

Christopher Peyton Miller. *Pixilated Practices: Media, Ritual, and Identity*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2020. 104 pages. \$17.

In this short but densely-packed book, Miller illustrates how media has come to replace ritual within our society. Ritual transforms, offers meaning, and identifies the particularity of the people who participate in it. Media has coopted these ritualistic markers in postmodern life, causing a loss in personal and corporate identity. Miller sets parameters around the term media, differentiating it from popular mainstream usage in social and political arenas, defining it as any pixelized presentation of consumable material. Devices like television screens, smartphones, and gaming devices replace ritual by entrapping individuals in a process “whereby a person’s subjective experience is influenced heavily, violated, and ultimately stolen by experience with media” (79). Miller defines this process as fusion and uses his book to explain and explore its physical and psychological effects. He argues that through fusion, the body is overwritten by media, reducing the individual’s identity and their ability to experience what is real.

Miller situates his argument with those observing the postmodern condition, particularly engaging Jacques Lacan, Jean Baudrillard, and Gilles Deleuze. He packs an existential punch through twelve brief chapters, which seem to fall into four distinct parts. The first two chapters focus on how humanity generates meaning as Miller introduces his concept of fusion in detail. He illustrates how media works “in such a way as to fuse a person or population to a meaning-making apparatus known as the screen” (4). Chapters 3 and 4 examine the results of fusion: our loss of humanity. Miller argues that we lose our subjectivity when merging with media because the subject becomes identical with the media it consumes. This causes the dialectical process to disappear and the identity to form in the context of the univocal presented in the virtual. Chapters 5 through 10 suggest the fallout effects of fusion on both the psyche and the embodied aspects of a person: violence, isolation, loss of independent thought, and fractured identity. Miller’s writing becomes increasingly hopeless as he explores media’s vicious cycle that creates voids within the subject, which it then fills with more media to perpetuate and increase its toxic effects. Identity and body eventually become another social construct mirroring the product it consumes. The final two chapters specifically examine media as ritual within postmodern humanity. Here he suggests the inescapable nature of fusion, as the line separating us from the media we consume has become blurred. The last few pages of this book offer a small word of hope in the conclusion. The antidote for this disease must be a force that displaces media and breaks fusion. Miller proposes that the force can be found in the rituals of the church and its sacraments, specifically the Eucharist, where the body of Christ can give us a new understanding of our own embodied experience.

Miller intentionally creates existential dread throughout his book, implicating media in horrific crimes against our humanity. His strong voice contributes to the academic conversation of media’s role within our lives and provides insight through his stark depictions. The reader may not agree with his conclusions. However, in pushing at the boundary of our humanness, he raises a challenge to contend with the media’s considerable influence. In reading this book, several questions come to mind. Is media as deterministic as he suggests, especially in light of a relatively simple solution which coexists with media consumption? Humanity has always navigated the social influences of its time in the process of building self and identity. His focus on ritual as the sole source of meaning-making and media’s acquisition of this process creates a binary of ritual and media which obscures the other elements which influence one’s identity.

This leads to another question: How might media's *off* button affect the fusion process he describes? The pixilated presence in our lives is undeniable but not all-encompassing, as screens turn off in favor of embodied experiences, including ritual. These questions aside, Miller's work provokes important thoughts that consider media's ritualistic role in society. He reveals how media has undermined ritualistic attributes to substitute the Christian identity for a homogenous consumer who disappears into a crowd of anonymity. The cure? An intentional turn to traditional rituals found in the sacraments and an embrace of our own embodiment alongside Christ.

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