

Gut Feelings: A Response to Norm Friesen’s “Dissection and Simulation”

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“It’s disgusting!” (quickly followed by “It’s cool!”). Thus declared my children, ages 9 and 12, upon having been enlisted into an impromptu experimental trial with the froguts.com online dissection simulation. Neither of them had ever dissected an animal before. It was striking how precisely their reactions to the simulation followed the affective trajectory from repulsion to fascination that Norm Friesen assigns to actual dissections of an animal’s preserved body in a classroom. What struck me most was how quickly it was all over. With the intuitive point-and-click virtuosity characteristic of their peers, it took the kids less than two minutes to complete the exercise of “eviscerating” the avatar (Can one eviscerate something that is bereft of viscera? What, *exactly*, were they *doing* to that thing?). The impression, I suspect, was superficial. Around the dinner table that night there was little talk of the operation that had taken place earlier that afternoon. It is nearly impossible to imagine that the same would have been true had they actually sunk a blade into some pickled creature’s flesh and peeled back its skin to reveal its innards for the first time. I think it is safe to assume *this* would have been a spontaneous and irrepressible topic of conversation, even as we passed the pork chops.

As Friesen avers, nobody forgets the first cut. For all the reasons he lists under the auspices of the “sensually intensive encounter” that is a dissection—the shock of seeing the pale carcass; the agony and pleasure of the sound and feel of the inaugural incision; the gurgle and smell of the brine; the morbid curiosity satisfied only by probing the cavity; the strange identification with vital systems unexpectedly similar to our own; the nagging fear that, even though the thing is already dead, one wrong move could lead to serious trouble—the digital counterfeit could never be anything but impoverished and forgettable by comparison. Friesen’s arguments are so immediately convincing one wonders whether it was even necessary to make them. Surely—earnest school administrators aside—there is not a biologist alive who would deny that the pedagogical and experiential value of an actual dissection exceeds that of a simulation by many factors. And presumably none would contest that the superiority of the actual dissection accrues to precisely those qualities that Friesen assigns to the “transforming cut.” Simulation, they would likely say, is meant to supplement, not replace, actual dissection and, in its limited way, can contribute to the effective teaching of the biological arts. If fewer animals are raised for the sole purpose of becoming specimens, so much the better. Nobody is claiming that simulated and actual dissections are the same, or even equivalent. Surgeons will always need to be at least as good with a knife as they are with a mouse, and “turning off” certain kids to biology is arguably what compulsory exposure to actual dissection is really for: it separates those with a stomach for the trade from those who would be well-advised to take up another line.

And so, perhaps Friesen’s careful illumination of the singular quality of actual dissection is just tilting at windmills...unless, of course, his arguments are not really about dissecting frogs at all, or at least not limited to this practice. By invoking Borgmann’s trenchant critique of hyperreality, Friesen signals that there might be more at stake here than a lost rite of passage. For Borgmann’s is not an account of this or that medium or tool but, rather, an indictment of contemporary technological experience *as a whole*, of which Friesen here presents simulated dissection as one particularly evocative example. This suggests the possibility that Friesen’s insights into the implications of normalized simulation in biological education might be portable to other domains in which the ethos of simulation also finds technological support and extension. Elsewhere, I have

written about how certain applications of emerging media technologies relieve us of the constitutive burdens of community and art (Barney, 2004; Barney, 2010). Here, I would like to explore whether Friesen's account of simulated dissection might help us to think about the circumstances of politics under contemporary technological conditions.

By politics I mean something that exceeds what we normally think of when we hear that word. Politics happens when it falls to us to make judgments and to act. When politics happens, the shape and operation of power is exposed, and questions are raised about justice and the good life, questions whose answers cannot be given in advance, questions whose very undecidability calls upon us to make judgments and to act. In other words, politics is an excruciating and even pathological situation, to which a range of qualities can be attributed. These include: that political judgment and action tend to arise in response to a fundamental *wrong* (usually some form of inequality or a structural exclusion); that they are experienced as *imperatives* rather than *choices* (the form of their expression is: "Faced with the circumstances before me, I cannot tolerate abstaining; I have no choice but to make a judgment and take action"); that they nevertheless unfold *contingently*, under conditions of *undecidability* (where the outcome of a judgment cannot be given in advance) and *unpredictability* (where the outcome of action arising from those judgments also cannot be given in advance); that they are burdensome and, in particular, carry the burden of *organization* and work; that, in their unfolding, they reconfigure the *horizon of possibility and impossibility* (they are not just about gaining equality or inclusion on present terms, but reconfiguring the very terms of inequality and exclusion); and that they are therefore, essentially *disruptive*.

Politics is thus a rare and exceptional thing. This does not mean politics is necessarily revolutionary—just that it is exotic in the precise sense of that word: it belongs to another country, a country *to come*—and that very little of what we associate with politics today actually qualifies as political, except in the sense that liberal-democratic “politics” formalizes a particular order and distribution of power. Inoculation against the pathology of politics has arguably always been a primary function of “normal” politics: most of what goes for politics in liberal-democratic contexts comprises a habit aimed at containing the possibility of politics itself. As Jacques Rancière observes: “Politics is the art of suppressing the political... Depoliticization is the oldest task of politics, the one which achieves its fulfillment at the brink of its end, its perfection on the brink of the abyss” (2007, 11, 19). In his book *Political Machines*, Andrew Barry attributes depoliticization directly to the normal operation of what goes by the name of politics in contemporary liberal democracies: “...one of the key functions of established political institutions,” he writes, “is to place limits on the possibilities for dissensus and restriction and on the sites in which political contestation can occur. What we generally term politics thus always has something of an anti-political impulse” (2001, 207). The genius of liberal democracies is that containment of the possibility politics is accomplished not via coercion but rather by consensus. According to Rancière, we live in consensual times, with consensus referring not to an agreement between people but rather to a collective resignation to the sense that “what is, is *all* there is” (2010, x). He contrasts consensus with another way of being in the world, a way of being that “lays claim to one present against another and affirms that the visible, thinkable and possible can be described in many ways. This other way has a name. It is called politics.”

The relationship between emerging media technologies and the possibility of politics is, then, ambiguous. On the one hand, digital networks and the applications and appliances attached to them have provided activists and dissidents with powerful tools they can use to disrupt prevailing horizons of consensus and to organize alternative possibilities, both in media contexts that are normatively liberal and those that are openly authoritarian (see, for example, Goldfarb, 2006, and Benkler, 2006). On the other hand, critics such as Jodi Dean point to the role these same

technologies have played in bolstering the regime of “communicative capitalism” under which politics becomes conspicuous by its absence (2008; 2009). As Dean describes, taken by the fantasy of participation, “people believe that their contribution to circulating content is a kind of communicative action. They believe that they are active, maybe even making a difference simply by clicking on a button, adding their name to a petition, or commenting on a blog” (2008, 109). For Dean, this passivity masquerading as activity “prevents *actual* action, prevents something from *really* happening.” In this respect, emerging media technologies function as a kind of fetish that compensates for what we experience more deeply as a profound lack – they relieve the pain of our of passivity and disempowerment by helping us to feel and believe that we are being active when really we are not. In language that resonates with Friesen’s account of the narrow (and narrowing) priorities of educational interface design, Dean describes a dynamic of “condensation” whereby:

The complexities of politics—of organization, struggle, duration, decisiveness, division, representation, etc.—are condensed into one thing, one problem to be solved and one technological solution. So, the problem of democracy is that people aren’t informed; they don’t have the information they need to participate effectively. Bingo! Information technologies provide people with information (2008, 112).

In this account, the fantasy of participation and the fetishization of its current technologies displace energy and attention from the more demanding burdens of politics by satisfying its less demanding counterfeits with relative ease or—to use Friesen’s Borgmannian terminology—“brilliance.” Thus, emerging media technologies culminate in a dynamic of foreclosure, whereby the advanced coding of communicative “participation” as political effectively excludes or forecloses more demanding forms of political judgment and action before they have a chance to happen. As Dean observes: “the political purchase of the technological fetish is given in advance; it is immediate, presumed, understood. File-sharing *is* political. A Web site *is* political. Blogging *is* political. But this very immediacy rests on something else, a prior exclusion. And what is excluded is the possibility of politicization proper...Struggle, conflict and context vanish, immediately and magically” (2008, 114).

Just like with the digital frog. As Friesen puts it, “In the simulated dissection, what appears as surprising and also amazing or impressive is the responsiveness of the interface, the ease and convenience with which the dissection steps can be negotiated” (this volume). For someone with a cause to promote or a grievance to air, nothing could be easier than starting (or joining) a Facebook group. However, just as dissecting an actual frog takes resolve, care, and skill, nothing about actual politics is convenient or easy. The online simulation described by Friesen is designed specifically to relieve the user of the existential and material burdens associated with the practice being simulated, while heightening those elements that gratify the user’s “certainty-of-the-world.” The brilliant simulation, “designed to anticipate and facilitate what we want to do, when we want to do it,” takes the edge off our encounter with alterity and culminates in an experience whereby the user “really only encounters *herself*.” Just as actual dissection exposes practitioners to a field of difference, resistance and difficulty (for, no matter how sharp the knife, the flesh still resists the initial cut), so too does actual politics expose us to differences that disrupt our certainties, thwart immediate gratification of our desire for convenience, and impose burdens of consideration, care, judgment and action that cannot be shed without draining the situation of its political character. In this light, the parallel between the demands of dissection and those of politics, and the consistency in how emerging technologies become available to alleviate these demands, are striking.

As Friesen describes it, initiation into the moral universe of an actual dissection comprises “a profoundly uncomfortable or disquieting situation or experience,” one that “can be experienced in terms of a deeply felt disgust or repulsion,” an embodied, intercorporeal imperative (whether it is the imperative to stop, or to proceed) that one feels in her guts even before she articulates that gut feeling with “intellectual disquiet” or a “moral qualm.” Such experiences, Friesen says, interrupt our “living-in-certainty-of-the-world.” As I have suggested above, to be initiated into politics is also to be incorporated into an essentially disruptive situation in which the outcomes of the imperative of judgment and action cannot be calculated in advance. And, after decades of critical feminist thought that has rescued us from the masculinist prejudice which equates public action with rationality expressed in reasoned speech, it should no longer be controversial to associate political judgment and action with the gut feeling that injustice simply cannot be tolerated (see, for example Berlant, 1997, and Ahmed, 2004). Such gut feelings are provoked more readily by sensory apprehension of the situation than by intellection or persuasion. As Davide Panagia puts it: “Flavor—not speech—turns the mouth into an organ of political action” (2009, 3). It is when the disgusting taste, sight, smell, sound or feel of injustice turns our stomachs that we are given over to empathy and outrage, and thereby incorporated into a political event that might otherwise present itself as an imprudent wager. Thus Rancière locates the possibility of politics in “ignorant stomachs,” and its suppression in the “intelligent heads” whose task it is “to explain to the population that nothing can be done except what our governments are already doing” (2010, 2). Politics, like actual dissection, takes guts (see Barney, 2011). In her work on bioethics in the age of new media, Joanna Zylińska follows Derrida in describing “the cut” as “a differentiation in the flow of life that cannot be subsumed within this life because it comes from ‘elsewhere’” (2009, 30). Political claims would seem to represent cuts of this kind: they are *advenient* not convenient; they come from outside or beyond an existing situation, disrupt that situation and cannot readily be subsumed by it (see Panagia, 2009, 151-153). If, by replacing *advenience* with *convenience*, simulation can render gutless the act of “cutting into the soft belly of an animal,” what might it do for the guts it takes to make political claims—that is, to *make cuts*—that are at least as scary?

It goes without saying that emerging media can be used to prompt sensory, affective, intercorporeal experiences of the injustices inflicted upon others in a manner that inconveniently disrupts our certainties about the world and moves us to judgment and action. In these cases, emerging media comprise means of representing an actual situation into which we might be meaningfully incorporated. It actually happened that on December 17, 2010, a Tunisian street vendor named Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire to protest his humiliation at the hands of state officials (Worth, 2011). That only relatively few people actually witnessed this act, or his subsequent death, or that many millions learned of these events via the internet, does not negate the fact that his story affected people such that many of them were moved to political judgment and action. This was clearly no mere simulation. Online dissection does not *represent* actual dissection, it *simulates* it, and so too is there an important distinction to be made between the use of emerging media to represent actual political acts and situations, and the proliferation of simulated political activity online. The difference is between those sorts of mediated encounters that call upon us to respond to the imperative of judgment and action by actually doing something gutsy, and those that enable us to evade that imperative by doing nothing at all, even as we console ourselves that by signaling our likes and dislikes, voting our approval or disapproval, and forwarding the link to our friends we are acting like people who care.

Perhaps it is as simple as this: you cannot be doing something if nothing is at stake. As Friesen describes, in contrast to the simulated dissection in which the previous condition can be restored after a slip of the mouse simply by clicking the undo button, “In the classroom dissection, irreversible errors, of course, *can* be made, and things *can* go seriously wrong.” The same goes for the adventure of politics. The primary meaning of adventure is “that which comes to us, or

happens without design,” and among its secondary meanings is “the chance of danger or loss; risk, jeopardy, peril” (OED, 2011). This is what makes politics real, not whether it happens online or offline. When one is moved to political judgment and action, there is no telling where things might end up, and things could go terribly wrong. As Hannah Arendt suggested, the basic condition of political action entails the “predicament of irreversibility,” whereby one is “unable to undo what one has done” (1958, 237). For Arendt, the remedy for this predicament is forgiveness, without which there would be no home in the world for politics. The technological ability to undo an unfortunate act by pressing a button is not the same as forgiveness, because in tracing the wrong line on a picture of a frog, or signing the wrong online petition, there is nothing to forgive. When it comes to simulation—whether simulated dissection or simulated politics—forgiveness is unnecessary because nothing is at stake, and nothing could go seriously wrong. As Malcolm Gladwell observes, contrasting the “politics” of social networking with the organizational burdens and corporeal risks that characterized the U.S. civil-rights movement, “Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice” (2010, n.p.). The question is not whether political activists can make good use of technologies such as Facebook in organizing and executing their attempts to disrupt and resist the prevailing consensus and to reconfigure the horizon of possibility, for it would be absurd to suggest that the mere use of online tools drains judgment or action of its political character. The question is what to make of the proliferating tendency to use these emerging technologies to support simulations of political judgment and action where nothing is on the line.

“We cannot finally,” Albert Borgmann writes, “be citizens both of the hyperreal universe and of the real world” (1992, 97). This does not mean politics cannot happen online or that emerging media technologies cannot be used to pry open the possibility of politics. It does not mean that those committed to “real” politics had better steer clear of the Internet. A couple of days after he had tried out the dissection simulation, my 9 year-old son went online to watch streaming video of a performance of the song “Somalia” by the rapper K’Naan. The song tells of K’Naan’s upbringing amidst the violence and poverty of Mogadishu (“*We used to take barbed wire/Mold it around discarded bike tires/Roll ‘em down the hill on foot blazin’/Now that was our version of mountain bike racin’*”) and his dismay at the indifference to this situation he found upon escaping to Toronto where, as a refugee, he also lived amidst poverty and violence (“*And when I told the world/None would bat an eye/They said, “Since you know how to kill/You should learn to die”*”). My son was moved. Perhaps it was the sound of the music; more likely it was the taste of injustice in his mouth, and the feeling it gave him in his guts. Whatever the case, there ensued several breakfast-table and bedtime conversations about Somalia and the wars there, about being a refugee, about poverty, race and violence in our own cities, and about K’Naan’s own prescription for all of this: an ethos of giving. These were not comfortable conversations, and it would have been far easier for me if we did not have to have them. But he would not let it go. He kept going back and listening to the song online. It seemed very real to him. Where this might lead is impossible to predict or control.

The Internet is part of the real world in which the possibility of politics either will or will not unfold, and any dichotomy that categorically pairs offline with real, and online with unreal, misdiagnoses the reality of contemporary experience. Citizens of the real world are necessarily engaged with emerging media technologies, even as hyperreality—the reign of gutless counterfeits—also thrives in the environment supported by those technologies. In this environment, simulation and its ethos stand ready to absorb difference, burden, and resistance into the empire of convenience. To the extent this condition prevails, the possibility of politics will suffer and continue to be marginal to contemporary experience. This, however, might be exactly where politics belongs. For, if politics is an encounter with difference that prompts risky

judgment and action which disrupts our certainty about the world, then it could only ever be of, and at, the margins of our experience. In temporal terms, we could say that politics is always to come. In this respect, we might therefore be forced to conclude that politics, whatever its technological situation might be from time to time, is essentially virtual: not simulated but potential. Reality will always nurture the potential of politics, even as hyperreality strives to starve it.

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