New Age, New Media:
TikTok as Ritual Practice

Elizabeth Mears and Masha Shpolberg

"Please don't scroll!" @grayson.bearden gasps as he runs toward the camera in the beginning of his TikTok videos. "Let me pray for you," he takes a deep breath and addresses Jesus, blessing the viewer with a prayer as instrumental music plays in the background.[1]

In this plea to the audience, Bearden disrupts the habitual scrolling motion familiar to anyone passing time on social media. On TikTok, where videos last anywhere from fifteen seconds to one minute, the ephemerality of media is keenly felt. Refresh your feed and soon it's populated with entirely new content; the video you just watched is nowhere to be found.

Society tends to think of social media as platforms for meaningless chatter, places we go for a quick dose of entertainment, not spiritual sustenance. Social media offer fleeting surges of dopamine which, in turn, are converted into capital by high-tech corporations in Silicon Valley. One might be skeptical about TikTok's capacity to foster a mindful, conscious movement. Yet spiritual content (both religiously affiliated and New Age) abounds on the app, with many content creators implementing techniques similar to Bearden's. In so doing, they believe they are either actively working against the platform's profit-driven agenda or co-opting it for their own purposes. Taken together, these videos offer a case study for the contradictions across "therapeutic" digital media—the rise of mindfulness apps or marketplaces, spiritual communities on social media, and cult-personalities.

While much has been written about the commercialization of the mindfulness industry in both popular and academic press, few have considered TikTok as an object of research to tease out the connection between refractory uses of social media and the emergent discourse on media lives, waste, ephemerality, and obsolescence.[2] What makes Tiktok a fascinating case study is its self-reflexivity and interactivity: narrators often directly address audiences in videos, acknowledging their activity within the app—as well as the limited attention span it explicitly promotes. In addition to messages such as "stop scrolling!" or, "this video is meant for *you,*" an entire category of "TikTok rest areas" has emerged, offering users a space to pause, meditate, or pray. @pastordonte, who represents the House of Hope ministry of Trinity UCC in Pennsylvania, amassed over a million likes by making such videos in which the text on the screen reads, "stay as long as you need," while showing him performing chores around his Church.[3]

This is not the type of content TikTok is generally known for. Founded in China in 2016, the platform was initially dominated by videos of users lip-synching and dancing to their favorite songs. It became popular in the United States in 2019 as a source of light-hearted entertainment. As users experimented with using the platform for a wide variety of content production, they carved out new subsections, much like the different corners of Youtube that one can explore. There is Jewish TikTok, Fashion TikTok, and even Prison TikTok, which provides users with a voyeuristic glimpse into incarcerated communities. The opportunity to deliver messages to a wide spectrum of audiences quickly gained the attention of religious leaders. Priests and rabbis alike began making videos to demystify teachings and recreate dances, laying claim to a certain hipness and emphasizing their approachability.

Along the way, thousands of "spiritual but not religious" users also began producing content which reflected on the nature of the platform itself. When it launched in July of 2011, Snapchat pioneered the idea of an image sharing site whose content is ephemeral—it disappears within hours and leaves no trace. The platform became so popular with Gen-Z users that other social media platforms began adopting the concept: in August 2016, Instagram launched its twenty-four hour "stories" feature and in March 2017, Facebook followed suit. In all three cases, users would be able to use the feature to share content that might be private or potentially embarrassing in nature

(particularly on Snapchat) or deemed not important enough to merit a permanent presence on their Facebook or Instagram timelines.

None of these platforms, however, inspired users to engage with the ephemerality of the medium to the same extent as TikTok has. As primarily a video (rather than a photo) sharing site, TikTok's medium form invites comparisons to early cinema shorts. Like demonstrations of physical prowess or comical physical ineptitude in early cinema, TikTok's videos may be seen as a later form of what scholar Tom Gunning has termed "the cinema of attractions": a very frontal type of film production which is aware of the spectator and committed to the pleasure of spectacle.[4] While the vast majority of the content circulating on TikTok might fall under this category, the "spiritual" videos described above function differently, and the Covid-19 pandemic has drastically increased their number. Through direct address to viewer, the plea to "stop scrolling," and the frequent reframing of the algorithm as divine providence (e.g., "if you have landed on this video, this card is for you"), they redirect users' attentions to the conditions of their own production and exhibition.[5]

One direct consequence of this is that users are forced to reimagine what mediated "spiritual" experiences might look and feel. For centuries in the West, this task had fallen to icons, material objects consciously painted using the most long-lasting ingredients. In Eastern Europe, certain icons that were credited with helping to secure a military victory or to protect a city from siege were then brought out of churches and carried in a procession through city streets. These icons' holiness was derived from what that they had *withstood* and *endured*.

By the twentieth century, the scope of religious media had expanded to include cinema. Here, once again, the emphasis was on a protracted, extended temporality. "Spiritual" cinema came to be associated with the "slow" cinema of auteurs like Andrei Tarkovsky or Terrence Malick, a form which invited the viewer into a trance-like state through the use of languorous shots, mesmerizing sound design and a diegetic emphasis on nature, especially the elements—reminders of the eternal.[6] It was a cinema that, in works like *Solaris* (dir. Andrei Tarkovsky, Soviet Union, 1972), *Mirror* (dir. Andrei Tarkovsky, Soviet Union, 1972) or *The Tree of Life* (dir. Terrence Malick, United States, 2011) saw the film itself as an island of memory meant to outlive both protagonists and director, as well as a refuge the viewer could visit whenever in need of escape from the outside world. (It is no accident

that all three films attempt to rediscover and "fix" in time the childhood perception of "home" or that Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* (Soviet Union, 1966) focuses on the life of an icon painter.)

Social media, by contrast, capitalize on "the Goldfish Effect," a marketing term used to describe the decline of attention spans. If we consider contemplation and presence to be key components of spiritual experience, then TikTok would be the last place to go. And yet, countless TikTok videos attempt to create a spiritual experience that reframes ephemerality and flux as meaningful experiences in their own right.

These videos can be roughly typologized into four distinct categories. The first might be termed instructional or informational: instead of creating a spiritual experience for the viewer, these videos teach them how to have one. Seventeen-year-old Cat Crabtree, or @thehippiechick, has amassed almost two hundred thousand followers and creates regular content on topics like ego death and psychedelics. She cites a mistrust of institutionalized religion and privileges a self- defined spirituality—one based on subjective experience.[7]

The second type of video takes a more directly therapeutic approach. TikTok 'rest stops' would fit under this category, as could those under the hashtag #manifestation, which provide a gallery of viral videos totaling some 4.9 billion views and offer affirmations and guided visualizations for a healthy, happy life.[8] Many creators use vibrational healing audio techniques, deploying 528hz frequencies to cleanse the aura of viewers or "#raiseyourvibration," while others, such as @divinemysticz, strike singing bowls.[9] "Some may get emotional" she writes, "This is okay. Your body is releasing suppressed emotions and healing through them."[10] TikTok as a therapeutic platform has its limitations, one being that the app's success depends on its addictiveness. The life cycles of such videos are self-perpetuating—as users grow more addicted to the comfort these videos offer, they may become more dependent on it for their wellbeing.

Through their direct address to the viewer and invitation to participate in shared ritual, these videos offer users an experience that approximates that of communion—albeit in their own space, on their own time. The tally of views the platform provides for each video and hashtag are designed to further cement the sense of belonging to a community—however fluctuating and intangible it might be. The hashtag #witchtok, for example, has 4.2

billion views, linking a community of men and women alike who film themselves burning sage, crushing herbs, and sealing spell jars.[11] As one might imagine, uplifting videos that provide a "you are not alone" message have proliferated since the onset of the pandemic.

The third type of video goes beyond this kind of direct and community-building address to the user by drawing attention to the technology itself and transforming it into a metaphor for spiritual experience. Content creators pull tarot cards, endowed with meaning based on the moment they are drawn and read, and tell users they were *meant* to view them, thus transforming the algorithm from a man-made tool into a conduit for divine messages.

Finally, the fourth—and rarest—"revolutionary" type builds on this self-reflexive approach, but uses it to create what Marshall McLuhan would have called an "anti-environment," an object or a situation that unmasks the inner workings of the medium.[12] Like the pioneering works of Garnet Hertz and other new media artists, they strive to create a space for alternative ideologies through conscious re-design.[13] One (rather naïve) example is a video titled 'TikTok is anti-capitalist,' where creator @paik4president explains that TikTok encourages not just replicating meme formats, but also reusing sounds and copying dance trends in a way that most other digital platforms, such as YouTube or Instagram, discourage or even ban, thereby creating a culture of sharing that rebels against the principle of ownership inherent to capitalism.[14]

A more sophisticated example would be a popular video by @goddessincarnated, which uses the looping feature to represent the process of reincarnation.[15] The creator-protagonist dies, but out of their deep concern for the state of the world, is sent back on a mission to bring "light" and teach others the way, presumably both on- and off-platform. In addition to its "spiritual" content, the video becomes an allegory for the life, death, and rebirth of similar videos and the constant flux of the platform. Although such videos are few and far between, they provide a glimmer of hope and, perhaps, a way forward.

In some ways the vision of spirituality these videos offer is not so different from what came before. The power of religious ritual, be it receiving communion in a Catholic church or plunging into Tarkovsky's world in a darkened theater, has always been predicated on its "syncing" quality: its

ability to bring large, anonymous and heterogeneous (young and old, rich and poor) crowds together so that for a brief moment they move and feel as one. Spiritual TikTok still offers users this opportunity to feel themselves "aligning" with countless, shadowy others. What's changed is that users seem to be comfortable with the process occurring in a much more staggered, chain reaction-like way, and that "liveness" is no longer a prime consideration.

Indeed, the times seem "out of joint," to borrow Shakespeare's phrase. On the one hand, this newest of technologies is being used to revive some of the oldest, ancestral practices with much of the "spiritual" but not religiously affiliated content a hodge-podge of "Eastern" beliefs and pagan practices. On the other hand, the constant refreshing of content on the app serves to establish a kind of trust: users believe that the videos they are watching are recent, created by people who share a comforting proximity to them if not in place, then at least in time.

Another surprising continuity is the way in which the long-ranging debate about the relationship between spiritual practice and political transformation carries over into the digital sphere. Echoes of Marx's pronouncement that "religion… is the opium of the people" reverberate in contemporary fears that users might find the content of these videos so comforting and addictive that they will be disincentivized from seeking out systemic change in the real world.[16] Moreover, the first three types of video give the impression that we are all being swept up by one great tidal wave, leaving users with little to no agency. This is one of the looming threats behind the lack of unification in the "spiritual but not religious" movement. Without a framework to translate spirituality into a moral code or ethical imperative, spiritual experimenters run the risk of continuing to operate within, and contributing to, the normative social order. This risk is only heightened by digital platforms' complicity with consumer-capitalism, algorithmic bias, and the creation of echo-chambers.

At the same time, a less direct or perhaps less intentional consequence of "spiritual TikTok" is that it is encouraging a much broader subset of users to begin thinking about the life span of the media they consume on a daily basis. Thus far, these videos have consistently drawn users' attention to the formal possibilities (looping) and constraints (ephemerality) of the platform, as well as the means by which they are delivered (the algorithm) and the users' own behavior (scrolling, distracted viewing). One can only imagine what

interesting results they might produce were they also to adopt a more ecological approach, exploring the materiality (the hardware as well as the software) underpinning their own creation—especially when it comes to the final stages of the life cycle. Perhaps here, "spiritual TikTok" could offer us a way out of the recalcitrant binaries of new media, a "third way" beyond the durable/disposable and material/virtual divides by granting us visions of intentional ephemerality and productive, nourishing obsolescence.

Notes

1   Grayson Bearden (@grayson.bearden), "WAIT... let me pray for you." TikTok, March 8, 2020, www.tiktok.com/@grayson.bearden/video/6801845316523019526?lang=en.
2   For more on the commercialization of the mindfulness industry, see: Anãlayo Bhikku, "The Myth of McMindfulness," *Mindfulness* 11 (2020): 472–479; Ronald E. Purser, *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality* (London: Watkins Media Ltd., 2019); Terry Hyland, "McDonaldizing Spirituality: Mindfulness, Education, and Consumerism," *Journalism of Transformative Education* 15, no. 4 (2017): 334–356; Ronald Purser and David Loy, "Beyond McMindfulness," *The Huffington Post*, August 31, 2013, www.huffpost.com/entry/beyond-mcmindfulness_b_3519289.
3   As of the publication of this essay, @pastordone had deleted his account citing that some of the views expressed are not reflective of, and not endorsed by, the entire community and board of his church.
4   Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 8, no. 3–4 (1986): 63–70.
5   Dionne Ruff-Sloan, "Just be," TikTok, April 9, 2020, vm.tiktok.com/ZMewN86am/.
6   See, among others, on Tarkovsky: Nariman Skakov, *The Cinema of Tarkovsky: Labyrinths of Space and Time* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012) and Robert Bird, *Andrei Tarkovsky: Elements of Cinema* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008). On Terrence Malick, see: Robert Sinnerbrink, *Terrence Malick: Filmmaker and Philosopher* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019) and Hannah Patterson, *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2007).
7   Cat Crabtree (@thehippiechick), "Not bashing any religion or beliefs, just my point of view," TikTok, April 20, 2020, www.tiktok.com/@thehippiechick/video/6817983933670640901?source=h5_m.
8   #Manifestation, "What are you manifesting?", TikTok, www.tiktok.com/tag/manifestation.
9   #raiseyourvibration, TikTok, www.tiktok.com/tag/raiseyourvibration.
10 Kehlsie Jayne (@the.divinemystic), "Let it heal you as you please," TikTok, April 12, 2020, www.tiktok.com/@the.divinemystic/video/6814998028886314245?lang=en.
11 #witchtok, "Here's to everyone feeling a bit witchy," TikTok, www.tiktok.com/tag/witchtok.
12 In *The Medium is the Massage,* McLuhan writes: "Environments are not passive wrappings, but are, rather, active processes which are invisible. The groundrules,

pervasive structures, and over-all patterns of environments elude easy perception. Anti-environments, or countersituations made by artists, provide means of direct attention and enable us to see and understand more clearly." Marshall McLuhan, with Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage* (New York: Batam Books, Inc., 1967), 68.

13   Garnet Hertz is a practicing artist and the Canada Research Chair in Design and Media Arts at Emily Carr University of Art and Design. For his professional website, see: www.conceptlab.com. Many of his works are featured on his Vimeo channel: www.vimeo.com/videoupload.

14   @paikforpresident, "We are living in digital socialism," TikTok, April 10, 2020, www.tiktok.com/@paik4president/video/6814115899503643910.

15   @goddessincarnated, "POV: You died suddenly before realizing your purpose," TikTok, April 14, 2020, www.tiktok.com/@goddessincarnated/video/6815757657853414662.

16   Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," proofed and corrected by Andy Blunden and Matthew Carmody, *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, 7 & 10 (February 1844), *Marxists Internet Archive*, accessed May 27, 2021, www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm.

Elizabeth Mears is a recent graduate of Wellesley College, where she studied Cinema and Media Studies and Religion. She is now a brand strategist based between the US and the UK.

Masha Shpolberg is Assistant Professor of Film Studies at the University of North Carolina—Wilmington. Her research focuses on eco-cinema, women's cinema, and the evolution of documentary film form.