



# Humanum

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## BOOK REVIEW

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### iPod, YouTube, WiiPlay

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**D. Brent Laytham**, *Pod, YouTube, Wii Play: Theological Engagements with Entertainment* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2012).

Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one.... Hence we always try to work away from the natural condition of any pleasure to that in which it is least natural, least redolent of its Maker, and least pleasurable. An ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula. It is more certain; and it's better *style*. To get the man's soul and give him *nothing* in return – that is what really gladdens Our Father's heart." – C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

In thinking through (and with) a book that undertakes to deal *theologically* with modern entertainment in its myriad forms, these words of advice from a senior demon tempter to his novice nephew are perhaps not wholly out of place. Elsewhere in this devilish correspondence the tempter Screwtape returns to this theme: "Nothing is very strong: strong enough to steal away a man's best years not in sweet sins but in a dreary flickering of the mind over it knows not what and knows not why, in the gratification of curiosities so feeble that the man is only half aware of them, in drumming of fingers and kicking of heels.... It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing." Such a prescient warning – applicable in all times, to be sure – nonetheless seems to be spoken directly for our benefit, we who live in the age of Facebook and YouTube, twitting away our days.

In *iPod, YouTube, Wii Play: Theological Engagements with Entertainment*, Brent Laytham proposes to think through the various forms of entertainment and entertainment technology that so enthrall us today. One of his primary principles is not to jump immediately to the extreme of either condemnation or celebration, but to reflect critically on *what* entertainment

is, *how* it works, and what it *means* for us. To reflect on entertainment *theologically* means, for Laytham (a United Methodist) to do so before God, within the Church, and in the light of the Gospel. This leads him to focus not so much on the content as on the *form* of entertainment today, and on how its inner logic *forms us*, shaping our patterns of thinking, feeling and acting. In what way, Laytham asks, does entertainment help form us to the mind of Christ, and in what way does it serve rather as a counter-formation?

This attempt to seek out the *inner logic* of today's entertainment culture is the real strength of Laytham's work. While he makes use of social statistics and current writings on these topics, he's not afraid to ask metaphysical, anthropological, and theological questions: what is the essence of what we're dealing with today, and what vision of man does it contain and impart? What does this have to do with our faith in Christ and our life in the communion of the Church? Laytham helps readers to see why such questions are important and how they are always already in play. Moreover, he eases an approach to this more universal understanding of things by working with particulars, devoting most of the chapters of his book to delving into the various forms of entertainment that are most present and powerful today: iPod, YouTube, Twitter, commercialized sports, and video gaming, among others.

These chapters contain a number of real insights. Laytham shows, for example, how the iPod not only makes music manifestly less social, but how, through its advertisements and the aura it promises and in many ways makes actual through the device itself, it focuses on a kind of *interior transcendence*: rather than being moved ecstatically out of myself by the beauty of a particular piece, I am now given the means to bring about a private, particular feeling or mood which I can manufacture for myself through my selections. This leads, among other things, to an incapacity to enjoy life "straight": we must instead increasingly aestheticize our existence. Laytham does a nice job of building up a more general argument through such particular analyses, showing how entertainment more broadly, for example, and not simply the iPod, teaches us to disregard limits, indeed to imagine that true freedom comes by overcoming limits through ever-increasing control and choice. In this way we become dulled to any wonder that lies within the merely mundane, insofar as it lies outside our immediate control and we cannot simply manipulate it into an "experience."

One of the questions which inevitably comes up when treating entertainment, and technology more generally, is: what should we do? What should our stance be towards entertainment trends? Laytham should be commended for first seeking to understand what modern entertainment *is* and *means* before asking what we should do in response. Regarding that latter, however, and consonant with his critical-dialectical approach, Laytham proposes, not a *via media* of temperate use – which is problematic among other reasons because rational control or choice are part of the very logic which these devices are conforming us to – but rather a recognition that entertainment is simultaneously a *power* and a *triviality*.

As a "power" (cf. Rom. 8:37-39, Eph. 6:12, etc.), entertainment is a widespread social structure with the constant pretension to be more important than it is, thus usurping the place of God. Indeed, it seems more omnipresent and omnipotent in our daily existence than God himself. Not only is it present in nearly every aspect of our lives (a virtual appendage to our bodies, in the case of the smart phone), but its particular way of providing amusement has become "the primary standard of value for virtually everything." Because of entertainment's intrinsically rebellious nature, its tendency to elevate itself above what it is, we must beware of simply trying to make use of it for our own good ends (on this, see the hard-to-believe chapter on Christian liturgy and "U2charist"): rather than being a mere neutral medium, entertainment will inevitably shape whatever content we put into it to the mold of its own logic.

At the same time, however, entertainment is also a “triviality.” For Laytham, this is a good thing. Trivial pursuits free us from our own false claims of authority and ultimacy; they help us to recognize that we are not God and are not responsible for saving the world. Through trivialities God reminds us that not everything in our lives is fraught with ultimate consequences. We are given permission to “waste time,” to recognize that life is not fundamentally something to be accomplished through our own will but rather a gift given to us to be received in thanksgiving and joy.

What does all this mean for our use of entertainment? According to Laytham, it means that we should not simply accept modern forms of entertainment unthinkingly, nor that we should simply reject them: rather, “refusing always and never,” we must sometimes enjoy and sometimes eschew. Laytham is at pains to indicate that he is not proposing a radical solution: we need not throw away our iPods, stop watching professional sports, or sell our gaming systems – after all, he argues, there is something good and legitimate in these pleasures. In the end, one is left wondering how his approach really differs from the *via media* of temperance that he himself indicates is inadequate. Perhaps part of the answer is that *understanding* entertainment is already a way of freeing ourselves from its problematic logic.

To enter into this question a bit more, I would like to press Laytham on two points. In the first place, it seems to me that in his affirmation of the intrinsic goodness of entertainment (a goodness which is inevitably distorted through sin, manifest for Laytham especially in the effects of corporate exploitation), Laytham misses something of the inevitable link between content and form. If the very logic of YouTube, for example, conditions us to “an endless chain of immediate but forgettable gratification that can only be satisfied by another video,” then this means that anything of more significance that does appear in this medium – “poignant or piquant sharings of self, witty or wonderful observations of life, graceful or gladdening performances” – shows up only *per accidens*, insofar as it is inherently contrary to the shallow triviality and self-reflexivity that YouTube consciously or unconsciously promotes. The same holds true analogously for other entertainment media.

Secondly, on triviality. While I agree with Laytham’s overall thrust that entertainment or genuine pleasure is a “useless” *gift* which reminds us that the world is good beyond anything we can do or make it to be, I am not sure I would agree with him in equating triviality itself with this intrinsic goodness. One of the marks of modern entertainment is precisely that it is trivial, rather than meaningful. It has nothing of true leisure about it. For the most part in America today “the real world” of work is sharply separated from the world of pastimes and pleasures, but for many of us neither sphere seems to be truly “meaningful” or “fraught with ultimacy,” except again *per accidens*. Neither helps us to enter more deeply into the reality of things: entertainment is simply a mindless, if sometimes thrilling, escape from the drudgery of the work day, a kind of “incarnation” in reverse, into superficiality.

Not all pleasures have to be “high,” of course, but they should all at any rate be genuine *pleasures*, as opposed to mere stimulations: they should have something analogous to “play” about them, the marriage of freedom and form and intrinsic worth and community and bodily presence which Laytham expounds in the central chapter of his book. Instead, too much of the entertainment today, precisely as informed by technology, stokes our misplaced modern desire for a freedom over things (and ourselves – the freedom to create our own identities), even if these “things” are simply pixels on a screen. Such pixels in fact are precisely the perfectly formless, infinitely plastic (because virtual) “stuff” that answers to our desire for an all-encompassing freedom. We marvel over touch-screen technology, how with the flick of a finger we can flip a page or strum a string *just like the real thing*. Having lost any interest in reality itself, we are captured by the world re-made through our own powers. It is seductive,

for we have the illusion of complete control, and the satisfaction of immediate response; whereas reality itself always further eludes our grasp and takes time to reveal itself: to which the proper response is *patience* and *wonder*, neither of which are encouraged or informed by modern entertainment technology.

Laytham's book is a welcome contribution to entering more deeply into these questions. I must admit that I at times grew weary of his constant attempts to be accessible, indeed catchy ("the iPod is an iCon of musical iDentity"): it's probably fair to say that he sometimes falls prey to a problematic he critiques, "the pressure on Christian[ity] to adopt the *idiom* of entertainment –looking, feeling, and sounding like secular entertainments" (not unlike certain presentations of John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* that attempt to make the Pope's teachings on human love "exciting," if not downright "sexy"). This issue did seem to diminish as the book continues, however. I also wish that Laytham had concluded with an overall treatment of what unites the various forms of entertainment he deals with, instead of simply pointing to this in a sketch in individual chapters.

Finally, I would have liked to see a more *intrinsic* connection between some of his critiques and how they relate to the life of faith and of the Church: often the theological connection seemed to be made only "after the fact," so to speak, rather than showing how the heart of the faith affects our daily lives and doings from the inside. Be that as it may, Laytham's work is at one and the same time clear and accessible, often engaging, and full of genuine insights into the essence of entertainment today, insights that prompt the reader to his own reflection on an area of our lives that is immensely formative and yet often remains unthought.

