

Film & Media in the Third Millennium Church

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By realizing the origin of humanity's compulsion to create believable stories coupled with the confluence of storytelling and technology, an unmistakable pattern emerges which not only provides a possible understanding of what is happening today but also of what is to come in the future: coalescing in a theoretical construct called the Divinity Singularity of storytelling.

Humanity has been on an unmistakable, accelerating trajectory of storytelling since the earliest cave drawings depicting animals fleeing hunters. Generation after generation the expression of stories utilizing, initially rudimentary, now sophisticated, technology has exponentially become increasingly advanced, evidentially influencing audiences to accept a story's "truth." This drive for believability is now coalescing at the nexus of the most sophisticated technology and creativity and compelling stories in history, advancing at an almost disturbingly rapid pace as we approach the start of the Third Millennium of the Church.

The seemingly radical superfluous, ever changing, ever proliferating film and visual media demands both percipience and superintendency by the Church while revealing opportunities to advance the Gospel of Christ immediately as the fulfillment of the Great Commission is imminent while revealing a protocol for the future Church.

Believability

There is broad agreement that creativity is a fundamental attribute of God and according to Leonard Sweet, God's first act of holiness.

and God saith, 'Let light be;' and light is.
Genesis 1:3 YLT

Since we are, "in the image of God" (Gen 1:27 YLT), we too must be intrinsically creative beings. From assembling a meal to writing a paper to creating a baby to making a movie, the power to create is exhibited in a myriad of expression which are unique to each of our personalities, our physical attributes, our talents and divine gifts. Some people become professional artists: less than 2% of the population (NASERC). Everyone enjoys art of some kind. Everyone is a creator. God is Creator and Artist.

The creation of Film and Media is characteristic of God's world making artistry:

for by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth,
visible and invisible,
Colossians 1:16a NASB

Film and Media artists pursue "world making" in elaborately creative collaboration, fusing constituent talents into a unified story. Everything from a camera or digital effects rig designed by numerous engineers are coupled with scripts, actors, sets, editing systems, visual effects: each project as specialized as the artists involved in the project's creation, all combining to build a world that audiences perceive as believable.

Rather than one initial tremendous, inexorable, divine creative act, artisans, driven by their innate world making character, must combine efforts to create their own worlds. Lacking the miraculous power of the divine, they regularly spend vast amounts of time and money to ensure their worlds appear true. The latest *Mission Impossible* movie fused the talents of over 1,700 people, not including all the people who designed the equipment such as cameras, vehicles, edit systems: the list is extensive: and cost over USD 350 Million (IMDb) and took seven years to create (ET): a truly amazing artistic feat. Even small indie films such as Fusionflix' *Miracle on the Precipice* or Virtual Reality or TV series or digital video games or factual documentaries all combine the efforts of numerous people all working to create a digital world that is perceived as true to the story being told.

In his essay titled "On Fairy-Stories," J. R. R. Tolkien says for a narrative to work, a reader must believe that what they read is true within the secondary reality of the fictional world. He calls this inner consistency of reality, "Secondary Belief." A story must function within a certain set of parameters that cannot be violated. If there is no gravity in the world, then the ball cannot fall to the floor, otherwise, the audience rejects that world and believability suffers. Who has not seen a film and commented at one time or another, "That doesn't make any sense"? These are the moments when our Secondary Belief is fractured, making the world being built less "true" to the audience.

Storytellers are driven to create true worlds because God is a world creator and they are in the image of God. They cannot help themselves. They do not just subsist but are compelled. Their gifts and callings are irrevocable (Romans 11:29 NASB). Whether they serve Christ or not, their passion and talent are derived from some of the most fundamental aspects of God's character. Perhaps this is why storytelling has had and continues to have such a profound impact on the world: shaping thought, behavior, and even consciousness. For many, it defines their reality, often without them even knowing.

Believability Meets Technology

Storytelling through Film and Media has become one of the most pervasive forces in our modern world with people now consuming nearly three hours per day of television series and films (Durrani), with an additional one and a half (1.5) hours of video gaming by the 3.5 billion gamers in the world (Duarte, "Gamers"). These numbers do not include the consumption of news, sports, or social media. Collectively individuals worldwide are consuming screen content at 6 hours and 40 minutes per day (Duarte, "Screen Time"). Comparatively, less than 10% of people in the United States read the Bible even a few minutes each day (Fulks et al. 4).

The marriage of technological advances and story has created the most pervasive and consuming and authoritative narrative delivery systems in history. A concern of losing ourselves and our values, and of morals and virtue being hijacked and eroded, or worse, substituted, from Christian principles is a justifiable concern. Storytelling has, in some respects, become intoxicating, bending the conscious will to the desires of the creators. Conversely, these same paradigms are creating the liberation of imagination like nothing ever seen in history, enhancing believability and equipping artists with the most formidable tools to provoke Christian principles, equip the saints, preach the gospel to the ends of the Earth, and prepare the bride for the glorious return of Christ.

However, the sheer velocity of technological advances in the creation of story is accelerating and evolving so fast that the Church could be unprepared to handle the impact to believers much less to take advantage of these powerful tools to advance the gospel of Christ. The propounded inevitability of a looming Divinity Singularity simplifies the Church's response: reject or embrace.

Wisdom instructs us to weigh carefully such a decision with souls potentially in jeopardy. Examining the anatomy of the Divinity Singularity reveals a pattern which has emerged through millennia that provides evidence of where the digital storytelling is headed providing a predictive model for engaging with global digital creations without actually predicting the ultimate destination, providing an opportunity to embrace rather than reject. For would it not appear self evident that if we are created in God's image with even a fraction of God's imagination coupled with technical skills, also divinely sourced, to create the sophisticated technology abounding all around us, that we were created to do so? While sin and the fallen world we sojourn through infect the divine spark, there remains hope through redemption and even a mandate to engage with the culture and not bury such resources "in the ground." (Matthew 25:25 AMP)

Toward Singularity

The essence of a singularity is the inability to predict the outcome (Vinge 12-13). Identifying patterns which indicate a looming singularity, however, may be possible. Understanding the results of a singularity may not be possible beyond understanding that tremendous change is coming (Ulam 5). A technology singularity is "a hypothetical future event where technological growth becomes so rapid and profound that it becomes unpredictable and irreversible" (Mucci). Gilles Deleuze views a singularity "as moments or points of intensity that can disrupt existing structures and systems" and "are in a constant state of change and transformation" (Borum).

Before computers, Bain wrote in 1937 that technology,

"includes all tools, machines, utensils, weapons, instruments, housing, clothing, communicating and transporting devices and the skills by which we produce and use them" (860).

Broadly, "Technology means the systematic application of scientific or other organized knowledge to practical tasks" (Galbraith 12).

So when the storytellers of old decided to create depictions on cave walls, story first intersected with technology. Some of the oldest cave drawings in the world are considered to be in the Chauvet Cave in France. The image of a volcanic eruption is portrayed along with depictions of mammoths, bear, and rhinoceros. The technological breakthrough of black paint made from charcoal or manganese dioxide and red paint made from haematite (Groeneveld) empowered a verbal story to expand its reach to generations. A new discovery in Indonesia telling the story of a pig hunt has now become the oldest technologically enhanced storytelling discovered so far (Ghosh).

Imaginary Worlds

Thus began the irreversible and increasingly accelerating fusion of story and technology. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* recorded in cuneiform script on clay tablets using a stylus becomes the first written story in about 1700 BC (George). Thespis steps out of the Greek chorus in Athens, Greece to play an individual character and theater is born in 534 BC (Adcock). Early Greek dramatists pushed for believability and technology pushed theater to new heights with staging, acoustics, special effects, (Taylor 2) and even scents (earth smells, flowers, various fragrances) (Krabbe).

The Romans are credited with mainlining entertainment sometimes with horrifying results. Slaves were granted their freedom when they would gouge out their own eyes on stage with a stylus. By 80 AD the Roman Colosseum became one of the most advanced technological wonders of the Ancient world with trap doors, elevator systems, platforms that could transport elephants from below ground to the stage, and hydraulic systems which could flood the performance area where sea battles were reenacted: all enhancing believability (Evans).

Biblical stories were told in stained glass as early as 1140 AD (Sowers). Art gravitates to realism in the Gothic age (VAM). Biblical Mystery Plays performed on Pageant Wagons in the late 1300s (Wilson 146) are followed by the Gutenberg Press in 1455 contributing to the European Renaissance (Cartwright). Michelangelo's astonishing Sistine Chapel was completed in 1512 (Marinazzo 44) followed by William Shakespeare's first play in 1590 (RSC). In 1600 Opera combined music, performance, and staging, transporting audiences into an even more immersive creative world (VAM).

Replication of the Real

Then in 1826 a technological advance would again irreparably alter the world using light passing through glass and separating light from dark. Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, using a camera obscura, captured the image titled "View from the Window at Le Gras," in Burgundy, France (Brown). For the first time in all human history, a still image of reality was captured and photography was born.

A few years later, in 1878, Eadweard Muybridge created the first motion picture, proving for the first time in history that all four hooves of a horse leave the ground when it gallops and establishing that cameras see more than the eye sees (Shah). This new technology combined time and reality enabling storytellers to capture and express life in motion, mimicking the “real” in a form that could be experienced again and again. “Moving pictures” were initially documentary films of real people doing real things but quickly evolved to fiction stories with actors like in *“La Passion du Christ”* by Albert Kirchner in 1897 (Shepherd).

These black and white, grainy, silent, short films rapidly expanded to feature length and by 1920 Hollywood was the film capital of the world (Bordwell). Sound was added and changed motion pictures forever in 1927's, *The Jazz Singer* (Bergan 20). Experimentation with color went mainstream in *The Wizard of Oz* in 1939 (Bergan 25).

Artists were becoming more and more sophisticated world builders, using technology to make their worlds more real, more convincing, more seductive, more authoritative. Humanity across the globe embraced these stories and exhibited a ferocious appetite for more. Fiction stories could transport the imagination to the moon or the center of the Earth or Jerusalem at the time of Christ. Factual documentaries and news reels brought the rest of the world to movie screens.

A seismic shift occurs when television brings entertainment and news into people's homes. The process toward singularity accelerates dramatically as performance art, always a community function, infiltrates millions of homes on television by the 1950s (Barnouw 198). Color TV quickly followed black and white much like film (Barnouw 401): much like cave drawings. A pattern becomes more clear. As television expanded to multiple networks, then hundreds of cable channels, the psychology of humans began to change (Arceneaux).

Computer Age

As visual media became a norm for daily living, the integrated circuit revolutionized the Computer Age in 1960. Gordon Moore observed in 1965, just three years before co-founding Intel, that core computer technology would double every year for the next decade. It did. Then postulated it would double every two years after 1975. The accuracy of his predictions became known as Moore's Law. However, Moore's Law was declared dead in 2016 and advances in hardware have momentarily slowed but astonishing advances like quantum, neuromorphic, or photonic computing may activate Moore's Law once again (Woods).

Computers radically changed the world as well as the ability to create worlds for storytelling. Imaging, graphics, special effects, sound, and music all rapidly entered the digital space. Color depth is now approaching that of the human eye (Vtech). Resolution has gone from Standard Definition (SD), to HD, 4k, 6k, 8k, 12k. At 16k resolution, now in use in machine vision applications (Teledyne), the resolution captured is beyond the human eye's capability to perceive (Cavazzana). Robots can now “see” beyond what

we can see by capturing the world beyond the human optical spectrum such as ultraviolet and infrared (Kapernikov).

While Film and TV shows had always been scheduled, videotapes changed the dynamic of viewing when people could watch whatever they wanted to watch whenever they wanted to watch it. Choice combined with powerful computer technology evolved through DVD to video streaming.

Choice spawned the technological paradigm of interactivity which is at the core of computing. Creative world builders used it to create video games, now a global phenomenon. Now we can be the hero of our own story, making decisions critical to the success or failure of the story. Churches have sprung up in these virtual worlds with members from around the world joining to worship and then quest together. We are no longer passive audiences but actively engaged.

Shortly after television brought the world into our homes, infant mobile phones quickly matured into "smart phones" and suddenly, Film and Media could now come with us wherever we went for the first time in history. Society was changing again. Lives were becoming less private, less introspective. Faster and faster data networks and more powerful phones have gone from 1G networks that could transfer basic audio and text data over analog networks in the 1980s to 3G networks in the 2000s with speeds of 2 Megabits per second (Mbps) (four times faster than 2G) to 4G networks rapidly increasing data speeds more than 5-fold to 12.5 Mbps (Galazzo). Now 5G networks operate at 100 times faster than 4G with data rates no longer calculated in Megabits but Gigabits with top theoretical transfer rates at 20 Gbps (Goss). These massive data rates have enabled mobile Film and Media to achieve HD quality video on a smart phone, revolutionizing mobile storytelling, compounding streaming data, and further altering media consumption behavior.

The Virtual World

The merger of the most advanced storytelling technology in digital film and television has merged with the most advanced computer technology in gaming to give birth to a new apex of technological/narrative evolution called Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality. These powerful story delivery systems are further altering humanity's imagination and perhaps consciousness.

Virtual Reality exposure therapy has already proven effective at treating Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) with recent trials resulting in "100% of the sample losing their diagnosis of PTSD at post-treatment and no relapse at follow-up" (Beidel et al. 8). VR and AR has also been effective in the treatment of phobias (Albakri et al.). The "world" projected by VR/AR is so convincing that the brain is effectively re-wired into believing the information being communicated and thereby alters the user's consciousness to relieve traumatic symptoms.

A technology that alters perception of reality so effectively will become the most powerful storytelling medium in history. AR gaming such as *Pokémon Go* revolutionized the use of AR throughout the world (Wingfield). VR movies are in infancy. Both AR and VR combined are projected to be used by over 130 million people worldwide by 2027 (Kumar).

Christian church services are already being held in VR like VR MMO Church, a virtual church community in the metaverse (Berg). Interactive VR games like *David vs. Goliath* allow players to face off against Goliath (Law). While games like *Deisim* allow players to act as a deity and create their own world "offering a unique perspective on creation and power" (Myron Software).

The Divinity Singularity

A Divinity Singularity of storytelling emerges as a plausible consequence of an unmistakable pattern of technological entanglement with the creation of stories. The pattern seems chaotic and spans millennia but has become more pervasive and determinate in the last 200 years since actual reality was able to be reproduced in the first photograph. According to IBM a singularity "is rooted in technological evolution, which is generally irreversible and tends toward acceleration" (Mucci). The unmistakable acceleration over the last two centuries obfuscated the same ordonnance of technological concurrence that was proceeding through history.

A Dark Destructive Future

Many predict that a technological singularity will either create a utopian outcome or a dystopian outcome (Bostrom). Since by its very nature, we can not know the ultimate outcome, speculation can become highly misleading and/or confusing like in the radical simulation theory, a fascinating, but ultimately flawed, theory that our world and all we are experiencing is an elaborate computer simulation. Philosopher Nick Bostrom suggests that in some time in the past, some beings achieved the ultimate story telling achievement and built a world so realistic as to be incomprehensible. Looking at the pattern throughout history, one could understand how simulation theory could seduce creatives into a euphoric state of pride so consuming that they seek to create such convincing worlds and become the god of their world. Nothing would seem so comparable to the sin of Lucifer than this kind of seeking equality with God (Isaiah 14:14 NASB).

Indeed, all film and media efforts lack full inoculation against this ancient of all sins without redemption through Christ. Scrutiny of film and media as we approach the end of the second millennia of the Church reveals many questionable practices found within these industries as well as content that shocks the senses and seems contrary to the virtuous life we are called into by Christ. Yet, Hollywood and its ilk are continually feeding the global demand for more content, more stories, more worlds. Secular creatives, made in the image of God, with creative desires reflective of the nature of

God, can quickly fall under the influence of the evil which is fighting to corrupt the entire world as we move to singularity: the outcome of which could be devilishly harmful.

A Future of the Greatest Millennium of the Church

The Church of the Third Millennium has an opportunity to lead the world toward a Divinity Singularity by embracing the God-born unction of righteous creatives and facilitate economic and technological systems that edify not only the Church but the entire world. The Church must embrace the responsibility to guide believers in lifestyle choices which reflect virtuous use and consumption of Film and Media and encourage the protection of children, who are particularly susceptible to the powerful images that are emerging. A balanced, virtuous life must be maintained. The Church must provide the requisite superintendency to cultivate mature faithful believers that can accurately parse holy scripture and create worlds that accurately reflect the fundamental truths of the faith.

The alternative is to leave film and media in the control of secular creatives. The Church must lead, not follow. The call to depart from Babylon at the end of the age is clarion,

“Come out of her, my people, so that you will not participate in her sins and receive any of her plagues;” (Revelation 18:4 NASB).

Independent faith filled producers, game designers, Virtual Reality directors and whatever the future holds must join technologists who create infrastructure that support them, whether studios or capture systems or global cloud based servers that are completely separate from the world’s secular systems such as Fusionflix’ Doxa, private cloud server, which can serve as a global exchange of redemptive media.

Conclusion

A Divinity Singularity of Film and Media is coming. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is already fueling the acceleration of film and media as it approaches its own singularity that Ray Kurzweil, one of the most vocal proponents of the (AI) singularity, has famously predicted will happen by 2045 (122). Pervasive, accelerating, and rapidly evolving world building technology such as VR and AR delivered through the coming 6G networks operating at 1 Terabit per second by 2030, 100 times the speed of standard 5G, creates opportunities that have never existed before which can be harnessed for messaging and storytelling for the fulfillment of the Great Commission now. These same technologies, coupled with faithful creatives nurtured by the Church, strategically position the Church of the Third Millennium to proceed joyfully, united globally as the Divinity Singularity inevitably approaches: a point that can be embraced as wholeheartedly as the impending “new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1 NASB) when a wholly new story begins.

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