the black cloth covering the speaker's hair. The talking mouth sometimes occupies the entire visual field. The shots of a talking mouth in such extreme close-up demonstrate the physical effort involved in producing phonemes through the integrated actions of tongue, teeth, and lips, to the point that bubbles of saliva are formed. Viewed in slow motion, the act of speaking and speech itself become eerie processes that assume almost monstrous features. The effect is a disconnect between the effort of speaking and the content of speech.

The voice adopts several different narrative positions layered one upon the other, referring to other narrators and narratives. Running through the entire video is the question of who is speaking at any given time. Who is the Messiah? Who are the saviours whose messages we are hearing? The gap between the face and what is being spoken becomes increasingly wide, as represented by the open, devouring mouth. Oral speech is emitted from the dangerously gaping chasm of the mouth, where monstrous teeth, tongue, and lips produce sounds that are inevitably perceived as threatening. It is here that one is reminded of Flusser's account: "Hordes of words arise within me almost without pause. They clamour for order, insist on my direction, demand articulation."<sup>29</sup> Flusser is referring to himself here, describing his mouth as a space occupied by an enemy force that in a sense pries open his lips from within, compelling him to speak.

But what is the effect of infusing "joyful tidings" – a message of salvation, no less – with menace? Among other things, it draws our attention to the "mis-speaking" (the German word for which, *versprechen*, means both promising and mis-speaking) of speech and of language itself. Messages of salvation are thus likened to enemy

29 Flusser 1999, 219.

forces occupying subjects and their bodies. In this way, THIS IS YOUR MESSIAH SPEAKING evokes the deeper meanings within the nexus of speech, exchange value, fetishism, the symbolic order (into which is inscribed a constitutive deficiency) and promises of salvation.

THIS IS YOUR MESSIAH SPEAKING is one of Frenkel's works that has acquired a profusion of diverse connotations by being situated in a variety of public spaces, where each new architectural, mediatic, and social context altered the work in terms of both its representation and its reception. A video that is already inevitably perceived as a "media composite" is therefore amplified through constant new associations with other composites of media.

In a text about her own trans-disciplinary practice, published in 2005 in an issue of the journal *Intermédialités* dedicated to the theme of re-mediation,<sup>30</sup> Frenkel lists the Messiah project as one of the chief examples of media migration in her work: in an overt sense, given the movement from one medium to another in the project, but also because the concepts and visual worlds, as they wander from performance to video to computer animation, through story-telling, photography, and printed image and text, and due to the multiple layering, irritatingly assume new meanings, and yet still resemble themselves, albeit in an uncanny resemblance.<sup>31</sup>

Her multimedia presentations make the interfaces, boundaries, and frameworks of the various media visible as such; she reveals their functioning as media, which ultimately means they function as a language that has to deny its medial quality in order to be perceived as natural. Frenkel's works of art explode the imaginary contract with which visual media bind their viewers to their content and also the naturalising character of speech and writing. Moreover, collectively her works reveal, as Marshall McLuhan stated, that what appears in media are other media and, consequently, that what appears in media is also their own history. Understanding the history and functioning of media does not mean believing in its promises, but rather, as Vera Frenkel says, recognising its unsettling effects:<sup>32</sup> the articulation of words whose promises and mis-speaking continue to produce effects on the history of human societies, and the disastrous role repeatedly played in this respect by faith or hope in salvation.

The idea of the endlessly postponed arrival of a messiah bearing happiness, salvation and abundance, and the assurance that want on earth can be eradicated both at will and instantaneously through consumption are combined in such a way by Frenkel that this ostensibly simple message is transformed into a persistent irritation for the

30 See Frenkel 2005, 149.

31 Frenkel 2005, 149: "Something survives; something changes, and forces of chance help to bind these elements into a new entity from which emanates the uncanniness of an apparent but indescribable family resemblance."

32 McLuhan 1964, 23: "This fact, characteristic of all media, means that the 'content' of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph."

viewers in light of their unconscious desires and their entrapment in such promises of deliverance.

The video's criticism is thus directed not only at consumer culture, but also at the notion of an anticipated "millennium", a "thousand-year reign" and at expectations of messianic salvation in general, as well as at the various ways in which such expectations have been culturally and historically articulated. No serious alternatives to consumerism are proposed, but when old fantasies of salvation are reconfigured as new promises of happiness, the old and the new promises mutually reveal each other's true nature.

Frenkel's video is a *mise-en-scène*, as it were, of the seductive advertising strategy of a messiah competing for preference over other saviours ("choose the Messiah with the right credentials"). The unconscious entrapment of the viewers begins with that assurance that they will not be told what to do ("Don't worry. No one will ever force you to do anything you don't want to do."). Nonetheless, the "false Messiah" inveigles them to go shopping. Ultimately, the video is about the interpellation of subjects (via inclusion or exclusion) into linguistic and other communities by means of various media, and also about their sharing in the promised happiness and commodities ("Or someone will shop for you").

Frenkel's translation of a criticism of consumption into a criticism of media leads to her question "Whose stories are we living after all?" Her criticism of media is not, however, a criticism of the (new) media, but rather instructions for their intelligent use, which means, above all, not having blind faith in them. In Frenkel's case, this means using media as artistic means for critical reflection and analysis of (visual) cultures and cultural practices, among which religion would be crucial. To believe in its core is to believe in words, languages, symbolic systems and whatever they seem to promise.

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