

Reflections on the Technology Project of the Society for the Arts, Religion and Contemporary Culture

Erling Hope, Jan 1, 2011

“...many people’s recollected nightmares are soundless, with suggestions of thick glass or deep water and these media’s effect on sound.” --David Foster Wallace¹

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In my working life, designing and fabricating objects and images for liturgical settings, I periodically spend long stretches at the computer. Drafting, administrating, perhaps researching; these tasks can require up to a month at the desk. This is typically followed by a more lengthy period in the workshop actually making the thing, which is likely to be a physical, dusty, *material* process. Not long ago, having recently completed this desk-work, and having embarked on the journey of bringing the idea into the reality of the studio space, I found myself confronted with the tedious task of milling, on a drill-press, the ends of some forty turned spindles. Care needed to be taken in setting the machine up, and after troubling through a series of progressively minute adjustments and test cuts, I was good to go. I ran the stack of spindles through the machine, one at a time, and then broke the machine down, loosening its fence and table in preparation for the next procedure. But I realized, a moment late, that the very first spindle, which I had pulled from the stack to use as a gauge, had been left aside while the others were milled. It remained, unmilled, at the side of the machine. I had forgotten to machine the 40th piece.

Vexed, I stepped back bodily. And I stepped back mentally. I faced the prospect of going through the lengthy set-up process all over again, now the more demanding for having to duplicate the results of the others, precisely. Suspended, I searched. And what I found myself searching for was the tab for “Edit > scroll down > Undo.” In the video monitor of my minds-eye, I was looking for the “undo” tab to correct my mistake.

This brief moment, which might have been easily overlooked or forgotten, lingers with me these many years later. A fleeting instant in a workaday world, it seemed to encapsulate a larger process, a bigger story.

I described this event to a friend who spends his entire worklife computer-bound. He responded with his own anecdote of a related moment, suspended likewise in a bodega, staring at the melons stacked high along the produce aisle.

He searched, he told me, for the “File > scroll-down > Sniff” command.

We all know it’s happening. The digital revolution is changing us in ways both trivial and essential. From freedom of speech to addictive compulsion, from the role of relationships to the nature of reality, new technologies are shaping and informing wide swathes of human concern and endeavor. It is reapportioning agency and ability, coercion and compulsion, information and ignorance, in society at large and in each of us individually. Our relationships with our bodies, our attention spans and capacity for reflection; narrative structure and spatial reasoning; social cohesion and surveillance, knowledge and fellowship; all these basic human concerns are undergoing significant shifts.

There is no shortage of commentary on these changes. Much of it supports the Solomonic claim that there is nothing fundamentally new to this dynamic, save the scale. Throughout history and even before it, our technologies have shaped the very substance of who we are. Socially, psychologically, even anatomically, we have evolved to conform to the new worlds we create. These changes can be so deep and pervasive as to go essentially unnoticed. Even now, we struggle to understand the full impact of the cultivation of fire² and the invention of language.

While these observations have been written about widely, there has been, to date, little attention focused specifically on the ways in which we discuss the influences of technology, and how these manners of speaking shape our experience.

The Society for the Arts, Religion and Contemporary Culture has been engaged in an extended inquiry into the Influence of Technology on Religion and the Arts. As the name of the project suggests, as our own name affirms, we have been focusing on the influences that bear upon both art and religion. The impacts of digital technology are immeasurable. But 50 years of experience tells us that taking a perspective which is at once so vast and so narrow as the interaction between art and religion generates conversations and insights of unique value and resonance.

As President of the Society, it has been my privilege to help steward this exploration of the effects of digital technologies on our very human lives. Between October 2009 and May 2010, the Society sponsored a series of three conversations on the topic, of varying degrees of formality. The conversations were held in New York City at Barnard College, Middle Collegiate Church, and Union Theological Seminary. They were video-recorded, and transcripts and video clips are becoming available online, at www.sarcc.org, and on our [Facebook page](#). Participants and presenters are listed in Appendix A.

This writing consists of a summary of observations derived from the series, framed within my personal reflections. It is general in nature, and emerges from this sense that the ways in which we discuss the topic profoundly influence the way we experience it. Because of this, it is concerned with the nature of the conversations as much as with their content. From this treatment, several novel

insights follow (I count, I believe, roughly a dozen), on the influence of technology on the arts and religion—the influence of technology, in other words, on the human being.

Questions

Our inquiry began with a set of questions which reflected the concerns of a Society of professionals, a minority of whom are specifically and deeply engaged in the field(s) of digital technology, but all of whom are involved in one or several aspects of the arts and/or religion, and all of whom feel the influence of the burgeoning digital world. These questions were circulated among the Society, and shared with a growing community of outside professionals—artists, academics, clergy—as introduction to the first of what we called a “Consultation on the Influence of Technology on the Arts and Religion.” This first Consultation took place at Barnard College in October of 2009. Among the questions first circulated were the following:

- What is gained and lost in the shift in emphasis from depth of experience to breadth of experience which technologies bring?
- How do the notions of artistic or religious discipline weather the evolving climate of distraction? Or is the notion of discipline becoming outdated with our emerging abilities to engineer experience and behavior? Or, further, will distraction come to be seen as simply another form of “undifferentiated attentiveness”? Are we witnessing a shift to a new paradigm of cognitive engagement and social interaction?
- Is the continuing atomizing of society enabled by new technologies actually a form of *articulation* of society? Extreme perspectives and narrowly focused interests enabled by digital communication can be seen as detailed and specific expressions of the range and wonder of human possibility. But, weighted as they are toward differences rather than commonality, what do these developments portend for the future of the *shared aesthetic and experience* which define culture?
- What does the emphasis away from sequential narrative and toward network thinking herald for literature? For the Abrahamic traditions? For our experience of living-in-time?

These questions formed something of our starting point. While some of them were addressed directly in our conversations, and pursued to more or less satisfying degrees, none could be said to have been brought to resolution. What emerged early, but only later with any clarity, was that the assumptions embedded within these questions impeded a full exploration of them.

Vocabulary

The early indications suggested that we would need to proceed with care in *how* we addressed our topic. Because of the relative diversity of perspective brought by the participants in our project, and because of our burgeoning awareness that how we talk about these things influences how we experience them, some reflection on the basic vocabulary central to our conversations seemed important from the outset. Many of the definitions of these words are in flux, and several have contradictions built into them, so it seemed helpful to establish our starting points. As our conversations progressed, however, it became apparent that it wasn't only our basic vocabulary which needed examining. The digital revolution and other, related changes in society are altering some fundamental aspects of how we talk about our place in the world and our relationship with our creations.

1. Religion:

In large segments of contemporary culture, the word "religion" has accrued strongly negative connotations. From neo-atheists to evangelicals to New Agers, the associations with empty ritual, hypocrisy and corrupt power structure condemn the word and many ideas and practices associated with it. While such critique cannot be ignored, positive associations continue to pertain for many people as well. Regional variations, and more than a century's philosophical and critical predictions to the contrary notwithstanding, the form and content of a wide range of religious traditions continue to attract, inspire and sustain generations of committed adherents. This fact alone illustrates that any minimally sufficient description of the word will need to accommodate both kinds of association.

Fortuitously, or by design, the word is itself built with this capacity. As with many of the most interesting words which inhabit these discussions, *religion* contains within itself its own antithesis. In our conversations, we have been careful to regard *both* etymological associations of 'religio'—that is, of "binding together again," as brothers and sisters, as parts of a whole, perhaps as the *undivided* self; but also of "binding back again"; of constraining--politically, socially, psychologically, sexually—but *also*: in discipline or discipleship. We took care to clarify, when significant, which sense we favored in the context of conversation.

Despite this complexity of valence, we chose not to steer straightaway towards other, less complicated but related words like "spirituality" or "faith" to frame our conversations. The double-edgedness seems an important part of the impulse, and an important part of our humanity. The complexity of the word carries the complexity of the phenomena, and imparts a level of richness to the subject that might otherwise be lacking or obscured.

In addition, the roots of the words suggest another point of pressure important to our discussions. The positive meaning of this word lives in unavoidable etymological tension with that leitmotif of our modern digitized world: "distraction."

“Re-ligio” to bind together again; “dis-tractio”: to tear apart.

If this is only a language problem, it heralds another, more lasting linguistic and practical concern: the redefinition of “religion” itself, as a word describing a set (or sets) of beliefs and practices. As religion and the digital world become increasingly intertwined, with *virtual* religious communities, i-shrine apps for personal media devices, worship services progressively friendly to digital mediations—*MTV music videos for sermons, call-and-response tweets*, etc., religion may need to expand its commitments to embrace practices now apparently antithetical to it. According, at least, to this etymological trope.

But there is, of course, more than semantics at stake here. Countless studies have, to date, demonstrated formidable links between distraction and unhappiness, ineffectiveness, ill-health, etc.. Happiness, effectiveness and health are not necessarily the stated end-goals of every religious tradition. However, religious practices featuring disciplines of sustained focused attention to entrain the mind toward goals of wholeness, of “at-one-ment”, toward the easing or erasure of the sense-of-separation which accompanies, as a side-effect, the attainment of self-consciousness, have figured prominently in every major body of religious practice. The costs of compromising this function warrant careful scrutiny.

The relationship between religion and memory is important to our study as well. Among other things, and more so than anything else is--more so than libraries or universities or museums—religious traditions are the places memories are kept. They are the form in which, week in and week out, day in and day out, people of faith recall the lives, events and ideas held most dear. (The significance of this aspect will be addressed in greater detail when we focus more directly on the influence of technology on religion.)

2. Art:

A word with too many edges to attempt to grasp, a word which harbors, in its contemporary heritage, an *interest in undoing itself*, in subverting any stable claims of meaning. “But is it art?” goes the refrain, which shows the restlessness of this word in contemporary English usage. It also shows a near-programmatic interest, within many forms of artistic expression native to the industrialized West, in challenging and undermining the hegemony of language in the cultures stemming from the Judeo-Christian traditions. Art subverts language by resisting definition. In our conversations, we have chosen to allow that this word remains, today, unsettled, and pursue any specific definitions only as it serves the specifics of our conversation.

3. Technology:

In order to ground our inquiry in a wide range of precedents, we define technology expansively, as *techne* or specialized *skill* or *capability*. There is

interesting and substantial overlap in this definition with older applications of “art” (as *specialized skill or ability*). It is also easier to track the long-term trajectory of technology’s influence on humanity when viewed in this broad fashion. Here we see, from fire to spoken language to alphabet to internet, the contours of a continuous, reciprocal pressure. Technology establishes new conditions to which we, *wildly* adaptive and flexible creatures, conform. “We shape our tools”, to use McLuhan, “and thereafter our tools shape us”. And while fire and spoken language have been with us long enough to register their influences with anatomical profundity--*they have changed our DNA*--alphabet, internal combustion engine, television, internet, etc.; these all shape our inner lives as well. We split atoms, we splice genes, we change the weather. We have become a force of Nature as surely as climate and geography, with profound implications for the world around us and for our own evolution.

But while this broad approach allows us a wealth of historical precedence to draw from, the current and emerging digital technologies usher truly new scales and new conditions which must be assessed more specifically than this treatment allows.

With each advance in technology, we gain agency, and we lose it. But not all technologies influence us the same. We are living through a real revolution in the technology of adhesives, for example, but we don’t talk so much about how this impacts culture or shapes experience. Many technological innovations change specialized concerns and endeavors, but the aspects of technology which cast the longest shadow are clearly those which fundamentally involve some sort of *mediation*. And while mediation is not a wholly new function of technology, and many of its effects are obvious and well documented, it remains, in ways, among the most enigmatic and difficult to assess. So what, more precisely, do we mean by “media”?

4. The M Word:

Of the myriad influences heralded by the digital revolution, the ones which exert the most profound influence on the inner life of humans are the functions which involve some sort of mediation—the mediation of experience, of information, of interaction, etc. It is this function which requires the closest scrutiny, as its dynamics follow subtle and surprising contours and ultimately describe some of the more enigmatic aspects of what it means to be human. But even mediation is by no means a new phenomenon, and is certainly not a unique function of digital technology.

First Things

The original revolution in digital communication technology was the alphabet. A singular technological invention whose utility swept across and between peoples, the alphabet aided its adopters profoundly but also shaped them internally, changing their relationships with one another and their experience of the world. It systematized thinking and calibrated written language to a degree of precision not previously possible. But it also, by simplifying and ordering the basic units of language and divorcing them from any but the simplest form of meaning--the phenomena of the sound they indicate--rearranged the relationship with meaning, memory and thought in the cultures which deployed it.

Socrates, we hear often these days, saw much of this right away. His concerns about the influence of alphabetic language systems remain significant to us today:

...for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them... You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem [275b] to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise.³

As is often cited, we know what Socrates said because Plato used the available technology of the alphabet to record it and preserve it. And we're glad he did because Socrates touches upon another tension we're all too familiar with.

So it is with written words; you might think they spoke as if they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they always say only one and the same thing...⁴

We have found ways to work around the diminishment of memory predicted by Socrates and confirmed by contemporary studies. But the changes initiated by alphabetic writing systems, changes that brought profound and permanent benefits to the cultures which adopted them, also rendered the peoples of those cultures deeply vulnerable to the cognitive and emotional dynamics of what we now call fundamentalism. The Abrahamic traditions--Judaism, Christianity and Islam--by no coincidence the main engines of this breakdown in humanity, claim a common ancestor in Abe, but it is the ABC's that bind us to this pathology. It does this in part by democratizing literacy, an obvious good which also renders its populace enrapt by the static written word *in ways no non-alphabetic language has managed to do*. It also systematizes religious thinking to an exclusivist

taxonomic degree, and tethers the guided discovery of the numinous to the sequential dynamics of narrative. Narrative holds a resonance which reaches deep into our being. But it also operates on, and cultivates, a fascination with the experience of choosing and the tension of conflict. What story of any interest does not hinge on moments of decision and some form of inner or outer conflict? Thus, with the people of Hashem, of Logos, of Q'tab—the people of the Name, the Word, the Book—we have 'chosen' and 'unchosen' people, we have sin and righteousness, spiritual warfare, inner and outer jihad... and we have an Abrahamic world in perpetual conflict.

Finally, alphabets sterilize the units of language, cleansing them of the layers of accumulated meaning and nuance which shade the characters of other systems over time, and as they cross into other spoken languages. Egyptian and Mayan glyphs, with their associations of characters with concepts (whether these concepts were of primary importance or secondary), resisted export to other spoken languages. Chinese characters, adopted by Japanese and Koreans, brought with them meanings which often did not accord with the spoken words to which they were assigned, complicating the task of *reading*, and making the relationship between word and world more tangled and subtle.

The precision possible with an alphabetic system is unparalleled in comparison. We can write nearly exactly what we mean to say, unburdened by written symbols which carry these shades of historical meanings, or meanings trucked in from an original mother tongue. Whether the character of a writing system can shape the character of the people who adopt it is hard to quantify. But can it be a coincidence that the three religions which have striven so earnestly to banish ambiguity from their worldview are the three which first banished ambiguity and multivalence from the very atoms of their written language?⁵

The recorded stories of the founders of these faiths engaged these tensions to various degrees. Moses, his relationship with spoken language complicated by a speech impediment, presented the digitized law on the original tablets, then smashed them.⁶ Mohammad is said variously to have dictated and to have transcribed the Qur'an... as an illiterate man.⁷ Jesus identified himself *with* the very alphabet ("I am the alpha and the omega" Revelation 1:8 et al⁸)... but is recorded as never actually writing anything more than mysterious scribbles in the sand.

The point is not that alphabets are bad, or that language is bad. Nothing kills a conversation quicker than declaring the futility of language to touch the really real. The point is more generally that technologies have limitations, exact penalties, effect consequences which reach far into the future. They can profoundly impact the ways we interact with one another and experience the world for generations upon generations. And they do this in ways which might seem capricious, but which are actually, from their very inception, identifiable and somewhat predictable. So the question: What long-term human outcomes are we laying the groundwork for with our current and emerging digital technologies?

It would certainly be impossible to anticipate, for example, the Holocaust from Matthew 27:25,⁹ the so-called “blood libel” passage, though a long and winding line can be traced from the text, through the alphabetic society’s reliance on written word to convey unchanging truth, to the anti-Semitic precursors to modern Christian fundamentalism, to the Shoah. Yet it is conceivable that, under slightly different circumstances, the early Church Councils might have considered Socrates’ warning in assembling the sacred texts, and weighed the dangers of such passages more heavily. And what? Clipped passages? Omitted that Gospel? Not necessarily. The point would be to *institutionalize* or otherwise *culturize awareness of hazards* which are not altogether difficult to anticipate, or to institutionalize counteracting influences. Sufi Islam’s privileging of poetry, for example, served well to counteract the prosaic influence of Qur’anic didacticism.

Full Disclosure (Quakers)

More than a century into the Protestant Reformation, the first Quakers noticed that the corrupting authority of, deference to, and *mediating role of* the official Church had not been remedied. It had instead been simply transferred to the Bible; to a *book*, to a device of information storage and retrieval. It was perhaps the best device of any kind invented in the last several thousand years, container of works of staggering art and profound religious expression, as well as terabytes of useful information-- and at that point the relatively recent beneficiary of the revolutionary innovation in data entry developed by Gutenberg.... but it was a device nonetheless. Imagine, in a thousand years or a few hundred years or sooner, some other object of comparable social impact occupying a place of comparable veneration, but with blinking lights. A sort of Authorized iPad.

Early Quakers did not speak of the Bible as a device. But, as with many other religious traditions which share a nominally experiential or mystical sensibility, Quakers harbored an abiding skepticism about the monopolizing role of language in Abrahamic traditions specifically, and in our daily life as social creatures generally. This “logoclastic impulse,” as with the iconoclasm which finds expression in many sects and traditions of the Abrahamic faiths, operates on a suspicion of the privileging of one mode of expression (language, vision respectively) over others.

Coming at the subject of digital technology from within this perspective, I recognize that these reflections may not be the most impartial report. But for Quakers--for myself--this skepticism is yoked to a countervailing recognition and, indeed, an *adoration*, of language’s profound ability to engage reality deeply, and to radically facilitate fellowship and communion.

And while Quakers are not known, or are only mistakenly known to harbor similar broad suspicions about technology, logoclastism can be regarded as an attitude about a *technology* in a way that the iconoclastic impulse cannot. Privileging language over senses as the conveyor of reality and truth, as Abrahamic traditions generally do, is a statement about media, about how much

we want to pack the space between us and the world around us with our inventions; how filtered we want our experience to be. This is not simply because language is a form of media in a way that the senses and *im•mediate* experience are not. Language *is* technology. Language is *media* technology. And all media both reveal and obscure what is beheld; they selectively expand and limit our perceptions and abilities.

Things, of course, are not as simple as the case I have just made. Clearly, it is not the device of the Bible, or the mechanics of Torah or the paper of the Qur'an which is venerated, but the information contained within them. It is the stories, values, and ideas held on the paper, it is the *memories* which are ultimately venerated. And so this sets up a tension, not only between God and Google (as the search engine replaces remembering), but between religion and the original revolution in digital communication technology--the alphabet.

In addition, other pressures certainly colluded to bring fundamentalism into the world, just as a myriad of other pressures brought about the holocaust. But the role played by the alphabet cannot be overlooked if we wish to see the potential these phenomena hold for shaping our future, a future which is probably not as dark as these precedents suggest.

But digital technology *is* different. The alphabet flourished on its own merits. In contrast, digital technology is *a product* of the marketplace, which means that it will be promoted far beyond even its impressive merits. It is engineered to draw and maintain our attention and focus, using our formidable sciences of cognitive and behavioral psychology to orchestrate the perennial growth of its consumption. Digital technology is performance-enhanced; its influence on society is augmented by the steroidal interests of corporate capitalism, which currently functions without regard for the impacts on individuals or on society. This fact makes it more important for us to scrutinize its pitfalls, since these will be obscured by the social system which forms around it.

Finally, while language may be an invention, may be a form of media, it (in its spoken form) has been with us long enough to have changed our anatomy, neurology, and genetics. It is, in a sense, organic to us, and is transitioning into something other than an invention.

Pres(id)ent

I had the opportunity, during his last year in office, to see a recent President speak in person. It was a large indoor setting with the podium center stage and two enormous screens on either end of the room. As he spoke, his image was simultaneously cast on these screens, so that the audience could choose to experience this encounter directly, as it were, or televised. I remember looking up at that screen, seeing this figure of this

man, this scamming, smug dissembler who disappointed me for 7 years... And, I remember, turning my head, perhaps 50 degrees, and beholding, on the podium, the most eloquent, intelligent, genuine and beguiling speaker I've heard since Mario Cuomo. It was visceral. And uncanny. Turn my head back to the screen; disgust, incredulity. Turn my head back to him; admiration and awe.

I have mentioned this to others and heard two similar stories about this particular public person. And, after recounting this story to another friend, I was countered with the following related anecdote:

This friend, M_____, works in film. In video, really; documentaries, some advertizing. At one point, his longtime friend and partner had occasion to occupy the other end of a camera; he was being interviewed. For the first time, M_____ saw this trusted colleague by way of a video screen. As he watched the monitor, mesmerized, he saw something in his friend he had never seen before. Some quality, some overall personality trait. And he realized, to his waxing angst, that he could no longer be this man's friend. He terminated a decade-long friendship and professional relationship, based on what the video monitor showed him about this friend.

As may be clear by now, the word "media" is not used in the sense that McLuhan intended it, as *extensions* of human agency. Media is regarded instead as, more fundamentally, perhaps more passively, "the thing in the middle." *Medius*. Media stands between subject and object, conveying information between them. In the process, it also changes, obscures or distorts the information, to varying degrees. In doing this, *it also reveals* information which is not otherwise detectible, as a filtered lens might do.

In addition, media and technology are distinct. Not all technology mediates (under our current definition), and not all media is technological, *sensu stricto*. Poetry, for example, is media in this sense, as is language in general, as also are art and religion in general. These media interpret experience for us, clarifying, skewing and obscuring, by turns. But whether we are speaking of a video monitor, or a specific language, or religion in general, etc., our sense of when any of these media are revealing and when they are concealing determines the esteem in which we will hold them, and how we will live our lives with them.

Dry and Wet Senses

Every medium, as McLuhan noted, changes the ratios between our use of our physical senses, and from this rearrangement comes a parade of outcomes and effects. Currently, digital technologies are far more capable at appealing to our "dry" senses (hearing, seeing) than to our "wet" senses (taste, smell). This is largely a technical issue; the dry senses are easier to manipulate with current technology. Seeing and hearing involve a degree of intrinsic mediation, through

space, as light and sound must pass through this medium before it reaches our eyes and ears. This medium provides the interface with our nervous system that the wet senses don't have. Wet senses must be stimulated chemically or neurologically or otherwise invasively.

Semi-Dry Senses

Current technologies are vying for traction with the "semi-dry" or maybe "moist" senses, to stretch the metaphor. Devices are currently in very specialized use to engage the sense of touch. Gloves with tactile feedback enhance remote surgery, for example. And at this writing, Microsoft is introducing a gaming console which observes the movements of players through digital cameras and (nearly) instantaneously duplicates these movements in the on-screen avatars, eliminating any need for hand-held devices and the over-development and -sensitization of thumb and forefinger which attends current gaming enthusiasts. Technologists are all a-twitter (pardon) about the potential for this new technology to change the landscape, not just of gaming, but of computer interface in general. And while it is risky to speculate on any technology as newly emergent as this new gadget, it appears possible that the Kinect system has the potential to usher a significant shift favoring proprioceptive or kinesthetic senses which have been atrophied and even distorted in the heyday of the button/mouse/toggle/touchscreen input.

Such a shift would be no minor adjustment. There is another definition of *media* intimately familiar to visual artists, and not incidental to the rest of us in illuminating this change. For painters, the medium is the material which holds the pigment in suspension. It surrounds the information and permeates it. It is this surrounding and permeating which concerns us here. Water is the fish's medium, as air is the bird's, we say. And so *media* takes on a secondary meaning, nearly antithetical (again, as with *religion*) to the first. It can be the thing in the margins, in-between; and it can be the thing *all-around and through everything else*. Two considerations suggest something more engaging than just another linguistic quirk, and akin to the dynamics found in *religion*.

Media in Religion in Media

First, and fascinatingly, the dynamics of mediation expressed *within* religion itself *reflect this double facet*. Krishna, for example, in his complex evolution from hero-trickster and avatar of Vishnu to full manifestation of the godhead—that is, from mediator-god to all-being Godhead--reflects something of these dual dynamics of mediation.

But probably no religious tradition engages this question of mediation in greater depth and subtlety than Christianity does. While all Abrahamic faiths are heavily committed to the mediation of language, and written word in particular, the Christ / Messiah adds a rich layer of complexity to the workings of mediation in religious experience.

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Jesus proclaims John 14:6, establishing himself as the universal intercessor, as the ultimate expression of *media*. In the Catholic tradition, additional layers of mediation accrue, as saints and priests intercede to the Intercessor.

But when the Apostle Paul describes Jesus as "He in whom we live and move and have our being..." (Acts 17: 24-28), he is describing this second, pervasive sense of mediation.. "I am the vine, and you are the branches." Christ, as *media*, is in and around and all through the Christian experience of the world. In its fullest complicated expression, the Christ dwells within the Christian's heart, conflating inward and outward, immanence and transcendence.

[here](#)

When my daughter was approaching two years of age, I remember starting a spontaneous game with her as she settled in to bed time. "Is this Soren [her name]?" I teased, as I grabbed her trunk. She nodded, giggling. "Is this Soren?" I said, grabbing her feet.

She paused, and surprised me with a "no" and a shake of her head.

Her *feet*, apparently, were not *her*. Curious, slightly concerned, I grasped her calves, and asked her again: "Is this Soren?" After a moment of consideration, she answered "Yes." Relieved, and also intrigued, I put her to bed, and put it out of my mind.

The next night, I asked her again, anxious to see that she had re-annexed her feet back into her developing body map. Nope. *This was not her*, her head shook to say, as I grasped first her feet, then her calves. To my alarm, tonight she began at her knees. My concern increased as, over the course of the next several evenings, my daughter got smaller and smaller until finally, and to my horror and regret, my daughter's definition of where the territory of her personhood began and ended extended no further than her face.

Fortunately, children are resilient enough to survive most of our reckless incompetence. As a teen, she now commands the space around her with an abundance of grace and authority. But the episode has stuck out for me as a stark illustration of the ways that acquisition of the medium of language initiates an over-reaching taxonomy of experience. The sense-of-separation which attends this parsing stands in tension with the states of grace which characterize the goals or peak experiences of many religious (again: "religio") traditions and practices. Language equips us for fellowship and communion, for the depth of

social engagement and phenomenal acuity which only we humans are blessed with. Yet it imposes cognitive distortions and opacities which only its suspension can loosen.

There would have been a period, we might conjecture, when language was truly used as a tool. It would have been deployed as needed, to share information about threats and opportunities, and then put away. We see glimpses of this use in proto-languages of vervet monkeys¹⁰ and prairie dogs,¹¹ Chomsky notwithstanding. As the utility of the function grew with increasing vocabulary and structural sophistication, it would have been used more promiscuously, until it arrived at a state of saturation and became the “medium in which we live.”¹²

Art had its own culmination of this process in the last century, on a much smaller, culturally-specific scale. Modernism defied the constraints of the picture frame (and earlier church niche), and ambitiously spilled into the world of lived experience. Duchamp, Braque and Picasso’s appropriation of ordinary objects and materials, Graham’s sublimation of street-posture, Glass playing the sounds of the audience, etc.. these emblematic moves expressed an impulse toward saturation which a new set of methods and enhanced effects facilitated (for the culturally initiated). Even as it reached in to our ordinary world, visual art invited us to immerse ourselves in it. “Inside the white cube,” we became part of the installation work itself. In this gesture, the arts were challenging and subverting the pervasive status of language, and offering alternate mediations.

The religious analog to the media dynamics we see in language (in general) and Modernism (more specifically) may or may not matter. What *is* essential to our consideration is that *digital technology is currently moving from the one meaning of media to the other, from the “marginal” sense of it, to the “pervasive.”* As language did long ago, and far more than the industrial revolution did more recently, digital technology is moving toward becoming the thing “in which we live and move and have our being.” The potential of the digital revolution to saturate experience in the built environment of the near future (and the rare present) dwarfs the impact of motors and engines and rivals that of the spoken word. Immersive headsets, kinesthetic and implanted interfaces, LCD walls;... if developments continue apace, much of human life will be lived in immersive digital worlds.

Starting with the wealthy and the enthusiastic and progressing outward from there, the boundary between human and digital will blur and dissolve long before any of the highly speculative uploading of consciousness anticipated by digital eschatologists. In describing the new Kinect gaming system and the more generalized uses to which the technology will be applied, Microsoft spokesman Alex Kipman recently described a next stage of technology in which we no longer need to learn about technology, because it learns about us. The ideal he articulates is one in which technology becomes invisible, unnoticed, its interface becomes intuitive and gestural rather than technical. It becomes the medium in which we live and move and have our being.¹³

Is it possible that media inclines toward a state of saturation? Given the examples of language, of Modernism, of digital technology, it may be that media tends toward a pervasive state far more than mere utility would merit. Given favorable circumstances and effective mechanisms, media may progress toward saturation as biology tends toward complexity, as the inanimate world tends toward entropy.

If this is true, the theological implications are weighty. It would suggest a native characteristic of mediation in religion to progress from communitive to unitive, from cosmological to ontological forms. This is a tempting idea, especially, perhaps, for the more theologically liberal-minded, to imagine that the progression from *marginal* to *pervasive* forms of mediation enacted by digital and linguistic technologies describes a general pattern of mediation, and that this course will be followed naturally by religious sensibilities as well: That the course of religious evolution would tend to run from “I am the way,” with its accompanying exclusivist claims and tendencies, to the more immersive and panentheistic experience of God and the world. This in turn would suggest an intrinsic counterweight to fundamentalisms *within religion*, to be activated by mechanisms yet to be determined.

But evidence is inconclusive that “religious evolution” follows a path from Bonhoeffer to Tillich, as it were, from the communitive to the ontological, or even that it should. At least two reasons suggest themselves for this. First, the importance of memory in religious traditions resists any sort of ‘evolution’ in these forms, and ensures a perpetual recirculating of older elements into later forms. (Paul, in the *pervasivist* “live and move and have our being” passage cited in Acts, is in fact quoting older Stoic philosophers—in the midst of a passage heavy in *marginalist* sensibility.)

Second, mediation seems to be an inherently slippery thing, shaded easily by the ways we speak of it, by the very vocabulary we use to address and assess it. “Depth” is a term which hounds the topic relentlessly, for example. Repeatedly, when discussing media, our conversations returned to the notion that mediating technologies—of every stripe: language, video, Facebook—radically expand the breadth of our experiences. We can see footage of things that happened a lifetime ago, we can talk to someone on the other side of the planet, we can read about things that *never actually happened*, we can snowboard down K-2 with skill and grace surpassing any living athlete. We can jump from reference to reference, hyperlink to hyperlink, exploring a subject in a broad web of fragmentary associations. We can have hundreds of “friends.” All this, at the nearly universal (if uneven) expense of *depth* of experience. How well do we know these friends? Can we feel the snow cool the back of our necks? Feel the ache of exertion in our legs? We cannot smell the scents of the scenes we read about or watch on footage. We cannot see the facial expressions of our colleagues on the conference call or hear the inflection in the email.

The spectrum of senses is one part of what we call depth, then. Ability to engage a range of emotions would be another. And sustained, focused attention, as in reading a book, would be another.

Author and critic Nicholas Carr writes persuasively on the notion that reading introduced the beneficial but *unnatural* activity of sustained, focused attention to the species.¹⁴ But focused attention is certainly not an unnatural capacity. Anyone who watches a cat or dog closely will marvel at the sustained, focused attention on the bird or the ball just beyond reach. Our dogs and cats may not be “natural” creatures, but they can illustrate that sustained attention is surely a natural activity. More specifically, it is a *predatory* faculty, a stalking act. It is the mode of an animal on the hunt. Distraction, multitasking—eat, sniff the air, eat some more, look around, munch munch, what’s that sound!?!; this is the bailiwick of the prey animal.

Biologically, we are one of the many species who are, or have been, both predator *and* prey. And we are one of the very few which can toggle between a diet including meat and one without. So, essentially, and suspending the impulse to attach value-judgments to the capacity for sustained attention, we can say that technology is returning us from an extended emphasis on predatory capacities to the cognitive terrain of prey-creatures. What this biological turn heralds for culture is difficult to predict, and beyond the scope of this writing. But identifying these shifts as biological may enable us to regard them more clearly and dispassionately.

Artists offer yet another challenge to our assumptions. For more than a century, artists have been testing and subverting the value of “depth” as a model for expressing and experiencing the really real. Denying the idea of a painting as a window-pane, addressing mundane subjects and materials, breaking up images and story-lines to deny sustained focus, displaying the flat affect of an empty shell; these are expressions of a challenge to the hegemony of the depth metaphor. Because depth is, of course, a metaphor, and therefore a *medium*. It is one whose prominence has inspired a cultural laziness in our thinking. And this is the operational definition of cliché. Depth has become cliché. This does not mean that it is false, only that we need to renew our thinking about depth.

Everything sits between something and something else. Everything mediates something else. In a sense, there is nothing exceptional about the act of mediation. Except that it is fundamentally human. If there is a need to define humans as distinct in creation, as language and culture are acknowledged in other creatures, perhaps here is the next place to plant our flag. Until the meerkats formally stake their claim.

Still, the problem of media as described earlier, as a question of how much we want to pack the space between ourselves and our experiences with our inventions, is ultimately insufficient. In our conversations, we have discussed the role of *the body* as a form of media, of the brain as mediating mind. I have heard an architect defend the large video monitors in his megachurch as providing an

“immediate” experience of the preacher for the congregants in distant pews. How do we tease apart media and mediated, here?

Mediation is a subtle and difficult subject, engaging the human condition in uncanny and enigmatic ways. Our dreams have adopted the palette of cinematic effects (disembodied viewer, jump-cuts, voice-overs, fade-outs), pandemical obsessive compulsive behaviors no longer need chemical triggers (texting, internet surfing, facebooking, gaming). Phantom cell phones vibrate our empty pockets. Navigating digital technology will not simply be a technical question of how much we consume, and where we draw the line. We are intertwined with our media inexorably. Mediation is a hallmark of our humanity and inseparable from our full engagement with reality, and the act of mediation runs deep into our essential nature and our history.

Abrahamic culture is haunted by this awareness since its earliest expressions. “Deep calls to deep” from ancient days, and we and the world around us mediate. Later, the idea of the *soul* came to mediate between *body* and *spirit*. In Modernity, *ego* mediates between *id* and *superego*, *persona* mediates between self and world. In our contemporary globalized spirituality, “I am the space between my thoughts.”

So, where are we going, then? As we plunge head-long into a distracted, compulsive, hyper-mediated future, what do we lose? What do we gain? As we move further from depths to shallows, from wet to dry senses, from predator to prey behavior, do we lose some essential aspects of our humanity? And do we gain, rediscover, or invent some equally essential aspects? Do we resist, or push through, to see what is on the other side? Mediation has always been a key to who we are. In so many ways, as Martin Buber said, we are the creatures of the in-between.

“...Sankaracarya himself, one of the most brilliant intellects the world has known, interpreter of the Upanishads and creator of the Vedanta system of pure monism accepted by a majority of all Hindus and analogous to the idealism of Kant, was a devout worshipper of images, a visitor to shrines, a singer of devotional hymns.

True, in a famous prayer, he apologizes for visualizing in contemplation One who is not limited by any form, for praising in hymns One who is beyond the reach of words, and for visiting Him in sacred shrines, who is omnipresent. Actually, too, there exist some groups in Hinduism (Sikhs, for example) who do not make use of images. But if even he who knew could not resist the impulse to love,--and love requires an object of adoration, and an object must be conceived in word or form,--how much greater must be the necessity of that great majority for whom it is so much easier to worship than to know.” Ananda K. Coomaraswamy “The Origin and Use of Images in India,” *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred* Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1992) p. 130.

APPENDIX 1

Participants: Bios at the time of the respective projects.

• **Gina Bria**— Founder of The Art of Thinking Project, a partnership linking ritual, technology, and anxiety with the ritual use of technology as an extension of the human form. Author of *The Art of Family: Ritual and Imagination in Everyday Life*.

• **Dr. Eileen Crowley**— Assistant Professor of Word and Worship, Catholic Theological Union, Chicago. Eileen brings together the interrelated worlds of worship, arts, and communications. A liturgical scholar and professional communicator, she studies how these areas intersect in contemporary worship around the world. Her research into the use of multimedia arts in worship has led her to develop liturgical, pastoral, and aesthetic criteria for the evaluation of media-in-worship practices, Catholic and Protestant. She is author of “Liturgical Art for a Media Culture” (Liturgical Press, 2007), and “A Moving Word: Media Art in Worship” (Augsburg, 2006).

• **Junko Chodos**— Extraordinary artist whose 2007 exhibition "Requiem for an Executed Bird" opened our eyes to a painter's view of the consequences of nuclear violence. Her "Centripetal Art" explores deep inner world reflections on the nature and phenomenological impact of technology on the human condition.

• **Rafael Chodos**— Attorney, author. He has published *The Law of Fiduciary Duties* (law), *The Jewish Attitude Towards Justice and Law* (law and religion); *Metamorphoses: The Transformative Vision of Junko Chodos* (art), *Centripetal Art/Matrix of Growth* (art eBOOK), and *Why on Earth Does God Have to Paint?/Centripetal Art*, published in July of 2009 (art and religion).

• **Josephine Dorado**— Social entrepreneur, educator, interactive events producer and skydiver. In her work, she explores the extension of the performance environment with technology and the process of cultural exchange through creative interplay in virtual spaces. She was a Fulbright scholarship recipient and initiated the [Kidz Connect](#) program, which connects youth internationally via creative collaboration and theatrical performance in virtual worlds. Josephine also received a MacArthur Foundation award to co-found [Fractor.org](#), which matches news with opportunities for activism. She currently teaches at the New School and is the live events producer for [This Spartan Life](#), a talk show inside the video game Halo. Commissioned performances include interdisciplinary productions for the [ISEA](#) and [RomaEuropa Festivals](#) as well as speaking engagements at [SIGGRAPH](#), [PICNIC](#) (Amsterdam), [Queen's University](#) (Belfast), and [London Knowledge Lab](#).

- **Anne Foerst**—ARC Director, Assistant Professor for Computer Science at St. Bonaventure University, formerly Director of God and Computers Project at MIT, author of *God in the Machine: What Robots Teach Us About Humanity and God*.

- **Robert Geraci**—Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, Manhattan College, author of *Apocalyptic AI: Visions of Heaven in Robots, Artificial Intelligence and Virtual Reality* (Oxford U.P.2010) and is working on two books on religion and video games and religion and our built environment.

- **Anthony Lioi**— Specialist in contemporary American literature, environmental literary criticism, and writing studies; research interests include gender studies, popular culture, and digital media. Founding editor of *Planetary: Teaching Writing, Rhetoric, and Literature for the Environment*, an international blog. Author of scholarly articles on tutoring technique in writing centers; on Loren Eiseley, Alice Walker, Susan Griffin, Rachel Carson, Gloria Anzaldua, and Robert Sullivan; on the place of the swamp in literary criticism; and on the kabbalistic background of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*.

- **Robert Pollack**—Professor of Biological Sciences at Columbia since 1978 and Director of the Center for the Study of Science and Religion since 1999. Lecturer at the Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research (since 1998), an adjunct Professor for Science and Religion at Union Theological Seminary (since 2002), and at New York Theological Seminary (since 2008), and an adjunct professor of Religion (since 2002). Dean of Columbia College from 1982 to 1989. Received the Alexander Hamilton Medal from Columbia University and the Gershom Mendel Seixas Award from the Columbia/Barnard Hillel, and has held a Guggenheim Fellowship. His 2000 book, *The Faith of Biology and the Biology of Faith: Order, Meaning and Free Will in Modern Science*, was published as the inaugural volume of a Columbia University Press series of books on [Science and Religion](#). His second book, *The Missing Moment: How the Unconscious Shapes Modern Science*, was published by [Houghton Mifflin](#) and translated into Japanese in 2001. He is currently working on a book on the persistence of identity.

- **Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou**— Associate Minister for Social Justice Middle Collegiate Church and Freeman Fellow. Rev. Sekou is a Professor of Preaching at the Seminary Consortium of Urban Pastoral Education in the Graduate Theological Urban Studies Program in Chicago, IL. He is a third generation Pentecostal minister and the special assistant to the Bishop of New York Southeastern District of the Church of God in Christ. He has served as youth pastor in the inner cities of Saint Louis, MO, Atlanta, GA, and Washington, D.C.

He authored the critically acclaimed *Urbansouls*, which takes a refreshing approach to the spiritual crisis in America as well as Hip-Hop, religion, homophobia, sexism, race, and politics. Cornel West penned the preface, writing: "Rev. Sekou has the most in depth and concise analysis of youth that I have ever heard." Currently, Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou is a Senior Community Minister at Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village and his forthcoming book is *Gods, Gays, and Guns: Essays on Religion and the Crisis in American Democracy*.

- **Micah Silver**— Artist, composer, curator dealing primarily with sound in the time-based arts at large. His most recent work *The End of Safari*, is currently on view at Mass MoCA and integrates multichannel sound with sculpture and scent. Other shows have taken place at the Jersey City Museum, Artspace New Haven, The Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, The James Joyce Centre, Dublin, and others. Silver is currently Curator, music at The Experimental Media Center in Troy NY and previously held positions at Diapason Gallery for Sound in NYC and the Earle Brown Music Foundation. He studied at Wesleyan University.

- **Ellen Sinopoli**— Brilliant contemporary choreographer working on exploratory situational interactions between bodies, space, light and technology. Founder of the Ellen Sinopoli Dance Company. Has collaborated with sculptors, architects, musicians and other artists in exploring the unlimited possibilities of perception and meaning through dance.

- **Siona Van Dijk**— Former Director of the Gaia Community, an online social network of over 300,000 spiritual seekers, visionaries and artists .Her interest is to explore the intersection and relationship between local and virtual social networks and the role of technology in contributing to an emergent collective spirituality.

ENDNOTES:

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- ¹ David Foster Wallace, *Oblivion* Back Bay Books, New York, 2004, P. 95
- ² cf. Richard Wrangham's recent work on the subject.
- ³ Plato's **Phaedrus** (from *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9, translated by Harold N. Fowler. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1925. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>
- ⁴ *ibid.*
- ⁵ Complications to this pattern pertain, from early Platonic attributions of meanings to phonemes, and later Kabbalistic attributions of meanings to letters, to 20th century Anthroposophical explorations. The complications would *be* the point, as complexity inherently disrupts fundamentalistic ideation, and the traditions which emerged from these linguistic gestures universally countervail against fundamentalisms.
- ⁶ A comparison of orthodox interpretations of biblical timelines with timelines of contemporary anthropologists presents the awkward possibility that Moses brought the tablets down from Sinai, but could not read them, as the Hebrew alphabet had not yet been 'officially' invented.
- ⁷ Surah 25:4-5, eg.
- ⁸ Revelation 1:8, 21:6, 22:13
- ⁹ The so-called "blood-libel" passage, in which "...with one voice the [Jewish] people cried, 'His blood be on us, and on our children.'" It is a passage which does not appear in otherwise nearly identical passages in other synoptic Gospels. It can be argued that the author, a member of a community which until recently had considered itself a part the Jewish community of Jerusalem, is letting slip a bitter rebuke to their recently having been excised from that community, in the crisis of the post-Temple moment. This scenario describes, in hindsight, a petty slur with monumentally tragic results.
- ¹⁰ cf: <http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/~mnkylab/media/vervetcalls.html>
- ¹¹ cf.: <http://www.wired.com/medtech/health/news/2005/06/67793> and http://news.bbc.co.uk/earth/hi/earth_news/newsid_8493000/8493089.stm
- ¹² per Continental philosophy of language of Gadamer, Wittgenstein, Leibnitz, etc.
- ¹³ "Science Friday" [webcast](#), PRI, November 19th, 2010; 3:40; <http://www.sciencefriday.com/program/archives/201011196>
- ¹⁴ [CBC Spark interview](#), June 23, 2010, 5:33, <http://www.mefedia.com/watch/31738982>