

# **Stewarding the Subtle Politics of Technical Objects: Perspectives on the Immediacy of Evangelical Worship Practice**

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**ABSTRACT** *In the worlds of technology trade events and training conferences in the United States, evangelical volunteers learn to steward audio, video, and lighting devices for the creation of immersive worship ecologies. This article explores how technology stewards learn to understand their relationship to technology. It asks: what does attending to the lively capacities of animated technologies used for worship reveal about the role of technology stewardship? It is argued that technicians, through the training events explored, learn to understand their role as technology steward through attempts to render technology invisible, transparent.*

**KEYWORDS** *Anthropology; New media; Evangelicalism; Religious practice; Stewardship*

**RÉSUMÉ** *Dans les mondes des événements commerciaux de la technologie et des conférences de formation aux États-Unis, les bénévoles évangéliques apprennent à régir l'audio, vidéo, et dispositifs d'éclairage pour la création d'écologies de culte immersifs. Cet article examine comment les intendants technologiques apprennent à comprendre leur relation à la technologie. L'article demande : que révèle la gestion des capacités vives de la technologie animé utilisé pour le culte sur le rôle de la technologie intendance? On fait valoir que les techniciens, à travers les activités de formation, apprennent à comprendre leur rôle en tant que gardiens de la technologie parmi les tentatives de rendre la technologie invisible et transparent.*

**MOTS CLÉS** *Anthropologie; Les nouveaux médias; évangélisme; La pratique religieux; Intendance*

## **Introduction**

**S**itting in a small convention centre break-out room in Atlanta, Georgia, at the Worship Facilities Conference and Expo (WFX) in 2010, other attendees and I fill the room. It is warm, filled to capacity with interested listeners. Camron Ware, the founder of the design and consulting firm Visual Worshipper, begins by introducing some of the aspects of lighting a room to produce a particular atmosphere using what he calls “environmental projection.” He is young, maybe early thirties, dressed casually in jeans and a T-shirt like many of the male attendees present. He adjusts the video equipment, ensuring that it is indeed working as he prepares for a live demonstration of his specialty. The lights are turned down as the two projectors, mounted at each

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end of the rectangular room, project intense colours on the walls. The beams cross over each other to oversaturate the bland walls of the room. The room fills with red as a large cross fills the space ahead of us, then the room is blue with outlines of leafless black trees flanking the centre, where Ware speaks. The colours continue to change as he speaks; extolling the virtues and solemnity of particular colour configurations and how they can accentuate the pastor's message or, if used improperly, detract from it. Ware explains that red is used to highlight tension, to raise the tenor of the service. Blue is calming. White, combined with doves, speaks to purity and redemption. Purples and vibrant colours elevate the saturation of the service—contribute to an otherworldly sensual experience. He asks: "What does saturating the space in colour and image do?" In response, Ware describes the strategy of bringing the ambient light level down so that the room is cast in shadow, creating a room of spectators engulfed in the colour. The effect of this is to give control of highlighting the action to the worship team, coordinating experience through the saturation of colour. It provides a sense of anonymity, Ware suggests, where people are free, in the dimly lit space to revel, to experience God intimately.

Conservative evangelical Christianity has its roots in the revivalist history of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States and Canada. Evangelicals generally believe in the importance of spreading the "good word" through missionization, biblical literalism, and the authority of the Books of the Gospel. Tanya Luhrmann (2012), in her extensive research, has marked the significant shift in the structure of belief for many U.S. evangelicals toward the experience of an intimate relationship with God. She argues that:

Over the last few decades, this generation of Americans has sought out an intensely personal God . . . . These Americans call themselves evangelical to assert that they are part of the conservative Christian tradition that understands the Bible to be literally or near literally true and that describes the relationship with Jesus as personal, and as being born again. But the feature that most deeply characterizes them is that the God they seek is more personally intimate, and more intimately experienced, than the God most Americans grew up with. These evangelicals have sought out and cultivated concrete experiences of God's realness. (p. xv)

One prominent way these experiences of realness have been cultivated is through the use of sophisticated performance technologies. Audio, video, and lighting technologies are used to create immersive, intimate experiences of God and the Holy Spirit. The concern many evangelicals share is that the technological mediation of these intimate experiences troubles the directness and authenticity of the encounter. What if it is not God moving through the speakers animating the words of the pastor? What if that terrible squeal of audio feedback was Satan trying to subvert the transmission of the true Word? What if the bulb that just burnt out is a message? These uncertainties animate technological education and help frame the mission of technology stewardship. Of the many Christian denominations that occupy the U.S. religious landscape, evangelicals, for the most part, have been early and eager adopters of cutting-edge performance technologies, invariably changing the experience of worship to speak to a

desire of immediacy (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 34). The work and logic of “transparent immediacy” then is to “erase or to render automatic the act of representation” (p. 33). Hypermediacy, in contrast, makes those acts of representation visible (p. 33). In the context of evangelical worship practice, the desire for an immediate and personal experience of the divine is in tension with the apparent hypermediacy of contemporary worship at moments of malfunction, or where technological presence intercedes.

This article is framed by the following questions: How, in educational contexts such as technology trade events, do evangelical technical directors learn to steward performance technologies like audio, visual, and lighting devices so as to create immersive experiences while also attempting to render the presence of technology invisible? How do the tensions between the visibility and invisibility of technological mediation inform ways of understanding the role and capacities of technology? What does attending to the lively capacities of animated technologies used for worship reveal about the role of technology stewardship? I argue that technicians, through the training events I explore, learn to understand their role as technology steward through attempts to render technology invisible, transparent. Through this attempt, stewards endeavour to create experiences where congregants have an “immediate relationship to the contents of [the] medium” (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, pp. 23–24). In what follows, I explore how the meanings and discourses House of Worship (HoW) speakers and trade publications use to constitute legitimate worship practice, define adroit stewardship and describe the appropriate relationship between people and technology.

This article is part of a larger anthropological study into the relationship between evangelical technical directors and performance technologies. The research that informs this ethnographic project was conducted over a six-year period and included participant observation, interviews, and extensive discourse and content analysis of the educational resources evangelical technical directors use to learn about emerging technical worship practice.<sup>1</sup> I followed the action (Latour, 1987) of a trade publication, *Technologies for Worship Magazine* (TFWM) and its educational Pavilion, as its staff and founders negotiated the tensions between technology manufacturers and religious users. TFWM is published in Canada but distributed mainly in the U.S. Researching alongside TFWM, I was introduced to the trade publication *Worship Facilities*, and its conference, *Worship Facilities Expo* (WFX), TFWM’s main competitor in the U.S. Both TFWM and WFX hold technology training sessions usually within trade demonstration events.

The examples, authors, and speakers I draw together here all play a role in the larger project and emerged during my fieldwork as central actors in thinking about the relationship between religion and technology. Following the action, with reference to Bruno Latour (1987), has meant listening to both human and nonhuman actors as attempts are made to learn how to craft technologized worship practice. The case studies, written sources, and ethnographic material I present here have been chosen from the larger project to reflect the central aim of this article: highlighting the tensions between the presence and absence of technology in worship; between the hypermediacy of high-tech worship practice and attempts to erase technology’s presence. Birgit Meyer (2011), following Matthew Engelke (2007), articulates this tension “as the ‘problem of

presence.' This problem of presence ensues from the concomitant denial of mediation and the striving for immediate encounters with God that demand mediation of some sort" (p. 29). These "sensational forms" that, according to Meyer organize authorized religious experience, also sometimes sacralize mediation (p. 32). In the case of evangelicals engineering a virtual (worship) reality, the attempts to sacralize mediation through authorized modes of technology stewardship contribute to the creation of a virtuous reality of immersive worship. In understanding how attempts are made to negotiate the requirement of mediation and quest for immediacy, Meyer argues that, "what a medium is and does is not intrinsic to the medium itself, but subject to social processes that shape religion mediation and authorise certain sensational forms as valuable" (p. 31). What this perspective offers is an attention to the specificity of relationships that get built through interactions with technology. I explore the discourses that frame certain dispositions as they take hold and become authorized ways of engineering worship practice.

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I have navigated the terrains of an anthropology of religion and the rigours of science and technology studies, struggling to find their common ground. Animacy is the ghost in the machine for science and technology studies—bridging the anthropology of religion with the renewed interest in the vitality, materiality, and liveliness of things. Contrary to a "primitive" animism, I take the suggestion from Tim Ingold (2006) that,

[a]nimacy ... is not a property of persons imaginatively projected onto the things with which they perceive themselves to be surrounded. Rather ... it is the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence. (p. 10)

In the context of U.S. evangelical churches, this sense of animacy serves to contextualize the practices of technology stewardship and attempts to negotiate the mediation of contemporary worship.

Further afield, Charles Hirschkind (2006) points to the role of cassettes and audio technology in the cultivation of ritual speech genres and postures of worship. The public broadcast and audition of tapes in Egypt, in contrast to private, internalized worship, foregrounds "modes of expression understood to facilitate the development and practice of Islamic virtues" (pp. 106–107). Hirschkind explores the sensorial and "material conditions of discourse" (p. 106) as he tracks the counterpublics of cassette listeners. Public audition and modes of ethical listening are "geared to the honing of sensibilities and the cultivation of pious habits" (107). The tapes themselves are understood as a vehicle for the cultivation of piety, and their content often critiques other forms of media entertainment. In contrast to mediated evangelical worship, it is not the technology itself that acts to shape the message, but the discursive content that forms embodied dispositions and modes of ethical listening. In the case of evangelicals who attempt to erase the presence of technology, we might suggest that they form a "technopublic" that problematizes the social life and situatedness of technology as it increasingly mediates worship practice. This "technopublic" might be said to consider the "technologization of religion and the religiosity of technology" (Stolow, 2013, p. 4)

and hint at the ways that technology animates religious discourse by making itself visible, despite attempts to steward it. In this sense, it is not only the sacralization of mediation that confronts evangelicals but the possibility that technology exists within the same field of potential that entangles both stewards and their devices.

In the first section of the article, *The Field of Technical Education*, I provide context for the following two sections by framing the broader discourses within which technical training occurs. In the following section, “Does It Point Our Hearts to God?” I follow the narrative of a conference speaker at the Worship Facilities Conference and Expo (WFX) as he sets out his vision of the “transformational church” and its relationship to the stewardship of technology. In the third section, *Technically Transparent Worship*, I explore discourses on the nature of technology, and how understanding its animated nature frames the erasure of its presence within worship ecologies. The conclusion draws together these two sections to offer some speculative thoughts on the materiality of technological devices used for worship.

### **The field of technical education**

In many U.S. evangelical congregations, volunteers do the work of running the audio, video, and lighting gear; they are sent by their church to attend conferences and trade events to learn about best practices for technology use, what the emerging technologies are, and what gear will help extend and augment their existing worship practice. The field of technical education provided by *Technologies For Worship Magazine* (TFWM) and its educational Pavilion and Worship Facilities Conference and Expo (WFX) brings both technology manufacturers and volunteers and paid technical directors (stewards) into a market. The desire for hands-on and conceptual training on the use of professional gear often fuels attendance. Training is often provided by those either in the church-technology industry or by manufacturers that can parse the rigours of technicity with the unique ecology of churches. As such, training is framed around the technologization of worship practice through the engineering of what educators deem is *relevant*, *excellent*, and *in line* with the activation of the volunteer’s latent “giftings,” or God-given talents and dispositions toward certain activities. Training also draws attention to the configurations of users and devices, such as audio and lighting control consoles, lights, speakers, microphones, projectors, and video displays.

Attempts to negotiate the tensile relations between people and things within evangelical technology circles have prompted debate about the “true” nature of technology and its capacity for action. This negotiation—which often frames the relationship between people and things—is comprised of questions such as: What is the proper use and place of technology within the church? How can it be rightfully used to honour God? Does technology incite idolization and is it inherently disposed to act capriciously? How does technology facilitate participation—reflect, magnify, and induce the heart to turn to God—or draw attention away? These questions animate both the curriculum of technical training events, fill the pages and online posts of trade publications such as *TFWM* and *Worship Facilities*, and form the content of popular blogs devoted to understanding the relationship between the evangelical church and technology.

These aspects of the spiritual ecology of technical directors and volunteers converge in the cultivation of the practices of technology stewardship. Stewards are tasked with caring for lively technologies, endeavouring that they be “kept in right relationship to other created things, used to serve the gospel, [and] not to enslave the Church” (*Worship Leader Magazine*, 2010, p. 29). Stewards learn to be mindful of those forces, be they evil spirits or the Holy Spirit, which they believe animate technology. Although this disposition toward animism frames conceptualizations of technology, and thus relationships between users and devices, I argue that through the speculation on the nature of technology, technicians and educators demonstrate the entanglement of people, things, and forces of all kinds, in an on-going shaping of the modes of evangelical worship as they are articulated in the context of training events hosted by TFWM and WFX.

### **“Does it point our hearts to God?” How stewards learn to understand their gifts**

Leadership is stewardship—the cultivation of resources for God. The Bible tells us one of the main resources God has given us is our gifts, aptitudes, talents, and abilities. Christian leaders faithfully steward the gifts they receive from the Holy Spirit, and they help those they lead to do the same. (Keller, 2007, p. 1)

For what is idolatry if not this: to worship the gifts in place of the giver himself? (Calvin, 2002, p. 857)

The ballroom at the Cobb Galleria Centre in Atlanta, GA, for the 2010 Worship Facilities Conference and Expo (WFX), is filled to capacity. The lights are trained on the stage as more people, predominately middle-aged White men, file in and sit on the floor or lean against the back wall. I take a seat on the floor at the back of the room, in front of the sound control booth. The floor is hard, despite being carpeted and there is nothing to lean against, but I have a clear view of the stage. There is an air of excitement as technicians and volunteers from all over the U.S. gather for the keynote address by Ed Stetzer, director of LifeWay Research and professor of Research and Missiology at prominent U.S. seminary universities.

Stetzer is talking today about his vision of the contemporary evangelical church, which he calls “the spectator church.” He sees his mission as instigating the activation and revitalization of church, transforming passive spectators into active participants. Stetzer begins by joking that “closer to the front is closer to Jesus.” Laughter trickles through the room. He is obviously used to addressing large crowds and moves from the centre of the stage to each side, speaking to the full audience as a pastor might—holding people’s attention though the inflections of his voice, ending his thoughts on the core sentiments that he then repeats. His sermon style resonates with the attendees, they nod their heads along with his points. He suggests that in order to activate the church body it must be recognized that all church members have gifts, in contrast to what he sees as the current attitude of: “pay, pray, and get out of the way.” A “transformational church” recognizes and activates the gifts of the church body as its key strategy for moving from passive to active participation. Considering the venue and audience, Stetzer reminds attendees that in this move from passive to active, toward

a transformational and “missional” church, “tools can be helpful ... but we need to remember that tools are not the goal.”

In order to achieve a “Christ-like” congregation, Stetzer suggests that the congregants comprising a church body must function together, much in the same way the parts of a biological body do. Failing to activate a member through overlooking his or her gifts is like losing an appendage, like being dismembered. The activation of the congregation means that members “live out their gifts” while “living on mission.” The role of technology, Stetzer reiterates, is to accentuate God-given gifts, but not replace them. He goes on: “technology can’t glorify god. Technology is a tool that, when used well, can equip people to glorify god. It is part of a strategy. But when it’s no longer a tool, it is an idol—this is when a good thing becomes a God thing, becomes a bad thing.”

These “bad things” trouble attempts to create immersive experiences. At events held by WFX and TFWM, stewards learn that negotiating the tensions around technology use often coincides with the inability to forestall every technological failure and mitigate every act of technological capriciousness. Yet these attempts to craft worship centre not only on how to use technology, but how to understand the reasons for failure. Idolizing technology allows it to take attention away from God and away from the message it is being used to convey. In its openness it is understood to have the potential to manifest both the presence of God’s voice through scripture or the subversive and disruptive forces of the spirit *Other*. The gravity of the position of steward is immense, as they learn to think about technology in the biblically correct way—as a tool—and to recognize the forces that can cause devices to act out if one is not attuned to them.

Similar expressions of the importance of the stewardship of technology populate the entire *Worship Leader* magazine issue from June 2010.<sup>2</sup> *Worship Leader* (2010) is a trade publication devoted to educating readers on selecting and incorporating contemporary music, technology, and dramatic elements into their sermons, while still remaining consistent with their interpretation of biblical scripture. A series of questions framed their treatment of the idea of stewardship:

What does it mean to steward technology? Who or what is a tech steward?  
 What does the role require and what does it look like? How do you decide  
 what technologies to use and not use? How will our worship be enhanced  
 and our community be strengthened when we steward technology? (p. 29)

Meant as a roundtable discussion between the magazine’s network developer and publisher, the questions reveal the aspects of negotiation that frame understandings of stewardship and its role in the creation of immersive worship environments.

The person selected to embody the role of steward must, according to the publisher, “be comfortable with learning new technologies, not tech-phobic, and also embody a pastoral perspective for the community’s network of relationships” (p. 30). *Worship Leader* (2010) also solicited input “From the Trenches,” or from House of Worship affiliates. Their responses swing between the recognition of the body as a technology to a more facile and rigid distinction between humans and things. One respondent, a Chair in Faith and Communication at a religious college, aptly discerns that: “The key [to effective tech stewardship] is recognizing that nearly everything we do in worship is technological, from instruments to banners to the use of our bodies” (p. 30). The implication

is that being a steward is the recognition of a gift, an aptitude or disposition, for understanding the dynamics of technological things, even insofar as the body becomes technological. The “becoming technological” of stewards is juxtaposed in the following declaration, where the rigid distinction between people and things is reinforced. “We serve people, not technology” (p. 30) declared the Communications Director of a U.S. church. While technologies may affect and be affected, the bodies that *matter* are human; namely humans with latent gifts seeking to be released. She continued by asking with regards to technology procurement: “Are we falling victim to geek and gadget lust or empowering people to release the best out of them?” (p. 30). And, perhaps most evocative are the contributions of a Worship Designer at a large U.S. church:

The skills of a production lead should be: one, love Jesus above technology (sounds obvious, but it’s not surprising that gadget geeks are prone to idolatry in this regard); two, be a champion of the congregational experience (this is a servant’s-heart, truly desiring that the glory of God is experienced by the congregation with the technology being used); and three, deep technical knowledge and attention to details (they’ve got to know the tools they’re working with and be able to troubleshoot quickly and they’ve got to catch all the little things from sound to lighting to lyrics on the screen, etc.). (p. 31)

“Having a heart” (McAllister, 2008) for the congregational experience, stewards learn to regard technology as mere tool, to keep it “fixed” and purified as technical object. Yet, technologies continue to lure stewards into lustful idolatry that disrupts the transmission of the true Word. The risk of idolization is echoed by an unacknowledged author in the article titled “Re-centering the House”:

The point is that in our era, the technology of communication and all the various creative and listening devices has taken center stage. Perhaps even to the point of technology trumping the Text. It is not unheard of for a worship leader to spend 20 hours putting all the editing touches on a 3-minute worship video vignette, or a similar amount of time with pro-tools generating the perfect background music. Becoming media literate takes time and may even draw us away from the Text, or even worse, become the Text. In a strange and tragic twist of irony, the story of Jesus we are sharing becomes a sub-text to the story of the manner we are telling the story. The audience for our worship is not God, but rather the audience is god. This is a basic distinction between secular forms of entertainment in other houses and the use of performing arts in God’s house. In God’s house the performing arts work for transparency. The purpose of the music is to serve the community in its active listening and dialogue with God. It is His Speech that generates faith. (*Worship Leader Magazine*, 2011)

The medium is very literally the message, according to this author. What this author signals is the capacity for technology to disrupt or subvert the story of Jesus, merely through its use. Poignantly, this passage highlights the tension that many evangelicals find inherent in technology use: it has the potential to become more visible

than the message it is used to convey. The caveat is that through managed and stewarded use, technology can be rendered invisible enough to provide a transparent and clear transmission of “His speech that generates faith.” But, even as technology is accorded the capacity for transparency, much work is done to continually render it as mere object divorced from the divine. Pastor Chuck Smith Jr. argues that “[t]echnology is not a vehicle for taking us into the presence of God, but merely a tool, and like any power tool, it can be destructive if not handled with care. In fact the most important lesson regarding technology is to know when to unplug” (Roberts & Smith, n.d.).

Sentiments like “knowing when to unplug” signal the tensions inherent in the attempted compartmentalization of evangelical technology use; while it is a requirement of many worship spaces that seat hundreds, if not thousands, of visitors, technology used to amplify, accentuate, and extend the pastor’s message harbours a capacity to simultaneously augment and upset its transmission. While it is necessary, it also unnerves discourses of a pure, unfiltered transmission free of interjection. It is as though technology carries a potential to exert itself—an ability to inform the message it conveys—or be open to the vexations of spirit *Others*.

Stewards are disciplined to distrust technology’s fickle, capricious nature. The understanding that technology as automata must act predictably is confounded by the experience of uncanny effects, unpredictable actions, and unintended consequences. Attempts to purify the delivery of the message through keeping technology in check are intensified in the material-discursive attempts to understand and engineer “technically transparent worship.”

### **Technically transparent worship**

Technology stewards learn to navigate the pitfalls and triumphs of a mediated worship environment. The ultimate achievement is to erase the presence of technology as it becomes densely integrated into a worship environment. Technically transparent worship is the culmination of adroit stewardship and a disposition toward technology that maintains control and mastery. The seamless integration of audio, video, and lighting technologies into a worship space occurs when church attendees are not reminded or made aware of the level of technical sophistication (which usually occurs through malfunction). Although the sophistication of devices may be “blackboxed” from the perspective of congregants, by hiding the “multiple components and inner workings of the machine, presenting the impression of a singular object without elaborate controls” (Suchman, 2005, p. 384), stewards learn to become wary of these boundary-making practices through experiences of failure. They learn that to “understand objects-in-action ... [they must acknowledge that] the material resistances of objects are inseparable from the arrangements through which they materialize in practice” (Suchman, 2005, p. 381). Technologies used for worship materialize evangelical uncertainties and tensions about the nature of objects through the ways they resist attempts to erase their presence.

As we have already explored, technicians learn about the virtues of being a technology steward and the right ways to use and think about technology. Taking technology for granted, or worse admiring it above God, threatens to tear the fabric of worship that is woven by the pastor and worship team. It is not the manufacture of the sus-

pension of disbelief, but rather the cultivation of a thick sensorial ecology that is poised to offer an immersive experience that engages the sensorial body (Brahinsky, 2012).

Many evangelicals, at least the ones I learned about and spoke with, harbor a keen concern about the nature of technology and its ability to distort or confound the true word (see also Schmidt, 2000). Leigh Eric Schmidt (2000), writing on the relationship between auditory technologies and the training of the ear during the crucible of secular modernity, recalls the review of Thomas Edison's phonograph with the following "revealing phrase": it possessed the "the illusion of real presence" (p. 113). The sense that technological mediation offers illusion in place of the tangibility of "real presence" is a trope that travels alongside the understanding many evangelicals share about the nature of technology.

Through research with TFWM, I learned about the concept of technically transparent worship and was pointed in the direction of Brian Gowing, a self-professed "techie" who assists churches that are having difficulty operating their media equipment. Gowing (2010) explains that, "[t]o me technically transparent worship means that someone coming into your church for either the first or the 1,000th time will not encounter technical or artistic issues that will interfere with providing them a total, enveloping, immersive worship experience that prepares their mind and soul to be impacted by God. This is an ideal or a mission statement, if you will." From Gowing's perspective, technology can have the ability to prepare the body of the congregant for impact. Like a crash position during flight, technology readies the body for the power of God.

Technically transparent worship requires a process to enact and perfect it. Gowing (2011b) suggests that this begins with "vision casting," planning, organizing, practicing, implementing, and troubleshooting. He describes vision casting as:

When the team responsible for the Sunday service environment sits down together and determines how the environment should be set up to reflect the message that is going to be given. Vision casting starts with the pastor explaining what the content of the sermon is about and what the main point of the message is. Bottom line: WHAT DO WE WANT THE CONGREGATION TO TAKE AWAY AND RETAIN? Once the team (pastor, worship leader, technical leader, design leader) understands what the point of the message is, that's when the fun begins. (Capitalization in original)

Stewards learn that through their attempts to render technologies invisible, they manage to erase their own presence too. Gowing (2011a) reminds us of this:

Remember, the tech team ministry is unique. We have the ability to impact the entire congregation, either positively or negatively. While a musician can miss a note and no one will probably notice, if we miss a cue to turn on a mic or play a video, everyone notices. We are the invisible ministry. If we do our jobs correctly no one should ever be aware that we're doing anything.

Technically transparent worship signals the attempt to keep technologies in control through stewardship in order to negotiate the mediation of worship ecologies. Technicians learn to conceptualize technology through the potentials of animism: as

inert and capricious; as both enabling and subversive; as something that requires attending to and eschews attempts at control. Ultimately, this is a way of seeing *things*; a way of embodying dispositions toward *things* that enacts beliefs about the order of things and their rightful place in respect to the work of ministry.

The motivation to engineer immersive experiences that presence God but render the technology that helps create these experiences invisible comes from the understanding that “technology has a tendency to draw attention to itself” (Roberts & Smith, n.d.). Chuck Smith Jr., son of Calvary Chapel founder Chuck Smith, continues:

One of the inherent dangers of technology is that it can be used to fabricate an experience. Worship that stirs the emotions always runs the risk of going no further—i.e., we are supposed to worship God in spirit. An experience that is driven by technology runs an even greater risk of leaving worshippers spiritually dry if the important elements of worship have not been incarnated. God uses people to lead and inspire people. A godly worship leader has an effect on the hearts and spirits of the worshippers that technology cannot duplicate. (Roberts & Smith, n.d.)

From this vantage, technology is the lifeless and cold antithesis to the effects of a “godly worship leader” or God’s “speech that generates faith.” Again we are reminded that technology is a tool; yet it contains capacities that trouble its definition as mere tool. In one sense of the word fabricate, technology creates, assembles, and constructs. As it does so, however, it carries with it a second meaning of fabricate, from Smith’s perspective, to forge or fake. This duality of assembly and forgery signals a powerful motivation behind technically transparent worship: as technology assembles, its presence threatens to overwhelm the worship experiences, pushing it toward the stirring of emotion, but no further. Only its erasure purifies the relationship between worship practice and performance.

Smith continues by noting the power of technology to embolden the effect of worship: “Technology can also exaggerate our experience. The role of technology is to enlarge and enhance—for example, it sends our voice further and perhaps gives it more force. Therefore, technology can give significant energy to a worship service that is poorly planned, mediocre, or may not even be biblical” (Roberts & Smith, n.d.). Again he locates the power of technology as a force, albeit ambivalent, that amplifies regardless of content or quality. Keeping the force of technology at bay then becomes one of the goals of technically transparent worship.

In contrast to Smith, Gowing locates the ability of technology not in the ability to forge experiences, but in its capacity to arrange. Gowing appears to see no conflict with technology as the catalyst for immersion, in contrast to Smith who locates that ability in a “godly worship leader.” What can technology do and not do? Smith and Gowing, read together distinguish the complexity of technology use for many evangelicals: its presence requires stewardship, management, and often attempts at erasure. Conceptualized in multiple registers then, technology elides qualification as mere tool in order to elicit impassioned responses to its presence and use.

A sense of uncanny activity permeates the relationship stewards build with their audio, video, and lighting devices and precipitates attempts to erase or render trans-

parent the work that technologies do in the production of worship practice. Yet, technology is animated in sometimes pernicious ways and so Gowing (2011a) relates that: “After 15 years of working in the technical field I am a firm believer that Satan inhabits electronics. If anything can go wrong with electronics it usually happens at the worst possible time!” When things go wrong it hints at the life and vitality of technical objects. Their animation exceeds our capacity to fully conceptualize the worlds in which they operate (Bogost, 2012; Bryant, 2011).

## Conclusion

It is essential to see the things and the people who are primarily unseen and banished to the periphery of our social graciousness. At a minimum it is essential because they see you and address you. (Gordon, 1997, p. 196)

As stewards learn to use a device, they begin to understand the dynamics of sound, video, and light and its importance in crafting immersive worship experiences. These intimate interactions with objects shape religious life. Stephen Pattison (2012) suggests that these relations become meaningful in the mediation of religious reality by suggesting that:

within religious traditions, even those that claim formally to be non-materialistic and anti-iconic and anti-idolatrous, there are rich veins of person-like relations with artifacts that help to mediate and make real religious reality. People become imbricated and tangled up with artifacts, sometimes surprisingly or accidentally, in such a way that it becomes possible to say that they are having meaningful relations in which many of the qualities of relationship that characterize relations with humans, including intentionality, agency, and affection, are apparent. Indeed, some people become more engaged with intimate artifacts and possessions than they do with other people. (p. 198)

There is an underlying sense of technology’s excessive potential as stewards get to know their devices. Insofar as technology is recognized as a mere object, it is also acknowledged as “doing things” with particular moral and ethical consequences; even seemingly passive things are still objects of influence. As Pattison notes, technology can elicit an engagement that vies for the attention of stewards, and sometimes become an idol. They become tangled up with things as they attempt to use these sophisticated technologies to augment sound, suffuse a room with light and shadow, or stream a crafted video. Stewards are often held to account when devices malfunction and so pre-service rituals such as praying over the technology are a means to pre-empt the brash visibility of technology and disruption of the worship service.

The tensions of mediated worship—that technology will attract more attention or divert attention away from the transmission of the Word and creation of immersive worship experiences—open a space to think about the narratives through which evangelicals come to understand technology use and speculate on the nature of objects. Alexandra Boutrous (2013) suggests that “[t]hinking through the intersection of religion and technology requires not only an exploration of technology use by religious groups, but also an examination of the multiple ways in which religious and techno-

logical narratives intersect” (p. 241). Interactions that contemporary U.S. evangelicals have through technical education, via published articles and through conversation and exchange, frame technology use. These are the stories evangelical technicians tell each other about the nature of technology.

Evangelicals, in their search to know and experience an intimate God, attempt to create the sensation of a direct, visceral connection with forces unseen (Oosterbaan, 2011, p. 58). Engaging with the content of a medium becomes problematic when technology upends the sense of immediacy and challenges the making of this virtuous, sacred reality. Making sense of these challenges calls to contemporary forms of animism that defy the assumption that modern Cartesian dualities separate mind from body, subject from object, and form the basis of techno-ontologies (Turnbull, 2009). Animism in this instance is not just the projection of qualities onto objects but the recognition of an openness, a capacity that hints at a modernity that has never been modern (Latour, 1993).

Jane Bennett, like Tim Ingold (2006) and his understanding of animism and the relational and mutual constitution of people and things, suggests that: “Instead of formative power detachable from matter, artisans (and mechanics, cooks, builders, cleaners, and anyone else intimate with things) encounter a creative materiality with incipient tendencies and propensities, which are variably enacted depending on the other forces, affects, or bodies with which they come into close contact” (Bennett, 2010, p. 56). It is the familiarity that evangelicals stewards learn to develop with technologies under their charge that alerts them to the propensities that can manifest: technology can be stewarded in service to the mission or can interfere as distortion of the message.

Stolow (2013) suggests that the repression of magic, the “purified” middle ground between “the tangible and merely ponderable” of science and religion that has laid

the groundwork for further elaborations of technology as a ‘disenchanted’ realm of tools, devices, techniques and expert knowledges governed by its own internal logic: a realm religious actors can only approach from the outside. And yet magic, the excluded middle, has never simply disappeared. As emphasized by a growing body of scholars ... modernity is pervasively haunted by its very effort to disenchant the world. (p. 9)

The uncanny nature and idolization of technology shifts attention from God toward the technological experience. The evangelicals I spoke with and did research alongside recognize the potential for technology to trouble the idea that it is a mere tool. Hence, they devote considerable effort through training and education to discursively quarantining technology, repeating and reaffirming its status as a tool and nothing more.

Evangelicals seek to understand the point at which immersion within a technologized worship ecology becomes more about the experiences, the feeling of the immersive experience itself, and less about being moved by the Spirit. They trouble the easy formulations of people and things that isolate and contain the limits of what is possible. Their understanding of the world as composed of things unseen with which one can interact, which as Tanya Luhrmann (2012) persuasively argues, comes amidst great commitment and learning, is not limited to personal relationships with God but inflects their technological worldview. Attempts to keep technology in its place pre-

suppose a particular understanding of not only its role, but its techno-ontological status (Turnbull, 2009).

## Notes

1. Methodologically, Sherry Turkle (2008) suggests that through intimate ethnography, an approach I have tried to engage during my research,

there are many stories to tell about people and their devices. We need to hear stories that examine political, economic, and social institutions. Inner history tells other stories. ... Inner history shows technology to be as much an architect of our intimacies as our solitudes. Through it, we see beyond everyday understanding to untold stories about our attachment to objects. We are given a clearer view of how technology touches on the ethical compacts we make each other.” (p. 29)

2. *Worship Leader* magazine’s Stewards of Technology issue suggests that

stewardship is one of those foundational Christian concepts—basic theology 101. From the moment God gave people the responsibility of shepherding and caring for creation, they became stewards. Another basic concept is the relationship between Christianity and language/broadcast media or, in other words, technology. They go together like pizza and cheese, milk and cookies, ketchup and fries. (2010, p. 28)

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