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Mary E. Hess

Luther Seminary, mhess@luthersem.edu

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Practising Attention in Media Culture

Mary E. Hess

Brian Eno once wrote that ‘familiarity breeds content. When you use familiar tools, you draw upon a long cultural conversation – a whole shared history of usage – as your backdrop, as the canvas to juxtapose your work. The deeper and more widely shared the conversation, the more subtle its inflections can be.’¹ In my teaching, which takes place both in seminary and graduate theological contexts, as well as in parish and congregational settings, I am very interested in just what the cultural conversation is that we are engaging. I seek to create as widely and deeply shared a conversation about Christian faith, and as subtle, complex and embodied a conversation as possible.

If Eno is right, that ‘familiarity breeds content’, then it seems inescapable to me that we need to take seriously the ways in which people live within popular culture – particularly mass-mediated popular culture – as part of the canvas upon which we work as educators. There are some obvious ways in which this canvas is already painted: explicitly religious symbols taken into pop culture (*Dogma*, *The West Wing*, *The Simpsons*, and so on), for instance, but there are also ways in which any discussion of faith is painted on a canvas that includes ‘secular’ images from the news, advertising, the Web, pop music, and elsewhere.²

This process of ‘familiarity breeding content’ is part of the depth and substance behind the notion of ‘practices’ being constitutive of identity. I am interested in how we think about ‘practice’ in a mass-mediated age, and in particular, how we think about Christian practice in the context of mass-mediated popular culture. If our familiarity with the basic postures and languages of faith builds, indeed breathes, content through our lives, how is that content shaped through its encounter with mass media? Kathryn Tanner, a Christian theologian who has spent significant time thinking about the various ways in which we currently conceive of ‘culture’ and then

¹ B. Eno, ‘The Revenge of the Intuitive’, *Wired Magazine* 7.01 (January 1999).

² The film *Dogma* was released in the US in 1999 and poked gentle and bathroom humor fun at Catholic notions of papal indulgence, marauding angels, and so on. The television show *The West Wing* is a primetime melodrama that began to air in the US in 2000 and centers on the activities of White House staff. So much has been written about the animated sitcom *The Simpsons* that I would simply suggest a literature search for more information on that particular show. Pinsky, *The Gospel According to the Simpsons* is a good starting point.

in turn how these conceptions interact with theology, has suggested that: 'Christian practices are ones in which people participate together in an argument over how to elaborate the claims, feelings, and forms of action around which Christian life revolves.'³ This is an interesting definition because it both suggests that there *is* something around which Christian life revolves, and yet it leaves that 'something' to be specified by the arguments in which Christians engage as they enact their ways of being in the world.

Another group of scholars, those working in conjunction with the Valparaiso University *Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith*, have similarly argued that Christian practices 'are things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world'.⁴ The practices they name in the book that lays out their argument, *Practicing our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, include: 'honoring the body', 'hospitality', 'household economics', 'saying yes and saying no', 'keeping sabbath', 'testimony', 'discernment', 'shaping communities', 'forgiveness', 'healing', 'dying well' and 'singing our lives'. Each of these practices points to a particular way of being in the world, a specific set of concerns and communicative responses to those concerns, that shapes what it means to be Christian. Yet each of them is also constructed through various mass-mediated representations.

What counts as 'saying yes and no', for instance, within the world of the television drama? How is that process permeated by the agenda-setting effect of the mass media? What might we learn in discerning when it is appropriate to 'say yes and say no' to specific media representations? In what ways might our practices of attention support or interfere with seeking silence? Media literacy educators are fond of saying that our most precious natural resource, that which is scarcest in the US context, is attention. Most of our industries spend an inordinate amount of time attempting to 'capture' our attention, to create 'sticky eyeballs' as they say in the parlance of the WWW. Indeed 'attention', the process of engaging attention, shaping attention, paying attention, and so on, is the practice most at stake and most embodied in our rituals of media.

In our contemporary context many Christians have thought about practising 'attention' in media culture in relation to content. On one end of the Christian spectrum you will find a vast amount of conversation and

³ K. Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) p. 125.

⁴ D. Bass (ed.), *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998). More information available at: www.practicingourfaith.org In some ways, both Tanner's and the Valparaiso project's definitions draw on the arguments of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, who argues that a practice is: 'any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended'. A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997) p. 187.

literature devoted to pointing out what is 'dangerous' content for Christians, and a vast number of resources devoted to labeling 'safe' content. There are institutions that put content-rating labels on record albums, and others that rate movies in relation to 'family values'. There are huge industries devoted to creating, marketing and distributing Christian content. I am not arguing that content is unimportant, but content is not so easily quantified or labeled, precisely because of the practices of meaning-making engaged in constructing it.

On the other end of the Christian spectrum, you will find people who are extraordinarily conscious of the ways in which economic factors shape media content. Living in a consumer society, they argue, all media is owned by industries that require the production of more consumers, and hence all media ultimately subordinates meaning-making to practices of commodification. We can not and do not engage in resisting, negotiating, contesting or in other ways frustrating that commodification; we simply fall prey to it. These Christians tend to look with scorn upon the Christian publishing and broadcasting empires as simply further evidence of 'empire building', of the creation of commodification with a Christian label.

I should apologise for the caricatures I am developing here, because either end of this spectrum is more complex than my description. But my point is that neither of these perspectives on the process of attending to mass media sufficiently respects the ways in which people bring mass-mediated materials into their meaning-making processes, into the ways in which we shape and employ our attention.

One of the most interesting aspects of contemporary communications research is the shift scholars are making in the underlying paradigm they use to describe communication, a shift that moves away from an instrumentalist focus to a more expressive one. Rather than using the metaphor of a message 'pipeline' or envisioning information as something the mass media deliver in much the same way that trucks deliver cargo, recent scholarship has begun to talk about communications media as crucial elements of our cultural surround, with the information they 'contain' or 'convey' seen as raw materials from which we then make meaning in complex rituals of representation and interpretation.⁵

From this perspective, religious communities have access to mass-mediated communication at almost any point of the process, rather than simply at the point of production. Perhaps a concrete example will help to make my point more clearly. In my own immediate faith context, that of the Catholic community, a video entitled 'Hollywood vs. Catholicism' was distributed in 1996 that purported to be a documentary showing many ways in which Hollywood has deliberately attempted to create entertainment that is

⁵ I develop this argument at more length in 'From Trucks Carrying Messages to Ritualized Identities: Implications of the Postmodern Paradigm Shift in Media Studies for Religious Educators', *Religious Education* 94 (3) (Summer 1999).

derogatory of Catholic meaning-making.⁶ There are clearly instances within US history where we can point to people and institutions who tried to advance an anti-Catholic agenda, but this documentary did not make an argument from social history. Instead the producers took clips of several films and asserted that the content of these films clearly displayed an anti-Catholic bias. The documentary further argued that the best way to engage such films was by not giving them any attention at all, that is, by boycotting them in movie theaters and not renting them on video. In this case there was concern with 'what' the content was as well as with the economic structures that distributed that content.

Is such a strategy an effective way to structure Christian identity? Perhaps. But my own reaction to the documentary, and that of many other Catholics to whom I have since shown it, is that it actually served to introduce me to films I would like to see. Creative art is not a simple or straightforward process of content manufacture. No producer can be assured that specific content will be 'read' the same way by everyone who engages it. For many of us who are passionately immersed in Catholic community, but all too aware of its flaws and human failings, the films excerpted in this documentary (films such as *Priest*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *Monty Python's Life of Brian*) highlighted dilemmas that exist within the Christian community, providing opportunities to confront difficult issues, oftentimes with humor or irony that helped ease the pain of doing so.

Paying attention to content is one way to think about the shape of attention in a mass-mediated context. But engaging in arguments over what constitutes appropriate Christian content is an ultimately doomed enterprise, since content is so dependent on context and on the practices used to engage meaning. In my previous example, for instance, the documentary sought to show 'bad' content and suggested that the right response was to boycott (both visually and financially) that content. That tactic backfired, however, because even simply showing the content to point out how bad it was highlighted the inadequacy of the criteria being used to judge it. Asking people to boycott provocative media is counter-intuitive. Indeed, in some ways this documentary 'produced' the opposite of what it was trying to create, because it allowed numbers of progressive Catholics to find films they otherwise might not have been aware of to further solidify their critical stance.

Paying attention solely in terms of critiquing content, or solely as a mode for somehow shortcircuiting consumer commodification, is not sufficient. Are there other ways of engaging our attention, perhaps some that are more productive of Christian identity and community? One in particular is what a group of scholars call a 'responsible imagination'.

⁶The videotape 'Hollywood vs. Catholicism' was distributed free of charge to a number of graduate programs in pastoral studies at Catholic universities by the Chatham Hill Foundation in 1996. I have never been able to find more of a citation for it than the Foundation's address, which is: P.O. Box 7723, Dallas, TX 75209.

Daloz et al. spent a number of years interviewing people who have maintained a long-term commitment to the common good (a difficult task in the US context in which commitment to selfish aims often seems more supported than commitment to common aims), and their study pointed to a number of common threads that were found in these people's lives. One that I think is especially pertinent to this discussion is something they termed a 'responsible imagination':

Their practice of imagination is responsible in two particular ways. First, they try to respect the *process* of imagination in themselves and others. They pay attention to dissonance and contradiction, particularly those that reveal injustice and unrealized potential . . .

Second, they seek out sources of worthy images. Most have discovered that finding and being found by fitting images is not only a matter of having access to them but requires discretion and responsible hospitality – not only to what is attractive but also to what may be unfamiliar and initially unsettling . . .

Living with these images, the people in our study appear to know that two truths must be held together – that we have the power to destroy the Earth and the power to see it whole. But unlike many who seek escape from the potent tension this act of holding requires, these people live in a manner that conveys a third and essential power: the courage to turn and make promises, the power of a responsible imagination.⁷

For these researchers, the process of imagination is not a trivial one. It is 'imagination' in the richest sense of that word. It is a form of imagination that lives within a community that helps to foster it, that helps to work over the insights that emerge from the process and connect them up with others. It is a seeking out of images: not simply those close to hand, or those that are easy and reassuring, but also those which require 'being sought out' in their dissonance.

This definition of a responsible imagination is full of paradox and ambiguity, not the certainty and clarity that the documentary I mentioned earlier sought to promote. Yet it was this kind of open and fluid perspective that these researchers found necessary for continuing commitment to the common good in the people they studied. It is also this kind of practice of attention that is most open to engaging cultural ritual. Finally, it is a way of thinking about attention that is open to the notion of process and argument that is so much a part of both Tanner's and the Valparaiso project's definitions of Christian practice. Such an understanding suggests that rather than focusing on the 'delivery' of a message (that is, defeating the content we believe is to be delivered, or defeating the distribution itself), we ought to be focusing on engaging culture, on stepping into

⁷ L. Daloz, C. Keen, J. Keen, and S. Parks, *Common Fire: Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston: Beacon, 1996) pp. 151–2.

active engagement with the rituals of meaning-making that pervade our culture.

We are already familiar with this shift in more traditional content areas within religious education. We have learned that it is not enough to present doctrine, for instance, simply as an intellectual activity. We have to find ways to make the beliefs and identity of our community of faith come alive to people emotionally. We have to show how they are embodied in concrete practices, and explore them critically. Paulo Freire pointed to this shift in his distinction between 'banking' practices of education and 'praxis'-oriented approaches.⁸ Within communications studies, you could call previous understandings of how mass media work a 'banking' approach to communication, and you could suggest that the newer, emerging definitions are praxis-oriented.

What does a praxis-oriented approach, in relation to our emerging understandings of mass-mediated communication, suggest about shaping attention to mass media within religious education? My research suggests that there are three ways in particular that religious educators might work on shaping a responsible imagination using mass-mediated materials, or what some people call 'pop culture objects' in communities of faith. The first of these is as entry points to experiences of transcendence and connection. The second is as clues to social currency. The third is as sources of social conscientisation.

In our media culture, people's desires and yearnings are often given voice at least partially and initially in relation to pop culture objects. In some ways the experience of feeling connected to people beyond one's immediate context, and to experiences beyond one's imagining, occurs more often through mass media technologies than it does in any other way. If we take theologians seriously in their claim that experiences of finitude, of connection beyond self, are essential experiences of religious community, then we must acknowledge that these experiences are occurring in mass-mediated contexts using mass-mediated objects. Indeed, those Christians who have been most intent on critiquing the content of mass media would probably agree that in part they do so because they are so conscious of a particular medium's ability to evoke religious experiences, and they want to ensure that the experiences evoked are authentic and appropriately channeled. Unfortunately, the production of meaning is neither initiated nor controlled so easily.

Along with an acknowledgement of how much religious experience can be evoked by mass-mediated representations, comes the concomitant caution from religious educators and other practitioners who work with people of faith that we must recognise the vulnerability and fragility of feeling that often accompanies such experiences, and almost always accompanies their articulation in speech. Far too often religious leaders make blanket claims negating or trivialising the kinds of experiential encounters made possible

⁸ P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1985).

by mass-mediated representations, thereby turning people away at the precise moment that they are ripe for what is traditionally called 'evangelisation'.

Mass-mediated popular culture is replete these days with so-called secular artists engaging religious themes, often in very specific Christian language. The award-winning album *'All that we can't leave behind'* by the group U2 includes a specific meditation on grace. Moby, whose CD *'Play'* was at the top of the charts for quite a while, encloses an eloquent essay on his Christian beliefs within that album. All of these musicians have been greeted with great skepticism by many institutional church leaders, while the congregants of those same leaders try to express often unarticulated, but no less real, religious feelings through engagement with these albums. The collision between religious meaning-making that occurs in mass-mediated formats and religious meaning-making controlled by church institutions is often so abrupt and painful as to drive younger people far from churches.⁹

The process of translating religious experience into language and beyond that into commitment to a community of faith is always fraught with difficulty, and the opportunity for misunderstanding and confusion is great. Such difficulties and confusion are somewhat eased when bridges are built that allow meaning to be created and sustained in multiple ways and in multiple contexts, when a responsible imagination is at work helping to create a focus for attention that can find God's presence.

A second way in which religious educators can engage media culture is as a source of social insight. Given that religious education is so often confined to 'Sunday School' contexts or other limited venues while mass media surround and immerse us, we need to recognise the ways in which popular culture can provide specific clues to issues of 'social currency'. We can survey the breadth of popular culture and ask ourselves: what themes are emerging as common concerns? In doing so, we need to think about this not only in overt terms: that is, what are the most popular films concerned with right now, but also what desires are television commercials seeking to evoke and respond to? What kinds of stories are news magazines covering? As we live into the months and years following the events of September 11 2001, it is not surprising that films that focus on archetypal clashes between good and evil such as *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* should enjoy such phenomenal success.

In my own research projects, participants have genuinely enjoyed permission to engage media culture in these ways. The practitioners who participate in our research workshops have come primarily from Catholic Christian communities, so their experiences flow from those locations, but perhaps their ideas can be evocative for those coming from other faith traditions. These religious educators suggest that the themes of relationality,

⁹ See for instance M. Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon, 1996).

identity, confrontations with illness and death, and a desire for connection beyond oneself, are all themes that consistently emerge within popular culture, and they are also all themes that are easily and naturally explored through engagement with sacred text (understood broadly to include liturgy and tradition as well as scripture).

Their suggestions of how to engage pop culture objects, however, are even more interesting. Rather than simply pointing out themes, or asserting that a religious community must agree to a specific interpretation of a representation embodied in a media object, these religious educators suggest that people need to be supported in environments that allow them to draw the connections themselves and then find ways to embody them in their own practices. They focus on supporting a responsible imagination.

Here are just a few of our participants' suggestions, more of which can be found on our project's web site:

Gather a group of people to follow a soap opera together and explore the scenes which made people cry by suggesting that tears are one way of sensing God's presence.

Choose a controversial show, such as *South Park*, and watch it together. Identify what made you laugh and what made you uncomfortable. Why? What do those emotions tell you about norms for our community?

Tape a television commercial and have a group watch it several times over. To what desires is the commercial responding? How do we fulfill those desires in our community of faith?

Tape two different national newscasts for the same evening, and then compare their similarities and differences. Think about how people of faith are represented, and then talk about how descriptive – or not – that representation is of your own faith community.

There are many more suggestions, but the similarities among them are important as we think about how to shape practices of attention. In the first place, media culture is engaged by a dialogical group, not in isolation. Second, emotional responses are important raw data from which to work. Third, there is a relationship between the mediated representation and the community of faith, but that relationship is not defined in advance but rather allowed to emerge from the dialogue. And finally, there is someone present who must be fluent in the practices and norms of the faith community to serve as a resource and a facilitator.¹⁰ In these examples the role of the religious educator is to create a space within which dialogue can flourish, in which there can be movement back and forth between the pop culture object and the community of faith, and in which that movement

¹⁰ More information on the research projects referred to here, as well as constructive exercises and other tools for engaging media culture in the context of religious education can be found at my web site: www.luthersem.edu/mhess

builds on existing resonances and relevance. This is precisely the kind of space Daloz et al. are writing about when they suggest that a responsible imagination is fed by trustworthy communities.

A third way in which popular culture objects are useful is as a catalyst for conscientisation. This is a familiar practice for many communities of faith. Media literacy education in the US began, and in some cases still continues, as a project of religious communities. Strategies for deconstructing support for consumer commodification and other destructive processes are well articulated in curricula produced by the Center for Media Literacy and other such organisations. Indeed, this pragmatic effort represents well the end of the Christian spectrum that was most interested in how we 'pay' for our attention.

Clearly the commercial basis upon which most of the mass-mediated popular culture of the United States is created has an impact on imagination, on the ability to focus our attention. In large measure the impact is one of narrowing attention to those images and ways of being represented through and in mass-mediated objects. Another way to think of this effect is as one of channeling attention towards an ever smaller set of ideas and ways of seeing oneself and one's relationship with others and with God.

Critiquing this overt narrowing of focus, however, is only one way in which such media objects can serve the goal of conscientisation. Because an ironic stance towards meaning is now embedded even in texts one suspects the producers intend to be taken in without critique, critiquing *overt* content is only one aspect of the process. Asking what is *not* named or present, what is not represented, what is left out, is an even more important question. Ensuring this kind of discussion requires bringing different viewpoints to the task. The most effective way this happened within my research projects was by ensuring that the people present in the discussion were themselves coming from a diversity of location and perspective.¹¹

Questioning the 'taken for granted', the 'common sense', implied within mass-mediated frameworks is a very difficult task, but it is greatly supported by a responsible imagination: both in the sense of an imagination that can focus attention on perceived dissonance and contradiction, and also in the sense of an imagination that is rooted in a community that has a richness of alternative story to share. Here again I hope that you can hear the resonance with Daloz et al., when they talk about engaging in a process of responsible imagination and paying attention to that process, particularly in its ability to identify sources of dissonance and contradiction and the ways in which that dissonance might lead to a recognition of unrealised justice.

Appropriate Christian identity cannot be supported by staying locked away in 'safe' or 'pure' contexts, barricaded against content that is feared

¹¹ See, in particular, chapter 5 of my dissertation, 'Media Literacy in Religious Education: Engaging Popular Culture to Enhance Religious Experience'. Completed in the Program in Religion and Education at Boston College, 1998. It is available both through UMI and via my website: www.luthersem.edu/mhess/diss.html

but never engaged. The biblical injunction to love our enemies requires an identity that can reach out to those from whom we are estranged, whether by structures of dominating power (as in situations of race, class and gender oppression), or by our own fears and ignorance. Such a compassion and engagement is required of Christians; the biblical witness makes it centrally constitutive of our identity.

In each of these cases – experiential transcendence, social currency, conscientisation – a responsible imagination applied to the practice of attending to mass media can shape the process of religious education and build a different focus for attention. Practising this kind of attention is at times great fun, particularly in contexts where pop culture previously was primarily ignored; and at times it is very difficult, particularly where pop culture texts cause us to question ways of seeing the world which we have taken for granted. But whether cause for laughter or for tears, it will always provide the opportunity to engage Christian identity. As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, each of the Christian practices the Valparaiso project identified is embedded in media culture and permeated by meaning-making practices shaped by that culture. How we take up those practices, or to use Tanner's language, the arguments we engage in in our attempts 'to elaborate the claims, feelings, and forms of action around which Christian life revolves', must of necessity engage media culture. Indeed, the central faith claims of Christian life are 'on the table' at this point in time in a way in which they have not been previously.

We now have, courtesy of media technologies, compelling representations of life lived out in multiple faiths, many of which are far distant from Christianity. We now have, courtesy of media technologies, multiple ways in which to capture our imagination and cede its territories to all kinds of dreams. Our struggle is to search out those dreams most worthy of our attention, and those communities most trustworthy and supportive of these dreams. Our struggle is to shape our attention and nurture it in as generous a way as possible; to shape it in, as Daloz et al. remind us, a way that 'resists prejudice and its distancing tendencies on one hand, and avoids messianic aspirations and their engulfing tendencies on the other hand'.¹²

It is my devout hope that in doing so, in practising the shaping of our attention, in bringing popular culture objects into religious education and bringing religious sensibilities to mass-mediated popular culture, we can truly create the familiarity that 'breeds the content' that will continue to nurture and support our communities of faith for some long time to come. In all these ways we stretch and nurture, challenge and sustain, our manner of paying attention in the world. And in all these ways we build familiarity with religious practice by building on and with the familiar images and sounds of media culture. Doing so we will surely deepen, nuance and make more complex the cultural conversation in which we are engaged, renewing and reinvigorating Christian practices along the way.

¹² Daloz et al. p. 151.