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This article results from the experimental convergence of five elements. Three of these are seemingly unrelated names: the Anglican philosopher John Milbank, the German critical theorist Walter Benjamin, and the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. The remaining two are themes that seem to have little relation to each other: the explosion of online pornography, which is making addicts of younger and younger users, and Christology or the study of the nature and work of the Second Person of the Trinity.

The preponderance of the literature on pornography is currently focused on the addictive qualities of pornography, in particular the addictive nature of virtual depictions of sexual activity. While such literature offers important insights into the dynamics at work in the consumers of pornography, I argue that pornography exercises a *cultural* power that requires a different framing. Analysis of its cultural power is significant because it precedes the analysis of addiction. It goes to the orientations and tendencies of a culture that seep into and orient individual behaviour well before the act of consuming pornography takes place. I argue that such an investigation requires not only the insights of the empirical sciences, but also those of philosophy and theology. With this in mind, I argue in this article that pornography's cultural power is best understood not only as a sociological phenomenon. There is also a metaphysics and theology at work within the structure of pornography itself.

At the metaphysical level, pornography's power lies not merely in its celebration of the virtual over the tactile. Drawing on Milbank, I argue that this celebration of the virtual is foregrounded by another metaphysical celebration of possibility over actuality, which is a reversal of the medieval priority of act over potency. This metaphysics of the possible is coupled with a theological imperative. Drawing on Walter Benjamin, I argue that there is a messianism and a soteriology at work in pornography's prioritising of the potential over the

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actual. This kind of messianism via the possible ends up abandoning or destroying the actual. Because of this messianism, there is a Christological pattern embedded within the structure of pornography that is activated at the point of consumption. This metaphysical and theological dynamic at work in pornography can be called out and challenged only by the discipline of philosophy and theology. With this in mind, the article will finish with a brief investigation into how the vocabulary of a Christology of the incarnate Word works as a counterpoint to the messianism of pornography.

Metaphysics

Because pornography currently relies on online distribution, much ink has been spilled in works that focus on the harmful effects of online pornography. This is understandable, given that this virtual reformatting of the modes of *distribution* has changed the format of preferred pornographic *content*: the most consumed form of pornography currently is a motion picture rather than stills. Be that as it may, the focus on virtuality means that there is a tendency for the literature to tie the cultural power of pornography to the infrastructure of the internet. This in turn makes the explosion in pornography look like a sudden and recent eruption rather than the result of a long and gradual cultural process. What gets missed in this literature is that pornography in and of itself is virtual content regardless of the mode of its distribution. This article would shift the focus from the distribution of pornographic content to the virtuality of pornography itself. What comes into focus is an allure of virtuality, which emerges much earlier than the emergence of the internet, and indeed, much earlier than the emergence of pornography itself. In other words, the question to be asked should shift from 'What explains the cultural pull of online pornography?' to 'What explains the cultural pull of virtuality, which pornography plays off?' The answer to this question goes back not decades, but centuries, and lies in an unusual—metaphysical—source.

In his *Beyond Secular Order*, John Milbank provides an intriguing genealogy of metaphysics that suggests that the story begins as early as the twelfth century. While not dealing directly with pornography, Milbank's genealogy is nevertheless useful because it lays out the metaphysical foundation for the infrastructure of pornography that will be built eight hundred years later: it tracks the metaphysical breadcrumbs that lead to the emergence of what might be called a metaphysics of simulation.

For Milbank, this metaphysics of simulation builds on a medieval linguistic puzzle: How can we speak of God and creature without confusion when both God and creature can be thought of within in the same plane of being, or 'univocally'?[1] In Milbank's genealogy, the scholastics sought to prevent this confusion by defining creatures in terms of their *not* being divine. Creaturely

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1. On the metaphysics of univocity, see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

existence—our existence—was the upshot of negating the divine. Without intending it, what is *not* became more fundamental in defining creaturely being than what *is*. In Milbank's words, there is a 'priority of the *not*' that underpins creaturely existence.[2]

There is another metaphysical change Milbank identifies that is important for our consideration of pornography. It is not just that creatures are more fundamentally defined by what is *not,* but that in doing so, both 'being' and 'not being' are put on the same level of existence. *Not* existing is itself given existential weight. The effect of giving anything that does *not* exist the same metaphysical heft as what *does* exist is that this provides the first step in undermining the medieval metaphysical anchor for our existence, which is the priority of the actual over the possible, or in scholastic terms, the priority of act (actuality) over potency (possibility). In the medieval schema, possibility can only emerge from the soil of actual existence. In a possibilist schema, possibility is championed as an independent entity, detached from actuality and emerging of its own accord. Building on this, Catherine Pickstock notes this detachment eventually bears the fruit of possibility having a priority over actuality. In her words, in this detached schema 'all essences, even actualised ones, were themselves at some stage only potential or possible essences'.[3] In other words, the possible is now the criterion of the actual, since 'every realised essence becomes dislodged or qualified by the lurking possibility of alternative essences'.[4]

This metaphysical detour is necessary for the present inquiry because we now have the basis for 'privileging epistemology over ontology and the rational over the actual'. Put another way, we now have the metaphysical infrastructure in which what *may be* (a product of human thought) now has priority over what *actually is* (that which is grounded in the solidity of the material).[5] When God and creature are spoken of in the same metaphysical voice, it is now possible to ground all possible things with nothing more than human thought. This epistemological turn has a theological fruit, for it is not that we have not so much brought God down to our level of thought, but rather elevated our thought to that of God's. While the Scriptures posit God as the anchor of our existence, a metaphysics that prioritises the possible makes our thought an equally—if not more—effective guarantor for the existence of anything that *may be*.[6] Thanks to our thought, *virtual* reality can now be given the same substance as actual reality. Indeed, virtual reality can be said to *transcend* actual reality. In a possibilist schema, the transcendent or the mysterious can exist in 'a realm of virtual

2.   John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 52.
3.   Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 126.
4.   Ibid.
5.   Ibid., 127.
6.   Ibid., 126.

possibility, or partial reality, which threatens perpetually to undermine the necessity of all realised possibilities'.[7]

More than simply undermine what is, there is now a 'logical order preceding actuality' in which the products of thought—the possible—*override* the material givenness of actuality,[8] as what is possible ascends the hierarchy of being to take on god-like attributes. In other words, thanks to our thought, the virtual can increase the possibilities that actual reality would not allow us to do. As earlier mentioned, what is actual is always haunted by what is possible. Because the substance of what is possible is what *may* exist, the possible breaches the borders of what *does* exist in actuality. This is the point where the metaphysics of possibility, the virtual platform of pornography, and its addictive qualities converge. It is not merely that pornography's distributive platform is virtual, but that pornography's substance is itself virtual, insofar as the virtual here pertains to the possible. Put another way, the selling point of pornography is not in the actuality of the sex depicted behind the screen. Rather, pornography's pull arises from the infinite *possible* forms of sex that may be viewed in *front* of the screen.

In other words, the *fact* that there are people having sex in a video is secondary to the *possible combinations* of numbers, races, ages, species, scenarios, positions and instruments by which the sexual act can be undertaken, all undergirded by the imagination of the consumer of porn. This point becomes particularly pertinent when one considers that the purpose of *consuming* porn is not the erotic act depicted on the screen, but the often autoerotic act taking place in front of the screen, fuelled by the thoughts of erotic fantasy. In other words, pornography is less a case of 'Look at the people having sex' and more of 'Look at what kinds of sex are *possible* for you'.

Messianism

In the consumption of pornography, the user locates his or her happiness at a location that is both within the mind and beyond the borders of actuality, squarely within the territory of possibility. Moreover, Walter Benjamin notes in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, the moment we locate our happiness with something, we also attribute a moment of redemption to our lives, a messianic moment.[9]

We then must ask: What is the messianic moment in pornography? For the consumer of porn, this moment lies in deliverance from the monotony of life through extraordinary fantasies. For those responsible on the production side of the ledger, the messianic moment lies in the income that is generated from that

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7.   Ibid., 127.
8.   Ibid., 126.
9.   'Our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption.' Cited in Elissa Marder, 'Walter Benjamin's Dream of Happiness', in *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, ed. Beatrice Hanssen (London: Continuum, 2006), 197.

consumption. At first glance, the two forms of the messianic moment might seem unrelated. However, the common tie between the two is the metaphysical prioritising of possibility over actuality. The messianic is tied with the deliverance from actuality to possibility. In the case of the user, the messianic is less the sexual release per se than the opening up of possibilities in which that sexual release can be obtained. In the case of the producers, the messianic is to be found in the acquisition of money. However, it must be noted that money is in and of itself useless. Its material value, and thus the messianic moment built into money, comes from its being a store of possibility—what Philip Goodchild calls 'potential to acquire value'.[10] We see a seamless garment wherein money and pornography are woven in the same metaphysical fabric. It is a messianism that locates the salvific within what is possible, rather than within what is actual.

Having looked at *where* the messianic is located, we should now turn our attention to *how* the messianic operates, and see how this form of messianism makes the possible relate to the actual. Recall that this messianism is grounded in prioritising the possible over the actual. What the prioritisation of the possible over the actual means in practice is that what is possible emerges only when it detaches itself from the actual. This is because, as indicated earlier, when we prioritise the possible over the actual, we assume that the inert finitude of the actual is a prison for the dynamic infinitude of the possible.[11] Attaining the possible thus requires breaking the bonds of the actual and never wanting to go back; and nowhere is this detachment from the actual seen more viscerally than in pornography.

In the case of the user of pornography, such a detachment comes in the autoerotic act. While at first glance this might seem about as grounded in materiality as it gets, in actual fact there is a profound detachment from the material taking place. In the first instance, there is what Nishant Shah calls a 'reverse-translation' or the 'alienation of the avatar from the body'.[12] Put another way, pornography abstracts the user and breaks him or her up into two components. There is an embodied component in the autoerotic act taking place *in front of* the screen, and there is the virtual component of the fantasy depicted *on* the screen. Furthermore, pornography creates a rift between these two components, which are effectively two bodies: a fantasised body in the erotic scenario depicted in the video and the actual body consuming the pornography.[13] Alienation also takes place in the case of the actor and producer: the insertion of money as the potential of value alienates the actuality of both the actor and the producer from the actuality of a sexual act as it becomes a fantasised depiction for consumption by anonymous account holders.

10.   Philip Goodchild, *Theology of Money* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 102.
11.   Pickstock, *After Writing*, 128.
12.   Nishant Shah, 'Material Cyborgs; Asserted Boundaries: Formulating the Cyborg as a Translator', *European Journal of English Studies* 12, no. 2 (2008): 211–25.
13.   Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 72.

To reiterate, the possible surpassing of limit imposed by the actual is seen as a moment of messianic promise. The trouble is that such promise is never fulfilled. This is because the moment of redemption does not really arrive. In the case of the consumer of pornography, instead of realising the promise of a deeper immersion into the sexual fantasy, Ward argues that the moment of sexual release is actually a 'withdrawal from the fantasised scene that supports the pleasuring' of the actual body.[14] The user, in order to experience the physical pleasure of the autoerotic act, is pulled from the fantasised body back to the prison of the actual body. In the case of the actor and producer, the 'potential for acquiring value' will soon dissipate as money gets spent. Once the pool is empty, it will make it necessary for the producers to return to the actuality of the sexual production line.

Christology

The question to be asked at this point is how this messianic puzzle contrasts with the Christian account. The point of contrast here lies in their respective metaphysics and in their respective loci of the messianic. I have earlier stated that in pornography, the messianic moment lies in the possible. In Christology, however, the locus of the messianic lies in the actual. In other words, Christology reverses the metaphysics of the messianism of pornography by inverting pornography's metaphysics of possibility. This reversal of the possibilism in pornography becomes clearer if one considers the patristic conception of the Second Person of the Trinity as the Divine Word or Divine Logos. For the fathers, the Logos was not merely a single idea. The Logos had an infinity of ideas, including what is possible, within itself.[15]

Within the Logos lies an infinite sea of possibility. Yet at the same time, as we profess in the creeds, the infinite Logos became incarnate in the finite actuality of human flesh. What this means is that when the Word became flesh, the infinite possibility of the Logos worked its way *through* the finitude of human flesh. Actuality becomes the site for the unfolding of the possible. This incarnational logic recalibrates the relationship between the actual and the possible. Recall that in the metaphysics of possibilism, the possible unfolds only when it is *detached* from the actual. In an incarnational key, the possible can unfold only insofar as it occurs *within* the actual.

Ward best articulates what this incarnational logic could look like in his *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*.[16] For Ward, the shape of the present is what marks and informs the emergence of future possibility. Yet at the same time, those contours of actuality do not capture or freeze those conceptions

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14. Ibid.
15. Ilia Delio, *Simply Bonaventure: An Introduction to His Life, Thought, and Writings* (New York: New City Press, 2001), 60.
16. Graham Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

of potentiality. No single expression of the actual can totally express the potential. Put another way, every instance of the actual already bears within it the potential for transformation. In Ward's words, every articulation of the actual 'will transform one epoch into another, invest certain objects with value … only to have this evaluation revised'.[17] This is important for Christology, because Christology so conceived shifts the locus of the messianic moment. Paradoxically, the possible remains the locus of the messianic, but the logic of the incarnate Word means that the messianic can be located only *within* the actual.

Biblically, this crossroads between the messianic and the actual is signposted with words like 'now', 'the day', and 'the moment'. This is why, for instance, the prophet Joel can couple his promise of salvation with the injunction 'even *now*, come back to me' (Joel 2:12); and this is why Paul can say with confidence that 'in the moment of favour I heard you, in the day of salvation I helped you; well now is the time of favour, now is the day of salvation' (2 Cor 6:2). The here-ness and now-ness of the messianic promise means the present moment is invested with value.

Metaphysically, the same cannot be said in the case of pornography. If pornography locates the messianic moment in a potential outside the actual, the actual becomes something to be overcome or cast aside. This is why the porn industry treats actual bodies as commodities, as actual sites for the extraction of potential monetary value. In the course of the extraction of this potential value, the integrity of bodies in their actuality is undermined as multiple genitals, instruments and partners stretch the limits of, and eventually overcome, the body's integrity. When this happens, bodies become disposable, and porn studios will cycle through one actor after another when an actor is rendered incapable of further performance.[18] As an aside, this anti-corporeal form of messianism might also explain the growing willingness to subject one's body to the scalpels of the growing army of plastic surgeons, slicing off flesh to align one's actual beauty to the potential airbrushed beauty of the porn star.[19] In the tsunami of the potential flesh of pornography, actual flesh is swept aside.

Conclusion

I have argued that pornography's cultural power does not lie in its virtuality. Rather, it is because that virtuality is smuggling in a parody of Christology. The messianism in pornography is a parody of the Christology of the incarnate Word because pornography makes messianic promises, but also demands the destruction of the here and now as a precondition for attaining those promises. By contrast, the Christology of the incarnate Word commits to the here and now as the precondition for the potential that we crave. I hope that I have shown that

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17. Ibid., 146.
18. Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon, 2010), xxvii–xxviii.
19. Ibid., 82–3.

it is not enough simply to highlight the harm of pornography. Reiterating the harm it causes runs the risk of reinforcing, rather than interrogating, the foundations of pornography's social and cultural hegemony. Yet speaking of pornography as the manifestation of a metaphysics and theology does more than provide merely another angle, for it mines the underpinnings of this cultural form that cultural critique alone might miss. Finally, I also hope to have affirmed, via this critique, theology's capacity to interrogate seemingly immovable cultural institutions of our time.