



Metal and Religion

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e **Jakub Jahl (Charles University): "Marilyn Manson and the Antichrist of Modern Age"**

Marilyn Manson is a shock-rock and metal band which became famous in 1995 with the controversial album *Antichrist Superstar*. This piece of art foreshadowed the future evolution of the band and its singer, Hugh Brian Warner. In the following decades the band focused on different visions of modern antichrists (the mechanical antichrist destroying humankind with trains, humanism, the military antichrist leading young people into bloody revolutions, the artistically antichrist as a morally depraved icon and many others). The focus of my study is about the transformation of the symbolic and metaphorical antichrist persona in the late 90's, and in the first two decades of the new millennium. The goal is to determine how the metal band Marilyn Manson reflected the change of postmodern western society in the global age and how this outcome was also influenced by the personal life of the leading singer. In its entirety it shows how metal music influences its listeners and engages them in not only social and political issues, but also religious topics.

Marilyn Manson and the Antichrist by Modern Age: Hyper-real Murder and @mansonisabusive

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I will begin my thesis with Baudrillard, the French philosopher who published the seminal work *Simulation and Simulacra* in the 1980s. In it, he explains how the distinction between the fictional (or fictional) and the real is blurring in postmodern society. Our lives are increasingly influenced by the world of media, news, showbiz and pop culture. According to Baudrillard, the whole world has become a spectacle on a stage, where the audience observes itself in a kind of perverse internet-transmitted live-shared reality-show that we call our world. Baudrillard calls this world, in which our lives and public events have become mere virtual segments on social media, hyper-reality, a reality that is rooted in the material world in the same way that it is rooted in the immaterial - media - fictional world.¹

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Baudrillard's work was followed by Adam Possamai, who began to use the term hyper-real religion. While Baudrillard considered all religions to be hyper-real, namely based on belief in a fictional world, fictional characters and fictional reality, Possamai created a separate category of hyper-real religions. In his conception, these religions are those that have arisen in close connection with modern pop culture, and are (at least initially) totally dependent on it. Among the most understandable of these new religious currents, for example, is Jediism, which was founded on the fictional Star Wars universe. In the same category of pop-culture religions stands the spirituality of Tolkien's world, Marvel and Harry Potter. According to Possamai, however, the range of hyperreal religions is much wider than mere creations of popular movie freaks. UFO cults, Dänikenism, and religious groups awaiting the arrival of aliens are also, in practice, hyper-real products of science-fiction films and franchises like *The X-Files* or *Star Trek*. Contemporary beliefs in conspiracy theories are also examples of hyper-real religion, according to researchers, and this is best seen in the QAnon group.

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¹ Kostičová describes it this way, "The media generates a spectacle that tends to become more real than reality, and in the end it loses touch with its original real image."

But it doesn't stop there either, because according to Possamay, Satanism is one of the hyper-real religions. This, according to him, draws not only on biblical (or gnostic) mythology and the occult, but also on pop-culture's popular horror films and Lovecraft stories. I base my definition on this, but enrich it with additional features that show that modern Satanism is a product of hyper-reality.

Satanism offers its followers the hyper-real story of Lucifer's fall. This is experienced by most Satanists in their own unique and distinctive way. For them, Lucifer's rebellion against God is the hyper-real story of their own lives, when, like Satan, they defy or resist the established order and oppose the state, religion, family, or social morality. It is the combination of real and fictional story that makes the whole thing so confusing to some religionists.

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Worm

At the center of our discussion today is the figure of the Antichrist, whose understanding has changed several times throughout history. If we go to the source material, the Bible, the word antichrist occurs only four times, in the letter of John. But there it does not speak of a specific individual, but of antichrists, that is, all those who are against Christ. It was not until the late Middle Ages that the now-popular interpretation that the Antichrist is the figure of the Beast 666 in John's Revelation, and that he will be a world ruler who will be worshipped as God, but will be the spawn of hell. An interesting twist was brought about in the 20th century by conspiracy theories in which the Antichrist was the leader of a secret society (usually the Illuminati, Freemasons, or the Elders of Zion) seeking a global world dictatorship (the so-called New World Order). In contrast, in Satanism, antichrist was a widely used term that represented any Satanist who opposed God and his demagoguery. Thus, the Satanic perception of the term antichrist was very similar to the biblical one, where there are many antichrists, not just one. However, it was Brian Hugh Warner, now known as Marilyn Manson, who made the Antichrist a kind of antithesis of the Savior, a hyper-real hero who comes to save the world.

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Manson began his hyper-real art on his first album, *Portrait of an American Family*, where he reflected on the social ills of American society, such as bullying at school (*Lunchbox*), a penchant for guns (*Get Your Gun*), pedophilia (*Snake Eyes and Sissies*) parental alcoholism, religious upbringing (*Dogma*), drug use and teenage promiscuity (*Cake and Sodomy*). The album cover featured (according to Manson) a typical American family with a father with a beer, a mother with a cigarette, a boy with a needle and a neglected baby.

It is the obsession with mass-media, television and pop-culture that is at the heart of the whole album. Manson first mixed shock-rock with pop-culture here, taking on the identity of Willi Wonka, the creepy chocolate factory owner from the children's story. He blended fairy tale characters with brutal depictions of reality, and put himself in the role of someone who eats little children (Smells like Children).

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It's not hard to see Manson's work as a critique of American society when his name conjures up a dangerous cult killer and popular showbiz figure, but in reality it's more than that. Manson doesn't criticize problematic phenomena, he confronts and absorbs them. He becomes the nice guy in the hat who gives drugs to teenagers and whispers to bullies to get a gun to defend themselves. In short, Manson reflects all the fears and anxieties of American society, embodied in the figure of the Antichrist. By taking on the form of a real singer, and a messianic/apocalyptic figure, he blurs the line between the real and the hyper-real. Patrick Osborne summarizes this in his text *Constructing the Antichrist as Superstar: Marilyn Manson and the Mechanisms of Eschatological Narrative* as follows: "Because Manson's image and his lyrics were carefully composed of various cultural symbols concerning evil and the Antichrist, he was actively promoting his own demonization. He enticed his audience to use explanatory millennialism and knowledge of previous cultural scripts to interpret the traditional representations of evil that hung before them." The role of biblical prophecy and post-Christian or Satanic culture is also highlighted by Moritz Schuster in his text *Marilyn Manson - The All-American Antichrist and the Belief in Prophecy in American Pop Culture*. He even compares Manson to a kind of *hierophant*, or high priest of a religious cult.

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Superstar

Let's take his magnificent masterpiece, *Antichrist Superstar*, which tells the story of Manson's Antichrist, namely an oppressed boy who undergoes a transformation from worm to butterfly, and grows into a feared world tyrant. On the album, Manson discusses religion, capitalism and fascism as the three pillars of the contemporary world. The album begins with the narrative of Worm, a fictional young man from a conservative Christian family who is destined to become the Antichrist and destroy the world. He presents the unbridled capitalism that dominated the world at the time of the work's release, 1996, as the gates of hell wide open for his arrival. As the lyrics of *The Beautiful People* put it, capitalism (Dried up, tied up and dead to the world) leads to populism (tourniquet), which in turn leads to fascism (*Beautiful People*). "The weak are only here to justify the strong." The influence of Nietzsche's philosophy of the superman is undeniable here, but it is combined with

naturalistic Darwinism and fascist chants. The ultimate superiority of superhumans is thus the main doctrine of Manson's Antichrist, who gains many followers in the story through this ideology at the intersection of fascism and egalitarianism. Of course, the story also contains religious overtones. The Antichrist was the son of Satan and the prophesied savior of all his servants. He was to be the one who would destroy the power of the Church, and establish Satan's rule over the strong and the able. Coco D'Hont, in her article in the chapter *Satan and the Social Order*, calls this the "(re)construction of America".

The story is, of course, an allusion to reality. The worm is reminiscent of Brian Warner, and the Antichrist is Manson's alter ego and his rise to fame. The story on the album was actually the hyper-real story of his own fame. It was half set in reality (Manson had sold-out concerts), and half in a world of fiction (a world where Manson was the chosen Antichrist, against whom Christians had to defend themselves, and whom Satanists wanted to follow). His godless music threatened churches in the real world, just as the songs of the fictional Antichrist did in the album's story. But Manson doesn't stop at religion, and he makes hyper-real strides there as well, using the melodies and symbolism of Webber's Jesus Christ Superstar musical, and when he deliberately accentuates the cult of celebrity. A case in point is the song Mister Superstar, which is actually a love song by an anonymous fan who loves his idol, his Superstar, his celebrity. The end of the song teeters on the edge of hyper-reality. The fan says, "Hey, I'll kill myself for you," and confesses to cult suicide in the name of celebrity.

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There are multiple hyper-real challenges on the album, which sparked political debates in the 1990s about the influence of music on youth. However, I am convinced that this is not a manifestation of extreme metal, but Manson's play with hyper-reality. It is never clear whether he or the Antichrist is speaking. This escalates on other albums, which I won't discuss at length here, but on which Manson uses statements like, "So give me a sign, shoot up a mall, a school, or kill... anyone who wants to fight you." Even in the Antichrist period, however, Manson didn't go far to make drastic statements, as the song Reflecting God shows. In fact, Manson announces the end of morality through the figure of the Antichrist. Murder is no longer a sin, for only the end of morality is the ultimate freedom. "When I become a god, they'll all die." Or as he says in song 15, "Now I won't hesitate to kill if I want to protect what I believe in." The Antichrist's doctrine is actually simple: "Hate every fucker that gets in your way." The Antichrist crowd chants in the Irresponsible Hate Anthem, "We hate love, we love hate." But it's not really a fictional crowd, it's a recording of Manson fans chanting it at a concert. SLIDE

Academics are usually sceptical about the possibility that Marilyn Manson could have driven someone to suicide. A case in point is Robert Wright's highly scholarly work, *"I'd Sell You to Suicide" - pop music moral panic in the Marilyn Manson era*. There he explicitly states that extensive clinical studies have failed to show any link between listening to

metal music and teenage suicidal tendencies, and I would like you to keep this information in mind as I continue to tell you. I do not claim to have evidence to the contrary, but I do claim that Marilyn Manson's music transcends the traditional dimensions of metal music and its influence on young individuals. Victor Turner (otherwise an expert on tribal communities) distinguished between liminal (borderline) experience, which he believed has the power to transform us (and which he usually found in religious ceremonies), and liminoid (borderline) experience, which is merely a kind of play on the border between art and entertainment. The question is whether Manson's concerts really fall into the latter category, and whether for some they are not more of a liminoid experience.

It's not just Manson's listeners, but also those close to them. Perhaps not all frightened parents panicked that Satan's spawn wanted to steal their children into his infernal army - some were apparently just worried about the mental health of their children, who were being encouraged to commit suicide and self-harm through Manson's music. "Self-mutilation is the sincerest form of affection" proclaims one of the songs, and one might take it figuratively if Manson and his fans weren't so fond of self-mutilation and its presentation to the world, as is evident in Manson's biography and interviews. However, Manson would say: "This time is not more violent. Violence is just more often televised."

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Manson continued to produce albums. On his next album, he took on a completely different incarnation. He became a fallen angel, an androgynous alien who descended from heaven. On the album *Mechanical Animals*, Manson succeeded in expressing a dystopian future in which humans are mere products, cloned robots that no longer have human emotions. It's actually a satanic vision of the millennium that follows after the Antichrist has taken power. And here, too, Manson combines the fictional story of two creatures, Alpha and Omega, with the reality of the 1990s, when the advent of the Internet began to show that we were in a new digital world.

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Manson has become the apostle of this transhumanist age, the mechanical Christ, as he calls it in *The Inauguration of Antichrist*. His promiscuous and drug-addicted Omega was not as shocking as the fascist Antichrist, but he still embodied the fears of American society in 1998. Manson also created a new wave of genderless beings that influenced the evolution of pop culture, as brilliantly described by Marri Pomeroy in *Grotesque, Hybrid Bodies, and Marilyn Manson*. Today, non-binarity is almost normal, protected by the state against discrimination. In 1998, however, it was something shocking and unimaginable. In the period of *Mechanical Animals*, Manson also broke out of the musical underground and became part of American pop culture. His considerable popularity was brought about by the use of a song from this album (*Rock is dead*) in the soundtrack of the film *The Matrix*. The Antichrist took on a new form, but became even more famous.

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And then, of course, there was the Columbine American School shooting. At first the American media blamed Manson and his music, but as time went on, perhaps thanks to Michael Moore's documentary, it began to be taken for granted that music was certainly not to blame for such shootings, nor were violent video games and other media that Christian conservatives pointed to. Manson has once again tapped into this theme, and made an album that is essentially about America's obsession with guns and violence. Again, it was a critique of militarism and wars, but the album was equally full of hyper-realistic calls for killing and suicide. Again, the influence of Manson's music was more likely to be dismissed or marginalized, as we see, for example, in Stephen L. Muzzatti, *Criminalizing Marginality and Resistance: Marilyn Manson, Columbine, and Cultural Criminology*.

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Angel with rotten wings

After the end of the first trilogy (Antichrist Superstar, Mechanical Animals and Holy Wood), Manson's interest in politics dropped for a long time, but his interest in art as such deepened. The second trilogy, which begins with Golden Age of Grotesque, is even more concerned with the hyper-reality of art and the transgression of artistic rules than the previous albums. He has become a degenerate circus performer who is unjustly persecuted for his perversions by the American administration, AKA the Nazis, as Manson presents it on the album. Ironically, however, it is he himself who (not only) flirts heavily with Nazi symbolism during this period. Eat me, Drink me followed, with Manson taking on the incarnation of a dark vampire who feasts on young children with his companion. In timing, Manson was right in the emo era, which influenced many young people in the trend of self-harm. During the making of this album, Manson fell into a romantic relationship with Evan Rachel Wood, who was to become his femme fatale. In his fictional idea of the story of the album Eat me, drink me, they were to commit artistic suicide together. However, this did not happen, and Evan instead broke up with him and later accused him of abuse, sadism and sexual abuse. In response, Manson released an album, during the making of which he locked himself in his apartment for 30 days and created a hyper-realistic piece about wishing Evan Rachel Wood to murder. He capped it all off with a video clip in which he actually beats a Wood-like actress to death in his apartment. "It's just art," some might say, but for Evan Rachel Wood it was a death threat.

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Manson's third trilogy was essentially based on visual violence against women. His music videos included realistic long needle piercings, flogging, drowning, cutting, knife murders, and even inserting eyeballs and other objects into vaginas.

Instead of criticizing society, Manson became concerned with hyper-realistic murders and sadistic practices against women. Instead of a gender-fluid artist, a prototype of toxic masculinity emerged. But perhaps this reflected the transformation of American society, which came to see male rapists in positions of power as its chief evil. In the MeToo era, the chief evil is not someone who blasphemes Christianity or someone who publicly displays his promiscuity. American society has changed in 20 years and is triggered by different things, different issues. Like the sexual abuse of women by powerful celebrities.

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It is part of Manson's strategy that it is difficult to distinguish his fictional violence from the real. The testimonies of now more than 10 different women about the period of this trilogy are part of a trial whose outcome we cannot predict. It is evident, however, that something significant changed in Manson's work and his image during this period. For a number of years before his first public accusation, he regularly joked during interviews that he tortured women in various ways, that he sometimes imprisoned them in one room of his house, and so on, all things that subsequently figured in the women's accounts. Is this merely the product of hyper-real art? Did the women take these stories from his fictional narratives that he builds around himself for the sake of image, or are the accounts of both actors real? It's as if Manson is no longer able to separate what he does for the show and what he does in real life. His real life has become the show. His hyper-real image, the media's image of the Antichrist Manson, has devoured him and remade him in its own image.

In addition, the women allege that Manson used his music as a way to scare and threaten them. An example of this is the song *We know where you fucking live*, in which Manson sings to an unknown person that he will visit her house and burn it to the ground, that it will be impossible to even identify her corpse. The song came out at a time when some of Manson's victims were beginning to make their accounts public, and several women have spoken out about Manson using his fans to scare people. He often threatened the women, as well as journalists, that his fans could kill them if he ordered them to. On the same album, he also addressed a song to his fans, *Kill4me*, in which he urges them to kill for him.

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Satanic murder, in my opinion, lies at the very heart of Manson's rhetoric and theology, if we could call it that. It's a theme that first appeared on *Antichrist Superstar*, and then found various incarnations throughout Manson's career. Murder in the name of Social Darwinism (MM), murder in the name of art (GAoG), murder in the name of love (EMDM), murder in the name of revenge (HEoL), murder in the name of terrorism (PE), murder as a satanic sacrament (BV). These are all themes from Manson's art. On *Heaven Upside Down*, it's complemented by political murder when Manson posted a video clip of Trump lying with his head cut off. But it all keeps coming back to a theme that was already presented on

Antichrist - murder for the beloved Superstar. My guess is that Manson, under the influence of his art, has become what he originally parodied: a cult leader who guards patriarchal power, abuses women, and has his beloved sect of devoted worshippers.

Conclusion

Today, it is clear that Manson attacked the hyper-real world with his album Antichrist Superstar. Implicit in Manson's work is the danger of falling into a hyper-real world and losing track of what is real and what is not. However, it is not currently thought that metal music can have a negative effect on listeners, let alone that someone might shoot up their school because of the music. Manson is seen more as an agent provocateur, as Ray Barton depicts in his article on "Everybody's Somebody Else's Ni****r".

But I would like you to think again about whether Manson is no longer crossing the boundaries of music, and even extreme metal, and becoming something that religious scholars should examine with the same seriousness as other cults. I don't know how many victims the hyper-real world of Marilyn Manson has claimed, but it is clear that its biggest victim has ultimately been Brian Hugh Warner himself.