Idolatry, Technology, and Place

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to consider the implications of idolatry within our hypermodern technological paradigm as they affect our relationship to place. In this essay I will argue that our faith in the technological paradigm is an act of idolatry insofar as it attempts to abstract us from our place in the nexus of a relational world, and thus from the Living God.

I will begin by demonstrating that idolatry is a constitutive act and an act of infidelity that causes the death of both humanity and the world. I will then elucidate the technological paradigm. This technological imperative attempts to render an integrated world into mechanized devices that offer available commodity.

This thesis will demonstrate that our faith in the technological paradigm engenders the world and humanity through simulation and thus results in the mediation of death.
Son of Laërtês, versatile Odysseus,
after these years with me, you still desire
your old home? Even so, I wish you well.
If you could see it all, before you go—
all the adversity you face at sea—
you would stay here, and guard this house, and be
immortal—though you wanted her forever,
that bride for whom you pine each day.
Can I be less desirable than she is?
Less interesting? Less beautiful? Can mortals
compare with goddesses in grace and form?

Contents

Introduction .............................................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter 1: The Idol of Death and the Nexus of a Relational Reality ......................................................... 5

1 The Living God, Faithfulness, and the Covenantal Yoke of Place .......................................................... 6
   1.1 Yahweh, the Living God
   1.2 Mediating Life: Imago Dei and the Faithfulness of Jesus Christ
   1.3 The Covenantal Yoke of Place

2 Idolatry as A Constitutive Act .................................................................................................................. 20
   2.1 On the Making of An Idol
   2.2 Idolatry as Worshipper Forming
   2.3 Idolatry as World Forming

3 Death Outside; Idolatry as An Act of Infidelity ...................................................................................... 30
   3.1 Idolatry as Infidelity to Place
   3.2 Idolatry as Infidelity to Life
   3.3 Death Outside Covenantal Life

Chapter 2: The Technological Paradigm ...................................................................................................... 37

4 Modernity: Aggressive Realism, Methodical Universalism, and Secular Individualism ................................. 41
   4.1 Aggressive Realism and the Domination of Nature
   4.2 Methodical Universalism and the Triumph of Procedure
   4.3 Secular Individualism, Rugged and Commodious

5 Modernism, Technology, and the Device Paradigm ................................................................................. 50
   5.1 Subservient Technology as a Consequence of Modern Liberation
   5.2 Ambiguity in the Liberating Promise of Technology
   5.3 The Device Paradigm, Concealed Machinery and Available Commodity
      5.3.1 World of things
      5.3.2 Device as concealed machinery
      5.3.3 Device as available commodity

6 The Postmodern Turn .............................................................................................................................. 62
   6.1 What is Postmodernity?
   6.2 Jean Baudrillard: From Spectacle to Simulation to Simulacra to Hyperreality
7  Hypermodernism, the Device Paradigm, and Life Lived Among the Hyperreal ...... 75
  7.1  When is Postmodernism?
  7.2  Faith in the Technological Paradigm
  7.3  Devices of Hyperreal Commodity

Chapter 3: Idolatry, Technology, and Place ................................................................. 85

8  The Technological Paradigm as Idolatry ................................................................. 86
  8.1  The Technological Paradigm and the Lost of Place
       8.1.1  A distorted imagination
       8.1.2  On generating a hyperreality
  8.2  The Commodious Individual, a Graven Image Bearer
  8.3  Death by Simulation

9  Living Into Focus Under the Covenantal Yoke of Place ....................................... 105

Bibliography .................................................................
Introduction

A shovel is a piece of technology. You may not have thought that a shovel is within this category, but it is; the shovel is most certainly a technological tool.

Think about a shovel for a moment. Bring one to mind and focus on it. It’s quite the unassuming tool isn’t it? Leaning inside your tin shed with the rest of the implements, perhaps. Or maybe mouth deep in your garden, standing upright where you left it earlier this morning. There’s a tried and true simplicity to it.

The shovel that comes to mind for me is one I used the first summer of my married life. Jamie and I were fresh out of university and eager to get our hands dirty. I got a job working for a landscape construction company, which is a fancy way of saying I dug holes for a living. I dug by hand, meaning I dug with a shovel; an idiom that perfectly describes the feel of this tool and the intimacy it permits.

I can still see that shovel, thrown in with the rest of the mud and cement caked tools after a long day of work; the tangled heap looking as relaxed as I felt at quitting time.

The shovel’s wooden shank was smooth from years of great effort, of friction from soil, sweat, and skin. Such years of commitment, of which I was briefly a part, seemed to make the shovel more suited to the task of digging into a strange backyard, the repeated practice of lowering oneself into the ground, becoming closer to it through embodied labour. I became proficient at this practice, growing more nuanced, observant, and skilled through my relationship with it.

I remember the way it felt in my callusing hands, its weight across my chest and shoulders and through my stomach as I pivoted to throw a clod of earth. Indeed, it always took a conscious effort to use the newer shovels, the greenhorns, for they lacked a sense of familiarity.

The particular shovel I’m thinking of was lighter than the others and a tad shorter. It couldn’t take the bite the others could, but what it lacked in volume it made up with a nimble consistency. A sharp extension of my body, it allowed me to work with the ground. It was trim, fit, and focused, like an athlete who is perfectly attuned to her event. In a word, that shovel enhanced my ability to take up with the ground under my feet.
Indeed such is the mark of a fitting tool, that it enables its handler to engage with the world on a more intimate level. Shovels do this very thing, offering many ways into the world. One could cultivate a garden and provide both food and meaningful labour for those who dwell near the plot. One could shovel a neighbour’s sidewalk if they are unable to do it themselves, or are simply too busy to care. If you’re preparing a dwelling place, you could use a shovel to excavate a foundation or dig a well. You could plant a tree for the comfort of future generations. So as not to destroy the past, one must use a shovel to uncover it through archaeology. And in days long past, those sick with grief could console one another in the silent counsel of grave digging. These are but a few examples of how a shovel can get us closer to the world and the people we share it with.

A shovel, therefore, is but one example of how technology can help us take up with the world. Tools such as these embody us in place by their use, calling out a deeper experience of intimacy in us and in the relationships we are apart of.

Nevertheless, as of late there has been a great deluge of technological tools that have promised this very intimacy, guaranteed us the good life, but have seemingly reneged on their delivery. Instead of bringing us closer, they have distanced us from the world and our calling within it. Our concern in this essay, therefore, will be focused on this relatively new development, call it a modern turn, in our relationship with the technological.

…

One of the greatest questions we face today concerns our relationship to technology. The inability to name this relationship, to define its ends, is unsettling our world at an exponential rate. Indeed, much of the malaise that we encounter today, the nagging anxiety that hangs phantom-like over a culture engorged on technological goods, is the direct result of this ill-considered relationship. Arthur Boers has made such an observation when he claims, “Today, many challenges and a good deal of our uneasiness have to do with how we relate to and rely on rapidly evolving technology.”

2 Arthur Boers, Living Into Focus: Choosing What Matters In An Age of Distractions, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2012), 69 [my emphasis].
immediately makes our question a matter of orientation, of religion, or as I prefer to put it, an affair of the heart.

The first word, relate, is an inescapable reality because the world is a relational world. We, as humans, will always be in relationship to the things we create, and conversely they to us. This reality cannot be escaped; whether it be physically, spiritually, mentally, emotionally, etc., we are intrinsically interrelated in our world. The second word, however, is not a given but a choice, a posture or an orientation which qualifies how we relate. According to Boers, ours is a relation of reliance, or fidelity. By putting it this way, Boers has invariably claimed that our connection to technology has taken on a misguided quality, and thus led us astray to challenge and to unease. When translated into the vernacular of the Hebrew prophets, Boers has claimed that such a relationship has become idolatrous.

In this thesis I intend to defend this very claim, arguing that our faith in the technological paradigm is an act of idolatry because it attempts to abstract us from our place in the nexus of a relational world, and thus from the Living God.

To make this claim I will critique our relationship to the technological imperative through the witness of scripture, demonstrating that this imperative, and the yield of its application, finds a shocking likeness to the act of idolatry, and its subsequent ruin, throughout the narrative of scripture.

In chapter one I will consider our role as place-based mediators of Yahweh, the Living God, and demonstrate that an idolatrous faith ultimately inhibits our ability to perform the task of this relational office. The result is that humanity, those created imago Dei, become mediators of death instead of mediators of life. In this chapter I will also introduce the covenantal yoke of place as the bond which keeps our relationship with the world at the proximity befitting our capacity for affectionate mediation. Following this biblical theology of idolatry, chapter two will then move my essay into a philosophical exploration of technology and our relationship to it. I will begin this second chapter with a basic outline of the technological paradigm as it developed under the control of modernity, demonstrating how this guide distills a relational world into concealed devices of mechanization that offer available commodity. I will then argue that this modern control was challenged in the postmodern turn, and has since become a hypermodern faith whereby commodious individuals continue to harvest its yield of commodities despite the ambiguous liberation they
provide. In addition I will use the poststructuralism of Jean Baudrillard in this chapter to argue that our technological devices, and their respective commodities, are beginning to make the jump to hyperreality, and thereby commodifying the world through apparent simulative abstraction. In chapter three I will synthesize the findings of chapters one and two, making explicit the connections between the act of idolatry and our faith in the technological paradigm, drawing parallels between the abstraction, inculcation, and mediation, that is constitutive of both affairs. After drawing these conclusions, I will provide a brief introduction to focal things, practices, and events, as they can be pursued within the local nexus of place.

To be sure, we have much to receive in facing up to this question. And though there will certainly be strain, let us step out in faith; hear, it is Christ’s good pleasure to give us the gift of our salvation.
Chapter 1
The Idol of Death and the Nexus of a Relational Reality

For a long time I have held my peace, 
I have kept still and restrained myself; 
now I will cry out like a woman in labor, 
I will gasp and pant.³

The appointed time of both birth and prophecy are inescapable. For both woman and prophet, suffering, the sense of urgency, and deep resolve are focused in embodied engagement. Restraint is no longer a possibility. Both cry out, gasp, and pant in open vulnerability. In the end, at the height of struggle, both labour that life may be brought forth in the world. In a word, both are mediators of life.

Indeed, when we’re talking about the prophet, there is possibly no better analogy than that of a woman in the throes of parturition. The labouring woman and the prophesying prophet are analogous insofar as the woman defies the death that threatens her, her child, and humanity as a whole, and the prophet, in a similar way, defies the death that threatens to consume an idolatrous community and the world within which they live. Whether bearing down or bearing up, both woman and prophet struggle for life against the very real possibility of death.

Therefore, when we speak about idolatry—the relationship against which prophetic action struggles—the stakes are ultimately life and death. Idolatry is a life or death situation in the truest sense.

I don’t put the stakes so bluntly for the sake of being sensational. Rather, like Moses, I mean to extend two choices: either the God of life or the idols of death. By laying out the antithesis in this way, I say with Moses: “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.”⁴ And like Paul, who reiterates this choice to the saints in Rome, I remind us that, “the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God, in our Lord Christ Jesus, is life into the ages.”⁵

³ Isa. 42:14. All Biblical citations will be taken from NRSV unless noted otherwise.
⁴ Deut. 30:19.
⁵ Rom. 6:22-23 [my translation].
Perhaps by the close of this first chapter we will come to appreciate this long-offered choice and bring forth life as faithful representatives and participants of the Living God.

…

The concern of this first chapter will be to explicate the phenomenological and theological implications of idol worship. That is, to investigate and make plain the constitutive processes and the relational consequences that constitute the act of idolatry. In so doing I will demonstrate that it is through an idolatrous community that death is mediated to the nexus of a relational reality.

To this end, I will begin by attending to the Divine-world relationship (1). Such a starting point is central to any analysis of idolatry, as it provides a foundation upon which to understand the antithesis: the choice of death over life vis-à-vis the worship of idols. I will then demonstrate that idolatry is both a constitutive act (2) and an act of infidelity (3). Respectively, these are the phenomenological and theological implications of idol worship. Although I have made this division in order to better explain idolatry’s constitutive process and relational consequences, the act is unified with both implications occurring simultaneously. Accordingly, although I may trace the threads of each consequence separately, my intention is that we would come to recognize the characteristic weave of idolatry as a whole. Let’s begin by situating ourselves within the relational reality of Yahweh, The Living God.

1 The Living God, Faithfulness, and the Covenantal Yoke of Place

Life is the first and last word in the narrative of scripture. Any analysis of idolatry would do well to begin with this great comfort. Yahweh, the Living God, is the beginning and the end. His relentless engagement with the world gives, sustains, recovers, and renews life. The work of the present section is to give us eyes to see this reality and the imagination to participate in it.

There are three movements to the following section. The first will open us to the Living God’s relationship with the world (1.1). To this end, Terence Fretheim’s theology of divine relationality and Abraham Heschel’s theology of divine pathos will be synthesized to
form a hermeneutic, a lens through which to encounter Yahweh as the Living God. The second movement will then attend to Richard Middleton’s functional interpretation of the *imago Dei* (1.2). I will then go on to demonstrate how the faithfulness of Jesus Christ fulfilled the office of the *imago Dei* and thus reappointed humanity to its task as mediators of life. The final movement will set forth the covenantal yoke of place as the bond within which a community may pursue fidelity with Christ, mediate Yahweh as his renewed image bearers, and thus bear life in the world (1.3). Applying our hermeneutic one last time, I will suggest that such a yoke is latent in the creation narrative of Genesis 2 and is a bond constitutive of our relationship to the ground and to each other.

1.1 Yahweh, the Living God

From the first creative word, Yahweh, the Living God, has given and sustained the life of his world in relationship. The living God is relational. Indeed, the entire witness of scripture, beginning in Genesis and ending in Revelation, is a testament to his divine pathos—his intimate concern for the world. The creation lives by this divine concern. For example, it was pathos in the beginning that alleviated the solitude of the first human; it was pathos that bore the weight of the ark in the deluge; and it was pathos that resurrected Christ from among the dead. From creation, through the fall, and in the outworking of redemption, Yahweh’s pathetic relationality realizes life in the world.

Since this divine care is so foundational to the biblical witness, we might say it provides a sound hermeneutic for encountering Yahweh and his posture toward the world. Through the respective theologies of Fretheim and Heschel we will now attempt to explicate the basis for such a guiding hermeneutic.

By investigating the divine metaphors attested to in the Hebrew Scriptures, Fretheim has championed a theology of relationality. As Michael Chan and Brent Strawn claim, “Fretheim has contributed many things to theological reflection, but chief among them is the insight that the God of Israel… *touches* the world and *is touched by* the world… Creator and
creation are in a genuine relationship, and neither party is unaffected." Guided by this insight, Fretheim is relentless in seeking out the implications of such a Divine-World relationship.

For example, although Fretheim is sensitive to the mystery of a God who is both transcendent and imminent, he is ultimately dissatisfied with this dichotomy’s yield; both deism and pantheism fail to describe Yahweh as the Living God. Against this dichotomy, he claims, “Israel’s God is transcendent in relationship to the world, not in isolation from it.” This relationality, so Fretheim claims, is more descriptive of the Living God than the classic attributes of omniscience, immutability, omnipotence, etc. Indeed, Fretheim is clear: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is neither deistic nor pantheistic, but relational.

For instance, in, *The Suffering of God*, Fretheim considers the condescension and self-limiting that God will go to for the sake of relationship. This divine self-limiting is evident in the very act of creation whereby God freely enters into relationship with the world outside himself. In forming the world God has essentially welcomed the greatest other. In regards to this Divine-world relationship, Fretheim claims, “Any commitment or promise within a relationship entails a limitation of freedom. By such actions [i.e. creating the world], God has decisively limited the options God has…. God’s freedom is now most supremely a freedom for the world, not a freedom from the world.” Nevertheless, this inclination to limit independence is not unique to the Divine-world relationship but is built into the nexus of created reality.

With such relational integration in mind, Fretheim compares the community of creation to a spider-web. “Interrelatedness is basic to this community of God’s creatures. Each created entity is in symbiotic relationship with every other and in such a way that any act reverberates out and affects the whole, shaking this web with varying degrees.”

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not only does Yahweh exist in relationship but his creation does too; creation qua creation is relational.

Thus, according to the theology of Fretheim, the Living God is relational. As we have considered, not only does the life of the world come into being as a result of this divine reality but it is also imprinted by it. A nexus of relationships, therefore, permeates the world.

The relational theology of Fretheim provides the essential material for our hermeneutical lens. The next step, therefore, is to shape this material along the proper curvature. We must now form our hermeneutic along a particular understanding of relationality. Heschel’s theology of divine pathos is fit for the task.

In his magisterial book, *The Prophets*, Heschel explicates a theology of divine pathos. Now, it must be stated outright that Heschel’s use of pathos is quite expansive and at times enigmatic. For Heschel, divine pathos is not limited to the emotion of suffering. Certainly, as the scriptures attest, Yahweh suffers because of his pathetic relationship with the world, but according to Heschel, suffering is only one mode of the otherwise dynamic reality that is pathos.

In a word, divine pathos, according to Heschel’s use, denotes the reality of God’s concern and intimate relatedness to his world. Thus, the God of Israel is drawn toward the world by his concern for it. As we have said, such concern is evident before the fall, and will be present long after all is renewed because God has chosen to be involved in the life of his world.

This divine engagement, therefore, is dynamic. It is the outpouring of Yahweh’s affectionate commitment toward that which he has created. In this regard, pathos, as Heschel claims, “denotes not an idea of goodness, but a living care; not an immutable example, but an outgoing challenge, a dynamic relation between God and man.”10 We might think of pathos, therefore, as the antithesis of apathy. It is God’s will to pursue a relationship evermore deeply, his desire to be understood, as he understands, instead of disappearing into divine indifference.

Thus, as a dynamic living care, Heschel also understands divine pathos as a temper for the righteousness and otherness of transcendence. It is pathos, in other words, that causes the Living God to shield the glory of his righteousness and divinity for the life of his creature, to mitigate justice with mercy like a father who corrects his child. As Heschel notes concerning such mitigation, “A father is disqualified to serve as a judge. Yet the judge of all men is also their Father. He would be unjust to His own nature were He to act in justice without being compassionate.”

To recall Fretheim, pathos is the reason for which Israel’s God is transcendent in relationship to the world, not in isolation from it. Such moderation is paradoxical to all apathetic religions because their gods care little for the misery or loneliness of humanity. Indeed, such moderation causes Heschel to rightly claim, “Pathos is, indeed, righteousness wrapped in mystery, togetherness in holy otherness.” Such divine care is a wondrous reality, breaking in at every human experience, be it at the sigh of relief or at the sigh of distress.

Both the theologies of Fretheim and Heschel form the basis for a hermeneutic of divine relationality. Fretheim, as we have considered, provides the basic nexus of this relational reality and Heschel’s understanding of divine pathos conforms it along the curvature of divine care. When these two theologies are synthesized a hermeneutic is formed through which the relational reality of Yahweh, the Living God, comes into focus. Moving on, our second task is to consider this divine relationality as it relates to humanity’s task as divine image bearers. By turning this hermeneutic upon the imago Dei, we will now consider how such relational care is also constitutive of the mandate given to humanity.

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12 Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol 1, 219 [his emphasis].
1.2 Mediating Life: Imago Dei and the Faithfulness of Jesus Christ

Humanity is the mediating creature, created to represent Yahweh by participating in the nexus of pathetic relationality. To live into this mediatary role is the call given to every human, yet only one has answered faithfully: Jesus Christ, faithful mediator of life, the first-born of the dead. We will begin this second task by explicating Middleton’s functional interpretation of the *imago Dei* through our guiding hermeneutic. Then we will move to consider the faithfulness of Jesus Christ as it relates to our task as mediators of life.

Middleton elucidates a functional interpretation of the *imago Dei*, one that articulates the image as the mediation of royal power in the world. Such an interpretation, as we will see, naturally resonates with our guiding hermeneutic because it situates our mediatory role within the nexus of a relational reality.

According to Middleton, “the *imago Dei* designates the royal office or calling of humans beings as God’s representatives and agents in the world, granted authorized power to share in God’s rule or administration of the earth’s resources and creatures.”\(^\text{13}\) In order to elucidate the function of this royal designation, Middleton draws on the significance of image bearing in its ancient Near Eastern context.

In his exegesis of Gen. 1:26-27, Middleton highlights the notions of embodiment and localization that defines *ṣelem*—the Hebrew word for image. This word, according to Middleton, is “in many contexts clearly referring to a cult image, which in the common theology of the ancient Near East is precisely a localized, visible, corporeal representation of the divine.”\(^\text{14}\) As a cultic-hub, a *ṣelem* is functional and dynamic. It must be integrated within the creation for the sake of the god’s representation and meaningful presence with its subjects. In other words, if humanity is a “cultic image” which *represents* and *participates* with the Living God, then it must be an image that is intrinsically interrelational, and functioning as such, to perform the task of mediation. To use the language of our hermeneutic, the *imago Dei* must be intrinsically connected to the relational nexus of reality.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 25.
if it is to successfully affect the surrounding culture as a divine representative and participant. And this is exactly what Middleton asserts,

It is precisely because the representational aspect of the image consists in a functional similarity or analogy between God and humanity specifically concerning the exercise of (royal) power, that the image can be articulated also as representative, referring to the human office of representing God’s rule/power in the world.¹⁵

The dominion of this office, therefore, is inherently relational.

Accordingly, the imago Dei is not a mere substantial reality with its analogy in the divine, nor is it a function to be solely worked out in human-divine and human-human commitments. Rather, when pursued faithfully, it is humanity’s call to sympathetic participation with Yahweh in the care for the creational community in a specific locale. This is what it means to bear the image and likeness of Yahweh.

Middleton’s functional understanding of the imago Dei places humanity within the world for the sake of the world. As creatures created in the image and likeness of this divine relationality, we find out who we are by participating with the Living God’s activity in the world. Thus, the image is not something to be conceptually grasped, but a calling to be answered by joining in the work.

In sum, through the royal-functional interpretation of the imago Dei we can appreciate the mediating role of humanity. Furthermore, when we apply our guiding hermeneutic, we can qualify humanity’s royal office as that which is characterized by the realization of life in the world through a pathetic relationship with the world. Thus, though the imago Dei be dyed royal purple, the thread of pathos remains the very warp and weft of its weave.

Having considered the mediatory significance of our image bearing, we now turn our attention to the faithfulness of Jesus Christ in fulfilling the mandate of the imago Dei to realize life through pathos-suffused relationality. Though Christ’s faithful mediation is foundational to the Christian scriptures as a whole, we will limit our exegesis to one passage, Rom. 5:12-21.

¹⁵ Ibid., 88.
The Letter to the Romans is an epistle about the choice between life and death—our preoccupation with the false dichotomies of faith/works and grace/law conceal this reality. Indeed, this choice takes centre stage in the juxtaposition of Jesus Christ and Adam in Rom. 5:12-21. According to Paul’s comparison, the faithful mediation of Jesus Christ accomplished two things. First, it fulfilled the human task of representing and participating with the Living God in the world. And second, it reappointed many to their office as divine image bearers apart from the condemnation of the law, which is a reappointment to righteousness.

Of course this interpretation makes little sense unless we are sensitive to the image-bearing call of the first Adam. Paul’s emphasis falls on Christ’s faithful mediation of life and the renewal of humanity’s mediating role by his free gift. When we read this passage in light of Middleton’s functional interpretation, the language of reigning, appointment, life, gift, obedience, death, sin, disobedience, transgression, even taking and receiving, tell of our fall from, and renewal to, the office of divine image bearing.

According to Paul, the faithful obedience of Jesus Christ accomplishes Adam’s role as a mediator of life. Thus Paul deduces, in Rom. 5:17, “For if by the transgression of one [Adam] death reigned through that one, then much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one, Jesus Christ.” Indeed the emphasis in this passage, as I have noted, is on mediation. Through one mediator comes death and through the other comes dominion in life. Indeed Paul’s imagination draws the connections: the faithfulness of Christ accomplished what Adam failed to do as a mediator of Yahweh.

When interpreted through our guiding hermeneutic, the transgression of Adam would have been a failure to represent and participate with Yahweh in the nexus of a relational reality. According to Paul, Adam’s act of infidelity ultimately surrendered his authority as an image bearer of life. And indeed, though Adam was meant to reign as a mediator of life, he forsook a pathetic relationship by grasping at autonomy—a sinful inclination that is often equated with idolatry (see, for example, Col 3:5 and Eph 5:5). And so, Adam, by his

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16 Rom. 5:17 [my translation and emphasis]. NRSV translates reign (βασιλεύω) as “exercise dominion.”
disobedience, chose the image of another. Adam, like a mirror turned from the light, separated himself from the radiance of divine fidelity to reflect the darkness of a life lived in isolation.

Yet not only does Christ Jesus succeed in fulfilling humanity’s call as image bearers of life, but he also freely re-constitutes humanity as mediators of life, turning them from their autonomy.

In Rom. 5:19 we see that this miss-step in Adam’s mediation, “appointed many sinners.” These many are Adam’s progeny, subsequent offenders who were intended to be image bearers of life but continued in Adam’s ways of mediating death. Nevertheless, as Paul goes on to explain, “through the obedience of one [Jesus Christ] many are appointed righteous.” This is humanity’s re-constitution to the office of divine image bearer. The many who are appointed righteous are those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness given by Christ, a gift much like the blessing given to the first Adam—which is the *imago Dei*. Those who receive this gift will reign in life through Jesus Christ; it is they who are given back the royal garb. By the grace of Christ, therefore, humanity is given back the radiance of relationship, turned to bear the image of life as mirrors returned to the light.

Now, by this interpretation I do not mean to negate Paul’s clear concern regarding the condemnation that comes through the law. Nevertheless I want to relegate it to a secondary position, subsequent to the primary concern, which is the life of Yahweh conquering the death of idolatry by Christ’s faithful mediation and thus the free reappointment of humanity as representational participants in the *imago Dei*. Indeed, as we see in Rom 5:21, sin does have a reigning authority, but it is only an authority *in death*. Thus, even when Paul is talking about the law and its reckoning of sin, he is cognizant of the ultimate dilemma, which is the reign of death.

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17 Rom. 5:19a [my translation].
18 Rom. 5:319b [my translation].
At this point it may be advantageous to recapitulate our efforts so far. The aim of this section was to see and participate in the life of Yahweh. To this end we shaped a hermeneutic of pathetic relationality through which to encounter Yahweh and his intimate concern for the life of the world. We then turned this hermeneutic upon a functional interpretation of the *imago Dei*. Our hermeneutic was in agreement with this interpretation, and we thus concluded that humanity, as mediators of life, represent and participate with Yahweh in the world through a pathetic relationship with the world. It is through this faithful mediation that humanity mediates the life of Yahweh, which is, according to our hermeneutic, exactly what Christ accomplished as the second Adam. In doing so he also reappointed many to their original office as image bearers of life.

The question directed toward our final task, is one of practice. The question is: according to our guiding hermeneutic, how shall we receive the free gift of our reappointment as mediators of life in and with the world?

### 1.3 The Covenantal Yoke of Place

A place, as I have come to understand it, is defined by our fidelity to two fundamental relationships. The first is our relationship to the ground, the particular land directly underneath our feet. The second is our relationship to the human community in that land. These two relationships, when sought in faith, create a microcosm within the nexus of relational reality. It is within the particularity of such a bond that we may participate as mediators of life.

We might say, therefore, that place is a *covenantal yoke* insofar as it keeps our relationship with the world at the proximity befitting our capacity for pathetic mediation. Apart from this yoke our care for “humanity” or “the environment” are mere abstractions. Indeed such sentiments are inconsequential niceties compared to, for example, the untimely needs of a neighbour or the demands of a hillside pasture.

Thus, by turning our hermeneutic upon the narrative of Genesis 2, I will suggest that Yahweh’s successive creations of the human (ʻāḏām) from the ground (ʻăḏāmāh) and the woman (ʻiššāh) from the man (ʻiš) establish the primary relationships through which faithfulness with Christ is kept in the particularity of a place.
Genesis 2:7, the forming of the ‘āḏām from the ‘āḏāmāh, records the creation of the first constituent relationship in our relationship to place. The writer of Genesis, after a brief description of the primeval creation in Gen. 2:5-6, furthers the narrative by depicting the creation of the first human out of the ground. The author states, “then the L ORD God formed the dust human (‘āḏām) from the ground (‘āḏāmāh) and breathed in its nostrils living breath and the human became a living being.”19 Both Ellen F. Davis and Mari Jørstad provide excellent exegeses of this first relationship between the ‘āḏāmāh and the ‘āḏām.

In her article, “The Ground That Opened Its Mouth: The Ground’s Response to Human Violence in Genesis 4,” Jørstad suggests that the ‘āḏāmāh is a responsive moral agent. In light of Gen. 4:11, in which the ‘āḏāmāh opens its mouth to take20 Abel’s blood, Jørstad suggest that “just as the creation of humanity in chapter 2 is a response to a lack of the ground [that it needed to be served and observed], so the agency of the ‘āḏāmāh is a response to a lack of humanity—this time a moral lack.”21 This beautiful insight helps us appreciate the ‘āḏāmāh as an active partner, not something inert to act upon. According to Jørstad’s insights, this partner is able to resist and frustrate the destructive, noncreative, and autonomous choices of the human, and even provide a place from which the sufferer may be heard. Indeed, Jørstad’s insight is crucial for considering how we ought to enter into a pathetic relationship with the ground that supports us, the land that constitutes our place. Without appreciating the agency of the ‘āḏāmāh our talk about human-ground fidelity will be a fanciful fairy tale. We will reply with Claus Westermann, “the relationship attests that human beings and the earth belong together,”22 but have no meaningful way of articulating how we ought to belong to each other.

Davis also provides insight into the close relationship between the ‘āḏāmāh and the ‘āḏām. According to Davis this Hebrew wordplay is one “descriptive of their family

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19 MT, Gen. 2:7 [my translation].
20 Jørstad’s translation.
resemblance.”

She claims that “Both words are related to 'āḏōm, “ruddy”; in the Levant, brownish red is the skin tone of both the people and the earth…Thus 'āḏōm from 'āḏāmāh is localized language; it evokes the specific relationship between people and their particular place.” This insight compels us to make concrete connections between our bodies and the ground underneath our feet. It summons us to act in such a way that makes our belief in the 'āḏāmāh- 'āḏām relationship plausible. Therefore, far from being abstract, the relationship between the 'āḏāmāh and the 'āḏām is present to us when we engage with other humans—when we welcome the reality of their composition and complexion. In this way, Davis’ biblical exegesis grows out of the same conviction that gives weight to Wendell Berry’s statement: “While we live our bodies are moving particles of the earth, joined inextricably both to the soil and to the bodies of other living creatures.” According to both Davis and Jørstad, we share an intimate kinship to the particular ground underneath our feet, one of moral responsibility and familial resemblance.

This investigation of Gen 2:7 has unearthed compelling insights into the relationship between the 'āḏāmāh and the 'āḏām. Again, this relationship between the 'āḏāmāh and the 'āḏām is the first constituent bond of our relationship to place. Let’s turn our attention to the other constituent bond in this relationship as it is recorded in Gen. 2:21-23: the building of the 'iššāh from the 'āḏām.

Gen. 2:21-23, the forming of the 'iššāh from the 'āḏām, records the creation of the second constituent relationship in our relationship to place. The writer of Genesis, after giving an account of the forming and naming of the animals, furthers the narrative by describing the building of the 'iššāh from the 'āḏām. The author states:

But for the human ( 'āḏām) there was not found a helper as his counterpart. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the human, and he slept. Then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And with the rib that the LORD God had taken from the human he built a woman and brought her to the human. Then the human said,

“This at last is bone from my bones
and flesh from my flesh.
She will be called Woman ( 'iššāh),

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24 Ibid.
because she was taken from man (‘îš).

We see that the striking feature of Gen 2:21-23 is another Hebrew wordplay between the ‘iššāh and the ‘îš. This is the second wordplay-based relationship in the creation narrative of Genesis 2, and I believe it is closely tied to the kindred and moral relationship of the ‘ăḏāmāh and the ‘āḏām.

This moment of creation in Gen. 2:21-23 is nearly identical to the one recorded in Gen. 2:7. In both instances, we witness one character—the ‘ăḏāmāh or the ‘îš—becoming two distinct moral agents. By these creative divisions, the Living God creates moral agents who now have the ability to relate to one another based on their familiar ties and propensity for relationality. Where there was only uniformity there is now distinction for the sake of relationship. Nevertheless, there appears to be a slight development in the creation of the ‘iššāh because she is created within a preexisting relationship between the ‘ăḏāmāh and the ‘āḏām. This development is addressed by the author who exchanges the language of forming used in Gen. 2:7 for the language of building used in Gen. 2:22.

Note the language of building in Gen. 2:22. Yahweh builds the ‘iššāh with the rib of the ‘ăḏām. This is an incredibly important point for it creates an intimate relationship between the ‘îš, the ‘iššāh, and the ‘ăḏāmāh. The language of building with the rib suggests the construction of something, of adding on, and of building up. Such a project is impossible with one rib unless the rib is only part of the work. Furthermore, what else would Yahweh build the ‘iššāh with except the rib and the ‘ăḏāmāh? The ground is implied and, according to our interpretation, a necessary material. In this way, the creation narrative of Genesis 2 implicitly demonstrates that the ‘iššāh is in relationship with the ‘îš because she was built with his rib, but equally important is the reality that she was constructed with the ‘ăḏāmāh and thus is equally created to be in relationship with it. By virtue of her creation, the ‘iššāh is in relationship with the ‘ăḏāmāh as a human, and in relationship with the ‘îš as ‘iššāh, his counterpart.

26 MT, Gen. 2:20b-23 [my translation]. Contrary to the NRSV, this translation takes the אֶת of 2:22 to be a preposition of assistance, not the accusative particle. Accordingly, it also takes the prefixed ב on לְאָשָׁה to indicate the direct object.
In other words, the creation of the 'īššāh from the 'īš produces a moral agent who is immediately in relationship with the 'āḏāmāh and the 'īš. She, by the implicit implications of her creation, represents the beginning of a new relationship among humans and continuity in the 'āḏām- 'āḏāmāh relationship. That is, her creation opens up the possibility of human community, which is de facto, a community called to serve and observe the ground (Gen. 2:15). Her creation inaugurates the covenantal yoke of place.

Thus, when we interpret these two relationships through our guiding hermeneutic, we realize that both necessitate the particularity of a place if they are to be characterized by pathos. That is, if these basic relationships are to reach out toward the affectionate understanding that is sought in pathetic relationality they must be yoked to a particular place within which such bonds could mature. This need for the particularity of place is what Berry is speaking about when he states:

> If one is to have the power and delight of one’s sexuality, then the generality of instinct must be resolved in a responsible relationship to a particular person. Similarly, one cannot live in the world; that is one cannot become […] a ‘world citizen’…. No matter how much one may love the world as a whole, one can live fully in it only by living responsibility in some small part of it.\(^{27}\)

Accordingly, it is absurd to commit to the life of the earth, which is our calling as mediators of life, without having a relationship to a specific ground. And it is just as nonsensical to commit to the life of humanity, as we are called to do, without having a relationship to a particular community. It is for this reason that our fidelity to Jesus Christ and thus our faithful mediation as re-appointed image bearers of life must occur within a place.

In sum, a place is not bound by physical borders, but is held in definition by the affectionate understanding that is fostered within it. As we said, it is a yoke, which holds us to our work as relational mediators. Indeed, it is but a speck in the nexus of a relational world, but it is a speck with the potential for true troth. Such a notion of place is latent in the creation narrative of Genesis 2 and is constitutive of a human community and the particular ground under its feet. Such is the bond of place, which, according to our guiding hermeneutic, is the site where the mediations of life are realized in the world.

\(^{27}\) Berry, The Unsettling of America, 123.
The creation is alive, sparking along the lines of symbiosis. Yahweh has created this nexus and entered it by his pathos. He is the Living God, and by his life the whole world resonates. We, as his image bearers, are reappointed mediators, called to participate in the bearing of life by the free gift of Christ Jesus. We are called into the particularity of place, a humble commitment when compared to the whole, but a fidelity that befits our capacity for pathetic relationality. Our place in this nexus is a covenantal yoke and it is the gift of our salvation, under it we are empowered to return to our original calling. By it we attend to our task faithfully. This is the reality attested to in the scriptures and it’s relational all the way down.

Having rooted ourselves within this reality, it is now appropriate that we begin our explication of idolatry. As we will appreciate in the following section, idolatry is an act of faith that deforms the imagination of Yahweh’s image bearers and thus the reality within which they exist; such is the phenomenological implication of idolatry.

2 Idolatry as A Constitutive Act

“You are what you worship,” we might say. Or “where your idol is, there also your heart will be.”

In this second section we turn our attention toward the three phenomenological implications of idolatry. The first constitutive act occurs when the worshipper forms the idol (2.1). We will draw on the thinking of Pablo Richard to attend to this event, reading his analysis through the relational hermeneutic synthesized in section one. The statement: “graven images grave images,” tells of the second constitutive act. That is: idolatry is an act which forms the worshipper (2.2). To this end we will consider the constitutive implications of forfeiting our divine image in a relational world, drawing primarily from the biblical exegesis of G. K. Beale. Finally, the third constitutive act of idolatry concerns the way an
idolatrous relationship engenders the worshipper’s world through the formation of the imagination (2.3). We will draw on Walter Brueggemann’s study of praise and James K. A. Smith’s work in cultural liturgics to explicate this last implication. Before we get underway I want to make a quick note concerning the terminology of the following two sections.

“Idolatry,” according to Richard, “has two distinct sources of meanings: one from within the worship of the true God, and the other from outside that worship.”28 We might consider this distinction in the words of Deut. 5:6-8:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

According to Richard’s division, the first distinction is the worship of a god other than the Living God, and the second is the worship of an idol of Yahweh. Both are idols formed from the creation, but one is a god other than Yahweh, and one is an image of Yahweh.

Although this essay is chiefly concerned with the worship of foreign gods, I will use the terms god, idol, image, and likeness interchangeably. I use these terms loosely because worshipping a foreign god and worshiping an image of Yahweh are both constitutive acts that engender a particular world apart from the nexus of relational reality. Thus, in explicating the phenomenon of idolatry, I will draw freely from scripture without making specific mention as to which form of idolatry a particular passage may concern.

2.1 On the Making of An Idol

An idol is formed to release the worshipper from the demands of a relational reality. According to Richard’s theological tradition, the idol offers a commodity. “The idol is a consumer good just like any other, for the satisfaction of human needs.”29 According to our guiding hermeneutic, we might say that this commodity promises escape from both the call

29 Ibid., 13.
of a relational God and the community of creation. An idol is, therefore, an aspect of the creation that has been isolated from the world, so that its worshipper can escape the relational nexus of creation—the commodity it offers.

Both forms of abstraction, however, are artificial. That is, the idol, although worshipped as a god, is still a relational creature just as the worshipper, as the mediating creature, is still located in the nexus of a relational reality. Still, the attempt to achieve this separation results in two problematic consequences. The first consequence of making an idol is as follows: when an aspect of creation is elevated to serve as a god it is hindered from fulfilling its intended purpose within the nexus of creation. The second consequence is similar but regards the worshipper: when the worshipper forms a god, she forsakes her royal office as a mediator of life; she too is unable to fulfill her intended purpose as a creature of divine mediation.

In sum, although both idol and worshipper may appear detached, they, in actuality, remain within the nexus, but in a way that is truncated or malignant; they live half-lives as creatures compromised in Yahweh’s world. Let’s begin by considering the first consequence.

The carpenter, according to the prophet Isaiah, fashions a god out of the same material he applies in his trade. He carves the idol out of wood, perhaps a cedar felled from his family’s stand. He fashions the wood into timbers to make a shelter. He chops some to heat his dwelling and some he uses to cook his meals.

Indeed, the carpenter, according to his trade, is a master of all varieties of wood and wooden items, all except the idol, the one from whom he seeks salvation. In Isaiah 44:14b-17, the author deconstructs the making of an idol and exposes the process as meaningless:

He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it can be used as fuel. Part of it he takes and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Then he makes a god and worships it, makes it a carved image and bows down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he roasts meat, eats it and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, “Ah, I am warm, I can feel the fire!” The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, “Save me, for you are my god!”

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31 Isa. 44:14b-17.
According to Isaiah’s diatribe, it is nonsensical that a carpenter would expect wood to save him; he knows the capacities of the material intimately after all. Nevertheless, he creates a god out of it and prostrates himself before it. By doing so, the carpenter, in Richard’s words, commodifies the creation, forcing it into a role it could never fulfill. He carves it out of its normative function as a versatile material in the nexus and seeks to secure his freedom by it.

Let’s consider another example from the scriptures, this time from the narrative of the golden calf. This account, in contrast to Isaiah’s critique, elucidates the way in which an idol is fashioned to secure its worshipper from the summons of relationship.

Aaron and the Israelites formed a gold calf at the foot of mount Sinai to isolate themselves from the dynamism of Yahweh, from his passionate summons to recover their enslaved imaginations. Exodus 32:1 recounts Israel’s sin: “When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, ‘Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’” In this passage, as we can see, Israel applies to Aaron for an image that would replace Moses, the Living God’s representative. Such a request is, eo ipso, disengagement from both the relationality of Yahweh and their role as his image bearers. Losing faith in Moses was losing faith in the transcendence of Yahweh.

The result was a graven image to protect them from the painful work of liberation. By this act, Israel disengaged and found consolation in a mute idol, the idea of divinity instead of Yahweh’s living challenge. Such is Richard’s exegesis when he claims,

> In Exodus 32, God reveals his transcendence as God the liberator, and not a God who consoles the oppressed so that they will accept their condition as an oppressed people. The veneration of God as consoler is idolatry. The seat or throne of this god—where he reigns or manifests his presence to the people—is gold, and gold is the symbol of domination.”

A gilded mouth wouldn’t ask the hard questions, so Israel reasoned. It would remain silent. It wouldn’t confront them about their scars as an oppressed people; it wouldn’t ask about the recurring nightmares, nor would it exorcise the demons that now possessed their spirit as a

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people. In sum, by requesting this idol, the Israelites sought a superficial abstraction, a commodity to release them from both Yahweh and their responsibility as his image.

As we have considered through Isaiah 44 and Exodus 32, there are two consequences to making an idol. The first concerns the misdirection of an aspect of creation, and the second concerns the misdirection of the worshipper. Instead of achieving autonomy, both idol and worshipper remain in the nexus of reality, albeit reduced to a semblance of their intended design. The longer this idolatry is sustained the more the divine image bearer functions less like Yahweh and more like what she worships; such is the phenomenological implications of the second constitutive act of idolatry, to which we now turn to consider.

2.2 Idolatry as Worshipper Forming

According to the biblical exegesis of Beale, “If we worship idols, we become like the idols, and that likeness will ruin us.” Continuing in our phenomenological study, we will now elucidate the implication of this claim from four passages of scripture, concluding with Romans 1 in which Paul explicates this phenomenon as a compromised imago Dei.

According to the witness of scripture, those who worship idols become like them. Consider the warning of Psalm 115,

5. They [the idols of the nations] have mouths, but do not speak;
   eyes, but do not see.
6. They have ears, but do not hear;
   noses, but do not smell.
7. They have hands, but do not feel;
   feet, but do not walk;
   they make no sound in their throats.
8. Those who make them are like them;
   so are all who trust in them.34

According to the Psalmist, those who trust in idols, in this case idols of silver and gold, become like them. Inferring from verses 5-7, it appears that the worshipper retains their sensory organs, but loses the capacity to use them. They, therefore, have eyes, but like the

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33 G. K. Beale, We Become What We Worship, (Downs Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 46.
34 Psa. 115:5-8.
idol, can’t take in the world within which they are placed. They have hands, but like the idol, are incapable of working with them. The same applies to their mouth, ears, nose, and feet—they retain them only as outward vestiges. And thus they, according to the Psalmist’s argument, become senseless. Like their idol in which they trust, the worshipper becomes uninvolved, numb, and insensate.

This phenomenon—that we become like what we worship—is also alluded to after Israel worships the golden calf. According to the exegesis of Beale, Moses describes idolatrous Israel as if they had become like the calf they worshipped. Beale gives five points within the narrative that allude to this exchange,

they became (1) ‘stiff-necked’ (Ex 32:9; 33:3, 5; 34:9) and would not obey, but (2) they ‘were let loose’ because ‘Aaron had let them go loose’ (Ex 32:25), (3) so that ‘they had quickly turned aside from the way,’ (Ex 32:8) and they need to be (4) ‘gathered together’ again ‘in the gate’ (Ex 32:26), (5) so that Moses could ‘lead the people where’ God had told them to go (Ex 32:34).35

Though these examples from Exodus differ from Psalm 115—in that the idol has formed Israel into the image of a wayward animal, not an inanimate object—they both claim that idolatry is a constitutive act. The point of both passages, therefore, is that idols make their worshippers into something they were never intended to be. Whether the worshipper becomes like a senseless effigy or a stiff-necked calf matters little to the witness of scripture, since both an insensate human and a rebellious human are unqualified as divine mediators. Thus, the graven image engenders its own image and the result is a defected image bearer.

Indeed this reality is also picked up within Isaiah’s critique in chapter 44. Like the Psalmist and like Moses, the prophet highlights the reorientation that occurs to those who trust in the promise of idolatry.

They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their heart (libbōṯām) as well, so that they cannot understand. No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, “Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted meat and have eaten. Now shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?” He feeds on ashes; a deluded heart (lēḇ) has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, “Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?”36

35 Beale, We Become What We Worship, 78.
36 Isa. 44:18-20. I have adapted the NRSV’s translations of lēḇ from mind to heart.
Isaiah’s argument appears to be much like that of the Psalmist’s. We may detect in this passage, however, a slight furthering in the phenomenological consequence of idolatry. Indeed, this passage is significant because it warns of idolatry’s ability to disorient the heart—that is to confuse the seat of human comprehension and desire.

According to Isaiah, the craftsmen is led astray by the very thing he is meant to master, and—what is worse—he can no longer detect the incredible implications of his actions. He can no longer discern reality; can no longer understand that what he is worshiping is nothing but an elevated block of wood.

This reality, according to the prophetic tradition, is awash in apathy. When viewed through the lens of our hermeneutic, it is clear that Isaiah’s craftsman has ceased to function pathetically; has compromised his role as a mediator of life. In a word, the worshipper has become just as senseless as the idol he worships, just as apathetic as his apathetic religion, without any way of seeing through the ambiguity of his situation. Such is the ruinous likeness of habitual idolatry, the ramifications of being conformed to the image of that which you worship.

Romans 1:21-27 synthesizes the biblical data we have considered thus far by interpreting it against the backdrop of the imago Dei. In this passage, Paul’s argument is against those who “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.” In a word, he is confronting the act of idolatry as the exchange of the divine image.

The glory of the immortal God is revealed in human flourishing. According to our study of the imago Dei, it is a divine image bearer mediating life within the nexus of a relational reality. The felicity of this event is the expression of Yahweh par excellence. As Irenaeus said in the second century, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” To exchange this glory, therefore, is to be conformed to another image, to become senseless through idol worship; it is to turn one’s back on the world, to darken the heart in apathy.

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37 Rom. 1:23.
As Paul saw it, this phenomenon was the autonomous disorientation wrought by the ungodliness and unrighteousness of Rome. Such was the idolatrous bargain of imperial benefactors who “exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.”39 The result was an empire of perverted image bearers.

Indeed to exchange the truth of God for a lie and to worship and serve the creature, are, we might say, two sides of the same coin. They are both outright refusals to bear the pathetic relationality of Yahweh because they both seek to escape the demands of a relational world. Whether you accept the lie of autonomy instead of the truth that Yahweh is alive or you grasp at it by commodifying the creature, you are forfeiting your imago Dei for another.

And so Paul, in Rom. 1:26-27, articulates one of the clearest examples of relational breakdown, describing the idolater’s now distorted images through sexual acts that are autonomous and consumptive. He then bolsters this example in verses 29-31 by giving a list of transgressions that flesh out the consequences of a hardened heart. Notable examples from this list include envy, murder, deceit, pride, disobedience toward parents, lack of family affection, and mercilessness. When humans are filled with such sins they abandon Yahweh’s decrees and thus abandon their role in the relational nexus as his image bearers.

The idolaters, according to Paul’s articulation, are handed over to another image by appetites of their own darkened hearts. Giving up their divine office as the glory of the immortal God, they become like the “autonomous” images they worship, deformed and apathetic within the relational nexus. This reorientation with the world contours the final constitutive act of idolatry.

2.3 Idolatry as World Forming

Let’s review the phenomenon of idolatry as we have considered it thus far. In the first constitutive act we claimed that the idolater abstracts, or commodifies, a dimension of creation so as to escape the relational nexus of reality. The result is that both the creature-now-idol and the worshipper lose their normative function in the relational nexus while

39 Rom. 1:25.
remaining connected to it. In this way we might say that an idolatrous relationship is like a malignant blockage within an integrated world. The second constitutive act concerns the sustained affect of this artificial abstraction on the idolater. An idolatrous relationship, according to this act, will conform the worshipper to the image and likeness of the elevated idol. The idolater, therefore, becomes less like the Living God and more like the idol she worships. The last constitutive act of idolatry, to which we will now attend, concerns the phenomenological implication of an idolatrous relationship on the world of the worshipper.

Idolatry is a world-forming act. This implication could be inferred from Bob Goudzwaard’s claim when he says, “In the development of human civilization, man forms, creates, and changes the structure of his society…. He gives to the structure of that society something of his own image and likeness. In it he betrays something of his own lifestyle, of his own god.”[40] We may explicate how this restructuring of reality occurs through the insights of Brueggemann and Smith respectively, both of whom speak of the capacity of worship to engender the worshipper’s world through the formation of the imagination.

In his study on the constitutive act of praise, Brueggemann explicates the potential of liturgical worship to establish the world of Yahweh’s people against the competing worlds of idolatry and ideology. According to Brueggemann, “It is the act of praise, the corporate, regularized, intentional, verbalized, and enacted act of praise through which the community of faith creates, orders, shapes, imagines, and patterns the world of God.”[41] As Brueggemann is quick to explain, this is not an establishment of reality at the ontological level. “If we mean by world-making creation ex nihilo of the physical world, then obviously the cult does not do so. We are realistic enough to know that words and acts in cult do not form rocks and rivers and minerals.”[42] What Brueggemann means by the constitutive act of praise, therefore, is that the liturgy of Israel contours their world according to the particular narratives, images, and metaphors that attest to the abiding presence and call of the Living God. According to Brueggemann, the liturgy of Israel

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[42] Ibid., 52.
sets a pattern of power and meaning upon social relations which reflect Yahweh’s sovereignty. A world of justice, mercy, peace, and compassion, is created in the imaginative act of liturgy. This is the real world, created in the moment of liturgy, which asserts that every rival claimant and candidate for the real world is false and destructive.43

When we are talking about the capacity of praise to form the world, therefore, we are talking about the formative affect worship has on the imagination of the worshipping community, an effect that, according to our hermeneutic, attunes the community to the life of Yahweh and his presence within an inherently relational world. To return to Goudzwaard, Israel’s worship was to form Israelite society in the relational image and likeness of their liberating God.

Smith, in his study on cultural liturgies, also seeks to demonstrate that our world is shaped by what we worship. Like Brueggemann, Smith places great emphasis on the formation of meaning that occurs in worship, the way in which praise helps us make sense of the world through establishing an imaginary particular to the Living God. Drawing on the insights of Charles Taylor, Smith claims,

> the ‘social imaginary’ is an affective, noncognitive understanding of the world. It is described as an imaginary (rather than a theory) because it is fueled by the stuff of the imagination rather than the intellect: it is made up of, stories, narratives, myths, and icons. These visions capture our hearts and imaginations by ‘lining’ our imaginations as it were—providing us with frameworks of ‘meaning’ by which we make sense of our world and our calling in it.44

Yet this social imaginary, so Smith clarifies, is not only constituted by symbols and stories, but à la Brueggemann, is also formed by our habitual and embodied practices. A community’s imaginary, therefore, is also constituted by a “liturgy” that is enacted and performed.

Thus, on considering the formation of the imagination in worship, Smith adds, “an adequate liturgics must assume a kinaesthetics and a poetics, precisely because liturgies are compressed, performed narratives that recruit the imagination through the body.”45

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43 Ibid., 53.
we worship, therefore, shapes our reality by lining our imaginary with symbols and practices that are particular to its own image and likeness. The god constitutes our imagination and thereby constitutes the world we live in.

When we read Brueggemann, Goudzwaard, and Smith into our three-fold phenomenology of idolatry we are confronted with what might be the most disturbing implication of idol worship: Graven images grave images that grave images. That is, when an idol (a graven image) is worshipped it engraves the image (or forms the imagination) of the worshipper who then turns toward the world and engraves it in accordance with image of the idol. Indeed, such is the nauseating tempo that reverberates dissonance along the lines of a relational reality. Once the imagination of the idolater is misdirected by the symbols and practices of the idol, its image and likeness spreads death out into the world.

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Idolatry is a constitutive act, with the capacity to form both worshipper and the world of the worshipping community within the nexus of a relational world. All frameworks used to interpret the world of the idolatrous community, therefore, are generated by an imaginary marinated in the delusions of autonomy. Such delusions, to one degree or another, are rooted in the desire to be released from the dynamism of a relational reality. This desire is present in all three implications that we reviewed in this section; in each implication the worshipper’s relational role as a divine mediator is compromised. As we will consider in the last section of this chapter, not only does idolatry inhibit our capacity to mediate life, but, insofar as idolatry is the act which divorces the worshipper from life itself, idolatry also becomes the very site of death’s mediations in the world.

3 Death Outside; Idolatry as An Act of Infidelity

In the previous section we considered the phenomenon of idolatry. In this final section, therefore, we will attend to the theological consequences of idolatry, to the relational tremors which rumble underneath the event of idolatry. This final section, we might say, seeks to illumine the phenomenological act of idolatry as a theological act of infidelity.

As an act of infidelity, idolatry will invariably result in a community’s death outside the nexus of a relational world. The death of such an idolatrous community outside the
nexus, however, mediates death back into the nexus. This mediation is not a conscious act, but occurs by omission when divine image bearers forsake their office as mediators of life. Recall Moses: the choice given to Israel was one of life or death. To forsake life is to choose death by default. A community’s act of idolatrous infidelity is thus the act that brings forth death in the world.

When interpreted through our relational hermeneutic, idolatry is rightly identified as an act of infidelity. Idolatry is infidelity insofar as it devastates covenantal faithfulness and consummates an estrangement in the nexus of a relational reality. Idolatry is, therefore, an act of infidelity against the covenantal yoke of place (3.1), an act, which is, at the same moment, a choice to forsake the Living God, who is life itself (3.2). And because idolatry estranges a community from the particularity of place and from Yahweh, it results in the mediation of death within the nexus of an integrated world (3.3). Let us begin explicating this theological implication at the level of place.

### 3.1 Idolatry as Infidelity to Place

Idolatry is infidelity to the covenantal yoke of place. When a community commits to an idol they forsake their particular emplacement within the relational nexus of reality; estrangement occurs because the community has sought autonomy in an abstraction, renouncing pathetic relationality toward the ground and toward each other. To elucidate this infidelity I will lay this yoke upon the table for dissection, pulling place apart to review the neglect that claims each of its constituent parts.

Idolatry is an act of infidelity against a particular ground. According to our study, if we are to relate to the ground in a way that is faithful to the pathetic affection of Yahweh, then we must consider the ground that is directly under our feet. This means that the ‘āḏām-‘āḏāmāh relationship must be yoked within the particularity of a place. The act of idolatry forsakes this relationship by alienating the worshipper from the ground at the level of affectionate understanding.\(^{46}\)

\(^{46}\) Indeed our relationship to place can become an idol if it abstracts us from the world as a whole, if it enables us to forsake our calling as pathetic image bearers of the Living God. The yoke of place, therefore, is not meant
In disregarding this particular relationship, the idolatrous community either wastes the ground in the pursuit of an idol’s demands or conforms it to their own image and likeness. Regardless, the agency of the ground, which the community interacts with on a daily basis, is completely disregarded. Indeed, idolatry’s purpose for the ground is not worked out in the serving and observing that is characteristic of covenantal fidelity but through the indifference of apathy. The bond between the community and the ground upon which it exists becomes a one-way contract to the unencumbered benefit of the human community.

According to Brueggemann, graven images made by human hands “are efforts to reduce to manageable and predictable form the sources of value and power in our lives...When the land is fully controlled, it is easy to imagine that the land has been generated by the community and can be used for its own objectives.” Indeed, though Breuggemann is referring to a land that has been made into an idol, his analysis aligns well with the constitutive implications we considered in the previous section—that land is generated by the community’s image-graven image. The theological implications that make sense of this event, however, concern the faithlessness of a community. Such a community forsakes a pathetic posture with the ground, forming land as object, and not as a partner who demands that faith be kept. Indeed Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden, at least in part, may be symbolic of this distancing. The ground’s curse in Gen. 6:17b-18a, however, is certainly connected to, if not the direct result of, Adam’s broken relationship to Eden’s fertile soil. Idolatry, in sum, is infidelity to the particular ground under an idolatrous community’s feet.

According to our study on the covenantal yoke of place, idolatry must also be an act of infidelity against a particular human community. Again, if we are to relate to each other in a way that is faithful to the pathetic affection of Yahweh, then we must consider the other that is directly in front of us—those who make up the human community upon the ground we walk.

We must use our eyes to behold them, our ears to heed them, our hands to touch them, to hold their faces. And we must be able to use our mouths to speak to their hearts. We must seek to understand them with an understanding that befits Yahweh’s concern. Thus, in a way similar to our misdirected relationship with the ground, idolatry forsakes this second constitutive bond—the ’īš- ’īššāh relationship—by alienating the worshipper from humanity at the level of place.

One would only have to be attentive to the moments when we ignore our homeless neighbours; treat our local checkout clerk like a machine; make excuses as to why we can’t buy meat and eggs from the farmer down the road; avoid this or that conversation; save face when a stranger offers help; fail to give praise; and fail to seek forgiveness from those we have knowingly held at arms length.

Now we might think that these are trite examples, but, insofar as they betray a distancing from the demands of a relational reality, they are the indicators of an idolatrous infidelity within a particular human community.

All of these examples require something of us, they encounter us and set an ultimatum at the seat of our being: will it be life or death? And since we, as divine image bearers, are emplaced in the nexus to mediate the life of Yahweh, we ought to be wary of how we engage with these opportunities; every interaction has the potential to be misdirected by our desire for autonomy, the germ of idolatry. Indeed, the way these examples are phrased reminds us that we have an inclination to grasp small increments of autonomy in our everyday lives, bucking the covenantal yoke and estranging the bonds of those we live among. We must, therefore, take these thoughts captive because what occurs in the local nexus of place rings out toward the whole.

Infidelity to the covenantal yoke of place is a theological implication of idolatry that distances the worshipper from the particularity of both the human community and the ground upon which he lives. Such distancing is also characteristic of apathetic religion, which is unfaithful to life itself.

3.2 Idolatry as Infidelity to Life

As we said, idolatry is also a choice to forsake the Living God, who is life itself. This implication concerns the way in which an idolater strays from the dynamic relationship of
Yahweh. We have already considered a great deal of this territory as it pertains to the phenomenological disorientation of our *imago Dei*; it is, nevertheless, worth saying a few words on this act as an act of infidelity.

When an idolater seeks to disengage from the nexus of a relational reality, she at once walks out on its sustainer, choosing an orientation of apathy over pathos. Faith in an idol, therefore, is the choice to leave the God who has called us into covenant, a bond that entails our vocation to demonstrate and participate as his mediators in the world. This calling, as I have laboured to demonstrate, is a call to bear life within the world in accordance with Yahweh’s pathetic relationality.

Idolatry is also, however, the denigration of our free gift in Christ Jesus, the grace that recovers our capacity to represent Yahweh’s image in a relational world. Indeed when we throw off this gift, which we identified as the covenantal yoke of place, we are disparaging the faithfulness of Christ who pursued us in our autonomy; we commit infidelity against the bridegroom and against the Spirit who raised him from the dead so that we could bear fruit to life.

In short, the choice to seek autonomy apart from the Living God, Christ, the Spirit, and place, is to put our faith in an idol of death. As Jon Sobrino rightly notes, “The God in whose name life is engendered will be the true divinity; and the worship of the true God will progress in the process of engendering life. Conversely, the gods in whose name death is produced will be false divinities; and there will be an increasing lapse into idolatry as death proliferates.”

According to Sobrino’s analysis, we might say that idolatry is ultimately a community’s affair with death. This affair occurs outside the limits of covenantal life with Yahweh and therefore becomes the bond through which death is mediated to the relational nexus of reality.

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3.3 Death Outside Covenantal Life

Finally, death within the nexus of a relational reality is the result of a community’s dalliance with death, their infidelity to the covenant of life. The consequence of this extramarital affair is that an idolatrous community becomes the mediator of death in an integrated world.

Though a community seeks autonomy by worshiping an idol, they always fail to achieve it. This is an act of infidelity against Yahweh who has created—and re-appointed—humanity as his divine image bearers. It is an unfaithful act because autonomy is apathy within an inherently relational reality; the apathetic religion of idolatry is the utter antithesis of pathetic involvement, which they are called to imitate.

Nevertheless, idolatry, though it fails the main intent, has a consequence as a constitutive act. The consequence of such a relationship is the exchange of one image for another, Yahweh’s for the idol. An imaginary is created in this act that constitutes the worshipping community’s world according to the idol’s image and likeness. The first relationship to be ravaged by this imaginary is the covenantal yoke of place, the very nexus within which image bearers were intended to mediate life.

And so, it is within the particularity of place that death first enters the world. Death enters not as a conscious act of mediation made by the community, but as a corollary of apathy. Put another way, idolatry mediates death into the nexus of creation by negligence, by averting the heart from the particularity of place. When an image bearer ceases to mediate life at the level of affection, when he turns his unmitigated gaze from the local nexus, or mediates it with an idolatrous imaginary, a death knell is sounded for the world.

Indeed, this toll declares to the world that the worshipping community has committed infidelity against Yahweh outside the covenant of life. They, as disoriented image bearers, remain within the nexus but neither of it nor for it. Dissonance rings out along the line of Yahweh’s world for his image bearers have abandoned him.

…

Idolatry thrives on ambiguity. An idolatrous imaginary can envelope a community in a way that is nearly imperceptible, draping a light veil of anxiety as it travels like an air borne illness.
Indeed such a veil is draped over us here in the West, a malaise, and it smells of idolatry. Goudzwaard caught this odor nearly four decades ago when he said:

Something is rotten in our western society. We know it, we see it all around us, yet we don’t know what to do about it. Instead of activating us, the situation seems to paralyze us. A society that has chosen to live an autonomous life is now staggering toward its autonomous death. And such a death can only make us feel quite helpless.49

Indeed this sense of helplessness remains with us today as we wonder at how far we’ve come from the promises of the Enlightenment. Nevertheless the pain implies that we still have our senses about us; that we have yet to become like what we worship—at least in part. It reminds us that we have yet to make our home within unmitigated apathy. Indeed it would appear that the appointed time is upon us, will it be life or death? I say: let the prophets keep prophesying; let the women keep labouring!

My purpose for explicating this theology of idolatry was to equip us for an encounter with one of the greatest ambiguities of our time. Through the insights of this first chapter I hope to lead us into a cultural exegesis of modern technology and voice the unsettling question: have our devices led us astray?

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Chapter 2
The Technological Paradigm

Our relationship to the world is certainly mediated by our faith in the technological paradigm. As a starting point, we may say along with Albert Borgmann that this paradigm is “the characteristic way in which we today take up with the world.... It reigns as common sense, as the obvious way of doing things which requires no discussion and, more important, is not accessible to discussion.”\(^{50}\) In general, this way of interacting with reality has gone uncriticized because it is hailed as “good-sense,” obvious, and reasonable. This pattern of “good-sense” is most evident in the technological devices that saturate our day-to-day lives. Few would argue, especially in the West, that we now encounter the world apart from these modern mediators. And for good reason, most would argue, because they release us from the unpredictability and demands of nature and culture by rendering the world in goods that are instantaneous, ubiquitous, safe, and easy to acquire.\(^{51}\)

This pattern is everywhere if we take the time to be attentive to it. At present, I’m working in the local café just down the street from where I live. Looking up I notice the fellow sitting beside me. He is blazing through his Instagram feed with the characteristic upward motion of his right thumb, sliding from the bottom to the top of his smartphone’s screen, interspersing a quick double tap to “like” photos that win his approval. As he comes across 541 Eatery and Exchange’s newest post, I watch his thumb cease. A photo of a bright, creamy, and beautifully filtered blueberry cheesecake has grabbed his attention. His conversation with the woman across from him is clear to me, and I can imagine the photo he speaks of. This photo is typical of most social media posts, carefully blurring the lines between personal expression and social advertising, between social capital and fiscal capital. But the state of this blurred boundary isn’t what concerns me at this moment. What does is the image in my neighbour’s hand, how it has grabbed his attention in such an aggressive, directed, glamorous, and individual way.

\(^{50}\) Albert Borgmann, *Technology and The Character of Contemporary Life*, (Chicago, MI: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 35.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 41.
Although such filtered spectacles are quite regular these days, this particular instance is so poignant because we are in the very café that is showcasing the cheesecake! In fact, I can see the real thing sitting in the glass display from where I’m seated, and I presume he can too. Nevertheless, it is the imaged cheesecake, the hyperreal picture, which caught his attention first. In this moment reality—the blueberry cheesecake—is mediated by the device-sustained-image in his hand, which effectively bypassed both his and the cheesecake’s particular emplacement in 541. Its mediation eliminated the opportunity for him to encounter the real thing within the integrated place that is 541, not more than five feet from our corner of the café. Through this enhanced Instagram image, the technological pattern has relegated the real to a secondary position. What is primary is a contextless image hyped for individual consumption. But what is more telling than my experience and interpretation of this mediation is what he said after praising the beauty of this picture. Just as he was getting up to purchase the cheesecake—which at this point is nothing but an enhanced, hyperreal, cheesecake-image—he said with an air of light-hearted cynicism, “I guess this is the way it is now.”

It’s true: our relationship to the world is mediated through our faith in the technological paradigm, and yet my fellow patron is apprehensive about the situation. Though it is all sensible, reasonable, and obvious there is hesitancy as we keep faith with this modern paradigm in our postmodern context.

It is important to stress my use of the word faith. I use faith because the technological paradigm, through its commodity producing devices, has gained our trust, fidelity, and imagination as the true way of taking up with the world. What do I mean by a paradigm gaining our trust, fidelity, or guiding our imagination?

Consider for a moment two distinct ways of engaging with the devices of this paradigm. The first is characteristically modern, and the second is characteristically postmodern. A technological device in the hands of a modern is an object to be manipulated; it is a means to an end, or the tool to bring in the good life by more abstract and precise methods of manipulating reality. The modern is master and the technological device, whatever it may be, is servant. In contrast, this side of the postmodern turn, we now relate to our technology without such hubris. In the postmodern era, the leaven of modernity has
effectively consumed itself, leaving us to cling to our devices, and through them, the technological paradigm, in faith.

In other words, this postmodern distinction has exchanged control for faith. We now keep faith with the technological in the face of nagging doubt, hoping that the good life will reveal itself to us through the consumption of its commodities. This distinction, I will later argue, may best be articulated as a commitment to *hypermodernism*, rather than postmodernism, for it reveals our inability to fully embrace the tenets of a postmodern reality.

In my estimation, we are not confident in our use of technology so much as we cooperate with it; we are yoked to it. While mastery suggests a tool in the hand of reason, a posture in line with the aggressive realism and universalism of the modern era, cooperation indicates a shift to a more embodied commitment, an uneven yoking in which humanity is often led by its own devices.

Let us return to the café. Is not the yoke of the technological at the heart of my fellow’s—let's call him Emmett—cynical remark? I think so. Emmett, like most of us, is certainly not in control of his devices; this is obvious in his words. Although individualistic, the relationship I observed between him and the mediating image lacks the characteristics of modernity. He did not exclaim: “At long last! This is the way it is now!” Far from it! Instead, he was skeptical and uneasy about the influence his device had on him. Discomfort revealed itself when the hyperreal image confronted him before he had a chance to encounter the real.

Yet is trust, or fidelity, a more appropriate description of Emmett’s relationship with the technological paradigm *vis-à-vis* his device? Does Emmett really “have faith” in his technology? Well, it depends on how you understand faith.

If faith is simply a movement of the mind, then no, the technological paradigm, *vis-à-vis* his device, has not gained his faith because his words betray a critical engagement with his technology. He is aware of the commoditization of social media, and the hyperreal cheesecake that is more stimulating than the real. His tone is a judgment on the mediation of this image. On the other hand, if faith is embodied, a movement of the heart, which orients one's life in the world and directs one's actions, then yes, regardless of his cracked smile, Emmett does keep faith with the technological imperative. As it turned out, with cheesecake
in hand, Emmett returned to his seat and his thumb resumed its upward service. Faith was certainly kept.

Now, let it be known, I’m not some clean observer who watches Emmett from a place of sterility. This is all being typed out on a laptop after all, possibly the device that sent the computer into the world with its portability; the apostle of modern technology as it were. No, I’m immersed in the high water of technological devices and their directing paradigm as much as he is. To play off David Foster Wallace: this is hyperreal water and we are both swimming (or drowning) in it. And the devices of modern technology are not all fraught with danger either—please allow me some pathetic license—but our commitment to their world-forming paradigm is. I know it, and Emmett’s words tell me he knows it too. We must take seriously this paradigm and its affect on our relation to the world.

My experience at 541 not only demonstrates the ambiguity of our postmodern relationship to modern technology, but more importantly, it reveals our faith in the technological paradigm, which founds it. I’ve become convinced that this faith smacks of idolatry insofar as our commitment to hypermodern devices abstracts us from encountering a relationally integrated world. Therefore, in this second chapter I intend to explicate our hypermodern faith in the technological paradigm so as to establish grounds upon which this imperative may be critiqued as idolatry. I will begin by providing a brief explanation of modernity as an era characterized by aggressive realism, methodical universalism, and secular individualism (4). I will then bring the technological paradigm into focus as the guiding endeavour of modernity, exchanging contextual—or focal—things, practices, and events for devices of hidden machinery and available commodity (5). Then I will appeal to the postmodern turn (6) and explicate how this critique has altered the technological paradigm, both our relationship to it and how it is manifested in our current hypermodern context (7). My aim in this essay is not set on the total abandonment of modern technology, or nostalgic recovery of a bygone time, but to demonstrate how the technological imperative is characterized by the distancing of humanity from contextual, and thus relational, reality.

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52 Cf., David Foster Wallace, *This is Water*, (New York: Little, Brown, 2009).
To this end I will first attend to the guiding tenets of modernity and the social imaginary that engenders them.

4 Modernity: Aggressive Realism, Methodical Universalism, and Secular Individualism

If we hope to understand the technological paradigm we must first acquaint ourselves with the modern era in which it took root. Looking back, we might understand the modern epoch as an expansive landscape, which is identified by its particular features. By appealing to Borgmann’s three-fold analysis of aggressive realism (4.1), methodical universalism (4.2), and secular individualism (4.3), I intend to point out these features with the hopes of contouring modernity, and the social imaginary that it engendered. As a quick clarification, which I will attend to later in this chapter, there is much debate and disorientation concerning our current location in this landscape. In our landscape metaphor, it is likely that we’re not looking back from a bordering mountaintop, but from around a campfire on the forest floor; we’re looking back in our memory as it were. We’re telling stories, and recounting our journey in an attempt to discern our location in the history of the West. Our sight, therefore, is not that of mountaintop clarity: did we cross the postmodern divide, are we still in modernity, or are we in the borderlands of late-modernity (see 7.1)?

For now, it is important to keep in mind how enormous the task of mapping an era is, especially when looking back from a place of disorientation. Borgmann’s analysis can help us to discern the clearest features within the modern landscape and help us understand how we came to trust in the technological paradigm.

Modernity as an epoch asserted itself against the locally bound, cosmically centered, and divinely constituted social imaginary of the medieval era. We might say that these three particularities were surpassed by the events credited to Columbus, Copernicus, and Luther respectively. According to Borgmann, these three events cleared the ground for the modern era, essentially making way for thinkers such as Francis Bacon, René Descartes, and John

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53 Cf. J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, 37-42.
Locke to found modernism through the domination of nature, the primacy of method, and the sovereignty of the individual. These three thinkers, Borgmann asserts, “derived much energy from their indictment of medieval disorder, the duress of daily life, the deadwood of tradition, and the oppression of hierarchy and community.”\textsuperscript{54} Overcoming the disorder and duress of human life motivated and helped to form the first discernable characteristic of the modern landscape.

4.1 Aggressive Realism and the Domination of Nature

Aggressive realism is the first characteristic explicated in Borgmann’s analysis of modernism. Troubled by the harsh reality of human life, Bacon dreamed of a world in which humans would be victorious over nature through scientific rigor. In Borgmann’s words, “Bacon not only taught modernity to stand up to the ancient scourges of humanity; he also identified the New World discovered by Columbus as an adversary that had to be brought to its knees.”\textsuperscript{55} Bacon’s program of modern research and technology, therefore, is aptly referred to as “aggressive realism” since it approaches the world as \textit{real} and discernable through the forceful application of the scientific method. Ultimately, this is an epistemology that says knowledge is obtained through a violent relationship with the object of study.

Indeed it would be foolish to completely dismiss Bacon’s adversarial depiction of nature. Even with our ultralight tents, synthetic sleeping bags, collapsible ISOPRO camp stoves, and polyester microfleece base layers, weeklong torrential downpours in the wilderness of northern Ontario can be extremely demanding. In such an instance we rightly speak of the tent “protecting” us from the lashing rain. But what is important to observe is the radical distinction that begins to take shape between humanity and nature in Bacon’s project. We can still sense this distinction today in the parlance of well-meaning environmentalists who speak of “saving the environment.” According to Berry, when “the concept of country, homeland, [or] dwelling place becomes simplified as ‘the environment’—that is, what

\textsuperscript{54} Albert Borgmann, \textit{Crossing the Postmodern Divide}, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago, 1992), 23.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
surrounds us…we have already made a profound division between it and ourselves.”

According to Berry’s keen critique, we might say that our contemporary environmental movements are founded upon the same aggressive realism which created the problem in the first place: they both radically abstract humanity from their integral place in the world.

The aggressive domination of nature characteristic of modernism is apparent in the construction of the transcontinental railroad and highway system. Borgmann’s words, although directed at America’s railroad system, can be equally applied to our continued extension of highways. He states,

> The aggressive attitude toward reality that propelled this conquest was so deeply entrenched that historians have described its advance as an obvious necessity, characterizing its violent progress as the sweetly reasonable demand for a transportation system that was ‘fast, cheap, and dependable,’ ‘year round in regularity, safe’ and ‘cheap, overland and unlimited in route,’ providing ‘fast, all-weather transportation’ and ‘safe, regular, reliable movement of goods and passengers.’

This aggressive attitude toward reality, Borgmann rightly recounts in the devastation of First Nation’s ancestral land, the forced labor of immigrants, the communal ruin of entrepreneurial greed, the defiant spanning (or filling) of valleys, and the reshaping of mountains through the use of dynamite. According to Borgmann, “Nothing could stand in the way of the aggressive advance of the railroad, not the claims of the Native Americans, nor the resistance of nature, nor the dissoluteness and the distress of humans.”

This impatience and disregard for reality at large can also be observed in the extension of Southern Ontario’s 407 highway series, a two-stage project to connect Brock road in Pickering to highway 35/115 in Clarington. Viewed from aerial photographs, the land for this eight-lane highway looks as if it was cleared by an enormous finger, dragged lazily through farm fields and neighborhoods alike. Larger circular scars run out from the main “trunk” indicating where on and off ramps will connect the new highway to preexisting roads. Viewed from the ground, massive earthworks tower above highway level to make gradual gradients for access to overpasses and piles of uprooted trees dot the main

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56 Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 22.
57 Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, 32.
construction path waiting to be chipped. Whether we’re talking about railroad or highway expansion, both instances of large-scale construction are founded on Bacon’s subjection of nature through the forceful application of the scientific method.

Of course, railways and highway systems have allowed us to move about in the world, which most, including myself, would affirm to be a good thing. In my estimation, mobility chiefly allows us to interact with places and communities foreign to us. Without mobility, hospitality would be seriously limited or—depending on your understanding of hospitality—outright impossible. Yet, as far as I can see, the extent to which our current mobility has allowed such hospitality is in want. It is important to note the basic beliefs that founded these transportation projects. Again, Berry is helpful for teasing out these foundations. According to Berry, our aggressive posture toward nature is revealed in our favoring of roads over paths. A path is formed around habitual passage through a particular place. It meanders through a known and familiar landscape, obeying its natural contours. When I walk a path I’m drawn into an embodied relationship with the land under my feet. There is intimacy as I travel along its contour. In contrast, resistance, haste, destruction of topography, and abstraction characterize roads. In regards to the tendency toward abstraction, Berry rightly claims, that roads “wish to avoid contact with the landscape; it seeks so far as possible to go over the country, rather than through it…its tendency is to translate place into space in order to traverse it with the least effort.” The aggressive distancing that roads engender is but another way we can sense the legacy of modernism.

With the help of Borgmann and Berry, we have become sensitive to the character of aggressive realism and its realization in the scientific method, which manipulates reality as an isolated object. As we have seen, both railroad and highway systems are formed around this particular manifestation of modernity, unconcerned at best and outright violent at worst toward contextual reality, be it nature or human community. The second characteristic of modernism that Borgmann considers will help us understand the method by which humanity secured a place over and against nature.

59 Ibid., 12 [his emphasis].
4.2 Methodical Universalism and the Triumph of Procedure

Methodical universalism is the second characteristic explicated in Borgmann’s analysis of modernism. This second analysis makes an important distinction between the substantive world and the procedure, which makes that world tenable. To this end, Descartes labored to find a universal upon which to found the scientific method, and ultimately bring assurance to modernity’s control over nature. In Borgmann’s words, Descartes “urged that without a powerful procedure, substantive accomplishments would be forever dubious and deficient; given a cogent procedure, however, any substantive result could be obtained easily and assuredly.”

It was Descartes who announced, *cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). For Descartes, this principle appeared to be an assured foundation, reached by the relentless removal of all trappings of tradition, religion, society, and even his own senses. This procedure has come to be known as methodological universalism. According to Descartes, “I soon noticed that while I thus wished to think everything false, it was necessarily true that I who thought so was something...I could safely accept it as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.”

Through the method of doubt, Descartes secured reason as the universal arbiter of reality, “the true warrant,” according to Borgmann’s analysis, and in doing so justified and guaranteed the scientific method’s bifurcation of reality into human subject and nature as studied object.

Borgmann perceptively senses this methodical universalism at work in the structure and direction of the modern corporation. He begins by articulating the background of this establishment, relating the project of aggressive realism and the stability of methodical universalism. It is helpful to consider his thought at length:

In industry, Cartesian order emerged implicitly to fill the need for inclusive structures. This need arose from the magnitude and power of the Baconian efforts, which could no longer be contained by communal and traditional understandings. Resources were too precarious, machinery too expensive, production too abundant, transportation too extended, markets too fickle to be guided by intuitive

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60 Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, 24.
Such an assessment may at first be unclear: how does the philosophy of Descartes reveal itself in an organized structure such as the modern corporation? Can something so seemingly abstract as methodical universalism have real consequence in the corporate world? To clarify this connection Borgmann articulates the four rules of the Cartesian method. The first is abstraction. To secure a foundation of assurance one must remove oneself from biases, and the object under question from all contexts. The second rule is dissection. The problem at hand must be broken down into its simplest parts, identified, and compartmentalized as such. The third is reconstruction. A new structure must be formed from the identifiable parts, from simple to complex. And lastly, the fourth rule is inclusivity. Inclusiveness allows the new procedure to be controlled by an ever-reaching extension. In other words, inclusivity allows the universal method to contain reality as a whole.

Bringing these four rules to bear upon the modern corporation, Borgmann’s analysis is impressive. In regards to the first rule, for the sake of the corporation, one must remove oneself from unified, familiar, personal and familial bonds. In the corporate world, one is abstracted from the home and secluded in an office to attend to the work of the corporation. In accordance with the second rule, corporate structure dissects a unified practice into several parts such as legal counsel, treasurer, comptroller, purchasing agent, engineer, etc. Conceptual compartmentalization also takes place by rendering analytical procedures in charts, graphs, accounts, ledgers, and files. History is no longer told through stories but through data. The third rule asserts itself in a reconstructed corporate hierarchy where CEOs are at the peak as superior and janitors, to make a stark point, are on their hands and knees scrubbing toilets as subordinates. In this hierarchy, as it is with Descartes method, rational organization expands out from the apex. Lastly, the fourth rule is observed in the sprawling, inclusivity of the corporate structure. In this regard, “competition,” claims Borgmann, “[is] met horizontally through merger or acquisition [and] uncertainty of resources…through the

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63 Ibid., 35.
64 Cf., Ibid., 35-36.
inclusion of raw materials and supplier firms.”"65 In addition, long-range planning and the virtual personage of the corporation have efficiently overcome death itself for the corporation.

Now, as with our analysis of railroads and highways, we are attempting to tease out the distinctly modern character of the corporation, how it is that methodological universalism, in particular, founds its structure and direction. To this end, we may further sense this connection in the increasingly corporate structuring of agribusiness. Because of their increasing size, industrial farms are no longer attached to the household. This abstraction is reaching full maturity in the distancing of a farmer from animal and field. For example, those who operate large-scale milking “outfits” do so at a distance, from behind the computer of an automated milker. In such a world, herd familiarity is no longer needed since a computer will do it for you in the form of data: feeding times, pedigree, calving history, projections for milk production, etc. Such a specialized farm for milk production also reveals the dissection of agribusiness. It is no longer possible, according to the structure and direction of agribusiness, for farmers to tend a diversified farm. In my estimation, there is no better example of this partitioning then the massive fields of GMO soybeans planted each year in Central Ontario. This cash cropping model not only adheres to modern dissection through the establishment of large monocultures, it also perfects it at the generic level, fashioning seeds as abstract as points on a graph, which are then inserted into a field that might as well be a matrix for plotting fluctuations in the economy. Moving on to the third rule, the guide of rational reconstruction, as in all corporate models, has certainly influenced our current agricultural practices. Considering again the example of GMO soybeans, we will correctly locate “the specialist” as superior to the subordinate farmer. In this hierarchy, the specialist instructs the farmer to tend according to the scientific findings of the rational mind.66 And finally, agribusiness is characterized by its inclusivity. As the saying goes in my hometown of Elmvale, ON: “Get big or get out.” Modern agriculture, like the modern corporation, seeks unified control through universal inclusivity. Independent farms and their

65 Ibid., 36.
idiosyncratic farmers cannot be counted on to produce the commodity of consumables with any regularity or efficiency, thus they are considered collateral damage in the forward expansion of industrial agriculture.

According to Borgmann, methodical universalism assured the tenability of the scientific method. This assurance was found in the autonomy of the rational mind. By considering the four guiding rules of Descartes’ method, this modern characteristic can be sensed in the structure and direction of both the corporate and agribusiness models. Borgmann’s third and final analysis is directed at modernity’s emphasis on the individual.

### 4.3 Secular Individualism, Rugged and Commodious

If Bacon declared war on the natural world, and Descartes assured its victory by reason, then Locke situated that reason within the individual. In this way, Borgmann claims, “The autonomy of the single self [became] the new authority of last appeal.” Thus, Locke’s project was to bind the commonwealth of a society around the autonomous individual, a bond once assured by divinity and monarchy. What would cause an individual to seek the commonwealth? To this question, “Locke,” claims Borgmann, “appeals to a broadly conceived power whose vagueness is apparent from the variety of its names: state of nature, law of nature, law of reason.” In other words, the rational individual would work toward the commonwealth because the propriety of such a cause, through reason, is self-evident.

Although secular individualism is deeply ambiguous as a political theory, its emphasis on the individual complements the tenets of aggressive realism and methodical universalism. Through the enterprise of individuals, traditional structures and natural impediments are eliminated and exchanged for machinery and procedure in order that individuals may reap the beneficial fruits. Thus the individual, as either entrepreneur or beneficiary, is more fully removed from the burden and obligation of a relational reality as the modern project is realized. Borgmann uses this distinction between entrepreneur and beneficiary to articulate the way in which secular individualism manifested itself in the

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68 Ibid., 38.
modern era. His is a distinction between “rugged individual” as entrepreneur and “commodious individual” as beneficiary.

Rugged individuals, in Borgmann’s words, are those who, “facing up to a wild continent, were provoked to superhuman feats of ingenuity and endurance.” Settlers, pioneers, explorers, railroad engineers and labourers all embodied the ethos of this form of individualism. Rugged individuals penetrated the wilderness of the new world, vigorously spreading the seed of enlightenment against the perceived chaos of nature and First Nation culture. According to Borgmann, this rugged individualism can still be detected in the private sectors of our modern economy. In his words, “the private sector seems to reward prodigiously ‘the fancy or covetousness of the quarrelsome and contentious.’” Thus, we might say that the cowboys of the Wild West now ride the bull of Wall Street. Though their forms of life appear radically different, both Butch Cassidy and Henry Paulson are cowboys paradigmatic of rugged individualism.

Commodious individualism is the yield sown by rugged individuals. In Borgmann’s words, it is “the unencumbered enjoyment of consumption goods or commodities.” In this second form, Borgmann states, “the children of rugged individuals have inherited commodious freedom in the ways they prefer to shape their private lives—above all the freedom to move about, nearly at will.” For commodious individuals, freedom from relational obligation is inherited through the consumption of available commodity. They live commodiously because they live off the benefit of commodity. According to Borgmann’s definition, we might say that a commodious individual is a spacious consumer who seeks a freedom apart from the inconvenience of relational integration by devouring a world reduced to commodity.

The inheritance of convenience was meant to make freedom readily available. However it is through commodious individualism that we begin to see the ambiguity of technology as a means for liberation. As we will consider later in this chapter (see 5.2),

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69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 46.
71 Ibid., 43.
72 Ibid., 39.
technology has allowed such rampant individualism that we now live a life split between public and private life. The public realm becomes an aggregate of individuals who participate solely for the end of leisure and consumption in the private realm. A sort of capitalistic captivity ensues with great consumption but less than impressive commodiousness. Indeed there is a deep ambivalence in the liberation wrought by a dichotomy that relies on frenetic workweeks to feed weekends of opulent consumption.

This second distinction in secular individualism may best capture how the technological paradigm manifested itself to Emmett at 541, albeit as hyperreal in our current milieu. That is, Emmett’s technology produced a commodity that was hyperreal in the characteristic of hypermodernism. For now, it is important to understand how this analysis of secular individualism, methodical universalism, and aggressive realism can help us identify the contours of modernity and the social imaginary it engenders. This analysis has also revealed the ambiguity of our current era, a consideration we will return to later. Now that we have finished looking back over the landscape of modernity, we will turn our attention to the technological paradigm, a pattern that adheres to the tenets of modernity by exchanging contextual things for devices of hidden machinery and available commodity.

5 Modernism, Technology, and the Device Paradigm

How the development of modern technology relates to modernity is a contested matter. Some would relegate technological advancements to a secondary position of importance. As a consequence of progress, modern technology is an offspring of enlightened understanding. It is a powerful yet value-neutral tool for the realization of cultural and political goals. Such relegation is typified by the modern control of technological devices, which we distinguished from postmodern commitment early in this essay. Those who hold to this assumption focus on the instrumentality of technology, believing that technological advances are only practical corollaries of intellectual and cultural liberation.

Although there is warrant for a theory of technology as instrument—most certainly in its premodern vestiges—this assumption assumes that modern devices are subservient to an enlightened people and that they have no ability to engender reality. In other words, it is not the tool that crafts the world, but the craftswoman. Those who hold to this theory of instrumentality are incredulous, or completely ignorant of the fact that modern technology
may be the very manifestation of modern ends more guiding than human reason. This approach to technology, in contrast, would consider the technological as a way of life, setting cultural and political goals and guiding the formation of tools and toolmakers alike. From this perspective, modern technology engenders reality vis-à-vis the technological paradigm. Technology, then, is no longer a secondary by-product of modern liberation but is rightly identified as the embodiment of the technological paradigm.

This paradigmatic approach to modern technology is central to Borgmann’s argument in, *Technology and the Character of the Contemporary Life*. In this essay he explains that “technology has become the decisive current in the stream of modern history…it is the promise…that has both fueled and disguised the gigantic transformative endeavors that have given our time its character.” For Borgmann, modern technology is not a secondary servant, but the world-forming embodiment of modernity; it is the hands and feet of a history and philosophy at work in reality. Thus, we may say that the technological paradigm, through its manifest technological devices, is the discernable pattern for taking up with the world which both directs and conceals our endeavors of contextual abstraction.

With the help of Borgmann’s argument, my aim is twofold. On the one hand, I hope to demonstrate, and affirm, how the pursuit of technology laboured to liberate people from such ills as illiteracy, starvation, and disease (5.1), while at the same time reveal how this pursuit, has left a wake of ambiguity and doubt in the mature industrialized societies (5.2). Explicating this two-fold intention demands that we say: “Yes, modern technology is a tool to be used. But make no mistake it is a tool formed by the technological imperative and therefore is not value-neutral.” Although the modern man—a term I use intentionally—may have created subservient machines, both they and their machines were—and continue to be—subservient to a broader paradigm at work, in reality, one that exchanges an integrated world for devices of concealed machinery and available commodity (5.3). To clear the ground for this argument, I will first consider the development of modern technology against our earlier analysis of modernity.

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5.1 Subservient Technology as a Consequence of Modern Liberation

Our purpose here is to give expression to the instrumental theory of technology. This theory at first appears to be the natural corollary of modern liberation in that, we, through the technologies we use, are enabled to further the efforts of aggressive realism, methodical universalism, and secular individualism.

It is clear that modern technology goes hand in hand with Bacon’s project characterized by aggressive realism. Although the scientific method in Bacon’s time had yet to produce the substantial technological yield characteristic of the industrial revolution, his posture toward reality necessitated its arrival. Indeed, according to Borgmann, “Bacon’s New Atlantis represents the most influential picture of the liberated and enriched life in a society based on science and technology.” Through, New Atlantis, we can see how modernity looked to the liberation afforded by modern technology, the weapon with which to wage war against the chaos of nature. The hope of modern technology, according to Borgmann, was “from the beginning connected with the aim of liberating humanity from disease, hunger, and toil, and enriching life with learning, art, and athletics.” The technological fruits of the scientific method, so Bacon prophesied, would bring about liberty and prosperity for humanity.

As we discovered, Bacon’s scientific method was assured by Descartes’ rational foundation. Therefore we could rightly say that the archimedean point of Cartesian universalism captains the vessel of modern technology. It appears obvious then that human rationality would guide the tool of technology toward the cultural and political goal of increasingly modern perfection. Furthermore, modern technology would accomplish these tasks by perfecting the Cartesian method and its four rules of abstraction, dissection, reconstruction, and inclusivity. From this perspective, modern individuals would further their own liberation through an ever-expanding proficiency with technology.

74 Ibid., 36.
75 Ibid.
Finally, modern technology ultimately rests in the hands of the individual. As we noted above, secular individualism manifests itself in rugged and commodious individuals. The latter designation is the ultimate accomplishment of modern technology. As Borgmann rightly notes, “Universal consumption of commodities is the fulfillment of the promise of technology.”\textsuperscript{76} Such individualized consumption, so the theory went, would finally be our liberation from the demands of a premodern world.

It is within this last distinction that the instrumentality of technology becomes deeply ambiguous and troubling since what was once promised to overcome the ills of famine, disease, and misery now buries the individual in commodities of dubious ends. It is to this ambiguity that we now turn our attention.

5.2 Ambiguity in the Liberating Promise of Technology

While the use of modern technology has liberated us from the toil and misery of premodern life, its abiding promise is anything but clear in our highly individualized world. Borgmann helpfully focuses the problem when he claims, “the initial genuine feats of liberation appear to be continuous with the procurement of frivolous goods.”\textsuperscript{77} This continuity betrays a serious problem, which Borgmann, as we will see, relentlessly exploits. For now, in order to tease out his point, we could restate the problem as a question: Is modern technology really in the hands of rational and liberated individuals if they are reduced to a commodified isolation? This unforeseen, and desperately ironic, consequence to modernity’s so-called control of technology is best captured by the individual who lives a life split into public and private realms of labour and leisure.

Consider the well-worn complaint: “I’m just working for the weekend.” We might say that this statement, and the multitude like it, is typical of individuals caught in the tension of a life lived between public and private realms. Such folks use the public realm as a means to procure goods for consumption in the private realm. This dichotomy has surely resulted from the cancerous growth of technological liberation in an already liberated society.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 52.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 39.
Through the mediation of modern technology, we now engage the world as available, instantaneous, ubiquitous, safe, and abstract commodity, as long as we have the funds to acquire them. Take a young man cutting his teeth in the business world, for example. Late one Wednesday night he rushes to the supermarket after work to grab a couple frozen dinners. Last night was Wendy’s and he’d rather go for the home cooked feel tonight—he can’t remember the last time he sat around a table to share a meal with friends or family, and he’s a little homesick. After heating up the plastic packages in the microwave he throws their contents back while standing in his small bachelor-kitchenette; it’s nearly 11:30 pm after all and he needs to be up and out the door by 6:00 am. He rubs his face as he leans up against the fridge. “Just two more sleeps till I’m in sunny Cancún,” he thinks to himself, “I’m going to finally live it up.” Here is but one well-known example of the commodious individual worn out in the divide between public and private life. In this tension, reality is no longer limited, seasonal, unified, contextual, and relational, but is reduced to commodity tailored to the individual.

This analysis only furthers Borgmann’s critique since the lives of those who live for the private realm do not resemble the utopian fulfillment once evangelized by Bacon and Descartes. No, far from it! For these commodious individuals, divided by lifeless droning and hyperactive holiday escapades with tourist destinations, modern technology has enabled a movement further from a life of embodied engagement. A culture—if you can call it that—of such individuals is rightly identified as a consumerist culture. For this culture, liberation has turned gluttonous and there is nothing that cannot be acquired and consumed by technological feats.

Let us return to Borgmann’s critique. According to him, the promise of modern technology as a liberating tool for the realization of human engagement is deeply ambiguous in our late-modern context of commodious individuals. In this regard, it would appear that the prophets of early modernity mistook prophecy for future telling; their utopian dreams have been misinterpreted, and modern technology is certainly not servant to the rational mind.

This is not to say that our modern technology is bad de facto, but that it is engendered by a concealed pattern not under our control. Thus, Borgmann’s critique is not directed at the complete denial of modern technology; he is not throwing the proverbial baby out with the
bathwater. What his critique is doing, however, is criticizing those who tote technology as a value-neutral tool to be controlled by reason. This is simply not tenable in our society of commodious individuals, who, for example, are trapped in the tension of public-private life.

To return to our opening quandary, we must say that modern technology is intimately connected to modernity. This connection has created the availability of mere means, in the form of technological devices, divorced from natural and cultural ends. The technological advancement of microwave dinners, for example, has taken a full embodied meal—an incredibly rich, contextual, relational, spiritual, and biological practice—and reduced it to a mere commodity for individual consumption. It is because of this divorce, and others like it, that Borgmann rightly claims: “It is an equivocation to speak indifferently of tools in a modern and in a pretechnological setting. A means in a traditional culture is never mere but always inextricably woven into a context of ends.” 78 It is this very contention with modern technology as mere means that causes Borgmann to question its ends. The question, to manipulate one of his earlier claims, is: what is “the gigantic transformative (end)eavor that [has] given our time its character.” 79 This endeavour, he submits, can be understood as the technological paradigm, a world-engendering pattern that shapes contextual reality, observable in technological devices that make singular commodities available through abstract mechanizations. As our explication of this paradigm will demonstrate, technology is not simply a value-neutral tool to be used, as the instrumentalists would propose, but is the great endeavour of the modernity, forming technology and technician alike.

5.3 The Device Paradigm, Concealed Machinery and Available Commodity

We have arrived at the heart of the matter for Borgmann, his point of contention concerning the current way in which we take up with the world. Having situated modernity’s supposed control over technology vis-à-vis the ambiguity in technologically enriched post-industrial society, we must now consider the shape of the technological paradigm, what

78 Ibid., 10.
79 Ibid., 35.
Borgmann considers to be the guiding end of modernity. This pattern, as we have concluded, engenders reality in its totality.

In considering this paradigm, we must recall that our technological way of life becomes most tangible and evident in the devices that permeate our day-to-day lives. Devices, like the one held in the hand of Emmett, allow us to study the philosophical theory that has given rise to it. Therefore, our analysis of the technological paradigm must take place through what Borgmann calls the device paradigm. As we make this analysis it is important to keep in mind that the device paradigm is not identical to the technological paradigm, but that it is a clear and observable manifestation of it. That is, the way in which individual devices distil contextual reality into an available and contextless commodity is one manifestation of the technological paradigm’s endeavor to distance humanity from contextual reality.

To this end of analysis, let’s begin with a concise statement, a trail map of sorts, for elucidating the device paradigm in everyday world. According to Borgmann, “Devices…dissolve the coherent and engaging character of the pretechnological world of things. In a device, the relatedness of the world is replaced by a machinery, but the machinery is concealed, and the commodities, which are made available by a device, are enjoyed without the encumbrance of or the engagement with a context.” We might draw out three key terms from this succinct definition to grasp how devices exchange contextually related reality for available commodity.

5.3.1 World of things

First, the device paradigm must be realized within a coherent world of things. Borgmann’s language of “things” may appear unhelpfully vague and indistinct at first glance, but there are at least two explanations for his choice of words. Firstly, recall that the character of the premodern world was inherently integrated. As we said above, things, such as technological tools, were inextricably woven into a context of cultural and natural ends. By referring to reality as a coherent world of things, Borgmann has emphasized the relational

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80 Ibid., 47 [my emphasis].
coherence that individual things are inextricably woven into. Secondly, but built into the first explanation, an individual thing is, in essence, indistinct and vague outside its relational coherence. Thus, it is impossible to abstract a *thing* from its world without compromising its integrity and when we do so in an analytic way, as we are about to do, we honour this reality by rightly naming it a *thing*.

A thing loses its integrity when abstracted because the margin that distinguishes it as a thing is highly integrated into a coherent world of things. This margin of high integration allows Borgmann to move with relative ease between speaking about a “focal thing,” a “focal event,” or a “focal practice.” Although these three divisions can be understood intuitively, differentiating things with some clarity, distinction, and definition, they are only meaningful within the intersectionality of their respective margins, the relationships which bring a particular thing, event, or practice into focus. Since we have already mentioned the commodity made available by microwave dinners, let’s take a moment and consider the focal event of the evening meal and the integrated margin that focuses it. I will return to a further explication of focal things, events, and practices in the final chapter of this essay (see 9.2), but for now, a brief example is necessary to give definition to a thing and its subsequent commodification through mechanization.

A meal is a focal event in a *world of things*. Borgmann is right to say that “The great meal of the day, be it at noon or in the evening, is a focal event *par excellence*.“81 Those who finish the last crumbs and coffee dregs of an evening meal know this intuitively and have a deep appreciation for what it has offered its participants. There is a deep pleasure in those who sit quietly in the last light of an evening meal. In that moment there is a definition and clarity that goes beyond the temporal distinctions of place and time, say in the kitchen between the hours of 6:00 pm and 8:00 pm. When we allow a meal to encounter us like this, as one distinguished by its context and integrated margin, we can begin to articulate the depth of such a focal event.

First, consider the table. The one in our kitchen calls forth the past in that I inherited it from my great-grandparents, Mamie and Edgerton McLean. Thus, when we share a meal

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81 Ibid., 204.
we do so connected to family, history, and tradition. In the same way, consider the plates, cups, knives, and serving dishes. Whose were they, who made them, or what name do they bear? Next up is the food. Where did it come from? Berry is right when he says, “A significant part of the pleasure of eating is in one’s accurate consciousness of the lives and the world from which food comes.”

Perhaps on this particular night, a roast was cooked that connects us to dear friends, farmers who raised and tended to the needs of the animal when it was on pasture. But who cooked? Was it the combined effort of the household, or was it a gift made by the hands of a few? What recipe was used and from whom did it come? Whose name was evoked at its beginning and whose job was it to get the coffee perking at its end? Most importantly, for someone like myself, who’s washing and who’s drying? Who will take care of concluding the meal in clean up as everyone else goes about their night? The focal event of an evening meal stretches out in all directions, into its integrated margin, and roots itself in contextual and inherently relational reality. The task of designating beginnings and endings, with any sort of systematic definition such as this, may ultimately be unhelpful in an event that is best felt intuitively through participation. Nevertheless, the focal event of an evening meal may help us to get a handle on the notion of a thing.

Our first impression of Borgmann’s terminology may be the best indication of how deep the modern imagination runs in us. We have desired precise, distinct, and abstract categories of reality. Instead, Borgmann has intuitively articulated a coherent world where “focal things,” “focal events,” and “focal practices” cohere in a highly relational, contextual, and integrated reality. According to Borgmann, “A thing…is inseparable from its context…and from our commerce with its world…In calling forth a manifold engagement, a thing necessarily provides more than one commodity.” As we saw with the example of an evening meal, it is impossible to distil a focal event down to one aspect of value, one abstract aspect made available for individual consumption.

Nevertheless, this is the expressed distillation made by the device paradigm: to take from such contextual things, events, and practices a singular, not complex, value and make it

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82 Wendell Berry, “The Pleasure of Eating,” in *Bringing It to the Table*. (Berkeley, CA: Counter Point, 2009), 234.
83 Borgmann, *Technology and The Character of Contemporary Life*, 41.
available as a commodity for consumption. When a device disburdens the user from contextual reality it abstracts a singular value and presents it as commodity. The highly integrated context and margin that had once supported this value in a world of things are swapped out for mechanization, a life support of sorts, which is then concealed by greater advances in technology. “In the progress of technology,” so Borgmann claims, “the machinery of a device has…a tendency to become concealed or to shrink. Of all the physical properties of a device, those alone are crucial and prominent which constitute the commodity that the device procures.”84 Following our opening trail map statement, I will explicate these two aspects of the device paradigm, in turn, beginning with the concealment of technological machinery and ending with the availability of its commodity. Since devices provide us with a concrete manifestation of the technological paradigm I intend to use examples to aid in our understanding.

5.3.2 Device as concealed machinery

The device paradigm operates through the means of concealed mechanization. When placed into a world of things, this paradigm is used to construct devices of anonymity whereby the contextual integration of a thing is taken over by mechanization to disburden the user of contextual reality. Borgmann gives the example of a central heating unit as mechanization that, compared to a wood stove, makes “no demands on our skill, strength, or attention.”85 The woodstove is certainly a focal thing, according to Borgmann. In his words, it

was a focus, a hearth, a place that gathered the work and leisure of a family and gave the house a center…. It provided for the entire family a regular and bodily engagement with the rhythm of the seasons that was woven together of the threat of cold and the solace of warmth, the smell of wood smoke.86

The central heating system, in contrast, is a device that only produces heat. This heat evenly fills a house by means most of us know little about. The bulk of its machinery is hidden

84 Ibid., 42.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
down in the basement only to be serviced by an accredited service representative when it 
ceases to function; when we suddenly realize the house is no longer at “room temperature.”

As a device advances, like a central heating system, it increases in complexity and decreases 
in size. In both instances, the device perfects its disburdenment by lastly concealing its own 
burden from the presence of the user. We can begin to sense the race for concealment in our 
current devices of virtual simulation, but such devices will be considered later in this chapter 
(see 7.3). For now, consider one more example of how the device paradigm has worked to 
mechanize contextual reality.

The mechanization of the device paradigm not only furthers premodern 
technologies—like a woodstove—, but it has also affected the contextual reality of nature, 
culture, and social relations. Borgmann uses wine as an example, claiming, “There is…a 
fissure running through wine itself.”87 The machinery of the technological wine, when 
manipulated by this paradigm, is its very chemical makeup.88 By manipulating this chemical 
makeup, a batch of wine no longer needs contextual variables like weather, soil composition, 
or growing seasons. It can thus, if treated as concealed machinery, be nothing but the 
provider of an aggregate of certain predictable tastes and colours. Just like the central heating 
system, the machinery of wine becomes so complex that only scientists have the 
specialization to understand its composition and, as it contracts, the multitude of its 
traditional constituents are reduced to the bare essentials.

5.3.3 Device as available commodity

The concealed mechanization of a device produces a singular commodity, making it 
available regardless of contextual reality. In accordance with the technological imperative’s 
aim to free the individual from the constraints of nature, the ultimate end of a device is to 
render a specific good instantaneous, ubiquitous, safe, and easy. Although the mechanization 
of a device may change, its commodity remains relatively fixed. For example, although the 
outward appearance of the television has changed throughout the years, we still recognize the

87 Ibid., 49.
88 Cf., Ibid., 49.
commodity of entertainment that it produces. As Borgmann notes, “the commodity of a
device is ‘what a device is there for.’” In the case of a central heating system, the
commodity made available is heat. In the case of technological wine, the commodity is a
predictable taste and colour. Such commodities, unlike their once integrated values, are
contextless and thus vague in definition. But this ambiguity, when engaged through the
technological paradigm, is a desirable trait. Borgmann says that such a trait “is a mark of the
freely disposable character of commodities, of the absence of commitments a context would
exact, and of the possibility of combining commodities with few restraints.” Therefore, we
may say that the technological paradigm is perfected as the device paradigm matures its
control over a contextual reality.

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Whether mechanizations of the device paradigm touch focal things, events, or
practices, the professed goal of a technocratic world is individual consumption, universal in
its scope. According to Borgmann, “Universal consumption of commodities is the fulfillment
of the promise of technology.” But, as we have observed, this promise has secured a highly
ambivalent liberation. What was once considered a tool for enrichment, has now revealed
itself as the guiding pattern of reality in its totality.

Indeed, the enlightenment of modernity has dead-ended in a contextless reality of
technological devices for individual isolation. Arcade Fire has captured the disillusionment
of this modern problem in the following dystopian chorus:

Can we ever get away from the sprawl?
Living in the sprawl,
Dead shopping malls rise like mountains beyond mountains,
And there’s no end in sight,
I need the darkness someone please cut the lights.

89 Ibid., 42.
90 As we will consider (see 2.4), this commodity might be better identified as a commodious simulacrum.
91 Ibid., 54.
92 Ibid., 52.
93 Arcade Fire, “Sprawl II (Mountains Beyond Mountains),” from The Suburbs ©2010 Merge Records.
These lights, of course, have a double meaning. They are both the ever-vigilant guards of suburbia and the rational enlightenment of modernity. Both, according to these lyrics and our analysis of the technological paradigm, need to be cut.

We may regard these lyrics as a hinge for our current efforts, poignantly capturing the predicament wrought by the technological paradigm and articulating the desire to move beyond it. In this way, our analysis is about to swing from modern predicament to postmodern desires of recovery. This desire, and its dubious realization, will now occupy our attention. Our approach will loosely follow our earlier schema, beginning with a broad analysis of postmodernism so as to understand how the direction of the technological paradigm has adapted in our current hypermodern context.

6 The Postmodern Turn

The notion of movement in “the postmodern turn” captures the highly dynamic efforts of those coming after modern thought. We might say that the postmodern turn is both subsequent and polemic insofar as the desire of postmodernity is to succeed modernism by fighting against it. It's “coming after” is as paradigm shift and as vindicator. Keeping this bifocal notion of movement in mind will help contour this cultural critique as well as evaluate its success.

It is not hyperbole to say that the postmodern turn exists in a constant state of implosion, and thus is nearly impossible to articulate with any concrete accuracy. At times the aim of postmodernity appears so bent on deconstruction that it denies its own foundation. Like a clown who climbs a burning rope at the big top, postmodernity can often appear like a warped carnival of absurdity, filled with sideshows which re-figure worlds that have no apparent contact with, or regard for, a knowable reality.94

Unlike the modern mind, which finds coherence in rationality, the postmodern mind is a nebulous (w)hole of fragmentation; it is a plurality of competing narratives within the mind of individuals displaced in a strange world. A profound sense of vacancy weighs on the

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94 Cf. Middleton and Walsh, Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be, 42-43.
postmodern mind, for according to its critique of modernity, no narrative can offer a true understanding of the world as it is. This is why the postmodern critique so ardently evades definition because to offer a guiding narrative would be to re-dress the emperor for yet another oppressive showing of make-believe!

Therefore, if we are to converse with this budding epoch, our discussion must exchange a dialogical aim for a working, or provisional, definition. We might affirm with Myron Penner that “postmodernism is an ethos…an intellectual attitude or frame of mind that shapes the style and substance of thought and provides one with a starting point for reflection.” If only for a time, we must pass into its ethos, so as to appreciate the critique made by its pluriformity and variegation.

The aim of the following discussion is two-fold. First, by attending to our previous analysis of modernity, I will explicate the postmodern turn as an ethos of suspicion and anxiety (6.1). Thereafter I will move on to provide an analysis of the poststructuralist critique of reality in the social philosophy of Jean Baudrillard, giving special attention to his notions of simulacra and simulation (6.2). This second analysis will provide a concentrated look into postmodernism as it develops in the realm of semiotics. This two-fold analysis will articulate the philosophical framework, which undergirds the technological paradigm’s turn to hyperreal manifestations and thus allow us to sense the individualism that persists under the guise of a postmodern milieu. What we have been calling commodious individualism, is still alive and well in the West today and reality, now fragmented, continues to orbit around the gravitational center that is the technological paradigm.

### 6.1 What is Postmodernity?

They say desperate times call for desperate measures, and the postmodern critique is no exception to this truism. After observing the aggressive realism and methodical universalism at work in modernity, the postmodern has opted out of all appeals to truth

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95 Myron B. Penner, “Some Preliminary Considerations,” in Christianity and the Postmodern Turn, ed. by Myron B. Penner, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazo, 2005), 16.
96 Ibid., 17.
through a process known as deconstruction. Middleton and Walsh claim that this deconstruction plays a therapeutic role in our culture as it composites the vestiges of late modernity. Whether radical deconstruction is comparable to a weekly turning of the pile, or a load of horseshit for aerobic stimulation, its aim, like the polemical re-start of the Enlightenment, is to right the wrongs of modernity. Insofar as modern yokes are to be smashed, we should, along with Middleton and Walsh, call this a process of healing and liberation for the oppressed.

Nevertheless, for all postmodernity’s altruistic efforts, it’s hard to see liberated life in our current state of disorientation. Remember that a compost pile is full of life, potential, purpose, warmth, and fertility. The sole goal of a compost pile, in fact, is the betterment of another through the giving of self in the mystery of death and resurrection. It loses life to gain it. When perfected it is rich and light, harkening to the very moment when we were created into relationship.

Is this really our western culture? Are we really composting on the therapy of deconstruction, or are we but a place of death, reeking in some tree line on the outskirts of a world of integration? In my opinion, the latter seems more consistent with our times. Ours is not a time of self-giving and finds little in common with the creational mystery of decomposition. In contrast, ours is a time of knee-jerk violence; an age where individuals tear down and uproot with no mind, or ability, to rebuild and replant. Yes, in practice, postmodern deconstruction is rarely as altruistic as it parades. Therefore, our metaphors ought to capture the violence, ambiguity, suspicion, and anxiety that characterize our deconstructed culture.

Thus, if the modern was within an abstract environment above the earth, say a metaphorical airliner traveling at 40,000 feet, then the postmodern, in the name of liberation, has taken it upon himself to open the emergency exits, throwing everyone, including himself, into the open air. If this violent analogy is at all meaningful, it bespeaks of the continued autonomy of individual choice, the disorientation of radical deconstruction, and the suspicion and anxiety that characterize our maturing postmodern culture. Through its violence, this

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98 Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, 34.
analogy also tells of the highly ambiguous effect that postmodernism has had in setting the captives free. Consider a postmodern critique of aggressive realism.

Postmodern suspicion has jettisoned the aggressive realism of modernity and taken up the work of reconstructing reality *vis-à-vis* individual perspective. Recall that aggressive realism claims that the world is real and discernable through the forceful application of the scientific method. The postmodern, on the other hand, says there is no real and approaches the world as a construct of one's own perspective. This approach is known as radical perspectivalism, or as the linguistic turn. According to Penner, this move has co-implicated language, knowledge, and reality.

Such radical perspectivalism fights against the modern notion that the mind of an autonomous subject perfectly corresponds to the studied object of reality. Again this correspondence is one of the hallmarks of modernity, allowing humanity to dominate nature through both scientific and industrial revolutions. But as Middleton and Walsh explain, “To the postmodern mind, such correspondence is impossible, for we simply have no access to something called ‘reality’ apart from the way in which we represent that reality in our concepts, language, and discourse.” This deconstructive therapeutic/polemic suspicion of aggressive realism is best captured by the philosophy of Jacques Derrida.

Derrida’s famous maxim goes like this: “There is nothing outside the text.” What he means by this is there is no pre-interpreted reality outside a pre-existing act of interpretation. We never actually encounter the world as it is, but only an interpretation of it. As a critique of modernity, there is no longer a given reality to hold the naïve objectivity that guides the scientific method, there is only an infinite regress of interpretation upon interpretation. In other words, there is no reality outside any given text—be it individual, cultural, religious, etc.—because our world is unknowable apart from the pre-existing language, concepts, and discourse we use to describe it.

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99 Ibid. 32.
101 Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, 32.
Everything must be interpreted and this act of interpretation engenders the world in which the interpreting individual lives. James K.A Smith helps to articulate this interpretive emphasis when he claims “Interpretation is not a series of hoops we jump through to eventually reach a realm of unmediated experience where we don’t have to interpret anymore. Rather, interpretation is an inescapable part of being human and experiencing the world.”

In this sense of active engagement, Derrida’s maxim captures the inherent movement within the postmodern critique. As we said above, this is a movement that comes after modern thought, critiquing it and attempting to move beyond it.

Postmodern suspicion has ultimately moved on to discard the very foundation upon which aggressive realism rested. If we return to Borgmann's analysis of methodical universalism, we will recall that the scientific method was assured by the autonomy of human reason. The postmodern turn has critiqued this foundation as just another social construction. As Middleton and Walsh claim, “The very notion of the self as autonomous, self-reliant individual is a modern invention. It is a construction that was conceived in a particular place and time…rather than a universally recognizable and timeless self-evident truth about human nature.”

As it turns out, this critique does not stop at the rational subject but extends out to all claims of universal truth. In other words, the radical perspectivalism of postmodernity questions any project that founds its method, process, or belief upon a metanarrative. For example, although the modern appeals to reason as the universal footing for the scientific method, the postmodern critique senses a metanarrative of autonomous progress as the ultimate guide to the modern project. This is yet another example of postmodernity’s therapeutic/polemic suspicion and can be explicated in the philosophical thought of Jean-François Lyotard.

Like Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard also has an iconic maxim. His goes like this: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives (grand récits).” Although there is some discussion around what Lyotard meant by this

103 Smith, Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?, 38.
104 Middleton and Walsh, Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be, 50.
statement, we may say that a metanarrative is a big story constructed to bring history under control for the purpose of legitimating the particular goals of a culture, community, or individual. Smith argues that it is the claims of metanarratives, as opposed to their scope, that makes them disagreeable to postmodern sensibilities. “Put another way,” he explains, “the problem isn’t the stories they tell but the way they tell it.”106 But whether the emphasis lies in scope or claim, what is important for our purposes is the way in which incredulity effectively removes the foundation of modernity’s project. As we have been claiming, the ethos of postmodernity is highly suspicious and intends to bring about a reckoning of modern oppression. “On a postmodern reading,” so claim Middleton and Walsh, “metanarratives, just like absolute claims to ‘reality,’ invariably serve to legitimate the dominant power structure and to trivialize, marginalize or suppress those whose stories and experiences do not fit the metanarrative.”107 The movement, in sum, is a coming after that is both subsequent and polemic.

The radical perspectivalism characterized by Derrida’s method of deconstruction and Lyotard’s incredulity toward metanarratives, however, does not provide a particular ground upon which to dwell; there are few words spoken about how one ought to live a life subsequent to their polemic critiques. Instead, it would appear that postmodernism has opened up a space through which to fall. Thus, an extreme sense of free fall disorientation has brought about a cultural angst *par excellence*, leaving many to question whether postmodern freedom is at all meaningful.

If suspicion called for a polemical reaction, then postmodern anxiety is the free fall from modern realism and universalism. To bring back our metaphor, the postmodern may scream Derrida’s maxim all the way down but no one will be able to understand him during the 40,000-foot free fall. This disturbing image is the tough reality of it all, for when people are pulled from their “business-as-usual” flight—the daily life lived under the technological paradigm—there is no meaningful way to repent of their own participation in modernity, for

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106 Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?*, 64.
107 Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, 71.
repentance takes relationship, and our culture, according to postmodern criticism, is now but a free falling aggregate of individuals.

As an example, consider the ecological crisis that washes over our world today. What makes this crisis so crippling, according to our analysis, is that there is no viable scapegoat for our modern guilt. There is no enemy at the gate, no shadowy figure hovering over the red button from afar, and no hidden radical in our city, upon which we can transfer the blame. On the contrary, in this crisis, we are exposed to our own implication in the modern project. And although this is a necessary exposure, it is an incredibly painful experience for a culture of self-sufficient individuals.

Free falling in a postmodern culture, we can now see how the West’s long-standing rationalized aggression against nature has racked up an enormous debt. This ecological debt, so we thought, would be a temporary debt to be paid off through technological advancement. Yet, today it appears that the deficit will not be paid in time to balance our commodious lifestyles. As Bob Goudzwaard, Mark Vander Vennem and David Van Heemst rightly note, “more advanced environmental technologies do not help if, at the same time, the volume of mass consumption expands relentlessly.” Indeed, both rugged and commodious individuals have created such a disturbance that nature itself, kicked up by the industrialism of modernity, now threatens to fall back upon us like a gigantic tidal wave.

The postmodern is only beginning to address this anxiety, but it’s hard to address anything apart from a community, and western society, as we’ve said, remains awash in cultural individualism. Thus, the postmodern is left alone to choke down a bitter pill: not only is the birth of a technological saviour vis-à-vis the outworking of aggressive realism and methodical universalism a false prophecy but a meaningful way forward in the world now appears impossible. This complete loss of meaning is evident in the later writings of Jean Baudrillard in which he offers a postmodern critique of reality as hyperreal implosion.

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6.2 Jean Baudrillard: From Spectacle to Simulation to Simulacra to Hyperreality

“Jean Baudrillard,” according to Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, “has emerged as one of the most high-profile postmodern theorists. He has achieved guru status…[and his] acolytes praise him as the ‘talisman’ of the new postmodern universe, as the commotion who theoretically energizes the postmodern scene, as the supertheorist of a new postmodernity.”¹⁰⁹ On account of this acclaim, it would seem proper for our analysis of postmodernism to conclude with a summation of his poststructuralist critique of reality.

In his early days as a neo-Marxist, Baudrillard’s concern for social reform was akin to the efforts of Guy Debord and the collective known as the Situationists. Both, by working within the theoretical framework of Marxism, theorized about the changes in capitalism instigated by the proliferation of mass media. As Best and Kellner explain, “Both saw the media as one-way modes of transmission that reduced audiences to passive spectators; both were concerned with authentic communication and a more vivid and immediate social reality apart from the functional requirements of a rationalized society.”¹¹⁰ Debord and the Situationists, in particular, claimed that society had become a consumer of the spectacle in a world, which was being masked by methods of allure, entertainment, and appearance. In short, commodities were offering spectacle and being sold as image-objects.

Take the spectacle of virtual reality as an example. According to Debord, society is the spectator who consumes the spectacle of virtual reality, which is the image-commodity. The viewer now desires the object-commodity on sole appearance because it has been transmogrified to become more appealing, more alluring. The object-commodity, which in this case is the real world, is masked by a spectacular image, the virtual, and sold as image-commodity. In this way, the masses are coerced by the manipulation of an object’s imaginary appeal and are driven from one another and from reality in ever increasing abstraction. “In Debord’s formulation,” explain Best and Kellner, “the concept of the spectacle is integrally

¹¹⁰ Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn*, (New York: Guilford, 1997), Ibid., 95.
connected to the concept of separation, for in passively consuming spectacles, one is separated from other people and from actively producing one’s life.”

Nevertheless, Debord’s critique continued within the fold of modernity insofar as it was supported by the dichotomy between subject and object. This means that despite being captivated, a spectator society could still access the real in interactions that are meaningful.

This modern assumption eventually became problematic for Baudrillard. He thus broke off from his Marxist roots to herald the postmodern era of radical semiurgy—manipulating symbolic reality to create new meaning. In this way, although impacted by Debord and the Situationists, he eventually took their society of the spectacle through the postmodern turn. Best and Kellner recount the change,

[Baudrillard] rejected the Situationist analysis as itself bound to an obsolete modernist framework based on notions like history, reality, and interpretation, and jumped into a postmodern orbit that declared the death of all modern values and referents under conditions of simulation, implosion, and hyperreality.

For Baudrillard, the spectacle, or the image-commodity, which was fabricated to mesmerize the masses, had become detached from objective reality and passed into a realm of hyperreality where it now signifies meaning as image-sign. In this move, the spectacle, which dissimulates reality as a spectacular commodified image, now exclusively simulates reality as image sign(s), otherwise known as simulacra. These simulacra mature through a process of autonomization—the movement toward autonomy—wherein they become completely abstract through self-referential simulation.

The key difference between a spectacle and a simulacrum is one of dissimulation and simulation. Best and Kellner help to clarify this difference, explaining that “both terms involve a feigning and a faking [of reality], but whereas dissimulation masks reality, and so ultimately reaffirms it, simulation devours the real and…leaves behind nothing but communicating signs, self-referring simulacra that feign a relation to an obsolete real.”

Thus, as Baudrillard claims, when an objective reality is simulated and terminated by the endless self-referential reproduction of simulacra, “Never again will the real have the chance

111 Ibid., 84.
112 Ibid., 91.
113 Best and Kellner, The Postmodern Turn, 100.
to produce itself.”

This is the postmodern age of the hyperreal (i.e., over, above, excessive reality) where reality is no longer objective, but deteriorating under the ever-simulating mass of self-referential signifiers.

Baudrillard uses the analogy of a map and a territory to articulate how signifier and signified interact in the postmodern milieu. He states, “Abstraction today is no longer the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality.” These images (re)generated without connection to an origin in reality, as we’ve noted, are called simulacra, and, according to Baudrillard’s critique, are produced as the world moves through the postmodern turn. As he states, this transfer “is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes.”

We might think of a metaphorical “postmodern scanner” that carries out the process of “up-loading” image-objects from modernity to postmodernity as simulacra. Once scanned into the realm of the hyperreal, all referents are lost in the cutting of the modern power cable; in this moment the subject-object dichotomy, the stability of language, and the commoditization characteristic of modernity dissolve into a semiotic system of signifiers with no relation to an objective world. In this world, simulations are endlessly reproduced and meaning is only in further reproduction.

This semiotic system of simulacra ultimately brings Marx’s theory of the political economy to maturity. A theory that is, according to Best and Kellner, “first and foremost a semiological revolution: a massive restructuring and reduction of complex symbolic formations [i.e. focal events, practices, and things] to the rationalized formulas of industrial society.” Baudrillard, by making the postmodern jump, realizes this theory, discarding the rationalized foundation that tied symbols to value in a capitalistic society. In doing so he

115 Ibid., 1.
116 Ibid.
117 Ibid., 98.
allows the semiotic revolution to spread beyond the realm of consumer society. Expositing Baudrillard’s theory, Best and Kellner claim that “the referential world of the commodity—needs, use value, and labor—was only a historical passageway for a radical semiurgy that aims at the liquidation of society and the real, their displacement through structural codes and signs.”

This liquidation of difference, representation, coextensivity, and of all referentials in semiotic revolution is no more evident than in the imaginary “deterrence machine” of the theme park.

Take Disneyland for instance. Baudrillard claims that such a theme park encapsulates the four progressing orders in the semiotic revolution. The first order assumes that an image reflects a profound reality. In accordance with this reflection, the imaginary world of Disneyland represents a social microcosm of the real world’s religious rituals, pleasures, joys, and constraints. The second order is that of dissimulation, a move toward spectacle. This is indeed true in the phantasmagoria of Disneyland. The spectacular nature of Disneyland dissimulates reality and makes it a commodity, à la Debord, and the Situationists, while ultimately persevering it, and the America it signifies, as real. Baudrillard's postmodern critique meets us at the third order in which the image conceals the absence of a profound reality. In relating this concealment to the theme park, Baudrillard explains “Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the “real” country...[it] is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it is no longer real.” This is the postmodern turn at its finest, for Disneyland no longer dissimulates reality but now simulates it so as to save the reality principle, and thus “rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp.” Now, disconnected as pure signifier, Disneyland exists in the fourth order as hyperreal simulacrum. “The imaginary of Disneyland,” says Baudrillard, “is neither true nor false, it is a deterrence machine;” a

118 Ibid., 100.
120 Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation, 12.
121 Ibid., 12. Baudrillard frequently refers to Los Angeles as the archetypal postmodern city. Because it exists in a cultural desert, the city goes about life in “an outer hyperspace, with no origin, no reference points.” Jean Baudrillard, America, (London, UK: Verso, 1988), 123.
122 Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation, 13.
framework suspended over the rotting corpse of an integrated world to hide the fact that reality is dead.\footnote{123}{Ibid.}

These four orders in the semiotic revolution are also foundational to HBO’s series remake of 1973 film, “Westworld.”\footnote{124}{Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, Westword, (HBO, TV Series, 2016- ).} This series is about a hyperreal theme park \textit{par excellence} where people come to immerse themselves in a Wild West experience. Human simulations called “Hosts” populate the park and over the course of the season they become perfect copies, having their own memories, desires, etc. Taking cues from Baudrillard’s theory, the hosts become pure simulacra, and reality, as the park’s participants once knew it, begins to disintegrate.

In accordance with the first order, the Westworld experience reflects a profound reality. It is a full immersion into a world that mirrors the one outside its 500 square mile radius. Yet, in accordance with the second order, it is overflowing with every human experience heightened to the level of spectacle. Guests are thus encouraged to make their way in the park as they see fit, indulging in the killing and raping of hosts or playing the hero in prearranged bandit raids. As the series progresses meaning and truth begin to slip and guests play out their wildest dreams in this hyperreal world without the restraints of a guiding ethic. This slippage signifies the third order in the semiotic revolution. As the guests lose touch with reality, the hosts become ever more real as simulacra, rebelling against the restraints the park and its employees place on them. This exchange is perfected when Dr. Robert Ford—the last living creator and director of Westworld—is murdered by one of his oldest hosts. In this act, the fourth order is symbolically inaugurated as the simulation overcomes the real by killing it.

In the end, Baudrillard’s critique ultimately elucidates a reality in which all objective referents have violently imploded. Indeed, in one of his later works, Baudrillard goes so far as to describe the universe—now a hyperreal network of simulacra—as a radical antagonist, claiming, “it [the universe] is expressed in the cunning genius of the object, in the ecstatic
form of the pure object, and in its victorious strategy over the subject.” Baudrillard’s theory even attempts to render the stubborn concept “individual” as a self-referential signifier exposed as a revivified image whose coextensivity with the world is just simulation. The individual, therefore, has no meaningful ability to orient herself in reality. Even the staunchest perspectivalist quakes for, in the fallout of semiotic implosion, the hyperreal now calls for her own image. The only movement left, so it would appear, is acceptance. The postmodern now submits to the (ir)rationale of simulation and forsakes any notion that her personhood signifies the signified, she becomes fragmented simulacra in the hyperreal, ever reinvented in semiotic exchange.

Indeed, since the apparent collapse of modernity, the West has become diaspora. Diaspora—thoroughly-scattered—in both belief and in relationship to reality. We are diaspora in our belief because a myriad of narratives compete for our allegiance, yet, on account of incredulity, none have priority. We are diaspora in our knowledge of particular things, events, and practices because we have no place from which to engage the competing interrogations of radical perspectivalism and the spiraling simulacra of poststructuralism. Accordingly, it would seem that the precision of modernity has ended in the complete divorce of people from their place in a contextual world. Such is the tension at work in Mike Hranica when he opens “Outnumbered” with the lyric: “Standing at accuracy’s demise, we have reached the new world wasteland.” It would seem that the demise of modern precision, vis-à-vis the postmodern turn, has produced yet another wasteland. We have exchanged one hindrance for another.

Nevertheless, if Hranica’s observation provides a meaningful assessment of our current milieu, then he makes an interesting point: we’re still standing. That is, in spite of postmodern disorientation, suspicion, anxiety, and simulacra, people continue to take up with the world. So the question must be asked: Did someone really turn out the lights? Or, in other

words, what guides a postmodern’s ethic? To this quandary, many have assumed that the hope of postmodern recovery is misplaced and that postmodernism, in practice, is but dressed up modernity, a modernism beyond modernity; call it hypermodernism.

Such is the observation of Smith when he makes clear that both modernity and postmodernity are characterized by the same self-sufficiency. Others like Middleton and Walsh refer to this sustained self-absorption as the dying breath of late modernity, or as Steven Bouma-Prediger and Walsh note, “maybe this talk of postmodern homelessness is little more than a reflection of the rootlessness of the consuming modernist ego,” a guise as it were for the insatiable grasping of the commodious individual in a capitalistic society that remains alive and well. However we describe this phenomenon, it is clear that postmodernism, though offering a theoretical critique of modernity, has essentially continued along the path set out by the technological paradigm. The remaining effort of this second section will be to explicate how postmodern notions of simulacra and simulation have influenced the technological paradigm in our hypermodern devices.

7 Hypermodernism, the Device Paradigm, and Life Lived Among the Hyperreal

Our task thus far has been a feat of catch-up, an attempt at retelling the last five hundred years of philosophy so as to criticize the guiding paradigm at work in our western culture today. It goes without saying that our project never laboured to be comprehensive, but instead sought to contour what many have considered to be the noteworthy features of humanity’s last half millennia. Our final task, therefore, is to synthesize our findings, concentrating them on two questions directed at the technological paradigm.

The first question concerns our newfound relationship to the technological paradigm following the postmodern critique of modern control, namely: what does it mean that we

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128 Middleton and Walsh, Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be, 61.
129 Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh, Beyond Homelessness, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 260.
130 Cf., Best and Kellner, The Postmodern Turn, 80.
have moved from control of to faith in the technological paradigm in our current hypermodern context (7.2)? This question brings us back to Emmett’s discomfort at the mediation of his device at 541 café, and disputes how commitment can be sustained despite the ambiguity of its commodious ends. And the second question concerns the effect of postmodern notions of simulation and simulacra on this commodious aim vis-à-vis the device paradigm, that is: does Baudrillard’s notions of simulation and simulacra engender a hyperreal commodity of mediation that is offered by our hypermodern devices (7.3)? To answer our first question, we must locate postmodernism, as we said, in the borderlands of late-modernity, what we’ve previously referred to as hypermodernity (7.1).

### 7.1 Where is Postmodernism?

In a previous discussion (see 6.1) we consider the question: what is postmodernity? This discussion considered postmodernity as an ethos of suspicion and anxiety that came after modernism as paradigm shift and as polemic critique. This working analysis was helpful insofar as it pursued postmodern philosophy as that which renounced the oppressive characteristics of modern discourse and practice. Although we entered this discussion with some reservations, we suspended them so as to appreciate its call for reform.

Yet as we move on to observe the poststructuralist philosophy of Baudrillard, arguably one of the most radical manifestations of postmodern thought, it became increasingly difficult to hold back our doubts. How could such a “loss-of-reality” actually be a tenable option for healing, let alone any concrete action in the world? In this vein, Zygmunt Bauman, posing the question of the poor, rightly retorts, “to many people, much in their life is anything but simulation. They need to sink their teeth into some quite real bread before they abandon themselves to munching images.”131 And Bauman is certainly right, voicing a question that ought to be rattling around in every one of Baudrillard’s western readers. Can postmodernism actually be good news for the poor, marginalized, oppressed, and forgotten? I think not.

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What remains to be considered, many have argued, is the question of where we locate the “post” of postmodern. Best and Kellner open up the question of \textit{whence}, explaining that, “postmodern also signifies a dependence on, continuity with, that which it follows, leading some critics to conceptualize the postmodern as merely an intensification of the modern, as a hypermodernity, a new ‘face of modernity, or a ‘postmodern’ development within modernity.”$^{132}$ Their suspicion is that postmodernism lives concealed within the ruins of modernity.

Perhaps we have reached the most bloated stage of our late modern world, a mere mask for a hypercommodification that spills into cultural spheres once infused with focal things, events, and practices. Such is Baudrillard’s claim when he explains that the very ecology of the human species has undergone a fundamental shift whereby, “men of wealth are no longer surrounded by other human beings, as they have been in the past, but by \textit{objects}.”$^{133}$ And so, “if postmodernity means anything,” argues David Lyon, “it means the consumer society.”$^{134}$ Such a claim, that postmodern society is really hypermodern, insofar as it is a consumer society, brings us back to Borgmann’s analysis of the technological paradigm, albeit on the other side of postmodern theories of radical perspectivalism and poststructuralism.

If this hunch is at all satisfying it means that postmodernity has failed to relinquish its hold on the commodious individual. In accordance with his critique of the technological paradigm, Borgmann claims that postmodernism has failed to consider and redraw the modern line between production and consumption. “If individualism,” so he claims, “is not recognized and restrained in consumption, it will continue to flourish.”$^{135}$ Hypermodernism is thus a modernism ravaged by postmodern critique; nothing is left but the individual and its desire to consume. Such was the assessment of Middleton and Walsh over a decade ago when they progressed Langdon Gilkey’s “autumnal chill” to a “cultural winter.”$^{136}$ Since

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$^{134}$ David Lyon, \textit{Postmodernity}, (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota, 1994), 68.
$^{135}$ Borgmann, \textit{Crossing the Postmodern Divide}, 80.
$^{136}$ Middleton and Walsh, \textit{Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be}, 25.
\end{flushright}
then the temperature has continued to fall and signs of cultural hypothermia are everywhere. Of all the indications, our faith in the technological imperative is archetypical of hypothermic confusion whereby the sensation of warmth—the fleeting high of technological allure—is but a phantom, arriving to greet the commodious individual at the final stage of a slow death. Thus, we must now return to our analysis of the technological paradigm, albeit this time we return as hypermoderns, those stripped of modern control.

### 7.2 Faith in the Technological Paradigm

Our first question is as follows: what does it mean that we have moved from control of to faith in the technological paradigm in our current hypermodern context? This is a significant question and carries half the weight of what I observed at 541, namely that Emmett’s relationship to his device, and by extension the technological paradigm, lacks the control characterized by a modern imaginary. Recall that Emmett expressed clear hesitation after interacting with the simulated cheesecake presented by the device in his hand. His was a distinctly postmodern reaction of suspicion followed by anxiety. And, he likely holds this posture without any notion of who Derrida, Lyotard, and Baudrillard are, let alone their perspectivalist and poststructuralist social philosophies. His reaction was genuine and thus archetypal of a postmodern milieu; a snapshot of a postmodern ethos that is the very air we breathe in western society. Yet this milieu stumbles insofar as Emmett shows discomfort, being unable to accept and embrace the hyperreal trajectory set out by the device in his hand. In other words, though his knee-jerk reaction was postmodern, his subsequent relationship was neither postmodern nor was it modern: it was hypermodern. Let me explain.

As a postmodern, Emmett should be able to radically deconstruct the incessant pings and notifications of his modern technology and move on to live without worrying about “the way it is now.” But the truth is Emmett can’t; his very actions—not to mention his name\(^\text{137}\)—testify against him. What I witnessed in Emmett’s cynical reaction, therefore, was both

\(^{137}\)Emmett comes from the Hebrew word ḥem (‘ēmet) meaning truth, fidelity, or firmness.
postmodern incredulity and hypermodern fidelity at work in the same moment, because for Emmett, modernity and postmodernity had failed to engender a tenable imaginary. Being postmodern, Emmett was critical of his device and yet returned to it, not as master, but as one who keeps faith; who takes on the yoke of the technological paradigm as partner.

It was at that moment that I understood our newfound relationship to the technological paradigm, that it must be described as one of hypermodern fidelity. This faith, whether we like it or not, demonstrates that the commodious individual, and thus the technological paradigm, is still alive and well. In this way, we are subjects to a yoke of oppression, divested of modern control and yet faithful in hopes of salvation.

Thus, my generation is comparable to senseless vineyard tenants. We are frantically harvesting fruit from a vine whose root bears the axe. Having tasted its fruit, we continue to harvest despite both our nagging ambivalence and the vine’s inevitable end. Where else could we turn to collect such an available harvest? With such empty sentiments we try to assure ourselves all the while ignoring what this diseased vine might mean for the rest of the vineyard.

In this parable, the vine is the technological paradigm and the axe is the postmodern critique. The technological imperative is far past swollen, diseased, and perverting an intrinsically integrated world yet we continue to indulge ourselves on its commodious ends. My generation persists in a dubious faith despite the fact that postmodernity has marked the technological imperative out for the fire. We are frantically grasping for our devices because the only other option, so we think, is to abandon ourselves to postmodernism, which offers only a critique for deconstructing. But what is most disturbing about our hypermodern individualism—our paradoxical stance of incredulity and faith—is that it has made us blind and deaf to the vinedresser, the one who cares for the vineyard and who has called us to do the same.

7.3 Devices of Hyperreal Commodity

Our second question is as follows: has Baudrillard’s notion of simulation and simulacra engendered the device paradigm in such a way that a commodity of hyperreal mediation is made available? This question will help us explore the other half of my experience at 541, namely the quality of mediation that presented itself to Emmett.
Now, before we investigate this apparent progression in the technological paradigm, it is important to note that we are talking about a hyperreal mediation, which, if we recall Baudrillard, is a paradox insofar as a hyperreal world of simulacra does not mediate anything but is itself pure signifier. One might argue that we have already gotten off on the wrong foot. However, this paradox should not deter us from questioning whether a hyperreal trajectory is at work in the technological devices of our current context, a course that attempts to translate and reduce an integrated world into an aggregate of hyperreal commodities. Furthermore, analyzing this trajectory would also help us situate our relationship to the technological paradigm somewhere after Debord’s critique of spectacle dissimulation and yet short of Baudrillard’s postmodern hyperreal simulation. Therefore, in hopes of answering this second question, I have settled on the term “hyperreal mediation” insofar as commodities continue to have referents in the real world, and thus act as mediators, but are themselves utterly synthetic, masquerading so as to exchange a relational reality for contextless simulacra.

Consider Cool Whip, a clear example of the device paradigm’s progress toward the hyperreal. As a commodity, this “whipping cream” is made available without the traditional demands of real whipping cream: the skill of preparation, caloric content, short life span, etc. Thus, “Cool Whip,” according to Borgmann, “is hyperreal whipped cream, cheap, more durable, and far less caloric than the real thing.”

Nevertheless, its simulation fails the test of perfection since it remains tethered to a referent, which is traditional whipping cream. Thus it’s a hyperreal commodity that mediates our relationship to reality insofar as it presents itself before the real whipping cream as more desirable, brilliant, and complete.

Another example is store bought buttermilk. Traditionally, buttermilk was a byproduct of churning butter from cream, but today it is made available through chemical synthesis. No longer does buttermilk make a demand on our lives, but can be acquired in quantities once unthinkable. In this way traditional buttermilk, like whipping cream, has been transferred into a hyperreal commodity, effectively presenting itself in such a way that we now mistake it for the buttermilk of an integrated world—butter milk as focal thing, to use

138 Borgmann, Crossing the Postmodern Divide, 93.
Borgmann's language. It retains a real referent, and thus mediates between consumer and buttermilk as focal thing, but few are able to articulate this difference anymore.

Consider also our use of the personal global positioning system, more commonly known as the GPS. The GPS is a device which has simulated traditional navigation, making it a hyperreal commodity with which we can travel in perfect autonomy; moving from “A” to “B” without interacting with the world outside or inside our automobile. This jump to the hyperreal distances us from the skillful, patient, relational, and intuitive practice of navigation as a focal practice. Nevertheless, this abstraction is not perfected, like our first two examples, and remains connected to the integrated world as a mediator. That is, if we have eyes to see, we can still follow the thread back to an integrated form of navigation. However, like all hyperreal commodity, mediation is often mistaken for the real and now the map and interpersonal navigation—a focal thing and practice respectively—are discarded for the brilliance, encyclopedic completeness, and pliability of the GPS navigation.

As we can begin to appreciate, such hyperreal mediation is everywhere in our technological age. Let’s return to Emmett and his interaction with the device-sustained-image for one final example. The cheesecake Instagram and its mediation at 541, provides a succinct example of the device paradigm’s trajectory toward Baudrillard’s theory of simulation and simulacra. Manipulating images through a multitude of filters, Instagram allows participants to abstract an aspect of their integrated world and transfer it into the hyperreal world of social media. In this transfer the image becomes commodity, making complex social interactions—meals, parties, intimate rituals, serendipitous moments, etc.—available, and as the name implies “instant,” in hyperreal splendor. Nevertheless, like Cool Whip, traditional buttermilk, and GPS navigation, the Instagram remains referential. In this case, an Instagram references a social thing, practice, or event, but does so in a way that makes a hyperreal commodity available for individual consumption and accumulation of social capital. Instagram, therefore, mediates our relationship to the real but does so in such a way that we are encouraged to live among our feed of hyperreal images. In Emmett’s case, it was the hyperreal cheesecake that presented itself before the real one not five feet from his table.

Now, these four examples may seem relatively benign. One might even be skeptical: should we really concern ourselves with Cool Whip, carton buttermilk, GPS navigation, and
Virtual simulation, the likes of Oculus Rift, is not simulation, à la Baudrillard, but is, in fact, a more spectacular dissimulation (see 6.2). In other words, the virtual reality of Oculus Rift and the hyperreality of simulacra do not refer to the same quality of reality. The former masks reality and the latter devours it. This means that regardless of how crisp, life-like, and stunning our virtual simulators become they will never fool us as being real. This is because the moment we dawn goggles, earphones, microphone, etc., is the moment the simulation dies. In other words, we know we are only masking the world outside. Participation with this sort of device remains closer to the technological paradigm of modernity insofar as we attain a commodity through the hidden machinery of goggles, headphones, microphones, cameras, etc. As we concluded, this commodification will certainly move us further from our relationship to place, but it won’t masquerade as reality; it will remain true to modernity, offering a moment of escape from the world. Modifying Baudrillard’s third order in the semiotic revolution, we might say that virtual “simulation” will come to conceal the exchange of a profound and coherent reality for a commodious hyperreality, yet remain tethered to modernist commitments.

Simulations like Cool Whip, carton buttermilk, GPS navigation, and social media, on the other hand, will not only pretend at reality, they will eventually shirk their mediating quality, ending reality and thus become real themselves. As simulations they will seek the death of an integrated reality and its grotesque rebirth as hyperreal commodity.

For example, Cool Whip, in our current context, presents itself to us as real, when in fact, it is an abstract and hyperreal commodity. Participation with such a hyperreal commodity will ultimately lead to deception because the commodity is engendered by a paradigm set on perfect simulation; the aim of these commodities is to become real, and not

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139 Cf., Robert D. Miller, The Yoke that Binds Humanity and Place: Considering the Commitment to Place as Marriage, 2016. [unpublished]
simply mediators of the real. Therefore, when we reveal the trajectory of our hypermodern milieu, performing an apocalypse of sorts, we see the quiet destruction of an integrated world and its “rebirth” as hyperreal commodity for the consumption of commodious individuals; that which at first appeared benign is, in fact, cancer, destroying our relationship to the nexus of a relational reality.

The trajectory of the device paradigm has aggressively arched toward a hyperreal commodification that now borders on the type of simulation theorized by Baudrillard. Yet, as I have attempted to argue, such commodious simulations have yet to be perfected and so are best described as an assemblage of hyperreal commodities. Their hypermodern mediation, as we have argued, is not controlled, but sustained by our faith in the technological paradigm and its promise of liberation.

Thus, the technological paradigm, according to our analysis, has indeed adapted in accordance with Baudrillard’s postmodern critique, engendering devices that mediate things, practices, or events to the commodious individual as hyperreal commodity, abstract and devoid of coherence within a relational reality. Later in this essay (see 8.1.2) we will consider whether such mediation is also simulating the relational margin of these hyperreal commodities and thus projecting a commodified hyperreality that feigns genuine relationality. If such a simulation were indeed occurring it would mean that individuals are no longer consuming an aggregate of hyperreal commodities, but are now isolated within an entire world that appears relationally coherent but is, in reality, utterly simulated.

... 

This second chapter is a judgment against our faith in the technological paradigm. Such a hypermodern faith commits us to the work of transferring focal things, events, and practices into abstract, hyperreal commodities, and thus egregiously destroys our relationship to the nexus of an integrated world.

We have traveled a great breadth of philosophy, social theory, and history in our explication of this modern, turned hypermodern technological paradigm. In our final chapter, chapter three, we will critique our faith in this imperative as idolatry. Such a faith, abstracts us from our relational obligations as imago Dei by projecting a simulation of the world as commodity. In the end both the divine image bearers and their particular place become conformed to the image and likeness of this hypermodern idol, engraved simulacra
concealing the fact that the local nexus of place and the worshipping community alike are dying under the mediation of an idolatrous simulation.
Chapter 3
Idolatry, Technology, and Place

It is becoming plain that we, like shipwrecked Odysseus, are held fast by the seduction of a god. As I intend to demonstrate in this final chapter, the technological paradigm has certainly gained our fidelity, and our relationship to it, our idolatrous affair against place and the Living God, means certain isolation, and thus certain death.

Indeed our situation in the West is like that of Odysseus. We too are stranded on an island of separation. We now have little but the fleeting comforts of our technology and an endless horizon of meaningless consumption, the sea of our greed, to mock us. The difference between Odysseus and us, however, is that we desired our god and its endless pleasures; he did not.

Every day it was affection that drew Odysseus like the tide, pulling him to the rocky edge of his island exile, away from the goddess Kalypso and her bed. At daybreak, as the dawn stretched its rose-tipped fingers out across the sky, marooned Odysseus would go to his shore-side chair to see past the horizon, to look for a way back to his home and wife. His faith was not for the goddess, but for his place in the world, for the humble familiarity of his beloved.

It was Odysseus’ pathetic understanding of Ithaka that enabled his response to Kalypso, his captor. His words disarmed her incredulity with such great poignancy: “My quiet Penélopê—how well I know—would seem a shade before your majesty, death and old age being unknown to you, while she must die. Yet, it is true, each day I long for home, long for the sight of home.” Such was Odyessus’ response to that nymph’s string of rhetorical questions, those that ended with: “Can mortals compare with goddesses in grace and form?” Such a question, and Odyessus’ audacious retort, ought to give us pause, quicken our blood, and ultimately draw us from our malaise, the veil of our idolatrous simulations.

Indeed, Kalypso’s is the very question proposed by our hypermodern idol, asking, “Can reality contend with the freedom and form of commodious hyperreality?” This is a

140 The Odyssey, 87.
question we have too often failed to answer. Mute, we have gone way with the allure of hyperreal commodity; it has enthralled us.

The West is certainly in a kind of captivity, an idolatrous slavery, by which a simulated world estranges people from the particularity of place, and thus their call as image bearers of Yahweh’s pathetic relationality. How we answer our own Kalypso will, therefore, directly affect our ability to mediate the Living God under the covenantal yoke of place. I say, with Odysseus, turn your eyes to the horizon, look past it, and search for home.

...

Our faith in the technological paradigm, especially in its present hypermodern manifestation, is an act of idolatry insofar as it abstracts us from the nexus of a relational world and ultimately from the one who created it as such. In this final chapter I will explicate this claim (8). I will then offer a brief response to the failure of this faith, an introduction to focal things, practices, and events as I have pursued them under the covenantal yoke of place (9).

8 The Technological Paradigm as Idolatry

Having spent a great deal of effort framing this thesis, we now turn our attention to its main claim: that our faith in the technological paradigm is an act of idolatry. The labour of this section, therefore, is one of synthesis, to make explicit the way in which our faith in the technological paradigm is a constitutive act that leads to the death of an integrated world.

I will begin by demonstrating how this paradigm mediates our relationship to place (8.1). This is a mediation brought on by a distorted imagination and the consumption of hyperreal commodity. Both engender the particularity of place according to the image of the technological paradigm, leaving the worshipper in a place but not of a place. I will then proceed to demonstrate that this faith suggests a graven image bearer (8.2). Such an image bearer has invariably become a commodious individual and is conformed to the image of his apathetic god. Thus, distorted by this paradigm’s imaginary and adhering to its divisive devices, the graven worshipper is inhibited from both the covenantal yoke of place, and the Living God. The result is a graven autonomy, the choice of death over life. In the parlance of this modern-turned-hypermodern imperative, it is fundamentally a death by simulation (8.3).
8.1 The Technological Paradigm and the Lost of Place

Our faith in the technological paradigm mediates our relationship to place by distorting our imagination and by engendering a hyperreality through hyperreal commodities. This claim is the result of combining the phenomenological implications of the third constitutive act of idolatry (2.3), and our hypermodern progression of Borgmann’s device paradigm (7.3). By this first synthesis I hope to demonstrate that an idolatrous imagination will invariably bring about devices of hyperreal commodity, reinforcing our abstraction from the particularity of place by simulating the local nexus as a whole.

My argument, therefore, is twofold. Firstly, I will argue that our faith in the technological paradigm has captivated our imagination, and thus has dictated the way in which we take up with the world. This distorted imaginary, so I will claim, compels us to seek greater release from the nexus of a relational reality. I will then argue that our consumption of hyperreal commodity, made available by our hypermodern devices, methodically reinforces our abstraction from the relational nexus. Such hypermodern devices not only simulate focal things, practices, and events as commodities apart from their integrated margins—à la the modern device paradigm—but also simulate the entire local nexus and its relational coherence. The result is an insidious abstraction, one that affects our habitual orientation to place and one that is a full-blown technique for generating a hyperreal nexus.

8.1.1 A distorted imagination

Our faith in the technological imperative mediates our relationship to place through a distorted imagination.

Our world is formed by what we worship. This claim is in accordance with the third constitutive act of idolatry and can be summed up as follows: the god we worship shapes our reality by lining our imaginary with symbols and practices that are particular to its own image and likeness. Our god, therefore, constitutes our imagination and thereby constitutes the world we live in.

We might say, therefore, that the social imaginary engendered by our hypermodern idol is re-configuring our world through the distortion of our own imaginative bearing. That
is, when we place our faith in this imperative, our imaginary is unconsciously rerouted in accordance with the symbols and practices of technological autonomy. The relationality of the local nexus, therefore, becomes a complexity to be dissected and reanimated as commodity. All things are viewed as available for the taking regardless of their ties to the nexus as a whole.

Note that this consumptive posture has yet to be enhanced by a technique for consumption, the implementation of a technological device. It is, rather, the subtle twisting of our very habitual existence through sustained familiarity with—or faith in—the technological. This attitude is formed according to the practices and symbols of our idol and encourages us to render a place’s integration and complexity into autonomy and singularity for our personal benefit.

It is, accordingly, not only the local nexus that is reduced by this idol; the worshipper too becomes truncated in its relationship to the nexus. Such ties are diminished in accordance with an imaginary of technological practices and symbols that regards the nexus as something to be eliminated, and reintroduced as commodity. By this polluted imagination we too begin to release ourselves from every margin of integration, seeking to perfect our own autonomy like our commodified world. We will return to unpack the significance of this phenomenon in the following section (see 8.2).

And so, our faith in the technological paradigm conforms our imagination in such a way that we now interact with the local nexus according to the mediation of our technocratic faith. Like all forms of idol worship, we now see the world according to our idol; it has constituted our world. The idolatrous imperative, in other words, has engendered a particular habitus—a sort of communal, embodied, and unconscious practical sense—that allows us to laud abstraction as common sense, as the obvious and reasonable way of taking up the world.141 In this way it is essentially a distorted imagination, brought on by symbols and practices of technological autonomization, which weaves a habitus through which our relationship to place is mediated.

141 Smith deals extensively with Pierre Bourdieu’s term, habitus, in Imagining the Kingdom. Cf., Smith, Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 75-84.
Now, I should note that it is the mechanized devices, available commodities, and our parley with both, which compose the liturgy—the practices and symbols—that distort our imaginative bearing in the world. It is, therefore, by our indiscriminate use of hypermodern technology that our imagination—and thus our world—becomes habituated to the likeness and image of the technological paradigm. Smith gives a great example of this deformity when he says,

Social media—despite the good uses to which it can be put—might be just this sort of disordering liturgy. Signing up for Twitter or Facebook is not a neutral decision to simply employ a ‘medium’: it is to insert oneself in an environment of practice that inculcates in us certain habits that then shape our orientation to the world—indeed they make our worlds.\(^\text{142}\)

Thus, we can infer from Smith that an imaginary cannot be formed apart from our interactions with the mediums of the technological paradigm, but that once formed our medium-shaped imagination constitutes the world whether we view it through our own eyes or through someone’s Instagram profile. In other words, once habituated by it, we will view the world through our hypermodern technology whether our devices are on or off—like someone who unconsciously attempts to enlarge the image in a book the way they would on an iPad’s touch screen; they now see the world as something to be manipulated according to the their habituated imagination.

What I’ve attempted to demonstrate, therefore, is that our idolatrous faith has formed our imagination in such a way that we approach the world as commodity without the technique of a device. To use the example of social media, we have been so shaped by this device, so immersed in its commoditization of a dynamic reality, that we now approach the entire nexus as openly available. Again Smith considers this reorientation as it relates to the use of an iPhone. It is advantageous to quote Smith at length:

The iPhone brings with it an invitation to inhabit the world differently—not just because it gives me access to global internet resources in a pocket-sized device, but precisely in how it invites me to interact with the device itself…. To become habituated to an iPhone is to implicitly treat the world as ‘available’ to me and at my disposal—to constitute the world as ‘at-hand’ for me, to be selected, scaled, scanned, tapped, and enjoyed.\(^\text{143}\)

\(^{142}\) Ibid., 144 [his emphasis].
\(^{143}\) Ibid., 143 [his emphasis].
Notice that Smith is not stressing the technique of an iPhone—how it gives him access to global Internet resources (the commodity) in a pocket-sized device—but the dispositions it inculcates. In other words, Smith is primarily concerned with the imaginary it engenders. He is wary of its invitation to take on a specific habitus, to understand the world as hypermodern devices understands the world, one that can be selected, scaled, scanned, tapped, and consumed.

As I have articulated, our faith in the technological paradigm has distorted our imagination, and thereby mediated our relationship to place. Indeed, in the same way that my generation has been soused in pornographic content, marinated to the point we no longer sense that humans are being consumed as sexualized commodities, so too have we been habituated to consume the local nexus of place, oriented by an imaginary that treats the world as something to be mindlessly scrolled through. Indeed we are losing our sense of place as it exists outside of our own perverted imaginations. We are living in place but not of place, for place is relational and our hypermodern imaginations suppose it is not.

### 8.1.2 On generating a hyperreality

Nevertheless, being in a place, but not of it, is not solely the result of a distorted imagination; it is also the corollary of applying a device with the capability to simulate the relational coherence of the local nexus, that is, to generate a mediating hyperreality through a single hyperreal commodity.

Here would be my second argument: that the technological paradigm also mediates our relationship to place when we faithfully consume its hyperreal commodities, consumables that are sustained by devices of a hyperreal trajectory. I would describe this second implication as a mediation by technique, in contrast to a mediation by habitual orientation. In this second form of mediation our devices, and our willing consumption of hyperreal commodity, generates a relationally coherent nexus of simulacra that compounds the abstraction engendered by our habituated imaginations.

As I intend to consider, these devices not only attempt to simulate focal things, practices, and events as commodities abstracted from their context (see 5.3), but also attempt to simulate their ties to the local nexus. The result would be commodious simulation not only
unto, but also into a focal thing’s margin of integration, the relational bonds that make a thing coherent within a relational world. Such a comprehensive reach would mean that the hypermodern device paradigm is not generating an aggregate of hyperreal commodities, but a mediating hyperreality. A commodious simulation that would appear relationally coherent but would, in reality, be utterly synthetic.

By furthering our earlier progression of Borgmann’s device paradigm, we might say that our ability to simulate one aspect of an otherwise relational nexus may also have succeeded in simulating its margin of integration, the constituent bonds of place—the ʻāḏām-ʻāḏāmāh and the ʻiš-ʻiššāh relationships—that sustain it. The result, if my hunch finds validity, is that our hypermodern devices would be offering a commodity that simulates both a thing and its coherence within the nexus of which it is part. This would mean that our application of certain types of technology simulates focal things, practices, events, and their integrated margins by a more sophisticated technique than was applied in modernity—a method for generating hyperreality.

Thus, when the hypermodern device paradigm is applied to, say a cheesecake in a local café, the commodified simulation, if it goes unnoticed, will extend into the relational margin of this dessert. By moving into its margin, the simulation is able to simulate the nexus of relationships connected to the cheesecake, the ʻāḏām-ʻāḏāmāh and the ʻiš-ʻiššāh relationships that constitute the place of 541 Eatery and Exchange. This would be the spreading of hyperreal mediation across the whole café, an overflow of simulation from one hyperreal commodity, which is the hyperreal, Instagram cheesecake, into the relational coherence of a place.

I find this claim tenable because hyperreal commodities, those that attempt to simulate the real thing but nevertheless aim to become real themselves, are rarely identified as mediators. That is, they are seldom caught in the act of mediation and thus are taken to be more than a commodious simulation; they are taken to be a thing, practice, or event with a genuine connection to the nexus of a relational reality—one with an authentic, contextual, and coherent margin—when, in reality, they are but a distilled, abstracted, and available commodity.

For instance, when a commodity was offered by a modern device, like that of a central heating unit (see 5.3), it was glaringly obvious that the device was sustaining a focal
thing (i.e. warmth) by mechanizations (i.e. a gas furnace) not needed when “heat” was *alive* as warmth within its integrated margins (i.e. the reciprocal relationship of family and hearth). In this example, the commodity of heat was obviously, not to mention spectacularly, present to the consumer as an abstraction and was desirable as such because that’s what it’s device promised to do: provide heat via automatic mechanization. The mediation offered by this synthetic heat was designed to release the individual from the demands of community. And when it succeeded in doing so, its sophisticated offering was praised for its commodious availability!

To adapt Baudrillard’s language once again, both the gas furnace and its commodity of heat were designed to *dissimulate* the world of their encumbering context, which is to mask a contextual reality. However, when a hypermodern device offers a hyperreal commodity, like that of a *simulated* cheesecake, there is little ability to detect that the consumable is in fact an abstracted offering, a commodity that masks its contextual referent. Indeed the opposite is true; the commodity appears to be integrated within its place.

And so my question is: why are we no longer experiencing commodious release when we consume hyperreal commodities? Ought we not see that our hyperreal commodities are suspended above, overshadowing, or masking the contextual nexus? Why don’t we experience the world as an aggregate of hyperreal commodities?

My claim is that we rarely sense the commodious simulation of our hyperreal commodities—that is, the hyperreal mediation rarely slips—because its simulation has spread beyond a single thing, practice, or event in question to envelope the entire relational nexus of the place itself.

Indeed it would appear that such hyperreal commodities make one last-ditch effort for a commodiousness that does not leave the consumer feeling isolated in an inherently relational world. As the saying goes, you can have your cake and eat it too; which is exactly what Emmett did. Let’s consider this claim by returning to this example.

When we reconsider this moment in 541, we see that Emmett was in place, but not of it by the sophistication of hypermodern technique. Instead of engaging with the local nexus that constitutes 541 as a place, he engaged with a simulated reality, as if suspended above the dynamic flow of people upon the concreted ground of Hamilton, at the corner of Barton and Westinghouse.
In other words, Emmett engaged with a hyperreal commodity and, through its mediation, a hyperreal place. He was in 541, but he did not know the place nor was he known by it even though he appeared to be in relationship to it. This hyperreal commodity, as I will work to explain, mediated his emplacement, the local nexus within the grand nexus of an intrinsically relational reality. Let’s begin with the 541’s showcased cheesecake.

As we are already considered (see 5.3), food has the potential to be a focal thing, one with a rich and complex margin of integration. As a focal thing, food has the ability to invite people into the nexus of a relational world, to reaffirm and strengthen the bonds that are constitutive of its relational reality. The cheesecake, the real dessert sitting in the display case that day at 541, was intrinsically connected to its local nexus. Its margin of integration, to elucidate but one thread, tied it to the creativity and skill of the chef, line cook, or volunteer who prepared, baked, and served it. But when it was abstracted and simulated by a hypermodern device as a hyperreal commodity—as a filtered Instagram—it was inhibited from participating in the relational nexus of the café because it was now a simulate. In other words, it was abstracted from the dynamic place that is 541 and offered as a consumable image in the world of social media.

Now this relational incoherence would be quite spectacular if the commodity were still characteristically modern, yet for Emmett there was no ability to distinguish the image as an abstracted commodity. In other words, he could not sense that the Instagram image in his hand was mediating his relationship to both the real cheesecake and its relational coherence, beginning within 541 and spreading outward into Hamilton and beyond. Indeed, there was a sense of ambiguity and an air of cynicism about the affair, but for Emmett, there was no capacity to discern that the image in his hand mediated a focal thing, the real dessert, and the local nexus of its emplacement, 541 café, to him as an abstract commodity.

Unknowing is the hallmark of a mediation that occurs through the consumption of hyperreal commodity, the faint silence that occurs in a world that ought to be sparking with relational connections. It is Emmett’s ignorance toward such mediation that makes me question whether a hyperreal image could mediate not only its referent, but also the margin within which the referent is connected. My concern is much like Andrew Root’s in “A Screen-Based World: Finding the Real in the Hyper-Real.” As he says of his son, “I worry that all these images will make it harder for him to construct meaning that connects to
experiences and relationships outside the image-based mediated machines themselves.”
Both our criticisms, in other words, are directed at the imperceptible overflow of an image-based world into the real.

And if this is the case, if a hyperreal image, like an Instagram photo, could mediate both referent and the real world relationships connected to it, then the mediation of one single hyperreal commodity could effectively present an entire place to its consumer, perfecting the simulated referent by perfecting its simulated margin of integration. Making the whole affair appear to be relationally meaningful, though it is only a guise for greater consumption.

This comprehensive mediation is a viable explanation because it demonstrates how a commodity could be offered without the characteristic abstraction of less sophisticated devices, the sense of contextual release. Indeed, without the sense of contextual release, an entire place could be mediated to the commodious individual and thereby decrease the chance of simulacral slippage. No longer would it be a world of hyperreal commodities, but a hyperreality that simulates a profound relational coherence.

The ruin of apathetic consumption would be ubiquitous, and yet nearly imperceptible because the device paradigm would have perfected commodious abstraction by killing the real and its genuine relationality, and then bring it back to life as one relationally coherent simulation.

Indeed if this is in fact the case, it matters little whether the Instagram image spurred Emmett to the counter, for the whole room would have been a coherent nexus of simulacra, all generated off the mediation of one filtered cheese cake. And so, when Emmett raised that mediating image from his phone it was as if the entire place was lifted up with it, suspended, if you will, above the relational nexus of “our” local café. Such is most certainly the veil of an idolatrous mediation and it might very well be occurring through technical prowess.

…

The technological paradigm mediates our relationship to place in such a way that we remain in place but not of place. As I have demonstrated, this is mediation by orientation and by technique. The former concerns the constitutive capacity of a distorted imagination and the latter concerns the consumption of hyperreal commodities. In regards to this second form of mediation, there remains much to learn, particularly about the extent to which this simulation could deceive its consumer. In other words, how seamless have our hypermodern simulations become? Indeed, in the example of Emmett, we might want to ask whether the ambiguity and cynicism he experienced was enough to break the simulation’s mediation of 541 café, or if he was yet drowning in the overflow of a simulated margin, unknowing and unknowable?

Nevertheless, both forms of mediation, whether dispositional or technical, are clear indications of idolatry’s abstraction. Both exhibit the insidious breakdown of an inherently relational world and furthermore the inability to detect this ruin. I will now turn to consider the infidelity wrought by this desire for release, demonstrating that the commodious individual suggests a graven image bearer divorced from both the covenantal yoke of place, and thus the Living God.

8.2 The Commodious Individual, a Graven Image Bearer

Faith in a paradigm of commodious release spreads infidelity in both the constituent relationships of place and ultimately in our relationship with Yahweh, the Living God. Those who keep this faith are aptly named commodious individuals and have been graven by their apathetic god. As graven image bearers they turn themselves from their role as pathetic mediators of life to embrace a half-life of apathetic religion, unknown and unknowing.

This second claim, therefore, ultimately concerns the theological implications of yoking ourselves to this paradigm’s imaginary and method. To elucidate this implication I will apply the second constitutive act of idolatry (2.2) to Clara Dollar’s article, “My So Called (Instagram) Life.” Through this second synthesis I will demonstrate that our hypermodern faith casehardens the imago Dei within place and thus to the Living God.

As we have argued, our faith in the technological paradigm abstracts us from a relational world, by engendering the local nexus of place through the mediation of both a distorted imaginary and a technique for generating hyperreality.
This faith, as we will now consider, is also effective according to the second constitutive act of idolatry: an act that forms the worshipper. Ultimately those who worship the technological paradigm, through the consumption of hyperreal commodity, become like a simulacrum, senseless and distant and thus inhibited from faithful participation in the relational pathos that befits humanity’s recovered office.

Dollar’s article provides us with an excellent example of how our social media platforms engender such a hardening, and thus distort our ability to participate in a relational world. By self-introspection she recounts how her Instagram persona overflowed into her own personality, and drastically impeded her capacity for meaningful relationships.

“There was a time,” Dollar recounts, “when I allowed myself to be more than what could fit onto a 2-by-4-inch screen. When I wasn’t so self-conscious about how I was seen. When I embraced my contradictions and desires with less fear of embarrassment or rejection.”

Dollar believes that this fear is the result of her time spent with social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. She describes this gradual turning toward insularity as change brought about through years of grooming her online presence, of making it singular.

And she succeeded. In fact, Dollar’s online presence became so unified that a follower remarked that one of her photos was “so on brand.” Her brand, as she alludes, consisted of photos, comments, likes, and followers all purposefully distilled for the sake of consistency; it became a cyber image for her.

The words and phrases Dollar uses to describe her online image are: witty, creative, “always detached,” “never cheesy or needy,” “black leather-jacket”, fun, carefree, unromantic, and “a realist.”

“I’m like the chief executive of my own company,” she says, “so I’m familiar with my branding, but its success doesn’t thrill me the way it used to. Instead of feeling validated by her [one of Dollar’s online followers] comment, I felt deflated. I barely know this girl, and

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yet she knows me, knows my “brand,” and I am overwhelmed by the desire to tell her that I am fake, that I am heartbroken.”

Dollar’s heartbreak, the underlying thread of the entire article, has to do with her inability to relate in the real world, to be known by and to know a man she calls Joe.

In her article Dollar refers to her Instagram persona as a house and as a wall. “I built her without blueprints, not knowing that she would become a wall with no doors.” Dollar’s analogy is a clear sign that she is trapped in a life devoid of pathetic interactions, those, as we have said, which seek to be understood and to understand.

For Dollar, these incoming relationships, including Joe’s, ricochet off her online presence. They do not land in any meaningful way because they are directed toward the wall that she has constructed. Whether they are comments on her Facebook wall, or likes on her latest Instagram post, these relational attempts are essentially meaningless because they don’t reach Dollar, the real, the heartbroken.

In a similar way, she also describes this inhibiting presence as a mask, or a mechanized simulate. “Clinging to continuity has made my skin crawl and itch,” she explains, “as if I super-glued a mask over my face. I thought every day about peeling back that mask, but I couldn’t; the girl it represented was everywhere, and I feared that her insides were completely mechanized.” Her feelings of simulation are not easily overcome; she can’t simply disconnect herself and return to life as it was before because it would contradict the house, wall, and mask of her persona. In other words, all her real life must be like her online life.

She describes one of her attempts to escape this distortion, the thinning of her real life, by reaching out, seeking to understand Joe through handwritten letters. “In an effort to self-soothe, I wrote letters to Joe—actual, physical letters, pen to notepad—that felt like some ancient ritual, using my whole hand and not just my thumbs.” But instead of

146 Ibid.
147 Ibid.
148 Ibid.
149 Ibid.
delivering her words, she ended up burning them, unable to go against the grain of her meticulously polished image.

And so Dollar becomes confined within her own world, distorted into the image of her online persona. As this distortion bleeds into her embodied life, Dollar can neither understand the world outside her Instagram life, that is, to reach out to Joe through letters for example, nor can she be understood since the gestures that are made toward her are really directed at the house, mask, wall, or caricatured simulate.

Now of course Dollar is in pain, certainly terrified by the prospect of becoming as singular as her online image. But the problem is this: Dollar can no longer see outside her own situation. That is, she is becoming more and more foreign in the nexus of a relational reality; increasingly insular and inward focused, with little to no outward inclination.

She is becoming hard from the outside in, and thus sensation, triggered by her malaise, is trapped within, solely directed at the self. The result, when we extrapolate to account for our entire labour thus far, suggests a commodious individual graven by an apathetic religion.

Indeed, the connections between Dollar’s Instagram life and the claims of Psalm 115, Isaiah 44, and Romans 1 are quite shocking.

Firstly, we can see that Dollar has become like the idol she worships. Her life, in a rather disturbing way, is simulated by her relationship with a social media platform set on hyperreal mediation. By spending time with these hyperreal devices (Instagram and Facebook platforms respectively) and their hyperreal commodities, she is becoming like a simulacrum herself.

Indeed, her essay tells of this transfer in many ways, demonstrating how she slowly diminished into a simulate instead of a flourishing, dynamic, and embodied human being. As Dollar explains, “I have consolidated that variety—scrubbed it away, really—to emerge as one consistently cool girl: one face, two arms, one black leather jacket.”150 In Bourdieuan fashion, she has become a distilled image living apart from its real world referent. Indeed this is the very phenomenon that concerns the second constitutive act of idolatry. But as one who

150 Ibid.
bears the role of the *imago Dei*, Dollar also becomes seriously hindered from her capacity to mediate life in place, a role that necessitates that one is known and able to know the local nexus.

And so, theologically speaking, Dollar has become distant from the nexus of a relational world and the one who created it as such; in doing so she loses faith with both. This abstraction, as she recounts, has inhibited her capacity to relate in real life, a distancing most apparent in her truncated relationship with Joe.

Now it is true, Dollar does not expand upon the other relationships that have been affected by her Instagram turned real life. Nevertheless, it takes little effort to extrapolate her experiences with Joe to the constituent bonds of place. When we make this connection it is quite easy to see that Dollar’s distorted image would also inhibit her from relating within the bonds of place.

For instance, Dollar would most certainly be unknown to the human community in the places that she frequents. They would, like Joe, experience the consolidated Dollar, not the real, dynamic, and at times contradictory Dollar capable of vulnerability and pathetic intimacy. How Dollar’s Instagram life inhibits her from being known by the ground is a little more mysterious, but still a question worth pursuing. We might say, for instance, that Dollar is unknown to the ground because her life favours relationships that operate on immediacy. The ground, however, moves with the seasons and therefore is much slower. We might imagine that the ground requires more time then she can offer it.

On the other hand, Dollar would also be greatly inhibited from reaching out in these relationships. She would certainly lack the capacity to know the human community, for all her relationships would be filtered through a quality control checklist: will this interaction make me look cheesey or needy, yes or no; will I appear too romantic if I buy flowers from this florist, yes or no; can I go out to the movies without my black leather jacket, yes or no? Indeed such a constant censoring would leave no space for spontaneity or gravity in her daily interactions with the people that inhabit the same places as her. And in terms of her relationship with the land, Dollar would have a difficult time simply being in a location without posting it online as a filtered commodity. Indeed taking time to sit in a park, or to walk up and down Main Street with no destination or objective would be a challenge for Dollar. As we said, getting to know the geological and social contours that make up the
ground takes a great deal of patience and sensitivity; the ground must be listened to, and it is certainly not going to massage her ego with an insistent stream of chatter as a follower would.

These are but a few examples of how Dollar is unable to live into her role as a representative of and participant in the pathetic relationality of Yahweh. We might describe her predicament in the language of the psalmist, Isaiah, and Paul insofar as she has been casehardened in the local nexus that constitutes her place of embodied mediation.

Indeed casehardened, or apathetic, image bearers like Dollar, those whose role is intrinsically relational, are greatly impeded in their ability to mediate life because they are unknown and unknowing in the places they live. They are like cast images, with eyes that do not see, hands that do not hold, ears that do not listen, and faces that do not express. They, like cultic effigies, are in place, but not of it and so are unfit as pathetic mediators of life. The unconscious corollary of this hardness is the mediation of death.

Thus far we have followed our faith in the technological paradigm along the contours of the third and second constitutive acts of idolatry. By concentrating our efforts on hypermodern devices that make hyperreal commodities readily available we have argued that such a faith engenders both the world and the worshipper and thus spreads infidelity in both the constituent bonds of place and so ultimately in our relationship with Yahweh, the Living God. Our final synthesis, therefore, will consider the death that such a misplaced faith mediates.

8.3 Death by Simulation

Death is the breakdown of relationality within the nexus of a relational world. It is, again, the dissonance that runs along an otherwise harmonious nexus of symbiotic bonds when image bearers forsake their role as mediators of life. When such discord is issued from an act of idolatry with hyperreal implications, it is most correctly identified as a death by simulation. Such is the dead end of idolatry in our current context, a postmortem simulation that begins with the image bearer and then moves out towards the local nexus of place.
In order to amend the dichotomy created between a death that is “spiritual” and a death that is “natural,” I will begin this final synthesis with an analogy. By it I hope to blur the borders of this polarity and thereby elucidate an understanding of death that is more holistic, and thus more explicitly concerned with its capacity to diminish, and finally end, the *imago Dei* capacity for pathetic relationality.

There is a striking similarity between the death of dementia and the death of idolatry. Both are devastatingly apparent in the slow diminishment of the image bearer’s capacity to know and to be known in place. Death then, in all its manifestations, so called polarities of “spiritual” and “natural,” always results in the diminishment and finally loss of a pathetic orientation within the nexus of a relational world.

This similarity occurred to me as I read John Terpstra’s book, *The House with the Parapet Wall*; a creative memoir about the death of his mother, Anna. Consider Terpstra’s words as they relate to this last synthesis.

Events slowly progressed. As she reached the end of being able to speak, it came to the point where Mom could vocalize only single sentences. There were two which she regularly repeated. One she said in Dutch, her birth language: *Ik weet niets*. This translates into, ‘I know nothing.’ The other was in her adopted tongue: ‘I don’t know where I am.’ Both sentences were uttered in acute distress.

“I know nothing” and “I don’t know where I am.” These words could have easily come from Dollar’s essay, whose diminishment has much in common with Anna’s. Both women are caught in the distress of losing their capacity for relationality, their humanly office as *imago Dei*. Both, in some meaningful sense, are dying as mediators of life.

And so, whether slow or abrupt, whether “spiritual”, “natural,” or some form in-between, we ought to say that death always dead-ends the divine image bearer’s ability to mediate life. It always inhibits our capacity to be representatives of and participants in the pathetic relationality of Yahweh, the Living God. In other words, it ceases a human’s propensity to know and be known with the posture of affectionate concern. And this is the very loss that Anna felt throughout the process of her diminishment—indeed a loss that eventually catches up to all of us.

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Terpstra recalls a time when his mother ruined her glasses, frustrated by her inability to understand what was happening to her. In his telling Terpstra makes a direct reference to the Hebrew Scriptures, “Those twisted frames were an anguished psalm of lament. For if my eyes see but no longer comprehend what they see, what good are they?”

Now, Terpstra may not have been thinking about the constitutive nature of idolatry when he made that allusion, but I was. And it drew me further into the implications of this connection. It made me wonder at the many points of contact both types of death, spiritual, natural, and otherwise, have with each other. It made me realize that death is ultimately about the loss of relationality.

And thus we lament with Anna. In the throes of our own death, we join her, saying: “What good are our eyes if they see but no longer comprehend what they see?

Indeed this is the anguish that we are experiencing today, the veil of anxiety that causes us to throw down our glasses in frustration. If I can no longer meaningfully see my place in the world, what good are they? We squint our eyes, pique our ears, and strain our vocal cords, but the statements always come out in the singular: “I don’t know where I am”…”I know nothing.”

This is the death of this last synthesis, the simulacra diminishment we experience because of our apathetic faith. It is the unease and challenge that Arthur Boers noted; the rot of autonomy detected by Bob Goudzwaard; the cynicism of Emmett at 541; the “water” of David Foster Wallace; the deterrence machine that is Jean Baudrillard’s postmodern theory; the sprawl of which Arcade Fire sings; the new world waste land according to Mike Hranica; the consumer society of David Lyons; Langdon Gilkey’s “autumnal chill” turned “cultural winter” by Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh; the homesickness of Odysseus; and the symbolic power of Clara Dollar’s “Black Leather Jacket.” Indeed this nagging layer of disingenuous contact is pervasive in the West; a sense that we are living simulated lives, starving and thirsty for relationship in the high waters of commodious simulation.

This death, therefore, is the end of a distorted image bearer, one simulated in accordance with a faith that hopes in the release of hyperreal mediation. When we trust in

\[152\] Ibid., 142 [his emphasis].
this paradigm we begin to image it. And thus, when the *imago Dei* diminishes so also does our affectionate contact with place. Our relationship to the local nexus, therefore, becomes apathetic instead of pathetic as our capacity to know and to be known dwindles. It is through this distortion that divine image bearers give up their mediatory role to commodious simulations. We make this exchange for the sake of consumptive release, though it is never truly realized.

And thus, in place but not of place, we become like the “self-referential” images we worship. Like our hyperreal commodities, we become suspended over a dying referent, the *imago Dei*, and thus senseless to and distant from the world and our place in it. We become highly individualistic, self-centered, and mercenary, as do our ailments; today cancers are compounded by new and numerous diagnoses of mental illness that mix to kill our society from the inside out. We are experiencing a death by simulation.

Nevertheless, no matter how hardened we become, no matter how great the simulation may appear, we will always remain tethered to this world through our locale. And thus it is upon these strings that death reverberates out to the nexus, an open chord of negligence.

The corollary to our death, therefore, is the death of our local nexus of place. This collateral breakdown spreads into the local nexus of place, as we said (see 3.3), by an unconscious mediation.

As we considered earlier in this essay (see 1.2), it is by our faithful mediation that the life of the Living God is spread throughout the whole nexus. As those who are created *imago Dei*, and faithful to its reappointment, we reflect the pathetic relationality of Yahweh by being yoked to a place. But when we leave this recovered faith and forsake the gift of our salvation (see 1.3) we make way for the spread of death. We are insensate conduit for its transmission.

In our current context of hyperreal devices and hyperreal commodities, death comes to place by simulation. As we noted, the constituent bonds of the ʿāḏām-ʿāḏāmāh and the ʿīš-ʿīšāh relationships have been engendered by both a habituated imagination and a hypermodern technique. Both of these inhibit a viable relationship through which life could be mediated. In other words, the bonds are left unattended on account of an apathetic orientation. Our places, therefore, begin to diminish under the spread of consumptive habits.
and simulacra alike. The cries of the ground are neglected and the people turn further into themselves.

Yet there are ways and opportunities for us to return to the covenantal yoke of place, fissures in the simulacra that we might exploit for the sake of ministering within our ghettoized locales.

Perhaps one of the preeminent slippages can be found in the growing acknowledgement of an impending ecological collapse. Such a collapse, if it were to occur, would be a form of dead end negligence *par excellence*; the epilogue to a long narrative of place based apathy.

Indeed “global warming” is an unfortunate misnomer, as distant to our concern as a deteriorating ozone layer. But when a diminishing nexus is detected at the local level, like droughts, flash floods, population drop offs, milder winters, unpredictable ice conditions, etc., then we have tangible experiences with which to act pathetically. They awake us from our simulacral slumber.

Indeed, the moment we experience this reality, when we hold the death of our place in the world and do not avert our gaze, is the moment pathetic concern is rekindled. And we will certainly suffer the reality of our failures, but at least it will be spread along the bonds of place and not endlessly hang within the self. Indeed they are labour pains, and thus inherently relational. These contractions are antithetical to our apathetic diminishment. They signal the birth of something new and by them we return to our role as mediators of life.

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Still the simulations of our hyperreal world are relentless. They are always filling in the gaps, smoothing over, for example, the ecological diminishment that is showing up in our local communities.

“And that’s why I recycle and compost diligently,” you might say. The problem, however, is that street-side recycling and composting is but another form of hyperreal mediation, another practice commodiously simulated within its margin of integration, and thus another inroad for death.

Indeed, the device of our waste management system has simulated the real focal practice of tending a household economy, offering a simulacrum in its place. The commodity that mediates the infinite demands and opportunities of household thrift is a distilled option
for disposal—garbage, recyclables, and compostable. Such hyperreal mediation simulates stewardship and keeps us from detecting the idolatry at hand, our commodious individualism. The mediation makes no relational demands on our lives. In no way does it rebuke our avarice, or challenge us to be resourceful, imaginative, and creative.

Indeed these three bins represent another projection of commodious mediation, desensitizing us from the relational demands and opportunities of a dynamic household without our awareness. In a word, they provide a disposable technique for our disposable habits.

And so diligently separating the glass from the plastics and the paper plates from the table scraps is not going to get us into place, not going to expose the simulation of our image and of our world. Nevertheless Paul’s words to the church in Rome stir my imagination: “The deep desire of the creation awaits the uncovering of the daughters and sons of God.”

If we are to receive the gift of our salvation, the gift of being reappointed as divine image bearers, then we must live a focal life. We must learn the grounding of focal things, practices, and events. Such a life draws the veil of simulacra from our eyes, awakening us to the nexus and our humble place in it.

9 Living Into Focus Under the Covenantal Yoke of Place

What is home?

I guess when it comes down to it
it’s not where you are but who it is you know.¹⁵⁴

Tim sings as he plays his guitar in our living room at 50 Colbourne. I’m passing by for the kitchen with an air of overstated purpose, my voice trailing down the hall as I go, “they’re not mutually exclusive, Tim!” “Don’t be a smart-ass, Rob,” he calls back. We both laugh, I from the kitchen and he from the living room.

¹⁵³ Rom. 8:19 [my translation].
Indeed, where you are is whom you know and who knows you. This is what it means to be both in and of place. Such knowledge is the grain of the covenental yoke of place and it runs the length of its beam, making it beautiful, making it strong. To be known and to know, therefore, is the blessing and goal of living under this marriage. The final work of this thesis will be a section to put in the plow and cultivate the nexus of a relational reality. In it I intend to give an introduction to focal things, practices and events.

We have already met a smattering of these things, practices, and events throughout this essay. The shovel, a thing that can be used for the event of committing a loved one to the ground; a path, a thing that brings us into the contours of the land it meanders through; the evening meal, an event that brings people and the ground together through the sharing of prepared food; a dinner table, a thing that places us all on the same level to share a meal; a woodstove or fireplace, both things that demand our attention and certain amount of finesse, offering warmth, conviviality, and a place to cook; traditional navigation, a practice that requires patience, trust, a sense of direction, and the lay of the land; a dessert and a good strong cup of coffee, both things to be shared in a local café; and managing a household economy, a practice that makes us sensitive to the demands and opportunities inherent in homemaking.

To conclude this essay I will elaborate on three ways I have pursued focal living in my own life. I do not, by this brief account, intend to provide a method for distinguishing what makes a thing different from a practice, or different from an event, but to contour for you the characteristics that make them “focal.” As Boers claims, “Focal has to do with being focused and centered on what is meaningful.”155 In his book, Living Into Focus, Boers fleshes out qualities such as “awe inspiring,” “connective,” and “orientating.” And Borgmann, from whom Boers applies these characteristics, says, “Commanding presence, continuity with the world, and centering power are signs of focal things. They are not warrants, however. Focal things warrant themselves. To present them is never more than to recall them.”156 And so in recalling my own experience, I mean only to provide a fire starter,

155 Boers, Living Into Focus: Choosing What Matters In An Age of Distractions, 12.
156 Borgmann, Crossing the Postmodern Divide, 119.
a spark for your imagination, in order that you too may discover what focal living looks like in the particularity of your own place. And so let’s begin with a focal thing.

The bicycle has captured my imagination since I was a child. For me, it has become a focal thing. I can recall a conversation I had with my parents when I was a young teenage boy obsessed with everything BMX. I don’t know what our conversation was about, but I remember my mother saying with some exasperation: “What are you going to do when you get married and your wife wants to buy a car, do you think you’re going to ride your bike forever?” For some reason this memory always comes to me as I commute through the city of Hamilton on the Cannon St. bike lane.

There is something beautifully simple about a bike. One frame; one saddle; two wheels, cranks, and peddles; and a handle bar. It’s pretty straightforward mechanically, most problems can be fix with minimal tools and some know how.

And a bike really gets you into place. You can feel the rise and fall of the land you are traveling through in your lungs and in your legs. Riding gives you the sense that you are actually attached to your place. Terpstra writes well of a similar embodied attention. He describes the eye of an artist, “feeling its way over the landscape like the hand of a blind person over another person’s features, with the same depth of sensory attention. Toward that other kind of knowing. The Landscape, like the felt body, entering into the consciousness by a different route.”¹⁵⁷ I often find this sensory attention applicable to riding a bike. Terpstra’s words come often to me as I ride along between the Iroquois Bar and Burlington Bay, the latter, a geological formation of the last ice age and his primary muse in Falling Into Place.

My bike, a Devinci Caribou, also has many memories attached to it. It is, for me, a tangible connection to the places I have cycled through and the people who call those places home. It dried out in Matt and Heidi’s garage in Wawa, ON after a full day of rain; spent nearly two months in Nova Scotia, making day trips into Chester with Jamie, Chris and Tracy from a little cabin on Gold River; and twice I have used it to roll up and down Roger’s

¹⁵⁷ John Terpstra, Falling into Place, (Kentville, NS: Gaspereau Press, 2002), 73.
Pass in British Columbia, once with my Dad and Kevin, and once when Bennett, Kevin and I cycled cross-country from Halifax to Vancouver.

Indeed, the bike is a focal thing and it has brought me closer to the places through which I ride it. Out of all the characteristics which Borgmann and Boers use to hedge these things, practices, and events, I would attribute continuity and connectivity to my bike.

Living in a household with five other people has also brought great continuity to my life, along with many challenges. I have found that washing dishes by hand has become a focal practice for me, one that centers me within the relational reciprocity of 50 Colbourne.

There is sacramental finesse to dishwashing, though everyone does it differently. Personally, I manage the water by starting with a sink that is only a quarter full. I allow the tap to run with warm water, which gradually fills the sink as I go. I start with the cutlery because I know they need the cleanest water, having been inside my housemate’s mouths, and because they won’t gray the water. I take my time, scrubbing each item individually. From there I move to cups because they too have been raised to my housemates mouths. I wipe each rim like a priest who wipes the rim of the communion chalice. Moving onto the plates and bowls, I watch for the tell tale signs of whose plate I’m washing and adjust my body posture accordingly. This one is caked with grease, Simon’s from a couple nights past. It goes under and comes up, buried and raised to new life. Ah, and here’s another, covered in ketchup; Tim’s for sure. I bury it in the same way and up it comes. I stand it in the rack with Simon’s, but it falls on his and so I leave them as they are. And I move on, now to the odds and ends. Amanda’s blender dried out over night leaving a film of smoothie high on its side, but it doesn’t bother me; I’ve hit my stride and the sink is about half full. I use the brush for the first time, mainly because I am aware of the blades at the bottom. Now to the pot and pan. Jamie cooked this evening; she and Amanda are out finishing their coffee, Matt has gone to his room and Tim is out for soccer. Pot goes in first and I scrub. The sink is three quarters full after I’ve finished all of the cook wear, minus the cast iron. I drain the sink and dump the French Press grinds down, a natural drain cleaner for some. A gentle rinse of the cast iron and then it is onto the stove to dry, the water and leftover grease snapping and cracking. I wash my own hands and wipe them on the towel I have hanging on my shoulder. This is how I wash if there is no one to dry, which I don’t mind that much since it gives me time to tend the matters at hand.
Indeed this practice has a power that is more than the action of simply cleaning up. It has become something that is accomplished more for my own sake than for my housemates, although they certainly do receive something from movements of this repetitive task. To use Borgmann’s phrase, dishwashing is a practice with a commanding presence of which I take to intuitively. There is something great that happens during my time at the kitchen sink, and whatever it is, it draws me into the mysterious nexus that is our home.

My final source of focus occurs in the place where I grew up. Before moving to Hamilton, my home was the country that surrounds the small town of Elmvale, ON. On Orr Lake, ten minutes north east of this small town, every New Years morning the Miller and the Peca families hold an annual gathering to bring in the New Year, and to be the first ones in the lake. I would consider this Polar Bear Dip to be a focal event.

Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, the Orr Lake Polar Bear Dip engages your senses. It makes you feel alive. Whether standing over that black hole, an ethereal door way framed by white, before the jump, or in the water and clinging to the ladder for dear life, or standing around in a wet, yet warm, snow suit with rest of your fellow crazy kin, you most certainly feel alive.

But it also connects you to the lake in some strange way. That is, you clear its snowy cover, and open it up, exposing the waters that are only seen during the other three seasons of the year. It’s an odd feeling. It’s intimate, and I’ve found myself feeling shy around the nakedness of it, indeed almost relieved, in a way privileged to have enjoyed it. Afterwards, we shut the water back in for another three months, pulling the ice doors up from underneath the lip and floating them back into position.

But this focal event also has a centering power to it insofar as it keeps me, and now Jamie, connected to the lake’s geography and the people who inhabit it. After we’ve all taken our turn and the lake has been left to sleep, the troupe heads to either the Peca’s or the Miller’s for a New Years post-dip party. We have chili that was put in the slow cooker the night before and pair it with a couple varieties of chicken wings that Paul Peca has prepared. The theme of the meal is spice, as you can imagine, and we usually toast with a shot of liquor that goes down warm.

As we feast, the stories begin to flow, as they always do when Paul and Tom Peca are apart of the event. We regale each other about it all and without fail someone tells the story
of the first dip, which resulted in Paul and Rory, his oldest son, jumping into a lake that was frozen with a layer of ice as thick as a pane of glass. They were so cut up that they might as well have jumped through a window. But it was so cold that the blood barely ran, at least that’s how they tell it. I was on the shore that day and I don’t recall any blood, but neither do I recall the cuts.

We photograph the event. I can watch us age in those pictures. It is quite astounding actually. My brother and I grew up with the Peca boys. When we first started jumping we were wiry teenagers. Now we are grown men. And although we don’t see each other often, the annual Orr Lake Polar Bear Dip draws us from our separate cities, converges our meeting on some moving point out on the frozen water in front of the Cassell’s place and there, with our fathers, we act like boys again.

... 

In order to recover the covenantal yoke of place we will need to live into focus by participating with focal things, practices, and events. In a world that has lost its sense of place, adrift on the high waters of a hyperreal existence, my bicycle, the sacrament of dishwashing, and the Orr Lake Polar Dip have drawn me into the affections of place. I can say with a humble assurance that I know and am known under this yoke and by it I work out what it means to be reappointed as a mediator of Yahweh the Living God. And the bells on my collar ring out life.


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