Marie-Therese Mäder

Mormon Lifestyles

Communicating Religion and Ethics in Documentary Media

Nomos

MEDIEN UND RELIGION

Marie-Therese Mäder

Mormon Lifestyles

Communicating Religion and Ethics in Documentary Media

Nomos

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Opening Credits

The seven years of research for this book benefited from the support of a remarkable number of people, to whom I wish to express my appreciation. I am profoundly grateful for:

My habilitation committee at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich/DE, composed of Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati (chair), Ulrich Schwab, Robert Yelle and the external evaluator Mia Lövheim. In committing to this duty, they donated a very valuable and finite commodity – their personal time.

The research group Media and Religion, a vital network of not only inestimable learning but also steadfast friendships. Natalie Fritz, Anna-Katharina Höpflinger, Stefanie Knauss, Michael Ulrich, and Paola von Wyss-Giacosa provided substantial support as I was writing. The publication process has been accompanied by the patient and capable Beate Bernstein from the publication house NOMOS and the incredibly gifted editor and linguistic adviser Rona Johnston.

Two scholarships, a Marie Heim-Vögtlin grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), which also co-funded this publication, and a grant from the Bayerische Gleichstellungsförderung of the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität. This financial support was vital, and the academic acknowledgement these scholarships represented was highly motivating.

The research for this project was an opportunity for me to spend time at a number universities and departments, where I was welcomed by several academic hosts: Charles Musser at Yale University in New Haven/US (Film Studies Program), Jürgen Mohn at the Universität Basel/CH (Science of Religion), Heather Hendershot and Edward Schiappa at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge/US (Comparative Media Studies), David Holland at Harvard University in Cambridge/US (Divinity School), and Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich/DE (Evangelisch-Theologische Fakultät). The opportunity to collaborate with María Teresa Soto Sanfiel (Departament de Comunicació, Audiovisual i Publicitat, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) was academically invigorating and also produced a prized friendship.

My family showed great patience and understanding as hour after hour was given over to this research, even seven days a week. My three children, David, Zoë and Levin, had good reason to ask what exactly I was working

on, a question that gave me useful pause for thought. My family accompanied me in different constellations on two research stays in the United States. And above all, this adventure was only possible because of the support of my beloved husband, Markus Hofmann, who cares for our family in so many ways and to whom I wish to express my deepest gratefulness.

Part I: The Field of Documentary and Religion

1. Framing the Question

Read the newspaper or listen to radio or watch television – reporting on religion seems to be everywhere. So, for example, we are now accustomed to wide-ranging debates on radical Islam, while the Pope's travels around the globe are regularly described – two instances from a seemingly endless choice.[1] Reporting on religion is often accompanied by images. Two kneeling and praying Asian women are shown at the memorial to the attack in Barcelona on August 18, 2017, when a car was driven into a crowd, killing thirteen people and injuring many others (Fig. 1). Flowers and candles – the red candles usually used in cemeteries – were left in honor of the victims. The commentary below the image, published one month after the Barcelona terrorist attack, explains that it is wrong to think that all religion is backward; we must remember that our free world is a product of the Enlightenment and also of Christianity.[2] Yet this claim is dubious, and its defense of religion, in this case Christianity, problematic.

First of all, the commentary immediately makes the two women Christian, yet they could belong to any religious tradition or grouping. In the article and via the image, readers are given information about religion, namely that Enlightenment is connected to Christianity and results in free will. The newspaper has adopted the role of an authority, as a source of religious knowledge.

Secondly, in European countries knowledge about religion, specifically of religious traditions and of Christianity in particular, is decreasing, a phenomenon that has been described as "religious analphabetism."[3] The implications for the role of the media are noteworthy. Scholars of religion Kim Knott, Elizabeth Poole, and Teemu Taira have argued, "At a time

---

1 Süddeutsche de GmbH Germany Munich, "Papst Franziskus als Friedensmahner," Süddeutsche.de, accessed October 19, 2017, http://www.sueddeutsche.de/news/pan orama/kirche-papst-franziskus-als-friedensmahner-dpa.urn-newsml-dpa-com-20090 101-170910-99-991119.

2 Michael Rüegg, "Warum wir in Europa Religion brauchen," NZZ am Sonntag, accessed October 19, 2017, https://nzzas.nzz.ch/meinungen/warum-wir-in-europa-die-religion-dringend-brauchen-ld.1314055.

3 Monique C. H. van Dijk-Groeneboer, "Religious Education in the Secularised Netherlands," *International Studies in Catholic Education* 9, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 17.

Fig. 1 Two women praying for the victims in Barcelona (Image: Sergio Perez/ Reuters).

when the numbers of people who participate regularly in religious practices and have access to religious knowledge is declining, the media's role as an information provider, even educator, is potentially important."[4] Drawing from their comparative investigation of the representation of religion in British media in the 1980s and the late 2000s, they have concluded that "[m]ore and more, people depend on the media – newspapers, radio, television, and increasingly the Internet – for education, information and news about religion."[5] The combination of these two phenomena – decreasing awareness of religious traditions and increased media reporting of religion – hands to media a prominent role in defining broad public understandings of religion.

How, then, does the media frame its communication about religion? As the photography and commentary related to the terror incident in Barcelona make evident, the media's approach is not neutral. Its informa-

---

4 Kim Knott, Elizabeth Poole, and Teemu Taira, *Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred: Representation and Change* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013), Kindle Locations 4708-4709.
5 Knott, Poole, and Taira, *Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred* , Kindle Locations 4688.

tion strategy is to be compelling, credible, and appealing, and its approach follows certain conventions to attract consumers. Because their reports and commentary about religion have a factual base, when responding to a specific event or accounting for specific circumstances they define what religion is and how religion is performed. The media is concerned to ensure that its consumers believe that it is conveying a reality, not an invention. To that end, it adopts a documentary mode of representation, communicating to consumers that what is seen, written, and spoken really happened. Religion is not overtly theorized; the media professional's hermeneutics is not explicitly addressed. To uncover the medial conceptualization of religion, we must read between the lines.

And our follow-up question must be: What is, then, the media construction of religion? These questions provide the impetus for this book, which examines media's spaces of communication, namely spaces of production, circulation and distribution, representation, and consumption.

1.1. Religious lifestyles in the media

Addressing media portrayals of religion, I use the term "religious lifestyles". The term draws from Max Weber's highly influential *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and from other approaches that similarly consider lifestyle a helpful category.[6] It is noteworthy that the English translation of the German term "Lebensstil", used extensively and consistently in Weber's text, is never literal, so never "lifestyle" or "style of life". "Lebensstil" is rendered variously as "way of life",[7] "uniformity of life",[8] "type of life"[9] and in other forms. One occasion on which Weber employs "Lebensstil" is his explanation of how the Puritans' asceticism and under-

---

6 Laurie Ouellette, *Lifestyle TV*, Routledge Television Guidebooks (New York et al.: Routledge, 2016), 55; Lynn Schofield Clark, "Introduction: Identity, Belonging, and Religious Lifestyle Branding (Fashion Bibles, Bhangra Parties, and Muslim Pop),"in *Religion, Media, and the Marketplace* (Piscatawa/NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 1–36; Barbara Hölscher, *Lebensstile durch Werbung?: zur Soziologie der Life-Style-Werbung* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998), 16; Benjamin D. Zablocki and Rosabeth Moss Kanter, "The Differentiation of Life-Styles," *Annual Review of Sociology* 2, no. 1 (1976): 269.

7 Max Weber and Anthony Giddens, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London, New York: Routledge, 2001), 111.

8 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 2005), 72.

9 Weber, 115.

standing of work contributed to the development of capitalism: "Wir suchen uns nun noch speziell die Punkte zu verdeutlichen, in welchen die puritanische Auffassung des Berufs und die Forderung asketischer Lebensführung d i r e k t die Entwicklung des kapitalistischen Lebensstils beeinflussen musste."[10] Conduct ("Lebensführung") and lifestyle ("Lebensstil") are two different but closely related terms in this paragraph. The first is used with reference to daily routine; the second embraces the more generalizing concept of how life is shaped within a broader world-view. Even though it may seek conformity, "lifestyle" leaves more space for individual variety.

In the approach taken in this study, religious lifestyles are understood as located in that tension between conformity and individual preference. Additionally, the religious lifestyles encountered here take account of the interaction of media and religion. The media report on and inform about religious topics, and in so doing they shape religion's representation within the media space. The media are also part of the wider public space, where they influence how religion is reconstructed, diffused, and understood. These communication processes are constitutive of religious lifestyles.

Lifestyles, and how they are presented by the media, are understood to be determined by a lack of social value coherence, a state described by Benjamin D. Zablocki and Rosabeth Moss Kanter as when "members of a society cease to agree on the value of the currency of the markets in commodities and prestige or at least come to recognize other independent sources of value."[11] Religious traditions, their practices and often conservative world-views have been one conventional source of shared values. A religious lifestyle, however, is a product of an independent source of value more individual and less fully defined by traditional institutions. As Jörg Stolz has shown for Switzerland, religion has become just one choice amongst many, and its value is no longer distinct from that of other activities. Religion has become something to do during leisure time. An individual might choose between going to the cinema, the gym, or a religious service. In Stolz' analysis, a majority of people see such activities or practices as

---

10 Max Weber, *Max Weber, Schriften, 1894–1922*, ed. Dirk Käsler, Kröners Taschenausgabe (Stuttgart: Kröner, 2002), 211; Weber and Giddens, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 111. "Let us now try to clarify the points in which the Puritan idea of the calling and the premium it placed upon ascetic conduct was bound directly to influence the development of a capitalistic way of life."

11 Zablocki and Moss Kanter, "The Differentiation of Life-Styles," 281.

equivalents.[12] But the person who makes that decision needs to be able to defend their choice, which is more than just a simple option but bears inherent meaning. That meaning is encompassed by a lifestyle that provides *value coherence* and is expressed in practices that might concern dress, food, social interactions, or sexual relations.

Another angle to the interaction of media and religious lifestyle concerns the portrayal of religion. The depiction of religious worldviews follows representation conventions like those of other realms of media depiction, for sports or politics, for example. These realms are not simply in competition, but might also intersect, for example in audio-visual parameters like camera, light, and sound. When viewed in terms of media conventions, religion is then just another cultural practice like any other human activity, be it vegetarianism or sports. According to media representations, there is very little difference between practicing religion or practicing sport. Adapting everything to the same standards of entertainment and information results in a levelling and conformity of values. If values converge, values start to blur, like a bland meal where everything tastes similar. According to Zablocki and Moss Kanter, such equalizing of values has the result that "individuals will seek other means of attaining value coherence."[13] The media has a role to play in establishing such value coherence, deploying strategies that shape and express popular and global lifestyles. Social-religious actors, media institutions, and consumers participate collectively in this process of producing, representing, and consuming religion. Zablocki and Moss Kanter propose that "To the extent that a person's position in the markets for wealth and prestige will leave some degree of freedom of choice, differentiation of life-style results."[14] Religion is evidently captured in the media landscape as an element of lifestyle, as an entertaining and informal mode of value coherence.

1.2. Documentary media and religion – and a Mormon case study

As the title suggests, at the heart of this investigation is the construction of religion in documentary audio-visual media. The analysis is rooted in ex-

---

12 Jörg Stolz et al., *Religion und Spiritualität in der Ich-Gesellschaft: vier Gestalten des (Un-)Glaubens*, vol. 16, Beiträge zur Pastoralsoziologie (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2014), 57.

13 Zablocki and Moss Kanter, "The Differentiation of Life-Styles," 283.

14 Zablocki and Moss Kanter, 293.

tensive research into Mormons in the media, which acts as a case study. Five core issues are decisive:

(1) The effects of documentary media on how religion is perceived: How do documentary media, in this instance commercials, television reporting, television series, reality shows, and documentary films influence representations, public perception, and opinions about Mormonism, particularly in light of a documentary's need to be able to convince its audiences that it depicts "real life" that is not in fact real but mediated.[15] The study recognizes that circulation and distribution for this media category are largely via television and the Internet.

(2) The effect of media on religious communities and traditions: How do Mormon organizations adapt to the logic of documentary media? This question is examined in light of the construction of religion in the media, which can be termed mediatization.

(3) The interaction between economics, religion, and access to media: How does Mormonism – the economically powerful Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) as well as other Mormon groupings – adapt to and profit from the logic of the documentary, particularly in light of LDS Church's interests in mission and conversion? The LDS Church, the largest group of Mormons, headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah, has more than 16 million members, more than nine million of whom live outside the United States.[16]

This critical analysis is accompanied by theoretical and methodological reflections that explore two additional issues. The goal is to develop an approach to the interaction of documentary media and religion within the study of religion:

(4) The scholarly conception of religion, and the need for its reevaluation: What theoretical framework is most effective for an investigation of religion as seen through the documentary lens? This study understands religion as a cultural phenomenon that interacts with other cultural fields. In media studies, it can be useful to embrace religion through communication theory, a perspective that allows media and religion to be understood as interactive systems where religious meaning is formed by media practices.

---

15 Patricia Aufderheide, *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.

16 "LDS Statistics and Church Facts | Total Church Membership," www.mormonnewsroom.org, accessed January 29, 2019, http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics.

(5) Methodological approaches to representation and self-representation of a religious community: how can a diversity of sources and data most effectively be systematized and analyzed? The book focuses on specific media fields, acknowledging the fund of symbols and codes that can be used to address, process, and transmit ideas about religion and concepts of religion.

These five main concerns are examined in the context of a transdisciplinary approach to religion and media that I have refined over the last 7 years. The path taken by such research is winding, and may include dead ends, but the view is always rewarding. The setting is scholarly, but also personal. Readers will find it helpful to be aware of the hermeneutic horizons that have accompanied and influenced this book.

1.3. Hermeneutic horizon of the researcher

My focus on documentary media emerged from the significant time I had invested in the in-depth study of religion and fiction film, which generated awareness of the neglect of relations between documentary media and religion. To extend and intensify my scholarly engagement with documentary media, I took up a postdoctoral opportunity with Charles Musser at the Film Studies program at Yale University. Before arriving in New Haven I followed a friend's suggestion that I plan a visit to Broadway to see the most acclaimed musical of the year 2011, *The Book of Mormon* (script, lyrics, and music by Trey Parker, Matt Stone, and Robert Lopez). I did indeed find the musical highly entertaining, although at the back of my mind I wondered why the audience was so intrigued by Mormons and Mormonism.

At Yale I was to produce my own documentary film, a very effective hands-on approach to understanding the concept and its realization. It was 2012 and the presidential campaign was in full swing, with debates on television and at the university. I recognized that Republican candidate Mitt Romney's Mormon affiliation attracted much media interest. The worshiping communities to which other candidates belonged were also part of the election rhetoric – Barack Obama's affiliations with the Black Church and two vice-presidential candidates' membership of the Roman Catholic Church. In my 30-minute long documentary *The Politics of Religion* (CH/US 2013), I conducted conversations with leaders within each of these three religious communities, including Mormon bishop Steve Weber, and attended their congregations' worship. My first personal contact with the

Mormons left me with a sense not only of their friendliness and readiness to talk but also of their political engagement. I came to realize that not all the Mormons I met supported "their" candidate.

As a scholar of the study of media and religion, I wanted to understand more about this community and launched an intensive exploration of Mormon studies, a young and diverse scholarly field in which Mormons themselves are very productive, especially in engaging their history. Their drive to communicate is also given voice in the rich production of their own media, be it for educational, missionary, political, or public affairs purposes. Mormon media productions are distinctively elaborate and also professional in terms of both quality and wages. Yet while Mormon theologians have no specific academic home, Mormon historians are often part of an official and well-financed church history department, staffed by professionally trained historians.[17]

While living in the United States, I learned more of the Mormon groups than are distinct from the LDS Church. While it was impossible for me to develop personal connections with these groups, not least as some of them exist in a precarious legal situation because they are polygamist, I did encounter them intensively in the media – in documentaries, TV reporting, and the reality show *Sister Wives* (US, TLC, 2010–2020, 14 seasons) produced by TLC (The Learning Channel). TLC established a German arm in 2014, since when the Mormon reality show has also been accessible in German-speaking European countries. The more I explored Mormonism, the more apparent became the vital role played by audio-visual documentary media for Mormon communities. Here one encounters both portrayals of Mormons and Mormonism whose vantage point may be either internal or external to the religious community.

Finally, in 2015, having made contact with the LDS Church to explain my research goals, I visited the capital of Mormonism in Salt Lake City.[18] (During this period I spent a year as a visiting scholar at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] and at Harvard Divinity School).[19] In Salt Lake City I was able to interview media professionals from the LDS Church, to talk to people from the Public Affairs and Missionary Depart-

---

17 "Church History Library," accessed June 19, 2019, https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/section/library?lang=eng.

18 I would like to thank Colleen McDannell who generously hosted me when I undertook my research in Salt Lake City, UT.

19 I wish to thank my hosts Edward Schappa and Heather Hendershot, of MIT's Comparative Media Studies, and David Holland, of the North American Colloquium at Harvard Divinity School, for their support.

ments, to visit the film studios that are closely related to the church (their outdoor setting is a mid-19th century Mormon settlement), to experience a VIP tour through the temple district with Swiss missionary Sister Myrtha and Elder Weston R. Innes, to visit the missionary education center in Provo, and to be given a private tour at Brigham Young University in Provo.

Throughout my stay in Salt Lake City I was accompanied by the helpful and friendly Karlie Brand Guymon from the Public Affairs Department (Fig. 2). Guymon scheduled and drove me to the interviews, accompanied me on the tour, and showed me Salt Lake City and parts of Utah. I was able to talk about religious worldviews with Guymon and also with other Mormons on many other occasions.

I identified myself as having been raised Roman Catholic and as married with three children. The Latter-day Saints respected my background but still referred from time to time to the advantages of being a member of the church. The director of the Missionary Department, Stephen B. Allen, ended our conversation with the announcement: "Now I'm proselytizing," and then presented, half seriously and half joking, the advantage of the ritual of sealing in producing a marriage and family for eternity. "It's possible to stay with your family forever,"[20] Allen encouraged me. I am really not sure if this is a desirable perspective. The Christian concept of "till death do us apart" certainly disposes of some advantages too. The members of the LDS community whom I met in Salt Lake City seemed to perceive me partly as Roman Catholic, partly as a Swiss mother, partly as a guest academic at MIT, and probably just a little bit as a scholar engaged in the study of religion.

Another field trip brought me to Frankfurt/M., Germany, where I had conversations and interviews with media professionals from the Public Affairs Department of the German LDS Church. The experience in Germany was quite different from my encounters in Utah, for although again very polite, the LDS were more reluctant and less generous with their schedule. They were also somewhat reserved. Perhaps their presence in Germany and Frankfurt, where the European administration for the LDS Church in Europe is located, feels less firmly rooted. Their attitude was also more defensive.[21]

In January 2016 I travelled back to Utah to visit the Provo City Temple before its dedication with Karlie Brand Guymon and my daughter Zoë. Karlie advised us "to dress in Sunday clothes as if going to a service"

---

20   See interview with SA1, Salt Lake City/UT, June 22, 2015.
21   See interview with SA7 and SA8, Frankfurt/M., August 19, 2015.

Fig. 2 At Temple Square North Visitors' Center, from left to right: nn, Marie-Therese Mäder, Sister Myrtha, Karlie Brand Guymon (Image: Marie-Therese Mäder, Salt Lake City/UT, US 2015).

(Fig. 3), which brought to mind the VIP tour of the temple district I had been given in June 2015, when I had been the only woman wearing trousers and a brightly colored shirt with a checked pattern. On being shown the group picture taken during the tour in front of the famous statue of Jesus, a friend commented that my clothes reveal me to be a non-Mormon (Fig. 2).

The tickets for the temple visit had to be bought in advance and they sold out quickly, evidence of the immense interest in the renovated Mor-

Fig. 3 Zoë Hofmann, Karlie Brand Guymon, Marie-Therese Mäder dressed in their Sunday best for their visit to Provo City Center Temple (Image: Marie-Therese Mäder, Provo/UT, US 2016).

mon temple. When we arrived, many families – most were Mormon and often had small children – waited in front of the entrance to the temple, with the women in skirts and all well dressed, as if "attending a church service." The parents were showing their children the temple to generate anticipation of the time when, aged 12, they will be allowed to enter the consecrated building (Fig. 4).

That step also requires a recommendation – based on an interview at which the applicant is asked if they keep the commandments – from the appropriate bishop and from the president of the stake. Baptism is also essential. The visit to the temple was not unlike a quick stroll through an over-crowded historic home, with many impressively quiet children. No

Fig. 4 A Mormon family in front of the LDS temple in Provo, UT (Image: Marie-Therese Mäder, Provo/UT, US 2016).

lingering was possible as the line of those still waiting would grow quickly, and the rooms could only be accessed in single file. Temple workers purposefully invited the visitors to keep moving. While more of the building can be seen on the temple website than I was able to take in on my tour,[22] the visit to this temple before its dedication was fully immersive and enlightening for a scholar of Mormonism.

In hermeneutic terms, then, this research has been approached with a perspective drawn from the methods of the social science, media studies, and ethnographic studies. The field work in Salt Lake City, Provo, and Frankfurt was indispensable in generating a comprehensive view of documentary Mormon media spaces. Meeting Latter-day Saints and the opportunity to conduct rich conversations made me more sensitive to how documentary media and religion interact in the case study.

---

22 "Tabernacle to Temple: Provo's Legacy of Worship," accessed October 20, 2017, https://history.lds.org/exhibit/historic-sites/utah/provo/provo-city-center-temple?lang=eng.

1.4. Structure of this book

This book contains three parts. Part I, "Opening the Field of Documentary Media and Religion", consists of three chapters (chapters 1–3). The *first chapter*, "Framing the Question", introduces the research questions, which address the interface of documentary media and religion, its effect on the perception of religion, and how religious and non-religious agents interact with documentary media. At this point the hermeneutic horizons of the researcher are laid out, including academic background and field-work experience. The *second chapter*, "Spaces of Communication: Theoretical and Methodological Framework", locates the research in the field of media and religion and expands upon the theoretical framing of the interface of documentary media and religion. There the heuristic concept of semio-pragmatics is introduced as a research tool and linked with the understanding of religion with which this study operates. The four communication spaces of production, representation, distribution/circulation, and consumption are presented and illustrated by sources used for this project. The multidimensional concept of "crystallization" is also explained. It defends the idea that the outcome of research is "inevitably situated, partial, constructed, multiple, and embodied."[23] That recognition endorses the use of a diversity of theories and methods in qualitative research and the presentation of the results in various forms. The methods drawn from social science, ethnographic studies, media hermeneutics, and film analysis that are applied in this study are discussed in detail. These methods are systematized in the spaces of communication of documentary media and partly elucidated with examples from the study. Finally, the types of documentary source on which the study is based are introduced: advertisements, documentaries, corporate videos, television reporting, series and reality television shows. *Chapter three*, "Shifting Perceptions of Mormons and Mormonism", considers existing approaches to Mormonism. We consider their methodological exploration of the religious community, the sources they have employed and the perspective from which the community is constructed. The chapter also provides necessary information about the historical and contemporary context of the community. The literature explored here is focused on Latter-day Saints, members of the biggest Mormon church with its headquarter in Salt Lake City/UT, but until 1890, when the

---

23 Laura L. Ellingson, *Engaging Crystallization in Qualitative Research: An Introduction* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009), 13.

community split over the issue of polygamy, all Mormon groups had a common history.[24]

Part II "Interactions between the Communication Spaces of Documentary Media and Religion" (chapters 4–6) explores the four spaces of communication in light of a variety of sources and methods. *Chapter four*, "The (Ex-) Mormon Image Campaigns", puts video series from two different production spaces in conversation. The media strategies found in *I'm a Mormon*, an advertising series launched – and produced – by the LDS Church between 2010 and 2016, are interrogated. Additionally, the chapter looks at the *I Am an Ex Mormon* video series, produced by former LDS members in response to the LDS campaign. The conclusion of the chapter compares the reading modes generated by the series' different communication spaces. *Chapter five*, "The Private is Public in Reality Shows about Religion", looks in detail at the interface between religion and reality television shows and explores how it blurs the boundaries between the private and public spheres of religion. The chapter focusses on two reality shows: *The District* (US 2006/2012), produced by the LDS Church, instructs missionaries for the field. *Sister Wives* (US 2010–2020), produced by the US TV network TLC, entertains its audience with depictions and discussions of the life of a polygamist Mormon family. The chapter aims to show how the public and the private interact and considers how the shows address their audiences with different reading modes. *Chapter six*, "Researching Spaces of Production and Consumption of Latter-day Saints Media", applies qualitative and quantitative methods to the spaces of consumption and production. It explores how the semio-pragmatic approach can be combined with an audience study. The audience study considers the effectiveness of the communication of religion through documentaries and also highlights cultural differences in the space of consumption, as it was conducted in Switzerland (Zürich) and Spain (Barcelona). The second part of the chapter considers how media professionals who are members of the LDS Church understand their own work in light of their religious affiliation. The results of the two approaches and their methodological implications and limitations are brought together and analyzed.

---

24 The case Reynolds versus United Stated (1878) is an important turning point in the legal question of polygamy. The court decided unanimously that marriage is a "sacred obligation" but regulated by law. People therefore cannot avoid a law because of their religious convictions. "Reynolds v. United States, 98 U.S. 145 (1878)," Justia Law, accessed May 31, 2019, https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/98/145/.

Part III "The Ethical Space of Documentaries and Religion" focusses on film's ethical principles, moral reasonings, responsibilities, and power relations (chapters 7–11). *Chapter 7*, "Sensationalized Mormons", introduces the central questions of part III. *Chapter 8*, "The Ethics of Entertainment and the Transmission of Information within Spaces of Communication", establishes the theoretical framework within which ethical questions are located and systematizes them in the communication spaces of documentaries, where the role of values, norms, and ethical judgements are discussed. Responsibility and power relations are given particular attention, as they are especially relevant for the ethical space of documentary media. *Chapter 9*, "The Spectrum of Mormon Documentaries", and *chapter 10*, "Telling about Mormons", consider the ethical space of ten documentaries in light of the following categories: the hermeneutic horizons of social actors in the spaces of production, representation, and consumption, the social actors' loyalties, the camera gaze, and the production context. *Chapter 9* discusses documentaries by filmmakers affiliated with Mormonism, mostly as members of the LDS Church. *Chapter 10* examines documentaries that are produced by private or public television channels or independent filmmakers. *Chapter 11*, "Religion as Sensation and Infotainment", provides concluding thoughts for this section on how religion is defined in the ethical space of documentary media.

The conclusion, Part IV (*chapter 12*), "Approaching Religion in the Communication Spaces of Documentary Media", assesses the outcome of this study by reconsidering the interface of documentary media and religion in light of a semio-pragmatic approach; asks how the different reading modes reconstruct Mormonism; and looks again at the concept of religion as engaged in this study.

2. Spaces of Communication:
Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The approach to Mormonism adopted in this study is located in the field of media and religion. Mormons form the case study, while the media specific to the project is identified as "documentary media", a term that we will explore below. The relationship between documentary media and religion is key on a systematic level and determines the theoretical and methodological parameters. It likewise shapes the study's approach to religion.

This chapter addresses a number of fundamental questions . How is the interface between documentary media and religion constituted? How is the term "documentary" defined and used? How is religion construed? And finally, how might documentary media allow us to research a religious group? The questions sketch an approach to religion that places center stage the media and their spaces of production, representation, consumption, distribution and circulation. The following deliberations are to be understood as working tools, to be employed and refined in the course of this inter- and transdisciplinary endeavor, as we scrutinize a diversity of documentary sources and their particular contexts.

The chapter starts with a short introduction to the field of media and religion. Next, the semio-pragmatics of documentary media are outlined, along with a discussion of how religion is conceived. The model of spaces of communication is then introduced, and discussed in relation to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' (LDS Church) media library.[25] Finally, the methodological approach is explained with specific reference to the sources available for this study.

---

25 "LDS Media Library – Art, Videos, Pictures, and Audio Downloads," accessed September 28, 2017, https://www.lds.org/media-library?lang=eng&_r=1.

2.1. The field of media and religion – an overview of approaches

In the last two decades "media and religion" has become established as an innovative and multifaceted field of research.[26] According to Stewart Hoover, whose own field is media studies, this research has taken two directions in particular: (1) examination of the ways in which religious groups and traditions use the media in the practice of their religion and (2) investigation of the engagement of the media with religion.[27] Audio-visual media makes up a subgroup, with its diverse forms – the "electronic church," feature films, television, or the Internet, for example – as subjects of research. Documentary media are frequently at the same time audio-visual media. Even though the literature that is mentioned in the following does not address audio-visual sources alone, they play a key role in the field of media and religion.

The interface of audio-visual media and religion can be divided up according to the lens through which the topic is viewed. For research on the use of media by religious communities three aspects are significant: (1) the producer and the production context, (2) the media itself, and (3) the consumer, aka the recipient. A focus on production will frequently deal with institutional and economic issues, for example the links between market and media within popular religion,[28] religious media as lifestyle,[29] or the

---

26 Mia Lövheim, "Introduction: Gender – a Blind Spot in Media, Religion and Culture?," in *Media, Religion and Gender: Key Issues and New Challenges*, ed. Mia Lövheim, Media, Religion and Culture (London: Routledge, 2013), 1–15; David Morgan, "Religion and Media: A Critical Review of Recent Developments," *Critical Research on Religion* 1, no. 3 (November 15, 2013): 347–56; Daniel A. Stout, *Media and Religion: Foundations of an Emerging Field* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, "Eine illustrierte Annäherung an das Verhältnis von Medien und Religion," in *Religiöse Blicke – Blicke auf das Religiöse: Visualität und Religion*, ed. Bärbel Beinhauer-Köhler, Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, and Joachim Valentin (Zürich: TVZ, 2010), 245–266.

27 Stewart M. Hoover, "Media and Religion," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005); Alf G. Linderman, "Approaches to the Study of Religion in the Media," in *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*, ed. Stewart M. Hoover (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997), 305–315.

28 Hubert Knoblauch, *Populäre Religion: auf dem Weg in eine spirituelle Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt/M.: Campus-Verlag, 2009); Hubert Knoblauch, "Populäre Religion. Markt, Medien Und Die Popularisierung Der Religion," *Zeitschrift Für Religionswissenschaft* 8, no. 2 (2000): 143–162.

29 Lynn Schofield Clark, *Religion, Media, and the Marketplace* (Piscataway/NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 1–36.

marketing of religion in the media.[30] Investigation of media representations, or texts, might consider their symbolic-mythical dimension.[31] In addition, studies on representation have subjected media texts to qualitative or quantitative analysis.[32] With a focus on explicitly religious themes, religious significance becomes an analytical category in its own right. Emphasizing the communication process and its aesthetic qualities likewise brings a focus on the medium and its religious representations.[33] When the central concern is with consumers and recipients, that accentuation has highlighted, inter alia, the ritual aspects of the media or the social practices of recipients.[34] Behind the concept of media consumption as ritual is the idea that groups and individuals adopt the modes of interpretation transmitted in the media and that these modes are subsequently transferred by the recipients into other social spheres. One topic that has been addressed in this context is how the media portrays issues of identity, belonging, and

---

30 Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age*, Religion, Media, and Culture Series (London: Routledge, 2008).

31 Jörg Rüpke, "Religion medial," in *Religion und Medien: vom Kultbild zum Internetritual*, ed. Jamal Malik, vol. 4, Vorlesungen des Interdisziplinären Forums Religion der Universität Erfurt (Münster: Aschendorff, 2007), 19–28.

32 Andreas Hepp and Veronika Krönert, *Medien, Event, Religion: die Mediatisierung des Religiösen*, Medien – Kultur – Kommunikation (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009); Oliver Krüger, "Exkurs: Die Präsenz von Religionen im deutschen Fernsehen," in *Religionen im Fernsehen: Analysen und Perspektiven*, ed. Constanze Jecker, Kommunikationswissenschaft (Konstanz: UVK, 2011), 161–184; Constanze Jecker, *Religionen im Fernsehen: Analysen und Perspektiven*, Kommunikationswissenschaft (Konstanz: UVK, 2011).

33 Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, "Religion und Visualität," in *Religionswissenschaft*, ed. Michael Stausberg (Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, 2012), 343–364; Pezzoli-Olgiati, "Eine illustrierte Annäherung an das Verhältnis von Medien und Religion"; Heather Hendershot, *What's Fair on the Air?: Cold War Right-Wing Broadcasting and the Public Interest* (University of Chicago Press, 2011); Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

34 David Morgan, "Religion, Media, Culture: The Shape of the Field," in *Key Words in Religion, Media, and Culture*, ed. David Morgan (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1–19; David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Stewart M. Hoover, "Media and Religion"; Stewart M. Hoover, "The Culturalist Turn in Scholarship on Media and Religion," *Journal of Media and Religion* 1, no. 1 (February 1, 2002): 25–36; Wayne Luther Thompson, "Religion and the Media," in *Encyclopedia of International Media and Communications*, ed. Donald H. Johnston (New York: Elsevier, 2003), 81–90.

human existence.[35] These three categories are certainly useful, but they are also not as clearly defined as these descriptions might suggest, for in practice media representation, reception aesthetics, and media production, as well as their institutionalization, are not only linked, but also influence one another, bolstering the interface of media and religion.[36]

The interface of film[37] and religion forms a subcategory of the broader topic of audio-visual media and religion. At first blush, film media and documentary media would appear to overlap, with both media forms conveying at least 24 images per second to provide the impression of motion, which is technically the case. But distinctions do exist, mirrored in scholarly activities in the field of film and religion, where researchers have primarily focused on the fictional feature film, and the experience of viewing has largely been addressed within the context of the cinema.

Five principal directions in scholarly approaches to the relationship between film and religion can usefully be identified.[38] First, since its earliest days, film has been used to convey theological narratives – we think, for

---

35 Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age*, Religion, Media and Culture (London: Routledge, 2006).

36 Oliver Krüger, *Die mediale Religion: Probleme und Perspektiven der religionswissenschaftlichen und wissenssoziologischen Medienforschung*, vol. 1, Religion und Medien (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012); Stewart M. Hoover, "Media and the Imagination of Religion in Contemporary Global Culture," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 6 (2011): 610–25; Hubert Mohr, "Auf der Suche nach der Religionsmedienwissenschaft oder: Wie die audiovisuellen Medien unser heutiges Bild von Religion verändern," in *Aspekte der Religionswissenschaft*, ed. Richard Faber (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009), 159–182.

37 I am using the term „film" for audio-visual sources instead of movie because film encompasses a broader spectrum of media sources. Furthermore, it refers to the academic discipline "film studies" that is a relevant field for the current approach.

38 Some important approaches and overviews to the field of film and religion are mentioned here: Natalie Fritz, "Von Rabenvätern und Übermüttern: das religionshistorische Motiv der heiligen Familie im Spannungsfeld zwischen Religion, Kunst und Film" (Marburg, Schüren, 2018), 17–44; Marie-Therese Mäder, *Die Reise als Suche nach Orientierung: eine Annäherung an das Verhältnis zwischen Film und Religion* (Marburg: Schüren, 2012); Marie-Therese Mäder, "A Cultural Studies Approach to Film and Religion, Context and Film Analysis of YES (Potter, GB / USA 2004)," in *Approaches to the Visual in Religion*, ed. Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati and Christopher Rowland, vol. 10, Research in Contemporary Religion (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2011), 101–118; Marie-Therese Mäder, "Film und Religion: ein multidisziplinäres Forschungsfeld," in *Religiöse Blicke - Blicke auf das Religiöse: Visualität und Religion*, ed. Bärbel Beinhauer-Köhler, Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, and Joachim Valentin (Zürich: TVZ, 2010), 325–348; Marie-Therese Mäder, "Film und Religion am Beispiel von EXISTENZ (David Cronenberg,

example, of narratives drawn from the Hebrew Bible or New Testament or films that deal with fundamental questions of human existence. Theological approaches were then constitutive of early scholarly engagement with film and religion, and their presence is therefore extensive and varied. We find films examined in light of, for example, theological aesthetics[39] and fundamental theological questions.[40]

Secondly, film and religion have been conceived as functional equivalents in everyday life. The functionality of feature films can be compared with the functionality of religion, in both instances at the narrative level. This direction highlights film and religion as competitors and film as a form of religion that tackles the contingencies of life and makes sense out of them.[41] Thirdly, film can represent religious phenomena within a specific cultural context. When that cultural context is key, various strategies are employed in reading the film in relation to its production and reception.[42] Fourthly, film and religion can be seen as communication systems, and as communication systems that interact in manifold ways.[43]

USA 1998),” in *Outer Space: Reisen in Gegenwelten*, ed. Charles Martig and Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, vol. 13 (Marburg: Schüren, 2009), 256–282; Colleen McDannell, *Catholics in the Movies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

39 Charles Martig, *Kino der Irritation: Lars von Triers theologische und ästhetische Herausforderung* (Marburg: Schüren, 2008); Lothar Warneke, *Transzendenz im populären Film*, vol. 59, Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft (Berlin: Vistas, 2001); Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (New York, N.Y: Da Capo Press, 1972).

40 Gerhard Larcher, *Zeit, Geschichte und Gedächtnis: Theo Angelopoulos im Gespräch mit der Theologie*, vol. Band 5 (Marburg: Schüren, 2003); Stefan Orth, Joachim Valentin, and Reinhold Zwick, *Göttliche Komödien: religiöse Dimensionen des Komischen im Kino* (Köln: KIM, 2001).

41 Margaret R. Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1996); John Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Matthias J. Fritsch, Martin Lindwedel, and Thomas Schärtl, *Wo nie zuvor ein Mensch gewesen ist: Science-Fiction-Filme: angewandte Philosophie und Theologie* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2003).

42 Melanie Jane Wright, *Religion and Film: An Introduction* (London: Tauris, 2006); S. Brent Plate, *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Nadine Christina Böhm, “Sakrales Sehen: Strategien der Sakralisierung im Kino der Jahrtausendwende” (Bielefeld, Transcript, 2009).

43 Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, “Film und Religion: Blick auf Kommunikationssysteme und ihre vielfältigen Wechselwirkungen,” in *Religious turns – turning religions: veränderte kulturelle Diskurse – neue religiöse Wissensformen*, ed. Andreas Nehring and Regina Ammicht Quinn (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2008), 46–66; Daria Pezzoli-Ol-

These first four characteristics of the interface of film and religion are as valid for documentaries as they are for fiction films, with no distinction needing to be drawn between these two audio-visual forms. The fifth, and final, dimension to the relationship between film and religion provides an opportunity to characterize the relation between documentary media and religion more specifically. We now leave behind fiction film, and focus on documentary media.

2.2. Documentary media and religion

Film and religion can be understood as interacting cultural moments.[44] Stuart Hall first described a "circuit of culture" in his textbook *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, published in 1997[45] and returned to the concept in the introduction to the revised edition of 2013 (fig. 5).[46]

For Hall, the term culture encompasses a way of life, a system of values and practices. Central to moments in culture is the sharing of meaning and a focus on practice. Persons, objects, and events never carry fixed meaning. Hall suggests that

> the question of meaning arises in relation to *all* the different moments or practices in our "cultural circuit" – in the construction of identity and the marking of difference, in production and consumption, as well as in the regulation of social conduct.[47]

---

giati, "Vom Ende der Welt zur hoffnungsvollen Vision: Apokalypse im Film," in *Handbuch Theologie und populärer Film*, ed. Thomas Bohrmann (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2007), 255–275; Brent S. Plate, "Filmmaking and World Making. Re-Creating Time and Space in Myth and Film," in *Teaching Religion and Film*, ed. Gregory J. Watkins, Teaching Religious Studies Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 219–232; S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*, vol. 43, Short Cuts (London: Wallflower, 2008).

44 Mäder, *Die Reise als Suche nach Orientierung*.

45 Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, Culture, Media and Identities (London: SAGE in association with The Open University, 1997), 1.

46 Stuart Hall, "Introduction," in *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 2013), xvii.
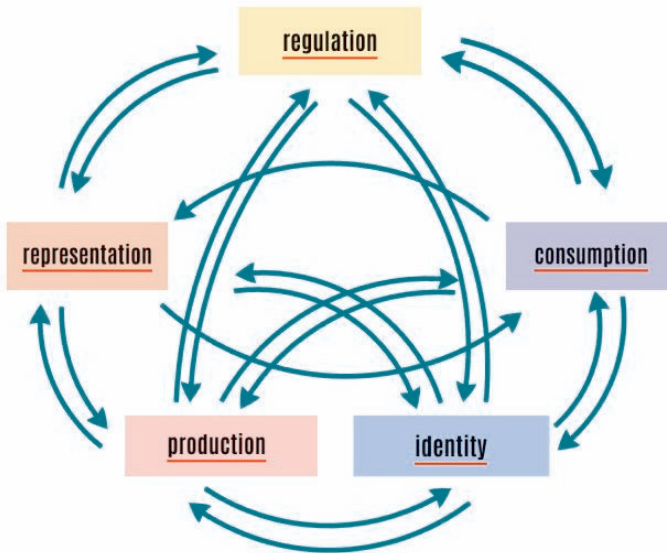
47 Hall, xx.

Fig. 5 Circuit of Culture (Paul du Gay and Stuart Hall).

In order to be able to make meaning in language, representation, or practices, people must possess shared codes. For example, sounds, clothing, images, or verbal expressions generate and communicate meaning. They represent human concepts, ideas, and emotions that are decoded, interpreted, and read. As communication is not a one-sided transmission but rather a dialogue, meaning is an unstable and alterable process. Also, different circuits of meaning can exist within a single culture, and they may intersect.

Difference and (associated) power relations are integral to cultural communication.[48] People communicate with a diversity of cultural practices – for example, the style of clothes and the manner in which they are worn, language expressions, visual representations of people in social media, the celebration of cooking, food prohibitions, or the consumption of specific products. These communicative interactions have in common that they are fundamentally defined by difference and power relations expressed in reg-

---

48 Natalie Fritz et al., *Sichtbare Religion: eine Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft*, De Gruyter Studium (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 120–128.

ulations. For example, dress policies are implemented in secular as well as religious places. In some sacred spaces, shoulders and upper legs must not be bared or shoes be worn. Dress codes are often communicated for weddings. Designer dresses might distinguish the rich from the poor. Such practices differentiate people one from another, and demonstrate how difference functions as a defining aspect of culture. Hall has suggested that

> We should perhaps learn to think of meaning less in terms of "accuracy" and "truth" and more in terms of effective exchange – a process of translation, which facilitates cultural communication while always recognizing the persistence of difference and power between different "speakers" within the same cultural circuit.[49]

This quote highlights that difference and power relations are established in the "same cultural circuit", within its distinct moments; those relations can therefore be revealed through analysis of cultural communication.

And so we reach the fifth dimension of the relationship between film and religion: representation. Cultural representation has three forms. The material world, individuals and their experiences, and events belong to the first; mental concepts, the imagined, and ideas are associated with the second;[50] signs representing these concepts belong to the third realm, with such signs consisting of codes that are shaped by social conventions.[51] It is in terms of representation that we find a marked distinction between the fiction film and the documentary.

The audience for a film will likely believe they know whether they are watching a fictional film or a documentary film, even though the genres use the same techniques and can draw on the same aesthetics. But *how* do they know that they are watching a documentary instead of a fiction film, or vice versa? How do they perceive that difference? And how *do* documentaries differ from fiction films? We turn now to explore these questions.

---

49 Hall, "Introduction," xxvi.
50 Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, "Religion in Cultural Imaginary. Setting the Scene," in *Religion in Cultural Imaginary: Explorations in Visual Und Material Practices*, ed. Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, vol. 13, Religion – Wirtschaft – Politik (Zürich, Baden-Baden: Pano Verlag Nomos, 2015), 9–38.
51 Anna-Katharina Höpflinger, *Religiöse Codes in der Populärkultur. Kleidung der Blackmetal-Szene* (Baden Baden: Nomos Verlag, 2020), 13–25.

The Semio-pragmatics of documentary media

An opposition of documentaries and fiction films, with the former conveying reality and the latter conveying an invented world, is hard to maintain. In place of the contrasting categories of fiction and documentary film, semio-pragmatics construct a heuristic approach, one that allows for a "documentary reading mode." The concept of "documentary media" then – derived from the documentary reading mode as used here – assumes the semio-pragmatic model, in which, according to Roger Odin, two paradigms – semiotics and pragmatics – are connected:

> It seems that both paradigms had been present all the time, present in the mind of the theorists, but also in everybody's mind: at the same time confidence in a text and in its autonomous existence, and the insight that the meaning of a text changes in accord with its context.[52]

The semio-pragmatic approach places audio-visual media in the tension between film and the communication spaces within which media function.[53] Rather than adopt the binary categories "fiction" and "non-fiction," we are encouraged through semio-pragmatics to construct a theoretical approach that is based on the variety of situations in which media communication takes place. These situations are then termed "reading modes."[54] Reading modes are generated and steered both by internal reading instructions, clues within the media itself, and also by information provided by the medium's context, which we can understand as external instructions. Internal reading instructions, also called peritexts,[55] comprise everything that is displayed in the film, including the information in the opening credits, the body of the film, and the closing credits.

---

52 Roger Odin, *Les Espaces de communication: Introduction à la sémio-pragmatique* (Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 2011), 15. French original version reads: "Tout se passe comme si les deux paradigmes étaient toujours là, en même temps, présent dans l'esprit des théoriciens, mais aussi dans l'esprit de tout un chacun: à la fois, la croyance au texte et à son existence autonome, et la reconnaissance que le sens d'un texte change avec le contexte." Translation mine.

53 Frank Kessler, "Historische Pragmatik," *montage a/v, Zeitschrift für Theorie und Geschichte audiovisueller Kommunikation* 11, no. 2 (2002): 106.

54 For an extended discussion of Roger Odin's concept of communication spaces see Warren Buckland, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 77–108.

55 Gérard Genette and Marie Maclean, "Introduction to the Paratext," *New Literary History* 22, no. 2 (1991): 263.