Photography & media

Exploring theology with digital art

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The world of computers and 'high tech' and that of religion may seem distantly remote from each other, but a recent exhibition suggests otherwise

Putting theologians and digital artists together might not seem like an obvious choice. While one seeks to understand ancient texts and to apply the past to the present, the other pushes present boundaries for future aesthetic, even technological, advances. The recent exhibition 'De/coding the Apocalypse', which ran in London from 7 November to 19 December 2014 at Somerset House's Inigo Rooms, attempted just that. It brought together researchers from the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at King's College London with digital artist Michael Takeo Magruder (b.1974, US/UK) to create an exhibition exploring themes from the

Book of Revelation. Not only did those involved successfully communicate between and blend disciplines in this innovative collaboration but the exhibition also pointed to the significance of exploring cultural themes by bridging the gap between artists and academics.

Digital art is a branch of contemporary art that is gaining increasing recognition in the art world. There is no simple definition of the term but, in essence, it can be described as the use of digital tools and techniques, such as computers, the Internet or robotics among others, as part of the artistic process. As our modern culture is evermore penetrated by these technologies, artists increasingly experiment with and use them as part of their work. With these digital creations come questions of how, through art, we may react to and interact with the flood of new technology and data.

How assimilation of technology into daily life influences individuals, our society and culture, is one of Takeo's interests in his work. This has focused on how technologies can inform and transform visitor experiences within traditional gallery spaces. In his recent projects, an interest in exploring the aesthetic aspects that transcend the analytical nature of data shines through.

The five digital media installations in 'De/coding the Apocalypse' offered the opportunity to explore such questions with a focus on the *Book of Revelation*, a text that has historically provided a rich source for visualizations of the Apocalypse. The installations were developed from the artist's responses to the academics' interpretations of the biblical text. They blended a variety of digital technologies, including computers, code systems, mobile devices and live data, with traditional physical art forms, such as painting, printing and sculpture.

Each piece was accompanied by an essay written by a contributing academic, which addressed major themes and concepts within the installation and its relation to the *Book*. The conversation between contemporary digital art practice and theological research sought to create multi-layered, innovative and relevant ways for modern audiences to explore the biblical text and to re-examine its theological tradition. Closer examination of two examples may give a picture of the overall exhibition experience.

The installation *The Horse as Technology* included a 3D printer that continuously created 3D copies of a real horse skull. The printed heads were arranged together surrounded by pillars of binary code. The work was set in a darkened room, its presence underlaid by an atmospheric soundscape; visitors found themselves in an eerie, unsettling atmosphere. Visitors could interact with an intricate virtual wire-frame model of the head displayed on a screen and observe the physical 3D printing process in real time. The installation evoked one of the most well-known images from the *Book of Revelation*, the four horsemen of the apocalypse. The trope of the horses, as an ancient exemplar of human 'technological' enhancement, was linked with these cutting-edge technologies to provoke us to consider both the wondrous creative powers and fearsome destructiveness technology provides.

In our society the rising tide of technological innovation is often coupled with concerns about, and fascinations with, the apocalyptic. Using these associations, the artwork challenged us as viewers, to reflect on the potential dangers in worshipping our empowered selves and our status as technologically enhanced 'cyborgs'.

The installation *A New Jerusalem*, in contrast, offered a digital vision of a world to come. The fantastical spatiality of the New Jerusalem, the post-apocalyptic, ultimate future portrayed in the *Book of Revelation*, was rendered in a virtual reality environment created by

combining biblical descriptions of the city with actual geographical data on modern Jerusalem. Visitors could experience the work simultaneously through a high-definition projection setup and an Oculus Rift headset. This innovative approach to envisioning the text explored the city with a sense of its expansive space, previously impossible with non-digital artistic means. The artwork pushed the boundaries of how we can view the future, maybe even salvation, by expressing biblical hopes and ideals of a future built on both a human and divine foundation.

It is difficult to capture the profundity of the viewing experience offered by these fascinating visual translations of theological and academic concepts. The works simultaneously affirmed the cryptic, ode-like nature of the text, retaining its multiplicity of layers, while allowing for our constant decoding and encoding to be applied to both the text and the artworks. They also reflected how universities and the cultural sector could mutually support each other to drive artistic and academic innovation, and how such exhibitions could provide promising future prospects for both the arts and academia.

Credits

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