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Editor

Editorial

Religion and Performance:
in "media" res

"In medias res" is a literary term that, in Latin, means to begin a narration in the midst of the action. The reader or viewer enters a created world as if it had always existed. Opening the door in the middle of the narrative exposes a world with a history heretofore unperceived, but no less active or affective than one's own. This is the power of the fictive: to introduce something entirely new while at the same time creating the effect that it had been there all along. The two articles in this second issue of *Performance, Religion, and Spirituality* deal with very different forms of media: contemporary video games and the silent cinema musical accompaniment of the early twentieth century. In this issue, I invite readers to consider the implications of regarding religion as something communicated through various media, but also as a form of media itself. What might the term "religious media" mean, beyond the idea that media can be religiously informed or may attempt to communicate a religious message? Religion and Media is already a robust academic subfield (see Hosseini 2008 for a survey of approaches to media in religious studies), to which I hope our issue can contribute with its specific focus on performing and performance. This editorial will delve into scholarly as well as personal reflection in order to consider media as carriers of meaning on several levels: individual, social, and cosmic.

In all of this, we begin "in *media* res", in the midst not only of the action, but also in the midst of the diverse kinds of media that shape our perceptions and our environments.

Religions and spiritualities play between temporalities and spatialities real and imagined, physical and metaphysical, here and "not here", now and never. While I emphatically do not equate religion with the fictive, I acknowledge the long, even ancient traditions in scholarship and the arts that bring religion and spirituality into the same arena as imaginative story-telling and world-building. Myths and rituals, as well as theologies and liturgies, when they perform the work of transformation, initiation, and celebration, often tell really good stories: they transport celebrants into alternative times and places, introduce dynamic characters, and move though compelling narratives. To participate in a religion or a spiritual practice is to enter a socio-cultural performance "in medias res"—to enter an active reality that had always been churning beneath or alongside the everyday.

On what conditions does this ability to enter an alternative reality depend, if, for the moment, we consider religious life and spiritual practice to offer ways to enter such alternative realitie? Like any form of the fictive, you need to choose your media. Are you into graphic novels or films? Video games or live theatre? Do you sink hours into social media, following Instagrammers you'll never meet? Are you a genre nut, and will never get enough detective novels, or true crime TV dramas, or young adult romance novels? At what altar will you worship? Who is your chosen saint? Where will you pilgrimage? The material conditions to meet spiritual demands often parallel those that fans bring to their immersive participation while following sports teams and celebrities, as well as consuming products and forms of entertainment. Religious studies scholars take seriously the idea that such fandom can blend indistinguishably with religion itself (Davidsen 2013). Worship, prayer, and meditation likewise depend on such material conditions. Can you separate the form of devotion from the context within which it is performed? Sure, I can pray to Jesus in a Buddhist temple, if I wished. There would be nothing stopping me. Sure, I could root for an American football team while attending an ice dancing competition. There would be little to stop me. But why?

When I consider such scenarios, I am reminded of the cultural assumptions that I, as a white middle-class American, have been brought up to make about religion: it is something that belongs to an individual, that it is an inviolable choice, something that you hold sacred in yourself and can carry with you wherever you go. In short, it is an aspect of your identity, and according to individualistic Western ideals, it is an identity that you are free to choose but not to force upon others. To enter the "alternative reality" of religion, then, means to access a sacred portion of yourself—your beliefs, your faith. According to this view, religious identity is a truth, a conviction, that an individual carries in their own heart, and in that way it signifies not only an alternative reality to the world around you, but a higher or a truer one. This is what might differentiate fandom from spirituality, then. The medium through which I express my dedication is not merely an alternative, not merely a form of truth, but *the* truth of my existence. (Then again, some "fans" might disagree that there is anything "mere" about their dedication!) If, as many a true believer might agree, I *am* my faith, then to what extent *am* I the conditions through which I express it? And to

what extent might this question apply to religious believers and spiritual practitioners outside the Protestant Christian cultural tradition that prompted this question?

If I step outside the paradigm of personal belief, then perhaps I could phrase the question this way: is a religion a medium or is it expressed through media? Think of a religion. Perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is an image that is distinctly cultural, and speaks very specifically to a region, a language, or an artistic tradition. Islam: the sweeping black curves of graceful calligraphy. Hinduism: the saturated sky blue of a deity's skin. Eastern Orthodox Christianity: the inverted perspective of an icon; the gold leaf of a halo. A spare, unadorned white steeple. Colored chalk. Garlands of flowers. Sticks of incense. But the further we range from the specific cultural context of the material, the further it seems from the religion that employs it. For a moment, consider a stick of incense as a kind of material religious medium, because it carries symbolic significance. I will argue for the moment that a stick of incense in Macao, standing upright in a wide sand-filled basin and sending curls of grey smoke into the sunshine outside temple doors, is *not* the same stick of incense sitting in a box beside a cash register at an alternative lifestyles store in San Francisco. The physical substance of the incense may be identical, but in no way does this particular medium necessarily carry the religious feeling or conviction that it is capable of invoking in one context over to another.

That elements are given meaning by the context in which they occur is something the scientific community has grappled with for a long time, such as in the way that Gestalt psychology studies the processes by which individuals discover and create relationships between disparate things—showing how, as is popularly understood, the world is more than the sum of its parts. Bridging science and the humanities, Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theory eloquently demonstrated that signification is not contained in any linguistic sign itself, but meaning arises in the relationship between interdependent signs as part of a language system where the value of each sign is a result of the simultaneous, interrelated presence of all other signs in the system (de Saussure 1916). By arguing that incense signifies depending on its context, it would seem that I am arguing that religion is something carried by a medium, rather than a form of media itself. Religion would thus be the meaning that arises through the relationship between its material reality and its context. This would extend a line of thinking with its roots in structuralism, which insists that if we can somehow define the boundaries of a system, like a language, then we can eventually pick apart its components, and in tracing this network of components, understand how meaning is made. Religious meaning, then, would be like the meaning of a line of poetry, or even just the meaning of one word in a poem, as approached by the structuralist critics of the early twentieth century. The word means in relationship to all the other words, within the system of the poem.

The next issue to examine is the meaning of the entire poem itself, and if such meaning is possible. Consider this story: a little girl stands nervously in the vestry of her town's only Catholic church, the same church where she was baptized, the same church where the only priest for miles around has listened to her furtive confessions. For the first time, this church will allow girls to serve alongside boys at the altar, which means leading the procession as a cross-bearer, lighting and extinguishing the candles, ringing the bells,

holding the book of the liturgy, and even washing the priest's hands before he prepares the Eucharist. The little girl anticipates these activities like approaching a beautiful but dangerous animal. Her nervousness subsides as the kind deacon, a man with thick glasses and halitosis, instructs her in tying the cincture of her alb, shows her how to swing the censer. This little girl takes on these responsibilities seriously. She feels that she is part of something cosmic, something precious. As the years pass, she grows into some confidence—there is power in what she does. But as the years pass, as she matures from a girl to a woman, she takes in the conflicting messages of her surroundings. God is a man, borne by a woman. God became man, but not a woman. Christ represents all of humanity, but half of humanity is incapable of representing Christ to the world. She feels the power and confidence ebb. The thing that was precious loses its luster, and the things that she longed to do, she lets go. After all, she's just a girl. Pursuing the poetry analogy, the girl's religious life is a poem that she discovers has meaning beyond the confines of the system of the poem itself. When she looks beyond the poem—that is, beyond the symbolic system of her religion—to answer ultimate questions about her own identity and self-worth, the self-consuming interdependency of meaningful signs within that system is not enough. The solar system implies a galaxy. A galaxy implies a universe. A universe implies…here we are at a frontier, and perhaps not a final one. For this girl, religious meaning is something that must endure a deconstruction of its material reality and the history of its origins. A religious system may seem to answer these questions, but when it fails to encompass the possibility of the dismantling of its own stories about itself, then faith may fail as well.

In this story, rather than religion being carried by the media of ritual, liturgy, water and wine, religion became a form of media itself, because it carried for the girl the ever-evolving messages in terms of participation and self-worth through to larger questions of ultimate significance, or a cosmic understanding. If religion is a medium in this sense, then it is, as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a "pervading or enveloping substance; the substance in which an organism lives; […]one's environment, conditions of life…". And if, as for this girl, that religious environment no longer speaks to her longing or looking beyond the confines of the system itself, she needs another paradigm for understanding the relationship between her existence and questions of the ultimate.

A difficulty with the approach to medium as condition and environment is that it reveals the opacity of language and meaning-making systems, and questions their ability to truly reflect embodied, experiential reality. While structuralist approaches to interpretation sought to clarify relationships between sign, signifier, and signification, post-structuralist thinking and deconstruction problematized any gesture toward an ultimate transparency of meaning. Religion-as-medium would extend the "religion-as-discourse" approach of post-structural analysis, after the influential work of Michel Foucault. Religion, as a kind of language, is uttered by subjects that are gendered and classed by the powerful institutions that regulate social life in specific yet complex historical situations (Foucault 1972). "The medium is the message", as the old adage goes, does not fully encompass this complexity. A creature's environment is not simply a soup that is swum in; it permeates the embodied existence of the creature. More simply put, we are our

environments, so we live the message of our medium. Often, we might think of social discourses, such as religion, as contexts in which we can exist apart, in the diving gear of our own thoughts and beliefs, unaffected by the stinging waters of difference. We bubble ourselves away at the very same time that we peer through foggy masks at the details of the life of those others, safe in the fiction that we are somewhere, someone, else. But these separations are stories that we tell ourselves. They are the same kinds of stories that tell us about our ultimate place in the universe, or the origins of the earth. The stories that distance us from our environments are the same kinds of stories that place us within other environments; that is, they are part of that religious discourse. So, rather than approaching religion as expressed through different forms of media or religion itself as a medium, I believe that we need a fluid model of religion that describes the permeability of subject and environment, which would also describe the interchangeability and transferability of story and storyteller, or, in the famous words of William Butler Yeats, the dancer and the dance.

Ben Phelan's article, "'Everyman, All at Once': Baptism and the Liberal Subject in *BioShock Infinite*", also investigates the interchangeability of subject and situation in the midst of ritual transformation, but in the context of the playing of a video game. At a crucial point in *BioShock Infinite*, the player/character undergoes a baptism ritual wherein it would seem that every possibility for transformation should be open to the player. However, as Phelan expands, this is not quite true. The spiritual dynamics of video games, as well as their use of religious imagery in world-building and story-telling, is an exciting aspect of media and performance studies to which Phelan's work makes a new and compelling contribution. Phelan demonstrates how the game uses the ritual of baptism not only to enhance the experience of gameplay by creating a futuristic dystopia full of twisted references to contemporary life, but also to call attention to the level of decision-making control that the player must abandon in order to continue the game. Such a move meta-theatrically frames the narrative in multiple ways: as the character within the world of the game, but also as a player in negotiation with the play of the game itself, as well as the game's creators. In one section, Phelan discusses how the use of baptism even caused some players to take issue with the gaming company on ethical grounds, because of the game interfered too strongly with their own religious beliefs. Such a fascinating eruption of the fiction of the game into the real world, and the irruption of reality into the world of the fiction, furthers my point that the relationship between religion and media does not neatly define elements, but rather demonstrates how such elements permeate one another. And, as Phelan's article also reflects, this relationship between the religious and the various media of our environment is not always invited or desired; sometimes, we are forced into situations where we must synthesize what we already know and what we are given in order to go on, or to go on playing. As an American scholar working in Asia, I can relate on a personal level. I often visit Bongwonsa, a Korean Buddhist temple, because it is at the end of a beautiful walk through a university campus and a quiet residential neighborhood near my home in Seoul. Although I am not a Buddhist or a Korean, Bongwonsa is something of a retreat for me. After a few visits with the Temple Stay program wherein I learned about temple life and etiquette, I feel comfortable using the

outer fountain to purify my hands, and going through the ritual bowing to greet Buddha when I enter and when I leave the temple grounds. But the big draw for me to Bongwonsa is not the beautiful main hall with its thousands of golden Buddhas, or even the expansive views of the city from its pagoda terrace, but something tucked away from view above the courtyard: a remarkable statue of Gwan Eum (also known as Kwan Yin in Chinese or Kannon in Japanese), the goddess of mercy. She is depicted in white marble as standing on a lotus blossom supported on the back of a dragon, who is apparently flying through clouds. In one hand she holds a fronded branch, and in the other a slim vase, the mouth of which is tilted down toward the open jaws of the dragon, as if she were offering him a drink. She gazes coolly, almost sternly, before her in an unreadable expression. Perhaps, with my own Catholic upbringing, Gwan Eum speaks to me as a powerful alternative to the more malleably feminine images of the Virgin Mary I was told to emulate. In my mind, Mary, another form of the Goddess, also rides on the backs of dragons. When I visit Gwan Eum, I am aware that I perform a kind of solo religious syncretism, seeking and finding in this iconography of a religious culture and a place so unlike the one that initially formed me a comforting and exciting vision of myself making a way in the world. Gwan Eum is balanced, but precarious; full, but in the process of emptying out; strong, but riding a current that is even stronger. She is my medium, not only representing, but also part of, the environment that both supports and permeates me.

The spiritual medium, first introduced by the late nineteenth century Spiritualist Movement around 1859, has had hidden influence in unlikely places, as illuminated by Kendra Leonard Preston in her article, "Performing Spiritualism in the Silent Cinema". As Preston establishes in her thoroughly-research essay, during the silent film era (1895-1927), spiritualism enjoyed a revival that resulted in a transposition of the aural techniques of spiritual mediums to the movie houses where predominantly women were employed as cinema accompanists. Preston traces this movement through the gender roles and expectations of women in Victorian society at large and also in the Spiritualism revival specifically, where such ideals for femininity were often reinforced at the same time that women also asserted themselves as spiritual authorities and entrepreneurs at the séances where they honed their performance skills. I encourage readers to click on the links to the videos inserted in the text of Preston's paper, so that they can listen for this reciprocity between an emergent religious culture, Spiritualism, and its uptake into the popular culture of film. Today, the spooky sounds of the early cinema's ghosts, spirit apparitions, and haunting dancing skeletons cannot be divorced from the popularly imagined séance scene. A popular understanding of Spiritualism as a religion both emerges from and is a part of the environment of popular media.

How do we know the world? How do we communicate what we know? Like any researcher, the humanities-based scholar of religion, spirituality, and performance benefits from paring down the questions to their most basic components. If religion and spirituality are ways of knowing the world, then how is this knowledge communicated? For the study of religion and performance, the question of media, of transmission and communication, is one of the most basic and so one that prompts an incredible amount of variation in approach. In addition to studying popular media in all its forms, we need to think about the

material existence and, as some would call it, the "biographies" (Kopytoff 1996) of the things that carry our messages. "When dealing with things of the spirit, matter matters inordinately" (Arweck and Keenan 2006, 1). And it is hubris to believe that only humans make meaning; the non-human actors that network themselves through forests and across galaxies perhaps work in ways that human minds cannot comprehend (Latour 2005). We need only open our eyes, yet alone the pages of a novel or the app for the latest podcast, to find that we are already *in medias* and *in "media" res*.

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