

Reviews



**Shaping a Digital World:
Faith, Culture, and Computer
Technology**

Derek Schuurman
Intervarsity Press, 144 Pages.

Bits, bytes and belief

Exploring the integration of faith and technology

Brian Bork

I couldn't help but read *Shaping a Digital World* thinking I had a rather personal stake in it. Or maybe a vocational one. I'm a chaplain at this technological juggernaut known as the University of Waterloo, a place preoccupied with innovation and technological development. That's a profoundly formative preoccupation, but it's not the only way I'd like for my students to be formed while they're at UW. It's my prayer that they'll wrestle with the grand Reformed worldview too; I want them to see how it integrates with and butts up against the obsessions of a technological age.

That project hasn't been an easy one for students to engage (faculty struggle with it, too). I don't know exactly why. Maybe it's because we've all lost a bit of our Reformed verve along the way, swapping it out for a blander, pietistic evangelicalism, one that can't speak to the big questions of our age with the same sort of depth.

Or maybe it's just really hard to reckon with how, exactly, Christ is Lord of calculus.

It'd be really easy to spend a few more pages reflecting on these questions, but that'd derail my true purpose here, which is to recommend Derek Schuurman's *Shaping a Digital World* as a worthy and true companion for precisely this sort of journey. Schuurman, a professor of Computer Science at Redeemer University College, has written a faithful and profound work that explores the way the Reformed world and life view integrates with and challenges our technological age. It's slim and approachable, too; if you've been intimidated by the prospect of wading through Jaques Ellul or Herman Dooyeweerd, you can rest at ease, because Schuurman has taken some weighty matters and made them accessible not only to aspiring nano-tech engineers, but also to folks waiting in line for the latest iPhone from Apple.

Waiting in line for that new phone might seem rather innocuous thing to do. But that action, like any activity, carries with it some assumptions and assertions about the kind of

lives we should lead. In fact, the gadget itself contains those assumptions and assertions. Building off of Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman, Schuurman argues that there's no such thing as neutral technology; all technology is "value-laden," and implicit in its design and function are some very real and formative ideas about the sort of world we live in. We may manufacture the gadgets, but in some sense, they "make" us, too.

So, that means we ought to think deliberately and deeply about the way we participate in this technological age. Schuurman encourages us to do just that by anchoring his discussion in the familiar narrative of creation, fall and redemption. The big themes in the creation story – sabbath and the cultural mandate, for example – have strong implications for technological development. So too does the story of the fall, which reminds us of our proclivity to fashion idols, whether they take the form of ancient golden statues, or modern ideologies like technicism, which occurs "when people replace trust in God with a reliance on the possibilities of modern technology."

As broken people living in a wounded creation, we might be skeptical of an enthusiastic embrace of technology, and some Christians certainly have done just that. But Schuurman reminds us that Jesus' work of reconciliation reverberates all the way through creation, including the technological realm. That means we can in good faith embrace technological development as part of the unfolding of a broken yet redeemed creation. Of course, that implies appropriate stewardship of technology. Schuurman offers up eight norms – among them, social, economic and aesthetic – rooted in God's goal of shalom that can help guide us in that process. Forming our lives around these norms is easier said than done, of course, but an attentive and contemplative reader should be able to find all sorts of small ways to put them into practice.

Those small steps matter a great deal, because they add up and shape the desires of our heart. And ultimately, that's what it comes down to for Schuurman.

"Without a connection to Jesus and a love of neighbour, any work to shape computer technology or culture on our own is bound to fail." That's a message that's dearly needed on UW's campus, not to mention the queue at the cellphone kiosk in the mall. ➤

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Exploring outer (and inner) space



Michael DeWitt

Occasionally a great film, or just one with a particularly rabid fan base, will elicit an audience's spontaneous, awestruck applause at the close. Alfonso Cuarón's latest work, *Gravity*, merits a different type of salute. In my theater, at least, silence reigned. Not one person stirred; too much, it seemed, needed processing. *Gravity* calls forth a level of emotional immersion I have not experienced from film in years. Cuarón, Sandra Bullock and George Clooney have accomplished something as exceptional as it is unexpected in an autumnal studio release, and 20 minutes after the closing credits I still felt like I just couldn't exhale quite enough.

From the opening, *Gravity* walks its au-

dience back and forth between long, lovely pauses and pulsing, frenetic movement. At the opening we are treated to the majesty of space as spacious, a true null set where every noise, every breath is an aberration. Perhaps a miracle. We've grown too accustomed to the wonder of space exploration, and Cuarón very carefully restores a proper respect for the environment, so much so that Clooney's casual veteran calm feels downright remarkable, even when everything is going according to plan.

Plans, especially those conceived in Hollywood, are far from foolproof, of course, and the film's space setting becomes a malign presence when things begin spiraling out of NASA's careful control. A thousand action movies have numbed most of us to

the threat of swirling debris an explosion looses upon those nearby. Not so here, where the eye is pulled to and fro as the camera spins, trying in vain to track a thousand bits of shrapnel at once, wondering which, if any, might prove fateful.

Impressive as they may be, it is between these spinning set pieces that the heart of the film comes to the fore. There is space here for Bullock's character to pause and ponder her next move, but also her place in the grand opera of emptiness. In one of the film's best deep breath moments, she floats in a brilliantly backlit, fetal pose, gulping in air, at rest. Unlike your standard summer popcorn affair she is not the catalyst for any of the catastrophe around her. Hers is not the story of a hero saving a city, nor shaping world events. She matters only to herself, her partner and perhaps, if she's lucky, a few unknown, silent observers.

Hope and tragedy dance cheek-to-cheek throughout *Gravity*. Part of this grows out of Bullock's character's background. Her story is blunt, convenient to the plot, and eminently human. Sometimes simplification is not only excusable, but desirable for putting a spotlight on simple ideas – a child, a lost shoe, a brilliantly in-focus floating tear. Regret, untreated, never really fades. Loneliness is a curse, creeping up slowly until it overwhelms. Despair lies at the end, and life's spark flickers in its presence.

Pascal's God-shaped hole in the human heart is never far from the fore in *Gravity*. A Russian Orthodox icon adorns a Soyuz capsule. Buddha maintains his equanimity

in a Chinese pod. Even Clooney takes a turn as a stand-in intercessory figure. And when Bullock begs for someone to whom to appeal, rasping that "No one ever taught me how (to pray)," her loneliness in the endless void swells into a whole new dimension.

As the credits rolled on our matinee showing, a young man held court with his friends, eager to share his insight on the characters' trials based off his own extensive experience with a shuttle flight simulator. It's a testament to Cuarón's filmmaking that even this armchair pilot, finally given an opportunity to flaunt his accumulated wisdom, instead acknowledged that accuracy of physics and pilot procedure are irrelevant to the personal transformative story present here. One comment from him really stood out, though: "Stable orbit is a fragile thing" he sighs with a weary shake of the head.

There is a thin line between life and death all throughout *Gravity*, and throughout a natural world vaster and more powerful than most sane people can really contemplate. Cuarón, Bullock and Clooney bring us back to the wonder, the fear and the breath-catching tightness in the chest of our ancestors, staring up at the inscrutable stars in their sea of blackness, fearing the dark, and seeking someone to say "You are not alone, and your story will matter." ➤

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