

Eat Me, Drink Me: A Marilyn Manson Discourse?

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Introduction

For the last ten years, Marilyn Manson has been one of rock and popular music's most controversial characters. We know that Brian Warner was born in 1969 in Canton, Ohio and Marilyn Manson was created sometime in the early 1990s in Florida. We can be fairly sure that the two are related to each other in some way.

Manson is one of Vivendi Universal's best sellers (Milner 2003), while MTV has argued that he's "the only major performer today who can justifiably call himself an artist." (Weiderhorn 2003). For others, however, he's a more difficult figure. According to one newspaper columnist Marilyn Manson set new standards for rock outrage. (McCormick 2007). Others (mainly right wing Christian groups) have made it plain that they think Marilyn Manson is evil (<www.justchristians.com/abundantLife/111998/5.html>). The *Observer* (2003) summed him up: "He sings about sex and death and teenage alienation. He drags naked girls around on dog leads and acts out the Nuremberg rally. (And) he set fire to his drummer." In June 2007 he released his seventh album *Eat Me, Drink Me* which reached No 8 in the American Billboard charts and in Britain debuted at No 8.

As can be seen from even such a brief overview, Marilyn Manson is a difficult figure to pin down. Media rumours about him abound and the concerns of parents of Middle America have made the headlines more than once. He is considered to be a media manipulator, a shock rocker, a racist, a Satanist, the Antichrist, an artist, and sometimes even a *credible* artist, but his real rise to international prominence came in 1999 when two teenagers, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, walked into their High School in Littleton, Denver USA and gunned down some fifteen of their schoolmates and injured twenty eight others. They

booby trapped themselves and the school, and eventually committed suicide. The suburban community of Littleton was shocked and simply could not understand why the boys had committed such pre-meditated and well-planned, cold blooded murder. When it was suggested that the boys were Manson fans, the media went into overdrive. Even the British newspapers linked Manson with the crime and within hours "Manson's notoriety went nuclear (as) Manson unfairly reaped the blame for 'inspiring' them." (*Observer* 2003).

Fairly typical of the kind of statement made by the media was the *Independent* on 22nd April 1999, which said: "The two boys were members of an on-campus group called the Trenchcoat Mafia, a withdrawn clique fascinated by the dark, satanic image of musicians such as Marilyn Manson." The *Daily Record* on the same day said: "Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold's killing spree mirrored the depraved lyrics of their rock star idol Marilyn Manson . . . The Trenchcoat Mafia gang were obsessed by the man who has made 10 million from albums glorifying slaughter and Satanism." Ironically, later research revealed that Harris and Klebold were not Manson fans and in fact the two teenagers hated the "decadent faggot Marilyn, while idolising Adolf Hitler as their anti-social icon." (Baddeley 2000:128).

It is obvious to suggest that Manson became a scapegoat for larger problems, but for the authorities and the media at the time, it seems to have been far simpler to attempt to drive Manson into the wilderness and place the blame on him along with rock and roll more generally, than to look at the gun culture of America as an influence on its children; a theme Michael Moore took up robustly in the film *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) in which

Manson spoke articulately and with some compassion about the tragedy.

So, perhaps it was all a case of mistaken identity and Marilyn Manson should be considered solely as a misunderstood artist, unfairly blamed for something he had nothing to do with. It is impossible, however, to avoid the suggestion that there was *something* about Manson and his work that meant that he was an easy, even obvious, target for such accusations. He said at the time of Columbine: "I definitely can see why they would pick me. Because I think it's easy to throw my face on the TV, because in the end, I'm a poster boy for fear. Because I represent what everyone is afraid of, because I say and do whatever I want." (Manson in Moore 2002). Manson's work is controversial, and in order to explore this it is worth making use of the terms discourse, ideology and hegemony.

A Marilyn Manson Discourse?

Discourse is originally a term from linguistic analysis developed by Michel Foucault to mean ways of thinking, talking, representing, doing and acting which actively shape our understanding of reality. This is an important idea because discourses can work to uphold ideology (an idea developed in Marxism to mean the collection of ideas circulating in the society's legal, political and religious systems). Discourses can also work in the creation of hegemony, or preponderant influence. Hegemony is a term developed by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist, who was trying to understand why workers in Western Europe had not risen together in revolt as they had done in Russia. For him the answer was that Western governments (or ruling groups) in more recent centuries have tended to use the ideological meaning of culture to *persuade* subordinate groups of the legitimacy of their power, rather than employing

coercion, i.e. the use of military force or police. However, this persuasion is a non stop process and constant, albeit often unspoken, negotiations take place. Through tactical alliances with other groups, and a willingness to make concessions, dominant groups must *work* to win broad consent for their own political, economic, intellectual and cultural leadership, in other words, hegemony.'

Putting Marilyn Manson into this context of discourse, ideology and hegemony is an interesting exercise because the extremity of the reaction to Manson in the wake of Columbine leads to the question: what dominant ideology does Manson risk destabilising, or more properly what dominant ideologies do people *fear* that he is destabilising? This subtly shifts the focus from the figure of Manson to the established discourses of society that he intersects with.

To take a brief example, even Manson's chosen stage name is provocative, coined as it is from two of America's most famous icons: Marilyn Monroe, sex kitten, screen goddess, tragic heroine, and Charles Manson, celebrity killer, psychotic responsible for an orgy of torture and slaughter in the Hollywood hills in 1969, and drug addict. So Manson just by his name is drawing attention to two major elements of American culture which sit somewhat uncomfortably beside one another but which are undoubtedly related. The culture of celebrity has certainly grown exponentially in the last twenty years as actors, actresses, musicians, indeed anyone on television becomes famous, a celebrity. However the American media in particular has also been responsible for raising serial killers to the status of celebrities. Serial killers have been reinvented as mythical monsters and attention is lavished on them: the meticulous recounting of their crimes, the building of 'fan clubs', the constant recasting of them as evil geniuses in TV series and films that are based on their lives and crimes. Up until 2001 serial killer related memorabilia could be auctioned on E-Bay, although the company eventually banned this trade after mounting criticism. Charles Manson is perhaps the most notorious serial killer of them all.

Commenting on the name, Manson said "I was writing a lot of lyrics . . . and the name Marilyn Manson, I thought, really describes everything I had to say. You know, male and female, beauty and ugliness, and it was just very American. It was a statement on the American culture, the power that we give to icons like Marilyn Monroe and Charles



Michael Manson

Manson and since, that's where it's always gone from there. It's about the paradox. Diametrically opposed archetypes." (Manson in Baddeley 2000:21). Manson thus throws the full spotlight of his fame on the 'diametrically opposed archetypes' at the heart of American culture.

To be sure, Manson does not offer a clearly thought out and rationally argued counter-hegemony discourse where all the elements fit together and make logical sense. He is, arguably, an artist and artists do not, as a rule, make rational arguments about the things that concern them. Manson's statements through song lyrics, performance, visual imagery and interviews, may be fragmentary, contradictory and even incoherent, but it is possible to draw some themes from what Manson does, for Manson sets himself up to interrogate some of America's dearly held ideals about itself. The remainder of the article will trace some of these themes through Manson's seven albums to date.

Portrait of an American Family (1994) & Smells Like Children (1995)

In his first two albums, it can be argued, Manson was a 'shock jock', an angry young man, a rebellious teenager amongst other rebellious teenagers, but he seems to have had a clearer than average understanding of what he was out to achieve. He said:

"I wanted to become what adults feared most. Marilyn Manson is the harvest of thrown-away kids, and America is afraid to reap what is sown" (*Daily Record* 1999). He also said "As a performer, I wanted to be the loudest, most persistent alarm clock I could be, because there didn't seem like any other way to snap society out of the Christianity and media induced coma" (Weiner 2000: 16).

Portrait of an American Family and *Smells Like Children* suggested a world filled with nightmarish figures culled from children's literature and entertainment such as the cartoon *Scooby Doo*, the children's book *The Cat in the Hat*, and the film *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* (dir: Mel Stuart, 1971), all of whom get name checks of some description or are visually referenced. For example, the album title, *Smells Like Children*, is a direct quote from the evil child-catcher of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*

(dir: Ken Hughes, 1968). These two albums seemed to have an aesthetic of twisted nursery rhymes and toxic candy; a long way from suburban dreams of white picket fences and Mom's apple pie.

Manson has often spoken of himself and his work as an evolution, and the next stage of that evolution came in 1996 with the provocatively entitled album *Antichrist Superstar*.

Antichrist Superstar (1996)

This was/is Manson's most apparently anti-Christian period to date. In this album, Manson seems to have deliberately planned to disrupt the religious discourse of America, which can be a perilous undertaking. America and Europe may no longer burn witches but the religious discourse is emotional rather than logical and can give rise to intense responses. Some would argue that, in a post-modern era, the religious metanarrative has come to an end. It does not dominate public life in Britain in the way it used to, but there are areas of America where it most certainly does. The choice therefore to title an album *Antichrist Superstar* was a provocative challenge to that world perspective.

Manson's avowed distrust and dislike of mainstream Christianity probably has its

roots in his education at a private Christian school in Ohio, where, if his biography *Long Hard Road Out of Hell* is to be believed, the children were regularly subjected to explicit seminars on the impending arrival of the Antichrist, and the effects they could subsequently expect. Manson says he still has nightmares about it. Additionally, in 1994, Manson met and was impressed by Anton LaVey, dubbed the 'Black Pope' who was head of the Church of Satan. (LaVey died in 1997.) However, Manson has consistently avoided definitively stating one way or another whether he is a practising Satanist or not. Even his biography says "I'm not and never have been a spokesperson for Satanism. It's simply a part of what I believe in, along with Dr Seuss, Dr Hook, Nietzsche and the Bible" (Manson and Strauss 1998:164). A typically baroque collection of influences.

As this quote suggests, Manson's use of Antichrist imagery in his lyrics, which is extensive on the album *Antichrist Superstar*, owes far more to the philosopher Nietzsche and his idea of the *übermensch* or superman, than to LaVey, though perhaps the two are not unrelated. There is undoubtedly a Nietzschean perspective in much of Manson's work, one which seeks to valorise 'authenticity' and individual thought, rather than learned conventionality. In this scheme, the *übermensch* is a person "not bound by convention, (but rather) responsible for the creation of his own character, beliefs and values" (Robinson 1999).

Manson speaks against the kind of evangelical fervour favoured by certain sectors of Christianity, partly because he sees it as pure hypocrisy, but, at the same time, he has suggested on more than one occasion that he is not opposed to Christianity. One website suggests that although this album may sound anti-Christian, Manson does not hate Christianity, rather he "frequently questions common Christian beliefs and practices to help us make our own decisions in regard to our beliefs" (www.mansonusa.com). The lyrics of the title song 'Antichrist Superstar' are interesting in this respect: "I can't believe in the things that don't believe in me. Now it's your turn to see misanthropy. Anti people now you've gone too far. Here's your Antichrist Superstar." Thus suggesting that 'the crowd' of believers, or fans, gets what it demands and should thus bear any responsibility.

Mechanical Animals (1998)

By the end of the *Antichrist Superstar*

tour, Manson admitted that he was at the limits of his strength. His drug use appears to have been getting out of hand, and he was emotionally and physically exhausted. However, in typical Manson style, he decided to use this to his advantage: *Mechanical Animals* was an album about a decadent rock star so anaesthetised by drugs and obsessive fan adulation that he's almost entirely lost contact with reality. Perhaps in reference to Nic Roeg's 1976 film *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, (starring David Bowie) he is also an alien, and an androgynous alien at that.

This album certainly discusses gender identity, both visually and lyrically, but drugs are clearly the pre-eminent concern of the album, with songs titles including 'The Dope Show', 'I Don't Like the Drugs But the Drugs Like Me', and 'Coma White', and the sleeve work heavily featuring pills and hypodermics. In 'Long Hard Road Out of Hell', Manson, playfully, includes a list of rules to help the reader decide whether they are an addict, adding that although he uses drugs, he is not an addict. Then again, with typical irony, Manson goes on to point out how many of his own rules he's broken! The impression from more recent interviews is that his 'drug' of choice is absinthe and has just launched his own brand called 'Mansinthe'.

Manson talks about drugs with a frankness that is frankly alarming to conservative America, (and Britain) where drugs are more usually depicted as the enemy, leading otherwise 'normal' people into a spiralling hell of addiction and inevitable death. This view of drugs is backed up with a firm 'just say no' message in the media. Manson upsets this discourse of prohibition and self control by discussing drug use and openly admitting the highs as well as the lows.

So in his albums up till 1998, Manson managed to upset 'white picket fence' America and outrage evangelical Christian America by openly talking about the Antichrist, glorified gender bending and drug use, but this was far from the end of his controversial musical statement. The next album *Hollywood (2000)* seemed to have many references, however oblique, to the Columbine shootings in songs like *Disposable Teens*, *The Nobodies*, *Count to Six and Die*, but there was another strong theme running through both *Hollywood* and *The Golden Age of the Grotesque (2003)*, his sixth album, which makes it worth discussing the two together.

Hollywood (2000) & The Golden Age of the Grotesque (2003)

In these two albums, Manson brings to the fore an element that had already appeared in *Antichrist Superstar* – the aesthetic of Fascism, a problematic aesthetic to raise under any circumstances. Manson deliberately employs what could be called an 'iconography of outrage' to make his points because there can be little doubt that it is outrageous to reference so blatantly in a popular music context the imagery of the Third Reich which killed 6 million Jews in its 'final solution', but Manson is prepared to argue the point.

He says over and over in different ways "It's essential to be extreme in order for the reaction to be extreme. I provoke people because art's meant to be a question mark." (*Observer* 2003). Speaking in 1997, Manson said, "We perform the song 'Antichrist Superstar' on a podium, with banners and it's a kind of sarcastic Nuremberg/TV evangelist thing. We're trying to say, it's all stupidity. In the way people react, there's not much difference between the Marilyn Manson audience, a Nazi rally and a Christian revivalist meeting" (Weiner 2000:35). In the same interview he said, "The Fascist theme's a very complicated part of the performance . . . I'm satirising the fascism of politics, of religion, and most importantly the fascism of rock and roll. Whether people realise that, or simply buzzing (sic) off the spectacle isn't my concern . . . we're the polar opposite of Nazism, we would be the first to be destroyed by it, and we're using the imagery against itself. Words and symbolism are only as powerful as you make them." (Weiner 2000:35-36).

Manson is treading in delicate territory here for if audiences do *not* detect the post-modern 'quoting' and irony which is apparently his intention, then such imagery can look very much like glorification. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model is useful in this context for communication is rarely a linear, straight-forward transaction and however much Manson might insist that irony is his preferred meaning here, it is no guarantee that it will be read as such. However, Manson, from his Nietzschean perspective, where the individual is responsible for themselves and not to convention or 'herd morality', is not prepared to take the blame for how fans (or critics) might read his work. An interesting and possibly dubious moral distinction in this particularly context.

The Golden Age of the Grotesque seemed to take a little step back from the imagery of Nazism itself and explore the art of pre-war Berlin, the Weimar period in Germany as it's usually called, which was both a period of extreme economic hardship (as Germany struggled with the reparations imposed by Allies at the end of the First World War), and, ironically, a period of intense artistic and cultural output. When speaking about his inspiration for this album, Manson commented: "The art that was created during the political upheaval transformed the spirit of what I was attempting with my record. It's not about going back in time, it's about bringing back the attitude." (*Observer* 2003). The videos for this album certainly seem to visually reference 1930s Berlin, perhaps by way of Bob Fosse's 1972 musical *Cabaret*.

As always, however, it is a little difficult to quantify exactly what Manson is trying to achieve with his music here because he seems equally happy to outrage left wing liberals as he is right wing conservatives. The song 'Use Your Fist and Not Your Mouth', from *The Golden Age of the Grotesque* would seem to be the very opposite of the philosophy espoused by the Liberal Left. To quote from the lyrics – "My hate-pop won't ever stop. I'm fucking glad we're different. This is my hate-American style Hit. This is a black collar song. Put it in your middle finger and sing along. Use your fist and not your mouth" It is probably safest to assume that in 2003, Manson is unable to stand any poorly thought out, 'namby pamby', 'wishy washy' stance that doesn't have the courage of its convictions.

In the four years after *The Golden Age of the Grotesque*, Manson seemed to be concentrating on the visual arts through painting and film projects (*Phantasmagoria: The Visions of Lewis Carroll* is currently in principle photography), rather than being interested in music, but in June 2007 came his seventh album, *Eat Me, Drink Me*.

Eat Me, Drink Me (2007)

True to form, *Eat Me, Drink Me*, seems to have created outrage amongst some critics and fans, but for thoroughly different reasons to his previous work. An article from MTV.com stated: "For the first time in Manson's career, he has written songs not about ideas, issues or his own beliefs, but about himself – a personal diary, if you will, spread out across eleven tracks" (Harris 2007). However, according to one disappointed fan posting on *Rolling Stone's* website, "No political criticisms, no Satanism, no sadism, no . . . Manson."

(www.rollingstone.com). Ironically, this time around, people were outraged by the fact that they had not been outraged by Manson's album! Even in 1997, however, Manson had been aware of this possibility, saying in one interview, "sometimes I think the most shocking thing I could do would be to behave politely." (www.mansonusa.com). However, in defending the subject choice for *Eat Me, Drink Me*, Manson said "My life became more of an inspiration to me than the rest of the world. I don't have any concern about politics or religion. I don't even need to comment on it anymore. I don't need to feel that I have a better explanation for who I am or what I did on this record" (www.mansonusa.com/redcarpetgrave).

However, it should be noted that even this more intimate incarnation of Manson has not been entirely uncontroversial. A publicly painful divorce from burlesque superstar Dita von Teese and a subsequent affair with nineteen year old actress Evan Rachel Wood has ensured that those who expect to be outraged by Manson can still find something to worry about. The video for the first single from the album 'Heart Shaped Glasses' (an explicit reference to Kubrick's controversial 1962 film *Lolita*) features Manson in explicitly erotic scenes with Evan Rachel Wood, as blood rains down upon them. There were rumours that the crew working on the video were uncomfortable during filming and television companies were certainly not happy with the video, insisting that these scenes be in black and white for TV broadcast. Manson commented: "You're okay with me driving a car off the cliff and fornicating, but the raining blood is bad? It's always a new experience learning what people hate and love." (www.mansonusa.com/redcarpetgrave).

Conclusion

Manson is an interesting artist who may be an authentic voice of counter-hegemony. He can hardly be considered the devil incarnate however much he might upset the discourses of American society: the family, religion, drugs, gender identity, political extremism, racism, decadence – Manson's own discourse has intersected with them all. Ultimately, however, it is difficult to sum up what Manson might be about, but perhaps that is the point. In 2003 he said "... if America represents freedom and democracy, then, as an artist, I can stand up and be dangerous and outspoken. I can create art that tests that democracy is working properly." (*Observer* 2003). In 2007 he said: "I had always

used music, in a strange way, to define myself as a person, but I had done it as an armour or barrier. This record really defines me as a person because I had just let things out that normally I didn't know were supposed to go into song-writing." (www.mansonusa.com/redcarpetgrave).

Manson has been a musician, performer, socio-political commentator, painter, film director, and also a human being with a personal life. For now, his audience can only wait, with interest, or dread, to see what comes next. Perhaps it is safest to leave the last word to Manson himself. On the track 'Mutilation is the Most Sincere Form of Flattery' from *Eat Me, Drink Me* he sings "The young get less bolder, the legends get older, but I stay the same." Time will tell.

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Notes

1. For more on these ideas see Bell, A. & Garrett, P. (eds.) (1999). *Approaches to Media Discourse*. Oxford, Blackwell and

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