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A Screen-Based World: Finding the Real in the Hyper-Real

ANDREW ROOT

This past Christmas my son Owen got a PlayStation 3 (PS3), the multimedia gaming system that allows you not only to play incredibly realistic video games, but also to stream all sorts of other images that we seem so to need to clutter our lives in this time, like photos, television shows, movies from Netflix, and even your Facebook profile.

Owen has been a video game lover since he was four, bouncing between our now-defunct PlayStation 2, his iPod touch, and the *PBS Kids* website. And if it wasn't for the many options that the new PS3 gives *me* (I must admit, I've bought NHL 12, so I can have my daydreams of taking a pass from Mikko Koivu dignified in 1080i), then I might be more worried about what this image-based existence was doing to him.

I'm convinced that some of what it is doing to him is positive, and a number of scholars have pointed to the benefits of video games.¹ These include not only the development of incredible fine-motor skills but, even more important, the ability

¹See Jane McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), and Craig Detweiler, *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games with God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010).

What is real? In our media-filled world, have we mistaken the image for the real thing? The church is called to proclaim the real, not by rejecting the use of sign and image, but by affirming those that speak the truth of our existence.

to problem-solve and to link his very brain to the technology itself,² becoming in tune with it, and extending his person into it. This, I'm sure, will help him as he someday moves into a technologically saturated workforce.

If I have a concern, it isn't that the gaming system or even TV is turning his brain into mush; I can see that gaming at least is moving him to think and problem-solve. My concern is not that he'll become brain-dead and stupid because of the machine. My concern is more existential than that: it's that the machine will liquefy and thin out his very consciousness, making it harder for him to discern the "real." I worry that all these images will make it harder for him to construct meaning that connects to experiences and relationships outside the image-based mediated machines themselves.

This article then will surround two foci: it will explore how an image-based digital world makes it more difficult to construct meaning, seeing how it is that our screens may hollow out our experience of reality. We will explore this by examining the work of Jean Baudrillard, who asserts that there is no turning back, that images and screens are with us from here on out. If this is the case, we will then ask how we are to evaluate pop culture and its images. How do we discern what is pointless (or dangerous) and what holds some veracity? Or, to put it in the language of Baudrillard, how might our screens mediate the "real" and not drown us in the hyper-real?

JEAN BAUDRILLARD AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

Just three weeks after first allowing Owen to play video games, my fears came to the front. We allowed him to play LEGO Star Wars for a half-hour on weekend days, which felt like a lot for a four-year-old. It was my terrible job to go upstairs and shut off the game, ending his digital session in another world. As you can imagine, a half-hour was just not enough time, and when I appeared as the reaper with the power to end his gaming session, I would be met with fierce opposition.

One day, as I ended his session, four-year-old Owen looked at me with frustration, threw himself on the floor, and began to shout. With tears in his eyes, he said to me, "Ahhh, why? I just wish I could live in Star Wars LEGO; real life isn't fun! I wish I lived in Star Wars LEGO!"

Owen's words hit me hard because they reminded me so vividly of French intellectual Jean Baudrillard's theory. Baudrillard, writing in the 1980s and 1990s, made an overstated but nevertheless poignant assertion about our world. He

²This is called the extended mind theory, developed by Andy Clark and others (*Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011]). They've shown that our brains have the ability to naturally link themselves to the tools we use. They've shown this most convincingly with the experiment of the rubber hand, in which they connect a rubber hand to a patient, hiding the real hand under the table. After a few minutes of seeing and feeling the rubber hand located in the place of the real hand, when a researcher takes out a hammer and swings it, hitting the rubber hand, the patient will flinch and the brain will show signs of a pain response. Clark and others have shown, taking this experiment deeper, that our neurons will extend to this object, that we can actually project our brains beyond the body, feeling things, having the brain respond to things not the body. This has been part of the argument for the possibility of artificial intelligence.

pointed out the utter proliferation of images both in advertising print and billboards, but even more so in television, and contended that this escalation of images, most directly mediated to us through screens, was making it harder (Baudrillard would say *impossible*) for people to construct meaning and to hold on to something real among all the fluid flashes of light images from their screens.³

“Ahhh, why? I just wish I could live in Star Wars LEGO; real life isn’t fun! I wish I lived in Star Wars LEGO!”

Baudrillard’s dramatic assertion rested on what he saw as the essential structure of meaning construction. He contended that we construct meaning through language, and language is built around a fundamental structure or relationship of sign to what is thereby signified. Our world, Baudrillard noted, is filled with objects and persons that we can experience, but we have few ways to organize them so that we might make meaning with these experiences without language.⁴ This structure of sign to signified gives us the very construction we need to make meaning.

For instance, when my daughter Maisy was almost two, we asked her if she would like to go and see the movie *How to Train Your Dragon*. She looked at us with excitement and shouted, “Yes!” and then asked, “Will there be a choo-choo in it?” Maisy was using the structure of sign to signified to construct meaning. She was wrong in how she was using it, but she was using it. She knew that “train” was a sign, a word that signified something that actually existed in the world, something real. So in hearing the sign—the word “train”—she constructed meaning. She wasn’t sophisticated enough with language to know that the sign “train” could actually mean two things: it could mean a steel machine that moved on steel tracks or it could mean to prepare or to teach. New to the language game, Maisy constructed the wrong meaning, but she nevertheless constructed meaning through the structure of sign to what is signified.⁵

Baudrillard’s point is that meaning construction moves along the path of sign to signified, from word or image to the signified real thing. For instance, when I’m at the bakery in my neighborhood and have one of their wonderful M&M cookies, about halfway through eating the cookie I get incredibly thirsty. Peering at the wall, I see a poster for an ice-cold glass of milk. The point of the poster, of the image on the wall, is not to move me to it, to consume it, to pull it from the wall and start licking it. The point of the image of the glass of milk is to serve as a sign to the signi-

³See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

⁴Even before the child has the ability to speak a language, she has a language between herself and her mother; a coo, a smile communicates a universe to her mother. These forms of intimate communication—this language—helps the infant create meaning. When the mother returns the smile, or responds to her cry, the child learns that universe is a safe place, that she is cared for. As she gets older, she’ll need a more sophisticated language system to communicate her thoughts and experiences.

⁵For more, see Mike Gane’s *Baudrillard’s Bestiary: Baudrillard and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991).

fied; the poster is meant to move me back to the counter to buy a real glass of milk to quench my thirst.

In a screen-based world, Baudrillard believes that the image, which is meant to be a sign, has become unhinged from the signified. The image is no longer a pathway to real things, but has become a world unto itself, has become that which we wish for—like Owen wanting to live inside LEGO Star Wars.

Images, Baudrillard reminds us, are simply simulations, and as simulations there is nothing wrong with them. They are useful for representation, for leading us to real things. They are like religious icons, which serve not as objects of worship (idols) but as images, representations that point through them to the real (God, in this case). But in our consumer age, Baudrillard asserts, the image, the simulation, has initiated a coup d'état; the image has sought to escape its position as a pointer, as a sign, by overthrowing the signified. The simulation becomes more real (because it is that which we desire) than the thing it is simulating.

Maybe the best example of this is the fashion or photo model. For all intents and purposes, this model is no longer a woman but a sign of a woman—a simulation that represents a woman, but not the real thing.

Maybe the best example of this is the fashion or photo model. The model is a simulation of a woman. Typically, the model must be over six feet tall and weigh less than a hundred pounds, something very few women can (or should) be. The model takes (dangerously) extensive steps to force her body to look good for the camera, pushing it beyond normal healthy limits. And even after the model has simulated the woman's body with diets and makeup, her image is taken into Photoshop to make her eyes bigger or neck longer and to erase any wrinkles or dimples. Her image is now complete as a simulation.

What has happened now is that her simulated image has been so deeply propelled into our public space that what we wish for, what we long to be or be with, is the simulation. So now men judge real women by the sign, by the simulation, and want the simulation more than the real, measuring beauty not by the real, but by the simulation. And many young girls wish not for healthy, functional bodies, but rather legs, hips, and breasts that match the “un-real” simulations they consume.⁶

We then make meaning by the prepared realities cut off from the signified, from the real thing themselves. Most Americans know more about the latest reality show celebrity than they do about their neighbors across the street. And all their real experiences are filtered through Twitter and Facebook. Real experience, Baudrillard believes, now must bend a knee to the simulation; the real has been replaced by the hyper-real.

⁶For more, see Chris Horrocks and Zoran Jevtic, *Introducing Baudrillard* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1996).

So Baudrillard concludes that, thanks to our screens, we live in an age where symbols and actualities are no longer necessarily connected, where life becomes about consuming images, about correlation to un-real (hyper-real) simulations of beauty, wealth, and celebrity. It becomes incredibly difficult to avoid correlating our lives, in some way, to the slang, fashion, and perspectives of the celebrity signs.

And this is what a celebrity is in our age: celebrities are no longer persons, they are no longer signified human beings; rather their humanity has melted away in the white heat of the media glow. Their melted humanity has been remolded into signs that are broadcast through our screens. We then consume these celebrity signs, using these signs to construct meaning—to decide what to wear, how to talk, and what is worth caring about (what is cool).

In a hyper-real world, where the sign is disconnected from the signified, those who tend to the real, to the signified reality, lose esteem—those like pastors and politicians (politicians who actually want to govern). And the celebrities—the reality show diva, the A-list movie star—become our new priests because it is from their own liturgy, from their image (their slang and fashion), that we construct our most significant meaning. We consume their un-real images to decide how we should live our real lives. The un-real (the hyper-real) now sets the terms for the real.

This very process of the celebrity becoming a sign (no longer a person) is also, of course, why celebrities go crazy and why we can so easily discard them, laugh at them, and move on to more relevant image priests. After all, the celebrity is not a person, but a sign. So, when the sign is no longer helpful in my meaning construction—when my attention is drawn to new, more interesting signs—I discard the old as irrelevant, as so “1984.”

So, Baudrillard contends that life in our screen-based existence is nothing more than consuming the un-real, taking in images and using hyper-real prepared realities to make meaning. As a good French intellectual, Baudrillard thinks there is no way back, no way to put the genie of the image-based world back in the bottle. It is lost. As an even better French intellectual, then, Baudrillard decides that the only answer, the only way forward, is no way at all; it’s time to simply crack open a bottle of wine and watch as the world drowns in its un-real images.

THE CHURCH AND THE REAL

I’m tempted to end this article here and join Baudrillard at the bar. After all, there is no turning back. Without some strong fundamentalist muscle, all the moralistic pleas for families to unplug their TVs and cancel their Internet subscriptions will have little impact. I can promise you that we’re not giving back our PS3. Our screen-based world is here for good (as far as I can imagine).

Nevertheless, the church seeks to tend to the “real,” and Baudrillard is partly right that the “real” is under attack. The church asserts that its very symbols—bread, wine, and the water of baptism—are *not* images, disconnected symbolic

signs, but rather the “real” presence of Jesus Christ. We claim that *these* very signs are infused with the real, with the ultimate reality of Jesus, whose very person is the fullness of God. Bonhoeffer asserts in his *Ethics* that Jesus Christ is God’s own “ultimate reality.”⁷

So how then, standing in a hyper-real world, does the church speak of the real? How does the proclamation of Jesus not itself get caught in the image, making Jesus a character on *South Park* or turning a pastor into Reverend Lovejoy of *The Simpsons*?

It might be that the vocation of the church in a hyper-real world is to stand for art. But we should be careful here. The church’s stand for art must be deeper than some kind of banal recovery of high culture, like paintings, opera, or the theater. Those things may very well be art, but such high-culture activities are art because they provide cultural capital (in a Bourdieuan scene). They give the participants esteem and value, making them “the kind of people who go to the theater.”

What the church calls “art” is not simply what has cultural capital—what is in museums or what is playing on Broadway. What the church calls art is that which represents reality, that which says something true—even in its horror—something about what is real, about the human experience. To proclaim the gospel is to speak of the real—most fully, Jesus Christ. But this Christ who is incarnate and crucified can only be found in existence itself, in the realness and fullness of the human experience.

WHAT IS REAL?

This causes us now to ask, “What is the real?” How is reality recognized in the human condition? How do we discern whether our movies, TV shows, and songs are “real,” whether they point to the “real” in the human condition?

We might be helped in this discernment process by the anthropology developed by James Loder in his book *The Transforming Moment*.⁸ In this book, Loder articulates a four-dimensional conception of the human being’s subjectivity. The first two dimensions he calls the “I” and the “lived world.” First, Loder asserts that the human being fundamentally has an “I,” a self. We recognize when some act is done to us: we have a sense of our own I-ness.

The other day, Owen asked me, “Daddy, do you know more about me or do I know more about me?” It was a profound question, a wrestling with his own subjectivity. In a logical, sure knowledge sense, I know more about him. I have more memories of him than he has of himself. I can remember the day he was born (like it was yesterday); Owen can’t remember three years ago. He can’t remember when he was three years old or when we lived on Branston Street. In the sense of knowl-

⁷Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Reinhard Krauss et al., ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 49.

⁸James Loder, *The Transforming Moment* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989).

edge, I know more about him than he does. But, in another sense, in a knowing that is more than knowledge, he knows himself better than I ever could. I can never know what it is like for him to be him; only he can know that, because as human beings we have a distinct “I.”

But this very “I,” while uniquely subjective, exists in an environment, in what Loder calls “a lived world.” We know our unique selves inside our environments: in cultures, families, societies, and multiple other systems. We make sense of the value of our distinct “I” by the very ideologies that our “I” rubs up against in our lived world. If our lived world is abusive and tense, it will impact our experience of our “I.”

These two dimensions of the “I” and the lived world are not unique; most all social sciences tend to them and acknowledge their anthropological foundational location. But these two dimensions often have defined the extent of our reflection on the human being. We have tended to see anthropology in a two-dimensional way, as Loder says.

Digital entertainment (movies, videos, webpages) revolves around these two dimensions, asserting that the beauty and worth of your “I” depend on, for instance, what you own. When it comes to our mediated pop culture world, these two dimensions tend to articulate how we should feel about our unique “I,” how it fits in the lived world. Our celebrity priests tell us whether we’re too fat or how to feel about the neighborhood we live in or the car we drive.

These very mediations may be entertainment but they are not art because, although they speak of part of the human experience, of the “I” and the lived world, they default into a two-dimensional perspective, and Loder would assert that we as human beings have not two dimensions but four.

*the reality of void reveals a deeper yearning in the human being
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MISSING TWO DIMENSIONS

Following the *theologia crucis* of Kiekegaard, Loder asserts that we are actually four-dimensional creatures. While we undoubtedly have an “I” that rests in a lived world, we must nevertheless wrestle with two other dimensions. The third dimension is “the void”: the reality of nothingness and suffering, of finitude. It is the fact that our unique “I” will sooner or later be gone, disappearing from all lived worlds. This void is marked not only by our final death, but appears already in our experience of loneliness, depression, fear, and loss. To be human is to wrestle with the void.

But the void is bound to another dimension, to what Loder calls “the holy.” By this Loder is not adding an *analogia entis* (“analogy of being” or “analogy of imitation”) to his anthropology, but asserting that the reality of void reveals a deeper

yearning in the human being for life, for something transcendent, for answers—or at least pictures—of the mystery of our very being and existence.

APPLYING LODER'S ANTHROPOLOGY

It might be that the way to think of art in a theological anthropological sense is to think of it as that which speaks of or represents in its form the four-dimensional core of human existence. What the church should stand against is not pop culture that is distasteful, but popular culture that is banally or dangerously two-dimensional, that which is bound solely to the image and cannot break through to the real, unable to speak of the void and the holy. It might be that four-dimensional pop culture escapes the traps Baudrillard sees.

The church should in turn affirm art—that which speaks of the four dimensions of human experience—even when art does so in crass or scary ways. The church should not just affirm *Christian* art, but any representation that speaks the truth of our four-dimensional existence, because even our digital media can speak of four dimensions when they touch on the real, on the fact that we are near death, needing an action from outside ourselves (something holy) to save us. We've all seen movies or heard music that touches these dimensions, pulling us deeper into our humanity.

This hermeneutic to judge pop culture rests on the same theological assertion that we call justification. The very way that God moves to reconcile us back to God—in the void (showing us there is no way of saving ourselves) and in the holy (it is solely in God's agency to save us)—moves us from death into life.

Shows like *The Wire* and *Lost* speak of these four dimensions: *The Wire* in never hiding from the void, and *Lost* through mystery that speaks of the holy. Shows like these are not the proclamation of gospel, but they are texts that articulate the human experience; they are worth being affirmed by the church because in their four dimensions they ironically break the hyper-real by mediating reality through the *crucis* of our need and yearning. ⊕

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