

## BOOK REVIEW

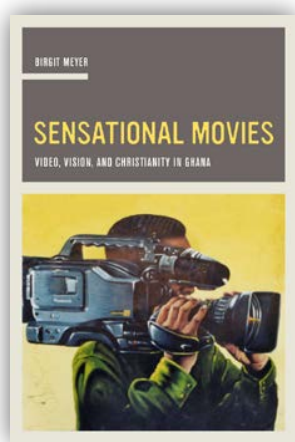
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# SENSATIONAL MOVIES, VIDEO, VISION, AND CHRISTIANITY IN GHANA

By *Birgit Meyer*

Reviewed by *Christine Albertini*

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Oakland, CA: University of California Press  
2015

*Sensational Movies, Video, Vision, and Christianity in Ghana* traces Birgit Meyer's historical-ethnographic study of movies in Ghana from 1985-2010. This fascinating account places the production, circulation, and reception of movies within the broad spectrum of culture in the public sphere. The period covered is a dynamic era of political and cultural upheaval in which Pentecostalism dominates as a key societal shaping force. Meyer traces the interplay of state, market, industry, visual media, and audiences with special attention to the space where there is convergence of religion and film. Priest, Ngolo and Stabell's piece in this journal (2020) drills down deeply into a disturbing aspect of modern life in some African societies, namely the manipulation of children caught in the still-present vestiges of witchcraft. Meyer's study examines movies as a horizontal thread revealing the interweaving of such darker aspects as covered by Priest et al. with the emergent Christian faith, which rejects witchcraft but incorporates certain symbols of its imagination. Movies are a mirror at this crossroad of the traditional and the modern.

In this work, Meyer places herself firmly in the panoply of leading researchers and theorists in the emerging field of film theory. She ably juxtaposes her ethnography and conclusions in thorough dialogue with seminal works in the field: comparing, contrasting, deepening.

*Sensational Movies* is a solid and well written work of scholarship. But it is also an accessible, readable, and engaging chronicle of a prominent slice of Ghanaian society. The mastery with which Meyer zooms in to the everyday life of Ghanaian audiences and zooms out to provide context makes for an enjoyable as well as an informative read.

In its initial chapters *Sensational Movies* provides an account of the nexus at which the monopoly of state cinema was supplanted by the democratization of video technology. The camera, taken out of the hands of a state-sponsored film industry and taken up in the marketplace by an emerging and talented visual arts industry, came to dominate public and communal spaces. "The basic characteristic of Ghanaian video movies being that they nourish themselves from and feed back into everyday life" (119).

The urban landscape of Accra is both an epicenter of video industry activity as well as the place where the majority of video stories take place. Accra for centuries has been a key center for both intra-Africa and international trade, even holding the unfortunate distinction of being the primary port of departure for the global slave trade in the colonial era. Post-colonial modernization has only enhanced the centrality of Accra as a crossroad of African cultures. But movies have offered only a partially true depiction of urban space as a developed modern city and have only partially captured the ordinary reality of most city inhabitants. The film industry bias is toward depicting a city life that is modern and progressive, as well as full of moral and spiritual dangers, and demonic entanglements.

Against this backdrop, films provide a description of the make-up and attitude of audiences affording an intimate insight into the changing landscape of social and familial norms. The period studied marks a time of

seismic transition of family life from tribal and extended family to an emphasis on the nuclear family. This combined with the rise of the Christian church places film in the position of morality tale, with a particularly Pentecostal-charismatic character. As noted in Priest et al.'s study, witchcraft and the occult haunt the sub-straight of this transitional time in the tension between more indigenous approaches to the realm of the spirit and Christianity, seen as modern and transcendent. Also noted by Priest et al., many Christian pastors, claiming the power to identify evil spirits and to cleanse are often turned to for reconciliation, just as chieftains and priests might have been turned to in the past (2020, 8). Christian pastors are regularly depicted as such in Ghanaian movies, and in fact are often the very actors of these portrayals.

Meyer does not simply observe the role of film and its audiences. In the spirit of Clifford Geertz's "thick description", which she cites, Meyer attends and hosts video gatherings of all sorts, as well as engages substantively with the artists in the field. This is not an armchair or arm's length study.

Meyer provides the most detailed and insightful analysis in chapters dealing with movies' attempt to "make the invisible visible". She notes the similarity between film and religion in that both conjure imaginary realms in an effort to bring them to life or make them appear real. It is the representational mediation of religion captured within the representational medium of film that makes the video and cinema world in this period a true magnifying glass of the images and ideas which would otherwise remain invisible. "Focusing on the convergence of religion and film, I do not intend to completely blur the two. Watching a movie and attending a church service are different activities, and audiences are, of course, aware of this. My point is that being alert to the interface of religion and film allows us to explore how movies in the framework of entertainment, offer a perspective on the spiritual that accommodates audiences' quest to 'see clearly'"(159).

Meyer devotes considerable space to movies' mirroring the traditional terrain of religion: the struggle between good and evil, demons and God, the powers of darkness and the occult with a Christian vision. "The images of popular Christianity, strongly deployed especially in Pentecostal-charismatic churches, converged considerably with that conjured up in video movies, sustaining a thick, mutually affirming intermedial texture" (153). A key original concept she develops is what she calls trans-figuration. Her "playful" point of reference is to the Transfiguration of Christ. For the purpose of movie analysis ". . . transfiguration in my use places center stage the practices through which an imaginary expressed through sermons and other narratives, including dreams and visions, is pictorialized

in movies and feeds back into narratives and the inner imagination" (155). Movies, it turns out, are an ideal medium for the transfer of symbolism. A corollary of the explication of trans-figuration is Meyer's examination of movies' role in attempting to render spirits visible through the logic of revelation. Again, playfully using another overt religious term, the term revelation in this context refers to movies "as successful harbingers of truthful insights into a dimension that is considered inaccessible via ordinary perception" (157).

The last area of intriguing examination is how videos contribute to an accurate and adequate representation of culture, tradition, and heritage as well as aspirations captured in more recent "epic" genre. At issue are both state policies and social desire to be have Ghanaian society viewed in certain ways. How do movies contribute to external and internal sensibilities of what constitutes culture, tradition, and heritage? This remains a controversial topic, just as the tension between pride in tradition and yearning for modernity exists in Ghanaian society.

One of Meyer's last stories is a profound and humble insight. In 2011 she was invited to give a short presentation about her research at an event in her native Netherlands, featuring Ghanaian and Nigerian films, along with a rousing sermon given by a Ghanaian Pentecostal pastor, and an interview with a film producer. Meyer was surprised that the largely African audience was annoyed by her presentation, feeling it undid the spell cast by the film and the sermon. Her desire to put a 'strange movie' in context for its audience was unnecessary. "These pictures were capable of speaking for themselves" (295). True. Nevertheless, the cannon of knowledge of this genre and this period in Ghana is much enriched by Meyer's dutiful work.

## Reference

- Priest, Robert J., Abel Ngolo and Timothy Stabell. 2020. Christian Pastors and Alleged Child Witches in Kinshasa, DRC. *On Knowing Humanity Journal* 4(1):1-51.



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