

*"Never satisfied are the eyes of man."*

# COMPETING SPECTACLES

Treasuring Christ in the Media Age



*TONY REINKE*

“Thirty years after Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Tony Reinke’s *Competing Spectacles* takes the impact-analysis of modern media to new levels. The conception of this book is not cavalier; it is rooted in the profound biblical strategy of sanctification by seeing (2 Cor. 3:18). The spectacle of Christ’s glory is ‘the central power plant of Christian sanctification.’ Ugly spectacles make us ugly. Beautiful spectacles make us beautiful. Reinke is a good guide in how to deflect the damaging effects of digital images ‘in anticipation of a greater Sight.’”

**John Piper**, Founder and Teacher, [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org); Chancellor, Bethlehem College & Seminary; author, *Desiring God*

“This book shows us how to pull our eyes away from the latest viral video or our digital avatars of self and toward the ‘spectacle’ before which we often cringe and wince: the crucifixion of our Lord. That’s the spectacle we need.”

**Russell D. Moore**, President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

“*Competing Spectacles* not only diagnoses our distorted vision; it prescribes spectacles that give us twenty-twenty spiritual vision. Essential reading.”

**Sinclair B. Ferguson**, Chancellor’s Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

“As a millennial who desires to abide in Christ while simultaneously engaging culture, I found this book incredibly helpful. The world seeks to captivate our attention through an endless stream of distractions, but Reinke encourages us to revive our hearts to the spectacle of Christ. I walked away encouraged to gaze upon the glory of the gospel, knowing it will reverberate through me and empower me to walk in Christlikeness.”

**Hunter Beless**, Host, *Journeywomen* podcast

“Leaning on Scripture as the lens through which we view this digital age, Tony Reinke communicates in brilliantly lucid prose a proposal for how we can glorify our unseen Savior in this world full of sensory diversions.”

**Bruce Riley Ashford**, Professor of Theology and Culture, Dean of Faculty, and Provost, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“If this book helps readers to digitally detox and to unplug from all sources of media that threaten to drown us in noise and to rob us of the capacity to attend to the things that truly enable us to flourish as human beings, then it will only have begun to do its good work.”

**W. David O. Taylor**, Assistant Professor of Theology and Culture, Fuller Theological Seminary

“How to navigate the Christian life in a media-saturated culture feels more confusing than ever. Tony Reinke provides a dose of desperately needed clarity.”

**Jaquelle Crowe**, author, *This Changes Everything: How the Gospel Transforms the Teen Years*

“Tony Reinke issues a grace-filled and prophetic call to examine ourselves as we navigate through a world of endless entertainment, spectacle, and distraction.”

**Trevin Wax**, Director for Bibles and Reference, LifeWay Christian Resources; author, *This Is Our Time; Eschatological Discipleship; and Gospel-Centered Teaching*

“*Competing Spectacles* can guide us back to reality, honesty, and calm, as we lift our eyes humbly to the Crucified One and pray, ‘Please show me your glory.’”

**Ray Ortlund**, Lead Pastor, Immanuel Church, Nashville, Tennessee

“Tony Reinke offers a succinct exposé of the threat that our image-saturated society poses to faith and to wisdom. We’ll do well to heed his message.”

**Craig M. Gay**, Professor, Regent College; author, *Modern Technology and the Human Future* and *The Way of the (Modern) World*

COMPETING  
SPECTACLES

## **Other Crossway books by Tony Reinke**

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*Lit: A Christian Guide to Reading Books* (2011)

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

# COMPETING SPECTACLES

Treasuring Christ in the Media Age

Tony Reinke

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

—Colossians 3:1

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

—Proverbs 27:20

O that I might see the joy that I desire.

—Anselm



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**PART 1**

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**THE AGE OF THE SPECTACLE**

## S1: LIFE INSIDE THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

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

To this cultural phenomenon I raise my objection.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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2. Well yes, technically, they could have been endnotes in the back, but I'm a footnote guy.

3. No, really, ignore them.

4. Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet-Chast, 1967).

## S2: SPECTACLES DEFINED

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

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

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

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1. Robinson Meyer, “The Grim Conclusions of the Largest-Ever Study of Fake News,” [theatlantic.com](http://theatlantic.com), March 8, 2018.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### S3: DISTRACTED SPECTACLE SEEKERS

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

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

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

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

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1. John Piper, twitter.com, April 12, 2017.

2. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 35.

3. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1890), 1:402–58.

4. *Ibid.*, 404.

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

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

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5. *Ibid.*, 402; emphasis added.

6. *Ibid.*, 424.

## S4: IMAGE IS EVERYTHING

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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5. Alastair Roberts, “The Strangeness of the Modern Mind,” December 7, 2017, [alastairadversaria.com](http://alastairadversaria.com).

## **§5: THE SPECTACLE OF THE SELF IN SOCIAL MEDIA**

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

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

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

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1. Thomas de Zengotita, “We Love Screens, Not Glass,” [theatlantic.com](http://theatlantic.com), March 12, 2014.

2. *Ibid.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Well, only gaming comes close.

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5. de Zengotita, “We Love Screens, Not Glass.”

## S6: THE SPECTACLE OF THE SELF IN GAMING

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

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

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1. Thomas de Zengotita, “We Love Screens, Not Glass,” [theatlantic.com](http://theatlantic.com), March 12, 2014.

2. *Ibid.*

3. When one NBA player was asked to compare the thrill of a recent video game victory in Fortnite (a survival game against up to 99 other competitors) to the thrill of winning a NCAA college basketball championship two years earlier as the

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

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

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

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

## **S7: SPECTACLES OF TELE-VISION**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## S8: SPECTACLES OF MERCHANDISE

The rise of both video spectacles and marketed consumables is no accidental marriage. Images capture our attention and lure us because they implicitly ask us to try on various costumes of identity, to envision how a product will craft our appearance in the eyes of others. And this manicured persona goes far deeper than cosmetics and clothing; it's the drive behind much of our consumable goods.

Chanon Ross describes the link between spectacle and consumption with the illustration of a mall shopper. "When a consumer enters the shopping mall, her senses are engaged by a panoply of stimuli designed to intoxicate. Images, music, scents, and products swirl together in a whirlwind of desire. The consumer does not have to want anything before entering the shopping mall because it is designed to cultivate desire *for her*, and it provides her with the products she needs to consummate the desire it has produced."<sup>1</sup> In our search to shape the formless blob of self-identity, we turn to new products. But outside the mall, the enchanted magic begins to lift, and soon the wardrobe looks drab. When it does, "purse in hand, she heads off once again to the shopping mall, and the cycle of de-intensification begins anew." The spectacle promises to give us an image others in the same culture will identify and appreciate, if we buy the right products. The promise is that "through his purchasing power, the consumer is able

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1. All quotations in this paragraph are from Chanon Ross, *Gifts Glittering and Poisoned: Spectacle, Empire, and Metaphysics* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 89–91.

to rise above the material world and experience himself as a transcendent being.” But real life hits, and we feel our humanity, our fallenness, and the vanity of pleasure seeking in this world. The dull pangs of our emptied heart lure us back into the mall for more goods. But “ever-greater spectacles must be produced” to attract our attention. “Images must be more vivid, violence even more excessive, reality television more outrageous, political campaigns more dramatic, and so on.” In this age of the de-intensifying spectacle, we must find fresher and brasher spectacles to recapture our prone-to-wander gaze.<sup>2</sup>

Spectacles of the advertisers are meant, like the mall, to awaken new desires within us that previously didn’t exist until the lack of a consumer good was identified as the cause. The advertising spectacle “serves not so much to advertise products as to promote consumption as a new way of life.”<sup>3</sup> Advertising spectacles create new itches inside us that can be scratched only by the next consumable good. The main function of the advertiser is “to awaken desire; to create, not to gratify thirst; to provoke a sense of lack and

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2. Undergirding reality TV ratings is an “inhibition of shame,” as contestants and producers are willing to do more and more bizarre things, says David Foster Wallace. In a post-shame world, it matters little if a controversial show draws wide scorn or rebuke, because “even if viewers are sneering or talking about in what poor taste stuff is, they’re still watching, and that the key is to get people to watch, and that that’s what’s remunerative. Once we lost that shame hobble, only time will tell how far we’ll go.” Stephen J. Burn, ed., *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, Literary Conversations (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 132. People still tune in to see what they can only scoff and scorn, and on this basis even more absurdly premised reality TV shows are born.

3. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1991), 72.

craving by giving us the apparent presence of something and taking it away in the same gesture.”<sup>4</sup> The advertiser’s goal is to “create an anxiety relievable by purchase.”<sup>5</sup> A spectacle puts before our eyes an object of desire, provoking a new longing for satisfaction in the thing or the experience, and then swiftly tugs the object away from us, leaving us with a new thirst, a new craving, that must be quenched in the purchasing of the thing or experience.

Advertising spectacles build powerful habits within us and make us endlessly restless buyers who crave the power to change our lives and our surroundings with another trip to the mall. The blob of the autonomous self is promised a new identity in a shiny new exoskeleton—a new consumable good to complete us and give us form in the world, to shape the identity we want to project to others. So we become self-consumed consumers—autonomous buyers whose lives are given new shape and form by the next thing we add to our Amazon shopping cart.

For years, consumer products were validated by an “As seen on TV!” sticker. Visual spectacles substantiate consumables, and they still do. Ads work best the more people see them, and this is why we see the same ads cycle over and over and over. Ads are potent not merely because they reach a lot of eyes but because they shape how an entire culture views a product, a phenomenon called *cultural imprinting*. “Advertisers have power because goods that

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4. W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 80.

5. David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2006), 414.

have an image associated with the mass spectacle register publicly as having a particular meaning,” says theologian Alastair Roberts. “Seeing an ad privately is nowhere near as powerfully effective as seeing an ad in Super Bowl coverage, as in the latter case we know that everyone else has seen the same image and it has registered in the public awareness. Advertising and the spectacle feed into a culture of mutual display.”<sup>6</sup> Every ad attempts to form a new longing within me, but the most prominent ads imprint a specific good as universally meaningful to us all. Then if I buy this marketed *thing*, I can assume that the whole culture will view me in a certain light.

In these ways the age of spectacles and the age of consumables merge naturally. Bluntly put, in the words of one theologian, our age is “a remarkably shrill and glaring reality, a dazzling chaos of the beguilingly trivial and terrifyingly atrocious, a world of ubiquitous mass media and constant interruption, a ceaseless storm of artificial sensations and appetites, an interminable spectacle whose only unifying theme is the imperative to acquire and spend.”<sup>7</sup> Behind the age of the spectacle is the age of consumption. Fed by a diet of sugary sensational candy and cultural imprinting, we gain new appetites for the world we see, as we lose our taste for the unseen. And this is no random process. All our appetites and longings are disciplined by the

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6. Alastair Roberts, personal email, March 10, 2018, shared with permission. See also Kevin Simler, “Ads Don’t Work That Way,” *meltingasphalt.com*, September 18, 2014.

7. David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 329.

world's spectacles so they can be pacified by an industry that reduces our desires to the newest goods and the next vacation and the latest consumer technology.

Spectacles make demands on us—they want our self-image, our time, our outrage, our attention, our hearts, our wallets, and, of course, our votes.

*“Thirty years after Neil Postman’s Amusing  
Ourselves to Death, this book takes the  
impact-analysis of modern media to a new level.”*

**JOHN PIPER**, Founder and Teacher, [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org)

*What images should I feed my eyes?* We often leave this question unanswered—because we don’t ask it. Maybe we don’t want to ask it. But viral videos, digital images, and other spectacles surround us in every direction—competing for our time, our attention, our lust, and our money. So we let our lazy eyes feed on whatever comes our way. As a result, we never stop to consider the consequences of our visual diet on our habits, desires, and longings.

Journalist Tony Reinke asked these hard questions himself—critiquing his own habits—and now invites us along to see what he discovered as he investigated the possibilities and the pitfalls of our image-centered world. In the end, he shares the beauty of a Greater Spectacle—capable of centering our souls, filling our hearts, and stabilizing our gaze in this age of the digital spectacle.

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*“Reinke has proven to be a wise guide  
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incredibly helpful.”*

**HUNTER BELESS**

host, *Journeywomen* podcast

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