Introduction

In Milo Manara's graphic novel, *H.P. and Giuseppe Bergman*, Giuseppe is sent by a corporation to get out and live the Adventure. Taking his task to pleasure, and leaving his place and partner in Venice, he goes out full of excitement for the Adventure. He travels in a van through the political turmoil of the heated Italian political demonstrations of the 1960s, and then sails to South America. Under the mentoring of the Adventure expert, H.P. – who gives hardly any guidance – Giuseppe faces a range of disappointing experiences. He fails to save a woman who has been lost as a sexual object at a poker game; is captured, pants down, by Indians from the Amazon; escapes them awkwardly to be then recaptured even more awkwardly by a South American revolutionary soldier; falls gravely ill; and is decapitated "heroically" – finally – by an Indian. Until his death, Giuseppe viewed his adventure as a real failure because he was not living it the "proper heroic way". He failed in everything that he did; he did not have control of any situation; he met sumptuous women and did not have sex with them the way a hero from the period between the distribution of the pill and the discovery of AIDS would have had. Only his death gave him a feeling of accomplishment to his Adventure.

After his death, Giuseppe "psychedelically" returns to Venice and wakes up on a crowded vaporetto. He first wonders if he had a dream. But these thoughts are soon forgotten when a feeling of frustration takes place. He realises that he has not died from the glorious death that was part of his great Adventure. Frustrated by his discovery, and after he has landed in the streets of Venice, he sees his mentor, H.P. – the initials of Hugo Pratt, the Italian Maestro of graphic novels – who loses his notebook. Giuseppe finds in these pages an account of H.P.'s life in Venice. He discovers how H.P. saw this City of canals as a place of occult knowledge. In these notes, the mysterious, the mystique, the spiritual, are to be found by whoever is ready to see them in their everyday life; not necessarily by going on a long adventure in some exotic lands. The story finishes with Giuseppe and H.P. together in a governmental agency where life seems dull. Giuseppe, upset to be back in the reality of everyday life, is then asked to observe the feet of an administrative officer, who seems as exciting as an accountant going through a tax declaration. After a closer look, he realises that this boring person has

two feet like a goat. The reader is left with the certitude that Adventure is everywhere for as long as one is ready to see and explore it in everyday life.

It is this type of adventure that this book hopes to offer. This hyper-real testament will open a door on an intriguing and fascinating world that is not necessarily exclusive to some exotic and/or occult groups, but that is part of our everyday life. This exoticism, that was the preserve of anthropologists exploring some far-away lands, of explorers hoping to discover unmapped territories, and of some luddite spies manipulating people to gain secret knowledge, can also be the preserve of social scientists and/or cultural observers who are ready to open their eyes to the everyday life of our postmodern world. By exploring new practices in a postmodern society, a new phenomenon that was left in the shadows of a Platonic cave since the 1960s will be brought to light; that of popular culture as a platform for religious creativity. The point of this book is the account and theorisation of a new form of spirituality that comes out of popular culture and gives meaning to many social actors. It is also the account of how certain groups such as fundamentalist groups attempt to police popular culture and prevent this religious "creativity".

However, before going on this sociological "adventure", a clarification of key interrelations between religion and art, between art and popular culture, and between popular culture and art are required to introduce the setting of this book.

Religion and Art

From a Christian perspective, the relationship between art and religion is not a simple one, especially since the gap between established religion and the arts has widened since the Renaissance. Previously, the medieval church, when not trying to ban the production of images altogether, offered the artist a controlled role as the producer of texts from the Bible for the illiterate. Art was under the patronage of the Church.

With the Romanesque style, the contemplative arts of the monasteries were sophisticated allegories and symbolism that could only be interpreted by members of the religious community. With the development of the Gothic style, religious art became directed towards the illiterate population and carried the development of Gothic cathedrals as the centre of cities and of the people's everyday life. These cathedrals were not only places of worship but could also serve as town halls and places of meeting. With late medieval styles, such as Giotto's artistic

movement, the gospel became more adapted to everyday life by simpli-fying allegories and symbolism into simple images of life.

However, since the birth of the Renaissance, and the new role given to the artist – that of being creative – tensions started to create a distance between the controlled power of the production of images by the Church and on the independence of the artist. There was a shift away from medieval symbolism and heavenly vision towards a more accurate description of forms from the natural world. With the growth of power of nation-states, merchant and shipping families, the Church was no longer the main source of patronage.

With the advent of secularisation (see Chapter 1), the Church was also no longer the main focus of life, and artists who explored themes such as existence and the meaning of life, were doing this outside of its canvas. On the other hand, the Church also stopped viewing the artist as an ally in evangelism. Despite several attempts in the ninetieth and twentieth century such as the European Sacred Art Renewal Movement and the Blake Prize (Australia), the divorce between the Church and the artist remains strong (Crumlin, 1984).

Even if art and religion are no longer in a perfect symbiosis as in the past, there are of course works of art that can be viewed as spiri-tual/religious on many levels (e.g. Kandinsky, 1977; Crumlin, 1998). Pushing the argument further, Smith (1994) argues that from within some modernist movements – such as abstract and formalist art – artists were seeking to create a universal art that would express a universal religion; that is "an international style capable of expressing an interna-tional spirituality divorced from local cult rituals and ceremonies" (*o.c.*: 107).

It is worth noting that at the beginning of the twentieth century, art's iconography was mainly Judaeo-Christian. However, by the end of last century, pieces of art from, for example, Kandinsky, Tobey, Kiefer and Flack, have been influenced by other religions, such as theosophy, Eastern religions, the kabala and the Goddess movement (Crumlin, 1998: 10). Even if art can be viewed as spiritual/religious and is no longer Judaeo-Christian-centric, discussing the association between art and religion might still be a taboo, as many art critics and historians tend to affirm that art is something separate from religion. However, as Crumlin (1998) points out, religious imagination is present in all areas of life and art and religion interpenetrate.

It will be the argument of this book that religious imagination is also present in popular culture, perhaps more now than ever.

Art and Popular Culture

Popular culture – also called low culture, mass culture, and popular arts – gained an interest in the academic sphere when it stopped being opposed to art – also called high culture and fine arts – especially since the decline of modernism and the advent of postmodernism in the arts and philosophy. For the purpose of this introduction, I will understand modernism and postmodernism as a philosophy and an art movement. In the next chapter I will deal with modernity and postmodernity; that is, a change in the structure and culture of our society.

Before going further, it is important at this stage to clarify the concepts of art and popular culture as used in this book. In my clarification, I will unfortunately make some generalisations, but these are mainly for heuristic purposes. By art, I make reference to "Fine Art" such as opera, symphony, painting, sculpture, experimental performance art, ballet, literature… Art is generally displayed in museums and galleries and tends to be valorised by the upper classes. By popular culture, I include popular music (rock, pop, country, etc.), popular fiction such a graphic novels, movies (Hollywood, made-for-television and indie), television drama and sit-com, advertising (print, television)… Popular culture tends to be part of the mass media and is consumed by the masses. For the purpose of this book, I do not include folk art or extend popular culture that would include, for example, fashion, hair colouring, body design (tattoos, piercings), the beach, and manufactured products (Coca-Cola, mobile phones), sport, etc.

The term "postmodernism" became popular in the 1960s on the island of Manhattan when artists and writers such as Cage, Burroughs, Hassan and Sontag first used it. These creators were rejecting high modernism, which they viewed as "exhausted" because of its institutionalisation in the museum and in the academy. The movement gained wider usage in the 1970s and 1980s, and discussions between this movement and a new philosophy was going back and forth between the US and Europe. This lead to postmodernism as a philosophy with key theorists such as Bell, Kristeva, Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, and Baudrillard.

The feature of postmodernism in the arts is that there can no longer be any boundary between art and everyday life; that there should no longer be a hierarchy between high and popular culture. The assumption that art is only repetition and that nothing new can be invented is also central. The movement also favours the mixing of codes, and is promiscuous in its use of artistic styles. For example, Andy Warhol led the Pop Art Movement and brought imageries of popular culture (e.g. Marilyn

Monroe, Superman, and a Campbell's can of soup) to a "high-art" canvas.

This led to the development of the study of popular culture which is now a growing field of research. Since the advent of what can be called "postmodernity" or "late modernity", everyday life and popular culture have reached the same level of recognition of high culture as a focus of study (Featherstone, 1991). Themes such as shopping, video clips, TV shows, and magazines are as well researched as Shakespeare's plays and Puccini's operas.

Today, the old border between "high" and "low" culture is not easy to recognise, as there is no longer a clear consensus within the field of cultural production and consumption. Art uses popular culture and vice versa (Walker, 1983). For example, many of today's poets are involved in rock music. Rock bands, such as Aerosmith, Metallica and Kiss perform with a philharmonic orchestra. Composers like Philip Glass synthesise classical and "popular" styles. In 2001, the Sydney Opera house marketed its operas as television shows to the larger public with the catchy blur of: "Opera: more shame than the *Weakest Link*, more tears than *All Saints*, more backstabbing than *The Mole*". As Jameson (1983: 112) explains:

> […] many of the newer postmodernisms have been fascinated precisely by that whole landscape of advertising and motels, of the Las Vegas strip, of the late show and Grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery and the science fiction or fantasy novel. They no longer "quote" such "texts" as Joyce might have done, or a Mahler, they incorporate them, to the point where the line between high art and commercial forms seems increasingly difficult to draw.

We are no longer bound to traditional values of (dis)taste which give a general agreement on what is good and bad. In this postmodern society, there is no longer any self-evident consensus on the cultural hierarchies, such as the opposition between the high bourgeois culture and the low working class taste of the nineteenth century. The word "pluralism" has been used in some circles to describe the status of "fine arts" in the age of mass media (Walker, 1983). In this view "fine arts" are only one type of cultural activity among today's multitude of cultural sources, and are not better or worse than popular culture. Opposed to this view, some philosophy and art schools of thought continue to teach us about taste, and claim that we do not know what is high and low in this society. They refuse to accept that "fine arts" are no longer the main sources of the deepest intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual experiences. However, cultural multiplicity has become so dominant and

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subcultures so many that cultures have now co-existing hierarchies that cannot be easily distinguished from one another, whether we like it or not.

It is important to note before going further that this book understands postmodernity as a cultural dominant, even a hegemonic force, in today's western world. Needless to say, not all cultural items of today are postmodern, but most of them are.

Popular Culture and Religion

This book does not understand popular culture as a sub-culture for the masses, or as a form of evasion which leads to a retreat from any socio-political activity, or as a form of control of the masses by various groups in power. Popular culture might be all of these, but it is also a medium for the autodetermination of social actors, and more specifically to this book, spiritual self-determination. Even if popular culture is part of global capitalism managed by multinational corporations, even if it provides a form of escapism from our "anxious" and/or "hidden" reality at the same level as window shopping, it is also a platform for our own biography. We live through and with it. We create our lives and view ourselves through popular culture.

Religion and popular culture co-exist intimately, and cannot be seen simply as a relationship of cause and effect. At times religion creates and regulates popular culture. Indeed, religious actors who express themselves in popular culture are also engaged in shaping popular culture, and in doing so, making possible some experiences and denying access to others. It can take the form of using the content of popular culture to back up their religion, or it can take the form of censorship towards certain narratives. At other times, popular culture can shape the form and content of religion. Some people appear to practice religion/spirituality by creatively reusing the artefacts of contemporary mass-mediated culture – e.g. images, stories, and songs from cable and broadcast television, radio, Zines – rather than following the meaning offered by religious institutions. They might view *Star Wars*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* or *Oprah* religiously and share with other people fictional or quasi-fictional scenarios. A plethora of distinct popular faiths appear to exist alongside more mainstream religions. Popular culture can amuse, entertain, instruct, and relax people, but it is also an inspiration for religion.

The time in which we were the social reflection of our parents is gone. Their religion, ethnicity, class, political affiliation, taste and distaste are no longer so easily transmitted from one generation to

another. Even if there are exceptions, the trend of today is to create one's own biography/identity. People in this postmodern age pick and choose what suits them for their identity at a specific time and place. As part of this library of choices, popular culture is on the shelf with class, religion, sexuality, significant others… (see Chapter 3). In this process, popular culture, among many other socio-cultural factors, influences the construction of the self; including that of the religious self.

As will be explored, the trend today in western societies is to move away from traditional institution, including mainstream churches. An outcome of this process leads people to seek a sense of spirituality by themselves; they pick and choose what fits with their belief system. In this new diverse and multicultural era, people draw on a vast range of religious resources through consumerism. They will pray, meditate and read tarot cards. Crystals and icons will inspire them. They will visit churches and absorb themselves in nature. They will also find meaning through popular culture. They are looking for what works for them.

If this process is on one side of a spectrum, we find on the other side others for whom this world of choice might seem unbearable. Indeed, consumerism can be celebrated by some and disliked by others. While these less consumerist actors do not find answers in mainstream churches, they seek more "engaged" forms of religion (e.g. Pentecostalism) by looking for a stability of commitment in a community which would give a stronger sense of authority and a tighter system of beliefs and practices; that is, a more structured world/spiritual view. The way religious/spiritual actors deal with popular culture depends on what side of this heuristic spectrum they tend to be. On one end, we will see that there is a free-market consumption of popular culture as a source of spiritual/religious inspiration, whereas on the other side, this market still exists but is more restrictive – not in the quantity, but in the breadth of popular culture content – and even policed.

For a Weberian Approach

I do not intend to raise a critique of these religious/spiritual practices. My intention is to account for these practices and offer a fresh theoretical perspective that is inspired by the works of, for example, the postmodernists such as Baudrillard and Lipovetsky, and the critical theorists such as the Frankfurt School and Jameson.[1] Even if this book deals with postmodern practices, it does not follow a postmodernist approach. While it acknowledges the profound changes that have made our world

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[1] Although these perspectives seem contradictory in principle, Agger (1991) points out their combined relevance when used by empirical sociologists.

postmodern, the underlying theoretical approach is Weberian. Weber believed that to understand a society, one needs to analyse the meaning social actors give to their action. Within this perspective, the sociologist is not simply a re-teller of social actors' stories. Rather, he or she is someone who uses his or her skills to understand a group of actors and uses his or her trained sociological imagination to put the actions of, and meanings given to these actions by, these social actors within a cultural context and structure.

After World War I, the Frankfurt school used Weber's work to adapt their Marxist perspective to the emergent consumer society. However this approach still remained within a perspective that viewed social actors as cultural dupes, controlled by the forces behind the emergence of mass consumption. This book, paradoxically, aims at re-adapting the theories of the Frankfurt School – and others such as Baudrillard – to a more Weberian approach which views social actors as agents, but still carried by some socio/cultural forces.

It is not the intention of this book to concentrate on the cultural content of popular culture only. Some popular works are blatantly religious, while many popular texts might have a dual nature; that is, a text and a sacred/divine subtext, or a narrative and a sacred/divine infranarrative. For example, Kozlovic (2003) researched many popular films and realised that Hollywood cinema very often employs, transforms and carries hidden sacred characters to spiritualise its "secular" products. This is not the aim of this book. The interest of this work lies more with a sociology of culture/religion than with an analysis carried in cultural analysis. The intention here is to study the impact these texts have on social actors, and vice versa. What is of interest is not if there is a religious/spiritual meaning in a text, but on why and how some social actors find a spiritual/religious meaning in a popular piece of work and what they do with it.

This book aims at taking the temperature of the times. Following the tradition of Simmel (1997) and Weber (1968), I am using a more impressionistic than positivist approach to articulate particular ideas from works of popular culture which in turn inform different religious values. As Street (1997: 147) argues, "no amount of empirical work will ever produce a definitive and irrefutable account of how exposure to popular culture produces particular results". However, there are elements scattered around in the information given by certain religious groups/actors and in various chat rooms on the Internet that inform us of a new trend in our postmodern societies.

The working assumption of popular culture is that it is a reflection of our society. The problem with this assertion is that the mirror is not

always well polished. Images might sometimes be distorted, but there will always be an element of truth in them. Popular culture is part of consumer culture and we can know people by what they consume. Plato might have claimed the same if he were still alive. In his metaphor of the cave, prisoners are exposed to shadows that are distorting reality. These prisoners are chained and can only see the wall of the cave in which forms are reflected. They cannot perceive the fire behind them which creates these shadows. For Plato, popular culture would have been one of these projectors of shadows that would have reflected an obscure image of reality. For him, the only way to attain reality is to stop watching these shadows. Plato's eschatology is to see the light from the sun – that is getting out of the cave and seeing reality – by using philosophy and its structured reasoning. But what of our current world, so destroyed by postmodern philosophies that have moved away from this Platonic view to claim that "true" reality never existed? Nietzsche was one of the first to make such a claim. He argued that in a world in which nothing is real, one has to choose a "fake" moral of conduct which would be apt to the development of our individuality. For the German philosopher, if there is no reality, one can only lie to himself and herself when choosing a moral of conduct, and one can only grow stronger when acknowledging this. But what if popular culture is one of these lies? What if popular culture is used by people as a moral of conduct to direct people's lives in this postmodern world? In this world of choices, in which ideologies, religions and philosophies are on sale on the market of knowledge, can popular culture be found at the same level of quality? If for Nietzsche one has to lie to oneself by choosing a moral that views itself as real, how about a moral found in popular culture that has no pretension of being real?

By using this Weberian approach, I will argue that these new phenomena create new forms of religiosity adapted to our postmodern world. Since no "testament" has yet been written on this topic, this book views itself as the "hyper-real testament" (see Chapter 4) of these new religiosities.

Contents

To write such a testament, different gospels need to be told; these are listed below.

The first chapter, "Religion and Spirituality: From Modernity to Postmodernity", explores the shift from modernity to postmodernity which changed the religious landscape of western societies. A profound metamorphosis happened at the individual level which gives legitimacy to individuals to seek religious and spiritual content by themselves and

for themselves. This seeking of content includes works of popular culture.

In Chapter 2, "Consumer Religion(s)", it is argued that all religions, whether they like it or not, are part of consumer society, but some are more consumerist – hyper consumerist religions – than others – hypo consumerist religions. It is revealed in this chapter that people in hyper consumer religions, according to Bauman, consume products for gaining and enhancing sensations. They can visit a "New Age" healing centre for a few days, participate in a "vision quest" and be initiated in shamanism, buy crystals, and indigenous paraphernalia, learn astrology… These objects for sale – books, tarot cards, crystals, CDs, aromatherapy products, etc. – have long lost any taint of the demonic and have become common products. This chapter underlines a strong correlation between these religions – e.g. "New Age" –, neo-liberal capitalism, and globalised consumer culture which has seen increasing prominence within (post)modern societies. However, this consumption of "sensations" is not restricted to commodities and services. It can be, following Mike Featherstone's work, extended to the consumption of signs and texts, and more specifically for this book to popular culture.

Chapter 3, "Subjective Myths", is an account of a new phenomenon in contemporary western society which appears to be saturated by media generated images of a "non-material", a de-materialised, concept of reality. According to Jean Baudrillard, we are now living in an economy of signs in which signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real. From this, the real and unreal have imploded blurring the distinction between them and thus have become hyper-real. For example, religious doctrines and philosophies are mixed with conspiracy theories, alien intelligences, and Jedi religions; take for instance the groups who find inspiration for their spirituality from the stories of H.P. Lovecraft – Cthulhu mythos –, vampire stories, and the science fiction novel by Robert Heinlein (1987), *Stranger in a Strange Land* which inspired the Church of All Worlds. This chapter explores the eclectic consumption of popular culture which produces new and subjective myths in contemporary western culture; these are myths that have relevance to the self only.

The fourth chapter, "Hyper-Real Religion; e.g. *Star Wars*", follows closely the chapter on subjective myths, and analyses how religion can be created out of popular culture, thus becoming a hyper-real religion; that is, the simulacrum of a religion which provides inspiration for believers/consumers.

Chapter 5, "New Forms of Religious Identification Carried by Popular Culture", argues that popular culture can even offer support in form-

ing new identities to groups and individuals who want to follow a religious and/or spiritual path. Indeed, in consumer culture, new identifications are being (re)created across the spheres of fiction and religion. This chapter investigates a case study by comparing the popularisation of the belief in the human potential ethic – i.e. the realisation of a "higher self" – found in alternative spiritualities with that of superheroes in comics. It will be shown that the popular growth of the belief in the human potential ethic and the development of superheroes in the comics' industry are in collusion – in Weber's sense – and offer a new choice of identification to consumers of popular culture. A comparison is also drawn with the power of the "Force" found in the *Star Wars* mythology.

In Chapter 6, "Esoteric Knowledge(s) and Popular Culture", it is observed that the blending of religion and popular culture can unintentionally affect certain forms of religion. This chapter explores the case study of esoteric knowledge, which seems no longer secret in western contemporary society; especially on the Internet. It is now part of popular and consumer culture and "secret wisdom" is no longer the privilege of an aristocracy of culture such as mystics or dervishes; it appears – paradoxically – to be within every individual's reach. Exploring this issue with the works of Simmel and Baudrillard, this chapter attempts 1) to understand the notion of secrecy, 2) to assess its place in popular and consumer culture – or what Baudrillard would call hyper-reality –, and 3) to evaluate the implication of this proliferation of "secret wisdom" in popular culture.

Chapter 7, "The Logic of Late Capitalism and the Stasis of Religion", brings previous argument into a new context. Following the work of Jameson, this chapter argues that certain forms of religion and popular culture are part of the logic of late capitalism; that is, the phase of late capitalism characterised by multinational corporations, its global market, and its mass consumption. Their interconnection creates new practices of religiosity never found in any previous society before. These new practices are part of what I call the "hyper-real testament". Paradoxically, since we have moved to postmodernism, the creation of new cultural content is in stasis and this can be applied to the field of religion. In terms of religious content, nothing new has been invented since the 1970s.

Chapter 8, "Popular Culture and Hypo-Consumer Religious Groups", goes deeply into the analysis of consumer culture by discovering that religious actors who express themselves in popular culture are also engaged in shaping popular culture, and in doing so, they make some experiences possible and deny access to others. This process can take

the form of using the content of popular culture to back up their specific religion, or, it can take the form of censorship towards popular fictions. In this case, censorship produces a popular culture that profoundly affects what is heard and seen. The impact of new forms of religious fundamentalism(s) will be explored.

The conclusion explores the differences in the consumption of popular culture by hyper-consumer and hypo-consumer religions and, coming back to a Weberian approach, analyses these differences through the belief systems of these different consuming religions.

Note on Methodology

I conducted fieldwork in 1996-1997 that led to the submission of my doctoral thesis in 1998 at La Trobe University (Melbourne) which will be published as Possamai (forthcoming). This research dealt with New Age Spirituality and while conducting my interviews, I realised that there was a strong affinity between this spirituality and some forms of popular culture. This was a topic of research and analysis that had to be put on the side until this book. The interview extracts that are reproduced in parts in this book are from this fieldwork (see Chapter 2). Since my PhD, I have lectured in Sociology at the University of Western Sydney where I have been able to conduct more research on popular culture and other types of religions. As part of this research, I surfed on the Internet to discover relevant sites and analysed various chat rooms using a type of cyber-ethnography as detailed by Markham (1998). This method combines scholarly texts and narratives into a reflexive ethnography conducted at both the real and the virtual worlds. It aims to produce a type of anthropological/sociological "thick" description from which researches make claim, write case studies, and attempt to explain behaviour and attitude.