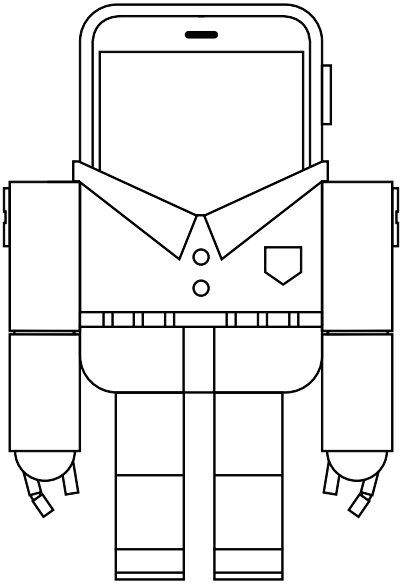

12 WAYS YOUR PHONE IS CHANGING YOU

Tony Reinke

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To Karalee

"All things are lawful for me,"
but not all things are helpful.
"All things are lawful for me,"
but I will not be dominated by anything. . . .
"All things are lawful,"
but not all things build up.

—Apostle Paul

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FOREWORD

By John Piper

Smartphones are dangerous, like marriage and music and fine cuisine—or anything else that can become an idol. They are also very useful, like guns and razor blades and medicinal cannabis—or lots of other things that can ruin your life. I personally like marriage very much, and use a razor blade every day. So I am with Tony Reinke in his chastened enthusiasm about the ever-changing world of modern technology.

But I could never have written this book. I don't have the patience, and I don't read fast enough or widely enough. Tony has done more research for this book than for anything else he has written. And those other books were *not* thrown together. His commitment to being informed, and being fair, demanded remarkable attentiveness to subtleties and persistent commitment to ever-clearer reedits. Add to this the gift of theological insightfulness, and this book becomes something very few people could have written. I surely couldn't.

But I do have one small advantage in pondering smartphones. I'm seventy years old. This is an advantage for two reasons. One is that I've been an adult during the entire computer revolution—from the beginning. The other is that I can feel the onrush of eternity just over the horizon.

I got my first real job as a teacher in 1974. I was twenty-eight. The first personal computer was introduced in 1975. It was a kit. I don't do kits. I wait. In 1980, I left academia and became a pastor. Virtually no churches used computers in 1980. They were more like expensive toys and fancy calculators.

But things soon began to get serious. IBM produced its first personal computer in 1981, and *Time* magazine called 1982 "The Year of the Computer." Pricing was prohibitive. But I wanted in for one main reason: word processing. Writing. The price was right in 1984, and my journal entry for June 16 reads: "I bought a computer yesterday. IBM PC, 256K of RAM, double disc for $1,995.00." The monitor was extra. The disk operating system (DOS 2.1) was $60.

Twenty-three years later the iPhone was created. Computer and phone were now one. I was on board within a year. Calling. Texting. Keeping up with the news. Playing Scrabble with my wife. And reading my Bible, saving verses, memorizing on the go. For all the abuses and all the devastation of distraction, wasted hours, narcissistic self-promotion, and pornographic degradation, I see the computer and the smartphone as gifts of God—like papyrus and the codex and paper and the printing press and the organs of mass distribution.

If you live long enough, pray earnestly, and keep your focus on the imperishable Word of God, you can be spared the slavery to newness. Over time, you can watch something wonderful happen. You can see overweening fascination give way to sober usage. You can watch a toy become a tool; a craze become a coworker; a sovereign become a servant. To cite Tony's words—and his aim—you can watch the triumph of useful efficiency over meaningless habit.

I wish I could give every young adult the taste of eternity that grows more intense as you enter your eighth decade. A happy consciousness of the reality of death and the afterlife is a wonderful liberator from faddishness and empty-headed screen-tapping. I say "happy consciousness" because, if all you have is fear, your smartphone almost certainly becomes one of the ways you escape the thought of death.

But if you rejoice in the hope of the glory of God because your sins are forgiven through Jesus, then your smartphone becomes a kind of friendly pack mule on the way to heaven. Mules are not kept for their good looks. They just get the job done.

The job is not to impress anybody. The job is to make much of Christ and love people. That is why we were created. So don't waste your life grooming your mule. Make him bear the weight of a thousand works of love. Make him tread the heights with you in the mountains of worship.

If that sounds strange to you, but perhaps attractive, Tony will serve you well in the pages ahead. Where else will you find the iPhone linked to the New Jerusalem? Where else will someone be wise enough to say that "our greatest need in the digital age is to behold the glory of the unseen Christ in the faint blue glow of our pixelated Bibles"? Where else will we hear fitting praise of Bible apps along with the honest confession that "no app can breathe life into my communion with God"? Who else is writing about the smartphone with the conviction that "the Christian imagination is starving to death for solid theological nourishment"? And who else is going to confront the presumed hiddenness of our private sins with the truth: "There is no such thing as anonymity. It is only a matter of time"?

Yes. And the time is short. Don't waste it parading your mule. Make him work. His Maker will be pleased.

PREFACE

This blasted smartphone! Pesk of productivity. Tenfold plague of beeps and buzzing. Soulless gadget with unquenchable power hunger. Conjuror of digital tricks. Surveillance bracelet. Money pit. Inescapable tether to work. Dictator, distractor, foe!

Yet it is also my untiring personal assistant, my irreplaceable travel companion, and my lightning-fast connection to friends and family. VR screen. Gaming device. Ballast for daily life. My intelligent friend, my alert wingman, and my ever-ready collaborator. This blessed smartphone!

My phone is a window into the worthless and the worthy, the artificial and the authentic. Some days I feel as if my phone is a digital vampire, sucking away my time and my life. Other days, I feel like a cybernetic centaur—part human, part digital—as my phone and I blend seamlessly into a complex tandem of rhythms and routines.

IPHONE 1.0

Tech wiz Steve Jobs introduced the iPhone at Macworld Expo on January 9, 2007, as a "giant" 3.5-inch high-res screen requiring no physical keyboard or stylus. Unlike the clunky smartphones to date, he announced: "We're going to use the best pointing device in the world. We're going to use a pointing device that we're all born with—born with ten of them. We're going to use our fingers." From that moment, the magic of multitouch technology would introduce highly accurate fingertip gestures to a pocket device, bringing humans into

more intimate proximity to their computing technology than ever before. When Jobs later announced, as an aside, "You can now *touch* your music," the magnitude of the statement was too mystical to grasp in the moment.[1]

Apple officially released the first iPhone on June 29, 2007, and I bought one that fall. I marveled at the technology stuffed inside this glossy handheld phone: a legitimate computer operating system, a newly engineered iPod for my music, a rapid new mechanism to text friends, super-sharp video combined with a new mobile browser to preserve the full look of the web, an accelerometer to sense how I tip and twist and rotate my phone—all on a screen with intuitive tactile controls guided by fingertip taps, swipes, and pinches.

On a road trip a few days after the sacred unboxing, I stood outside a snowy Iowa rest stop, unlocked my new iPhone, and replied to my first rural email. Wirelessly. Effortlessly. I was hooked, and so were millions of others. In ten years, nearly one billion iPhones have been sold.

Apple's mobile phone was followed by Android, and smartphones spread over the globe and over every corner of our lives. We now check our smartphones every 4.3 minutes of our waking lives.[2] Since I got my first iPhone, a smartphone has been within my reach 24/7: to wake me in the morning, to deejay my music library, to entertain me with videos, movies, and live television, to capture my life in digital pictures and video, to allow me to play the latest video game, to guide me down foreign streets, to broadcast my social media, and to reassure me every night that it will wake me again (as long as I feed it electricity). I use my phone to keep our always-changing family schedule in real-time sync. I used my phone to research, edit, and even write sections of this book. I use my phone for just about everything (except phone calls, it seems). And my phone goes with

1. Mic Wright, "The Original iPhone Announcement Annotated: Steve Jobs' Genius Meets Genius," The Next Web, thenextweb.com (Sept. 6, 2015).
2. Jacob Weisberg, "We Are Hopelessly Hooked," *The New York Review of Books* (Feb. 25, 2016).

me wherever I go: the bedroom, the office, vacation, and, yes, the bathroom.

The smartphone combined several budding technologies[3] into the most powerful handheld tool of social connection ever invented. With our phones, all of life is immediately capturable and shareable. So I was not surprised when the editors of *Time* named the iPhone the single most influential gadget of all time, saying that it "fundamentally changed our relationship to computing and information—a change likely to have repercussions for decades to come."[4]

Oh, yes, the repercussions. What is the price of all this digital magic? I have since discovered that my omnipresent iPhone is also corroding my life with distractions—something Apple execs unwittingly admitted on the eve of the launch of the Apple Watch, marketed as a newer and less-invasive techno-fix to all the techno-noise brought into our lives by the iPhone.[5]

Unknown to me at the time I was unboxing my first iPhone, Jobs was actively shielding his children from his digital machines.[6]

Should I be shielding myself?

THE BIG QUESTION

The makers and marketers of the smartphone wield great power over us, and I want to know what effect this technology has on my spiritual life. As in every area of the Christian life, I want to learn from the history of the church and from older Christians. My first interview of many in the path of producing this book was a phone

3. This book is far too short to retell the riveting history of the smartphone. For that, see Majeed Ahmad, *Smartphone: Mobile Revolution at the Crossroads of Communications, Computing and Consumer Electronics* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2011).

4. Lisa Eadicicco et al., "The 50 Most Influential Gadgets of All Time," *Time* magazine (May 3, 2016).

5. David Pierce, "iPhone Killer: The Secret History of the Apple Watch," *Wired* (April 2015).

6. In 2010, just after Apple launched its innovative tablet (the iPad), a reporter asked Jobs, "So, your kids must love the iPad?" He responded: "They haven't used it. We limit how much technology our kids use at home." Nick Bilton, "Steve Jobs Was a Low-Tech Parent," *The New York Times* (Sept. 10, 2014). Later, Apple's vice president of design, Jonathan Ive, admitted to setting "strict rules about screen time" for his ten-year-old twin boys. Ian Parker, "The Shape of Things to Come," *The New Yorker* (March 2, 2015).

call to seventy-five-year-old theologian David Wells (1939–). His most recent book on God's holiness was surprisingly filled with talk about technology (a relevant subtopic now in any conversation).[7]

"It is only since the mid 1990s that the web has been widely used in our society, so we are talking here about two decades," Wells told me. "And so we—all of us—are trying to figure out what is useful to us and what damages us. We can't escape it, and probably none of us *wants* to escape it. We cannot become digital monks." To my surprise, Wells seemed personally familiar with the temptations: "There is no doubt that life is more highly distracted, because we get pings and beeps and text messages. We are, in fact, living with a parallel, virtual universe, a universe that can take all of the time that we have. What happens to us when we are in constant motion—when we are almost addicted to constant visual stimulation? What is this doing to us? That is the big question."[8]

Wells is exactly right—our phones are constant variables, always changing and morphing new behaviors in us. Many years ago, Jacques Ellul (1912–1994) prophetically warned of this danger of the technological age, writing that "unpredictability is one of the general features of technological progress."[9] The unpredictability of the tech age carries with it a certain level of unabated insecurity that pushes us far from an answer to Wells's question. We don't know what our smartphones are doing to us, but we are being changed, that much is clear.

I later emailed seventy-one-year-old Oliver O'Donovan (1945–), an accomplished Christian ethicist in Scotland, to ask him if Christians should feel uneasy about the rise of digital communications technology. "Electronic communications are a question for the younger generation more than for mine," he admitted. "It is they who have really to learn to understand the powers and threats that they embody, partly through trial and error, but also, and very importantly,

7. David Wells, *God in the Whirlwind: How the Holy-love of God Reorients Our World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).
8. David Wells, interview with the author via phone (July 9, 2014).
9. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 60.

through remembering what was of greatest importance *before* the communications revolution kicked in.

"Nobody has ever had to learn this before," he said of the questions we now face. "Nobody can teach the rising generation how to learn it. It is a massive challenge to conscientious intelligence, handed uniquely to *them*. The danger they face, of course, is that the tools set the agenda. A tool of communication is a tool *for communicating something*." He then echoed the question from Wells: "Media don't just lie around passively, waiting for us to come along and find them useful for some project we have in mind. They tell us what to do and, more significantly, what to *want* to do. There is a current in the stream, and if we don't know how to swim, we shall be carried by it. I see someone doing something and I want to do it, too. Then I forget whatever it was that I thought I wanted to do."

O'Donovan concluded the interview with a striking warning: "This generation has the unique task assigned it of discerning what the new media are *really good for*, and that means, also, what they are *not* good for. If they fluff it, generations after them will pay the price."[10]

MY TENSIONS

I wanted to write this book in conversation with elders in the church, but my questions for Wells and O'Donovan boomeranged a question back at me: How can we who are most familiar with our smartphones do our best to flesh out the consequences?

I also find myself in a tricky place—asking critical questions about how my phone is changing me while also working full time online and trying to leverage my skills and experiences to grab the attention of a virtual audience. As the online world is growing global, and growing mobile, new gospel opportunities are opening, too.

Broadly speaking, the power of the digital age to pool human intelligence and factual data is unprecedented (Wikipedia is only one

10. Oliver O'Donovan, interview with the author via email (Feb. 10, 2016).

example of what's to come). Every Christian is now given unmatched opportunities for online ministry. Our prominent preachers today can reach hundreds of thousands of people through social media. Even the most average Christian can speak to an immediate audience of two hundred or three hundred friends on Facebook, a reach unparalleled in human history.

So I feel the squeeze of this catch-22. I want to become skilled at winning attention online (for Christ), but I also want to ask critical questions about my own phone impulses, habits, and assumptions.

MY INTENTION

This book about phones could easily grow thicker than a phone book, so to keep it short, I must address only the essentials and navigate with care and brevity. While some writers claim our phones are making us cognitively sharper and relationally deeper,[11] others warn that our phones are making us shallow, dumb, and less competent in the real world.[12] Both arguments ring true at times, but "social media are largely what we make of them—escapist or transforming depending on what we expect from them and how we use them."[13] The question of this book is simple: What is the best use of my smartphone in the flourishing of my life?

To that end, my aim is to avoid both extremes: the utopian optimism of the technophiliac and the dystopian pessimism of the technophobe. O'Donovan is exactly right when he says that our temptation is to watch someone doing something and then merely to copy the behavior and lose sight of our personal callings and life goals. In other words, we must ask ourselves: What technologies serve my aims? And what are my goals in the first place? Without

11. Clive Thompson, *Smarter Than You Think: How Technology Is Changing Our Minds for the Better* (New York: Penguin, 2013) and Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006).

12. Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011) and Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30)* (New York: TarcherPerigee, 2009).

13. Andy Crouch, *Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk & True Flourishing* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 87.

clear answers here, we can make no progress in thinking through the pros and cons of smartphones *as Christians*.

And yet, if you own a smartphone, you have likely abused it. Such abuse is the target of countless magazine features, books of lament, and powerful videos that reveal just how foolishly our smartphone overuse influences our lives. A moment of guilt can be a powerful motivator, but it won't last. As time wears on and guilt subsides, we revert to old behaviors. This is because our fundamental convictions are too flimsy to sustain new patterns of behavior, and so what seems immediately "right" (turning off our phones) is really nothing more than the product of a moment's worth of shame. What we need are new life disciplines birthed from a new set of life priorities and empowered by our new life freedom in Jesus Christ. So I cannot tell you to put your phone away, to give it up, or to take it up again after a season of burnout. My aim is to explore why you would consider such actions in the first place.

SMALL PRINT

Here are a handful of notes to keep in mind as we begin.

First, this book is written *to me* as much as it is written *by me*. Not only do I need this message, I bear its greatest burden. If the title seems to imply that I'm preaching at you, I'm not. I'm preaching at me. Not many of you should become authors, for we who write books of ethics are held to our words more strictly than anyone.

Second, to keep this book's title short, I have implied that everything in this book is relevant for every individual reader. In truth, I have never been more aware of the variety of smartphone behaviors. We grab our phones as content creators or content consumers, and we focus on timeless content or timely content. Likewise, our smartphone relationships trend in certain directions: as part of virtual communities or as complements to our face-to-face relationships. And those conversations constantly drift toward edification or chitchat (see Figure 1, p. 22). All of us are sliding around these grids constantly, and each trend has its own strengths and pitfalls to address in the pages

ahead. But none of us can plot ourselves exactly in the same spot. I mention this at the front of the book as a way to ask for patience when we discuss behaviors that may not immediately apply to you.

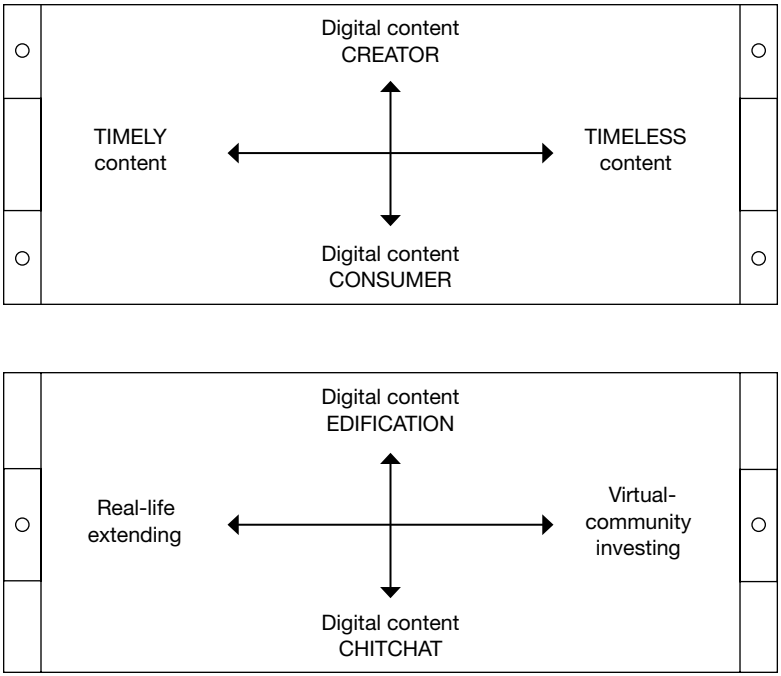

Figure 1. Smartphone behaviors and relationships

Third, this book is not antismartphone; it was written for people who, like me, benefit from the smartphone and use it daily. You will probably hear about this book on your phone in social media, and some of you will read this book on your phones, maybe even quote from it on Facebook—that's not oxymoronic, ironic, or paradoxical; it's the fulfillment of why I wrote it and how I intend to get the message out.

Fourth, this book is not prosmartphone, either. I want this book to be balanced, but balance is not my driving concern. Whether or not I strike the prophone/antiphone balance throughout (or even

section by section) is of little concern because I know that, in the end, readers will be split. I concede this point up front in order to speak more directly to my readers who intend to rethink life patterns (and to avoid bloating this book with a million conditions, caveats, and qualifications). I proceed under the assumption that we all need to stop and reflect on our impulsive smartphone habits because, in an age when our eyes and hearts are captured by the latest polished gadget, we need more self-criticism, not less.

Fifth, since you are reading a book titled *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You*, I assume you are likely the type of reader who bravely welcomes such self-critique. I applaud you for it. The old philosopher Seneca was exactly right when he said, "Be harsh with yourself at times."[14] Sometimes. Not always. At certain key moments in life, lean into the bathroom mirror, squint your eyes, and project pessimism at the person you see. We all need healthy critique. But if you are *only* harsh with yourself, let me speak a word of caution. This book fails if, having read it, you only hate yourself more; it succeeds only if you enjoy Christ more. So if you are easily weighed down with conviction and self-doubt, I pray that this book educates and equips you to enjoy freedom in life to taste deeper the infinite joy we have in Christ, leaving mediocre indulgences behind for deeper and more satisfying pleasures ahead.

Sixth, I'll be quoting theologians, philosophers, professors, pastors, popes, perceptive non-Christians, and public atheists—which means that inclusion in this book is not a full endorsement of someone's theology or a wholesale endorsement of the links, apps, books, or mobster movies mentioned ahead.

Finally, as the title suggests, this book centers on diagnostics and worldview more than application. We won't ignore important practices, but the application will be implied generically throughout and addressed specifically at the end.

14. Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic: Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, trans. Robin Campbell (New York: Penguin, 2015), 67.

CALL FOR HUMILITY

Self-doubt is a hallmark of wise creatures.[15] And self-critical conversations about our personal behaviors require a big dose of humility. Conversations about our smartphones often do not raise new questions; they return us to perennial questions every generation has been forced to ask.

Take Snapchat, the latest phenomenon in "instant expression." In one of my interviews, a theologian suggested to me that it is difficult to let your "yes" be *yes* when your words disappear in a few seconds.[16] But defensive techies immediately negate this claim with a simple fact: while ephemeral words shared on Snapchat disappear in seconds, our vocalized words disappear from the air in *hundredths of a second*. Technology does not make our words more temporary—if anything, it makes them more durable. If we must give an account of every idle word, we are probably the first generation that can truly appreciate the volume of our idle words, since we have published more of them than any group in human history.

So although we can examine our authenticity when we speak through intentionally self-destructing messages (such as Snapchat), our phones do not make our words more transient or empty; they merely raise questions asked in every generation. Only when we acknowledge these questions can we then get back to examining Snapchat.

That is often how conversations on digital media work. So I begin the book by asking for a truce. Can we agree that some of the most important smartphone questions will also apply to nondigital conversations? Just because a struggle we face in our digital lives also relates to nondigital contexts does not mean that the conversation with digital communication is averted—it means that Scripture proves its ongoing relevance in the digital age.

15. Prov. 3:5–8; 12:15; 26:12.
16. James 5:12.

WHO AM I?

As you can see, this journey to untangle my relationship with my phone is very personal (i.e., self-critical of *me*), so you need to know who I am from the outset.

I'm "an early adopter"—a nice way of saying "self-professed iPhone addict and techno-junkie." I am also a Christian of nearly two decades who holds the Bible as the ultimate and final authority over my life. Educated in business, journalism, and liberal arts, I now work as an investigative reporter of the complex dynamics of the Christian life in tension with the current pressures of cultural conformity. I research and write in concert with many other voices in the church, both living and dead.

Married for nearly two decades, my wife and I have three kids, and we are trying to raise them to be technologically competent and digitally self-controlled.[17] In our home, we currently run one desktop computer, three laptops, three tablets, three smartphones, and one iPod.

At the time this book was published, I had compiled 32.6 years of experience in four platforms: blogging, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.[18] I have worked online for nonprofit ministries for a decade, and never without an iPhone. And those labors have not insulated me from the pressing questions of the digital age—rather, they have amplified them. At the same time, my work has put me in contact with several of the most thoughtful Christian philosophers, theologians, pastors, and artists who are thinking carefully about helping the church respond wisely to the digital age, and here I will share some of the best insights from my many conversations with them.

Simultaneously, I wrote this book in dialogue with a variety of Christians: students, singles, married couples, parents, homemakers, business professionals, and ministry leaders. Each of us faces

17. Tony Reinke, "Walk the Worldwide Garden: Protecting Your Home in the Digital Age," Desiring God, desiringGod.org (May 14, 2016).

18. I have been blogging for 565 weeks, posting on Twitter and Facebook each for 441 weeks, and using Instagram for 248 weeks.

similar questions about how to live healthy and balanced lives in the digital age.

BACKWARD DESIRES

Media ecologist Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980) reminded his generation that technology is always an extension of the self. A fork is simply an extension of my hand. My car is an extension of my arms and my feet, and no less so than Fred Flintstone's footmobile.

Likewise, my smartphone extends my cognitive functions.[19] The active neurons in my brain are a crackling tangle of skull lightning, and my thought life resembles a thunderstorm over Kansas.[20] This tiny electrical storm in the microscopic space of my nervous system quite naturally extends out to my thumbs to create tiny digital sparks of electricity inside my phone that beam out to the world by radio waves.

This all means that my phone marks a place in time and space—outside of me—where I can project my relationships, my longings, and the full scope of my conscious existence. In fact, hold up the word "desire" in a mirror and it will read "erised," the name of the magic mirror in the Harry Potter books.[21] In the ancient Mirror of Erised, you see the deepest longings of your heart revealed in vivid color. Our shiny smartphone screens do the same.

Too often what my phone exposes in me is not the holy desires of what *I know I should want*, not even what *I think I want*, and especially not what *I want you to think I want*. My phone screen divulges in razor-

19. "If the wheel is an extension of feet, and tools of hands, backs, and arms, then electromagnetism seems to be in its technological manifestations an extension of our nerves, and becomes mainly an information system." Marshall McLuhan, video interview, "The Future of Man in the Electric Age," marshallmcluhanspeaks.com (BBC, 1965). Throughout the book, I will distinguish between our lives as *embodied* and *disembodied*, not as precise terms but as useful terms of contrast. Of course, on our phones, we always use our bodies—our eyes, thumbs, ears, brains, and even our nerves to sense the phantom vibrations. The usefulness of the terms will become clear later in the book when we address the influence of our phones on our physical health, something we often ignore. They will also serve as a good contrast to the *embodied* life, a term I use in reference to scenarios in which all of our personhood—mind, body, soul, emotion—is displayed and used simultaneously (as in a face-to-face conversation).

20. A metaphor from N. D. Wilson's address, "Words Made Flesh: Stories Telling Stories and the Russian Dolls of Divine Creativity," Vimeo, vimeo.com (April 25, 2015).

21. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (New York: Scholastic, 1998), 207–8.

sharp pixels what my heart *really wants*.[22] The glowing screen on my phone projects into my eyes the desires and loves that live in the most abstract corners of my heart and soul, finding visible expression in pixels of images, video, and text for me to see and consume and type and share. This means that whatever happens on my smartphone, especially under the guise of anonymity, is the true exposé of my heart, reflected in full-color pixels back into my eyes.

Honestly, this may explain the passcodes. To get into a phone is to peek into the interior of another's soul, and we may be too ashamed for others to see what we clicked and opened and chased around online.

What could be more unsettling?

If we are honest enough to face our smartphone habits, and use the pages ahead as an invitation to commune with God, we can expect to find grace for our digital failures and for our digital futures. God loves us deeply, and he is eager to give us everything we need in the digital age. The spilled blood of his Son proves it.[23] We need his grace as we evaluate the place of smartphones—the pros and the cons—in the trajectory of our eternal lives. If we fluff it, not only will we suffer now, but generations after us will pay the price.

22. A haunting heart reality vividly described in James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 27–38.

23. Rom. 8:32.

Introduction

A LITTLE THEOLOGY OF TECHNOLOGY

The moment when my first smartphone caught a wireless email outside that blustery rest stop in the Iowa cornfields is not where the story of this book begins. The launch of the iPhone at Macworld Expo 2007 is not far back enough either. Neither is the beginning of Apple or the birth of Steve Jobs. To see the timeline of the smartphone, we need a quick glance at the history of technology as it stretches back over the centuries. Our digital age is no cosmic accident.

THE STORY OF TECHNOLOGY

In the beginning, God created Adam out of mud and Eve out of a rib. Yahweh bent down and exhaled breath into their lungs, and they awoke into a strange world of oceans and sunshine and mountains and fruit and unnamed animals, untilled soil, and untapped materials, such as diamonds, gold, silver, and iron.[1] God first commanded his creatures to make babies, to collect food, and to govern the animals. But in those early commands, God already had drawn his endgame into his blueprints. The garden was only a beginning. The goal was a globe of technological advancement, leading to a creation so refined that the city streets will be paved thick with crystal gold, a creation

1. Gen. 2:10–14.

so radiant and luminescent that we can hardly imagine what it will look like in the end.[2] So when Adam and Eve awoke and walked into the garden, an unseen, much larger plan was also set in motion. The untilled garden would become a glorious city.

We find ourselves in the middle of this garden-to-city unfolding of history, and God is governing the entire process in several ways. Between the guardrails of natural law, as well as the guardrails of the abundance and scarcity of certain raw materials in the earth, and carried forward through his image bearers, each wired for innovation, the trajectory of technological progress—from the garden to the city—was set in motion. This process is entirely initiated, intended, and guided by God.[3]

But between the muddy rural beginning of the garden and the gleaming urban finale, we must fill in the story, because that's where we find ourselves: east of Eden, west of the Great City, journeying now in God's sovereignly guided history, holding smartphones. As the broader history of technology unfolds, the Bible teaches us nine key realities we must rehearse to ourselves in the digital age.

1. Technology modifies creation

God's commission to the first couple, to garden the globe and to raise animals, implied a series of technological advances that would make all of this work possible through stone tools, then copper tools, and then iron tools.

Unlike his other creatures, God's image bearers would grow food strategically. By design, agricultural advances began rather quickly—a trajectory of shovels, sickles, and horse-drawn plows, and then tractors, irrigation systems, and now GPS-guided (and GPS-driven!) equipment. Technology is used to subdue creation for human good, but also to increase efficiency. Today's agriculture is not perfect, and

2. Rev. 21:18–21.

3. This inevitability explains what historians call the phenomenon of "multiple discovery" or "simultaneous inventions." See Clive Thompson, *Smarter Than You Think: How Technology Is Changing Our Minds for the Better* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 58–66.

it raises moral questions, but the long train of technological advances here is especially illuminating and stunning.

Farming also is one example of technology built from the Creator's intelligence (given to mankind) and creation's abundance (supplied in the earth). Technology is the reordering of raw materials for human purposes. Adam and Eve reordered the raw materials of soil in order to make plants and flowers flourish. Today, chefs and cooks reorder the raw materials of foods into delicious meals. Framing carpenters reorder raw materials of lumber and nails to form homes. Pharmaceutical chemists reorder organic and synthetic elements into healing drugs. Musicians reorder notes and sounds into music. Novelists reorder the raw material of human experience into stories. As a writer of nonfiction, I reorder the raw materials of words and ideas for a publisher, which then reorders wood pulp, black ink, and binding glue into a book for you to hold and read. All of this is technology.

2. Technology pushes back the results of the fall

Not long into the story of the world, Adam and Eve made the tragic mistake—committing the inexplicable sin—of ignoring God's only prohibition. Satan tempted them, and Eve and Adam took a bite at becoming godlike. In that moment, God brought down his curse on creation, and the immediate result was a breakdown in man's relationships with everyone and everything.[4]

That breakdown still affects us today—weeds in the crops, pain in the delivery room, and embarrassment in nakedness. Farmers use weed-killing technology to minimize thorns and thistles on the farm. Women use pain-suppressing technology in childbirth. Fashion designers use fabric to cover our bodies. The sweep of technological advance is a gracious gift from God to help us live in a fallen creation. But all of this technology also reminds us of our fundamental problem—we are sinfully alienated from God.

4. Gen. 3:1–24.

3. Technology establishes human power

Unhitched from fear and obedience to God, technology quickly becomes a pawn in human power plays. The discovery of copper and the invention of stronger and harder carburized iron brought easier farming, but it also brought new equipment for warfare.[5] To own iron mines and employ blacksmiths was to control an endless supply of new weaponry, and to control an endless supply of new weaponry was to flex military superiority, and to flex military superiority was to wield power over rival nations. Bows, arrows, iron, and gunpowder all give power to defend and conquer. The same holds true today. Power and superiority rest on technology: atomic weapons, warships, drones, fighter jets, and missiles. The larger a nation's military, the more power it can wield in the world. Such a quantifiable and scalable power is possible only through technological innovation.

4. Technology helps to edify souls

In the biblical storyline, innovations also serve worshipers.

Musical instruments were invented in order for God's people to express their joy in beautiful songs.[6] Later, the temple of Israel exhibited years of advances in building technology, metallurgy, and artistic craftsmanship. The greatness and the majestic scale of the temple proclaimed to the nations the glory, greatness, and splendor of Israel's God.

As God's plan moved from a come-and-see religion (Old Testament) to a go-and-tell focus (New Testament), chisel and stone gave way to primitive advances in paper and ink, making it possible for written communications technology to advance. God's words, first scratched in stone, then on processed animal skins, and then on products of trees, would become the Creator's centerpiece for drawing together his people separated by continents, languages, and millennia. Over time, the many scrolls of the Old Testament and the many books and letters of the New Testament were gathered into a codex,

5. Gen. 49:5; Judg. 1:19; 4:3.
6. 1 Chron. 15:16; 23:5.

translated, and mass-published as a single book of unified authority that we now conveniently carry in one hand. Every time we open our Bibles, our souls are being fed through centuries of technological advancement.

From trumpets and temples to gold-edged Bibles, God intended technology to play an essential role for us to know and worship him.

5. Technology upholds and empowers our bodies

Technological advances change and refine our bodies in very dramatic ways, too. Eyeglasses and hearing aids boost our senses of seeing and hearing. Musical technology, such as the violin, fine-tunes human motor skills and gives us new purposes for the microrefined movements of our bodies. Industrial technology connects our hands to the hydraulic arms of digging machines. Medical technology starts stopped hearts and sustains dying bodies. Advances in medicine cure diseases and slow terminal illnesses. And advances in clothing make it possible for us to adorn our bodies in ways that define and shape the identities we project to one another.[7]

Technology enhances our bodies, refines our movements, amplifies our actions, and shapes how we present ourselves to the world.

6. Technology gives voice to human autonomy

The good-bad-ugly mix of technology came to a particularly obnoxious expression at the Tower of Babel, an attempt to consolidate all known building innovation to build a rebel city.[8] More than a simple skyscraper, Babel was a new empire with a central city unified around a temple (the tower), all dedicated to the worship of human progress. Suppressing God's ingenuity in all human advances, Babel was man's attempt to hijack technology and to fabricate an entire society and religious life in rebellion to the Creator.

As such, Babel marked man's collective rejection of the idea that technology is a gift from God. Before they built a tower into the sky,

7. 1 Pet. 3:3–4; 1 Tim. 2:9; Rev. 17:4–5.
8. Gen. 11:1–9.

the people of Babel drew a line in the sand that said to the Creator, "Human autonomy will take credit for technological innovation from here on, *thankyouverymuch*." The mockery of this treasonous act is also partially comic—man builds his temple *up* as high as possible, and then the living God of the universe stoops *down* to his knees and puts his cheek on the ground in order to evaluate the progress.[9] This is always what happens when technology is misused in unbelief. God is the genesis of all knowledge and technological advance, and he is the author and finisher of a glorified city to come. Why would a mud skyscraper impress him?

Technology is not inherently evil, but it tends to become the platform of choice to express the fantasy of human autonomy.

7. God governs every human technology

The Tower of Babel was really the Tower of Ignorance. This skyscraper of pride was assembled with earth's raw materials and shaped by human ingenuity—and all of these gifts came from God. To build a godless skyscraper, using God's resources put in the ground and God's inventiveness put in his image bearers, was the height of human arrogance and (as we will see later) the total distortion of human purpose.

So God scattered the builders across the globe by a variety of languages (and drew all those languages back together at Pentecost when the gospel was ready for worldwide distribution[10]). God was not absent at Babel. He was the cosmic foreman on site, overruling human technology to serve his ultimate gospel purpose.

But God's sovereign reign over the most horrific evils of technology is nowhere clearer than in the Roman cross. An upright wooden post with a transverse beam, the cross was a showcase for a criminal: nailed down by three iron spikes, he was then lifted up for all to see as the cross was planted in the ground. The cross was designed to kill criminals, insurrectionists, and disobedient slaves, and to do so

9. Gen. 11:5.
10. Acts 2:1–13.

slowly by exhaustion and asphyxiation. The slow death was public torture, a billboard of intimidation: Behold the fate of any fool who defies Roman rule and threatens social stability.[11]

But this awful tool of torture doubled as the hinge on which all of God's redemptive plan turned. God created trees to serve man, but man invented crosses to destroy man. In the darkness of this most evil moment, God's entire plan for the glorious new city took a decisive step forward. Through an evil misuse of technology, man killed the Author of life, yet God was sovereign over the entire process.[12] By a cosmic paradox that will never be eclipsed, in the naked torture of shame before the eyes of man, Christ exposed all the forces of evil to the shame of stripped-naked defeat.[13]

Evil was defeated by technology, all by God's sovereign design. Technology, even in the hands of the most evil intention of man, is never outside the overruling plan of God. In this case, Calvary was *hacked*. God broke into the technology of the cross "and with a little twist reversed its function."[14] God does this: he makes a mockery of our evil technologies through his sovereign hackery.

8. Technology shapes every relationship

The lineage of technological advance is long—bows and arrows, wheels and axles, iron tools and weapons, movable type and printing presses, clocks and watches, steam engines and railroads, cars and jets, computers and smartphones. Every new technology opens humanity to new hopes, dreams, and aspirations. Every technology changes the fundamental social dynamics of how we relate to the world, to one another, and to God.

First, technology changes how we relate to the earth. With a GPS app, I can see my exact place on the earth in a way that was almost impossible twenty years ago and unfathomable to my ancestors.

11. Martin Hengle, *Crucifixion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977).
12. Acts 3:15; 2:23.
13. Col. 2:15.
14. Martin M. Olmos, "God, the Hacker: Technology, Mockery, and the Cross," *Second Nature*, secondnaturejournal.com (July 29, 2013).

Second, technology changes the way we relate to one another. If I approach you on the street and begin chatting, our relationship is fundamentally open. But if I approach you for a chat and my video recorder app is open and I am holding my phone out in front of me, our interaction is fundamentally changed as you try to decide if you will make eye contact with me or with the invisible audience watching on the other side of my mini camera lens.

Third, technology can become a metaphor that God uses to reveal his work in the world. Once we had made primitive advancements in metallurgy, for example, God could reveal his work in humanity as a consuming fire who smelts mankind—to judge the dross of rebellion and to purify his handiwork, his nation, of false alloys. The unveiling of new technology creates new metaphors for God to reveal how he engages with us mortals.[15]

9. Technology shapes our theology

Finally, we use technology to manifest metaphors of God (for good or ill). Take the more recent technology of the pocket watch—miniature hairsprings, winding wheels, and precise gears, all wound up into rhythmic clicking. With the invention of the watch, we could keep time with accuracy and choreograph our schedules. The technological advance in timepieces also birthed two new metaphors to explain God's relationship to us—one perceptive, the other deceptive.

First, the watch provided a helpful metaphor for God. Since the watch's various pieces all come together to serve one function in the end, it bears all the marks of "intelligent design," the handiwork of one designer. Such is also true of our bodies. Together, the various parts and pieces and chemicals of our existence join in harmony to sustain our cohesive existence. This is "the watchmaker analogy." God is not only close; his fingerprints are on us.

15. Isa. 1:22–25; Jer. 6:27–30; Ps. 119:119. See also Paula McNutt, *The Forging of Israel: Iron Technology, Symbolism and Tradition in Ancient Society* (Sheffield, England: Bloomsbury T&T Clark: 2009). It should be said that God coined new metaphors of technology for himself until the closing of the canon.

But the watch also provided a faulty metaphor for God. Some began to imagine a God who assembled the universe, wound it up, set it in motion, and walked away. This is a form of deism, the idea that God is generally withdrawn and remote from the world apart from preserving natural laws.

For better or worse, technology fundamentally changes how we talk about God. And technology shapes the way God communicates himself to us. God makes himself clear to us through metaphors of technology, and we find it possible to define him, and also to distort him, by projecting metaphors of technology onto him.

TECHNOLOGY THEOLOGY

I've only skimmed the depths here. My point is that every technological innovation is a new theological invitation for renewed biblical contemplation by God's people. That means several things.

First, life in the digital age is an open invitation for clear, biblical thinking about the impact of our phones on ourselves, on our creation, on our neighbors, and on our relationships to God. Thoughtlessly adopting new technology is worldliness.

Second, technology is technology, whether tethered to an outlet or to a horse. For this project, I will not make a hard-and-fast distinction between *tools* and *technology*, disconnecting primitive tools off the electrical grid from newer technologies we plug in. Partly this is because household gods of carved stone or wood and handheld idols of silver and gold, common in the ancient world, were not tools. These idols were more like our technologies, divine oracles of knowledge and prosperity, used by worshipers in an attempt to control and manipulate the events of life for personal benefit. The figurine and the iPhone appeal to the same fetish.

Third, whatever my smartphone is doing to me, it is also pointing me toward a glorious city to come. We do not trust in handheld things. We do not trust in handmade things. Instead, we long to be in the presence of our triune God in a new creation, built not by human ingenuity and sinful hands, but by the very design and innovation

of God—the sinless and deathless and tearless creation God has always intended.[16]

OUR PLACE IN HISTORY

So here we are, in "the digital age," an age so thick with innovation that we grow blind to it. And we are adopting and adapting to new technologies faster than any generation in world history. As of 2015, among American adults eighteen to twenty-nine years old, 86 percent own a smartphone, up from 52 percent four years earlier. In the same demographic, 50 percent own a tablet, up from just 13 percent four years earlier. Concurrently, among the same demographic, ownership of computers, MP3 players, game consoles, and ebook readers declined.[17] Our phones are gobbling up these functions.

Perhaps we adapt so readily because we are a gifted generation, easily trainable and moldable. Or perhaps we adapt so readily because, as Jacques Ellul suggested, our technology exerts a sort of terrorism over us.[18] We live under the threat that if we fail to embrace new technologies, we will be pushed aside into cultural obsolescence, left without key skills we need to get a job, disconnected from cultural conversations, and separated from our friends.

Whatever our motives, the fact remains—we are adopting, we are going online, and we are going mobile. Smartphone cases double as wallets because we wouldn't dare leave the house without them. In fact, 36 percent of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds in America admit they are online "almost constantly"—a phenomenon made possible by the smartphone. The most likely adult to live online makes more than $75,000 per year, is a college graduate, lives in a nonrural setting, and is in the eighteen-to-twenty-nine age range.[19] Our mobile web addiction may be new, but it's here to stay. We are never offline.

16. John 14:1–7; Acts 7:49–50; Heb. 9:11–28.
17. Monica Anderson, "Technology Device Ownership: 2015," Pew Research Center, pewinternet.org (Oct. 29, 2015).
18. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 384–400.
19. Andrew Perrin, "One-Fifth of Americans Report Going Online 'Almost Constantly,'" Pew Research Center, pewinternet.org (Dec. 8, 2015).

So is my smartphone a hostile enemy? Is it a cultural trinket? Is it a legitimate tool? Those are a few of the questions we will examine in the pages ahead. Our phones have concentrated powerful technology into a little device we control with our thumbs. We have full access to this technology, and by some kind of digital and electrical magic, we are potentially connected at all times with every other phone on the planet.

All of these realities *are* changing us; there's no debate on that. The bigger questions remain: *How* are our smartphones changing us? And should we be concerned?

COMPETING SPECTACLES

Other Crossway books by Tony Reinke

12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You (2017)

Lit: A Christian Guide to Reading Books (2011)

Newton on the Christian Life: To Live Is Christ (2015)

COMPETING SPECTACLES

Treasuring Christ in the Media Age

Tony Reinke

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If then you have been raised with Christ,
seek the things that are above, where Christ is,
seated at the right hand of God.

—Colossians 3:1

Sheol and Abaddon are never satisfied,
and never satisfied are the eyes of man.

—Proverbs 27:20

O that I might see the joy that I desire.

—Anselm

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PART 1: THE AGE OF THE SPECTACLE

PART 2: THE SPECTACLE

PART 1

THE AGE OF THE SPECTACLE

§1: LIFE INSIDE THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

Never in history have manufactured images formed the ecosystem of our lives. They do now. Sixty years ago Daniel Boorstin warned us: "We risk being the first people in history to have been able to make their illusions so vivid, so persuasive, so 'realistic' that they can live in them. We are the most illusioned people on earth. Yet we dare not become disillusioned, because our illusions are the very home in which we live; they are our news, our heroes, our adventure, our forms of art, our very experience."[1] Sixty years later, this risk is now our reality. We live as if all the media broadcast into our eyes is life itself, as if our images now offer us an alternative existence.

To this cultural phenomenon I raise my objection.

In a consumer society, images are the language of transaction. Images aim to provoke something in us in order to get something from us. New images ask us for all sorts of things—our time, our attention, our outrage, our money, our lust, our affection, and our votes. Is it possible to resist them? Should we try?

This book is a theology of visual culture, a culture that is increasingly closing in around us. It will not help you prioritize your TV options. Online viewing guides will help you there. It will not help you watch pop films through a gospel lens. Several good books do this already. Nor will it help you untangle the narrative threads of a thoughtful film.

1. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 240.

Long conversations with friends are superior. More intentionally, this book is a companion for Christians walking through digital detoxes, the now necessary periods of our lives when we voluntarily unplug from pop media, news media, and social media in order to de-screen our eyes and to reorder our priorities.

As a convention, I must litter this book with two hundred footnotes.[2] On first read, ignore them and read slap through the book as if they didn't exist. Later you can return to the notes for deeper exploration.[3]

To keep the book brief, I painted my argument as one rough silhouette using a wide bristled brush and black paint on a white canvas. A much longer book could bring in a full spectrum of detail and color. Here I simply seek to answer one question: In this "age of the spectacle" (as it has been called[4])—in this ecosystem of digital pictures and fabricated sights and viral moments competing for our attention—how do we spiritually thrive?

2. Well yes, technically, they could have been endnotes in the back, but I'm a footnote guy.
3. No, really, ignore them.
4. Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet-Chast, 1967).

§2: SPECTACLES DEFINED

First we must clear up some definitions. *Spectacles* can mean one of two things. *Spectacles* are eyeglasses that sharpen human vision, bringing clarity as we look through them. In this sense, worldviews are metaphorical spectacles by which we see the world. But that is not how I will use the word. For this project, *spectacles* is confined to its second meaning: a moment of time, of varying length, in which collective gaze is fixed on some specific image, event, or moment. A spectacle is something that captures human attention, an instant when our eyes and brains focus and fixate on something projected at us.

In an outrage society like ours, spectacles are often controversies—the latest scandal in sports, entertainment, or politics. A spark bellows, grows into a viral flame on social media, and ignites the visual feeds of millions. That's a spectacle. As the speed of media grows faster and faster, the most miniscule public slip of the tongue or passive-aggressive celebrity comment or hypocritical political image can become a spectacle. And often the most viral social media spectacles are spicy tales later exposed as groundless rumors and fake news.[1]

Whether it's true, false, or fiction, a spectacle is the visible thing that holds together a collective gaze. And that's the focus of this book. A spectacle can come packaged as a brilliant photograph, an eye-catching billboard, a creative

1. Robinson Meyer, "The Grim Conclusions of the Largest-Ever Study of Fake News," theatlantic.com, March 8, 2018.

animation, a magazine centerfold, a witty commercial, or a music video. It can be an advertisement or a sarcastic anti-advertisement, a sitcom or a mocking anti-sitcom, a talk show or a cynical anti-talk show. Spectacles can go meta: TV shows about TV shows, ads about ads, and movies about movies. Spectacles are ambitious video-game landscapes, network television series, a blockbuster movie, a horror film, a sports clip of an athlete's glory (or injury), or a viral GIF on social media.

Spectacles can be accidental or intentional—anything that vies for our eyes: a historic presidential inauguration, a celebrity blooper, an epic fail, a prank, a trick shot, a hot take, a drone race, an eSports competition, the live streams of video games fought with fictional cannons, or real warfare fought with steel weapons. Spectacles are the latest video from a self-made YouTube millionaire sensation, or a flash mob meant to appear as a spontaneous gathering in public. And the age of spectacle making spawns a particular form of celebrity: the loudmouthed provocateur and the nitwit icon—notoriously unsuited for any other social role but fame.

Ad makers use premeditated spectacles to bolster corporate profits, but spectacles can have more grisly origins: a teen suicide on Facebook Live, a public assassination, a police-shooting video, or traffic footage of a deadly accident.

A spectacle can target you while simultaneously speaking to a million "yous" (like a popular video ad meant to

coax purchases). Or a spectacle can gather together a community for a unified purpose (like a live political speech meant to coax votes). A particular tweet can become a viral spectacle, but the whole ecosystem of Twitter is one endless spectacle too.

Some spectacles draw us together in regional unity, like cheering for a local sports team. Others bring us together disconnectedly, like watching a movie in a theater. Some spectacles draw us together in small groups, like projecting movies on a TV in the living room. Some spectacles isolate us, like streaming Netflix on our iPad, scrolling social media on our phone, and gaming on a solo device. Some spectacles spatially separate us, like VR goggles.

Additionally, different modes of spectacle invite different forms of vision. Many spectacles, like our best movies, fixate our minds in a dream-like trance and put our bodies in a state of inertia. Some spectacles, like social media, offer a dopamine jolt as we become the center of attention. Other spectacles, like a TV show watched live and interacted with on Twitter, absorb us into a community of watchers. Spectacles can lead us to be self-centered or self-forgetting or others-focused. Others stoke our obscene voyeurism and personal lust.

Spectacles engage us differently. The Super Bowl is a supreme example, and it gathers our attention in different ways: live and in person, inside a stadium roaring with sixty thousand spectators; live and remotely, inside your living room with six friends; or on-demand, in the time-shifted

medium of next-day highlights on your phone. The Super Bowl is also a prime example of how popular spectacles overlap. The event is a hybrid of athletic spectacles, celebrity spectacles, entertainment spectacles, and advertising spectacles—all generating mass interest for the latest consumables, devices, video games, and Hollywood releases. All the culture's most powerful spectacle makers meet at the Super Bowl, and even feed off one another, to create a four-hour, multilayered feast for the eyes.

Behind it all, spectacles want something from us. "Consuming" is part of it, but we don't merely ingest spectacles; we respond to them. Visual images awaken the motives in our hearts. Images tug the strings of our actions. Images want our celebration, our awe, our affection, our time, and our outrage. Images invoke our consensus, our approval, our buy-in, our respreading power, and our wallets.

§3: DISTRACTED SPECTACLE SEEKERS

Why do we seek spectacles? Because we're human—hardwired with an unquenchable appetite to see glory. Our hearts seek splendor as our eyes scan for greatness. We cannot help it. "The world aches to be awed. That ache was made for God. The world seeks it mainly through movies"[1]—and in entertainment and politics and true crime and celebrity gossip and warfare and live sports. Unfortunately, we are all very easily conned into wasting our time on what adds no value to our lives. Aldous Huxley called it "man's almost infinite appetite for distraction."[2]

Worthless or worthwhile, our eyes are insatiable things. And this visual appetite raises interesting questions about what attention is and how we should use it.

In the first volume of his landmark work *The Principles of Psychology*, William James explained the marvel and mystery of what it means to be an "attentive" being.[3] He said that human attention is a "withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others, and is a condition which has a real opposite in the confused, dazed, scatterbrained state which in French is called *distraction.*"[4]

Attention is the skill of withdrawing from everything to focus on some things, and it is the opposite of the dizziness of the scatterbrained spectacle seeker who cannot attend to

1. John Piper, twitter.com, April 12, 2017.
2. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 35.
3. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1890), 1:402–58.
4. Ibid., 404.

anything. Thus, attention determines how we perceive the world around us. "Millions of items of the outward order are present to my senses which never properly enter into my experience. Why?" asks James. "Because they have no interest for me. My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I *notice* shape my mind—without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos."[5] James argued that of the many possible things that you could fix your mind on right now, you have chosen to attend to one thing—this sentence. Thus, this book is primarily shaping your life right now, not the one hundred other things around you that you must now ignore. That's attention. Which means that we must learn the art of refocusing a wandering mind, because "the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will."[6]

In other words, we're not simply creatures of our environment. We are creatures shaped by what grabs our attention—and what we give our attention to becomes our objective and subjective reality. Identical twins raised in an identical environment will be shaped differently if they focus on different things. We attend to what interests us. We become like what we watch.

5. Ibid., 402; emphasis added.
6. Ibid., 424.

§4: IMAGE IS EVERYTHING

Tennis superstar Andre Agassi was only nineteen years old when he starred in a television commercial for Canon cameras. The spot featured him in all sorts of eye-grabbing poses, a spectacle on display before the viewer's clicking shutter. As the ad closes, he steps out of a white Lamborghini in a white suit to speak his only line: "Image"—he says with a sly smile, pausing, tilting his head down to drop his sunglasses and to reveal his serious gaze—"is everything." The ad caught fire. Agassi said that he heard the slogan a couple times a day, then six times a day, then ten, then endlessly.

In his autobiography, he recounts his shock. The slogan stuck. He couldn't shake it. "Image is everything" *became* Agassi's image, one he spent years trying to escape. "Overnight," he said, "the slogan becomes synonymous with me. Sportswriters liken this slogan to my inner nature, my essential being. They say it's my philosophy, my religion, and they predict it's going to be my epitaph."[1] Crowds yelled the phrase at him whether he won or lost—because who needs tennis trophies when you can lose in style? The line mocked his tennis goals and minimized his athletic aspirations. It made him cynical, calloused to crowds, irritated by journalists, and eventually sickened by the public gaze. Perhaps Agassi was a victim, not so much of a scripted line but of a new impulse in the age of spectacles. *Image* and *substance*

1. Andre Agassi, *Open: An Autobiography* (New York: Vintage, 2010), 131–32.

were now divorced—because that is what images are: a simulacrum, a representation, an object that makes space between appearance and substance. "In a world dominated by the image instead of the word, interior life gives way to exterior show. Substance gives way to simulation."[2]

In the age of the spectacle, image is our identity, and our identity is unavoidably molded by our media. To use the evocative language of Jacques Ellul, speaking about movies, we choose to give ourselves vicariously to the on-screen lives that we could never personally experience. We escape into lives that are not ours and become adapted to the experiences of others. We live inside our projected simulations—inside the promises and the possibilities of our most beloved celebrities. The result, "like a snail deprived of its shell, man is only a blob of plastic matter modeled after the moving images."[3]

Our popular movies represent "a pedagogy of desire," a place where our loves and longings and identities are shaped for us.[4] In the age of the spectacle, we leave the hard edges of our embodied existence—our shells—in order to find our own shape and definition as we live inside a media-driven life of abstraction. And because we can live entirely inside the world of our images (consumed and projected), we lose our identity and our place in the community. We lose a sense of what it means to be inside the body God

2. Douglas Rushkoff in the afterword to Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 265.

3. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage, 1964), 377.

4. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, vol. 1, *Cultural Liturgies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 110.

assigned and shaped for us. Freed from the hard edges of our humanity, we become autonomous, plastic, shapeable blobs. "Digital technology abstracts society and creation from the particularity of our bodies, the material order, and our social situatedness, placing hypermodern selves within a thoroughly artificial environment of manipulated symbols and images."[5] We become detached selves, abstracted from nature and community—abstracted from our true selves.

All these media-driven identity confusions are amplified by the digital cameras on our phones, which arrived just in time to merge our self-image capture and our self-image editing in our social media.

5. Alastair Roberts, "The Strangeness of the Modern Mind," December 7, 2017, alastairadversaria.com.

§5: THE SPECTACLE OF THE SELF IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Today we get lost in a maze of mirrors that distort our reflections of the self, argues anthropologist Thomas de Zengotita. He says that our screen technology has grown to a new pinnacle of addictive delight in the digital age because our screens make it possible for us to live in a dual role: as both *spectator* and *star*.[1]

In the rare moments when we catch broad attention—whether through our images or tweets or memes—we become the *star*. And when we watch ourselves get approved and liked, we become the *spectator* too. In social media, our dual spectator-and-star role is seen "in the special intensity, the devotional glow you see on the face of a stranger in some random public place, leaning over her handheld device, utterly absorbed . . . matching twitter-wits on a trending topic, feeling the swell of attention rising around her as she rides an energy wave of commentary, across the country, around the world—it's like the touch of a cosmic force, thanks to the smallest and most potent of all personal screens, the one on her smartphone."[2] As we watch others watching us, we get caught up in the energy of becoming the star. We become spectators of our digital selves.

Our digital photos and selfies only amplify this self-projection. According to global stats, we now take more than one trillion digital pictures per year. We become actors before

1. Thomas de Zengotita, "We Love Screens, Not Glass," theatlantic.com, March 12, 2014.
2. Ibid.

our own phones and the phones of our friends. We modify our self and filter our appearance. And then we become spectators of ourselves, because "each selfie is a performance of a person as they hope to be seen by others."[3] As blobs, we seek an identity projection that others will celebrate.

Our camera-ready culture has changed us. Until 1920 no one thought it was appropriate to smile for a camera. Today we all must be ready to be photographed at any moment, ready to strike a performance pose contorted for the camera. Image is everything, and social media is where we craft the spectacle of ourselves. As we perform our self-chosen identities in front of our cameras, we find that the magic of computer-generated imagery (CGI) has been put in our hands. Our digital self is now editable by endless filters and lenses and bitmojis—a unique plasticity for self-sculpting offered to no other generation in human history.

After writing a book exclusively about smartphones and how they form and de-form our self-perception, I will not belabor the social media spectacle here.[4] What's important to see in this project is that self-sculpting and self-projecting make social media an irresistible spectacle because we become the self-molded star at the center of it all. As a result of these cultural shifts, we each feel the shift from *being* to *appearing*. Our self-made images—our digital appearings—become everything.

3. Nicholas Mirzoeff, *How to See the World: An Introduction to Images, from Self-Portraits to Selfies, Maps to Movies, and More* (New York: Basic, 2016), 62.

4. See Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).

In a deeply addictive way, we exist as both star *and* spectator. And social media "testifies to the power of that dual aspect of display, a reciprocal intimacy that no engagement with any other medium, let alone reality, can match."[5]

Well, only gaming comes close.

5. de Zengotita, "We Love Screens, Not Glass."

§6: THE SPECTACLE OF THE SELF IN GAMING

As Thomas de Zengotita points out, video games also situate us in the role of *spectator* and *star*, but those roles merge in realtime. "A seasoned gamer has mastered the console. He isn't conscious of his physical situation. He presses the buttons to turn and shoot and jump without thinking about them. He becomes the agent on the screen. There is no gap between his dirty little 14-year-old thumb and his avatar's massive biceps as it wields that enormous gatling gun against the zombie horde. He is the 'first-person shooter.'"[1]

Zengotita's tone is too dismissive, but his point is also too significant to ignore, especially as he goes on to explain the psychological effect. "As a first-person shooter, you get to perform *and* you get to watch at the same time," he says. "The powers and pleasures of two kinds of centrality—spectator and star—have merged. An untapped possibility for synaptic closure has been realized and an historically unprecedented form of human gratification attained. No wonder those games are addictive."[2] Yes, and on the verge of the VR (virtual reality) revolution, first-person shooter games set in open-world environments are only going to become more addictive, offering thrills in victory that were previously reserved for elite athletes.[3]

1. Thomas de Zengotita, "We Love Screens, Not Glass," theatlantic.com, March 12, 2014.
2. Ibid.
3. When one NBA player was asked to compare the thrill of a recent video game victory in Fortnite (a survival game against up to 99 other competitors) to the thrill of winning a NCAA college basketball championship two years earlier as the

But it's this same addictive quality that lures us back to social media on our smartphones, yet in a slightly offset way, in a dance between these roles as spectator and star. In social media "you also engage with yourself, with your world, on this new plane of being where agent and observer are fused. But the smartphone ups the ante. It introduces just enough distance, just enough lag time, between you and your doings on the screen to allow for an endless cascade of tiny moments of arrival, of recognition. Each prompt, each response, intercedes between you and the representations of yourself and your world that you are both producing and contemplating."[4] In social media, if we wait a moment, we get feedback, we get seen. We don't get the instant gratification of the gamer, but we come close.

In either case, whether it's in the live moment of gaming spectacles or in the slightly time-offset dance of social media, we stand at the center. We become star and spectator. In our most addictive media, we become the spectacle.

team's star, he had to think hard. Dan Patrick Show, "Lakers Guard Josh Hart Talks Fortnite & More with Dan Patrick," youtube.com, March 23, 2018.

4. de Zengotita, "We Love Screens, Not Glass."

§7: SPECTACLES OF TELE-VISION

The opening sequence of *The Simpsons* is now cultural legend. Parting through clouds to the sounds of heavenly chorus, we zoom in to Bart scrawling out his latest transgression on a school chalkboard. The bell rings, and he runs outside and jumps on his skateboard with no backpack or books. Next we see overachieving Lisa in an afterschool band practice, but her saxophone solo is too much, and the instructor points her out the door. She jumps on a bike and rides off with her instrument and a giant stack of books. At the town's nuclear power plant, the workday ends with a horn, at which Homer brainlessly drops a tong holding a glowing carbon core, which bounces and embeds in the back of his shirt as he walks off. He drives off, discovers the uncomfortable nuclear rod, discards it out the car window, and it bounces across the sidewalk as Bart dodges it on his skateboard. Next we see Marge and the pacifier-sucking toddler, Maggie, check out at the grocery store, then drive home in a screeching, horn-honking rush. The family races home from every direction. Homer pulls in the driveway first, then Bart, skateboarding over the roof of Homer's car. Angered, Homer steps out and lets out a screech as he's nearly run over by Lisa on her bike. He jumps and squeals again, then sprints inside the house to narrowly escape getting run over by his speeding wife, who slams on the brakes to make a skidding stop in the garage. In unison, the family sprints, jumps, and squeezes into place on the couch, in front of the blue glow of their shared TV—the family's

eye-pacifier, it seems. We're meant to scoff at this dysfunctional household and the vanity of their daily existence—man, woman, underachiever, overachiever, toddler—each brainwashed by media, all gathered again before the comfort of their TV spectacles. But then, here we are, watching them. Are we the ones getting mocked?

So what has made the Simpsons blind to one another? Why do they only see through each other? And why do they avoid eye contact? Perhaps fed with endless offerings of video, our own gaze becomes easily numbed, blank, and bored. We ignore one another, and when we must make eye contact, too often we offer others a disinterested gaze. Maybe our spectacle culture has conditioned us to this place—"wooed several gorgeous hours a day for nothing but our attention, we regard that attention as our chief commodity, our social capital, and we are loathe to fritter it."[1] Television alone is worthy of our precious attention, and we protect that gaze from others. People become rather boring compared to the enrapturing magic of our screens.[2]

Tele-vision is the bringing of far-off things to our immediate vision. Beginning with video footage of the assassination of JFK, catastrophe came so close to us that we

1. David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1998), 64.

2. "An imageless gaze at my friend's face can be cultivated only through a continual guard of the eyes; it has become a fought-for ideal that I can pursue only by constant training, behavior that runs counter to the surrounding *Bildwelt* [pictorial world] that solicits me to deliver myself to the show." Ivan Illich, "Guarding the Eye in the Age of Show," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, vol. 28 (Autumn 1995): 60.

could remember where we were standing, as if we stood in the presence of the tragedy and witnessed it for ourselves.[3] JFK's shooting, MLK's shooting, Reagan's shooting, Princess Diana's death, the Twin Towers collapse—you remember where you stood when you first witnessed video of these events. While first responders to 9/11 said it was like living inside a movie, *tele-vision* brought the movie-like catastrophe close to all of us. Through video, spatial separation dissolves, and far-off events are brought to our couches. Through video, we all become eyewitnesses to tragedy, brought so close to events that we feel present—so present that in the face of televised disaster we experience a mediated trauma of our own.

Video is now everywhere. Whatever happens in front of any other Wi-Fi–connected digital camera in the world can be mediated to us and to our vision. Amateur video is pouring into public platforms every second of the day. More than twenty-four thousand minutes of new *user video* is uploaded to YouTube every minute of every day. This means that the tonnage of *new video content* uploaded to YouTube in the next fifty-eight hours would require an unbroken lifespan of eighty years to watch.

Our insatiable appetite for *produced video* is mirrored in the expansive suite of our streaming platforms: Hulu, Netflix, Amazon Prime, Facebook video, YouTube Red, and several other video-on-demand and live-video streaming

3. Thomas de Zengotita, *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005), 6–11.

platforms, most of whom not only host video but now fund their own studio projects.

The estimated number of running, scripted, original television series available on American television boomed from 210 in 2009 to 455 in 2016—an exponential growth with no signs of slowing down.[4] Cresting five hundred shows per year seems imminent. And that number doesn't include reality TV shows, 750 of which aired in 2015 alone.[5] Add to this watchlist the hundreds of movies released each year, with thirty or so of the most talked-about movies grossing ticket sales over $100 million.

New big-dollar spectacles compete for our attention. As I write this, on a random fall weekend, two blockbuster action movies, two new releases of mega-gaming franchises, and the second season of a streaming hit show were released on the same day. Big-money launches will continue to be the norm—multiple spectacles, with similar launch dates, all vying for the same eyes and leaving consumers on Twitter to express their blissful distress at prioritizing the attention demands.

Even our news has become more immersive over time. Scripted evening news programs—with tidy recaps of the day's major events, edited into one neat program—first gave way to the breaking news and endless live video feeds of CNN, and have now given way to Twitter. Now the raw

4. Maureen Ryan, "TV Peaks Again in 2016: Could It Hit 500 Shows in 2017?," variety.com., December 21, 2016.

5. Todd VanDerWerff, "750 reality TV shows aired on cable in 2015. Yes, 750," vox.com, January 7, 2016.

footage and earliest allegations and theories and eyewitness reports are delivered to us even before the event has ended. In Twitter, we all become reporters piecing together the story.

But there's no need to belabor the point that we live in a culture dominated by produced video and subsidized spectacles. The point is that all these increasing options are changing us. Whether we're talking about primetime dramas, reality TV, YouTube channels, breaking news, comedy routines, gaming franchises, or animated movies, "in a mediated world, the opposite of *real* isn't phony or illusional or fictional—it's *optional*."[6] The real world around us dissolves away, not because our spectacles are false or fake, but because we hold sovereign sway over a menu of endless spectacle options. We control it all. We remote-control it all. And inside the buffet of digital options, we lose sight of the edges that give shape to our embodied existence. We grow blind to what we cannot control.

In the *tele-visual* age, our eyes run to and fro throughout the whole earth in godlike omniscience, with endless options offered to us in our handheld phones. More easily than ever, spectacles reach us from the other side of the world. And while we may be in control of our private spectacles, we also become more passive to them. Spectacle resistance is an option we willfully ignore. Our lazy eyes and our incurious gaze are happily fed by the spectacle makers. We no longer seek out new spectacles; new spectacles seek

6. de Zengotita, *Mediated*, 14; emphasis added.

us out, delivered to us with hardly more required than a thumb twitch, or less. Auto-playing video clips animate, expire, and then scroll on to the next one in line. Auto-starting next episodes extend our Netflix bingeing. We are asked to do nothing. Simply veg.

Few of us have reckoned with the consequences of this tele-visual culture on our attention, our volition, our empathy, and our self-identity.