

The Internet Gaze

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Introduction

Rose Tyler recounted her epic moment: “I looked into the TARDIS and the TARDIS looked into me.” To which the Doctor replied, “You looked into the time vortex, Rose, nobody is supposed to see that!”¹ To gaze, and to have our gaze returned is a risky business in any reality. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark* the Nazis find the lost ark of the covenant and two of them open it, finding what just looks like sand. Moments after ghosts emerge and encircle the Nazi group. As bolts of lightning impale the soldiers, Indiana Jones shouts to his similarly bound colleague, Marion Ravenwood, ‘don’t look’, the dead Nazi remains are swept up and consumed by the ark.²

Friedrich Nietzsche warned us, “He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.”³

Our gazing into the internet and the internet’s gaze at us is a complex, ambiguous set of practices and experiences. I want to explain that ambiguity: the dangers of gazing into and being gazed at by the internet *and* the profound positive possibilities of that mutual gaze. This lecture will not be a jeremiad of only bitter laments about the state of the internet and prophecies of the unremitting downfall of society. Neither will you be getting a panegyric in which I laud the potential of the internet for good and advancing human flourishing. Rather, I hope to demonstrate that the internet gaze is good and bad – often at the very same time. As tempting as it might be, I will not deal further with the Tardis or Indiana Jones or even Nietzsche. Instead, I invite you to come with me on an exploration of contemporary understandings of the internet and how our data is processed and used to shape us, its users. Using some biblical materials and theological insights I want to give you some tools for evaluating your own use of the internet more critically; to gaze but not be consumed.

What is happening?

You may remember some of the early version of the internet such as AOL. Its origins lie in Steve Case’s construction around 1984 of an online bulletin board for owners of Commodore 64 home computers.⁴ In 1991 the company was renamed America Online and in 1993 AOL introduced its own email addresses with access to the rest of the internet. Remember that, until then the internet had been the preserve of people affiliated with colleges and universities. (The history of the internet in terms of military research and communications need not interest us here.) Compuserve, which was how I first entered the digital world before one’s email address could connect beyond other Compuserve users. By partnering with various print publishers Compuserve offered online versions of a few newspapers and magazines. This was not on the world-wide-web but solely within the Compuserve ecosystem. It was internet but not in the sense we now know it. I remember great excitement in April 1995 when Compuserve gave us access to the world-wide-web via the Spry Mosaic browser and shortly after having a 14,400 bits/sec dial-up modem instead of the 9600 version I’d started out with.

¹ *Dr Who*, “The Parting of the Ways”, S1.13; Russell T. Davies (screen writer), Joe Aherne (director) 2005.

² Indiana Jones, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, 1981, written by Lawrence Kasdan, directed by Steven Spielberg. LucasFilm Production.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 102.

⁴ <https://time.com/3857628/aol-1985-history/>

The point is here that this was interactive in only the most limited of senses. You could post comments to a bulletin board and exchange emails but you read information you requested – by then in some form of rudimentary webpage. You gazed a lot – often out of the window waiting for a page to download – but it was, to all intents and purposes, in one direction. The internet was not yet gazing at you, the user.

It was not until web 2.0 arrived that we became co-creators in interactive and collaborative online spaces that we now know as social media. We do not, here, need to resolve the debate around quite how revolutionary was web 2.0 compared with web 1.0. All we need to recall is that web 2.0 brought us social networking sites, wikis, video sharing sites (such as YouTube), and image sharing sites (e.g., Flickr). From being largely (but not exclusively) passive with web 1.0 we were enticed to be much more active in contributed user-generated content in web 2.0. It was in October 2005 that Facebook became available to *some* universities in the UK; it was in late September 2006 that it was made available to anyone over the age of 13 years with a valid email address. Indeed, there was life before Facebook – and we did have friends we wrote to before autumn 2006! Similarly, before the first YouTube video ('Me at the Zoo') was uploaded on 23 April 2005 we had shared photos, and sometimes cine film, or even Betamax or VHS recordings with one another. We were boring others with our holiday videos and photos long before 2005. Perhaps the earliest figurative cave paintings, dating to 43, 900 years ago and found in Sulawesi were met by yawns of tedium from their first viewers hearing about someone's summer holiday pig-hunting trip!

Be that speculation as it may, since around 2010 we have been emerging into web 3.0 or the semantic web. In this development the aim is to render the information on the internet as machine-readable for its *meanings*, not just as code. More sophisticated versions, perhaps a web 4.0 is coming over the horizon. Instead of being so reliant on human-generated algorithms to process data, the next generation of the web involves artificial intelligence systems developing the code and analytical algorithms.

Let us come back to some examples that might be familiar to many of us.

Facebook

What is on your newsfeed in Facebook? What you see is individualised based on your previous behaviour as a Facebook user. We might term this *personalisation*. By way of contrast, if you and I choose to watch the BBC's Nine O'Clock News from our different homes we see the same programme – albeit if you're in London you'll see the London opt-out near the end of the programme and I'll see Reporting Scotland. The degree of personalisation is minimal. That is not the case on Facebook – our respective newsfeeds are highly personalised. Another, less neutral, way to put this is to recognise that Facebook creates a filter bubble for us to inhabit; Facebook algorithms selecting what reaches us and, perhaps even more importantly, what *does not* reach us.

This is why it is more accurate to refer to Facebook *users* rather than the most passive term, *audience*. Furthermore, it is important to think of ourselves as being in a 'communicative relationship' with the Facebook algorithm: 'Because the newsfeed algorithm is ranking content based on Facebook users' everyday behavior, this means that the users become active co-distributors of the content they engage with through liking posts, clicking links, watching videos, etc.'⁵ Yes, the algorithm is pushing news to us based on fixed computational models but this algorithm relies on input from not just our individual behaviour, but the behaviour of all Facebook users. In short, you and I gaze into Facebook and Facebook gazes back at us. These are not two unrelated gazes but gazes that are closely inter-related and dependant upon one another. At the same time, the Facebook gaze is a monetised gaze. It is easy, perhaps, to forget that Facebook is free to use; there is no subscription fee. Nevertheless, Meta (formerly Facebook Inc) generated

⁵ Sander Andreas Schwartz and Martina Skrubbeltrang Mahnke, 'Facebook Use as a Communicative Relation: Exploring the Relation between Facebook Users and the Algorithmic News Feed', *Information, Communication & Society* 24. 7 (2021), pp. 1041-1056, at p. 1043.

revenue of 118 billion US dollars in 2021 (that is up from 86 billion the previous year).⁶ By way of comparison, General Motors generated 127 billion US dollars revenue in 2021.⁷ Google's revenue in 2021 was over 256 billion US dollars.⁸ The point to take away here is that a social media platform, such as Facebook, is actually an advertising platform – that is how its revenue stream is generated. To put this another way, you are gazing into a highly personalised filter bubble advertising platform – and those adverts are gazing at you, seeking your attention as an individual (albeit you have been slotted into multiple intersecting categories of similar people).

Amazon

Let us take just one other common example: Amazon. What happens when you search on Amazon? First thing to say is that we do not *really* know because the algorithmic search engine is proprietary, known as A9 at the moment, and its computational code protected as commercially sensitive. What seems to count are:

the received wisdom among sellers is that the primary factors driving search ranking are: relevance of product key terms to search terms, sales velocity, price, and product availability...Opinion differs on whether ratings (both the volume of ratings and the average rating) are directly considered by the algorithm, or whether their influence is indirect via impact on sales.⁹

In a bricks and mortar shop there are spots that are more advantageous for sales than others. When we step into any store we are being guided (manipulated if you like) to gaze in particular ways. Yes, we are guided to what we already intend to buy but arguably more importantly, we are steered towards what we *might* like to purchase. The position of a product at eye-level rather than on a low shelf, or where it comes on our journey through to the back of the store to get bread, all matter. We move through the bricks and mortar store but in the online store we sit still and the products are moved past our eyes.

For what it is worth, there could be around 75 million products available for sale on Amazon (in March 2021).¹⁰ Shoppers might contribute reviews of particular purchases, our searching and shopping behaviours are valuable data for Amazon (even if it is not clear quite how this is used), as is copious data about products and sellers.

Convenience and surveillance capitalism

It is appropriate to talk of an 'ideology of convenience' within Amazon with which most of us readily collude (to some extent or other): 'the ideology of convenience plays a crucial role in supporting, perpetuating, and legitimizing extractive relationships between capitalists and consumers'.¹¹ The gaze of, and into, the internet is how 'surveillance capitalism' works.¹² This mode of economic exchange takes our online behaviour and monetizes us; the digital exhaust trails we leave behind are sold on or utilised to generate more personalised online marketing or to enhance digital services more widely. Surveillance capitalism is therefore much more than mere commerce over the internet. It is a form of gazing at users that is intense, sometimes invasive, and often exploitative.

Can anything good come out of Silicon Valley?

⁶ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/268604/annual-revenue-of-facebook/>

⁷ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/225349/revenue-of-general-motors/>

⁸ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/266206/googles-annual-global-revenue/>

⁹ Emily West, 'Review Pollution: Pedagogy for a Post-Truth Society', *Media and Communication* 9. 3 (2021), pp. 144-154, at p. 147.

¹⁰ <https://www.scrapehero.com/how-many-products-does-amazon-sell-march-2021/>

¹¹ Jenny Huberman, 'Amazon Go, Surveillance Capitalism, and the Ideology of Convenience', *Economic Anthropology* 8. 2 (2021), pp. 337-349, at p. 338.

¹² Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

Before we let despair and negativity about the internet gaze overwhelm us we need to consider its positives. Characters in one of the Monty Python movies posed the question, 'whatever did the Romans do for us?' Part of the response was to say, 'Well, apart from medicine, irrigation, health, roads, cheese and education, baths and the Circus Maximus, what have the Romans ever done for us?' So, we might say about the gazing internet: Well, apart from large scale medical research studies, citizen-reporting of police injustice, video-calls with loved ones during lock-downs, access to digital repositories of academic writing, prevention of terrorism, communication networks for environmental protection campaigning, and videos of cats, what has the internet ever done for us?

We are able to support our friends and family through times of illness because of social media networks. Small businesses can set their products in front of a mass audience on Amazon or Etsy in ways impossible even just a few years ago. These benefits come via the same systems that generate the very disadvantages I have been listing. It seems that we cannot have the benefits without the disadvantages; the internet gaze is profoundly ambiguous.

Gazing in the Bible

Lament

Responding to the destruction of Jerusalem and her Temple in the 6th century BCE by the Babylonians and the exile of the Jews into captivity in Babylon, the Book of Lamentations is a book of gazing:

Lamentations 1: 1-3 (NRSVA)

How lonely sits the city
that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the provinces
has become a vassal.
² She weeps bitterly in the night,
with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers
she has no one to comfort her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her,
they have become her enemies.
³ Judah has gone into exile with suffering
and hard servitude;
she lives now among the nations,
and finds no resting-place;
her pursuers have all overtaken her
in the midst of her distress.

Lust

King David's gazing upon Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, (2 Sam 11) is a gaze of lust and illicit desire. This way of looking set off a train of events that included the murder of Uriah and the death (as God's judgment) of the child Bathsheba bore David. The power of the illicit gaze is such that Jesus gives the injunction, 'And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away;

it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire' (Matt 18:9). The dangerous gaze is not confined to sexual desire but misdirected desire of all sorts as the Epistle of James expresses in stark terms:

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ²You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet^[a] something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts (Jas 4:1-2a, NRSVA).

Wonder

Let me choose just one example of a gaze of wonder, the disciples seeing Jesus transfigured:

Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' (Matt 17:1-4 NRSVA).

As much as this is a pivotal moment in the narrative about Jesus being identified as the beloved Son of God (the voice from the bright cloud), it is a story about gazing and being over-awed to which the seemingly natural, cultural, religious response is to offer to build tents.

Providential Gaze of God

To lament, lust and wonder as human forms of gazing we can add the Divine gaze: 'Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father' (Matt 10:29, NRSVA). Note that this is not providential protection from harm – the sparrows are dead – but a warning that the gospel brings division – a sword, not peace – and the choices that have to be taken of loyalty to God or to family. We cannot get into questions of religious violence or the equally problematic matter of harm that God apparently gazes upon and does not intervene. All we can say in this context is that the Divine gaze is complex and problematic – not given to simplification.¹³

Ola Sigurdson on the gaze

Swedish theologian, Ola Sigurdson can help us here to understand the gaze in relation to God's kingdom and the formation of Christian ways of gazing. For Sigurdson, 'how the way in which we perceive the world, not least, through our gaze, has a social context that is not given by nature'.¹⁴ Whilst Sigurdson is talking about the human gaze I think the notion that the gaze is socially constructed is equally true of the digital gaze that comes towards us from the internet. I say this, not to project human characteristics onto the internet or to anthropomorphise Amazon, Facebook, or any other online data-gathering service. It is appropriate to talk of the gaze of the internet as socially constructed because it is a gaze coded by humans. Constructing the fields in a relational data-base is a political act; what Lucy Suchman calls the 'politics of the code' wherein 'the inscription of formal representations of action in technical systems transforms the debate more clearly into a contest over how our relations to each other are ordered and by whom'.¹⁵ It is true that more recently artificial intelligence systems have a role in enhancing algorithms – but this builds on the work of human minds and, as Suchman correctly observes, human political decisions. What is counted and

¹³ Those interested might want to follow my argument about when the Divine gaze fails in Eric Stoddart, *The Common Gaze: Surveillance and the Common Good* (London: SCM Press, 2021)..

¹⁴ Ola Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies: Incarnation, the Gaze, and Embodiment in Christian Theology*, trans. Carl Olsen (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2016), p. 285.

¹⁵ Lucy Suchman, 'Do Categories Have Politics? The Language/Action Perspective Reconsidered', *Computer Supported Cooperative Work* 2. 3 (1994), pp. 177-190, at p. 188.

what is not counted, what is included in the computation of relationships, are not innocent decisions. This does not mean that such decisions are necessarily corrupt – it simply means that coders have made socially-situated choices (whether or not they might admit it. To come back to Sigurdson, ‘our gazes can actually be transformed, and we therefore do not need to presuppose a particular way of seeing the world, be it the majority perspective, or not, as a given way of seeing’.¹⁶ What might such transformation look like for Christian gazing?

Sigurdson makes a helpful distinction between two more types of gaze: a covetous gaze and a generous gaze. A generous gaze is a ‘gaze that characterizes a disciple of Jesus...is not a gaze that controls, not a gaze that attempts to master and own its object, but a generous gaze’.¹⁷ Sigurdson points to the gaze of Jesus’ disciples who, in the biblical narratives, are given the grace to understand Jesus’ parables to understand his teaching and thus the significance of his miracles. They sometimes gaze upon miracles of restored sight that, Sigurdson says, ‘portend the coming kingdom of God...But this kingdom of God becomes present in Jesus himself’.¹⁸ Sigurdson proposes that ‘to see Jesus, with a particular gaze, was to behold salvation’.¹⁹

And now the crucial point; to see other people *using this sort of gaze* is Sigurdson’s theological claim that, ‘the gaze becomes an expression for the person’s relationality toward other people as well as towards God’.²⁰ Sigurdson is convinced that although there is much that is metaphorical about sight in the New Testament (as ‘spiritual sight’) this is never separated from seeing in a literal sense. However, it is not seeing *per se* that is paramount. Rather it is *how* one sees (with a covetous, controlling gaze or a generous, hospitable gaze) that matters. Christians therefore seek to be formed or taught to gaze in a Christian way. Crucially, but not at the expense of actual gazing, ‘the gaze of faith is characterized by the fact that it sees more than what reveals itself for the eye, in other words, that it beholds the invisible in the visible’.²¹

How then is a Christian gaze shaped? I want to continue following Sigurdson here when he states, ‘through the liturgy the believer experiences the world as God’s world’.²² There is no need to make a rigid distinction between the language, symbols, and practices of private devotions and public worship. For our purposes here we can treat those under the single heading of ‘liturgy’. Now I am aware that some Christian traditions are more comfortable than others about the term ‘liturgy’. Again, we need make no contrast between services of public worship that feature extemporaneous prayers and have more spontaneity than those that draw on the resources of a settled, long-developed, form of words. True, common speech often uses ‘liturgical’ to refer to the latter, and even more specifically to the more formal service of the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or Anglo-Catholic traditions. Vestments, processions, incense, kneeling and genuflecting are liturgical practices that are woven with spoken prayers, readings and sermons. But the term ‘liturgical practices’ equally applies to the smart-casual clothing of worship leaders, smoke machines, hand-raising and extemporaneous prayers and preaching. Extending ‘liturgy’ as a broad category is crucial for appreciating Sigurdson’s point (to repeat him): ‘through the liturgy the believer experiences the world as God’s world’.²³ The liturgy in which we participate forms how we see the world. To put it starkly; liturgy trains our gaze. However, liturgy is not the only way in which our gaze is shaped. Our gaze is shaped by our wider social context, our family and educational upbringing, our experiences of

¹⁶ Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, p. 285.

¹⁷ Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, p. 190.

¹⁸ Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, p. 193.

¹⁹ Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, p. 194.

²⁰ Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, p. 209.

²¹ Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, p. 244.

²² Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, p. 275.

²³ Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, p. 275.

privilege and marginalisation, and – the focus of this paper – by the internet gazing back at us, categorising us, personalizing what we see and the services available to us.

Let me select *one* component of liturgy to illustrate where, with Sigurdson, I am going in my argument. The Lord's Supper, Communion, Eucharist, Mass – whatever one's tradition calls it – is a powerful shaping of a Christian's gaze. In one way or another, depending on our respective theological outlooks, we gaze upon symbols of sacrifice, of self-giving love, of invitation to new life. The symbols include the table, bread and wine, a cross, our own reaching out for and being handed the bread and wine, and other bodily actions that might include kneeling, crossing ourselves, standing next to others at the altar or sitting beside others in our seats. Yes, the words of institution and prayers of consecration are what we hear – but shaping our gaze just as much, perhaps even more so than words, are the symbolic objects and symbolic actions which we observe (in the twin sense of seeing and participating in). We are gazing at the Eucharist and are gazed back by the Eucharist. We see and we are seen. This is not only an interior experience of devotion but observing the Eucharistic Feast (in that twin sense of observing) is embodied, external, and communal.

Now let us not be naïve. Gazing into and being gazed upon by the Eucharist is *not* the gazing of Rose Tyler into the Tardis nor that of the Nazi agents peering into the ark of the covenant in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Rather, the analogy is perhaps closer to that of Nietzsche's gaze into the abyss. *But*, it is a gaze into the *abyss of love*. What do we see? How do we then see differently?

Let me consider what we see first and by way of three biblical texts. In formal terms, what follows is a constructive theology of the internet gaze.

A constructive proposal

In Luke 24 we read that after the news about the empty tomb two disciples are walking to Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem and they are talking about what has recently happened. 'While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them,¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.¹⁷ And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad' (Luke 24:15-17). The stranger (unbeknownst to them as Jesus) explains the significance of those recent events. The story continues,²⁸ 'As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on.²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them.³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.' (Luke 24: 28-31). Jesus is revealed to them, we might say their gaze is renewed, in the breaking of bread, reasonably taken as an analogy to the Lord's Supper. It is possible to talk therefore of not only seeing *in* the Eucharist (in the breaking of bread) but seeing *through* the Eucharist. 'Seeing through' not in the sense of seeing through a fraudster or disingenuous flattery. But 'seeing through' in the sense of seeing beyond. In Sigurdson's terms, 'Learning to see the world as God's world, and so to exercise one's gaze, for the invisible, is not a momentary process, but a process that builds on repetition and deepening'.²⁴ Sigurdson is right about seeing through and thus beyond – but he does *not* make the mistake of then neglecting the visible. Seeing *beyond* and seeing *close-up* are integrally related. In Sigurdson's words, 'The gaze, thereby becomes both an ethical, and a political question, since it concerns, fundamental ways for the person to relate to herself, her surroundings, her fellow, humans, and God'.²⁵ Let me illustrate this from two biblical parables that feature different outcomes of an insufficient gaze.

²⁴ Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, p. 285.

²⁵ Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, p. 285.

First, the one, from Luke 16:19f, traditionally called the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Lazarus is poor and covered in sores. He sits at the gate of the rich man who lives an ostentatious and profligate lifestyle, showing no concern for the poor man's needs. Both die; the rich man in Hades sees Lazarus in heaven and pleads for Lazarus to be allowed to give him a finger-tip of water to relieve his agony. 'But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony"' (Luke 16:25). The rich man's gaze was faulty – he could see all his wealth and status but was unable to see (in the sense of perceive the needs of) the poor man on his doorstep. With a little poetic license, we might envisage the rich man gazing into the internet and accumulating more and more status from news stories posted about his parties and lifestyle. Perhaps the rich man is wealthy enough to buy a social media platform – who knows?

Second, a differently insufficient gaze practiced by the parabolic sheep of Matthew 25. It presents a great division between the sheep and the goats:

³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" (Matthew 25:34-39).

The 'insufficient' gaze of the sheep means that they saw only those in need and did something about it but did not see that they were doing this to the Lord – present in those who were needy. Having an insufficiently-developed gaze in this parable is virtuous. There is no sense that the righteous are helping those in need because the righteous realise that it is the Lord. Rather, the righteous are doing the right thing without any such spiritual ulterior motives.

So, a Christian gaze shaped by the liturgy sees the world as God's world and in a very particular way. Such a liturgically-formed gaze sees human need and compassionately addresses it (without ulterior motives). This is not to suggest that seeing poverty and injustice are *all* that such a liturgically-shaped gaze can perceive. But the point is two-fold (at least): (a) the gaze can be (perhaps we should say, must be) formed and not taken for granted, and (b) the gaze disproportionately falls with compassion on those in need (at least as far as the Gospels seem to be concerned).

Where then does this leave us in thinking critically about the internet gaze? I offer some conclusions.

Conclusions

If we go back to the internet gaze we find different types of gazing. There is **the gaze of our peers and as peers**. People perform on the internet to entertain; to entertain their friends (that broad Facebook category that on other platforms might be called 'followers'). I am not here advocating a new puritanism that scowls at people having fun, lightening others' mood, or simply having space for silliness. As much as it could be fascinating to explore a Christian ethics of fun, that is a discussion for another time, nevertheless, it is always worth remembering that social mores around 'course speech' are historically and socially conditioned. Just listen to some of the BBC Radio 4eXtra re-runs of comedy shows from the 1950s. Under the cover of seemingly innocuous language comedians could have audiences in hysterics about taboo subjects such as marital sexual relations or camp gay discourse. Outwardly prim and proper 1950s audiences took permission to laugh at what, if spoken directly, they would have frowned upon. And, at the very same time, racist and sexist views underpinned much of the socially-acceptable humour of not just the 1950s but until much more

recently. My point is rather to invite us to consider how we are being shaped by those who entertain us – yes, those who are professionals – but also on social media where we are being shaped by our peers. If we are one of those who entertain others on social media then how might we be shaping those who gaze at us on the internet? If we draw on the principle of a gaze that looks out first and foremost for those in need, a Christian gaze into social media entertainment might balk at poking fun *down* the ladder of social status and power to speak back. Such a gaze might have much less reticence about puncturing the powerful – those up that ladder. Indeed, Jesus’ mother might well lend her support – she was singing about the powerful being cast out of their thrones.

What about **the internet gaze of government** – and our gaze into government internet sources? We should make a distinction between official government statistics coming from non-political sources such as the Office for National Statistics and those emanating from political parties. Public perceptions of the world in which we live can be extremely skewed. Even a cursory glance at the ‘Perils of Perception’ reports being produced annually by IPSOS Mori alerts us to just how inaccurately the public guess proportions of, for example Muslims in their country. The French have the greatest level of misperception when asked about the percentage of people in their country who are Muslim. The average guess being 31% when the reality is 7.5%. People in Great Britain, asked the question about their own country goes 15% when the reality is 4.8%.²⁶ In March this year YouGov in America asked people to estimate the relative size of different groups in society. As in Europe, they overestimated the population who are Muslim in the US – estimating 27% when it is only 1%. People estimated that 41% of Americans are Black; the actual proportion is 12%.²⁷ My point is that official data-gathering and reporting is crucial to accurate understandings of the societies in which we live. This is not only the case for distribution of public services and political representation but also as a counter to political narratives that pander to fears of those deemed to be ‘the other’ and in some way a threat.

Christians, just like everyone else, need reality checks when gazing into the internet abyss of political partisanship that stokes othering. Othering is that process by which we treat those who might be different in some way, how we perceive them solely in terms of a single characteristic that we find disturbing. The other is seen as fundamentally different or alien. Just as we can other, we can be othered. And, unless we resist, we can find ourselves taking on board the othering directed upon us – we come to believe that we are alien in some way.²⁸

A covetous gaze (to use Sigurdson’s terminology) perceives with a desire to control other people and readily adopts the framing through fear and erroneous beliefs about proportions of minorities in society. A generous gaze into the government internet, one shaped by Christian liturgy, appreciates independent data-gathering as a means for identifying where injustice and marginalization might be taking place – or at the very least where further investigations into possible injustice would be required. A gospel-shaped gaze would avoid the mistake of the rich man who over-looks the poor man at his gate.

Alongside peer gazing and government gazing (and being gazed at) we have to deal on a daily basis with the **gaze of corporations** – and our gaze into those commercial windows on the internet. What might be a Eucharistically-shaped gaze into the world of online shopping? Sigurdson is convincing in his claim that our gaze is always being shaped – and so just as the Eucharistic liturgy might shape our gaze so is the consumptive liturgy of online commerce attempting to shape our gaze. This form of consumerism is not merely to present us with multiple versions of what we desire, pushing us towards one producer’s goods than others. Consumerism is much more insidious because it seeks to

²⁶ Bobby Duffy, *The Perils of Perception: Why We’re Wrong About Nearly Everything* (London: Atlantic Books, 2018), p. 113.

²⁷ <https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2022/03/15/americans-misestimate-small-subgroups-population>

²⁸ See here Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

shape what we desire. How many times have you been scrolling through the internet and paused at an online store, searching for one item and then realizing that you 'needed' something else as well. 'Needed' is a tricky concept here because this is not about remembering to re-stock your cupboard with self-raising as well as plain flour. It is the essence of advertising that you come to believe you desire – and perhaps you do now actually desire – something you can purchase. I am not going to propose that frugality and minimalism is necessarily the only authentic Christian response to advertising and the consumerist gaze into, and from, the internet. One might argue from the parable of the sheep and the goats – let alone from the parable about the rich man and Lazarus – that a Christian gaze so prioritizes attending to the needs of those who are poor that personal luxuries are to be repudiated. Jesus' miracle at the wedding at Cana might suggest that celebration beyond the bare essentials of food and drink has a place in the kingdom of God here and now. At the very least a Christian gaze into online commerce will have to wrestle with the *tension* between frugality for the sake of meeting the needs of those who are poor and an element of celebration. Here too a Eucharistic-liturgical shaping might be helpful. The more formal, what some term, 'high' liturgies of some Roman and Anglo-Catholic liturgies offer a model of such a tension. Ornate architecture and furnishings, including works of art, music, vestments and rituals are in excess of what is strictly required for the Eucharist. Such aesthetics, it can be argued, helps to lift a worshipper's gaze such that they can *see through* to a different world, of different values, to the colourful kingdom of God. Such an approach recognizes the full embodiment of Christian worship and thus of the gaze of faith. As I say, this is in tension with frugality and poverty for the sake of meeting the material needs of those who are poor. My point is simply that the tension is not easily resolved – between extravagant beauty and austere minimalism. If we bring this back to the internet gaze, a Eucharistically-shaped gaze into online commerce is a gaze that keeps wrestling with that tension. Part of that wrestling involves continually remembering that our desires are being shaped by corporations – such as Amazon. Given the algorithms behind their search engines, the highly personalized results returned to us are based on our being sorted and categorized according to the data we surrender about our preferences and, less consciously, through our online behaviour. According to Jesus, God might know every hair on your head but Amazon knows too and says, 'here's a hat you'd like', 'here's a hair product just right for you'. If God knows you better than you know yourself – it may be that Jeff Bazos is not too far behind with Amazon's knowledge of you, your needs and your desires?

Rose Tyler gazed into the Tardis and the Tardis gazed into Rose – with devastating consequences for both Rose and her Doctor. The Nazis peered into the ark and the contents of the ark consumed them in fire and lightning. Staring into the abyss, as Nietzsche warned, means the abyss stares back and transforms the gazer into a monster. To gaze into the abyss of God's love is transformative but to a very different end. A gaze into and beyond the Eucharist, sees through to another way of being in God's world. It is a gaze that first and foremost perceives those who are in need – of clothing, food, drink, of companionship. It can be a gaze that displaces the powerful, that destabilizes misperceptions of 'the other', and that resists being shaped by global corporations. Vigilance is crucial for the internet gaze neither slumbers nor sleeps.