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Manson and Althusser

“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.”¹ Shock-rocker Marilyn Manson is a difficult figure to locate. Though revered for his artistic genius, Manson is considered a media manipulator, racist, Satanist, and even the Antichrist by some. Surprisingly, Manson’s overwhelming success in the music industry, having sold over 68 million albums since the dawn of his career in 1989, is not seen as wholly responsible for his international prominence. Rather, Manson was held responsible by popular media for the Columbine shooting in 1999: “Harris and Klebold’s killing spree mirrored the depraved lyrics of their rock star idol Marilyn Manson.”²

While media rumors run wild with allegations against Manson, as an artist and provocateur, he remains a notable figure for cultural and social analysis. That is, Manson’s discography and performances are defined by an iconoclastic agenda including hyperbolic and often perverse constructions of media, religious, and capitalist iconography and imagery. Arguably, Manson, with his use of familiar and powerful iconography, re-hails and re-interpellates his audiences into a new ideological order, in which subjects are made explicitly aware of totalizing, hegemonic systems at work; however, Manson’s nonconformist agenda is complicated by the fact that Manson profits from his endeavor, reifying capitalism, a subject of his subversion.

¹ Ellen, Barbara. "I Was Kind of a Disturbed Kid" *The Guardian*, May 4, 2003. Accessed December 5, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2003/may/04/artsfeatures.popandrock>.

² Dingwall, John. "STAY ALIVE AND STAY CRAZY; Motto of Nazi Misfits Behind Class Massacre." *Daily Record (Glasgow, Scotland)*, April 22, 1999. Accessed December 5, 2015. http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-60424833.html?refid=easy_hf.

To begin an ideological analysis of Manson's work and how it functions to interpellate audiences, it is necessary to first outline the social theory of Louis Althusser. In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Louis Althusser examines how "every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time it produces" (2). To contextualize this assertion, Althusser confronts the Marxist spatial metaphor of society's construction: the base/superstructure representation, wherein those in control of the productive forces and relations of production (the base) also establish the politico-legal and ideological climate of the superstructure. Seeing this metaphor as "descriptive," Althusser moves beyond it to posit two means by which those in power exert control and sustain such control through reproducing the necessary means of production: (1) the repressive state apparatus (RSA), which functions predominantly through violence and consists of "the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Prisons etc.," and (2) the ideological state apparatus (ISA), which functions predominantly through ideology and includes religion, education, family, media and culture^{3,4}.

Accordingly, behind the "shield" of the RSA, it is the ISA that maintains the ideology of the ruling class through the interpellation of subjects. As such, Althusser posits that ideology "'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals...or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects" by what Althusser terms "interpellation" or hailing.⁵ Though Althusser illustrates interpellation through policeman's call to an individual ("Hey you!"), interpellation eventuates beyond this metaphor as the subject is instantiated as a grammatical position as

³ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *On Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), pg. 10.

⁴ Ibid, pg. 17.

⁵ Ibid, pg. 48.

interpellation signifies a shift from the grammatical position of object to subject. Althusser also invokes a second sense of the subject: one is subjected, through interpellation, to a preceding authority such as a sovereign or a law. For Althusser, ideology functions by and through its subjects. In this sense, “the existence of Ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals are one and the same thing;” therefore, ““*individuals are always-already subjects.*”⁶

The first single and second track on Manson’s 1996 album “Antichrist Superstar,” “The Beautiful People” clearly interpellates listeners and simultaneously articulates Manson’s anti-institutional and subversive motive. Primarily, Manson’s repeated chorus of “hey you” hails audiences explicitly and further in precisely the same manner as Althusser’s example of a policeman’s call. Manson’s interpellation of listeners can and should not be seen as limited to his repetitive, hailing chorus. That is, if interpellation, as per Althusser, is intended to subjectivize individuals under dominant ideology so as to maintain societal power relations, then into what ideology does Manson hail audiences of “The Beautiful People?”

From the first stanza, Manson establishes his anti-capitalist argument which lies coterminous with Marx’s critique of capitalism operant in his base-superstructure model, from which Althusser extrapolates in his work on ideology. Through this model, Marx argues that individuals enter into the base and its relations of production to work, or else starve, and that the relations of the base constitute:

the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness...The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.⁷

⁶ Ibid, pg. 49, 50.

⁷ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), pg. 20.

As such, Marx asserts that consciousness cannot be divorced from socio-economic status and further that the existing social stratification permits those who control the relations of production to also control the consciousness of those without power. Following Marx's suit, Manson sings, "It's not your fault that you're always wrong/The weak ones are there to justify the strong," serenading listeners with anti-capitalist, Marxist rhetoric.⁸ The laboring, powerless class, is "always wrong" in that any subversive, interrogative thought is counter to the consciousness determined and prescribed by the ruling class – those who control the means of production and thus dominant ideology. Further, Althusser notes that the reproduction of the skills of labor power, on which the power of the ruling class in part depends, is contingent upon the capitalist education system. This system instructs future laborers on the "know-how" and skills requisite of labor power while it also indoctrinates students in "submission to the ruling ideology."⁹ Thus, "the weak ones justify the strong" through their adherence to the know-how and submission prescribed by the ruling class and upon which the power of the ruling class is dependent.

Manson's bridge in "The Beautiful People" articulates explicitly the systems that he sees as culpable for the social stratification that distributes power so unevenly: "The worms will live in every host...It's as anatomic as the size of your steeple/Capitalism has made it this way."¹⁰ Ruling ideology is so potent and pervasive, Manson posits, that it can be rendered as parasitic and infectious as a worm. Moreover, the ability to disseminate ideology is determined by "the size of your steeple" (17). Althusser notes that religion functions as an ideological state apparatus, and

⁸ *Manson, Marilyn. Antichrist Superstar. Marilyn Manson. Trent Reznor, 1996, CD, 3-4.*

⁹ Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," p. 9.

¹⁰ Manson, Beautiful People 15-20

then posits “the Church has been replaced today *in its role as dominant Ideological State Apparatus* by the School” (31). Herein, Manson sees capitalism and religion as inextricably linked and, further, religion serves as a broadcasting satellite for the interests of those empowered by capitalism. Thus, to answer the earlier question regarding the ideological destination of Manson’s interpellation, the lyrics of “The Beautiful People” invite listeners into a new ideological order wherein the exploitative nature of capitalism and religion are revealed, a realm of subversive operant hegemonies.

“The Beautiful People” alone is not sufficient to subject audiences into Manson’s counter-hegemonic realm. It is also within Manson’s tour performances in which he utterly embodies shock-rock subversion with colossal crucifixes composed of television screen onto which Manson mounts himself as a burnt Texan Jesus, screaming and singing – a messiah returning from the depths of hell, charred with truth – scarred by subversion. Before delving into the rich imagery and symbolism of Manson’s “Mechanical Animals” (1998) tour, which blends familiar media and religious iconography to construct a formidable anti-institutional dystopia, a mapping between two of Althusser’s ideological state apparatuses – religion and media – must take place to comprehensively investigate Manson’s references to them.

Althusser asserts that, historically, the Church served as the dominant ideological state apparatus of the state, and “concentrated within it [were] not only religious functions, but also education ones, and a large proportion of the functions of communication and ‘culture’” (25). While the school, in Althusser’s formulation, replaced the Church as the dominant ISA, it is not as though this apparatus exited stage left never to be heard from again. After all, in spite of

Nietzsche's cry of "God is dead," debasing the Christian God as no longer a credible source of absolute moral principles, Christianity has more than survived.¹¹

In fact, Kevin Howley, professor of media analysis and criticism, argues that Christianity's invocation of media has widely improved and made efficient its own ideological dissemination. Televangelism or "prey TV" interpellates viewers to advance a Christian conservative political agency "through various modes of address within a particular program and via the appropriation of conventional television tropes, styles, and genres across programs."¹²In his analysis, Howley emphasizes Althusser's own use of "telecommunication" in his statement on interpellation, which he argues indicates the way in which television hails its viewers: "Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man."¹³ With this in mind, Howley articulates that televangelist and other Christian programs capitalize on the precise interpellating power of the television medium through "the yelling and screaming rebukes of the televangelist 'hail' the teleparishioner in a most dramatic...unnerving fashion... 'Come up to the altar. Right now! Stand up, right now. This minute.'...the televangelist speaks to his parishioners on a one-on-one basis."¹⁴

¹¹ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, "Prologue," in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New York: Dover Publications, 1999), pg. 3.

¹² Kevin Howley, "Prey TV, Televangelism and Interpellation," *Journal of Film and Video* 53, no. 2/3 (July 01, 2001): pg. 30, accessed December 13, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/20688355?ref=searchgateway:edbda72608e26854be99490c39492161>.

¹³ Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," p. 48.

¹⁴ Howley, "Prey TV, Televangelism and Interpellation," p. 31.

Howley, in his critique and analysis of televangelism, illuminates how two ideological state apparatuses – religion and media – function in tandem to forward a conservative Christian political agenda. As such, his argument is premised upon the religious ISA making use of the media ISA rather than a true melding of the two into a singular hegemonic ISA, in which media functions as religion. That is, in the analysis of Manson's tours below, it is evident that Manson sets up media as a megaphone for orthodox religious agendas (as per Howley), and further, elucidates media, with television in particular, functioning as a religion in and of itself. As will follow, Manson aims to articulate the presence of a singular media-religious ISA by explicitly titling one of his most successful works: *God is in the T.V.*¹⁵

It seems no surprise then that Marilyn Manson's own brand of subversion, fusing religious and media iconography and assembling media as its own breed of religion, was inspired in part by his own connection to televangelism. Discussing his religious beliefs in an interview with Beliefnet.com, Manson recalls:

When I turned about 14, I developed a friendship with this guy whose mom was the secretary to Ernest Angley, the faith healer, who's very popular in the Midwest. He had a television show, and he was sort of like Liberace mixed with Jerry Falwell — very glitzy, very high-tech...these Friday night services that began at midnight... It was odd because you were starting to fall asleep — it's the perfect time to brainwash people. People were tossing money onto the stage and speaking in tongues. It was very terrifying, like a horror show. It may have been what inspired me to become a rock musician!¹⁶

The influence of said experience actualizes in Manson's tour imagery and persona, Mechanical Christ, which he began to perform in 1998 during his *Mechanical Animals* tour, filmed as a video

¹⁵ Marilyn Manson, *God Is in the TV*, perf. Twiggy Ramirez, Pogo, Ginger Fish, and John5, Marilyn Manson, recorded November 2, 1999, Ralph John Perou, 1999, CD.

¹⁶ "Marilyn Manson: The Beliefnet Interview," Beliefnet, 2001, accessed December 13, 2015, <http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Music/2001/05/Manson-Interview.aspx?p=9>.

album titled *God is in the TV* later released in 1999.¹⁷ Manson's show opens with "The Inauguration of the Mechanical Christ," a fitting title as Manson first appears crucified on a cross consisting of television screens playing static, adorned as a dark angel (See Figure 1). The imagery fuses together Christian, namely a crucifix, and media iconography, as represented by glitched-out television screens. By using televisions to physically construct the transcendent image of a cross, Manson actualizes and visualizes Howley's argument, which, as noted, articulates Christianity's instrumentation of the media ISA for ideological dissemination. Further, in the static lies a seemingly empty yet mesmerizing and meaningful message. The on-screen static does not represent nothingness; rather, it is simply a digital display in limbo with no input, signifying the potential for use. Thus, the static represents the capacity to be used as an instrument of propagation – a digital battalion residing in pixelated destitution, ready at a moment's notice to distribute the holy word, or any other word for that matter. However, this seeming nothingness is complicated by Manson's own presence as he arrives on stage crucified.

Regarding his repeated citation of crucifixion and Christ figures, Manson notes "Christ was the blueprint for celebrity. He was the first celebrity, or rock star if you want to look at it that way."¹⁸ In Manson's performance, the celebrity as deity is erected, an analog of media as religion. One must ask, to what effect? It is possible that, in an era where communication technologies are in their prime, Manson's performance forwards an argument that ideology and hailing, which serve to reproduce the conditions of production, have been born anew as hybrid ISAs, disseminating

¹⁷ Nick Kushner, "The Mechanical Christ," *Nachtkabarett News*, accessed December 18, 2015, <http://www.nachtkabarett.com/theThirdAndFinalBeast/MechanicalChrist>.

¹⁸ Paul Gargano, "Revelations of an Alien-Messiah," *Metal Edge*, June 1999, pg. 11.

agenda in a manner that best fits the audience. While media is certainly a vehicle, as Howley posits, it does not necessarily exist as distinct from religion, or any other ISA.

In line with Manson's performance, Stig Hjavard notes, "As a cultural and social environment the media have taken over many of the cultural and social functions of the institutionalised religions and provide spiritual guidance, moral orientation, ritual passages and a sense of community and belonging."¹⁹ Though media touts secularity and objectivity, Manson illuminates that mainstream media functions as theology by performing the same work that religion has previously, according to Hjavard's thesis: serving as point of communal attentiveness to an all-knowing, all-powerful entity. In this sense, media is no longer the vessel rather a fundamental aspect of ritual, characteristic of religion. In relation to Althusser, no matter the means of production that require reproduction, media-religion as an ISA can accomplish the ideological work necessary, and potently at that. As such, though Manson cites Christianity to highlight how powerfully it has come to unite with media as an ISA, the function of media as religion transcends the particularities of Christian theology. The way in which media functions – providing answers, a sense of belonging, morals etc.—makes it versatile and capable of fulfilling a variety of ideological goals.

Laden with critique and subversion, unmasking oppressive structures, Manson's performances still remain absolutely profitable. Manson, a highly grossing musical artist with an estimated net worth of \$25 million, complicates his own agenda – one that retaliates against in part against capitalism. One might ask, "If Manson's listeners were truly devout to his message,

¹⁹ Stig Hjavard, "The Mediasation of Religion: Theorising Religion, Media and Social Change," *Culture and Religion*, no. 2 (2011): pg. 124, accessed December 18, 2015, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14755610.2011.579719>.

incorporating his critique into quotidian life, then why would they buy his merchandise at all? pay hundreds of dollars to see him in concert, or buy his albums? After all, isn't he saying that we need to rage against the structures that maintain our oppression, capitalism in particular?" Manson's performance itself seems to shock audiences into a particular mode of subversion, wherein they protest societal oppression yet pay a literal price for such a title—the price of whatever Manson is selling. It is not so much a matter of whether Manson explicitly reproduces the means of production, rather to what extent his relative economic superiority to his audience reflects the base-superstructure stratification previously mentioned. Further, analysis is warranted to determine whether Manson can truly subvert the systems he finds so damaging, but from which he profits tremendously.

Why, then, is it possible for thousands of fans to return time and time again to the altar of the alleged anti-Christ despite his conflicting messages? Manson's allure is complex, and certainly lies for most listeners beyond his own success. Nonetheless, to understand how, in a country where religion, and Christianity in particular, is not only widely practiced but also politically invoked, one must consider Slavoj Žižek's analysis of German industrial band and Manson contemporary Rammstein:

The minimal elements of Nazi ideology enacted by Rammstein are something like pure elements of libidinal investment. Enjoyment has to be...condensed in some minimal ticks, gestures, which do not have precise ideological meaning. What Rammstein does is it liberates these elements from their Nazi articulation. It allows us to enjoy them in their pre-ideological state. The way to fight Nazism is to enjoy these elements...by suspending the Nazi horizon of meaning. This way you undermine Nazism from within.²⁰

Ultimately, Manson's own citation of historically repressive ideologies, capitalism and Christianity, in particular, liberates their elements in such a manner as to make them appetizing

²⁰ *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, dir. Sophie Fiennes, perf. Slavoj Žižek (Zeitgeist Films, 2012), DVD.

for the most nonconformist of crowds. Releasing the crucifix from its Christian iteration, Manson transforms the universal symbol into spectacle. In this way, Manson supersedes his own capitalist success by devolving signifiers of oppression into their most crude and atavistic forms. With regard to his fixation with Christ and Christ figures, Manson, too, said “[Christ] became this image of sexuality and suffering. He’s literally marketed – a crucifix is no different than a concert shirt in some ways.”²¹ Perhaps it is through commodification of the “libidinal elements” of capitalist and religious iconography that Manson finds his subversive success.²²

²¹ Paul Gargano, "Revelations of an Alien-Messiah," *Metal Edge*, June 1999, pg. 11.

²² It bears mentioning that in one of Manson’s most stunning performances, he reenacted the Nuremberg rallies replacing swastikas with dollar signs – a move to both avoid censors and reframe capitalism as a regime in and of itself.



Figure 1: The Mechanical Christ emerging on stage during the opening of God is in the T.V.