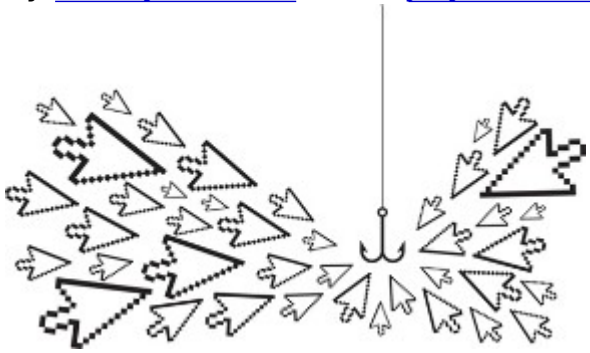
Clickbait kitsch

by Kathryn Reklis in the July 9, 2014 issue



Your homework today is to try and watch this and NOT cry," announced a Facebook post that showed up in my social media feed three times in one morning. I clicked, and the link took me to Upworthy.com to watch a video of an inspiring high school teacher interacting with his students.

Another post announced that "you too will cry after watching this . . . 90 percent of people cry." The short video was about two orphans in Malaysia "discovering the power of unconditional love" on the eve of Eid al-Fitr, the Muslim holiday marking the end of Ramadan.

My feed includes at least one of these invitations every day. If I count the other emotions that I'm told to feel—amazement, wonder, laughter, inspiration—the number of those invitations multiplies, and I click almost every time. There's the irresistible tagline and the endorsement of my peers. Who doesn't want to see what lies behind "This is what happens when parents love their children unconditionally"? If three or four of my friends post the same link, I've got to see what all the fuss is about.

In my first-year undergraduate theology class, I teach a unit on art and theology that includes a discussion of kitsch. To illustrate the concept, I describe a 30-second commercial that condenses a mother-son relationship from infancy through college and admit that I may break into tears thinking sentimentally about my own four-year-old—until I realize that the point of the vignette is to sell me toilet paper. Kitsch, I explain, is a form of art or culture that coerces an emotional response that's unworthy of the object generating it.

Kitsch is a theological problem because the Christian story is meant to affect us, to generate an emotional response in us. Emotions are such a powerful part of our religious experience that Christian theologians from the patristics era to the present have warned against false competitors for our affections. Augustine, for example, was more worried about sentimentality than about immorality in the theater shows of his youth—he feared that the theater tricked him into feeling more strongly for fictional characters than for the plight of real people.

And isn't the promise of prepackaged emotional response in these clickbait videos exactly that—a virtual embodiment of sentimentality? On the one hand, there is nothing pernicious in responding viscerally to an uplifting story about an inspiring teacher. On the other hand, Upworthy offers a play-by-play description of what the video holds at different time markers and the reactions the viewer should expect to have. As I reach for a tissue around the seven-minute mark, as predicted, I can't help feeling that my emotions are being played with.

Although it's easy to label these videos sentimental kitsch, Christians need to pay attention to the trend. An estimated 50 million unique viewers every month are watching Upworthy—a number that rivals major news sources like Time.com and Fox News. Other "feel good" sites include HuffPost Good News, Tumblr Positivity, and Pulptastic. There are even Christian spin-off sites like GodFruits and GodVine that tack Christian messages onto videos found elsewhere on the web. Odds are that everyone on Facebook comes across these videos occasionally, if not daily.

Perhaps there's value in the power of these videos to evoke *shared* emotions. After all, the sites depend entirely on that adjective.

Maybe clicking on these links in our social media feeds is not unlike sharing parking lot gossip after church on Sunday morning. I mean no disparagement in this comparison. The chatter of "Did you hear. . . ?" forms the backbone of communities. Out of these exchanges we test our own reactions to stories and events. We practice sympathy and empathy and shape our moral imaginations.

If we genuinely accept that the Christian story is emotional and embodied—that it lives deep in the sinew that connects our bodies and souls—we cannot dismiss the trend of clickbait videos. Humans are, after all, easily baited. But perhaps we can use the videos as a starting point for something else. We can acknowledge the human desire to know what other people are feeling and even crying about. As we feel *along with* other people, we can then learn—and encourage others—to take the

step toward feeling *for* them, which is how people learn to extend compassion and sustain communities.