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Pushing the pictorial turn: Mitchell, Benjamin, and religion online

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PUSHING THE PICTORIAL TURN: MITCHELL, BENJAMIN, AND RELIGION ONLINE

ABSTRACT

This thesis asserts a visual ontology as a way of understanding religious practice online.
W.J.T Mitchell argues twenty-first century humanities are shifting away from text and towards an interest in the meaning of images. However, he denies digital images a place within this pictorial turn, judging them banal. Mitchell's theorization of new media is a postmodern rereading of Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". I argue that Mitchell's utilization of Benjamin's *aura* in his constructions of the human relationship to new media misinterprets the role of these technologies in relating the image to the object, and that digital images should be rethought in terms of a visual ontology.

The study of religion online has flourished as a subfield parallel to the increasing utilization of visual-digital media. Cross-disciplinary study of religion online reflects vast but methodologically shallow scholarship. Recent publications make an effort to deepen these theoretical investments, as the accumulated scholarship becomes self-reflexive. This thesis contributes both Mitchell's picture theory and the exploration of a visual ontology to this new methodology.

As human interaction within digital media becomes predominantly visually based, there comes a need for parallel theorization of visually based being. Tensile interactions between text and image go beyond the metaphor of the "living image" and become towards a new way of being. Second Life, an inhabitable virtual world, exercises Mitchell's tension between text and image, as both struggle to delimit means of experience. New object/image/text/picture orientations in virtual worlds like Second Life, particularly in its religious spaces, consequently create new ways of being human within the visual-digital culture. Largely a re-reading of Mitchell and the deployment of his theory across the images of Second Life, this essay finds that Benjamin's ideas of disembodied reproduction and the aura as lost through mechanical intervention fade as visual media becomes lived in and expressed outwardly as the avatar.

PUSHING THE PICTORIAL TURN: MITCHELL, BENJAMIN, AND RELIGION ONLINE

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M.A. THESIS

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INTRODUCTION

New media has digitized the aesthetics of being human. Practices of being online in visual mediums reorient perceptions of identity, community and geography. This *visual ontology* is a reaction to a cultural pictorial turn. A reinvestment in the vitality of images converging with the advent of the digital-graphical mediation of the internet results in a new birth for the living image. Religious peoples and organizations have broadened possibilities for perception by inhabiting these digital-graphical mediums, practicing in virtual worlds like Second Life. Academic study of online religious practices reflects long-held anxieties surrounding humanity and the technological apparatus, filled with at first expectation, then cynic disappointment. Current scholars are rehearsing methodologies moving across disciplines. Engaging W.J.T. Mitchell's method of "picturing theory" with a reading of Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" this present thesis contributes to this movement of scholarship. I argue that to fully understand practices of being in digital media, we must elaborate a concept of *visual ontology*.

W.J.T. Mitchell (art, media and literary theorist and editor of *Critical Inquiry*) argues that a cultural "linguistic turn" has been replaced by a "pictorial turn". Cultural valuations have shifted away from text and language and towards pictures and images. The pictorial turn is "the realization that while the problem of pictorial representation has always been with us, it presses inescapably now, and with unprecedented force, on every level of culture, from the most refined philosophical speculations to the most vulgar productions of mass media" (*Picture Theory* 16). *Picture Theory* is a method towards

discovering what pictures *are*: "The simplest way to put this is to say that, in what is often characterized as an age of "spectacle" (Guy Debord), "surveillance" (Foucault) and all-pervasive image making, we still do not know exactly what pictures are, what their relation to language is, how they operate on observers and on the world, how their history is to be understood, and what is to be done with or about them"(*Picture Theory* 13). A network of relationships between images, bodies and institutions constitutes Mitchell's investment in the problem of pictorial representation in the contemporary moment.

Religion scholars are asking parallel questions of materiality and the image. The *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* observes "There are today several discussions from different disciplines especially focusing on sensual and bodily aspects which to some extent cross over seamlessly to discussions on 'aesthetics'. Most prominent is probably the 'visual culture debate' and – in Religious Studies – the debate on 'Material Religion'" (4.1: 3). Works by Morgan (2007), Plate (2005), Latour (2002) Braiterman (2007) and others deal with visual consequences of and for religious practice. The materiality of digital mediums at the intersection of aesthetics and religion is contested. "Cyber religion", "religion online" "online religion" "digital religion" and "religion and new media" designate a maturing subfield within Religious Studies also investigating these questions. Essential to this subfield are problems of authenticity, temporality, spatiality and interactivity. Scholars outside of the discipline –sociology, anthropology and communication and media studies - concurrently invest in questions of embodiment and community. While methodologies range, these elemental concerns remain constant.

Anxieties surrounding the positioning and preservation of humanity in relation to new image making technologies lead back to Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". His essay imbues aesthetics of religion[1] , cultural media studies, and (in focus here) the work of W.J.T. Mitchell. The 1936 essay's inspirational and enigmatic contribution to this history is the concept of aura. It is ideal, sacred and wholly distant. *Aura* radiates authenticity and originality - not conveying perpetual wholeness, but rather historical situation. Originality is not a condition of value, but of continuity. *Aura* functions as the indicator of originality, not as originality itself. Authenticity is an accumulation of time. Perceiving *aura* is perceiving immediately this aggregated historical distance. This distance is metaphysical[2], manifested as a sense of majesty, awe and sacrality. Within the present project, *aura* congregates definitional language from Benjamin to Mitchell to construct a new origin of such emanation, human being as the original image.

Within the reach of aura - at its point of perception - is a mode of existence.[3] Means and meanings of authenticity are situated historically. Constructed through social valuations, authenticity and originality are perceived and appreciated through both historical and technical mediation. The origin of aura is historically determined. Societal transformations both regulate and reflect means of sense perception (Benjamin 222). It follows that the pictorial turn must participate in this bilateral exchange of valuation and perception. Digital aesthetics mediate modes of existence as visual digital media accelerates movement within the pictorial turn.[4] Potential formal manifestations of being

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[1] For more see: Plate *Walter Benjamin, Religion and Aesthetics*
[2] See Plate
[3] For more see Snyder in Smith 163-4
[4] Nakamura argues that 1995 was the visual advent of the internet.

increase with the graphical capacities of digital media. Mitchell, however, devalues internet aesthetics within the pictorial moment. Billed as a utopian escapism, for Mitchell the realization of digital images is trite. Reorienting Mitchell's rubric, this project (through introducing digital images like those in Second Life) introduces picture theory to the subfield of online religion.

Second Life is an exemplar of a larger socio-cultural phenomenon. Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and YouTube all participate in the new visual medium, making up the technological apparatus of what I am labeling *visual ontology*. The dispersed nature of visual being, spanning content and platforms, requires a new vantage point. The work of Walter Benjamin, foundational in its cultural critique of mechanical (or technical) reproduction, fails to meet the expectations of new media. Benjamin's language as deployed by W.J.T. Mitchell is an example of this failure. I do not mean to say that Mitchell has failed, but rather that his language has failed him. Mitchell's "picturing theory" or picture theory is an idea that has the potential to change the language with which we talk about images and as a result, how we interact with them. Mitchell's application of Benjamin in his theses on "Biocybernetic Media" represents a failed translation between old and new media. After laying out a genealogy of Mitchell's theory anticipating its application, I reintroduce both Benjamin and Mitchell to the technological vocabulary available through digital mediums like Second Life.

Created by Linden Lab, Second Life became accessible in 2003, adding to the increasing number of virtual worlds appearing online at the time.[5] These digital worlds share foundational characteristics, all presenting a contiguous series of navigable images that create the sensation of a stable "world" of images. Landscapes of earth, sea, sky, and

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[5] For a list of these worlds see Bartle *Designing Virtual Worlds*

elaborate architectures can be moved on, in and around. These persistent images are navigated in real time.[6] These images are referred to as "virtual worlds" because the images are shared, comprising multiple individuals simultaneously. Individuals navigate and experience such landscapes and architectures using graphical corporeal representations of selves. These individual representations are known as "avatars". Second Life's development company refers to it as a "… 3D world where everyone you see is a real person and every place you visit is built by people just like you" (SecondLife.com). There are few spaces within Second Life that were created by the administrators at Linden Lab besides locations for the education and orientation of new users. Individual, independent users plan and execute the architectures of Second Life. Tom Boellstorff, in his ethnography, remarks on the visual turn taking place: "A broad cultural shift during the time of my fieldwork was that the notion of "virtual world" increasingly presupposed three-dimensional visuality: a defining characteristic of a virtual world (versus a blog or a website) was that it was a place in which you could look around." (Boellstorff 92).Visual and textual relationships go beyond the images of Second Life. The whole of internet navigation requires the negotiation of a series of image-text relationships.

Looking around such visual-virtual spaces for the makings of a visual ontology and its potential impact on the subfield requires situating this exploration historically. The first section of this project surveys the foundations, reformations and expectations of the study of religion online. Beginning in the mid 1990's and continuing to the present moment, this survey includes texts not specific to the study of religion online, but involve pertinent aspects of being in digital media. Routledge has published a series of texts that

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[6] For an interesting theory of "game time" see Juul in *First Person* 131-142

follow the evolution of scholarship in religion online specifically. This series is

frequently self-referential, composed amongst a community of scholars. As such, these

texts define their own terms of scholarship, arguing for a coherent history. On the one

hand, this canon could be viewed as isolated, isolating and limited in scope or breadth.

On the other hand, the series could be used as a case study. Informed with and set in

contrast to concurrent scholarship on the issue, it serves herein as micro-model of trends

in the academic study of religion online.

Dawson and Cowen introduce their formative collection on religion online urging us to remember two things: first, the growth of the popularity of the internet was extraordinary in its speed, and second, there is a very real "digital divide" in the world. While the expansion of the internet as a new medium was viral, access globally is still limited. Dawson and Cowen caution against the rhetoric of a global connectedness and remind us of the socio-economic position of the user (Dawson and Cowan 5). Citing the digital divide could be one reason to overlook the work this project hopes to accomplish. Citing the inaccessibility of the internet across the globe, one could argue that talking about a visual ontology within new media is an exclusive rhetoric. Benjamin argued that new public media was an inclusive (and oppressive) social force. The highest means of rhetorical manipulation take place within mechanical/technical media. I will not entertain a set of arguments against the legitimate concern regarding the digital divide but offer the possibility of this argument as recognition of its place in the academic context.

Christopher Helland's "Popular Religion and the World Wide Web: A Match Made in (Cyber) Heaven" charts the parallel emergences of the popular graphical internet (as noted by Nakamura above) and religious practice online. Helland observes that "[a]s Internet communication became more popular, home computers became less expensive, and software made the whole process a lot more user friendly, computer-mediated communication expanded rapidly. By the mid-1990s the World Wide Web had come into existence, and people began to "surf" the Net, to create their own home pages, post their own data, and share information on a scale only made possible by this new technology.

To no one's surprise, religion flourished on the internet" (Dawson and Cowen, 25). Helland's survey of the growth of the internet and religious practice therein illustrates a history of an emerging media. Composed of case studies and situated practice, Helland illustrates a range of manifestations of religiosity online. This present project is less concerned with that history, and more interested in a critique of the *study* of these manifestations of online religion, looking at methods of scholarship.

Hojsgaard and Warburg's 2005 collection (within the Routledge canon) identifies four so-called "waves" of scholarship of religion online. Movements between waves mark changes in both material and theoretical scope. Moving across only a decade it is difficult to agree with the authors that there are four distinct movements within this small time. On the other hand, the realization that the technology under investigation was changing at the same time as the theory strengthens the case for charting four "waves" in such a short time. Interactions between moving parts creates a turbulent landscape for developing, testing, and integrating methodology. The wave model indexes affective reactions to the technology within the scholarship. Engagement with these movements below (as well as with concurrent works) positions a picturing theory methodology arguing for a visual ontology inside (and outside) a scholarly lineage.

The first wave of scholarship began in the mid 1990's, parallel with the pictorial turn in computer mediated communication. As the internet became a public media (a *mass* media), academics began to imagine its future implications for religious practice. This early research was optimistic and reactionary. Scholarship tended to frame religion online as a utopian "cyber religion" and fantasize about yet unrealized (and unrealizable) possibilities. Heidi Campbell categorizes the first wave as *descriptive*, offering "broad or

general surveys of religious engagement" and "positive reflections on how the Internet may reconnect people with spirituality in postmodern society" (*Digital Religion* 8). Hojsgaard and Warburg mark the first wave as having a lot of enthusiasm without "reference to situated practices" (Hojsgaard and Warburg 5). These reactions to new media were both utopic and dystopic, but, either way, in the extreme. Such a mystified reaction to new media is familiar to Walter Benjamin. He writes this about scholarship on film (the new media at the time of his writing): "Characteristically, even today ultrareactionary authors give the film a similar contextual significance – if not an outright sacred one, then at least a supernatural one" (Benjamin 228). Early reactions to "cyber religion" shared this sacred or supernatural hue, viewing technological possibility with an uninformed reverence.

Stephen D. O'Leary is credited for starting this first wave of research. His essay "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks" "seeks not to provide a comprehensive map of religious landscapes in cyberspace nor an in-depth analysis of the communicative practices of an particular religious community, but only to speculate on the transformation of religious beliefs and practices as these are mediated by new technologies"(Dawson and Cowan 37). This speculation results in a mediated theory of religious practice, working through the cultural-evolution theory of Walter J. Ong. While O'Leary's conclusions maintain a utopian optimism, they arrive from the application of previously established theoretical models to the materiality of a new medium. Bringing the situated practices of new media together with Ong's concept of a "second orality", O'Leary effectively performs the synthesis of 'old' and 'new' media studies. O'Leary's formative article has served as an inspiration for this present

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project, not for its conclusions but for its methodology. The way that O'Leary incorporates the voice of Ong serves as a model for my own deployment of W.J.T. Mitchell.

The so-called "second wave" of scholarship faced the consequences resultant of initial utopian and dystopian prophecies. Campbell describes this wave as "the categorical" (*Digital Religion* 9) as scholars felt the need to locate their scholarship, and realized a societal influence on the technologies of new religious practices. The introduction to Dawson and Cowen's 2004 text, resting on the cresting second wave, charts these expectations and disappointments. Dawson and Cowen correctly hold both the scholarship and the religious practices themselves responsible for these failings: "…much of today's online activity is rather pedestrian and anticlimactic when compared to the initial hype and rhetoric" (Dawson and Cowan 6). This language of a pedestrian and banal digital experience will reappear below in W.J.T. Mitchell's reactions to the aesthetics of the internet. Second wave scholarship labored to move the study of religion online out of the speculative and into a proper subfield, establishing a constellation of questions and a vocabulary which remain in emerging scholarship.

O'Leary second essay exemplifies the observed resonance between the first and second "waves". I mention it not for its influence on later scholarship, but to create a sense of continuity between tones in the scholarship. O'Leary self-diagnoses himself with a "cyber-pessimism" (Hojsgaard and Warburg 38), citing a gulf between his predictions about the graphical interfaces and their manifestations. Pessimism does not lead to dystopic thinking however. Characteristic of contemporary scholarship, O'Leary tempers

his fascination with situation. Early online churches, holy sights and virtual pilgrimages[7] all serve as locations for O'Leary's theoretical work. Looking forward O'Leary sees that "the designers of online virtual worlds are nowhere near close to exploiting the latent capabilities of the World Wide Web, as it now exists. The state of the art in digital religion will have to become considerably more sophisticated in its presentation of the visual, aural and symbolic dimensions of religion to create a serious experience of the virtual sacred. Let us assume, however, that further steps will be taken in this direction, that as a new generation comes of age for whom the Web is a fully naturalized symbolic environment, we will see artists, designers, and worship leaders collaborating to extend religion further into the digital realm" (Hojsgaard and Warburg 43). A more advanced virtual experience will arrive as the internet becomes a "naturalized symbolic environment" (a term which resonates with Mitchell's ideas on media as habitat, taken into account below).

Contemporary scholarship in this still establishing subfield has moved across the disciplines. Recent (2008-13) scholarship dealing directly with religion in new media reflects an increased awareness of the importance of new media to the humanities. Heidi Campbell's *When Religion Meets New Media* (2010) depicts an encounter or a conflict of two distinct objects and their mutual negotiation. For Campbell, media and religion are discrete objects. Campbell gives examples of either acceptance or rejection of new media within religious communities, and characterizes this (admittedly) complicated relationship in a dual tradition/media division. In contrast, Rachel Wagner's *GodWired* (2012) fosters a more nuanced theoretical approach to virtual space as ritual space. *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (2013) pushes

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[7] For more on the virtual pilgrimage see both Hill-Smith and Helland

digital religious practice forward as serious space for inquiry. Emerging researchers in the field include Hill-Smith (2011), Helland (2010) and Connelly (2010). Each work exemplifies the rapid movement in scholarship away from a confrontation with or idealization of new media towards a mediated approach to thinking about graphical digital environments. Each of these pieces recognizes the expanding and troubled sense of "media" in new media. This thesis pushes the trend forward, utilizing Mitchell's picture theory as a way of arguing for a visual ontology with digital graphical practices.

Three themes, generated within the second wave of research and sustained through the latest collections, permeate cross-disciplinary study within the subfield: Issues of authenticity, temporality and spatiality, and interactivity. These themes are addressed explicitly in Campbell's latest collection, spread across six chapters entitled "Ritual", "Identity", "Community", "Authority", "Authenticity" and "Religion". Six can be collapsed into three for brevity's sake. Parts of "Identity" and "Ritual" fall under spatiality and temporality, dealing with the demarcation of space and time by both bodies and ritual. "Community" and parts of "Authority" fall under interactivity, dealing with the efficacy of communication. Parts of "Authority" and "Religion" fall under my categorization of Authenticity. Below I provide a quick glance at some instances of each in the literature.

Both Radde-Antweiler and Connelly take up problems of authenticity and possibilities for an authentic experience in digital spaces. Louise Connelly provides a case study of Buddhist mediation in Second Life. Radde-Antweiler, citing Benjamin on aura, examines distinctions commonly made in the subfield between the 'virtual and the 'real': "The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from it substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it experience" (*Digital Religion* 96). Radde-Antweiler's reading of this passage slips into a trite rationalization for the "mediatization" (a semi-technical term) of everything, making the argument that every kind of interaction is mediated in one way or another, and in that sense, a digital interaction is as authentic as any other. This reading of Benjamin's passage lacks a distinction between authenticity and mediation, aura and media. Radde-

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Antweiler mistreatment of Benjamin results in a missed opportunity for exercising his usefulness in explaining new media.

Stephen D. O'Leary's second essay, characterized by his cyber-pessimism, investigates spatial possibilities within digital media. Interrogating the capabilities of new media formats to execute ritual function, O'Leary does "not believe that any cyber-ritual – even one that makes full use of the latent capabilities of current Internet technology – will ever be able to replace ritual performances in a physical sacred space"(Hojsgaard and Warburg 44). O'Leary touches on a common dichotomy playing out in the study of religion online as mentioned above between the virtual and the real, and the expectations that are held for each. Lorne L. Dawson sees the study of religion online being "held in check by a tendency to understand new media in terms of more familiar old media" (Hojsgaard and Warburg 32). This present thesis posits that same assertion. Both Dawson and O'Leary rest on the tipping point between an old media aesthetic and a new media aesthetic, what O'Leary called a "fully naturalized symbolic environment"(Hojsgaard and Warburg 43). Dawson destabilizes the expectations of an old media orientation, touching on interactivity as well, seeing it as "what most distinguishes the Internet from all other modern mass media. Computer-mediated communication is a group phenomenon; it is inherently social" (Hojsgaard and Warburg 31).

In the same volume, Debbie Herring pushes this interactivity even further, into what she labels a "contextual theology", a theology that "takes as its starting point not statements about God but the *context* where people are engaging with God, and the religious thinking that occurs as a result of the particular characteristics of that context…Contextual theology is situated, specific and self-conscious, and the process,

reflection and action that occur arise from the people and their particular circumstances(Hojsgaard and Warburg 149). Herring brings this methodology to the study of an Internet news and chat website dedicated to Christianity. Herring challenges a normative way of researching religion online and, like O'Leary, introduces the study to a different methodology. Contextual theology involves similar theoretical commitments to Mitchell's picture theory, as explicated in the second section of this essay.

Interest in these issues of authenticity, spatiality/temporality and interactivity appear outside of the smaller subfield. Pierre Levy constructs a philosophy of being in the digital age in the companion texts *Collective Intelligence* (1994) and *Becoming Virtual* (1995). Lévy's concept of the "hyperbody" influenced designs and consequent theorization of virtual bodies and selves. Another influential work still cited in current scholarship is Julian Dibbell's depiction of society inside a fully textual chat room known as LambaMOO (Dibbell 1992). Dibbell's treatment of virtual reality as a location of meaningful interaction resonates through contemporary ethnographies and anthropology of digital environments. More contemporary works within the thematic triad include T.L Taylor's *Play Between Worlds* (2006), Ralph Schroeder's edited volume *The Social Life of Avatars* (2002), and the sociological and ethnographic work of Christine Hine (2000). Boellstorff's Coming *of Age in Second Life* (2008) is an ethnographic look at the virtual world which engages closely with habitual problems of authentic embodiment, negotiating time and space, and interpreting interactivity.

A larger issue overarching these identified themes within the scholarship is a problematic theoretical and categorical relationship between religion and digital media. The title of Heidi Campbell's 2010 monograph *When Religion Meets New Media*

exemplifies the type of essentializing within the literature, putting religious groups in opposition to how they shape technology. Campbell introduces her religious-social shaping of technology, which presents technological change and user innovation as a social process. It places researchers' attention on how and why a community of users responds to a technology in a certain way, and calls them to identify what values or beliefs influence this negotiation. There are two major problems with this approach. First, it incapacitates both "religion" and "technology". Within the "SST" model (as it is called) religion and technology are both social aspects which are manipulated and shaped within a social group. The boundaries between these three essentialized positions do not bleed at all. This leads to the second problem: this approach ignores any religious aspects of the technology itself, setting up an encounter between the two static entities.

Stewart Hoover identifies a tendency to either "essentialize" or "particularize" the digital: "First, by 'essentializing,' I mean that some tend to evaluate the digital and digital practice in relation to what it does, what it stands for, or whom it effectively stands in for. This means we see the digital as a pundit or poor substitute for the actual and authentic role played by religion. The second response, to 'particularize' the digital, means 'instrumentalizing' it and thinking about how digital culture and practice might serve or stand in for prior means of mediation and other forms of practice"(*Digital Religion* 266). Campbell's approach performs such movements upon religions *and* technologies. Campbell's "religious-social shaping of technology" treats religious practices and communities as discrete group of beliefs or peoples. New media and technology are, in Hoover's words, a "stand in" for prior means of mediation. Campbell labels this process one of "negotiation": "Here religious communities draw on their history, tradition and

their core beliefs as a basis for established patterns of media use. They must consider in what respect this new form of media mirrors past technology to see if old rules apply" (*When Religion Meets New Media* 61).

Combinations of definitional frameworks transform the appearance of a methodology. Conceptions and definitions of both 'religion' and 'technology' are necessarily included in the literature. The problem with such a concrete binary language is most visible in the work of Heidi Campbell, and her process of "negotiation". Knut Lundby picks up on the shifting binaries between "technology" and "religion", and identifies a spectrum of these relationships. Methodologies range from the philosophical to the situated case study and from a technological determinism to a social shaping of technology (*Digital Religion* 225-35).

Approach to the study of media and religion	Selected author	Definition of religion	Methodology
Technological determinism	M. McLuhan	G. K. Chesterton	Philosophical
Mediatization of religion	S. Hjarvard	P. Boyer	Survey
Mediation of meaning	S. M. Hoover	C. Geertz	Ethnography
Mediation of sacred forms	G. Lynch	E. Durkheim	Cultural sociology
Social shaping of technology	H. Campbell	C. Geertz	Case studies

Figure 1. (*Digital Religion* 227)

This spectrum (and Lundby's subsequent articulation of the chart) reveal the determinant variable within the shifting subfield to be the "approach to the study of media and religion" rather than the "definition of religion". Interpretations of technology and media move the methodology, while static definitions of "religion" move passively within the

theoretical frame. The history of the study of religion in new media is more a study of new media than of religion.

Stewart Hoover demands a changed approach: "We must see digital religion as being about the generation of models of practice and the ability to produce meaning in the world that relates to the religious" (*Digital Religion* 268). This concept of 'meaning making' drives the Center for Media, Religion and Culture founded by Hoover in 2006 (cmrc.colorado.edu). Hoover's understanding of "the religious" is more fluid than a definitional. Referring to "the religious" rather than "religion" transforms Hoover's question into one of experience as opposed to institution. Orienting a study of religion around a theoretical engagement with "models of practice" and the production of meaning are attuned to a way of being in graphical new media. Reference to digital religion and generation of models 'world' media, rather than treating it as a utilitarian technology. Hoover continues: "A colleague of mine has remarked that in many ways what really defines much of online practice is the aesthetic rather that the cognitive or perceptive logic of the digital. What do technologies hail us into because of the abilities they have for us in terms of aesthetic purposes and qualities?"(*Digital Religion* 268).This question of aesthetics as posed by Hoover is one this thesis works to answer. Looking forward to an apparent fourth wave of research, I work to engage a new materiality of religion with a canon of visual theory.

Authenticity, temporality/spatiality and interactivity haunt the study of digital religion. This project involves these problems in a theoretical framework provided by W.J.T. Mitchell. "Picture Theory" (or picturing theory) is a means of directly interfacing a visual nature of being with the triptych of issues pertinent to the study of digital religion.

Mitchell's methodology, inherent in his argument for a cultural pictorial turn, cultivates three useful theoretical devices. Concepts of the imagetext, the living – social image and biocybernetic reproduction all inform a way of being visually. The intellectual labor below involves a folding out of these tools for their use in describing a visual ontology in digital media. To begin I introduce Mitchell's argument for the pictorial turn. The section that follows this deals explicitly in Mitchell's language, accessing his meaning and establishing a theoretical framework. I then turn to Mitchell's address to new media, and his concept of "biocybernetic reproduction". Here begins the injection of Benjamin's language, and the three concerns of digital religion scholarship. Offering a re-reading of Benjamin through Mitchell, this section reorients thinking about new media through Benjamin's concepts of "aura" and "apparatus". I close this project by suggesting that thinking through a visual ontology frees religion online from tired tropes within the scholarship.

ON PICTURING THEORY

Mitchell's assessment of an erupting moment in cultural critique is revelatory. An observable swell of intellectual investment in questions of both materiality and visuality across the Humanities and in the particular field of Religious Studies attest to Mitchell's accuracy. The pictorial turn as an intellectual movement is changing the way images are accounted for, validated, and valued. This turn is evident in an increased study of media, along with the parallel material turn. The rise of digital (or "new" media) takes place at the same time as the beginnings of Mitchell's turn. Lisa Nakamura cites the launch of Netscape Navigator and Internet Explorer in 1994 and 1995 as the dawn of the graphical-digital interface (Nakamura 1). Digital media remains largely a visual experience. In worlds like Second Life, where the capability for chatting through audio channels is possible, text remains the predominant means of communication.[8] All popular interfaces with internet technologies involve negotiating image-text relationships. Mitchell's theorizing of this cultural movement becomes of great importance due to the dominant visuality of digital media, and the virtual experience's involvement in the pictorial turn. Picture theory is essential to understanding ways of being in digital environments and the consequences of these ways of being on religious practice. The question is how to apply picture theory (or "picturing theory") to religious practice in digital-graphical environments. What pieces of picture theory makes it a unique way of seeing religious images?

The Pictorial Turn and Picture Theory are separate ideas. The first is a movement, the second a method. Much of *Picture Theory* and *What Do Pictures Want?* outlines and applies this method. Picturing theory is first exercised through what Mitchell labels

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[8] For more on the controversy surrounding the introduction of voice chat see Boellstorff 113

"metapictures". Metapictures are described as "pictures about pictures – that is, pictures that refer to themselves or to other pictures, pictures that are used to show what a picture is" (*Picture Theory* 35). These pictures call into question the constitution, creation and observation of pictures[9]. Metapictures question the state of the picture or the act of picturing. These images perform a methodology Mitchell is hoping to articulate and he floats these images as part of the maiden voyage of his picturing theory. Pictures *about* pictures necessarily ask questions on their own terms. This questioning of pictures by pictures reveals one of Mitchell's larger theses on media.

Media theory cannot rise above the media it examines (*What Do Pictures Want* 210). Metapictures are self-reflexive. Mitchell's picture theory is self-conscious. Theory reflects the media it critiques. Articulating appropriate or applicable theory means articulating the media at hand. Methodologically, the act of "picturing" is "an embodied discourse, one that is constructed around critical metaphors, analogies, models, figures, cases and scenes"(*What Do Pictures Want* 209). Mitchell pursues a way of articulating theory within a medium. Opposed to "the metalanguage of systems theory or semiotics, for instance, [that] might lift us out of the welter of media and give us a neutral scientific perspective on the totality of media… [m]y approach is just the opposite. It assumes that no theory of media can rise above the media themselves, and that what is required are forms of vernacular theory embedded in media practices" (*What Do Pictures Want* 210). Mitchell, beginning with *Picture Theory,* hopes to cultivate a theory that takes an ""ordinary language" view of pictures and images, a treatment of representation as a vernacular phenomenon" (*Picture Theory* 36).

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[9] See Mitchell *Picture Theory* 38-46 for examples

Fostering this vernacular requires Mitchell break down a semantic hierarchy between image and text. It is the seeming impossibility of a theory made up of pictures that historically gives precedent to the text as descriptor. In order for images to be useful as a catalyst, medium and means for theoretical labor, they would seemingly have to achieve the level of textual description. Mitchell wants to break down image-text distinctions at the site of this dialectical tension. Mitchell articulates these varying power relationships through technical combinations of "image" and "text": "I will employ the typographic convention of the slash to designate 'image/text' as a problematic gap, cleavage, or rupture in representation. The term 'imagetext' designates composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text. 'Image-text', with a hyphen, designates *relations* of the visual and the verbal" (*Picture Theory* footnote 89). The gradation of Mitchell's three formulations of "image text" destabilizes relations between discourse and representation.

Specifically, Mitchell wants to release "speech acts" from a purely textual medium: "Language can stand in for depiction and depiction can stand in for language because communicative, expressive acts, narration, argument, description, exposition and other so-called 'speech acts' are not medium-specific, are not 'proper' to some medium or other. I can make a promise or threaten with a visual sign as eloquently as with an utterance" (*Picture Theory* 160). Disrupting the hierarchy is part of Mitchell's larger project defending the utility of Visual Studies as a discipline. "One lesson of general semiotics, then, is that there is , *semantically* speaking (that is in the pragmatics of communication, symbolic behavior, expression, signification) no *essential* difference between texts and images the other lesson is that there are important differences between

visual and verbal media at the level of sign-types, forms, materials of representation, and institutional traditions. The mystery is why we have this urge to treat the medium as is it were the message, why we make the obvious practical differences between *these* two media into metaphysical oppositions which seem to control our communicative acts…"(*Picture Theory* 161). The rupture of representation caused by the image/text "opens the possibility of other relations between texts and visual images, and the de-disciplining of the divisions between visual and verbal culture" (*Picture Theory* 100).

The image/text as opening is exactly that, a space rather than a method, a way of seeing: "The image/text is neither a method nor a guarantee of historical discovery; it is more like an aperture or cleavage in representation…" (*Picture Theory* 104). An opening is what allows images and texts to represent with the same authority. Mitchell grounds his ability to picture theory on this representational egalitarianism. Clarifying that this act of equality is not one of leveling or flattening, Mitchell nuances the "image/text" rupture: "The image/text is not a template to reduce these things [image and text] to the same form, but a lever to pry them open. It might be best described, not as a concept, but as a theoretical *figure* rather like Derrida's *différance*, a site of dialectical tension, slippage and transformation" (*Picture Theory* 106). The "figure" of the image/text as aperture, rupture and open possibility permits the transforming the reading of pictures and a picturing of theory. The image/text as a heterogeneous figure of representation allows for image and text to be expressed each in their own vernacular.

I repeat and emphasize "vernacular" because it elucidates the position from which Mitchell evaluates pictures and images. The vernacular position argues for the usefulness of picture theory in understanding visual being in digital religion. In order to appreciate

the vernacular it is necessary to understand Mitchell's own larger institutional stance. Mitchell is in defense of Visual Studies as a viable discipline. In the chapter "Showing Seeing" (*What Do Pictures Want* 336) he differentiates Visual Studies from more established disciplines of art history and aesthetics. Defining Visual Studies through a series of debunked myths and counter-theses, Mitchell chisels out a platform for this fledgling discipline amongst established fields in the Humanities. At the core of this differentiation is Visual Studies as a medium itself, concerned with facilitating relationships between seen and unseen, art and non-art, varying sensory modes, everyday seeing and showing, and "the visual construction of the social, not just the social construction of the vision"(*What Do Pictures Want* 343). Visual Studies does not offer an apologetic approach to images or a softening or "liquidation of art as we have known it" (*What Do Pictures Want* 342). Rather, Visual Studies takes seriously the idea of a visual culture or a visual nature, the way everyday seeing and showing dictate social order. A vernacular methodology is part of this inhabited theory of seeing images.

The pictorial turn (and the reflexive theory) is a "postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institution, discourse, bodies and figurality. It is the realization that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of *reading* (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that the visual experience of 'visual literacy' might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality" (*Picture Theory* 16). The image as interwoven with apparatus, bodies etc. becomes subject to Visual Studies. The discipline expands means of analysis beyond a textual base. Metapictures come to the front, the grammar of non-textual analysis

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becomes a vernacular one. Pictures talk about themselves in their own language. "Representation as a vernacular phenomenon" (*Picture Theory* 36) (steeped in the context of the media being theorized) invites what I label a *visual ontology*, a means of speaking about images in a language of experience rather than observation. Mitchell realizes "…the problem of pictorial representation has always been with us, [but] it presses inescapably now, and with unprecedented force, on every level of culture, from the most refined philosophical speculations to the most vulgar productions of the mass media"(*Picture Theory* 16). Traditional forms of analysis are no longer adequate or applicable. Means of representation becomes means of understanding. Modes of valuation begin to shift and questions of observation become ones of experience. Visual ontology is a realization of the change in the treatment of images and the resulting adaptation in methodology. This adaptation is inspired by Mitchell's defense of Visual Studies and his treatment of the image under picture theory.

How does picture theory conceive the image under this new model? In order to properly deploy this methodology over digital-graphical practices of worlds like Second Life, I first must articulate the treatment of the image under picture theory. It is necessary to understand what Mitchell desires from images and pictures. He proposes we treat images as living organisms, as *bios*. The conception of the living picture has a multifaceted and extensive history, and Mitchell accepts the metaphor as well worn, stating: "My only contribution is to update it, to insert it into the new context of biological science and evolutionary thinking and propose a generalizing of the mutual mapping of iconology and natural history" (*What Do Pictures Want* 89). My focus (due to scope) will remain on Mitchell's use of the living picture idea and its immediate

application to methodology. Mitchell recognizes the vitality of the metaphor of the "living image." He recognizes the influence of the image on the study of visual culture in contemporary discourse:[10] "There is no difficulty, then, in demonstrating that the idea of the personhood of pictures (or, at minimum, their animism) is just as alive in the modern world as it was in traditional societies." Examples include magic portraits, mirrors, haunted houses and living statues (*What Do Pictures Want* 32). Mitchell's question becomes: what do we do after we recognize the personhood of an image? How does this metaphor usefully transform itself into a mode of valuating images?

Lines of inquiry that intersect images transform when treating the image as alive. Mitchell wants to effectively broaden the working vocabulary of the living image. This necessitates transforming the types of questions we ask of images. As images become more and more alive, their needs increase. If the personhood of images comes something close to concrete, questions of "power" become those of "desire" and questions of "value" become those of "vitality" (*What Do Pictures Want* 33). Mitchell finds an image's *vitality* and a pictures *value* weighed on separate scales. For an image, being independent of any particular medium, "…the question of vitality has more to do with reproductive potency or fertility…with an image, the question is, Is it likely to go on and reproduce itself, increasing its population or evolving into surprising new forms?"(*What Do Pictures Want* 90).[11] For a picture, the particular incarnation of an image bound to a medium, vitality is dependent on its capacity for "…liveliness of lifelikeness, a sense that

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[10] For more on Mitchell's explication of this genealogy see *What Do Pictures Want* 31

[11] Speaking about images as potent has survived in digital culture. Particularly popular videos or images that spread across various internet platforms and receive uniquely high levels of attention are labeled "viral".

he picture either 'captures the life' of its model, or that it has in its own formal qualities an energetic, animated or lively appearance" (*What Do Pictures Want* 90).

Picture and image both have the capacity for life, depending upon media in one form or the other. The former for its capacity to exist at all, the latter for its propensity to proliferate. Media both binds and distinguishes picture and image. Both require a medium through which to "go on" or "go before" (*What Do Pictures Want* 87). The living image as Mitchell sees it is reflected in his figuration of media. Living images and pictures are social creatures. They move forward, regenerate and interact with each other through media. Media, then, is where these pictures and images live. But media is also the means by which images or pictures (and individuals) communicate across distance. Mitchell expands on the definitional dilemma: "If media are middles, they are ever-elastic middles that expand to include what look at first like their outer boundaries. The medium does not lie *between* sender and receiver; it includes and constitutes them" (*What Do Pictures Want* 204). Mitchell acutely touches on a boundary problem of media. Media is the means both "through which" and "in which" images interact (*What Do Pictures Want* 208).The questions becomes where do images live? What is media for the living social image?

Raymond Williams suggests defining media as a material social practice and do away with *any* reified sense of media as thing (*What Do Pictures Want* 204). This definition opens an endlessly mediated "Pandora's box" for Mitchell (213) (much like Radde-Antweiler "mediatiztion" of everything), and Williams' definition requires further refinement. This unbound definition is not useful when trying to think through new the living image. Mitchell consequently develops ten theses on media, in an attempt to corral

his sense of the term. Since my focus is on how picture theory as a methodology is useful for talking about religious practice and digital images, I attend only to Mitchell's third thesis, his most provocative: "A medium is both a system and an environment" (*What Do Pictures Want* 210). Media or medium in this formation maintains both its material and social characteristics. "A medium, in short, is not just a set of materials, an apparatus, or a code that "mediates" between individuals. It is a complex social institution that contains individuals within it, and is constituted by a history of practices, rituals and habits, skills and techniques, as well as by a set of material objects and spaces (stages, studios, easel paintings, television sets, laptop computers)"(*What Do Pictures Want* 213). Images live within the social environment of the medium. This assumption is at the core of Mitchell's methodology of "picturing theory" along with taking the role of Visual Studies to be the study of "everyday seeing and showing" (*What Do Pictures Want* 343).

Pictures are social creatures. The theorization of a picture cannot escape its surroundings. Taking root in *Picture Theory* and coming to bloom in *What Do Pictures Want?* these ideas are the seeds of Mitchell's tensions between pictures and media. *These* two theses comprise the discussion of images, beyond questions of the "metapicture" or "ekphrasis"[12] or the difference between "imagetext" "image/text" and "image-text." While such a specialized vocabulary explicates the particularities of Mitchell's fight for the image, it need not be deployed in every instance or application of picturing theory. Centered between the living image and the theory of its environment is Mitchell's call for a "vernacular" theory of images. This is at the center of the methodology.

Going "Beyond Comparison" (*Picture Theory* 83) Mitchell argues that within a picturing methodology, comparative discourse need not be imported, as it is present

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[12] For more on this idea see *Picture Theory* 151

within the medium or the work itself: "The first place to look for the appropriate description language for analyzing the formal heterogeneity of a representation is in the representation itself, and in the institutional metalanguage- an immanent vernacular, not a transdisciplinary theory- of the medium to which it belongs"(100). The "immanent vernacular" is contained within the picture. A vernacular theory of images is not a dirge for the comparative method or for the discipline of art history. It is unique to the practice of Visual Studies. Vernacular languages of description are symptomatic of a semantic leveling between images, texts and medium that is "…greeted with alarm by unreconstructed high modernists and old-fashioned aesthetes, and heralded as a revolutionary breakthrough by the theorists of visual culture" (*What Do Pictures Want* 346). Vernacular theory and semantic democracy as possibilities are accessible through the "aperture or cleavage" opened by the imagetext of picture theory (*Picture Theory* 104).

My desire for using vernacular theory is not to impose picture theory upon the images of new religious practice, but rather to see if Mitchell's image of theory has "legs."[13] I suggest that thinking the living, personified, and desiring image through the animated avatars and architectures like those of Second Life demands the living image be taken as a literal statement rather than a metaphoric one. The analogy between images and organisms is admittedly nothing new, and Mitchell only wishes to "update it" and insert it into new contexts (*What Do Pictures Want* 89). I perform the same movement within this present essay, updating Mitchell's formal theoretical structure parallel to his analysis of the image in new media. The latter change necessitates the former. Through adapting a vernacular descriptive language of theory, Mitchell's predictions for the future

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[13] Mitchell's gauging of the vitality of an image. For more see *What Do Pictures Want* 87

of media foundationally reconfigure the unfolding theoretical articulations of the image that follow. As a result of this interweaving, my present argument for a new way of being visually in digital mediums must be first steeped in Mitchell's own critique of the digital image, wrung dry and then reformed around observed practices surrounding new media. This evolution of theory will result in dramatically different valuations and representations of the personified image, questions of vitality and value, and possibilities for the image-text/subject-object relationship than those put forth by Mitchell.

A critique of new media using picture theory must be born out of Mitchell's formulations of emerging means of image making. Representations of new media in *What Do Pictures Want?* constitute a subsequent theory of new images. These representations delineate Mitchell's theoretical vernacular. Mitchell begins his look forward to new media by pushing his own metaphor: "The life of images has taken a decisive turn in our time: the oldest myth about the creation of living images, the fabrication of intelligent organisms by artificial, technical means, has now become a theoretical and practical possibility, thanks to new constellations of media at many different levels" (*What Do Pictures Want* 309). Mitchell and I agree that images are coming to life. The meaning of the living image is beginning to change, moving beyond the metaphorical into the practical. It is the ways and means of this animation that I question. Mitchell proposes "biocybernetic reproduction" (*What Do Pictures Want* 312), as a way of labeling this change.

Biocybernetic reproduction, narrowly defined by Mitchell, is the introduction of computer technology to biological science and resulting genetic engineering and cloning capabilities. Broadly speaking, biocybernetic reproduction includes both "…the grandiose plans to engineer a brave new world of perfect cyborgs to the familiar scene of the American health club, where obese, middle-aged consumers are sweating and straining while wired up to any number of digital monitors that keep track of their vital signs and even more vital statistics…"(*What Do Pictures Want* 312). More omnipresent examples might include the tactile interface of tablet computers and smartphones and full

body scans at airport security. Mitchell sees these new relationships between the *bios* and the *cyber* rewriting dialectics of "…nature and culture, human beings and their tools, artifacts, machines and media…"(*What Do Pictures Want* 314). As Mitchell notes, not only are living things become more like machines, machines are becoming more like living things (*What Do Pictures Want* 314). Intersections between humanity and technology, the *bios* and the *cyber*, indicate a blurring of lines between the two.

Messy parallel integrations redefine the limits of both *bios* and *cyber*. Mitchell couches this new landscape of humanity and technology in a larger struggle for power (or desire) between "...the image and the word, the idol and the law" (*What Do Pictures Want* 314), marking the structural, technical, coded *cyber* as "word" and the affective, analogical and sensational *bios* as "image". This suggested parallel relationship expands the frame for thinking about bleeding boundaries between bios and cyber: "Raymond Bellour notes that 'all French reflection for half a century has been drawn between the pincers of the word and the image'"(3 *What Do Pictures Want* 15). Beyond French thinkers, the tension between image and text makes up the entirety of picturing theory. Claims for semantic control and a vernacular way of thinking about imagetexts (or image/text or image-text) are performed by a constant making and breaking of boundaries between words and images. Mitchell suggests this making and breaking is visible in the means of biocybernetic reproduction. Within mediums which can broadly be described as biocybernetic or "new" or digital, hierarchies of the word over the image are being questioned: "[t]he digital is declared to be triumphant at the very same moment that a frenzy of the image and spectacle is announced. Which is it? The word or the image?" (*What Do Pictures Want* 315).

What seems a strange question for Mitchell (given his belief in the imagetext)

begins an unraveling between theory and observation. Even if this question is posed

sardonically (by now we should *know* there is no definite image or text) it leads to a

series of steps that distance Mitchell's theoretical assumptions from an observable world

of digital images. This question as posed by Mitchell begins a series of departures

between his picturing of the digital image and my own material observations in instances

like Second Life. In his observation of new images, Mitchell concentrates on

representations of digital being. These include the science fiction fantasies of films like

Jurassic Park, Terminator 2 and *The Matrix (What Do Pictures Want* 316-7). Little

attention is paid to the visual *practices* taking place within new media.[14] Images of the

internet and the social practices surrounding them are not part of Mitchell's picture of

biocybernetic reproduction. Outdated fantasies of bio-cyber relationships take their place.

Jurassic Park and *Terminator 2* for example were released in 1993 and 1991 respectively,

almost ten years before the chapter on new media was written.

Intertwined obstacles of time and distance prevent Mitchell's chapter from

accurately representing the lives of images in new media. Time presents an obstacle

because the metapictures that Mitchell uses to describe biocybernetics were out of date

when he used them, and now are twenty years past. Granted, it's impossible to

perpetually describe the current moment. However, it is essential to new media studies

that such description reflect an active population rather than the *depiction* of such a

population through science fiction. Fantastic and ungrounded depictions of bio-cyber

interaction lead only to the cynic disappointments visible in second wave scholarship on

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[14] For an interesting conversation about cyber-being and the fantastic vs. embodied implications of using Deleuze in such a reading, see Ella Brians "The 'Virtual' Body and the Strange Persistence of the Flesh: Deleuze, Cyberspace and the Posthuman."

religion and the internet. This dilemma ties time to distance. Mitchell's talking about films *about* biocyber activity is not talking about biocyber activity itself. The broad argument of my thesis is that digital images (like those of Second Life) allow for a new mode of being. Recognition of interactivity within the image is essential to theoretically picturing these new images in this way. Mitchell's describing films that *depict* this type of interactivity avoid engagement with the foundational aspects of new media. Mitchell's metapicture is one step removed, at a distance.

In a section entitled "The Age of Biocybernetic Reproduction" in his essay *Dinosaurs and Modernity* (Clarke and Henderson 351) Mitchell reveals why he has chosen to avoid images of the internet. Reasoning is tied up in his most violent attack against digital images: "The internet is hailed as the gateway to a new dimension of experience called cyberspace, and virtual reality beckons as the replacement for the mundane realm of modernity. But anyone who has spent much time in these new dimensions quickly discovers just how disappointing and banal most of them still are. VR turns out to be an extension of the penny arcade or the home shopping network, and Internet pornography turns out to be about as interesting as the graffiti in a public toilet. The grand convergence of computers with biology leads, not to a new age of human possibilities, but to the high-tech fulfillment of a Victorian fantasy, a dinosaur theme park" (Clarke and Henderson 363).

These comments require some context, a picture of Mitchell's materiality. Originally published in 1998, this aggressive language reacts to fledgling representations within a digital-graphical medium. Concurrent with second wave research, they share many of the same disappointments. While Mitchell's colorful description remains

without examples, his disappointment echoes O'Leary's description of various online rituals some three years later: "The texts and conversations are presented with fancier and more colorful graphics, but there are no sound files, no three-dimensional graphics, and no attempts to use the more advanced capabilities provided by Java applets, Flash animations, or video in any format…The virtual sanctuary displays a variety of iconic Christian images with a repeating animated loop of a burning flame; it does not attempt to simulate the sacred space of an actual altar of sanctuary"(Hojsgaard and Warburg 39-41).The interpretive difference between the two is that O'Leary can see the possibility and Mitchell cannot.

Mitchell judges these images "disappointing and banal." He most closely relates virtual reality to consumerism and human waste, seeing only trite amusements. His valuation is voiced out of a gulf between fantastic expectations and disappointment. "…[T]he world of biocybernetic reproduction is for most people an imaginary, utopian, fictional place. It is not an immediate everyday experiential reality in the same way that the innovations of mechanical reproduction (assembly lines, automobiles, telephones, and movies) were in the modern era" (*What Do Pictures Want* 363). From this orientation, Mitchell's foray into virtual reality is destined to disappoint. First treated as a fantasy or utopia and consequently exposed as reality, virtual reality necessarily fails expectations. Mitchell assessment of virtual reality (in this early treatise on biocybernetic reproduction) deals in first in the fantasy and later the reality. The criterion is utopian: "Computers are routinely marketed with all the rhetoric of revolutionary modernism, as if they were a technical innovation as profound as the invention of printing…" . Mitchell's projection of reality is underwhelming: "… But for most people, computers are simply speeded up

extensions of the type writer, the ledger book, the mail box and the filing cabinet"(*What Do Pictures Want* 363).

I see two ways of refuting Mitchell's picture of digital media. The first argument: it is simply outdated. Mitchell's assessment is premature and the present realities of digital media *do* meet more of these fantastic expectations. This stance involves making distinctions between Mitchell's moment and the present concerning computing power, graphic capabilities and defending across the line new manifestations of digital-graphical technologies. This form works to a certain extent. Mitchell's depiction of the human interaction with technology *is* both too broad and too negative. At the present moment "for most people" (a term I graft from Mitchell with precaution) personal computing goes beyond accelerating older media forms. New means of processing data and applications for displaying that data foundationally shift how text is received. Beyond speed, new media reformats information. Since 1998 when Mitchell compared the internet to the penny arcade, there indeed *have* been leaps made in the advancement of graphical possibilities.[15] So, arguing against Mitchell from a technical standpoint has its victories. However, they are limited by the reactive and defensive position of the rebuttal. The thrust of the argument accelerates out of a retained belief in a biocybernetic utopia. Within this argument rests a hold out for a utopian future. Punching from its heels, this temporally positioned defense itself becomes perpetually outdated as new forms of image reproduction come to life.

The second way to resist Mitchell's picture of digital mediums: question his theoretical expectations. Question both the functional and performative expectations Mitchell has of biocybernetically reproduced media. What is new media supposed to do

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[15] See Bartle

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and how? How is it the same or different than 'old' media? Taken that these questions form the beginning of Mitchell's theses on "biocybernetic reproduction", I suggest challenging them. Much like those posed by Herring and Dawson, these fundamental questions reorient expectations of media. Once refocused around these questions, the clarified picture of digital media becomes more useful. This reorientation is in the spirit of Mitchell's vernacular mode of picturing theory. The recognition that new media functions differently than 'old' media is central to a theory of new media and the study of religion online. Such a path of inquiry requires wrestling with Mitchell's inspiration for declaring "The Age of Biocybernetic Reproduction", taken from Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction". Mitchell initially distinguishes his model from the formative Benjamin: "It is tempting to simply adopt Benjamin's model of technological determination and apply it to explain the dominant tendencies of contemporary culture. We live, it is often said, in the period of DNA and the computer. Dramatic as the discovery of nuclear energy was, it was really only a quantitative extension of the age of energy – the development of a bigger productive and destructive force. Having passed the end of the twentieth century, however, it is clear that biology has replaced physics as the frontier of science, and that computers and artificial intelligence constitute the frontier of technology. We could call this, then, the age of biocybernetic reproduction to reflect he double wave of scientific – technical innovations that have carried is beyond the machine and assembly line, and beyond the mechanically reproduces images of photography and cinema" (Clarke and Henderson 362).

The heart of my present thesis is a re-reading of Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art…" against Mitchell's interpretation of the text as a means of accessing a visual way

of being. Considering this essay's foundational position in Mitchell's view of digital mediums, taking a close look shifts expectant conclusions about biocybernetic (or new) media. The next section of this essay closely engages the language of Benjamin and Mitchell, charting the reading of Benjamin's essay presented in the fifteenth chapter of *What Do Pictures Want?*. Critical analysis of both texts presents the opportunity to inform the tension between them with material observations of the digital media in question. Images of Second Life serve as the exemplar of the broader graphical nature of digital media. (I do not intend to exclude other forms of digital mediation through the use of these images, but only wish to provide a vibrant example of contemporary visual practices in digital mediums.) These images will work to present my own interpretation of Benjamin's essay in the light of new media. Born out of this infused re-reading is a new way of using picture theory, to "see" religion online in opposition to Mitchell's picturing of the digital image as "disappointing" and "banal" (Clarke and Henderson 363).

Before beginning a close reading, I would like to quickly and broadly oppose two assertions Mitchell makes while framing biocybernetic reproduction. The first is the complete transplantation of the biocybernetic for the mechanical: "I will state it as a bald proposition then, that biocybernetic reproduction has replaced Walter Benjamin's mechanical reproduction as the fundamental technical determinant of our age" (*What Do Pictures Want* 318). Mitchell tempers this claim by debating the translation of "mechanical" versus "technical", but his replacement of one mode for the other is essentially complete. I argue that the turn back to the material that Mitchell observes and the resilient formatting of the mechanical age (keyboards, turning e-book "pages", web

page "road-signs") indicate an integration of the mechanical with the cyber. [16]

Mechanical means of reproduction have not been completely abandoned as Mitchell would assert, nor has the influence of the mechanical age ceased to be felt in new technologies.

The second sweeping claim I broadly resist is that the age of DNA, of biology rather than physics, is upon us. Mitchell's theoretical affiliation with genetics begins with Raymound Bellour's model of new media as a double helix of signs and sensations. The idea being that "…the word-image dialectic seems to be reappearing at the level of life processes themselves"(*What Do Pictures Want* 315). Images from *Jurassic Park* become the metapicture of this phenomenon, images of genetic code projected on the visage of a genetically engineered dinosaur. Mitchell believes the 'coding' of DNA and the 'coding' of computers are natural affiliates, representing the images of the present moment: "Anyone who has read science historian Donna Haraway on cyborgs or watched science fiction movies over the last twenty year cannot fail to be struck by the pervasiness of this theme"(*What Do Pictures Want* 316). While I cannot refute the presence of such images, I am wary of investing in genetics as *the* model of the digital image. Bellour makes for an easy progression of Mitchell's bio-cyber relationship. I caution against Mitchell's full acceptance of this framework. W.J.T Mitchell's use of genetics as a model of the moment and his reading of Benjamin under appreciate the reality of digital images in situated practice.

Mitchell's appropriation of Benjamin's essay arrives out of these assumptions. Built on a pretense of the disappeared mechanical and an adoration of the genetic model, the reading of "The Work of Art…" argued for in *What Do Pictures Want?* misrepresents

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[16] For more on the Humanities' turn back to materiality see *What Do Pictures Want* 153

realized expectations of new media and digital images. The sort of changes observed as biocybernetic media are not taking place in practice. While Mitchell declares the death of mechanical reproduction, his critique of Benjamin's essay remains steeped in the vernacular of mechanically reproduced media (film, painting, sculpture). Basing its rubric in older media, his assessment poorly gauges the transformative properties of digital media. Rather than engaged cartography of new media and its possibilities, W.J.T. Mitchell's reading is cursory. I reengage Walter Benjamin's essay with digital media through a critique of Mitchell's challenges to the text. Like Mitchell, I agree that "[i]f we pursue the question in the spirit of Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" then every term needs to be re-examined"(*What Do Pictures Want* 318). It is the mode of re-examination I find unsatisfying.

Mitchell distinguishes his mode of biocybernetic reproduction from Benjamin's mechanical reproduction by way of three parallel changes: "[f]irst, the copy is no longer an inferior of decayed relic of the original, but is in principle an improvement on the original; second, the relation between the artist and the work, the work and its model, is both more distant and more intimate than anything possible the realm of mechanical reproduction; and third, a new temporality, characterized by an erosion of the event and a deepening the relevant past, produces a peculiar sense of 'accelerated stasis' in our sense of history"(*What Do Pictures Want* 319). I would like to simplify these distinctions into three questions of authenticity, spatiality and temporality. Mitchell bases his reading around these changes. Authenticity, spatiality and temporality meet thematically in the study of religion online. Authenticity is discussed in terms of identity, ritual efficacy and authority. Spatiality surrounds questions of presence, bodies, and architecture.

Temporality determines interaction and reinforces authenticity, agency and identity. Mitchell's questions of new media are identifiable as questions for religious practice in new media. Themes identified in the surveying beginnings of this essay appear in the language of Mitchell and Benjamin. Authenticity, spatiality and temporality are pivotal in establishing relationships between picture theory and religious practice online. Navigating these three channels between Mitchell, Benjamin and observations of Second Life charts a picture of visual being in a digital medium.

The original image, the copy, and ultimately *aura* make up the first constellation of concerns - authenticity as a value of the image. Benjamin begins discussing authenticity as a unique condition of location: "This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence (Benjamin 220). As Joel Snyder notes "[t]hus, the original had the power to "pull" art lovers to the museum or collection in which it was housed"(Snyder 162). This located history escapes reproduction. This sense of distance goes beyond spatiality: "…the unique phenomena of distance, however close it may be" (Benjamin 222). Plate describes this as "…a metaphysical distance from an object even though it may be physically close" (Plate 88). Walter Benjamin arrives at *aura* to describe this accumulated sense of history and distance perceived in the work of art. "The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history to which is has experienced"(Benjamin 221).

Visual Studies broadens the definitional boundaries of 'art', which can retain an aura, into the context of images, concerning itself with everyday seeing and showing. This broader field of study includes digitally produced or reproduced images. Boundaries

of aura come under new mediation. Without attempting a (re)definition of *aura*, I will expose Mitchell's manipulation of the term within the vernacular of new media, followed by a reading of Benjamin's language into the picture of the avatar in an attempt to chart these boundaries. "Benjamin famously argued that the advent of photographic copies was producing a 'decay of the aura' – a loss of the unique presence, authority, and mystique of the original object"(*What Do Pictures Want* 319). This conception of aura begins Mitchell's evaluation of its viability within new media. "Now we have to say that the copy has, is anything, even *more* aura than the original. More precisely, in a world where the very idea of the unique original seems a merely nominal or legal fiction, the copy has every chance of being an improvement or enhancement of whatever counts as the original" (*What Do Pictures Want* 320).

The "world" where the possibility of the original is in question is a postmodern one, beyond the scope of Benjamin. It is a world of contested subject/object relations, the circuitous world of French thinkers caught between pincers of image and text.(*Picture Theory* 315). It is also the world of copyright reformation, where it is questioned whether one can own a piece of data, and image or a sound. Inhabiting this world are what Sherry Turkle labels the "custodians of doubt" (Turkle 5) those who are cautiously hopeful about the possibilities of new technologies.

Aura for Mitchell is a manipulable property: "Photographs of artworks can be 'scrubbed' to remove flaws and dust; in principle, the effects of aging in an oil painting could be digitally erased, and the work restored its pristine originality in a reproduction. Of course this would still constitute a loss of the aura that Benjamin associated with the accretion of history and tradition around an object; but if aura means recovering the

original vitality, literally, the 'breath' of the life of the original, then the digital copy can come closer to looking and sounding like the original than the original itself" (*What Do Pictures Want* 320). Etymology usurps Benjamin's nuanced term. Mitchell chooses Benjamin's terminology rather than meaning for support. This act diminishes the importance of the historical testimony of an image as a determinant of aura. The possibility of duration within the digital goes largely unaddressed by Mitchell.[17] Aura instead becomes a recoverable dimension of an image. "Pristine" replaces historic. Vitality replaces aura. These foundational shifts in the meaning of aura are the product of Mitchell's re-examination of every term within Benjamin's work (*What Do Pictures Want* 318). I would like to sound this altered language against Benjamin's original text. Dissonance between these definitional boundaries creates a third space for compromise. Bringing images and practices from digital media into this space, I work to create a situated reflection on aura in new media.

Building his journey towards a sense of *aura*, Benjamin solidifies the necessity for unique presence: "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (Benjamin 220). Benjamin stresses the physical situation of the original image. It has a unique physical location. "This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence" (Benjamin 220). History physically impacts the image - as scars, rust, rot and evaporation. Both Benjamin and Mitchell acknowledge the materiality of history. Both recognize a relationship between originality and physicality. The ways in which mechanical

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[17] Mitchell does include a note about the logged "history" of activity in Adobe Photoshop. This "history" is also available within web browsers and Second Life, an indexed history of movement.

processes are gathered around the image by Benjamin and Mitchell reveal divergent investments in this aging process. For Benjamin, physical changes to a work of art "…can be revealed only by chemical or physical analyses which it is impossible to perform on a reproduction…" (Benjamin 220). The apparatus that surround the image *reveal* an authenticity built of history. These physical and chemical processes help unveil the history of an image. For Benjamin, "[t]he whole sphere of authenticity is outside the technical – and of course, not only technical – reproducibility" (Benjamin 220). In contrast, Mitchell argues that an image's originality is *achieved* through technical means. By digitally "scrubbing" away its imperfections, by effectively removing any trace of history, "…the work is restored to its pristine originality in a reproduction" (*What Do Pictures Want* 320). In this case, traces of history impede originality and (arguably) potential aura. Originality for Mitchell is a-historic, concerned with a "pristine" (*What Do Pictures Want* 320) image rather than a persistent picture.

These polarized sets of relations between history and authenticity problematize technical distinctions between a "work of art" and an "image." I use the terms "work of art" and "picture" here interchangeably, as both are materially determined. Broadly speaking, a picture is materially bound, an image not so. From Mitchell's foundational difference, a particular work of art is a necessarily a picture, a "…constructed concrete object or ensemble (frame, support, materials, pigments, facture)…" (*Picture Theory* 4). Individual works of art are discrete pictures situated spatially and temporally. Pictures/works are subject to physical impacts of history. Benjamin's accumulated and authentic history is concerned with such pictures and such physical impact (Benjamin 220). Authenticity is established partially through the material condition of a picture

subject to a unique history. Observing differences between authentic pictures and reproductions takes place at a material level. Here is the dust, scratch, rust etc… Mitchell broadens the scope of authenticity beyond materiality by valuing images within an a-historical context. The reproductions "scrubbed" of imperfections are concrete depictions both spatially and temporally bound (in this instance, as an image file in Photoshop). These works are pictures. Mitchell is suggesting that the material state of these *pictures* can affect the aura of the original *image*: "…the digital copy can come closer to looking and sounding like the original than the original itself"(*What Do Pictures Want* 320). Reaching back across time, digital technologies change the state of original images, argues Mitchell. Distinctions between Benjamin's original "work of art" (a picture) and Mitchell's original "image" (a representation not materially bound) come into question. I suggest that, for Mitchell, the unbound image has replaced the material work of art as the "original" or "authentic". Benjamin's original work of art was historically bound and inherently distant. In Mitchell's picture of digital media, the originality of the *image* is achievable (and surpassable). What is being perfected and reclaimed through digital manipulation is not the condition of the original picture but the original image. For example, if one were digitally restoring a damaged photographic portrait, the goal would be a more authentic image as opposed to a more authentic picture. The achievement would a truer representation of the subject, not the medium. The attempt is not at a better picture (photograph) but a better image (subject). The unbound image becomes accessible through digital manipulation.

Fractures between Benjamin and Mitchell on the fault line of picture and image reveal changed delineations of authenticity and the accessibility of aura. Aura remains a

property of the authentic and the original, though its historical ties are severed by Mitchell. Benjamin's properties of "the original" are transferred from the work of art (the picture) to the living, breathing, desiring image. Questions of "value" became those of "vitality" under picture theory. So too with aura: aura becomes an indication of life. Aura expresses the vitality of living images, the "…"breath" of life of the original" (*What Do Pictures Want* 320). Mitchell's sense of aura is immediate, accessible and manipulable. I suggest that by asking questions of the living images that go unasked by Mitchell one can accept the immediacy of Mitchell's aura while maintaining Benjamin's importance of history. By reorienting the expectations of new media away from those of so-called old media, and speaking within the social vernacular of individuals' interactions within digital images, this question of authenticity becomes one of identity. Shifting this query brings the living image out of the metaphorical.

Avatars[18] are the living visual-representations of unique selves within digital media. Richard A. Bartle's opus on designing virtual worlds suggests a number of ways of thinking through the avatar: "They are tangible entities within the virtual world, as real (to it) as any other object. As representations of sentient beings, they have attributes and skills; however, they have other functionality merely by their virtue of being objects. From this point of view the virtual body is a machine that the character lives in" (Bartles 384).[19]Each avatar is a situated picture of the user. To think of the avatar as the picture of anything, it resembles the portrait.[20] Avatars within Second Life are *animated,* moving (walking, flying) through the virtual world.[21] Avatars exceed animation. Their vitality

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[18] Along with the profile pictures i.e. Facebook, Twitter etc…
[19] For more on problems of virtual embodiment, see TL Taylor
[20] For Benjamin on portraits see Benjamin 225-6
[21] For more on animated images as living see *What Do Pictures Want* 53

goes beyond movement. The life of the avatar is tied through distance and history to the user. History and physicality give evidence to authenticity (Benjamin 220). Through Mitchell's assessment of new media the subject of history shifts from picture to image. Avatars (as the objects of images) are not dependent upon their own physical duration for historical testimony. As unique living portraits of individuals, history of the picture of the avatar is tied to its original image, the user. Historical testimony resides in the individual behind the avatar. As animated avatars move through space, they carry with them a personal history.[22]This historical identity of the image is possible by way of the networked means of new media. It is both immediate and historical, satisfying both Mitchell and Benjamin's picture of aura. Acknowledging this interactive aura goes beyond Mitchell's willingness to theorize new media in new terms.

Observing the historical interactive aura of avatars requires changed expectations of media. Walter Benjamin, in comparing film to the stage, marks different potentials for aura: "…for the first time – and this is the effect of film, man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it. The aura which, on the stage, emanates from Macbeth cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor. However, the singularity of the shot in the studio is that the camera is substituted for the public. Consequently, the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays" (Benjamin 229). Benjamin divides his expectations for the persistence of aura between two mediums. Stage and film have different potentials for retaining aura. The aura of the stage actor, present in the same space as the audience, is perceptible. The aura of the film actor, separated from the audience through the reproductive media of film, is lost. For the avatar, the authenticity,

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[22] For ethnographies of virtual living see Boellstorff, Nardi and Hines

originality, history and aura of the image are not *recovered* through "scrubbing" or exact

digital replication, but *retained* by new media's ability to facilitate immediate

interactivity. Aura's presence within the avatar as picture of user is perceivable. To

rework the quoted language of Benjamin: …for the first time – and this is the effect of

digital images – humanity can operate with its whole living person (within a medium),

and retain its aura.

Holding aside some questions of authentic performances of identity that plague

the academic study of religion online, the possibility of aura through digital mediation

represents a new humanity through apparatus. The shooting of a film, notes Benjamin,

"affords a spectacle unimaginable anywhere at anytime before this" (Benjamin 232).

Film cameras represent a tyrannical division between the self and the aura, the worker

and the product, the person and the prayer. (Benjamin 231). Benjamin sees an actor

stripped of aura, temporality and spatiality shattered, divided and pulled apart across

miles of screen real-estate. The task and the struggle of an actor in this circumstance

(where mechanical intervention works to rend aura from body), is to retain a whole sense

of humanity in the face of the apparatus. As humanity engages with film, reality becomes

a secondary process of editing. The reality taking place in a film is an illusion, a result of

an editing process that removes any sign of the apparatus involved in the production of

these images. "That is to say, in the studio the mechanical equipment has penetrated so

deeply into reality that its pure aspect freed from the foreign substance of equipment is

the result of a special procedure…"(Benjamin 233). This "pure aspect" is the illusion of

reality. As a result, "[t]he equipment-free aspect of reality here as become the height of

artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology"
(Benjamin 233).

Mechanically induced realities of film involve constant intervention by technologic appendages, holding up an illusion of authenticity. Benjamin observed a deliberate attempt to hide these appendages through means of editing. New technologies, new media and new means of representation account for and illustrate these apparatuses without illusion.[23] Within the digital world of Second Life, the apparatus is presented through the medium of interaction. The computer (the means of reproduction), specifically in this case the keyboard, is acknowledged as present in the mediation of the image/text that is the avatar. As one avatar chats to another through text, the avatar onscreen mimics a typing movement in the air, to indicate that the user is typing. Thus, during sermons or prayers or orations that take place (like those in the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life) the visibility of the apparatus and the acknowledgement of mechanical intervention are apparent. More, the screen which contains the picture of the avatar is also filled with the screens, logs and notifications of all internet based mediums. The apparatus is apparent.

Mitchell argued for an integration of the *bios* and the *cyber*, a dissolving boundary between organic and mechanic. The coming of the *biocyber* marks a relinquishing of humanity to the apparatus. It seems, to the contrary, that preserving a sense of humanity in the face of the apparatus is less challenging (or at least less anxiety producing) than in the mechanical age. Old media and new media generate or invite different reactions as apparatus. Film cameras, printing presses, and reel-to-reel audio are the steaming, clanking, lumbering dinosaurs of a medium's imposition. Like the animatronic dinosaurs

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[23] For more on modern art and the apparent apparatus, see *What Do Pictures Want* 111

of Mitchell's exemplar *Jurassic Park* these reproductive machines are physically imposing, mechanically manipulative brutes. Old media technologies sit in opposition to humanity, as something foreign, dictating perception. New technologies of new media feed a sense of humanity, a sense of immediacy, and a sense of interaction. Ergonomic computer keyboards and mice, intuitive, tactile touch screens and honestly anthropomorphic avatars all invest in a familiarity with the human body. There is little left of the mechanical resistance that could be found in a jammed press or a wound camera reel.

Talk of mechanical resistance, immediacy, and interaction along with the presence of the apparatus begins a conversation surrounding Mitchell's final two reinterpretations of Benjamin's language concerning spatiality and temporality. Through this analysis a new vocabulary of new media, as woven through observation and exemplars, is uprooted and unveiled. Bouncing between Mitchell and Benjamin, this vocabulary illuminates a new visual ontology of new media. Immediately interactive interfaces do not mask their moving parts. There is neither a denial of the apparatus, nor an overwhelming acceptance of it into the body as some sort of cyborgs, but an acknowledgment of its constant presence, a congenial, parallel existence of both *bios* and *cyber*. Anxieties expressed by Mitchell result from misplaced expectations and a failing vocabulary of old media. Mitchell begins his discussion of spatiality and temporality by recasting two players in Benjamin's theatre of the mechanically reproduced: the cameraman and the surgeon. Comparing actors through different mediums, Benjamin places on his stage the painter, the cameraman, the magician and the surgeon. Surrounding the body as a medium, the surgeon and the cameraman mark the extremes of

distance: "[t]he magician heals a sick person by the laying on of hands; the surgeon cuts into the patient's body" (Benjamin 233). Surrounding images as a medium[24], the painter stands in for the magician, the cameraman for the surgeon: "[t]he painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web" (Benjamin 233). Inviting inquiry into both temporal and spatial relations, these parallels posited by Benjamin are re-mediated by Mitchell: "The cameraman is replaced by the designer of virtual spaces and electronic architectures, and the surgeon adopts new techniques of remote, virtual surgery" (*What Do Pictures Want* 321). Mitchell attempts to bring Benjamin's actors into new means of reproduction.

This is the only time that Mitchell mentions virtual worlds or architectures within this discussion, and does so with little elaboration or nuance. Instead, Mitchell is carried off by the virtual surgeon into a discussion of the performance artist Stelarc.[25] Lack of engagement with located aspects of new media is symptomatic of Mitchell's disoriented expectations. This parallel tract of the cameraman and the virtual designer is provocative, but unexplored, interesting but underdeveloped. I would like to work some of this language through, in the spirit of Mitchell's intentions. What Mitchell is suggesting is that the cameraman, the interrogator of reality, has been replaced by the virtual architect. Mitchell sees that both determine the vision (or the visible) of reality. The cameraman and the virtual architect both control that which is seen and how. The penetrating[26] operator of the mechanical apparatus manipulates reality, determining its visible scope.

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[24] This analogy is arguably incomplete or at least tenuous, as the image as medium contradicts the medium dependent picture.

[25] For more see *What Do Pictures Want?* 321-335

[26] I avoid eroticizing this language, but it would prove an interesting divergence.

While this is an accurate interpretation of Benjamin's meaning, Mitchell's depiction of virtual space is incomplete.

Mitchell does not recognize the user as part of the population of the new media aesthetic habitat. Though justifying the re-reading of Mitchell's simple sentence is difficult, perhaps that it is *only* a single sentence indicates Mitchell's unwillingness to engage with the realities of new media and his turn instead to the familiar halls of the art gallery. Pushing against Mitchell, I would argue that the cameraman has been replaced by the user, by the avatar. Users determine how their environment is seen, as each movement is like the movement of a camera. Within Second Life, switching from an over-the-shoulder third person perspective to a point -of-view first person perspective involves clicking on a small 'camera' icon. In this case, the avatars eyes literally become camera lenses; the avatar becomes a camera-man hybrid. It is in this same way that the images of an individual on their Facebook page can be curated in such a way as to project the desired personality. The user determines how they are seen, within the confines of a coded and prescribed system. Coding and regulating the media through which these images are seen is done by hardware and software designers. These "virtual architects"[27] are less cameramen and more director, screenwriter, or producer. They create the medium, or at least the rules of the medium.

Beyond Mitchell's misreading of the passage on the cameraman/painter problem, some of Benjamin's language on spatial-temporal relations of humanity to media is left out of Mitchell's discussion. Interrogating this language draws a more accurate picture of visual being in digital media. The first passage concerns the "mobile mirror", and the estrangement of the individual from his own image: "The feeling of strangeness that

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[27] Coder, designer, etc…

overcomes the actor before the camera, as Pirandello describes it, is basically of the same kind as the estrangement felt before one's own image in the mirror. But now the reflected image has become separable, transportable. And where is it transported? Before the public. Never for a moment does the screen actor cease to be conscious of this fact" (Benjamin 231). In this way, we have all[28] become screen actors, conscious of our presence to a mass public. Through the avatar and programs like Chat Roulette, Facebook and Twitter, our visual being is visible to the public. The user is a public figure in the social environment that is digital media.

The mobile mirror of online worlds creates a means of mass participation. Conceiving new means of mass participation leads to the second passage unaddressed by Mitchell: "The mass is a matrix from which all traditional behavior toward works of art issues today in a new form. Quantity has been transmuted into quality. The greatly increased mass of participants has produced a change in the modes of participation" (Benjamin 239). Benjamin is referring to art breaking out of the gallery and onto Main Street, breaking out of the frame and arriving on celluloid, on screen. By way of film the masses observe, debate, and participate in art in ways that were previously unknown. New media has created changes in modes of participation that go beyond Benjamin's conceptions of the "mass" of film.

"Mass media" has less now to do with distribution and more to do with participation. Movie-goers, participating by way of observing the images in a new community of public art, were essentially still consumers, locked out of the mechanical

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[28] All of us who participate one way or another in digital media

processes of film production.[29] Means of participation were means of consumption. The success of websites is determined by unique users, new visitors. Second Life's interface gives access to these numbers readily. The popularity of a certain location within the virtual world is gauged by its "traffic" - the movement within the designated virtual space. Unique user traffic measures interaction and engagement, manipulation rather than consumption. Interactivity and an agency of images foster mass participation in visual environments on a global scale, facilitating a means of interaction beyond the scope of the mechanically reproduced film. Mass participation in new media is being the living image, participating in a visual ontology. Mass participation is participation in the social environment of the living image.

Re-reading Benjamin through Mitchell around three issues pressing on both visual studies and the study of religion online offers possibilities for moving forward a theory of visual ontology. Translating Benjamin and Mitchell into the vernacular of visual being lends a few conclusions. Benjamin's *aura*, originally concerned with the "unique existence of a work of art" (Benjamin 220), becomes a property of vitality rather than a property of history. The avatar, as a portrait of the user, retains and expresses a historical continuity, an interactive originality and vitality that is congruent with Benjamin's necessity for the historically bound aura. Using this reading of aura rather than Mitchell's "scrubbed" and manipulated digital image is a more honest and authentic reading of the text. Moving forward with a concept of aura in new media requires an understanding of its historically bound interactive nature. Understanding the avatar as a type of portrait of the user is a way of bridging Benjamin's appreciation of the portrait as

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[29] Benjamin does mention people are able to 'play' themselves, a new mode of participating in art made possible through film (Benjamin 232)

the last stronghold of authenticity and the new way digital media allows for the living image to be understood. Understanding the living, breathing portrait of the user as the avatar shifts Mitchell's expectations of new media. Moving beyond the lumbering apparatus of old media, new media moves beyond the metaphor of the living image, and the human relationship to the technologies of new media evolves.

The means through which humanity is maintained in the face of the apparatus, a chief concern of Benjamin's, have shifted. Mechanical resistance and intervention have abated, and the illusionary practices of film editing replaced by an appreciative acceptance of the technologies that are a new social network of images. Reality within the participatory field of media is no longer an illusion. While this appreciative acceptance does not go so far as to validate Mitchell's claim for the *biocyber*, it does reconfigure the human-media relationship. Reconfiguration takes place on a visual spectrum, a visible plane. The spatial and temporal relationship of the human to the apparatus, while indicative of the authenticity of the image, also fosters a visual immediacy, an agency within images. The moveable avatar, the manipulable profile picture, and the "hash-tagged"[30] twitter picture all exercise a visual-textual field that is redefining experience in media. The moveable mirror allows for the mass participation in a new visual community.

Thus W.J.T. Mitchell's picture is changed. Gone are the cyborgs depicted in film, the old media attempt at capturing the new. The biocybernetic obsession of the performance and gallery artists mentioned in Mitchell's piece are replaced by the located practices of peoples participating in digital mediums. Mitchell's *methodology* remains

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[30] "hash-tagging" is the insertion of the symbol "#" in front of a piece of text to index it amongst other participants

foundational to my approach however. The figure of the image/text, the living image and the media as social habitat all remain fruitful ways of illustrating visual ontology. Scholarship on religion online in the present so-called "fourth wave" has perpetually been claiming to locate theory, discrete methodologies and typologies. Connelly's essay on Buddhist practices in Second Life (Campbell 2013) is a fine example of how such scholarship falls short of its own expectations. I don't mean to imply that this work is not valuable. It is worth reading as a survey of the experience of practicing religion in my chosen exemplary space. However, the language of this essay (and many like it) does not engage seriously with the presentation of the medium through which this practice is taking place, the images.

Figure 2. Image by Author.

Thus I introduce my own metapicture of iconological ontology in religious practice. The

above picture is a medium for picturing theory, makes up the vernacular vocabulary. The

section below begins a conversation between my re-reading of Benjamin and the visual

language offered by Second Life. Before addressing how it helps "picture" the theory

discussed up to this point, I will quickly sort through the broad context for this image.

This image was captured on March 7, 2013 in the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life, on

Epiphany Island. The Island also contains a smaller chapel, the offices of the presiding

church officials, and a prayer garden that flits with the perpetual movement of animated

birds, butterflies and rabbits. The cathedral and island are free and accessible to anyone.

Founded in 2006 the cathedral was constructed across two months in 2007. From it's

website: "Anglican worship services are held daily on Epiphany Island, both in the

cathedral and in our smaller meditation chapel. A weekly bible study is held on Sunday mornings, with more courses and discussion groups in the planning stages" ("About the Cathedral"). The cathedral is under the authority of Christopher Hill, Bishop of Guilford, England. Hill has written an essay on the theological consequences of the conducting Anglican services within Second Life (Hill). Hill excludes practices such as communion and baptism from the church, the disembodied nature of these virtual spaces making certain rituals impossible. Such exclusion speaks to a continued separation of the *bios* and the *cyber*, and yet the attention to such matters, a theological wrestling with the visual nature of the space, supports a concept of a visual ontology that participates in meaning-making[31].

My chosen metapicture displays my avatar standing in the cathedral, reaching out to interact with a text entitled "Service Sheet". As my avatar reaches out to the object, small dots of light commute between its hand and the text, visually indicating an interaction. As the light travels, the text from the service sheet is transferred to my inventory, available to be read. Texts are accessible to anyone who visits the cathedral, including one labeled "Cathedral Gestures", that, when touched, allows the user to download specific movement to be enacted by their avatar within the cathedral.

Mitchell's device of the metapicture visualizes theoretical distinctions made throughout this thesis, while staying within a visual (or "picturing") framework. This image from Second Life is the social vernacular of a visual way of being religious. Talking through this picture folds together the foundational aspects of visual ontology discussed. It pictures the living or personified image of the avatar (unfortunately, animation and interaction escape the medium of the printed page). The metapicture

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[31] The term "meaning-making" is adaptation of Stewart Hoovers language

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illustrates media as both habitat and architecture, the digital as both projecting and enacting a social environment. Pictured most acutely is the imagetext, the tactile relationship with text taking place through visual mediation. What makes it a meta-picture, a picture of the digital picture, is the visibility of the apparatus, the acceptance and appearance of the medium. The tension between living individual, architecture, habitual media, image and text are all highly visible.

The metapicture demands my changed questions of Mitchell's living image. As the image comes alive, its needs increase. Mitchell moves the question of power to one of desire. A living image is no longer objectified through a valuation of its ability to influence the viewer. A living image becomes subject of its own desires. A question of value becomes one of vitality. Images are valuated on their viability, their potential to 'go on' or 'go before' to regenerate or spread virally. What does the *living* image of the avatar desire? Is it viable? How does augmenting these questions help better understand the avatar as a new type of living? Considering the aesthetic digital media, in this case the avatar, the concept of a "living image" is no longer itself an image, it becomes a picture, becomes framed in new media. The living image is no longer a metaphor. Mitchell would argue that his own use of the term was no longer metaphoric, that reference to image as *bios* was literal, situated in social contexts. Mitchell living image is weak. His living image is alive as a social agent, as a generative (and regenerative) force. Image and pictures that reproduce themselves virally through human beings are very much alive. Certainly, however, the lives of images have evolved beyond Mitchell's conception in both *Picture Theory* and *What Do Pictures Want?*

The reading of Benjamin offered above supports a claim that the living image has evolved from metaphor to situated being within the aesthetic of digital media. Thinking through new technologies for the retention of aura, a maintained humanity in the face of the apparatus, the mobile mirror, and new modes of mass participation all invigorate a changed conception of the living image. These issues parallel primary concerns identified in the study of religion online: authenticity, spatiality and temporality, and interactivity. Authenticity and identity involve my reconfiguration of new media's relationship to the aura. The vitality of my avatar, of my metapicture, are retained and perceived through interactivity that is tied historically to my self as the user of the avatar. A user can operate as a whole living person within this medium and retain an aura. Aura is maintained through technologies of reproduction that foster human relationships between media and self. The mechanical apparatus that worked in opposition to humanity as described by Benjamin have been replaced by the pseudo-symbiotic apparatuses of new media (digital worlds, webcams etc...). They allow individuals to "move the mirror" in a way never before possible, the living portrait participating in unbounded mass media.

New mass-media is the habitat of Mitchell's living social image. The language surrounding new media offers a kaleidoscopic view of media as habitat. The advent of the term "social media" begins a shared sense of a communal medium. Terms like virtual environment, space and more colloquial terms like "Twitter-sphere" and "home page" all give a located sense to new media. Social media accounts for not only its function but its form. Social lives of users, as well as the social lives of digital images can be included in this discussion of a "social media". As witnessed above, Mitchell defines media as a social institution, containing both individuals and their media practices. Individuals and

practices collapse together within the visual social field, most clearly within the image of the avatar. Avatars are authentic portraits existing in a social habitat of other living images. Avatars serve as the intersection of an individual and their media practices. Pushing forward the words of McLuhan, the media is no longer just the message; the media is the "me."[32] Benjamin argued modes of perception equal modes of existence. Existing within the social habitat of embodied images is being visual, a visual ontology.

The metapicture of visual ontology above illustrates a particular image-text relationship. The picture of the avatar reaching for the book, the animation of dots that mediate that interaction, and the implications of this tactile interaction with text all play out Mitchell's concept of the imagetext. This metapicture illustrates elements of 'chatting' that occur between avatars, mediating textual and visual communication. Chat occurs in a side window within the screen, as a means of communication. The chat window is separated from the body of the avatar within the virtual environment. Avatar's names float above their body, a gap between the body and the label. Similar image-text positions are established between Facebook profile pictures and textual status updates and Twitter profile pictures and the text of tweets. The image and the text remain related, but separate.

Dots of light travel between the avatar's hand and the desired text. As the dots traverse the gap between the pictured hand and the pictured book, the text pictured by the presence of the book appears in a new window on the user's screen. Through these channels of light, the avatar has revealed the text within the book. These dots imagine a line of communication, making visible systemic aspects of new media. The apparatus of communication (the computer coding within Second Life) is visualized in the social

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[32] For more on Mitchell's take on McLuhan see *What Do Pictures Want* 201

habitat of the media environment. The mediation of image and text is visualized. Mitchell uses a similar image to illustrate inhabited elements of systemic mediation. Describing media as "both a system and an environment" (*What Do Pictures Want* 210), Mitchell utilizes the one vase/two face image.
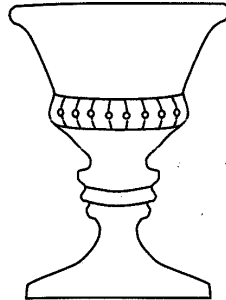
Figure 3. (*What Do Pictures Want?* 211).

 "The invisible media of seeing and speaking are depicted here as channels of intersubjectivity, a kind of emblem of the very process of "addressing media"…the two faces address each other simultaneously in what Jacques Lacan would call the "scopic" and "vocative" registers …The unmarked ribbon of the oral medium is contrasted to the punctuated, subdivided channel of the visual, perhaps to suggest a qualitative difference between the scopic and vocative, the pulsations and nervous glances of the optical process contrasted with the fluidity of the smooth talker"(*What Do Pictures Want* 210-11). Mitchell describes the lines and dots marking the space between the mouth and eyes of the unmarked faces. For Mitchell, the lines and dots make visible the very real act of mediation, along with the space and form of media facilitating this act.

The text image interaction animation within Second Life visualizes similar channels of communication. Dots of light travel between the image (avatar) and the text

(book). This animation describes a relation both internal and external to new media. Internally, the coding that carries out the interaction is hidden, as are most of the mediations in new media. The visual field of operating systems is accessible to most users, the textual field of code lies hidden. The hand-to-book animation illuminates this opacity, traversing the unmarked space between text and image. Thus the animation of a communicative line of dots animates a hidden image-text relation. Externally, the animation illustrates fluidity between image and text in new media. The animation illustrates a connective tissue between image and text. At the same time, it is distinguishing difference. The tactile relationship to the materiality of bound books is familiar. Reaching out to a text on a table is familiar. However, within a coded digital space this movement between image and text is completely unnecessary. The picture of the avatar and the text exist within the same medium. There are a number of ways the text could be presented to the user. It is not bound to a material text. It could pop up on screen upon entering the church. It could be delivered to the user's inbox without the animation. Without the animation or without the distinction, text and image would blend more seamlessly. However, the designers of Second Life (and in particular the Anglican Cathedral) decided to make this mediation of image and text visible.

Speaking on a similar image-text relationship, Mitchell begins a conversation with Foucault over Magritte's *Les trahison des images* (*Picture Theory,* 65). Magritte's pipe and script call attention to a dialectic between image and text. An example of "…the insertion of the picture into a discourse on vision and representation" (65), this image-text relationship would be defined by Foucault as a "calligram". A calligram "brings a text and a shape as close together as possible" (65) as image and text mutually attempt to

define the subject. Both text and image work to overcome one another as the reigning

descriptor. Mitchell cites Foucault's argument for a *third space* in between the text and

the image: "On a page of an illustrated book, we seldom pay attention to the small space

running above the words and below the drawings, forever serving them as a common

frontier. It is there, on these few millimeters of white, the calm sand of the page, that are

established all the relations of designation, nomination, description,

classification"(*Picture Theory* 69). An infinite number of relations exist within the space

between image and picture. This gap contains a continuous back and forth between image

and text, the "multistable"[33] definitional space of the metapicture. Foucault's recognition

of space between text and image (particularly in Magritte's painting) as the "calm sand of

the page" (*Picture Theory* 69) stills a combative binary relationship between image and

text. For Mitchell, the infinite loop of relations becomes a space of rich description.

Rather than a pitching battle for power between image and text, Mitchell finds a vibrating,

living metapicture. This sandy third space is where the hard *logos* of the land meet the

fluid and descriptive *bios* of the sea.[34]

Mitchell's use of Foucault's image-text relationship (and the resulting third space)

reflects the image of the living avatar. Mediation between text and image takes place

within the visual field of new media[35]. This intermediary mediation is visible on

Facebook newsfeeds and Twitter feeds, as means of communication are between visual

self and textual expression. The body of the avatar is spatially separated from its textual

voice, its chat screen. The separation of textual communication (chat) from the graphical

body of the avatar makes up a Foucauldian "sand" of the page. The space of screen

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[33] Mitchell uses "multistable" to define the rhetorical footing of the metapicture. See *Picture Theory* 45-57
[34] For more see Mitchell *What Do Pictures Want* 315
[35] Remember Mitchell argues that *all* media is "mixed media"

between the text and the image is where a whole sense of being an imagetext is negotiated and maintained. In between the avatar and the communicative text exists a gulf, a gap, a sandy stretch of imagetext. Interaction with the authentic living image of the avatar requires an intermediary mediation of text and image. Human interaction between living avatars takes place on this sandy gulf. A whole sense of being is constructed between the body (image) and voice (text) of the avatar.

Perceiving the shifting sands of this being assumes a historical continuity. Awareness of agency requires a living agent behind the imagetext. The belief that the moving, speaking avatar is inhabited by a human agent allows for my redefined sense of a vital aura. An avatar's aura is visible in image-text relations. Facebook status updates, Tweets, Instragram captions and Second Life chat-logs all activate a living relationship between the image, the text and the user. The mirror moves into a mass media of participation, reflecting the portrait of the user into a new media habitat. *Knowing* that the avatar and the text constellate around a user creates a sense of visual being in new media. Foucault found in the third space "all the relations of designation, nomination, description, classification" (Mitchell 1994, 69). Perhaps it also contains all the vibrations and movements of visual ontology: the living image, the habitat of media and the whole infinite relation of the imagetext.

FINAL THOUGHTS

What does picturing a theory of visual ontology accomplish? How does visual ontology help in better understanding religious practice online and more broadly being online? In working towards a conclusion, I will briefly make some larger connections between my metapicture and picture theory before observing intersections between this thesis and the study of religion online presently and moving forward.

My metapicture speaks in the "immanent vernacular" of digital images. All the theoretical work being done can be experienced within its frame. The apparent apparatus and the image-text relationship can be *seen* in the image. Pictorial avatars' expressive mediation between text and image describes a wholeness of human being within digital media. Mitchell's metapicture of the imagetext facilitates an appreciation of this existence. What escapes the media of the present printed page is the sense of aura, the "essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning…" (Benjamin 221). Because my metapicture is again being reproduced to appear on this page it is pushed out of the "sphere of authenticity" (220). That sphere is inhabitable through digital mediation. An awareness of interactivity within this medium is known to the spectator/participant, the gaze of one user unto another through the aperture of the image/text.

My invitation to a metapicture is not a comparative discourse within online religion. The most damaging aspect of the subfield is a propensity to force comparison between media and religion. Treating both as discrete sets of motivations and agents of power, such analysis is inherently comparative. Mitchell's tool of the metapicture gets between this dialectic, as the third space, as the sand of the page, as a way of negotiating practices within their own frame. The textually bound language within this space (as

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opposed to the language of the image) works towards a way of understanding that goes beyond its own textual frame. Beyond the metapicture is textual *ekphrasis*, the faithful description. The ekphrastic description is "the verbal representation of visual representation" (*Picture Theory* 152). The textual work of ekphrasis is the visual work of the metapicture. The hope of ekphrasis is to go beyond text to describe such a theory of images. "Words can "cite" but never "sight" their objects. Ekphrasis then, is a curiosity: it is the name of a minor and rather obscure literary genre (poems which describe works of visual art) and of a more general topic (the verbal representations of visual representations)…" (*Picture Theory* 152).

Both the ekphrastic description and the metapicture of visual being foster the importance of spectatorship, of *seeing* being, of *seeing* practice. Avatars desire to be seen as alive, as residents[36] of the media habitat. Seeing the avatar through the aperture of the image/text allows for the experience of the living image in digital practice. The image/text as a figuration of semantic democracy means both the avatar picture and companion textual utterances define the expressive boundaries of a digital being. Seeing image-text relationships played out through chatting in Second Life or the text mediation relayed in my metapicture, along with Tweets, Facebook updates and YouTube comments all affirm the living image, give access to the "sphere of authenticity", of originality. Visual ontology visually animates the imagetext (composite) through the image/text (aperture).

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[36] Agreeably, users of Second Life are referred to as "residents" within the developer's literature. See Rymaszewski
Second Life : The Official Guide

Turning to the second question posed above: How does visual ontology help better understand religious practice online and (more broadly) being online? I would like to draw a few connections between the conclusions reached above and the trends in scholarship observed early on, before making a few predictions about the future of the subfield.

My introduction of a visual ontology confronts the anxieties of retaining a sense of humanity within a bio-cyber-religio relationship. Inside and outside the discipline Turkle, Terranova, Stolow, Dawson, TL Taylor and others all negotiate the tensions between human and apparatus. Early scholarship fantasized about escaping humanity altogether into a cyber-reality, utilizing the apparatus as a means of release from the human condition.[37] Consequent scholarship was filled with disappointment, cynicism, and pessimism. Currently the subfield is working to define itself amongst contemporary technology. This in the statement by Hoover: "Yet we have to keep in mind that at some fundamental level digital religion is essentially about religion and spirituality. It is not about changing the world and politics; it is about people using technologies to live out the spiritual"(*Digital Religion* 268). Hoover clarifies that as a situated practice, being online or being religious online is not a political stance or declaration about the state of organized religion in contemporary society. It is a personal act.

This engaged personal relationship with technological practices is expressed in my fledgling, questioning methodology introduced by way of Mitchell's picture theory. Investigating visual ontology exercises Mitchell's theoretical mechanisms outside his material lens. Like Cowan questioning the rubric of old media, Herring's suggesting contextual theology, and O'Leary's utilizing Ong, my metapicture of visual ontology

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[37] For more on this history see Brians on works like Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Stepehnson's *Snowcrash*

attempts to "see" digital religious practice through a method previously unengaged in such scholarship. Conceptualizing (metapicturing) the avatar as living image and as imagetext brings Visual Studies into digital-religious cultural studies in a way that does not trivialize the aesthetics of experience, but reorients the expectations of these aesthetics. Broadly speaking, picturing a re-engaged reading of Benjamin visualizes being online. Such visualization could help the projects of Connelly, Helland, Hill-Smith, and Wagner engage with the aesthetics of Buddhism in Second Life, instances of virtual pilgrimage and virtual-ritual-game spaces respectively.

Lastly, looking ahead, what can be expected of coming research in online religious experience? My investment is in the pictures and images of digital experience. I think Stewart Hoover's colleague is correct when s/he says "what really defines much of online practice is the aesthetic…"(*Digital Religion* 268). Many, including Campbell and Lundby, call for a more nuanced methodologies and "typologies for categorization and interpretation" (*Digital Religion* 10). This is the wrong direction, and I hope my work has shown an active resistance to both typologies and categories of experience. Concerned with such reification of terms, Jeremy Stolow opposes a typology: "Perhaps, therefore, the only safe way to make use of these terms is to place them in the category that rhetoricians call *cathachresis*. A cathachresis is a figure of speech that denotes a thing that otherwise cannot be named, because there is no proper referent, as in the popular example "the legs of a table". By emptying out the words "religion" and "technology" and thereby drawing attention to the underlying disjuncture between these words and their absent referents, might not this serve to make new room for the many hybrids that lie beneath the semantic divide, each awaiting its own opportunity to be made visible as a

god *in* the machine?"(Stolow 19). Maybe the avatar as the living imagetext, made visible through the aperture of the image/text in the "semantic divide", awaits such an opportunity.

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