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Pornography: More "Real" Than Reality Itself

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ROSIE: BODIES UNVEILED AND HIDDEN

One cold night, a Seattle teenager named Rosie Larsen is found murdered, her body stuffed into the boot of a car pulled from the bottom of a lake. So begins the investigation that takes up the first two seasons of the American crime drama, *The Killing*.

What makes this more than standard crime drama fare is the exploration of the ways in which the killing of this one teenager figuratively ricochets out to kill others, both people and institutions. Each episode highlights the slow disintegration of bonds in the wake of Rosie's death, the first of these being Rosie's parents and siblings. Her death also consumes the lives of the investigators, Sarah Linden and Steven Holder. Sarah's prospect of creating a new family dissolves in her drive to solve the case, while the body of Steven is literally broken by those he investigates as the case progresses. Rosie's death also engulfs a mayoral election campaign, unveiling a web of corruption, maiming and death dealing, which permanently marks one of the candidates both physically and politically.

Meanwhile Rosie herself, though murdered, maintains a constant presence throughout the two seasons. Rosie's presence is maintained, not through her body as such, but through the digitised copies of her body—saved in video footage and audio files uncovered during the investigation. Indeed, what struck me most was how the virtual presence of the victim made Rosie *even more* present to her family and investigators, revealing more of her life than her embodied life kept secret. We see in the video and audio files a Rosie that associates with gangs, works in casinos and (at least apparently) gets raped by classmates. While the digitised Rosie at the end of a camera or microphone seemed more real than the Rosie of real life, her now lifeless body has become the avatar of the one in the camera lens, DVD, and smartphone.

I bring up *The Killing* in the context of an essay on pornography because at the heart of the onslaught on the dignity of the human person is the onslaught on the glorious heft of the body. It is an onslaught defined by an abstraction of the body that follows the growing availability of digital communications. This is a process of abstraction in which the phenomenon of pornography is merely the sharp end. I argue that, important though the issue of pornography might be, focusing on that alone is to ignore a vast and pervasive technological, psychological, and metaphysical infrastructure that is orienting a whole culture towards the pornographic even before the word "porn" is mentioned. This infrastructure is certainly operating in the background of the first two seasons of *The Killing* and is laid bare to a careful viewer. This infrastructure's central dogma is the negation of flesh via its abstraction into digital code, where flesh is made word. What *The Killing* also highlights is the way in which the death of the tissues in one body reaches out to deaden other bodies as well, the bodies familial, social, and political.

I will establish the above case in two moves. The first would be to look at the metaphysics behind pornography, an aspect of pornography that often gets ignored in the apparent physicality of the phenomenon, with all the concerns of sexual activity or malfunction, brain re-wiring and sexual performance anxiety that accrue with porn consumption. The second move would show how this metaphysics is culturally woven, not just into pornography, but also the social and cultural practices and institutions of our contemporary milieu. This cultural architecture would manifest a logic of “hyper-reality,” where the virtual is rendered more real than reality itself. This logic of hyper-reality does not simply “pervade the culture” like some odourless gas, but directly correlates to the rendering of bodies, literal and allegorical into abstract, digitised playthings.

SIMULATION: PORNOGRAPHIC METAPHYSICS

In focusing on the harmful effects of online pornography, it is understandable that we situate it in a phenomenon only as old as the internet. However, in his *Beyond Secular Order*, John Milbank suggests a starting point much earlier in history, in the twelfth century: the departure from the metaphysics of analogy and choice for a more flattened metaphysics of “univocity.” This would also lay out a metaphysical foundation for the very culture on which the infrastructure of pornography will be built eight hundred years later. That genealogy is long, complicated, and peppered with jargon, and space allows me to treat only the aspect that most immediately concerns the topic of pornography: the metaphysics of simulation. Put simply, this metaphysics builds on a puzzle about how to speak of God and creature “without confusion,” when both God and creature can be thought of within the same plane of being—existing “univocally”—and yet still be distinct from one another. At the risk of oversimplification, in Milbank’s genealogy, the medieval scholastics who first tackled this problem sought to prevent this confusion by taking up the medieval notion of defining creatures in terms of their *not* being divine. What sets this univocal notion of “not divine” from its previous analogical counterpart was that, whilst the analogical “not divine” still had a zone of mediation between the creature and creator, such that one was able to participate in the other, the univocal “not divine” now was completely shorn of any contact between one and the other.

In this univocal schema creaturely existence—and by extension our existence—was the upshot of *not being something else*. What is *not* therefore became more fundamental in defining creaturely being than what *is*. In Milbank’s words, once you have established univocity, there is a “priority of the *not*” that underpins our being in this world. This priority of the *not* is then given more credibility with the arrival of nominalism, where that which transcends particular things in this world are, as the name suggests, mere names generated by human will. This is an important development in our story of simulation because it then becomes possible to name anything—even nothing at all—and give it existential weight.

The net result of univocity, nominalism, and the “priority of the *not*” is not just that we are more fundamentally defined by what is *not*. What is significant for our consideration of simulation is that both being and nothingness are put on the same level of existence. *Not* existing is itself given existential weight. Giving anything that does *not* exist the same metaphysical heft as what *does* exist undoes the metaphysical anchor for our existence that was established in medieval thought, namely, the priority of the actual over the possible, or in scholastic terms, the priority of act (actuality) over potency (possibility). In Milbank’s estimation, possibility in a univocal schema is not only given equivalence to actuality, but is actually given *priority* over actuality.

To put it in terms more immediate to this inquiry, we now have the metaphysical infrastructure through which we can entertain the idea that what *may be* now has priority over what *actually is*. This is because when God and creature are framed in the same metaphysical voice, it becomes possible to

anchor this “possibilism” in nothing more than human thought. For in Milbank’s estimation, we have not so much brought God down to our level of thought, as we have elevated our thought to that of God’s. Put another way, while the Scriptures posit God as the anchor of our creaturely existence, a metaphysics of possibilism makes our thought an equally effective guarantor for the existential heft of anything that *may be*. Metaphysically, *virtual* reality can now be given the same substance as actual reality: because we think it.

HYPER-REALITY: PORNOGRAPHIC CULTURE

The metaphysics of “possibilism” outlined above is what undergirds a culture whereby the simulated eclipses the real. Our devices therefore are purveyors of this metaphysics, facilitating a culture where machine-made representations of reality, rather than reality itself, have become increasingly mainstreamed. In the closing half of the twentieth century and only two decades into the twenty first, a tsunami of digitally generated imagery has so drenched the culture that representations have now become a cultural ecosystem, the backdrop against which cultures grow and operate. Now, more than in any age before, cultures are becoming ordered by these representations of reality—the logos, the videos, the tweets and memes. We move our bodies—physical, social and cultural—towards these. We sometimes wear them on our bodies: in the form of clothing, accessories, tattoos, prosthetics, chants, political slogans, and riots. Furthermore, these representations do not even need to reflect the real thing in order to stir, organise, and mobilise us to buy and sell things we may not have formerly desired, vote for folk we have never known, or ogle at people we have never met.

How it all came to this raises a question quite different from the one raised in Milbank’s enquiry. While Milbank’s genealogy focused on *how* reality is conceived, we must now turn to the question of *where* reality is conceived, and for this we must turn to the literature on hyper-reality, a term popularised by the work of the French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard, though the substantive work goes back as early as the late 1960’s with the work of Guy Debord.

Writing in 1967, Debord wrote in his *The Society of the Spectacle* that we are not so much awash with images of reality, which interrupt our normal relations with people in the real world. Rather, these images have come to situate themselves as nodes of social relations, such that the social norm is a “relationship between people that is mediated by images.” That mediation is now the norm makes the copy of reality, rather than reality itself, a person’s primary interface with the world. As such, the abstraction of a relationship between embodied persons is now the social norm. In Debord’s words the abstraction, rather than the thing being abstracted, becomes the “means of unification [...] the focal point of all vision and consciousness.”[1]

The impact of Debord’s observation on the normalisation of mediation really comes to a sharp point when we get to Baudrillard’s work. In his 1981 work *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard argued that in a cultural scene saturated with images, a shift takes place whereby images or simulations are no longer mere *reflections* of reality. Images, copies of reality, have become free-standing commodities in their own right, to be bought and sold. Over time, late capitalism’s commodification of the image has turned the copy into something more than a mere abstraction. While Debord’s mention of mediation suggests an ongoing link between the reality and its copy, Baudrillard claims that we have given so much cultural investment to copies that we are now living in an “order of the simulacra,” where free standing simulations no longer need anchors in the real world, and copies of reality can compete with reality itself. Saturated by ontologically independent simulations, the distinction between the “real” world and the “imaginary” simulation starts to blur and break down. Furthermore, fantasies tickled by images somehow seem less fantastical, and having an abstraction of a commodity is now as good as having the commodity itself. It must also be said that, in late capitalism, bodies have become one of

those commodities which must compete with its copy. When one is unable to gain access to an actual body, the image-driven fantasy does just as well.

For Baudrillard, however, the competition between copy and original is over. When the mediating copy is no longer a place-holder for reality, but its replacement, the copy, in Baudrillard's words, becomes "more real than nature."^[2] Simulations are now "models of a real without origin or reality: a hyper-real."^[3] In the order of the simulacra, "the real that never was"^[4] has overtaken the real that is. The simulation is now the standard of reality to which the real world must conform. Simulations have become idolised. Put another way, the physical, social, and political bodies that make up the "world that is" must reorganise to realign themselves to the parameters of the "world that might be."

Civic bodies in South Africa must reconstruct themselves to plug into the global economy, signified by rows of flashing numbers on Wall Street. The bodies of both mothers and fathers are recruited into the workforce, away from their children, in the name of increasing productivity, signified by statistics on a spreadsheet in a finance department and manifested by unstable employment, flatlining wages, and ever-rising costs of living. Children, meanwhile, are fed a steady diet of propaganda about how their bodies are meant to look and move, thanks to the never-ending stream of ads, shows, movies, games, and music pouring out of a slew of devices, now more prosthetics to bodies than independent objects. When the work day is done, the adults are on the couch, beholding the same stream with those very children on those same prosthetics. In the world of the hyper-real, what is real is to be found in virtual reality, rather than reality itself. In this context, it is the copy of the body—the hyper-real body—that has become the true body.

Little wonder, then, that in *The Killing*, the digitised video and audio files of Rosie are not only regarded as reliable evidence for the investigation. Indeed, the digitised files of Rosie are deemed a more reliable record of her life than her organic body could ever be. Only, those digitised files turn out to be *not* as reliable as initially thought. At one point of the investigation, Holder comes across a den—more like a torture chamber with a mattress at the centre—underneath Rosie's school, dubbed "the cage." There they find a video file of what appears to be Rosie being forced upon by two schoolmates, with her face hidden from view. Further investigation reveals that the scene is a simulation created to make the victim appear to be Rosie. In another situation, a photograph allegedly placing a mayoral candidate near a crime scene turns out to be a complete fabrication, created by a rival to smear his suitability for public office. These two episodes of overreliance on unreliable simulations, however, do not deter the ongoing faith of the investigation in digital copies of bodies over the organic originals. Meanwhile, the organic bodies of Rosie and a growing network of family members, friends and politicians, continue to obscure the truth of their lives, and obfuscate what is real, whether by not telling the full truth, or by physically hiding from view, only to have a contradiction revealed in a digitised audio or video file. We thereby witness a two-pronged erasure of the real, and by extension a two-pronged erasure of the body, where the organic original is no longer trusted, and its digital copy no longer has any inherent fidelity.

While far from pornographic in and of itself, the series gradually uncovers an infrastructure of hyper-reality that is deeply salient to the consumption of pornography. For pornography's sole trade is in simulacra, the generation of profit via the distribution of digital portrayals of escalating sexual possibility, and training viewers to desire greater possibilities from simulations detached from the limits of the organic body. Pornography is not really about sex but the possibilities of sex that do not wait for bodies to catch up. This explains the proliferation of body image issues, sexual dissatisfaction among copulating couples, and the pressure on those couples to themselves simulate what is seen in pornography. Note the suggestion that the actual body in hyper-reality has now become the simulation.

When the simulation becomes “more real than the real,” Baudrillard says, “that is how the real is abolished.”[5] In the same way that the vortex of Rosie’s dead body engulfs the social bodies of families and cities, the vortex of simulation does not stop at the bodies being exploited for pornographic use. The same vampiric infrastructure that deadens the body is also deadening the sites of community, and the institutions meant to foster solidarity have now become reformatted to dissolve it. Cities become more focused on providing Wi-Fi than habitable public squares; family homes resemble dormitories for online gamers just to sleep in. The joke about holidays being occasions for family members to come together to check their phones is increasingly becoming less of a joke. In hyper-reality, a stable community is turned into what Baudrillard calls “a homogeneous human and mental flux. An immense to-and-fro movement similar to that of suburban commuters, absorbed and ejected at fixed times...,” flitting from one simulation after another in a pornified cultural ecosystem.[6]

CONCLUSION: EMBODIMENT

There is a fascinating matrix when one considers two different biblical translations dealing with idolatry. In the Latin Vulgate, idols are called *simulacra*. In the Greek Septuagint, a word used for idolatry is *porneia*. I suggest that tracing the rise of pornography does not make sense in isolation of tracing the rise of hyper-reality, the metaphysical and later cultural replacement of actual bodies by simulated ones. With reference to Rosie Larsen, I also suggest that the idolisation of the abstracted bodies of porn is closely interfaced with the necrosis of communal bodies. Rosie, however, is not a dead body or a useful explanatory tool. Rosie is an (albeit fictional) embodied person, and this is the reality that Rosie’s family holds on to, as they sit on their couch pondering her life, while watching a home video of her, at the end of season 2. It is a bittersweet moment, since they long for a body that is no longer on the couch with them. The question that is put before us is whether we are able to retrain ourselves to turn away from the simulation that has lingered with us for the last eight hundred years, and to long instead for the original we have marginalised. Indeed, since the metaphysics that made hyper-reality possible began as a theological problem, we also face the question of whether the heart of a response to our *porneia* should be the longing not only for *a* body, but *the* body of the Word that became flesh, precisely in order to give unfathomable worth to flesh.

**This article builds on another piece written for [Truth and Love](#) by Courage International.*

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[1] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (London: AK, 2006), 7.

[2] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 28.

[3] *Ibid.*, 1.

[4] *Ibid.*, 28.

[5] *Ibid.*, 81.

[6] *Ibid.*, 67.

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Bodies

