

TV Buddha - The Spiritual Gaze between User and Device

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Abstract:

Through analysis of Nam June Paik's 1974 'TV Buddha' and relevant material this paper will investigate the effects of free-flow information, the internet and personal computing on an individual's interaction with spirituality and religion. By comparing McLuhan's theory on the 'extensions of man,' with Virilio's 'Information Bomb' this paper will establish the magnitude of the internet's impact on these traditions. Referencing Annette Pons-de Wit's research¹ and Asamoah-Gyadu's research, the paper will outline examples where religion, and spirituality have been impacted by personal internet use in an increasingly digitalised global society.

This paper illustrates the complex catalyst of personal computing and its implications on traditional, spiritual and religious practices. In the context of these examples the device acts as the interface between the user and his/her online experience, rather than the question of how the device itself impacts them. In de Wit's research, De Koster interviews and monitors the effects of an online forum for Dutch orthodox Protestant homosexuals. De Koster's case study provides conclusive evidence on the impact of an individual's "offline" experiences on their online experience.

This paper will also look into the ICGC (International Central Gospel Church) and the effects their online presence has had on its expansion. The text explains the impact of online evangelism and the rise of 'disembodied' religion and ideology. To further understand the changes in religious belief during the digital age, the paper will draw on statistics from the Pew Research Center (US), and the Office of National Statistics (UK).

In conclusion, the paper finds that an individual's outlook on spirituality and religion is altered by a barrage of accessible, interactive media and information. De Koster's research is an example where individuals have different attitudes online based on their 'offline' world. In the case of ICGC, the internet's impact was vital for its progress. The pastor expanded the religious community through the availability of the content to users in different continents. Nonetheless, the paper recognises the speed at which technological change is occurring, and acknowledges its connotations for the future of institutionalised belief systems. TV Buddha unintentionally reflects these changes by acting as a long-lasting artwork questioning the relationship between the user and device, as well as technology and the individual's spirituality.

KEYWORDS: *TV Buddha, Religion, Spirituality, Online/Offline Experience, Disembodiment, Device, Personal Computing*

¹ Contextual Responses to Inter-religious Encounters Online, Social Compass, Vol. 62, 2015

SECTION 1: Nam June Paik's 'TV Buddha'

*"Skin has become inadequate in interfacing with reality. Technology has become the body's new membrane of existence."*² Nam June Paik speaks of what both Virilio and McLuhan believed about mass media and the free-flow internet. Virilio believes technology is enhancing, or changing *'the old 'animal' body'* to achieving *'total symbiosis between technology and the human'*³.

Through analysis of Nam June Paik's 'TV Buddha' this paper aims to establish a stronger understanding of the effects internet and device technology have on the individual's mindset. Considering the different versions of TV Buddha, the paper will establish the transitions of the concept, and consider Nam June Paik's changes to the work over the years.

The sculpture brings to question spirituality, religion, narcissism and even surveillance. The narrative doesn't reveal the relationship between the TV and the Buddha yet there is an overwhelming resemblance to the interaction between the user and the device. ⁴Paik said he thought the Buddha looked like a television viewer and naturally began to make the connections. After what is accounted to be a last minute decision to fill up space at an exhibition, Paik found himself creating a thought-provoking artwork that questioned two engines of control and has gained momentum conceptually as devices have evolved. This piece has come to be Paik's most well-known. The power of its image has continued to be relevant as technology has progressed. Personal computing and specifically handhelds encourage integration between user and application to solve simple on-the-go everyday tasks. This is evident in search engines, journey planners, even shopping. Search engines allow a breadth of knowledge to be available in an instant. The scale of everyday usage is unprecedented, and each year seems to creep into different aspects of everyday life. TV Buddha's reflection of this relationship between user and device highlights the growing ambiguity over its effects.

The Buddha stares at his electronically reproduced image staring back at him. *"The Buddha and the telly look at one another, inscrutable, meditating."* (Adrian Searle). Searle's words would suggest a more contemplative relationship between the two, however they still remain silent. In the case of a standoff between them, Jonathan Jones writes *"to put it bluntly: a camera has one eye"*⁵. The relationship is ambiguous. In the original 1974 version, the short delay in the televisions feedback from the camera provides

² Nam June Paik, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, By Kristine Stiles, Peter Howard Selz, Uni of California. p430.

³ Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb*.

⁴ Krane 2015

⁵ Jones, J. 2015

an unintended archival feed of the Buddha. It suggests that the Buddha is looking back at himself. This was not an intentional feature, the simple technology is to blame, nonetheless, the delay poses questions on the archive. The ambiguity has arisen from the work's longevity. After the rise of social media, this work poses questions on the narcissism of mass media / internet culture.

Other versions of the Buddha have included the television buried in earth, or "*A miniature mountain*⁶." Nam June Paik wished to show how television had "*become a well-integrated constituent part of nature*⁷." This is now a simple fact, the television, and what Virilio calls "The Information Bomb," have grown to be significant tools, and a natural part of everyday life. Their evolution has given birth to the internet, though Virilio would argue that it is through advances in military technologies that has encouraged this culture.

'*Enlightenment Compressed*' is Paik's 1994 version of the Buddha. The following quote, from Carolyn Krane, (Rhizome) gives further evidence to the impact of TV Buddha as a reflection of personal spirituality in the digital age.

Canadian media scholar Marshall McLuhan provocatively argued in the 1960s that television sets are extensions of the human nervous system. When we are watching we are "plugged in"--creating a feedback loop that extends the body into the machinery, and the machine back into the body. McLuhan also drew on the myth of Narcissus to describe the televisual experience. Like Narcissus, one is so intoxicated and absorbed by the electronic image, he / she fails to recognise it is actually an image of oneself that is reflected back to them. Enlightenment Compressed and TV Buddha suggest that this mode of televisual experience is analogous to the practices of Zen meditation. For Paik, television provided an enlightening experience where one transcended the self--not in a mystical or religious way, but through the material technical system that was grounded in the real world.⁸

Krane's statement opposes this paper's outlook on religious connection, however strongly adheres to the impact of 'televisual experience' on the individual. Paik's inclusion of the Buddha was not intentionally a religious gesture, as is evident, however, he saw a similarity between the pose of the TV viewer and the meditative Buddha. Even though its technically unintended, the implications on religion are hard to ignore. By including the Buddha in the first place, the religious, or perhaps spiritual, connection is made.

Although Buddhism is a non-theistic religion, this paper uses TV Buddha as an example to discuss both non-theistic and theistic religion/spirituality. Personal devices allow users to

⁶ Edith Decker-Phillips.

⁸ Carolyn Krane, Rhizome.

be online and updated with free-flow information. These fact-based interactions cover a wide range of topics such as current events, social medias, technologies, sciences, nature, beliefs etc. How do these interactions change the users experience in reality? As Krane mentions, there is a significant level of narcissism present in TV Buddha. This narcissism can be seen today through social networking sites. The self-gaze presented in the sculpture precedes the narcissism of online profiles / identities. Virilio believes that humans " *become fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves.*" The evolution of these extensions alter over time, and have proved to become smarter and more interactive with everyday life. This quote generates questions on the evolution of digitalised media and the 'televisual experience'. It suggests that any new 'medium' replicating the user is immediately accepted. Given the evolution of these technologies, the 'medium' continuously progresses and alters.

"Marshall McLuhan, who declared that the medium is the message, was wrong. The medium is not the message, it is a tool. And when it is no longer a tool, it's junk. Television is almost over. What will the future archeologists of our own time make of these glass-faced boxes, in front of which we wasted half our lives? I think Nam June Paik foresaw this future. Much of his art is a sort of hymn to obsolescence."

Nam June Paik was "a great recycler⁹." He saw that technology moves quickly. Ultimately in the TV Buddha, Paik gives the CCTV and television a set purpose and a longer lease of life than many other bits of tech from the time. Work throughout his career include these recycled machines. He was fascinated by digital media, and is today heralded as the first true media artist. The different televisions used in versions of the sculpture show a progression in its technology. From the white spherical 70s TV to the 90s black box. As the sculpture progresses, the Buddha's image gets better, thanks both to the new cameras and better screen resolution. The newer versions also have no delay in the image. The Buddha only changes in size and appearance.

"Today, television is disappearing in most countries of the world, and we are experiencing excessive benefits from digitalised visual culture. However, in contrast to the diminishing presence of analog technology, Nam June Paik's significance is rising. This is because, while he lived in the era of analog TV, he opened the infinite possibilities of the world beyond it¹⁰."

Considering the questions of spirituality in Paik's sculpture, this 'world beyond' the analog television moves closer to Virilio's theory of human-technology "symbiosis". It could be argued that excessive smartphone usage could mimic a primitive "symbiosis." Technology impacting everyday is much more evident in smartphone usage. Tasks completed with the help of devices, highlight this reliance. For a complete symbiosis to be possible,

⁹ Searle (2010)

¹⁰ Searle (2010)

technology must have an inclusion with every aspect of human life. However do these technologies work with, against or have no impact on belief systems.

SECTION 2: Marshall McLuhan + Paul Virilio

Marshall McLuhan's work has helped open philosophical debate on the impact of the media. His most notable work in the relation to this research is 'Understanding Media.' In this text he explains his concept on 'the Global Village,' 'Media as an Extension of Man,' and "The Medium is the Massage". His work centres on the mass media's impact on its audiences and its effects on traditions, institutions and everyday life. Looking into McLuhan gives an understanding of a few philosophies surrounding technology and the medias influence in its wake. McLuhan has become a celebrated intellectual on communication theory and philosophy. ¹¹"The electronic age... angeluses man, disembodies him. Turns him into software."

¹²"An extension appears to be an amplification of an organ, a sense or a function, that inspires the central nervous system to a self-protective gesture of numbing of the extended area, at least so far as direct inspection and awareness are concerned."

McLuhan, along with Virilio believed technology to be an extension of the human body, and such, part of the body. An extension can be to any aspect of human ability. For example, writing or speaking are the ability to extend intellect and conscious thought to an audience. In this respect, writing is an extension of consciousness. Putting these thoughts in the context of internet use and information access, the interactions made online are also an extension of the users consciousness and mindset. This suggests the changing relationship between man and technology. The device is the gateway to this extension. What was before just a telephone now holds an abundance of everyday uses. McLuhan talked of being engrossed in media and the necessity for everyday ¹³*encyclopaedic wisdom.* Emails, travel apps and news feed give off information about current events, both public and private. A lot of this available information could be described as *'encyclopaedic'*¹⁴. These have become the norm for interacting with the physical world. McLuhan wrote that *"any technology creates a new environment, a new set of relationships among people."*¹⁵ Personal devices and the services they provide are improving and evolving rapidly. Its possible that through using the internet to discover new religions and ideologies, an individual's perception of their own or others religions can change. Wikipedia is a pool of open source human knowledge. The curiosities of an

¹¹ McLuhan 1964

¹² McLuhan 1964

¹³ Virilio

¹⁴ Virilio

¹⁵ Marshall McLuhan, Forward through the Rearview Mirror, p113

individual's consciousness are extended through using and filtering these services. In the Western world this access is fairly indiscriminate, promoting and allowing a more Pluralist engagement with religious and spiritual differences. However, in other parts of the world, the control of these services acts as a system of propaganda. De Wit cites this effect as ¹⁶*'Cyber-Balkanisation'*. As Harris writes *"Nothing is more sacred than the facts. No one, should win any points in our discourse for deluding himself... Anyone who wants to know how the world is, whether in physical or spiritual terms, will be open to new evidence."*¹⁷

In the next section, the paper will outline two case studies. The first sheds light on an individual's struggle with the laws of religion and personal beliefs about sexuality. The results highlight an increased self-awareness and in some cases, confidence made possible through personal computing. The second looks at online evangelism, and the effects internet access can have on 'disembodied' ideologies and religions.

SECTION 3: Case Studies

Stuart Clark questions the prevalence of technology in his recent broadcast on BBC Radio 4¹⁸. He considers the sheer use of computers in science as a potential hurdle for scientific progression, however at the same time, the overwhelming majority believe the opposite. His theory is based on the confusion and over-collection of data, paralleled with the computers, and humans, abilities to actually process this data. Clark believes in a shift from 'The Enlightenment to the Entanglement.' His theory is based on the idea that the computer produces a quantity of data that only further '*mystifies*' the scientists, and thus progression slows. Reductivism during the Enlightenment spawned an increase in technological and scientific production and development to establish evidence of nature's controls and habits. Inevitably, this growth in fact-based science caused some to doubt the canons of traditional spiritual and religious practice.

Research investigating online inter-religious encounters provides necessary examples of religious online use. There is an increasing pluralist philosophy towards different religions, however simultaneously there are increasing numbers of Atheists. De Wit believes this open-mindedness and the access of the internet gives promise to a more 'Pluralist' society where all traditions and cultures are accepted for their individual beliefs. Does the personal device, and the access it gives, aid in understanding or further confusing its user on decisions regarding these typically difficult questions on religion and spirituality. An extreme example can be seen in the use of social media by Islamic State. The individuality and persistence of targeted messages and the brutal, yet professional propaganda films released to the public give this terrorist organisation a 'medium' to expand their ideological message within the confines of any home with a device.

¹⁶ De Wit

¹⁷ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*. 2004

¹⁸ BBC Radio 4 (URL for programme)

The movement this case study addresses is in no way extremist, the correlation with Islamic State merely recognises the similarity in its growth through online content and interaction. In the following quote, de Wit explains what she believes will be the impact of the "*Information Bomb*" on religious institutions.

"The influence and power of institutionalised religions will wane and be replaced by the authority of the individual, who has to define his or her world view in an ever more multi-sided reality."

Looking at this focus on the individual, this paper will analyse two case studies. The First looks at the impact 'offline' experience has on digital interaction. The second study considers the creation of a new religious community, and the impact the internet has in determining this doctrine. These case studies outline the papers investigation into personal computing's effect on spirituality and religion. Paik's Buddha suggests the personal interaction with this medium, and hence the focus will be on the individual's experience.

Through De Koster's research, two common personalities are made evident in the involvement with a Dutch orthodox Protestant forum for homosexuals. This evidence is to examine the effect of an individual's 'offline' experience has on his/her online experience. Given the religion's view on homosexuality as a sin, this study is ideal in investigating the personal interactions and effects of an accessible online forum. The study finds that two types of users make up the majority of the subjects in the research. Type A are those who had undergone negative 'offline' experiences. They used the forum to seek closure with like-minders. According to De Koster, and De Witt, this causes the group to be in-focused, and embattled by similar negative experiences. For these reasons, they are unlikely to include those who's points of view differ, for example, heterosexuals. On the other hand, Type B experience positive attitudes towards their sexuality in their "offline life" and therefore used the forum as a platform for self-reflection. Type B is more inclusive, and finds it beneficial to their development to discuss the topic with those who differ, for example, heterosexuals.

This case study does not relate to the device, but exemplifies the impact of online interaction on self-reflection. The results show that offline experience directly effects the individual's interactions with the online forum. Alongside this, the study reveals an individual's increased self-reflection made available in the process. The results bring to mind, Paik's 'Buddha' challenging the 'self-gaze.' This is relevant in understanding the effects of the Internet on an individual's experience 'offline', and for both Type A and B it proves to create a level of closure. Given the effects on personal issues such as coming to terms with sexuality within an opposing religion, the study suggests that personal computing and access to the forum impacted their life experience positively.

In this context, as well as being the current pinnacle of communication, modern personal computing acts as a vehicle of access to a wider breadth of knowledge allowing that individual to research everything available about anything including ideology and belief systems.

ICGC:

The disembodiment of the “*medium*” promotes a de-centralised community across the globe. This case study describes the effects of this ‘*disembodiment*’ and its impact on a NRM, and its digitalised expansion.

Asamoah-Gyadu’s article sheds light on the practical advantage of online interaction to spread belief, or ideology. The ICGC (International Central Gospel Church) is what Asamoah-Gyadu cites as an NRM (New Religious Movement). The article gives an insight into the ICGC’s growth using online media as its main influence. Credit is given to this de-centralised system as people migrating to other countries can stay in touch with the community. The website holds multiple online sermons each week. This allows its global followers to keep up to date with the teachings. This model of ‘disembodied’ belief is a growing trend since the commercial uprise of the internet. Perhaps more generally, the inclusion of the television and the mass media separates interest from geography. Live updates and images from another continent are as invasive as the users ‘offline’ experience. Virilio’s concepts of ¹⁹*meta-geophysics* are broadly exemplified in this case study. Tradition and religion used to strongly correlate with the location of the person, however, today this is not entirely the case.

“The internet holds promise for the future direction, shape and influence of religion.”²⁰

¹⁹ Virilio

²⁰ Asamoah-Gyadu (2007) p226

Conclusion:

To conclude, through the examples provided there is a clear spectrum of change within attitudes towards religious and spiritual interaction on the internet. Religious communities share their experiences and information in a more accessible and open manner as is shown with De Kesters and Asamoah-Gyadu's research. However, a secular society more engaged with fact-based belief has seen a growth in Atheists and Agnostics. According to the Office of National Statistics, a quarter of the population in England and Wales do not affiliate with a religion. Pew's research on projected religious switching between 2010-2050, also proves the rise of those who identify as unaffiliated with a religion. The survey projects 97,080,000 people to become unaffiliated in the next 35 years. However the results of un-affiliates in England and Wales does not reflect the situation worldwide. The majority of the world is religious however atheists/agnostics are rising prominently. Although the research provided can't hold the internet as the direct and definite reason to this change, it is partially evident that an increased access of knowledge can change an individuals outlook on anything. This paper looks at that possibility in judging ones belief system. Alongside this, the impact of the net on the ICGC acknowledges the ability for new movements to hold 'disembodied' communities due to the personal device.

According to the research, there may be an evident shift promoting a more pluralist society. This would be a society where individuals stay true to their religions, or lack there of, whilst respecting the values of others without laying judgement over their beliefs, or traditions. The internet gives extremism a forum. This is evident in de Wit's report on inter religious encounters, where she cites an increased polarisation of some religions, and in some cases, an effect that she has cited as 'Cyber-Balkanisation.' This is the active bordering between what the religious community believe is unacceptable for its followers and visa versa. This is a dangerous step towards active, mass control of a community's ability to access facts. The pluralist attitude made evident through online content has pushed those with extremist messages to look inwards, and connect with like-minders, rather than opening up their point of view. This in itself is an interesting outlook of technology's effect, however, it seems the overwhelming majority see it as an opportunity to connect with other people, and no judgement is made over their nationality or belief. This is an individual's choice based on his/her 'offline' experience.

Paik's TV Buddha, 1974, considers the increased narcissism of social media and the 'self-gaze.' Social media encourages a level of self-reflection, however the result of its frequent over-use is more self-obsessive. Engaging with these sites is a social norm. Sharing information to a network of friends updates them of your activities, and has become a large part of a wider online social community system. TV Buddha, although based on the frequent watching of television, shares similarities with the interaction between user and personal device. The self-gaze between the Buddha and its digital reflection compares to the reflection between the user and their online profiles / identities. The different versions of the work reveal elements of further evolved narrative, particularly through the

sculpture's continued technological upgrades. By studying versions of the Buddha, the paper demonstrates the conceptual longevity of this work's implications on an individual's interaction with spirituality and technology.

The Buddha continues to watch his own image, with the help of this technology. Perhaps, this extension allows an individual to further evaluate life choices and understandings of traditions. Paik's versions of TV Buddha invites the viewer to consider the television, and the mass media, as an intrinsic part of everyday life. This paper uses the previously obsessive relationship with the television to shed light on the impacts of the relationship between today's users and devices. By establishing the change of digital interaction in relation to 'offline' experience, along with the increasingly 'disembodied' belief systems available online, it is evident that the inclusion of free-flow, interactive information can have a significant effect on an individual's quest for spirituality or religious understanding.

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