The Postmodern Sacred

*Popular Culture Spirituality in the Genres of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Fantastic Horror*

Em McAvan

BA (Honours) Curtin University

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

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Introduction

The Return of the Religious and the Postmodern Sacred

God is no longer dead. When Nietzsche famously declared his death toward the end of the 19th century, it seemed possible, even inevitable, that God and religion would die under the rationalist atheist onslaught. That, however, was not to be the case. Religion and “spirituality” have survived the atheist challenge, albeit profoundly changed. Although there are a number of contributing factors, the revival of the religious in the West has occurred partly as a result of the postmodernist collapse of the scientific meta-narratives that made atheism so powerful. The postmodern critique of Enlightenment universalism (of which, more in the first chapter) has had the unexpected result of fuelling the resurgence of some forms of religion. The critiques of religion made by such modern luminaries as Nietzsche, Marx and Freud have been found to be “also perspectives, also constructions or fictions of grammar” (Caputo, 2001: 59). Postmodern writers have critiqued modern universalisms as contingent, historically produced and arbitrary, but they are unsurprisingly also often aware of the contingency of their own positions. Significant too, the postmodern respect for tolerance and diversity (however limited or facile this may be in practice) has meant that atheist dismissals of religion as “superstition” have become problematic to make, considering that postmodern subjects are unable to make recourse to some universal truth claim. Definitive statements like “there is no God” come off suspiciously like the dogmatic statements of the Christianity of old. Concurrently, the postmodern skepticism towards scientific meta-narratives has meant the growth of all sorts of pseudo-science and New Age medical and psychological
practices. The apparent return of religion and/or pseudo-science are both unexpected considering the antipathy towards traditional religion by feminism and gay liberation, as well as the Marxist roots of the liberal Left, yet it emerges in part as a way of finding more female and queer friendly forms of spiritual practice. In practice, this respect for diversity is arguably oriented more towards the individualised practices of New Age “spirituality” than towards Christianity or Judaism (Islam arguably represents a rather different case post September 11), however God figures and Christian symbols are nevertheless pervasive throughout popular culture. The return of the religious has been in two forms therefore, the rise of so-called fundamentalisms in the established faiths—Christian, Jewish, Muslim—and the rise of New Age style spirituality. It is in the interplay between traditional religions and New Age-ised spirituality that the stream of spiritual popular culture that I call the postmodern sacred finds itself. The question I ask, therefore, is how does the sacred appear in the postmodern media?

Clearly after September 11, religion has become an ever-more vital, and contested, part of culture here in Australia, and indeed across the world. The aftermath of September 11, however, has not been a re-assessment of what legitimately constitutes the domain of the religious or the spiritual (and these two are not necessarily one and the same), but rather, the political implications that stem from religious belief. Debates over abortion, gay marriage, terror legislation, Israeli settlements, Middle East policy and so on are inflected with religious beliefs and practices, yet these debates all take religious positions as given. The terms shift depending on context, but all have a marked tendency to take religious beliefs as unified positions, static and fixed traditions—becoming, variously, religious/secular, Christianity/Islam, Judaism/Islam, East/West, and so on. This is, I should add, a
presumption not only of atheistic disdain towards religion (as outmoded for example),
but one also made by religious adherents themselves, advocating their eternal, fixed 
truths. What I would like to do here is complicate the matter substantially, by
pointing out how secular and profane are always-already entangled within one
another. I use popular culture as an entry point, an entry point that can presume
neither belief nor unbelief in its audiences. In particular, I shall chiefly use explicitly
unreal texts, texts in the science fiction, fantasy and fantastic horror genres. All of
these, I argue refract religious symbols and ideas through a postmodernist sensibility,
with little regard for the demands of “real world” epistemology.

The argument

Chapter One traces the broad outlines of what I call the postmodern sacred, a
strain of spiritually inflected unreal texts that have been remarkably central to the
popular culture of the last decade or so. I begin by discussing the traditional sacred as
analysed by such scholars of religion as Mircea Eliade and Rudolph Otto. This
establishes the continuities and discontinuities the postmodern sacred has with the
traditions it draws on. I analyse the postmodern turn by engaging with three of the
most influential theories of postmodernity—Jean-Francois Lyotard’s idea of the
collapse of the meta-narrative, Jean Baudrillard’s ideas about hyper-reality and
simulation, and Fredric Jameson’s theory that postmodern art is a theory of pastiche.
I argue that the postmodern sacred exemplify those three theorists’ work in different
ways. As a consequence of the postmodern turn, it is an individualised, consumerist
approach to spirituality, pastiching together religious symbols into unreal texts.
Given that texts like Lord of the Rings and The Matrix have been some of the most
successful of the last decade, this appearance of spirituality in the midst of popular culture is an important cultural development.

Chapter Two analyses the New Age usage of what I call transcendental signifier. Modifying Jacques Derrida’s notion of the transcendental signified, I argue that New Age influenced popular culture gestures to the transcendental as a way of signifying a spirituality distinguished from the monotheistic Jewish and Christian traditions. I argue that the transcendental signifier is reliant on a New Age approach to subjectivity—one that individualises and detraditionalises spiritual experience. I analyse the use of the transcendental signifier in such texts as *Dead Like Me* and *The X-Files*.

In Chapter Three I discuss the literalisation of metaphor in the postmodern sacred—the appearance of gods, monsters, heavens and hells. I argue that the special effects of contemporary visual culture makes the supernatural a visceral experience, a process that makes the sign appear almost corporeal. Paradoxically however, that process produces a hyper-reality that makes the postmodern world highly unreal. I analyse corporeal gods and monsters in such texts as *Stargate SG-1*, *Futurama*, and *Constantine*. I suggest that the corporeal gods may in fact be a way of staging belief safely in a secondary world, without entailing the need for real-world belief and practice.

In Chapter Four I analyse the key text of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. I discuss the relationship between Tolkien’s text and Biblical motifs such as apocalypse, sacramentality and Christ figures. I argue however, that the postmodern reception of Peter Jackson’s recent film adaptations has re-written the *Lord of the Rings* as a New Age style text as much as a Christian. I argue then that the postmodern sacred is marked by a supplementary relationship between Christianity
and the New Age, that these two elements both add to and replace each other’s presence in texts.

In Chapter Five I discuss the apparent return of the meta-narrative after September 11. I argue that the “return of the real” discourse raised after September 11 disguises its own hidden postmodern positions, that September 11 merely provides a convenient pre-text around which to hang an already existent conservative “backlash” to the postmodern identity politics of feminism, anti-racism and gay liberation movements. I argue that whilst the postmodern sacred appears to present heroic narratives that would confirm the “return of the real” argument these are often diffused into the pleasures of postmodern textuality. I discuss a number of texts in this chapter—the anti-postmodern heroes of The Matrix and Harry Potter, and the direct responses to September 11 presented by Stargate SG:1 and Battlestar Galactica.

In Chapter Six I discuss postmodern nostalgia. I argue that, rather than a refusal of postmodernity, the search for a lost authentic real life experience “outside” of the postmodern symbolic exchange is in fact a key part of the capitalistic system. I analyse the varying uses of nostalgia in Harry Potter, Xena: Warrior Princess and Buffy the Vampire Slayer. I argue that Buffy in particular shows the dueling nostalgic principles at the heart of the postmodern condition most starkly—the ironic postmodern referentiality that renders the world into a series of signs, and the search for a world outside the sign through intense, even violent, bodily experience. I argue that these two principles in fact tacitly support each other, that nostalgic postmodern consumption relies on a swing between one and the other.

Thus, I argue that the postmodern sacred is a paradoxical attempt at accessing spirituality, using the symbols contained in explicitly unreal texts to gain a second-hand experience of transcendence and belief. This second-hand experience displaces
the need for belief or real-world practice into a textual world, requiring little of its consumers. While they seem to suggest a desire for a magical world outside of capitalism, the wonder produced by these texts however is only temporary, eventually the consumer must return again to purchase another text.

Methodology—Selections, Omissions, Erasures

Film theorist Melanie J Wright points out that, “for the most part, existing literature on religion-film relationships show little or no awareness of critical approaches in film and cinema studies, although it routinely expresses interest in those fields” (8). Wright rightly outs that new work in religion and film is regularly hailed as pioneering, precisely because of a lack of on-going dialogue between the two fields (and, despite the fact that she points out research has been undergone since the 1920s, it is clearly too early to speak of an intersecting field possessing any degree of scholastic stability). For religious studies, often the problem has been a set of presumptions about the text that are clearly un-workable in present day Cultural Studies practice—of auteurism (in particular, using the “real” world belief of writer or director to validate religious readings), of a static method of interpreting religious symbols, of suggesting that consumption of a religiously inflected text necessarily entails religious belief of itself. These approaches suggest the kinds of passive audiences critiqued by such writers as Henry Jenkins. Jenkins suggests that fans engage with texts in a far more sophisticated, participatory fashion, discarding unwanted textual elements, foregrounding others, and sometimes re-writing popular culture texts into substantially new texts.
Wright suggests that “the territory of cultural studies, into which much film studies has been shifting, offers a discursive space in which the much-touted dialogue between religious (or theological) studies and film studies is perhaps newly possible” (27). Yet, this thesis is not chiefly intended to be a dialogue between theology, religious studies and Cultural Studies, although there are of course references to theologians and sociological and other forms of religious study. Dialogue implies, I think, a certain minimal kind of ethical responsibility, of “doing justice” to a person, or in this case, discipline. I make no pretence as to being a theologian. Instead, I situate it squarely with contemporary Cultural Studies practice, and more broadly, within that body of work that has come to be tagged “theory.” As such, one thing you will find here is a spirited defence of the continued relevance, and indeed in my opinion the increased applicability, of theory for contemporary Cultural Studies scholarship. So as the title suggests, this thesis draws heavily on postmodern theory, in particular that of Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson and Jean-Francois Lyotard, as well as the deconstructionist theory of Jacques Derrida. Influential, too, have been the theological probings of Mark C Taylor, whose own work creatively reads contemporary religious culture through the lens of postmodern and post-structuralist thought.

One approach I have largely avoided is the Jungian derived mythological approach to films, exemplified by such writers as Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell. Mythological criticism tends to posit a recurrence of archetypes and across cultures; the kind of universalising theory film and Cultural Studies have long since discarded. Joel W Martin rightly points out that “myth critics tend to focus on our psychological quest for meaning but ignore the way meaning is always politicised and historicised” (10). Mythological criticism has been clearly problematised by the
insights of post-structuralism, from the Foucaultian focus on power (knowledge is never neutral, it works to privilege some positions and marginalise others) to the Derridean disruption of the text, and culture by extension, as a seamless whole.

Mythological criticism is also problematic from a feminist perspective, since reading provisional historical constructs as universal and timeless seems to deny the capacity for change that underpins feminist thought and activism. Where I have referred to the mythological approach, it is not as much as a theoretical framework as to trace the emergence of these ideas\textsuperscript{ii} into New Age spiritualities and popular culture—for example, Joseph Campbell’s work influencing George Lucas’s \textit{Star Wars}.

In keeping with current Cultural Studies practice, the ideological work that texts I have studied perform with regard with to race, class, gender and sexuality—what are sometimes dismissed as “identity politics”—is never far from my mind. It’s important to realise that while texts perform what Annette Kuhn terms “cultural instrumentalities,” (1990: 1) these are necessarily multiple given the impossibility of truly definitive readings.\textsuperscript{iii} While for reasons of economy I have often tried to confine my theorising to the religious, it is nevertheless apparent that these texts may perform other, equally important, roles in the culture.

Generically, the texts I have chosen fit largely into the genres of fantasy, science fiction and fantastic horror, what I loosely call the unreal. I began writing this thesis as a study of the literary genre of fantasy. What became increasingly apparent over the course of my studies, however, is how artificial the separations between fantasy, science fiction and horror are, and indeed how the different media of print, television and film are reliant upon one another when one is looking at these kinds of fandoms. Whilst it is surely laziness that leads bookstores into lumping the three together, nevertheless there is a strong inter-relationship between the three—science
fiction and fantasy inevitable incorporate some form of horror, whilst some forms of
horror at least incorporate some aspects of the fantastic, say in the forms of
supernatural elements or creatures like ghosts, vampires and so on. It is this common
supernatural element that generically marks off the texts of the postmodern sacred.

Critical approaches to these genres have frequently followed Russian
structuralist Tvetzan Todorov’s approach, which divides texts into uncanny,
marvellous and fantastic. Those texts that introduce a moment of epistemological
uncertainty—is this real or not—are what Todorov calls “the fantastic.” While this
approach has been immensely influential, particularly in psychoanalytically
influenced theories such as Rosemary Jackson’s, it is not particularly useful in
understanding contemporary unreal genres, for these genres induce little of the
hesitation that Todorov or Jackson describes. The mostly-Tolkien derived fantasy
genre sold in bookstores and the subversive literature Jackson affirms have little to do
with another, the latter of which being more applicable to writers like Kafka. Besides
this, very few unreal texts, particularly visual film and TV texts, produce the kind of
ontological hesitation described. Thus Jackson and Todorov’s definitions are of little
use to understanding the texts I have analysed. Where I have used the term fantastic,
it has generally been to mean, broadly, those texts with supernatural or otherwise
unreal elements.

More recently than Todorov and Jackson’s work, Alec Worley has suggested
that fantasy might be defined by the presence of magic—“magic fuels fantasy,
manifesting as miracles, mysterious forces or inexplicable events, none of which can
be ascribed to the laws of rationality, nature or science” (10). Any text that offers a
scientific explanation, however, falls into science fiction (hereafter SF) for Worley.
Whilst interesting, this approach proves problematic, given the rapid growth of
pseudo-scientific explanations in fantasy texts (often in a genetic basis), and the miraculous events that periodically occur in otherwise scientific SF (say, for instance, the unexplainable revival of Neo in the first *Matrix* movie). Worley uses the classification “science fantasy” for texts like Star Wars which have implausible “scientific” explanations for their events—which seems a contradiction in terms. These are unrealistic (implausible) realistic (scientific) unrealistic (not reflecting real life) texts? At this point genre analysis begins to seem a little specialised, devising distinctions that have little to do with the way texts are consumed, let alone how they function culturally.

Whilst I think a loose definition based upon a real/unreal binary is helpful in some sense—these texts are explicitly unreal—it is as useful to describe the genres by settings and tropes (medieval styled worlds, wizards and dragons for fantasy, space-ships and aliens for SF; vampires, werewolves and so on for fantastic horror). Whilst SF and fantasy seem relatively easy to recognise, if not always to define, fantastic horror is the least recognisable of these. What I mean by fantastic horror is those texts with supernatural elements and creatures—vampires, werewolves, demons and so on. Examples I have used include the postmodern Gothic series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, and the comic-book movie *Constantine*. These texts use elements from classical Gothic texts, but tend to work as much as a synthesis of fantasy’s epic struggles and Gothic signifiers. *The X-Files*, on the other hand, combines classic and contemporary horror tropes with conspiracy theory SF. While these all show a remarkable generic fluidity, there are two elements that have remained constant—the presence of some fantastic or supernatural element in the text, and religious iconography and significance. For this reason, I have excluded teen slasher movies and other forms of somewhat Realist horror texts from my texts.
Classically, science fiction has tended to define itself against the real, or extrapolate from it. Marxist literary critic Darko Suvin argues that SF produces what he calls “cognitive estrangement.” Suvin argues that SF includes a novum, a “strange newness” (4) that allows its readers to see the world through different eyes. SF, he says, “sees the norms of any age, including its own, as unique, changeable, and therefore subject to a cognitive view” (7, italics original). It is this critical capacity that Suvin argues distinguishes SF from other unreal genres like fantasy and fairy tales. But as Jean Baudrillard points out, the sense of real and unreal in the postmodern world becomes tenuous (1994: 124). When reality collapses into hyperreality, it becomes too difficult to create the cognitive effects described by Suvin. I shall argue in my final chapter then that postmodern nostalgia tends to downplay the critical tendency of SF, preferring instead to make the recycling of older texts in the genre as crucial a feature of the genre as any. In a cultural climate of pervasive nostalgia, it becomes difficult to separate SF’s critical capacity from other similarly unreal genres—SF, particularly on television, becomes a set of familiar tropes rather than a practice of extrapolation and cognitive estrangement on the real world. So rather than spend time in tedious genre nit-picking, I have preferred to take my texts on the same terms as their viewer-readers, which seem far more aligned towards a real/unreal distinction than between the three. Genre in this sense, especially given the postmodern cross-breeding of texts, is marked as much by a history of readings and shared audiences than by any firm sense of textual contents.

So why these genres, rather than those which explicitly depict “real-world” religion (say, The Passion of the Christ)? Wright suggests that a “small number of critics have asked how film might move from trying to depict religion to ‘doing’ it” (4). In my opinion, these genres provide the flexibility necessary to depart from a
Realist epistemology of the “real,” and are thus best equipped to deal with many of the supernatural events we find in various religious traditions. New uses of CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) in particular make unreal genres able to depict the supernatural in hyper-real detail. Importantly, too, the departure from “real” history frees some texts to be able to construct alternative versions of spiritual experience, to make a disguised comment on current practices, and to combine various traditions together in interesting ways. The recurrence of religious tropes in these texts is often over-looked in critical accounts of their success. Instead, we see unreal texts dismissed as adolescent wish-fulfilment. I shall argue instead, not for the high seriousness of these texts (many are indeed quite silly), but for the importance of the religious element to their cultural functioning. I argue, against the backdrop of a postmodern world both estranged from reality and desperately seeking it, that consuming religiously-inflected texts is a way of accessing spiritual experience divorced from real-world practice or belief.

When it comes to the criteria I have used in selecting my texts, contemporary impact and degree of visibility in the culture has usually been key. I have chosen therefore contemporary texts, which have been consumed within the postmodern media culture. Texts like Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings and The Matrix have grossed billions of dollars in box office, DVD purchases and spin-off material. Within those mass audiences, all also feature devoted fan bases that one could arguably call cultish. I have also chosen TV series like The X Files, too, which have been wildly successful. Other texts have been chosen for their cult status—Buffy the Vampire Slayer, for instance, has never been quite the massive hit it promised to be, yet it lasted seven seasons and spawned a spin-off called Angel. But Buffy’s cultural impact, both in its immensely self-referential dialogue and butt-kicking post-feminist
heroine, cannot be underestimated; as the series has been widely imitated (amongst others, for example in the latest incarnation of the British Dr Who series). Some of the other selections have been perhaps more capricious on my part—for instance, the series Dead Like Me which I analyse in Chapter Two was cancelled after two seasons but gained a devoted following on cable re-runs. In this it lacks both popularity and cultural impact; however, it nevertheless provides a generic context for the other more popular unreal texts. The consumption of science fiction, fantasy and fantastic horror fans are, not surprisingly, often confined to those genres, however one often finds little discrimination between the three—the key determining factor being their recognisable unreality. As to the production of the texts, although many of these texts feature multi-national casts, writers and production teams, they are nevertheless produced and distributed as global Americanised culture, and thus many national differences have been effaced. It is arguable that both production and consumption of the postmodern sacred occur in a virtual, postmodern world which more often makes distinctions based upon genre, special effect budget (how it looks), and the recognisability of the stars, than with nationality of production.

Because of my criteria in choosing texts because of their popularity and visibility within the culture, the majority of these have been films or TV series. This illustrates, I think, a cultural shift towards a post-literate society. Although texts like Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings begin on the page, their reception has arguably been largely mediated through their filmic adaptations. Although I argue that postmodern reception of these texts is marked by a tendency to slide between mediums, I shall on occasion refer to the written texts in order to demonstrate the slippages elided by postmodern readings (but not, one hopes, by postmodern theory itself).
As for the omissions in this thesis, well, sadly one cannot study all the texts one might wish to. Japanese anime is one area I have neglected in particular, and has grown astronomically over the time I have been writing this PhD. Many anime texts make creative use of Buddhist, Shinto, Christian and other religious symbols (see for instance, the above photo from anime Chrno Crusade, which features gun-toting nuns and an elaborate demon cosmology. For a white Western scholar like myself, anime provides the challenge of wrestling with an immense output, not to mention the dangers of a critical Orientalism. Although it contains many unreal texts—science fiction, cyberpunk, fantasy—the term anime merely denotes Japanese animation, and such anime also encompasses romance, martial arts comedies, and so on. So obviously, anime is produced in a different cultural context to my other texts and tracing sensitively the differences in signification and generic expectation, as well as the cultural shifts that occur in its translation and consumption in the West, proved in
the end too daunting a challenge, especially considering the already wide scope of the thesis. While it is arguable that many of my conclusions have applicability to the Western consumption of anime—especially given the cross-over between fantasy/SF/horror fandoms and anime—studying the religious themes in anime in the depth required would make a thesis in itself. For a basic English-language primer on anime, I recommend Susan Napier’s Anime: From Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle, which includes an interesting chapter on depictions of apocalypse and its relationship to both Japanese religious traditions and modern history (249-274).

Despite the backdrop of September 11, the most significant absence from this study is Islam. This is due to the fact that, despite the incredible growth of Islam in the West in countries like the UK and France, explicit references to Islam remain largely absent from unreal texts. One suspects this is due to the fact that most writers and producers continue to be basically unaware of Islamic beliefs and practices, and thus unable to appropriate symbols or tropes for textual use. Given the prohibitions on representing Muhammad, references to Islamic beliefs in such texts could be problematic due to the possibility of causing offence to Muslims (most famously, the Salman Rushdie affair, which continues to be controversial a good decade after the publication of The Satanic Verses). Another practical consideration would be the ability of the largely post-Judeo-Christian audience to understand Islamic references. Of course, the repressed nevertheless returns, so we tend to see a refracted Islam appear in the familiar Orientalist guises of the “exotic” or the racialised, monstrous, often alien, Other. I have, of course, noted this when it appears, most particularly in texts like Peter Jackson’s films of Lord of the Rings.
Notes

1 Hindu, Buddhism and Confucianism represent special cases given their relationship to the New Age in the West. Although I argue that the New Age is particularly receptive to those traditions because of their perceived liberal approaches to gender and sexuality, as Karen Armstrong notes, “There are Buddhist, Hindu and even Confucian fundamentalisms, which also cast aside many of the painfully acquired insights of liberal culture, which fight and kill in the name of religion and seek to bring the sacred into the realm of politics and national struggle” (2004:ix). So the separation between fundamentalism and spirituality becomes slightly strained, and depends on the national context in which one is talking—Buddhism as practiced in the US or Australia varies significantly from its practice in Tibet.

2 See Chapter One for an in-depth analysis of Eliade’s work on the sacred and profane.

3 Kuhn defines cultural instrumentality briefly as “what, in cultural terms, it [the text] does” (1).
Chapter One

The Postmodern Sacred

Postmodern and sacred are two terms which do not sit easily together. Postmodernist critics have typically had an antagonistic relationship with the sacred, partly, one suspects, to the Marxist heritage of much current humanities research, and in particular the broad field of Cultural Studies.\(^1\) Partly the rise of the Religious Right has proved problematic for those of us more comfortable with the identity politics of the Left—be they feminist, queer, anti or post-colonialist, anti-racist and so on. Religion can often seem our natural enemy. More basically, though, religion serves mostly as a bastion of the traditional, and it is this that jars when one juxtaposes postmodern and sacred together. However, there is nevertheless a movement within

Daniel Radcliffe as Harry Potter in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*
contemporary popular culture that I am terming the postmodern sacred that synthesises aspects of the postmodern with the sacred, and as we shall when we begin looking in detail, that relationship is not as odd as it would appear at first glance.

What is the postmodern sacred? The postmodern sacred is, in basic terms, pop-culture spirituality. It is texts that are consumed in part for their spiritual content, for an experience of the transcendent outside of the bounds of formal religious and spiritual traditions. It is New Age stickers that say “magic happens”, it is Lord of the Rings, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, 2 “Jesus Is My Homeboy” shirts. It is the un/belief of REM’s “Losing My Religion” 3 and the “gay church music” of The Hidden Cameras. The postmodern sacred is everywhere once one begins to look for it, for popular culture is rife with the detritus of millennia of religious tradition. Because of the suspension of the usual rules of the “real world” in their textual universes, the postmodern sacred occurs most of all in the literary and visual genres of science fiction, horror and fantasy and it is those that I will be drawing on for my textual analysis. Although they are produced for the profane purposes of capitalism and entertainment, these texts are heavily packed with spiritual signifiers cobbled together from various religions and myths.

The postmodern sacred characteristically utilises the signs of disparate religious and spiritual traditions, but it is not a part of them. It is notable for its critical stance towards religious institutions 4 and yet it is also willing to use them for their symbolic power. Because it is largely textually based, the postmodern sacred is consumptive, and is necessarily entangled with the mechanics of postmodern global capitalism. Thus it makes the egalitarian call of all pop culture, but delivers the unequal products of classed economics. It is, first and foremost, a de-institutional and individualised 5 form as Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim would describe it,
a “choose-your-own” approach to spirituality, though that choice is necessarily
curtailed by the products available in the market. Though the postmodern sacred can
be criticised for its erasure of class, I find myself in agreement with philosopher Jane
Bennett when she says that the commodity might embody several “dissonant
possibilities” (127). These dissonant possibilities include producing a will to
consume further, erasing the social inequities involved in the production of the
commodity itself, and doing ideological work that can range from feminist to
fundamentalist.

The postmodern sacred emerges out of the various New Age movements that
have become an increasingly acceptable part of hegemonic Western capitalism,
championed and popularised by such people as the influential Oprah Winfrey, though
it is not constrained by their need to justify their beliefs as epistemological “truth.”
The postmodern sacred is the textual sedimentation of many New Age beliefs and
practices. It takes from the New Age both its scepticism towards traditional
institutions as well as a constant emphasis on the Self. Sociologist Paul Heelas argues
that the New Age places the experience of the individual at its foreground as the sole
arbiter of truth and authority. He says that “truth, not surprisingly for those who see
themselves as spiritual beings, must – at least first-and-foremost – come by way of
one’s own experience. For this alone provides direct and uncontaminated access to
the spiritual realm” (21). Rather than view their practices as religion, New Agers
often use the term “spirituality” to more accurately capture what they consider to be
more properly “lived” spiritual experiences. This shift in terminology is important. It
foregrounds the break that New Agers see themselves as having made with traditional
organised religion, which they considered a set of beliefs and practices that are “not
lived” in the same way. “Religion” is considered to be tied to institutions such as the
Catholic and Anglican Churches, to be disconnected from if not totally opposed to real-life spiritual practice. The New Age emphasis on lived experience means then that spiritual experience can just as easily occur in a popular culture context as in a yoga class or in meditation, for popular culture is experienced as a bodily experience—sound and spectacle on small and large screen. Similarly, too, popular culture is re-experienced as a common culture, from both commodified aspects like clothing, figurines etc to the endless quoting of beloved series.

This shift in terminology is also important in that it often discards the notion of God. Recently, this New Age shift has been articulated by religious scholar Ray Billington (although he himself seems not to link his own ideas to the New Age, drawing instead on the writings of various mystics). Billington provocatively argues that God is antithetical to spirituality, that we need to “remove the concept of God. We need mysticism without theology”(8). Billington argues instead for a holistic, largely Eastern influenced spirituality, a “religion without god” as the title of his book goes. What replaces God in the New Age is the often nebulous idea of “spirit” or “energy.” These ideas derive from Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism but are largely disconnected from their traditions. The New Age appropriation of yoga or tantric sex, for instance, frequently re-figure these practices as capitalist commodities, as reliant on racialised exoticism than true mysticism.

But, whilst the New Age ideas of spirit are undeniably important to the postmodern sacred, it is also important to note that the figure of God has not been completely abandoned. The postmodern sacred on the whole makes use of Eastern and Christian ideas and symbols equally, in a sometimes jarring synthesis of disparate traditions. This eclecticism is a key feature of the New Age that fictional texts have taken for themselves. It is the interplay between the Judeo-Christian traditions and
New Age spirituality that marks the postmodern sacred as a peculiarly contemporary form of popular culture.

But whilst its textual appropriations do not preclude the possibilities of the postmodern sacred functioning as a complement to traditional forms of institutional religion, the postmodern sacred arguably functions as supplemental in the sense that Derrida describes it in *Of Grammatology*, an addition and a replacement. Though the pop culture texts I’ve referred to have been praised in some religious quarters, it should be noted that evangelicals, for instance, largely loathe these texts, for a number of reasons. The critical stance on religious institutions understandably alienates religious conservatives, as does an often ironic take on traditional religion, especially in such paradigmatically postmodern sacred shows as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The practice of witchcraft in many texts has enraged evangelicals most, making that time-honoured move of confusing Wicca or Merlinesque magic with Satan worship. A recent example of this is the ludicrous banning of J.K Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series in a number of school libraries in the United States. The outright fear and hostility towards *Harry Potter* is not by any means isolated, a fear of any text that involves the unreal or supernatural has long propelled evangelical disdain for the fantastic. The point is, then, if pop-culture spirituality functions as a supplement to traditional religious practice, it is, in some quarters at least, a monstrous supplement. This supplemental relationship between Christianity and the New Age will be examined in greater detail in chapter four, where I talk through how both have been used in Peter Jackson’s post-millennial film adaptations of J.R.R Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

Another facet that places the postmodern sacred outside of much traditional religious practice is that it characteristically affirms the rights of people who have
historically been marginalised by the Christian institutions—specifically, women, people of colour and queers. This marks a significant departure from much of the religious history of the West, and in particular makes the postmodern sacred diametrically opposed to the rise of the Christian Right, which has been notable for its blatant hatred of queers, constant opposition to feminism and racial equality (taken in the form of, say, opposition to Equal Opportunity legislation). Whilst much religious discourse takes the form of virulent denouncements of these marginalised positions, the postmodern sacred is notable for its inclusiveness and availability. In other words, one does not need to be accepted and ideologically vetted to engage with pop culture, one needs the media access.  

This does not mean, however, that the postmodern sacred cannot be criticised on the grounds of representations of race, gender or sexuality. Rather, the postmodern sacred has an explicit commitment to these ethical positions (more strongly in some places than others) and to contemporary liberal notions of equality and tolerance. So we see fairly positive strong female characters (Buffy, Major Carter in Stargate, Scully in The X-Files), queers (Willow, Tara and Kennedy in Buffy, Captain Jack in Torchwood), and people of colour (Teal’c in Stargate, Morpheus in The Matrix). While many of these representations are still problematic—this can at times be mere lip-service to the idea of equality, not to mention Orientalist exoticism or sheer tokenism—it is noteworthy nevertheless and marks a shift from Eurocentric, patriarchal and homophobic religious traditions.
The traditional sacred

In beginning to define the postmodern sacred, I pointed to a number of aspects that separate it from the traditional sacred. However, in order to fully appreciate those differences one must understand of traditional forms of the sacred. In particular, Mircea Eliade’s classic study The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion proves itself worthy of a more in-depth engagement, in order to illuminate the continuities and discontinuities that the postmodern sacred has with modern, medieval and pre-modern forms of the sacred. Eliade’s work surveys a wide cross-cultural landscape; he is ambitiously interested in the entire history of human religious behaviour. Like anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and linguist structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure, Eliade’s work is one of the last gasps of universalism in humanities scholarship. But even taking that substantial difference into account, his work has proved tremendously influential in not just the field of the history of religion which he helped found, but also in the various New Age spiritual movements and philosophies that the postmodern sacred itself draws on.

The traditional sacred maintains a clear-cut distinction between sacred and profane, such that Eliade can claim that the “first possible definition of the sacred is that it is the opposite of the profane” (10, italics original). Eliade argues that culture can be divided by this opposition, indeed for him, the two are inherently opposed. It should be noted that though the profane has frequently had the suggestion of the taboo or sacrilegious, Eliade in this instance however means it to mean merely the non-sacred. In the traditional sacred, then, the sacred and the profane are inimitable, they cannot exist together, though as we shall see, one will nevertheless occur within the other. A fairly typical example of this viewpoint is when Greek Orthodox theologian
Demetrios Passakos says “every culture brings forth [. . .] the distinction between sacred and profane and consequently between clean and unclean” (277, italics added), signifying already not only the universalising tendencies of this line of theological speculation, but the continuities being made between pre-modern “primitive” religions and modern and postmodern Christianity. The division between sacred and profane works to divide culture radically in this sense; one can extrapolate a list of binary oppositions rather rapidly, say:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>sacred</th>
<th>profane</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>clean</td>
<td>unclean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>believers</td>
<td>heretics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>us</td>
<td>them</td>
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It is quite clear in examining the sacred/profane binary how ideologically loaded those terms are—sacred and profane not only necessarily rely on the existence of the other, but quite clearly the way the opposition is structured works to privilege the sacred. That privilege has in many ways been erased by the legacy of Enlightenment rationalism and secular humanism, which has tried to rephrase the split in different terms which privilege the profane side of the opposition (say as superstition vs. reason). Regardless of how one wants to phrase it though, sacred and profane historically have served to illuminate a profound cultural split.

Though defining the sacred or indeed religion is notoriously difficult, it is nevertheless necessary that we attempt a basic definition. For Eliade, the sacred “always manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from ‘natural’ realities” (10). The sacred, by definition, then is not of this world, it is otherworldly, supernatural, transcendent. One poignant definition of the sacred remains Rudolph Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* which suggests that the holy may be considered to be the
awe-induced state of experiencing “the presence of that which is a mystery
inexpressible and above all creatures” (13). Otto terms this psychological state
“mysterium tremendum” (12) and coins the term “numinous” to describe supernatural
elements that are wholly other to this world. Eliade contends that Otto’s analysis is
grounded solely in the “irrational” experiences of awe and terror, and proposes
instead to view religion in its entirety (10). The interplay between awe and terror is
one experience that continues to underlie constructions of the transcendent in the
postmodern sacred’s texts, yet this as Eliade rightly points out, is an entirely
subjective experience. Defining the sacred by its effect on a presumed viewer is
interesting, but incomplete in describing other religious experiences. In contrast,
Eliade prefers to look at how the opposition of the sacred and profane structures the
very being, time and space of religious cultures.

Interestingly, though Eliade takes the sacred and the profane to be opposed,
paradoxically, the fact that the sacred must necessarily manifest itself in profane
objects means that, “for those who have a religious experience all nature is capable of
revealing itself as cosmic sacrality” (Eliade 12). The paradox of the sacred then is
that it is a manifestation of radical Otherness (ie not being of this world) in this
natural world. Thus the initial sharp distinction between the sacred and the profane
becomes increasingly complicated. How can the sacred, which is by definition
otherworldly, nevertheless appear in this world? How does one distinguish between
the sacred and profane if they both appear in this (profane) world? Eliade, however,
does not pay much direct theoretical attention to this apparent paradox in his work,
though his work on what he called *hierophanies* may go some way to answering these
questions.
Eliade coins the term “hierophany” to describe those manifestations of the sacred in this profane world. The hierophany, as Eliade defines the term, is when “*something sacred shows itself to us*” (11). The hierophany stands out from the rest of the world in that it announces itself as sacred. It manifests itself, it is a revelation. The question of how to distinguish the sacred from the profane is thus answered by the hierophany, for the hierophany’s “announcement” of itself *as* sacred makes the question meaningless. The hierophany, then, is self-evidently sacred. This tautological definition is arguably insufficient for any skeptical, let alone atheistic, approach to the sacred. Suffice it to say that the hierophany is understood as *sui generis* in Eliade, it cannot be understood in any other terms.

On a more sustained engagement with Eliade’s work, we find that the hierophany works to construct a sacred/profane divide that reappears even more strongly than at first glance, since the split between “the sacred and profane is often expressed by the opposition between real and unreal or pseudoreal”(Eliade 13). One way that opposition is expressed in Eliade’s work is in his conceptualisation of sacred space. Most fundamentally, manifestations of the sacred dramatise a cosmological act of creation, testifying to the presence of gods and other-worldly presences. Eliade says “every world is the work of the gods, for it was either created directly by the gods or was consecrated, hence cosmicised, by men [sic] ritually reactualising the paradigmatic act of Creation” (64).

Though at first glance this seems to blur the lines of sacred and profane (or even entirely erase the profane), one finds on closer inspection that split is being made at the meta-physical level of Being. Eliade argues powerfully that religion not only organises space into sacred and not-sacred but translates the sacred into absolute being and the profane into non-being:
There is [...] a sacred space, and hence a strong significant space; there are other spaces that are not sacred and so are without structure or consistency, amorphous [...] For religious man, this spatial nonhomogeneity finds expression in the experience of an opposition between space that is sacred—the only real and real-ly existing space—and all other space, the formless expanse surrounding it. (20)

Eliade argues that the manifestation of sacred space (the hierophany) ontologically founds the world, creating an absolute fixed point of reality. He points out that this sacred space is conceptualised as the “Centre of the World,” for example Jerusalem is the centre of the world in Christian tradition due to its associations with Christ and indeed the pre-existing Hebrew tradition of it as a Holy City. This symbolism of the Centre of the World is invoked in many disparate ways, though, in the formation of not only obviously religious spaces like temples, (holy) cities and countries; but in the dwellings where people live—“every religious man places himself at the Centre of the World [...] as close as possible to the opening that ensures him communication with the gods” (64). The spatialisation of the Sacred presents the illusory promise of absolute ontological foundation, a fixity of Being.

Conversely, then, profane space appears to the religious to represent partial or even absolute non-being. It is Chaos, unknowable, terrifying. That opposition noticeably shows how the sacred/profane works not just to secure the space of the sacred, but as a projection of Otherness elsewhere, where everything outside the bounds of the sacred cannot be said to even properly exist. It’s easy to see how problematic this opposition can be, meaning at the very least that profane space must be ritually “sanctified,” and at worst that those who live in that profane space are dehumanised and denied the grounds of very existence.

It should be noted that this conceptualisation of the profane appears to be clearly part of Eliade’s ahistorical invocation of the archaic.13 When he points out the
complete desacralisation of the profane modern world (13) quite clearly there is not that sense of non-being with which the profane appears to a religious mindset. Indeed, that association of the profane with non-being is not one that transfers especially well to the contemporary. Whilst Max Weber famously pointed out that the desacralisation of modernity had created a kind of existential dread,¹⁴ this is arguably quite different from that conceptualisation of the sacred as the only true ground of being. Even postmodernists who talk about the replacement of the physical with the symbolic¹⁵ nevertheless approach modern space as being unmarked by the sacred—it is neither religious nor irreligious, it is instead a-religious. So, although his work has been tremendously influential, Eliade’s conceptualising of space is nevertheless largely irrelevant to the spaces of the Western countries with which the postmodern sacred is produced and consumed.

Though it is problematic in many ways, I find Eliade’s work to nevertheless be productive in theorising the traditional sacred. His initial distinction between sacred and profane is useful because it articulates a premise that has underlined Western culture for a very long time—indeed such a premise continues to be held by many people, both religious and secular. Whilst I argue that such a distinction has been considerably complicated by the postmodern sacred, it is nevertheless apparent that the sacred/profane binary continues to inform in some fashion how our culture sees spirituality.

Eliade’s work is highly relevant to the present in other ways. We see that religious experience for Eliade has certain thematic concerns. His work on sacred time and space illuminate an ongoing argument of his, that religious desire is motivated by a desire for the real. He says:
Religious man’s [sic] desire to live in the sacred is in fact equivalent to his desire to take up his abode in objective reality, not to let himself be paralysed by the never-ceasing relativity of purely subjective experiences, to live in a real and effective world, and not in an illusion. (28)

It is here that Eliade is at his most compelling. This argument is applicable not just to the ontological founding gestures of the many religions he discusses, but, in a different sense, to the postmodern turn towards fundamentalism. For what is fundamentalism but an attempt to return from the destabilising effects of the apparent effacement of “reality” by the postmodern? The association of the sacred with absolute being—and vice versa—is one that continues to inform Western thought, in both fiction and non-fiction. The idea that there is something not-quite-real about contemporary life informs textual representations of nostalgia, not just in the New Age but right across the culture. Nostalgic texts, of course, aim at fixing this inauthenticity through a return to origins. So Eliade is quite right in linking the sacred with the suggestion of ontological fixity, although it is a promise of religions, political movements and texts alike which is ultimately undeliverable.

That I agree with Eliade’s association of the sacred with Being does not, however, mean that as a critic I see Eliade’s advocating of sacred time as representing some form of truth about the nature of time. Rather I see this idea of sacred time as still being important in the culture, for it continues to inform New Age conceptions of the sacred, as well as spreading out further into the wider culture beyond the narrow confines of “spirituality.” Tony Stigliano has argued that Eliade’s work on the sacred attempts to further his earlier fascist sympathies, however it is arguable that the consequences of those theories have spread out into the culture, almost entirely disconnected from any notion of a return to a racially “pure” fascist state. Indeed, the notion of cyclical time provides a powerful alternative to
masculinist and Eurocentric narratives of linear time, as we find in the work of feminist Celtic and pagan fantasy writers like Marion Zimmer Bradley, and one that will demonstrate that the New Age-ised project of spirituality need not be linked to a fascist project of “cleansing” a nation’s origins from the “taint” of immigration or ethnic mixing.

Significantly, too, Eliade’s point about hierophany proves especially useful in distinguishing the postmodern sacred from the traditional. The postmodern sacred is most clearly differentiated from Eliade’s hierophanies because it does not (usually) announce itself as sacred. Indeed if pressed it would claim the profane—whilst collapsing any firm distinction between the sacred and profane itself. Whilst Eliade’s conception is problematically ahistorical and acultural, I would also argue that the postmodern sacred represents a profound rupture in that unified narrative. In my next section I shall discuss how the postmodern sacred may be further distinguished from the traditional sacred of Eliade’s work.
Postmodernism has by now become a commonplace “school” of critical thought (if something so diverse may be called that). Indeed, a number of contemporary theorists have discounted it over the last few years, especially after September 11\textsuperscript{19}—for example, Terry Eagleton’s *After Theory*, a collection entitled *After Postmodernism* promoting “critical realism.” But this is perhaps more indicative of an academy hungry for new theory than of any profound cultural shift.

One needs to weigh, quite seriously, the question of what realism exists now, and how have we truly moved past postmodernism? I do not believe the West has shifted in any significant way beyond the postmodern condition. If anything, the tendencies described in postmodern theory from the 1980s onwards have only increased.

We live in a world of the virtual, in which media permeates everything and everyone. Media “news” seems unable to relay “real” events without first mediating
them through popular culture references from music, films or TV; indeed the lines between journalism, entertainment and advertising are blurry at best. This is the age of the spin-off, of product placement and infotainment. Symbols slide through different mediums, from the movie screen to the television to the computer to the mobile phone to the written page to the clothing with which we brand ourselves. Arguably the symbolic, the virtual and the real have merged, irrevocably, into one.

The rapid public embrace of the I-Pod demonstrates this ably, where the real-world referent of first vinyl and then the CD have been replaced with the virtual data of the mp3. The mp3 is, of course, a simulation with no material equivalent, infinitely reproducible; it is for this reason that the attempts of organisations like the BPI (in the UK) and the RIAA (in the US) to argue that the downloading of an illegal mp3 is equivalent to stealing a CD are so highly unconvincing. Quite obviously, the internet has made world-wide dissemination of texts almost instantly possible, replacing material production with digital copying. Indeed, albums can be leaked online as mp3 files months ahead of their arrival as CDs in-store. The one constraint is, perhaps, server space, yet Peer to Peer (and now Bit-Torrent) programs have long made everyone in possession of a file a potential content provider. In such an environment, the digital quickly out-runs the analogue, the virtual eclipses the material.

Mobile phones have made people contactable immediately much of the time, and text messaging (along with email) has changed the way people use language, more concisely perhaps, or more brutal or facile depending on your point of view. Modern distinctions between the public sphere of work and the private sphere of family and recreation are increasingly hard to make in a postmodern world in which business people sit on the train on their way home typing emails on their Blackberry phones (a mobile phone and computer in one). 24/7 Broadband internet connections
have transformed both workplaces and homes, online messenger services like MSN messenger make instant, “free” communication overseas not only possible, but constant. Bit-Torrent makes most contemporary TV shows and movies downloadable relatively instantly, with some shows even translated by eager fans and put online within days of their initial screening (“fansubbed”), or one could watch the shows on Youtube, or browse Myspace profiles for music. So subjectivity in the contemporary is clearly what Scott Bakutman calls a “terminal identity” (9), one formed in front of the computer and television screens, at the intersection of various information networks. Perhaps the decline of postmodern theory may, ironically, coincide with the utter victory of the cultural logic of postmodernism itself.

In any case, it is my argument that the cultural condition of postmodernity is more than ever a vital part of the culture, even for those who do not consider themselves postmodern. We shall see this in detail in Chapter Five where I discuss the hidden postmodern presumptions of anti-postmodernists like American President George W Bush and Australian Prime Minister John Howard. Indeed, it is arguable postmodern positions have become so ingrained in the culture that a critical (or even fundamentalist) position entirely outside has become impossible. Even reactions against postmodernism continue to share many of its assumptions. But to begin with, I would like to make some form of separation between postmodern theory and postmodern culture. The wider cultural impact of the theorists usually associated with postmodernity is debatable, however, that of those industries that have hastened postmodernity—media, television, movies, computer games, tabloid news and so on—is most assuredly not.

My argument is therefore that the texts I analyse are produced under the cultural conditions of postmodernity, in particular from the 1990s onwards, and as
such have a number of postmodern facets. Inevitably the postmodern sacred has continuities with traditional forms of the sacred as Eliade describes, but just as surely it has significant differences. In the postmodern sacred, the postmodern acts as a qualifier on the sacred. This does not merely mean that this will be an investigation into how sacred might appear in this postmodern world, though it is that, but that the postmodern sacred is notable for a number of postmodern characteristics. The work of three of the most prominent postmodern theorists – Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson – are all instructive in conceptualising the postmodern as it appears in the postmodern sacred.

The first key facet of the postmodern sacred is that it arises out of a crisis of “grand” or meta-narratives. Jean-François Lyotard famously outlined this thesis in The Postmodern Condition, arguing that postmodern culture is marked by skepticism towards the Enlightenment grand narratives of science, rationality etc. For Lyotard, postmodernism is in some ways about a crisis of belief. This is manifested by the “end of” debates that the academy has waged for some time—the end of history,23 the author,24 God, theory, and time.25 There is often the sense in postmodernism that nothing can be relied as true for very long. Hence we see a popular suspicion towards politicians, churches, the suitability of public figures like sports stars to be “role-models” and so on. The crisis of belief in the State will often manifest itself in the form of a fantasmatic “conspiracy theory” in which the public face of the State is suggested to be façade run to cover up the traces of a hidden cabal running the world for their own nefarious purposes. The television series X Files ran with this premise—“The Truth Is Out There”—and proved a barometer of the American public’s distrust in its government, both real and as a pleasurable fantasy, as well as a measure of fin-de-siecle tension before the year 2000. The fact that the State has been
publicly proven to have been untruthful (say for instance Watergate, Bill Clinton’s economical use of the truth, the imaginary Weapons of Mass Destruction with which the Bush government justified the Iraq war) only adds fuel to the conspiracy theory fire, though I find myself in agreement with Žižek when he argues that paranoia exists regardless of whether the subject of paranoia actually exists or not.26

One crisis of the postmodern meta-narrative is the very question of reality, and it is this point that is taken up by the Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard argues that because of the immense saturation of media and the predominance of the sign, the distinction between real and not real has collapsed into what he calls the “hyper-real.” He says, “simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyper-real” (1). What this means for the postmodern sacred is that the distinction has disintegrated between “real” religiosity (as practiced by the traditional sacred) and “fake” simulation in popular culture texts. Whilst arguably Baudrillard over-states his case—people continue to make rather urgent distinctions between the real and the unreal—it is nevertheless clear that the relationship between the sign and the real-world referent has become fraught. What this means is that representation itself has become considered real, whilst our experiences of the real are mediated through textual representation, especially visual representation in advertising, television, movies and music videos. An example of the former would be the way in which advertising has become a form of action itself, from political “spin” to public announcements about the dangers of smoking and so on. An example of the later would be the common reaction to the September 11 bombings of the World Trade Centre buildings in New York—that it was “like a movie.”27 If, after Baudrillard’s recent death in March 2007, the media was quick to declare the death of postmodern theory and heap scorn
on Baudrillard’s work, it is also interesting to note that postmodern positions towards the real have become so ingrained that Thomas de Zengotita can assume a “common sense” tone in his popular polemic *Mediated* to explain how reference to popular media makes postmodern subjectivity always-already mediated and self-reflexive. This is not to say that the modern sensibility to the real that underlay the reaction to Baudrillard’s death is not still incredibly culturally powerful, but that even that is still, in some crucial ways, postmodern.

Whilst Baudrillard’s theories of the postmodern focus on the simulation of politics, recreation and indeed everyday life, Fredric Jameson has another take on postmodernism more focused on the postmodern text itself. He argues that one of the key features of postmodernism is its reduction to the play of surface aesthetics. He says “the emergence of a new kind of flatness of depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense [is] perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms” (1991: 9). Jameson argues that postmodern texts are marked by what he calls *pastiche*, the suturing together of texts from other texts. *Pastiche*, Jameson says, in an oft-quoted passage:

is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satirical impulse, devoid of any laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality (17).

Pastiche, as a textual strategy, sees the postmodern text borrowing from other texts. Whereas parody had a satirical or ideological point to make about the text that is being referenced, reference in a pastiched text has become an end in itself (if not the primary end in some particularly stylish texts like Quentin Tarantino’s *oeuvre*). It’s easy to see how pastiche can fit in with Baudrillard’s theory of simulation, for
pastiche is the textual result of the contemporary disconnection between sign and referent. Pastiche asserts that there is nothing but the play of signs from which to assemble texts, the notion of a real-world “outside” the text begins to retreat.  

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak makes this link clear when she says that:

if one wanted to extend the concept-metaphor, one could locate a break between film (the photographic negative) and video (electronic virtual space), and extend Jameson’s isomorphic practice to say that postmodernism (and postmodernisation as postfordism) is related to micro-electronic transnational capitalism rather than multinational late capitalism. And then the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union can reveal to us that hi-tech postfordism is supported, in the lower ranks, by labour practices that would fit right into old-style industrial capitalism. (317)

So postmodernity is very much about the virtual and electronic shift in political and aesthetic economies, though as Spivak rightly points out, this continues to make use of modern and even pre-modern forms of capitalist organisation. Indeed, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue in their mammoth Empire, global capitalism notably makes a shift from industrial production to the production of information and symbols, what they term “informatisation” (285). Whilst information tends to flow from a privileged positions within the network—particularly the US in the texts I am analysing—it flows from and through other points too. Texts from India or Japan are widely available here in Australia, along with what is marketed as “world” cinema (that is, anything from non-English speaking countries). The metaphors employed by global capitalism—the net, the web—suggest a different kind of spatialisation at work, one without a centre. In some ways this recalls Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s idea of a rhizome culture, a culture which connects any point to any point without regard for linear development (20), although it is clearly not subversive of postmodern capitalism in the way that Deleuze and Guattari would have perhaps hoped. As Spivak points out, modernist top-down distribution has not been
superceded by postmodern virtuality; rather it intersects with it, and supports it.

Because of this shift in production, it is now perhaps impossible to underestimate the number of texts circulating in the culture now—in bookstores (on-line and off), on terrestrial television, cable or satellite TV, DVD.

As well as the opening up of new markets, the world-wide distribution of non-Western texts is a way of deferring the crisis of originality in postmodern culture, of finding new or under-utilised sources for pastiche. Whilst there are occurrences of non-Western texts becoming popular world-wide (say for instance, the anime of Miziyaki), there still remains a marked preference for Western “interpreters” of Other cultures, of appropriation and incorporation. So even as the market demands “new” works, inevitably the endless flow of cultural information makes texts cannibalising; of other texts, and of themselves even. Available, simultaneously, is much of the history of cinema in the West, not to mention the endless re-runs of old TV series. The texts of the past remain eternally present in the postmodern media, and it is this inability to forget that is part of what makes postmodern texts utilise pastiche so frequently. The postmodernist text is fixated not only on other texts but on its own textuality, thus we see the constant self-referential moments of postmodernism. Though pastiche sometimes functions to conceal its sources, postmodern texts also frequently foreground their own generic characteristics. A recent example would be in the movie Serenity, in which one of the film’s group of anti-heroes Jayne declares “let’s go be bad guys” as the team head in to rob a bank. It is clear that this kind of self-referentiality amounts to a kind of winking to the audience, and just as clearly shows a crisis of belief in the ability of texts to describe the world in any kind of meaningful way as classical Realism attempted to. Jameson argues that irony is the
characteristic mode of postmodern textuality, and the pointing out of generic
characteristics often seems the blankest irony of all.

Arguably then, postmodernism has entered a baroque stage, in which its
positions and strategies have become utterly pervasive in the Western world, in which
reflexivity, irony (and conversely, the desire to escape the textual\textsuperscript{38}) have become
default positions in the production and consumption of texts. This is done in and
through a popular culture produced by the mass media, yearly, weekly, daily, hourly.
When Jameson analyses such “high” art as Warhol’s Diamond Shoes in his
immensely influential Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, there
is the sense that he is far more comfortable discussing the objects that criticism
“should” address itself to—art, architecture, poetry, literature. Importantly, these are
usually singular objects, able to be isolated and critically analysed; in stark contrast to
the endless flow of “low” pop culture texts (part of what Jameson rightly calls a
postmodern technological sublime). So, while many of Warhol’s works are culturally
ubiquitous, “Diamond Shoes” is obscure enough to be a problematic metonym for a
cultural-wide movement. Yet if Jameson’s theory seems at times awkwardly poised
at the edge of the postmodern (able to recognise it, but not quite of it), he himself
points out how the distinctions between high and low break down in postmodernism
to the degree he suggests it is marked by a schizophrenic flow of signifiers.
Postmodernism may have begun as yet another avant-garde movement, but it has been
embraced, and been done that much more effectively, by a mass media which has
little interest in art. Popular culture is often the domain of the young, and as such, as
Mark C Taylor points out, “Lytard is wrong; postmodernism is not something we
teach our children; it is something they teach us” (1993: 170).
The postmodern turn makes not only other fictional texts available for pastiche, but non-fiction texts as well. This point can be illuminated by a discussion by the postmodern Marxist psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek who points out that one of the characteristically postmodern facets of contemporary psychology is that the line between patient and analyst has evaporated, that the symptom in fact incorporates the theory attempting to describe it. He says:

Traditional psychoanalysis relied on a notion of the unconscious as the 'dark continent', the impenetrable substance of the subject's being, which had to be probed by interpretation: when its content was brought to light a liberating new awareness would follow. Today, the formations of the unconscious (from dreams to hysterical symptoms) have lost their innocence: the 'free associations' of a typical educated patient consist for the most part of attempts to provide a psychoanalytic explanation of his own disturbances, so we have not only Annafreudian, Jungian, Kleinian, Lacanian interpretations of the symptoms, but symptoms which are themselves Annafreudian, Jungian, Kleinian, Lacanian - they don't exist without reference to some psychoanalytic theory. The unfortunate result of this reflexivisation is that the analyst's interpretation loses its symbolic efficacy and leaves the symptom intact in its idiotic jouissance. (1999b: n.p.)

In an analogous way, the postmodern text has often incorporated theory within itself; it could not exist without reference to not only literary theory but to philosophy, sociology and indeed psychoanalytic theory as well. The notion of praxis, the unity of theory and practise is one that is characteristically postmodern and has been repeatedly raised by feminist and queer critics and artists. This can be expressed in pop-culture in a number of different manifestations—for instance, witness the way the Warchowski brothers incorporated Baudrillard’s Simulations within the Matrix, or the incorporation of Joseph Campbell’s Jungian theories of myth into Star Wars. Given that theory contains a repertoire of symbols available for fictional appropriation, it makes sense that the postmodernist appetite for pastiche would cannibalise the theory of the academy, as well as the literary canon, religious traditions, myth and so on.
Whilst this is all fairly well trodden philosophical ground, the question arises, what does this mean for the postmodern sacred? What influence does the postmodern exert on the postmodern sacred? It should be fairly apparent what the postmodern disbelief in “grand” narratives would mean for religious narratives. The absence of belief in meta-narratives that Lyotard describes means that such a meta-narrative as the God of the traditional religions is treated with skepticism. Similarly however, the death of the Enlightenment narratives of Science and Reason has meant that atheism too has been robbed of its cultural power. The postmodern sacred, then, lives in an age of cultural agnosticism, in which “spirit” provides a useful medium between the two unsustainable poles of belief and total unbelief. “Spirit” suggests that we are on the terrain of the New Age, of Oprah and pop-psychology, neither willing to commit to a meta-narrative of theology nor to entirely discard the idea of God (or Gods, or Goddesses). This is a point made strongly by postmodern a/theologian Mark C Taylor—a large, growing group of people find themselves, “suspended between the loss of old certainties and the discovery of new beliefs, these people constantly live on the border that joins and separates belief and unbelief” (1984: 5). It should not be surprising, therefore, that at the very least, the postmodern sacred is willing to play with the sacred, albeit situated at a safe distance in a secondary textual world divorced from the need for real-world commitment and belief.

Whilst Lyotard’s argument suggests that faith in rationalist science has faded, it is done so in an interesting fashion in the postmodern sacred. Far from simply disputing rationalism, the postmodern sacred seems to use it in order to confirm that the supernatural can exist alongside rationalism. The constant references to those magical things that live on the outskirts of our consciousness—Greek gods, fairy tales, mythic monsters and so on—introduce culturally familiar elements into the text,
while the use of some kind of rationalism helps those improbable things re-enter the realm of the possible. The postmodern sacred thus incorporates irrationalist forms of belief into rationalism—and in doing so collapses the border between the two, producing not a meta-narrative of scientific rationalism but a postmodern interplay between scientific and pseudo-scientific New Age language games.

Due to the fact that it is immersed in media, the postmodern sacred is inevitably a simulacra as Baudrillard would describe it. It is neither a real nor fake representation, it is instead the textual simulation of religious traditions. The postmodern sacred is, then, hyper-real, in that its representations seem *more real than religious tradition itself*. Part of this hyper-reality is possibly due to the fact that postmodern sacred is able to graphically represent the spiritual as though it were literally real. The fact that the sacred is otherworldly necessarily means that it is necessary to suspend the “real-world” conditions of physics etc in order to represent the sacred, yet the postmodern sacred is able to present this unreality with far greater regularity and in greater hyper-real detail than the visual traditions of the world’s religions.

Baudrillard himself points out that the prohibition on representing the holy for religious fundamentalists stems from the fear that representation and its inevitably simulacral nature will ultimately point to the non-existence of “real-world” religious referents like God, Allah, Jehovah, Muhammad or Buddha (*Simulacra and Simulation* 4). The recent Danish cartoon controversy\(^4\) stems not just from the troubling racialisation and absolute conflation between Muslim, terrorist and Muhammad but more basically from the violation of a generally accepted Muslim prohibition on representation of the Prophet.
The postmodern sacred, however, has no such prohibitions on religious representation. Indeed, simulation is the very pre-condition for the postmodern sacred’s occurrence. Religion must be simulated, must be aesthecised and break free of its contexts in order to be used and recontextualised as a textual signifier. It is precisely the simulacral nature of the postmodern sacred that makes it that monstrous supplement to traditional religious practice. The postmodern sacred’s textual strategy of pastiching together signifiers from disparate sources makes it problematic for traditional forms of the sacred intent on maintaining the “purity” of the sacred traditions. It has instead a relativising effect on the spiritual signifiers, presenting multiple versions of the sacred, or often even presenting a true “hidden” path to the sacred outside of the institutions that regulate religious practice.

Postmodernism’s textual games are not merely limited to the fictional. Paul Heelas points out that New Age spirituality draws on a number of different, sometimes contradictory traditions. As I have argued, the postmodern sacred is entangled within New Age spiritualities, it emerges out of that same culture attempting to re-enchant the world, and much of its vocabulary is the language of the New Age, though it is also notable for pilfering from the world’s great religious traditions as well—Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and especially Buddhism. What distinguishes the postmodern sacred from the New Age, however, is that it will take epistemological and ontological claims about the truth of the world, disconnect them from their context, and pastiche them together to form fictional texts. What we have, in a sense, is modern-day myth, which as Darko Suvin argues is religion that one has ceased to believe in (2000: 216). That postmodern scepticism towards meta-narrative claims opens up many different avenues for its symbolic appropriation, whilst
retaining an unwillingness or indeed possibly even an inability to ground itself in any one spiritual tradition.

An example occurs in the postmodern Gothic television series Buffy the Vampire Slayer, which uses not only the traditional Christian iconography of crosses, holy water etc, but also relies on a kind of Wiccan symbology that features capricious Gods, demons and spirits from many different mythologies. In Buffy, every mythology is real, from Hansel and Gretel to Dracula, and that fact is dramatised, again and again on-screen. For the characters, unbelief is tantamount to suicide. Buffy doesn’t require its viewers to believe in its mythologies—it is explicitly unreal—indeed, part of the pleasure of the text is in entertaining the possibility of the supernatural without having to truly believe in it. If this has long been true of the Gothic genre in general with regard to “superstitious” folk beliefs in ghosts and monsters, it is arguable that now both Christian and New Age real world beliefs have been added to the list. We begin to see, then, how the postmodern sacred is belief by proxy, it displaces “real” belief into a secondary, unreal textual world.

But although these texts are not supposed to be believed in, there is nevertheless a certain suspension of disbelief, a suspension that positions the texts’ viewers on “the border that joins and separates belief and unbelief” (Taylor, 1984: 5). It is an undeniable fact that the fictional exerts a considerable influence upon discourses of the “real”, and this is readily apparent in a number of different areas. Lynn Schofield Clark, for instance, points out that a quarter of contemporary American subjects believe in aliens, a belief undoubtedly fuelled by fictional texts such as The X-Files and Roswell (5). In the New Age itself, it is quite clear that part of the resurgence of “Celtic” mythology is related to the phenomena of Celticed fantasy, which uses Celtic signifiers like druids and mystical Stonehenge-like circles
without grounding them in a real-world referent. Medieval recreationists are likely to have been as influenced by the fictional worlds of Tolkien and his ilk, or at the very least by the Arthurian legends, than to have had their imaginations fired by historical descriptions of the time period. That blurring of the real and fantastic worlds is part of the reason why fantastic texts have often been historically regarded as culturally problematic (or even potentially dangerous), and why they are so frequently situated as clearly demarcated children’s texts, because the possibility of belief in the fictional in some ways endangers the Real. It opens the possibility that the Real itself might be fictional; it disrupts the ontological foundation of capitalist reality.

Mircea Eliade’s concept of the hierophany proves especially useful in distinguishing the postmodern sacred from the traditional. The modern and premodern sacred are understood as hierophany, fragments of absolute spirit that are the link to the otherworldly. This hierophanic relationship is an unmediated link between the believer and the sacred; the hierophany is a part of the whole revealed to the community of believers (in whatever tradition one looks at). In the postmodern sacred, however, there is no fragment of the whole, for indeed there is no hierophany in the sense that Eliade describes. The postmodern sacred is most clearly differentiated from Eliade’s hierophanies because it does not (usually) announce itself as sacred. Indeed if pressed it would claim the profane—whilst collapsing the distinction between a sacred and profane itself. While many of the texts I will analyse as part of the postmodern sacred have content that mimics this traditional sacred, the production of the postmodern sacred most clearly is not a manifestation of a wholly different order—it is explicitly made, solely, for the purposes of capitalistic consumption.
Since the postmodern sacred posits itself as wholly profane, it does not have the use value or ontological foundation which characterises the traditional sacred. Whilst Eliade’s conception is problematically ahistorical and acultural, I would also argue that the postmodern sacred represents a profound rupture in that unified narrative. The postmodern death of the meta-narrative has meant that the postmodern is fundamentally different in not looking to a Truth referent in which to ground its practices. The postmodern sacred remains ambivalent to the possibility of truth, any truth. The postmodern sacred is instead a belief by proxy. It is characteristically postmodern in that it is virtual, pastiched together from the fragments of spiritual traditions that do have that ontological foundation. The postmodern sacred will not allow itself to believe in these truths in an unmediated sense, it is always diffused through texts, kept at a distance with irony and parody. Writing about fantasy fiction, Darko Suvin points out that this kind of textual appropriation is “not thinkable before overriding mythological or religious belief suffers an epochal political breakdown, as a consequence of which some of its aspects and elements become available for fictional manipulation” (2000:216). What this means, then, is that the postmodern sacred is only made possible by the disruption of religious meta-narratives that problematise straight-forward belief. It is this as much as anything that explains the fundamentalist disdain for the postmodern sacred, for it in some senses presumes the death of traditions they would rather hold on to.

If the traditional sacred is something that people will live and die for, there is no similar sense in the postmodern sacred. Though it is usually characterised by large communities of fans – the use of the term “cult” in describing speculative or fantastic texts is quite telling – these communities themselves are transient, for today’s text du jour will be inevitably replaced tomorrow. Zygmunt Bauman terms
these communities “neo-tribes,” (1992: 136) and points out that transient groups like fan communities are based solely on members’ self-identification. Unlike more traditional collectives, ‘neo-tribes’ have little choice in the inclusion or exclusion of members. “Tribes” quickly die out in capitalism’s blur of aesthetic changes, to be replaced by other tribes with a different object of adoration, or possibly a different set of consumptive criteria. None is stable, or membership automatic. Each one must be chosen, according to taste, the choice reiterated through continued consumption.

A good example of a postmodern sacred space would be a movie theatre. One might look at the movie theatre as a sacred space that sets aside the rules of the secular for a certain amount of time, however this sacred space differs from the traditional sacred in a number of key ways. Entrance into the “sacred” space is governed not by the laws of religious community but by the laws of the market, anyone willing to pay the ticket fee may enter the cinema. Significantly, the sacred space is highly individualised, it is not brought into being by any solid community of believers, that particular theatre will be populated by a unique group of people linked only by their desire to watch that particular movie, and thus it is unlikely to be completed repeated again. So whilst one can look at the postmodern sacred as in a certain sense a sacred space within the culture, it is not marked out as such. In fact, it is marked out as the complete opposite. With the exception of a few “religious” movies targeted at religious communities, movies are considered generally to only be profane—entertainment, escapism. Sacred spaces continue within our culture to be clearly delineated areas, and clearly the movie theatre is rarely regarded as a possible site of spirituality, though of course there is a great deal of research that engages with the idea that films can be spiritual. Eliade argues that sacred space is in an interruption of the normal laws of the secular, yet it is clear that the postmodern
sacred space only partially fulfils that condition, for though the movie theatre might for the consumer be an intermittent communion, it is of course a business that will run countless and constant screenings so long as it makes a profit. As a part of the profane world of business, the movie is hardly an interruption of the laws of the secular, let alone a hierophanic fragment of the transcendent. Epistemologically then, the postmodern sacred cannot be defended by Eliade’s definition of the sacred, because it is so entangled within the profane world.

Whilst Eliade usually aligns “profane” with the natural world, it should be noted that the sacred/profane usually carries other connotations besides that of business in the post-Christian West. Christianity is notable for its spirit/body split, in which the “pure” Christian spirit is contrasted to the “temptations” of the profane flesh. In particular, almost all forms of sexuality have been considered profane, except monogamous heterosexuality “sanctified” by marriage. Even now, the Catholic Church catechism claims one of the benefits of marriage is that it “helps to overcome self-absorption, egoism, [and] pursuit of one’s own pleasure” (402)—as if marriage and one’s own pleasure are mutually incompatible.

The spirit/body split has inevitably had gendered dimensions, which have been widely critiqued by feminists. In an argument that is just as relevant for the masculinist Christian theological tradition as it is for the scientific rationality she critiques, French feminist Luce Irigaray interrogates the neutrality of the transcendental position, arguing that in Western culture it has largely been the prerogative of white men to have bodies but to not be bodies. She says:

Men are distanced from their bodies. They have relied upon their sex, their language and their technology to go on and on building a world further removed from their relation to the corporeal. But they are corporeal. They therefore need to reassure themselves that someone really is looking after the
body for them. Their women or wives … are guardians of their corporeal unity (49)

The transcendental, in Irigaray’s view, whilst ostensibly neutral, obscures a viewpoint that is implicitly masculinist. For Irigaray, masculine ‘neutrality’ is a discursive strategy that simultaneously disavows masculine embodiment whilst “marking […] the feminine as mute and out-lawed body” (Summer-Bremner 1). The masculine body constructs itself as normal, yet has the privilege to speak from a transcendental position—a seemingly objective position outside the specificity of the body. The disdain for the corporeal in the Christian tradition frequently manifests itself as misogyny—and vice versa. The corporeal, by definition, has been historically constituted as profane.

In postmodernity, however, we see the distinctions between sacred and profane erased. Counter-cultural “free love,” feminism and the commodification of sexuality in late capitalism have all had their part in diminishing the negative connotations of sexuality and corporeality. By and large, there has been a widespread acceptance of behaviour and relationships that were previously considered “sinful” or simply immoral—pre-marital sex, de-facto and same-sex relationships. The notion that the sexual act of itself is immoral—and thus in need of matrimonial sanctification—has become largely outdated. This does not, contrary to conservative jeremiads, mean that sexual ethics have disappeared, merely that they have shifted to an ethics of serial monogamy. This has meant a shift to the notion that pleasure, of itself, is a desirable and worthy goal. Zygmunt Bauman, for instance, argues that postmodern identities are formed under a pleasure-seeking role (179).

This shift to pleasure seeking, however, is not necessarily tied to the sacred. Indeed, Bauman points out that “postmodern cultural pressures, while intensifying the search for ‘peak-experiences’, have at the same time uncoupled it from religion-prone
interests and concerns, privatised it, and cast mainly non-religious institutions in the role of purveyors of relevant services” (180). Paraphrasing Weber, Bauman calls this process ‘this worldly ecstasy’ and argues that the postmodern version “abolish[es] the concept of ‘non-peakers’ altogether and declare[s] peak-experience a duty and realistic prospect for everybody” (180). He finds peak-experience to have been separated from “religion-inspired practices of self-denial and withdrawal from worldly attractions” (180). Postmodern textual producers deploy “peak-experience” to stimulate consumer desire and purchase. Peak-experience is suggested to increase in intensity and fulfillment, with the promise of complete and total ecstasy always just over the horizon.

Whilst Bauman maintains a distinction between traditional forms of religious peak-experience (say, the ecstasies of saints or whirling dervishes) and postmodern this-worldly ecstasy, the postmodern sacred maintains no such boundaries. As I have argued, the postmodern sacred contains both consumerist and non-consumerist implications—cognitively dissonant responses to the same cultural phenomena. The postmodern sacred is, above all, a corporeal experience, for popular culture is first and foremost physical—packed with sound and spectacle. Beaudoin points out that “experience is key” for GenX spirituality (73) and it is this individualisation of faith that underlines the postmodern sacred. In its focus on the visceral effects of popular culture, the postmodern sacred not only elides the distinction between sacred and profane; it relies on it, it revels in it. Thus we see New Age texts on tantric and sacred sex, the re-discovery of more sex-positive Christian writers such as Teresa of Avila (Beaudoin 83).

The profane/sacred split is erased in other ways in postmodernity. On the one hand, we have what might be called the profaning of sacred culture. The traditional
faiths have been mired in scandal, protected child molesters, collaborated with war-mongers, such that it is impossible for a contemporary subject to not see the profane in traditional domains of the sacred. Not only that, but there exists a considerable industry devoted to distributing various forms of religious kitsch, for the sacred has become well and truly commodified in postmodernity. This can be manifested in such commodified relics as dashboard Jesus and the rosary, or in the body of religious pop-culture directed at the faithful.

A good example of the later is the immensely successful fundamentalist Left Behind series of novels. Left Behind, written by Tim La Haye and Jerry Jenkins, is a literalisation of a certain kind of American evangelical reading of the apocalypse, yet is just as clearly reliant on secular genres like the thriller and the disaster movie as it is on an evangelical theological and literary tradition (Gribben 86). Left Behind, which has thus far yielded 12 books and a number of increasingly high-budgeted movies since the first novel was released in 1995, dramatises the coming apocalypse, the appearance of the Antichrist (interestingly identified with the UN, and not with the Catholic Church as is traditional in evangelical Rapture theology). In contrast to the postmodern sacred, Left Behind clearly makes referent to a truth referent outside the text—under a certain kind of evangelical reading of the Bible, this is an imaginative version of what really will happen. For the cultural critic, however, Left Behind provides an interesting window into the American evangelical movement, since as Crawford Gribbens points out, the series provides a “barometer of evangelical cultural fear” (92). It is easy to see the series’ exponential growth as a response to the post-September 11 landscape specifically, and to evangelical concerns about the postmodern world generally.
However, whilst it is important to recognise that much of the postmodern swing towards the sacred has been in the form of fundamentalisms that are inextricably linked to the postmodern, these disparate movements depart from the postmodern sacred in important ways. They are postmodern in organising on-line or present simulacra of religious worship onscreen, and seem to emerge out of a postmodern nostalgia for “authenticity”—one of the main rhetorical strategies of the fundamentalisms of the Book (Jewish, Christian, Muslim) is a nostalgic discourse on modernity as a process of loss, stripping people of their true religion, making society a pit of sin, and so on and so forth. Whilst this is undeniably an anti-postmodern discourse, the very terms of it have been set from within postmodern culture, and as such are hardly that dissimilar from other postmodern nostalgic yearnings. Zygmunt Bauman, for instance, finds fundamentalism to be a characteristically postmodern phenomenon, arguing that it takes the cult of counselling and self-help experts to its “radical conclusion” (1997: 184), making God the ultimate prescriptive counsellor. He argues that the “allure of fundamentalism stems from its promise to emancipate the converted from the agonies of choice. Here one finds, finally, the indubitably supreme authority” (184). So fundamentalism thus both exposes the inadequacies of postmodern culture (by pointing out the flaw in “egalitarian” consumerism) and is itself implicated in it.

Where fundamentalisms depart from the postmodern sacred, then, is in content, for they are generally not kindly disposed to the individualised spirituality of the New Age, nor of the fantastic genres. It is not, therefore, the project of this thesis to claim fundamentalisms and their pop-culture spin-offs as part of the postmodern sacred. Even though they arise out of postmodernity, they are produced with a specifically religious audience in mind (as distinguished from the secular audience of
the postmodern sacred), and frequently exhibit a disdain or even hatred of the ethical and textual positions of the postmodern. In contrast then, we have the postmodern sacred, in which the sacred is utterly entangled in popular culture. This can manifest itself in the form of an ironic dismissal of religions—say for instance, the popular “Jesus Is My Homeboy” T-shirt sported by many a punk in the past couple years, Kevin Smith’s “comic fantasy” movie *Dogma*, or the fundamentalist church parody website Landover Church. One could look at the ambivalent relationship between popular music and the sacred, for instance, the rock & roll tradition that spans from the vicar in the Beatles’ “Eleanor Rigby” through REM’s “Losing My Religion.” Similarly one could look at the entanglement of the secular and the sacred in the black music tradition of America, in which music stars such as Al Green, and rappers Run (from Run DMC) and Mase have all turned to the cloth after their success—and then, inevitably returned to the profane music world. One could look at the invocation of the gospel church by disgraced R&B singer R.Kelly, or the theological probings of nymphomaniac-turned-Jehovah’s Witness Prince. However, one must ultimately limit the scope of a project on the postmodern sacred, whilst pointing to other sites of possible investigation. In my next chapter I shall turn to Jacques Derrida and his theory of the transcendental signifier as it has been aestheticised in postmodern popular culture.

Notes

1 This starts, of course, with Marx’s famous antipathy towards religion, demonstrated in such comments as his “religion is the opiate of the masses.” Though Marx’s own narrative in *Communist Manifesto* reads like an inversion of a religious millennial meta-narrative of redemption, nevertheless postmodernist theory has inherited the Marxist disdain and even sometimes disinterest in studies of religion and spirituality. Postmodern (often Marxist or post-Marxist) critics like Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard have a generally dismissive attitude towards religion. Slavoj Žižek’s position is complicated by his Lacanian background and is in general terms critical of the New Age, Buddhism and Islam, though he reserves some hope for the Christian
legacy in The Fragile Absolute. The same cannot be said for sociology, however, which has a long history of studying religion.

A number of writers have written on religion and spirituality in Buffy the Vampire Slayer. For a general overview on religious themes, see Wendy Love Anderson’s article “Prophecy Girl and the Powers That Be: The Philosophy of Religion in the Buffyverse.” See also Agnes Curry’s article on Buffy and its resonances with Thomist theology.

Tom Beaudoin has an instructive analysis of “Losing My Religion” in Virtual Faith.

Beaudoin in Virtual Faith, for instance, argues that members of Generation X view institutional churches with skepticism, if not outright hostility. Though Beaudoin is keen to claim this skeptical attitude towards the institutional churches for specifically Generation X, arguably much contemporary thought has at the very least a skepticism towards institutions. The success of Dan Brown’s Da Vinci Code, for instance, relies on the premise that the Catholic Church is a secretive, often untrustworthy institution.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue in Individualisation that larger categories like class, race and family have disintegrated in the contemporary (2), and as such, people are left to find their own way because “there are no historical models for the conduct of life” (26). In practice, individualisation often means the purchase and symbolic deployment of commodities as a means of “personal expression.”

This term derives from Derrida’s famous close reading in Of Grammatology of Rousseau’s use of the word “supplement”. Derrida ascribes two functions to supplement—firstly, as it is most commonly read, that the supplement “cumulates and accumulates presence” (144). So the supplement is, firstly, an addition. Simultaneously though, Derrida argues, the supplement “adds only to replace [. . .] it intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of” (145). The supplement, therefore, both adds to and replaces the sign. I shall examine the notion of the supplement further in Chapter Four, where I analyse the supplemental relationship between Christianity and the New Age in the postmodern sacred.

See for instance Buffy’s comment about religious reliquaries, often used to hold the fingers of saints, “note to self: religion creepy” (“What’s My Line” Part 1 2010).

The American Library Association lists J.K Rowling as the fourth most “challenged” author in American Libraries between 1990 and 2004, a challenge being a formal, written complaint requesting the material be removed from the library. Whilst most challenges tend to be due to sexual content or “offensive” language, it is clear that J.K Rowling has attracted these challenges due to the fantastic elements in her works. See the ALA website for a full list of challenged authors:

http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbooksweek/challengedbanned/challengedbanned.htm#mfcb

This, of course, raises the issue of class, and indeed its sedimentation as aesthetic taste as described by Pierre Bourdieu.

I have not had time to go into Torchwood, which has only recently begun screening here in Australia. The series is set in contemporary Wales and features a team who fight otherworldly monsters who have slipped through a dimensional portal. In short, like The X-Files (which I do discuss in Chapter Two) the series brings into being a whole host of supernatural occurrences. Most interestingly, Torchwood features a number of instances of queer sexuality, which is perhaps not surprising given that it was created by British Queer As Folk creator Russell T Davies.

Jacques Derrida terms God a “transcendental signified,” (Positions 19-20), a concept I shall examine in greater detail in the following chapter.
This point has some rather interesting implications for postmodernist theory, for the postmodern point that the reality of space and being has somehow been elided by media simulation seems to nostalgically place Being into the un-retrievable past. Eliade suggests the traditional sacred places the possibility of placing it in the present. Clearly, however, millennial longing for the apocalypse shows a disgust with the present, for as James Berger points out the world “must end because in some crucial sense it has [already] ended” (7). Given the “end of” discourses that postmodernity has accrued (history, the author, originality, rationality, theory, pop music and so on) it’s hard not to see how contemporary fundamentalists have taken postmodern anxieties and articulated them through older theological language of the ontological foundations of space, being and time (or lack there-of).

See Olson’s discussion for a critique of Eliade’s ahistorical and unified conception of spirituality.

Think, for instance, of his infamous “disenchantment” thesis, which seems to suggest at times the end result of capitalism was a society of technicians disassociated from the possibility of a real engagement with the spiritual or even the supernatural.

Baudrillard, for instance, describes in “The Precision of Simulacra” how the map precedes the territory in postmodernism and how today it is “the territory whose shreds slowly across the extent of the map” (1).

Susan Stewart’s post-structuralist work on nostalgia in On Longing is especially relevant here. Stewart poignantly defines nostalgia as “the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition” (23) and argues that even as the nostalgic text recalls the past into the present it simultaneously recalls its loss. The nostalgic text aims to reproduce the aesthetics and ideologies of the longed-for past but cannot remove itself from its position in the present. Stewart argues that the desire of the nostalgic text to remove the gap between signifier and signified (thus creating a stable referent) becomes linked with a desire for origins, for original context, and thus original signification. She points that the womb is frequently constructed as the original site, “the utopia of biology and symbol united within the walled city of the maternal” (23) and it is this idea of pre-birth, birth and beginnings that suffuses nostalgia. One could suggest this desire for origin in the womb seems a desire to re-enter a Lacanian mirror-stage, before the subject enters the adult imaginary, the world of multi-accsentual signification. I take this point up in greater detail in Chapter Six.

That sacred time can be accessed only by appropriating suitable “shamanic” rituals from an exoticised “primitive” Other.

Though there nevertheless remains the potential for Eliade’s work to be used by fascist movements.

See Chapter Five for a more in-depth look at the “return of the real” discourse after September 11.

Antonia Levi for instance notes that the anime Wolf’s Rain was translated from Japanese into English by fans and made available a mere 22 hours after its first broadcast in Japan.

Youtube (http://youtube.com) is a website where people can post and watch video clips online. Most of these clips are popular culture related, excerpts from TV shows and music videos. Myspace, on the other hand, is more of a virtual community. Users post profiles of themselves, photos, videos etc, and music artists can showcase their songs. Part of the allure of Myspace is that people can add other people’s profiles as their “friends” and send them messages. Since many celebrities have profiles, Myspace promises the possibility of virtually interacting with celebrities—
and then there are the media-hyped stories of bands like the Artic Monkeys becoming famous through the site.

22 Stealing the term from William Burroughs, Bakutman calls the postmodern virtual subject, “terminal identity: an unmistakeably doubled articulation in which we find both the end of the subject and a new subjectivity constructed at the computer station or television screen” (9).

23 An argument notably made by Francis Fukuyama after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the “victory” of capitalism over socialism. Fredric Jameson, too, suggests that history is over, given that postmodernism is marked by a profound ability to think historically in any other way besides the aesthetic.

24 See Michel Foucault’s “What Is An Author?” for a discussion of the author as a function of discourse, required to assign attributes like “creativity” and “profundity” to certain types of texts (124).

25 See for instance, Fredric Jameson’s essay “The End of Temporality.”

26 Žižek’s analysis of the paranoid fantasy of The Matrix is instructive here. He says “our reality is that of the free agents of the social world we know, but in order to sustain this situation, we have to supplement it with the disavowed, terrible, impending fantasy of being passive prisoners in the prenatal fluid of the Matrix” (1999: 26). In a similar way, American individualism is supplemented by the paranoid suspicion and utter subjectification of the conspiracy theorist.

27 This is a point Baudrillard himself makes with regard to the first Gulf War in his provocatively titled The Gulf War Did Not Happen, that the media saturation combined with the “surgical” precision of the war combined to make it, in fact, not a real war but a virtual war. He says of the 24 hour CNN coverage: “the closer we approach the real time of the event, the more we fall into the illusion of the virtual” (49). Baudrillard takes up these ideas again after September 11 in The Spirit of Terrorism but argues that S11 retains the symbolic dimension of an exchange of death as well as its virtual simulation. He says “[t]he collapse of the World Trade Centres is unimaginable, but that is not enough to make it a real event. An excess of violence is not enough to open on to reality. For reality is a principle, and it is this principle which is lost” (Baudrillard, 2003: 28)

28 Patricia Cohen’s obituary in The New York Times, for instance, charmingly quoted Alan Sokal and Jean Breaumont’s complaint that “if the texts seem incomprehensible, it is for the excellent reason that they mean precisely nothing.” More kindly, Matthew Beaumont in The Guardian arts blog, took the opportunity to ask what comes after postmodernism.

29 See Chapter Five for more on anti-postmodern postmodernism, particularly in reference to September 11 and the “return of the real” rhetoric that followed.

30 Jameson’s analysis of the postmodern can be a little unclear, since it is occasionally unclear whether he is talking about the postmodern as a historical era, as a mode of aesthetics in art and architecture, or of postmodern theory itself. For instance, he begins Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism with “it is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (1991: ix), a sentence about what theories of the postmodern attempt to do, though confusingly, one could just as easily read it as a statement about the intent of postmodernism to think historically, which would run counter to the rest of Jameson’s argument.
Jameson sees the pastiching impulse in such texts as George Lucas’s *American Graffiti*, *Chinatown*, *Body Heat*, as well as in architecture such as Toronto’s Eaton Centre and Los Angeles’s Westin Bonaventure Hotel. However, it must be noted that the notion of “real world” texts nevertheless continues to separate the sitcom or political drama from science fiction, fantasy or horror.

They say, “in the passage to the informational economy, the assembly has been replaced by the network as the organisation model of production, transforming the forms of cooperation and communication within each productive site and among productive sites” (295, italics original)

Deleuze and Guattari oppose the rhizome to that of the classical metaphor of the tree of knowledge, the “system of thought [that] has never reached an understanding of multiplicity” (5).

Žižek points this out when he suggests that “there are features [of his thought] that justify calling Deleuze the ideologist of late capitalism” (2004: 184), using examples such as the Deleuzian multiple “intensities” of porn, and the “becoming-machine” of Transformers.

Jameson uses the example of *Body Heat* as a distant remake of James M. Cain’s *Double Indemnity* (*Postmodernism* 20).

Or, in the case, of postmodern science fiction, to imagine the future outside of other science fiction texts. To return to the previous example, *Serenity* and the *Firefly* series that spawned it is a perfect example. An uneasy generic melding of science fiction and Westerns, it is grounded entirely in other texts, including classic Westerns like the *Wild Bunch*, the original *Battlestar Galactica* series, and the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. See the audio commentaries for the *Firefly* episode “Objects in Space” to hear series creator Joss Whedon talking about his use of existential philosophy in the series.

See Chapter Six for an in-depth look at nostalgia, and how postmodernism produces a desire for a “real” experience outside of its mediations.

Here Paul Heelas’s work on the New Age is especially relevant, particularly *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralisation of Modernity*. Heelas argues that one of the characteristics of the New Age movement is the shift in terminology away from “religion” which is associated with the traditional churches and towards a more properly lived, real “spirituality.”

In which the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten published pictures of the Prophet Muhammad, provoking protests across the world by Muslims, as well as the re-publication of the offending cartoons by other newspapers as “free speech.” See for instance, Gwladys Fouché’s article in *The Guardian* "Cartoon Row Spreads across Europe."

A number of writers have talked about re-enchantment as a postmodern phenomenon. See for instance Jane Bennett, as well as George Ritzer. George Ritzer is a major proponent of re-enchantment theory, arguing that contemporary “cathedrals of consumption” (for instance, McDonald’s, Disney World and Las Vegas’s casinos) work to re-enchant the world in a number of ways. As Ritzer has pointed out elsewhere in *McDonaldisation* these cathedrals are highly rationalised, and they therefore need to continually re-enchant themselves to attract consumers, for as Ritzer says, “no characteristic of rationalisation is more inimical to enchantment than predictability” (98). For Ritzer, re-enchantment provides little more than an opportunity for producers to renew the appetites of their consumers. This is rather
more pessimistic than Bennett, who retains the hope that affective response to an
enchanted commodity might provoke more than just the will to consume.

42 See here J. Lawton Winslade’s article on Buffy’s use of Wicca: “Teen Witches,
Wicans and "Wanna-Blessed-Be's": Pop-Culture Magic in Buffy the Vampire Slayer.”

43 Olson points out that Eliade presupposes a fundamental unity to the sacred—“there
is a basic unity underlying all religious experience” (46). The Sacred and Profane
theorises generally about the sacred, how it organises space and time, with making
any distinctions between the pre-modern which he is largely concerned with, and a
modern which Eliade himself acknowledges to be desacralised. Thus we end up with
a universal theory that can only be applied to modernity by inference, since Eliade’s
distinction between the pre-modern and the modern are implicit, as when he contrasts
a modern desacralised approach to eating with a pre-modern spiritual approach (14).
Nevertheless, this remains a profound problem for a writer with Eliade’s aspirations,
which aspires to be a “general introduction to the histories of religion” (18). Whilst
Eliade at times makes clear that particular religious traditions are indeed a product of
their histories (16), he is unable or unwilling to incorporate that insight more fully
into his methodology. That particularising gesture is lost in his haste to make
pronouncements of universality of the (unitary) religious experience. Eliade’s elision
of the differences between different religious traditions is profoundly problematic for
the postmodern critic, attentive to concerns of gender, race, class and sexuality, since
that elision ends up being an erasure of the specificity of different traditions. Alice
Kehoe argues in regard to Eliade’s appropriation of shamanism that it amounts to an
“arrogant cultural imperialism that denies full humanity to the first nations of the
Americas” (n.pag).

44 Or at least, did have an ontological foundation prior to the destabilising effects of
postmodernism.

45 As indeed people continue to do in many parts of the world right at this moment.

46 For instance, the Passion of the Christ, the Left Behind movies, and to a lesser
extent The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.

47 The alignment of business with the profane can be seen in Christianity’s long-
standing antipathy towards capital, starting with Jesus’ clash with the money-lenders
in the Temple as described in Matthew 12:12. The opposition between the sacred and
business is notable, for instance, Christianity, Judaism and Islam all have prohibitions
on usury, though to different degrees of strictness. Resentment against money-lenders
was often a flare for anti-semitism in the Middle Ages, famously shown in the figure
of Shylock in Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice.

48 The Catholic catechism describes the sacrament of marriage thus: “In his mercy
God has not forsaken sinful man. The punishments consequent upon sin, ‘pain in
childbearing’ and ‘toil in the sweat of your brow,’ also embody remedies that limit the
damaging effects of sin. After the fall, marriage helps to overcome self-absorption,
egoism, pursuit of one’s own pleasure, and to open oneself to the other, to mutual aid
and to self-giving” (402)

49 Say in the ubiquity of pornography and porn-derived culture—the Playboyification
of culture that has resulted in the fame of Paris Hilton etc.

50 Even the American constitution in early modernity signals the beginnings of that
shift—alone in the world, Americans have the right to the pursuit of happiness.

51 The meanings of the rosary are, at best, ambivalent. It could either be taken as an
expression of devout Catholicism, or as ironic fashion item—the later being employed
by fashionistas and Goths alike from Madonna onwards.
See Karen Armstrong’s *The Battle For God* for a comprehensive explanation of how fundamentalisms arose in the twentieth century as a reaction to modernity and the legacy of colonialism.

Accessible online at http://www.landoverbaptist.org/

Although he had long explored spiritual themes, Prince released a Jehovah’s Witness concept album called “The Rainbow Children” in 2001.
Chapter Two

‘Something Up There’: Transcendental Gesturing in New Age Influenced Texts

Spike sacrificing himself to save the world on Buffy (“Chosen” 7.22)

The last few years have seen religion return to public discourse in the West with a vengeance, from the September 11 attacks on New York to the increasingly political significance of the Christian Right in America. Much of which has been in the form of religious fundamentalism(s) (however contested a term this may be). To some observers, the return of religion has marked a polarisation of society between secular and religious, demonstrated in the “blue state/red state” theorising of a divided America in the aftermath of the 2004 election. Religious scholar Massimo Introvigne argues that whilst there is a general increase in interest in religion or the spiritual, little of this has benefited traditional institutions. He points out that half of the citizens of the European Union identify themselves as “religious” without attending
church services. Interestingly, this means that this group of people, who believe in a
sometimes rather nebulous form of God, often distinguished from the God of
Christianity and its churches, “paradoxically represent the real religious majority
group in Western Europe” (Introvigne n.p.). It is arguable that this group represents a
significant group in the U.S and Australia too. This group, who believe in some kind
of spiritual power without necessarily belonging to a religious institution, are just as
likely to encounter the sacred in popular culture as in a church, synagogue or mosque.

In Virtual Faith, his study of contemporary spirituality, Tom Beaudoin
suggests that the chief point of contact with spirituality for Generation Xers is in
popular culture, as distinct from organised religion. For Beaudoin, the
spiritual/commodity relationship is not the paradox that many might see. In fact, he
argues compellingly that the sacred is not divorced from culture; rather, it is an
intrinsic part of it. The images of Christianity are able to be appropriated by products,
recontextualised and reworked into different places within the culture. One should
keep in mind Jane Bennett’s point about the multiplicity of possibilities and meanings
the enchanted commodity can create, which might include the contradictory meanings
of other-worldly contemplation and this-worldly consumption.

Whilst there are examples of popular culture texts that can be placed within an
identifiable religious tradition, (Mel Gibson’s Passion of the Christ, for one¹),
arguably pop culture is rife with many more texts that are not. What this chapter shall
look at though, is a detraditionalised method of reading spirituality in which religious
signifiers are disconnected from their context, in which spirituality is to be found only
in a series of fragmented moments. The moments I shall mostly drawn from in this
chapter are to be found in television series Dead Like Me, Angel and The X Files,
though one could easily pick from any number of other culturally relevant texts—TV
series **Buffy**, ² **Angel, Joan of Arcadia** and **Revelations**, the **Lord of the Rings** books and movies, the immensely successful **Da Vinci Code** novel.

*Detradionalisation: Individualised Pleasure*

As I argued in the previous chapter, drawing on Lyotard’s work, the postmodern is marked by a scepticism towards meta-narratives. This is manifested in not just a skepticism towards discursive formations, but towards the institutions from which those discourses have traditionally drawn power—ideological state apparatuses (as Louis Althusser termed them) like the education system, the legal system, religious institutions, the media, the family and so on. ³ What concerns us most in studying the postmodern sacred is the institutional churches find themselves viewed with skepticism by many postmodern subjects. Whilst the Lyotardian point would surely be of generalised skepticism, arguably this has been exacerbated in this case by such theological fault-lines as female priests, widespread child abuse by the clergy, contraception, gay marriage, and acceptance of homosexuality generally. As Tom Beaudoin aptly puts it, “institutions are suspect” (51). Whilst it is true that some sections of society in the West are flocking to the mega-churches of evangelical Protestantism, as well as the exponential growth of Islam in the UK, for the post-secular groups that make up the postmodern sacred’s audience, the morality of organised religion is increasingly divorced from their own. Paul Heelas argues that for New Age spiritual movements, the very term religion has become discarded. He says “‘religion’ is associated with the traditional; the dead; the misleading; the exclusivistic” (1996: 23). Similarly, the critique of patriarchal institutions by feminists and queer activists has left traditional forms of religion looking decidedly
suspect for those with any kind of anti-sexist, queer-friendly politics. Rightly or wrongly, the New Age is often considered a more female and queer-friendly domain of religious culture. So a suspicion of institutions is an integral part of the way in which postmodern culture perceives the terrain of religion and spirituality.

Postmodern scepticism towards religious institutions is the result not just of a general distrust of meta-narratives, but emerges from the movement towards what Paul Heelas calls a “detrivialised” society. He argues that “detrivialisation involves a shift of authority; from ‘without’ to ‘within’ (1996: 2). That means that institutions such as the Church no longer have a significant sway over people’s lives unless they choose that for themselves. As Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim argue, contemporary culture is individualised, and tradition is only one choice amongst many that one must make in organising one’s life. Detrivialisation therefore problematises the idea of a community of religious believers that we find in traditional forms of the sacred; postmodern subjects are not born into community, communities are chosen to belong to or to remain in.4

That detrivialised shift, from without to within, manifests itself in the postmodern move away from the kind of discipline that Foucault argued characterised the modern state. The modern state manifested its power in terms of an internalised disciplining of the body and the mind, an internal self-surveillance like the panopticon that Foucault famously uses as an example in Discipline and Punish. The panopticon model, however, has been displaced in postmodernity, for the notion of a single point of surveillance (which precipitates the internalisation process for Foucault) has become impossible, given that postmodern culture is so widely dispersed. Arguably instead, centres of surveillance are multiple and contradictory, the regulatory State being contradicted by the dictates of advertising and so on. Under such a
circumstance, frequently the only commonality is a capitalistic injunction to consume, since as Zygmunt Bauman points out, postmodern identities are formed under a “pleasure-seeking” role (Bauman 179). Indeed, if one were to look for a postmodern compulsion, one would find, with Žižek, that the postmodern compulsion, such as it is, would be most likely “to enjoy!” This marks a remarkable shift from the sober Protestant work ethic that Weber suggests fuelled the growth of capitalism in the first place, and is suggestive of the postmodern shift from production towards consumption—and thus the individualised form of consumption that gives rise to the postmodern sacred.

This shift to pleasure seeking, however, is not necessarily tied to the sacred. Indeed, Bauman points out that “postmodern cultural pressures, while intensifying the search for ‘peak-experiences’, have at the same time uncoupled it from religion-prone interests and concerns, privatised it, and cast mainly non-religious institutions in the role of purveyors of relevant services” (180). Paraphrasing Weber, Bauman calls this process ‘this worldly ecstasy’ and argues that the postmodern version “abolish[es] the concept of ‘non-peakers’ altogether and declare[s] peak-experience a duty and realistic prospect for everybody” (180). He finds peak-experience to have been separated from “religion-inspired practices of self-denial and withdrawal from worldly attractions” (180). Postmodern textual producers deploy “peak-experience” to stimulate consumer desire and purchase. Peak-experience is suggested to increase in intensity and fulfillment, with the promise of complete and total ecstasy always just over the horizon.

What the postmodern shift towards pleasure-seeking means for the postmodern sacred, though, is that it needs to be understood first and foremost as a pleasurable experience. It is not meant usually to be instructive, to educate, or to lead
the wandering flock back into the churches. It is this emphasis on pleasure that demarcates the postmodern sacred from evangelical attempts to create popular culture of their own, for instance in the surreal religious amusement parks of the United States such as Orlando’s “Holy Land,” or evangelical DVD releases like the CSI-derived Miracle Scene Investigators. Although it is not without its own implicit moral instructions (if often of a rather different sort, say of “tolerance” or the ethical responsibility to consume rather than religiously derived morality), popular culture in order to succeed as popular however, must be primarily a visceral and pleasurable experience.

Indeed, part of the postmodern skepticism towards religious institutions is based on a perception that they are anti-pleasure, or at the very least regulate it. This is manifested in discussions over contraception and abortion; to a postmodern culture that has almost entirely uncoupled heterosexual sex from the possibility of pregnancy—and thus allowed a relatively historically unique opportunity for sex to signify primarily pleasure—the Catholic Church’s stance on contraception seems a very decidedly unpostmodern anti-pleasure. Indeed, the conceptualising of desire as sin is a profoundly foreign concept to postmodern subjects used to their desires (particularly sexual) being provoked in order to sell just about anything.
“If only he’d joined a mainstream religion, like Oprahism, or voodoo”

Futurama, “Hell is Other Robots” (1.09)

This de-traditional, New Age shift arguably holds true for a significant part of the wider culture, more than merely those involved in New Age and/or Eastern practices like Buddhism, Taoism, yoga and meditation. Slavoj Žižek even goes so far as to call the New Age the hegemonic discourse of global postmodern capitalism (2001: 12). While this overstates the case considerably—especially in an America where the religious Right has increasingly made its political and cultural presence known—it is nevertheless true that the New Age has become a significant part of the Western spiritual landscape. New Age terminology has become part of the everyday discourse of the West, popularised by talk-shows, and a never-ending supply of self-help experts and pop psychologists—most significantly on Oprah Winfrey’s talk show. Whilst Oprah began as a sensationalist talk show not too dissimilar to modern day freak shows like Donahue, Jerry Springer and Ricki Lake, over the course of the
90s, Oprah began to evolve to become a more “quality” talk-show. In 1997, she began what she called her “change-your-life” TV. Oprah, in the decade since, has specialised in the combination of New Age spirituality and self-help. Favoured guests on Oprah have included Gary Zukav, author of Spirit of the Soul, John Gray, author of self-help hetero-gender essentialist tract Men Are Mars, Women Are From Venus. Segments like “remembering your spirit” explicitly evoke New Age of conceptualisations of the self as a spiritual being, usually one that has lost its way and been covered over by the “baggage” of late capitalism. This clearly recalls Paul Heelas’s point that for New Agers, “truth [. . .] come[s] by way of one’s own experience. For this alone provides direct and uncontaminated access to the spiritual realm” (1996b: 21). Oprah and her assorted experts help her viewers get in touch with their “real” selves, in far greater numbers than any previous New Age group.

On one level, this emerges out of a dissatisfaction with consumer capitalism, but whilst projects like the “Angel Network” encourage community activism, this is still, as Kathryn Lofton points out, a highly consumerist version of spirituality. She points out caustically that

the only way religion or religious belief works for Oprah is if it is carefully coordinated with capitalist pleasure. Thus, the turn to ‘spirituality’: the non-dogmatic dogma that encourages an ambiguous theism alongside an exuberant consumerism. (616)

Indeed, as Lofton makes abundantly clear, Oprah’s spirituality invariably comes attached to a product of some sort. There is her magazine O. There is Oprah’s infamous “book club,” which single-handedly has the power to make bestsellers out of the books she chooses. The books on Oprah’s book club tend to be heart-warming, another way to remember one’s spirit. Here reading fiction is constituted as self-improvement, not so much of one’s mind as one’s soul—“part of a commitment to
change people by changing how they view, and participate in, the world around them” (Parkins 148). There are the endless array of products personally approved by Oprah—shows with titles like “Oprah’s Favourite Things” encourage viewers to model their own consumption on Oprah’s presumably more spiritually enlightened preferences. Then there are the experts on her show who frequently have books and products of their own to hawk. All these work to position Oprah as one of what Bauman calls the “‘prophets’ of peak-experience, […] those able to consume “more refined products […] in a more sophisticated manner” (1997: 181). Oprah teaches her viewer how to consume in a more spiritual manner. The obvious paradox of Oprah’s brand of spirituality then is that while it seems to emerge as a response to the excesses of consumerism, it poses a consumerist solution to that problem.11

Of course, what separates Oprah from the postmodern sacred is that Oprah is supposed to be factually “true.” The texts of the postmodern sacred are fiction. The incredible success of Oprah has helped popularised New Age ideas and symbols, to make them familiar and more easily appropriable for fictional usage. Oprah has helped popularise an individualised, de-traditional approach to spirituality and religion. Oprah and her guests, however, rarely explicitly condemn “organised”

*Homer talking with God on The Simpsons (“Homer the Heretic” 4.03)*
religion—that would only alienate viewers. Instead, we see a New Age model of inclusion, one that sees figures like angels appropriated from Christianity, and “spirit” being made vaguely equivalent to God. As Wendy Parkins points out, the “spiritual discourse spoken by Oprah and her guests [in the 1998 season] was broadly inclusive, speaking of ‘karma’ and ‘grace’ in equal parts” (149). Of course, such a relativist, New Age perennialist outlook is bound to infuriate Christians; even as it includes Christian motifs it has implicitly discarded Christianity’s exclusive purchase on spiritual truth.

It is easy then to see how the postmodern sacred takes the “real world” New Age ideas of people like Oprah and then transfers them into fictional texts. The postmodern sacred takes a suspicion of institutions as its departure point, but it is also unwilling to discard the entire symbolic tradition of Western Judeo-Christian religions. Indeed, it is often keen to claim the ground of “real” spirituality for itself, against hypocritical religious dogma and religious figures who appear more intent on maintaining power than in seeking after the sacred. This is, of course, a reductive reading of religious institutions, one that often takes the excesses of “fundamentalism” as metonymic of the entire wide sweep of Christianity. Indeed, one suspects the success of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* rests precisely on this premise, on not just its conspiracy theory approach to religion (that is, that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had children together) but upon its opposition of “real” spirituality to the institution of the Catholic Church.12 Whilst the postmodern sacred is unwilling to accept the authority of religious institutions in discerning truth, it is nevertheless happy to use the symbols associated with those institutions. The postmodern sacred often takes a willful delight in the symbolic pilfering from religious traditions, taking pleasure in heretical reconfigurings.
An example of the distance between much contemporary popular culture and organised religion occurs in The Simpsons episode “Homer the Heretic” (4.03). In the episode, Homer has a number of dreams in which he converses with the Christian God. Like Homer, even God would prefer to be “watching football” than attending church. In fact, Reverend Lovejoy “really displeases” God. In this version of detraditionalised spirituality, we see Homer’s “heresy” of not attending church allied with bodily pleasure—sleeping in, Homer dancing in his underwear, eating waffles. Traditional Christian practice is suggested to be boring, judgemental and hypocritical, embodied by Reverend Lovejoy and Homer’s irritating neighbour Ned Flanders. Homer says to God “I’m a not a bad guy, I work hard, and I love my kids and why should I spend half my Sunday hearing about how I’m going to hell.” Significantly, though, this episode also features Homer at his most spiritual—attired in monk’s garb, he communes with nature in his backyard. Homer says “so I figure I should just try to live right and worship you in my own way” (4.03)—a postmodern religious statement if ever there was. Whilst the episode ends with the normative closure of Homer being rescued from a fire by a multi-faith fire engine crew and rejoining his church, God consoles him by saying “don’t feel bad Homer, 9 out of 10 religions fail in their first year” and then with the open-ended statement “the meaning of life is…” This leads to an ambivalent closure to the episode at best, whilst Homer has rejoined the flock, it is obvious that meaning cannot be found in organised religion. The Simpsons is, of course, a realistic text of sorts (if rather tenuously in this particular episode), so one would not technically consider it as part of the postmodern sacred, but this particular episode evocatively sums contemporary postmodern approaches to religion. The question then, is how does the postmodern sacred make use of these individualised and de-traditionalised New Age ideas and practices?
The Transcendental Signifier or, the New Age in pop culture

George looking at the afterlife on Dead Like Me ("Pilot" 1.01)

The French post-structuralist Jacques Derrida provides an interesting way into thinking through how both New Age and Judeo-Christian ideas might function in popular culture. Derrida’s thoughts about religion are tremendously complex and more usually considered in terms of Judaism and Christianity (see for instance Caputo 1997, Caputo et al 2005 and Cixous 2004). Derrida argues that God functions as a “transcendental signified,” inhabiting a position outside the usual realm of signification (1981: 19-20). He argues that while signs usually function as both signifier and signified, the transcendental signified breaks down the chain of meaning, and no longer functions as a signifier. In such a linguistic economy, this means, as Kevin Hart points out, that the Trinitarian Christ signals perfect meaning,
the complete conflation of the sign of presence and presence itself—“since Christ is
God, what He signifies is signified in and of itself” (Hart 8). One recalls, too, the
theological tradition of defining God tautologically in the Jewish Bible because of his
[God] certainly did not mean, as later philosophers would assert, that he was self-
sufficient Being” (30). Rather, the statement is designed to evade the question—
“Hebrew did not have such a metaphysical dimension at this stage and it would be
nearly 2000 years before it acquired one [. . .] So when Moses asks who he is, God
replies in effect: ‘Never you mind who I am!’” (1999: 30). Interestingly, both these
examples show how a history of readings has modified the subject in question. Even
God, as Armstrong shows, has a history.

So the transcendental signified—God—is a function of language, a way of
“nam[ing] the nameless” (Caputo, 2005: 37) as Derrida eloquently puts it.
Significantly, too, Derrida argues that God works as a guarantor of meaning, for in the
metaphysical-theological tradition people have only been able to speak imperfectly to
one another. The Biblical story of the Tower of Babel, for instance, has usually been
taken to illustrate the folly of aspiring to match God, but humanity’s punishment as a
result of that folly was that language became a source of antagonistic separation
between different peoples. \(^{14}\) Perfect meaning is for the Biblical God and God alone.

But metaphysics and theology are haunted by the possibility—even
inevitability—of their own failure. The dream of “pure” meaning might be the pre-
condition for translation, but as Derrida shows again and again, translation does not
leave the text un-modified. The text can always be shown to exceed itself, to have
currents that run counter to its explicit purpose. And this is an idea that Derrida
himself rigorously applies to his own corpus; for instance, Geoffrey Bennington’s
Jacques Derrida was accompanied by a “Circumfession” by Derrida, a deconstruction of an explanation of deconstructive theory.

Of course, it should be noted that God is merely one example of a transcendental signified for Derrida, however. Drawing on Derrida, Mark C Taylor points out that:

this does not mean [. . .] that every sign refers directly or even indirectly to God. The point to be stressed is that some notion of the transcendental signified is required by any referential system that gives priority to the signified over the signifier. While not always explicitly named God, the transcendental functions as the purported locus of truth that is supposed to stabilise all meaningful words” (1984: 105).

Derrida argues that the transcendental signified structures the entire history of Western metaphysics as a guarantor of meaning and furthermore that the distinction between signifier and signified begins to break down once one begins to question the possibility of such a “pure” meaning (1981: 19-20). Whilst meaning—the signified—is usually privileged over the signifier, that distinction becomes collapsed by the Derridean insight that the signified is itself a signifier. For as Taylor says, “consciousness, therefore, deals only with signs and never reaches the thing itself” (1984: 104). Rather than “representing” a pure Platonic idea or material object outside of signification, we find, only and ever, more signs. Most especially then, God is a mutable sign whose meanings are shaped by a history of signification.

Whilst Derrida explores (and disrupts) the metaphysical and theological implications of the transcendental signified, in this chapter I propose to modify his concept in my reading of New Age style narratives to what I will term the transcendental signifier. The transcendental signifier is a recurrent trope of the postmodern sacred, a way of gesturing towards the transcendental without using the specific language of theology. Rather than referring to God or heaven, the New Age
uses such transcendental signifiers as “spirit,” “the afterlife,” “the great whatever.” Frequently detraditional spirituality posits the notion of something “up there,” unable to be conceptualised any further. This often has the feel of a sort of lay negative theology, God—or spirit, or energy, or whatever you want to call it—is unable to be explained except by recourse to what it is not, the world down here of signs and the exchange of meaning. Whilst traditional theology has holy texts and a history of theological interpretation with which to buttress the transcendental signified, New Age-ised language will often strip the transcendental signified to its barest, leaving only the notion that there exists something else not of this world. So the transcendental becomes even more significant in talking about the shift towards a New Age language of spirituality than in the Judeo-Christian model, which retains certain anthropomorphic features in the Godhead, and Christ (for Christians). The New Age takes the transcendental signified and disconnects it from the figure of God, who is associated with the “dead” traditional religions.

The transcendental signifier works most clearly in the postmodern sacred as a means of making some kind of gesture towards the transcendent without having to tie that (fictional) ontology to any established real-world religious tradition. Gesturing to the transcendent is a characteristic textual strategy of the postmodern sacred, for it allows the pleasure of play with the transcendent without the commitment or even need for belief that an established religion would have. It fits perfectly with the postmodern sacred’s vacillation between belief and unbelief, and demonstrates its comfort with the seemingly more ethically palatable New Age. The transcendental signifier is suggestive rather than descriptive, and perhaps that is all it can ever be (although we shall see in the following chapter how the corporeality of the image functions in a different way in the postmodern sacred). More kindly, it is perhaps an
admission of the human inadequacy—since we cannot definitively know what the supernatural or transcendent is, it is best not to try. And any definitive reading would run counter to the New Age idea of discarding “dogma,” which places the transcendent largely in the individual’s experience of it.

My argument is that the postmodern sacred uses the language of the New Age—“spirit” instead of God—as a means of grounding its textual universes outside of the bounds of traditional religion (but not as an ontological grounding of reality itself). Massimo Introvigne argues that “popular culture [. . .] confirms that stories our generation of non-belonging believers [. . .] like to tell and hear are not about secular universes, but involve notions of a Higher Power. These stories, however, more often than not, have no sovereign, omnipotent transcendent God” (n.p.). The television series Angel provides a useful example, for the titular hero is sent on missions relayed by his sidekicks Doyle and Cordelia from the “Powers That Be,” a phrase that is both suggestive of a surplus of meaning and absent in actual detail. These “Powers That Be” fulfill some of the traditional roles that God has occupied; sending Angel on his quests for Good and on his road to personal redemption, yet it remains unclear if these powers have created the world, or have any power to intervene personally, and so on. Interestingly the character Cordelia ascends to a “higher plane of being” in the finale of Series 3 (“Tomorrow” 3.22), again a phrase more redolent with New Age connotations than with those of the Judeo-Christian tradition. One needs to note, though, that even though the postmodern sacred uses the language of spirit, it is not necessarily making a statement about the ontological nature of reality itself (though characteristically postmodern irony would refuse to disallow that as a possibility either). These are fantastic texts, after all, not meant to be read in a straight-forward Realist fashion. Much of the relationship between the postmodern sacred and
“reality” is metaphorical, what science fiction theorist Darko Suvin would call an “estranged” relationship to realistic representation.

The postmodern sacred’s use of the transcendental signifier can be seen clearly in the television series *Dead Like Me*. *Dead Like Me* is the story of George, an 18 year old who is killed by a toilet seat dropped from the space station Mir. After her death, rather than go to heaven or indeed hell (because she’s “not that interesting”), she remains on Earth and becomes a “Reaper,” a harvester of souls. Though *Dead Like Me* is set largely in a realistic universe—this is no futuristic sci-fi or medieval fantasy world—it does nevertheless dramatise and embroider a post-death cosmology. Death is set in motion in this world by “gravelings,” small malevolent creatures. People’s deaths are almost always inevitable and fated, the details given to George’s boss Rube, with a location and ETD (Estimated Time of Death).

While on the one hand, we see the Reapers go on living after their deaths (some seventy years or so in Rube’s case); they themselves do not know what happens to people when they die. Reapers get to go on living like the rest of us, more or less, having to hold down day jobs they hate, balance relationships, and enjoy the pleasures of life like “delicious key-lime pie” (“Pilot 1.01) and so on. So what is significant about the way *Dead Like Me* characterises the after-life is that the final destination where people go after their deaths is never specified—Rube says “it’s not for us to know” (“Pilot,” 1.01). But it is, however, gestured to, “the great whatever” as George puts it (“Curious George,” 1.03). We see manifestations of the afterlife and the recently deceased follow, but the Reapers themselves can’t follow. The afterlife is individualised and varies depending upon the person who has just died—it is, amongst other things, a carnival, the cliffs of Dover, a Hindu goddess. The sacred, then, becomes amorphously pluralistic, able to be manifested in multiple ways,
though always with the same transcendental source. This is, once again, a common
New Age point\textsuperscript{21} that has been taken up by the postmodern sacred’s fictional texts
and used for its own pop-cultural pleasure.

Thus it is that the postmodern sacred is notable for the way it separates this
transcendental gesturing from traditional anthromorphised theology. The afterlife
could be a Christian heaven or hell, but it could just as likely be a fun fair or Hindu
goddess. Any kind of definitive theological reading is impossible in the world of
\textit{Dead Like Me}. Similarly with God, when George asks Rube about the existence of
God, his response is a blunt “you tell me,” and other theological figures such as
angels are reconceptualised as “upper management types” (“Pilot,” 1.01).\textsuperscript{22} On one
hand, this could be seen as a failure of imagination for the postmodern sacred, an
inability or unwillingness to fully conceptualise other realms of existence. On the
other, gesturing to the transcendent is one way in which the postmodern sacred
opposes its spirituality to the religious traditions. It suggests that the \textit{real} spirituality
has got very little to do with traditional theology, indeed it largely discards the
concept of God—or at the very least it is at pains to distinguish itself from the God of
the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. Instead, \textit{Dead Like Me} provides a New
Agey, vaguely Eastern style philosophy. As Rube says, “life and death have to exist
in perfect harmony. Yin and Yang, call it what you want, but that balance has to be
maintained” (“Pilot” 1.01). But if \textit{Dead Like Me} draws on Eastern ideas, it
appropriates them into a decidedly Western viewpoint—conspicuously absent are
ideas like re-incarnation. \textit{Dead Like Me} thus ultimately proves unable to provide
many answers for the questions it poses about the afterlife, and perhaps this is to be
the credit of the show that it refrains from giving us easy or familiar answers (it’s not
for us to know). Thus we end in the real world rather than the transcendent; the last
episode “Haunted” (2.15) ends with George affirming the pleasures of living (sort of), saying, “it’s not so bad, being dead like me.” Interestingly, this ending comes quite close to the religious dogma Dead Like Me attempts to distinguish itself from.

George is “dead” in this world with something else to look forward to after, possessing a surer knowledge of the here-after than any believer can have. It might be “not so bad” being dead like her but there is always the prospect of going somewhere else. Dead Like Me would surely be more radical if there was nowhere else to go, but as it is, this suggests that there remains a remarkably strong continuity between the New Age and Judeo-Christianity.

The co-ordinates for many of the New Age style SF/fantasy universes were arguably set by Star Wars, which combined portentous seriousness with pop-Buddhist ideas and an absence of formal “real world” religious institutions. Star Wars, of course, provides another key example of the transcendental signifier with its suggestive phrase “The Force.” Whilst it predates most of the texts I have analysed by at least 15 years (and thus is occurring in a slightly different cultural context), the initial Star Wars trilogy remains one of the key touch-stones for visual science fiction and fantasy. It is arguable that Star Wars’ use of the transcendental signifier precipitates at least part of the postmodern sacred’s move towards nebulous New Aged conceptions of spirit. In the concept of “the force,” George Lucas clearly draws more on Eastern, or at least New Age, ideas—the force is roughly analogous to the “chi” in Taoism. Indeed, more than one writer has read Star Wars as a Buddhist text (see for instance Matthew Bortolin’s The Dharma of Star Wars). One of the many disappointments that fans had with the second trilogy is that George Lucas decided to explain “the Force” in pseudo-genetic terms, creating the less satisfying concept of “midi-chlorians” to explain the Jedis’ mystical powers. It’s arguable then that the
power of the transcendental signifier lies in being suggestive, in not telling too much. But Star Wars is not alone in using New Age style transcendental signifiers—other ways of conceptualising the transcendental signifier in the postmodern sacred include fantasy author Robert Jordan’s “the Light” in his Wheel of Time series,23 “heaven dimensions” in Buffy, and a kind of barely articulated divine Providence in Peter Jackson’s Lord of the Rings movie adaptations.

So, whilst light on details, the postmodern sacred is characteristic for its suggestion that spirituality exists through what we might call a surplus of meaning. The postmodern sacred, then, frequently makes recourse to symbol rather than to didactic explanation; shifting from a literal relationship to religion to a metaphorical one. This has, of course, certain theological precedents in the Christian tradition, for as Avery Dulles argues, “revelation never occurs in a purely interior experience or an unmediated encounter with the God. It is always mediated through “symbol [that] suggest[s] more than it can clearly describe or define” (Dulles 131). Although Dulles is clearly describing a Christian model of divine revelation, symbol that suggests more than it can describe sums up rather well the postmodern sacred’s use of the transcendental signifier in pop culture. In Christianity, this mediation of symbol could occur in any number of contexts; the symbol of the Cross can be found in Church art, worn as jewellery, and ritually enacted in bodily movement in churches, homes and even on sporting fields. In the postmodern sacred, however, we find that there is no transcendent revelation (or hierophany as Eliade would term it), instead we find that it is the symbol that is fore-grounded, in order to grasp at a transcendent that is almost, by definition, unrepresentable.
The Alien as Transcendental Signifier

Samantha Mulder’s alien abduction on The X Files (“Little Green Men” 2.01)

The transcendental signifier emerges in a slightly different manner in supernatural/horror texts like the hugely popular fin de siècle television series The X-Files, as well as its many imitators like The 4400, Supernatural and even the Superman prequel series Smallville (which has an X-Files influenced litany of weird occurrences). I shall restrict my analysis here largely to The X-Files, which is the most culturally significant of those texts I have mentioned. The structure of the majority of the X-Files series is simple. The series centres on two FBI agents, Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, working on the “X-Files,” the cases the FBI has designated unsolvable by conventional explanations, and possibly involving the paranormal. Mulder is the believer, formulator of exotic theories involving such unlikely protagonists as aliens or ghosts, which are of course frequently found to be the truth. Scully, on the other hand, is the sceptic, the scientist recruited by the FBI to de-bunk Mulder’s work on the paranormal.

The X-Files works as a text of the postmodern sacred in a number of ways. Firstly, it exhibits a postmodern distrust of “official” meta-narratives, centring largely
on the activities of the US Government, its Army and law-enforcement agencies.

Behind that very obvious paranoia (and paranoid is surely the best way to describe the series), though, one sees in *The X-Files* a Lyotardian skepticism towards Enlightenment-derived meta-narratives of scientific rationality. The series, instead, entertains the possibility of the supernatural, with a particular interest in aliens (and the government’s cover-up of their existence). A short list of the series’ plotlines would include an on-going alien abduction narrative, a man with pyrokinetic powers (“Fire” 1.12), a boy with stigmata (“Revelations” 3.11), and killer cockroaches (“War of the Coprophages” 3.12). In short, *The X-Files* lets back in what modern science has sought to banish. As Lavery et al argue that, “for many viewers, their weekly experience with the show is an unsettling, sometimes frightening experience that powerfully interrogates a consensus reality that excludes the paranormal” (12).

While the series slogan “the truth is out there” suggests on one level an unfashionable attachment to truth, the truth is ultimately unknowable on *The X-Files*; since as Lavery et al point out, episodes frequently end without full resolution or explanation (17). This is certainly in part because of the serial nature of the television series—full narrative closure must be differed for another week or even another series in order to maintain a viewing audience—but it’s worth pointing out that many dramatic episodic TV shows wrap up their plot strands weekly, only to begin anew the next week. Yet even “one-off” episodes of *The X-Files* remain as open-ended as those involving long-time plotlines (such as the alien abduction of Mulder’s sister, for example). But Mulder’s search to find the answers to his sister’s abduction however only finds merely more questions. Truth on *The X-Files*, while continually posited as findable, is forever out of reach, deferred for another week. Conspiracies overwrite each other, rendering previously taken for granted knowledge suspect. That lack of narrative
closure seems to bespeak both a suspicion towards epistemological certainty—we can never really truly know the entirety of the truth—as well a postmodern play with narrative itself.

While it might seem that The X-Files shows simply a tabloid-fuelled credulous postmodern willingness to entertain the most ludicrous of beliefs, arguably the series is more subtle than its lurid plotlines might suggest. After all, the emblematic poster behind Mulder’s desk says “I want to believe”—not “I believe.” The series, then, is about wanting to believe in the supernatural, or the extra-terrestrial, not being able to. But Mulder’s take on the supernatural is scarcely the only position on the show (though it does seem to be the dominant one). The counter-balance to Mulder’s willingness to believe is Scully’s scepticism. Scully is the voice of Reason and rationalism, a medical professional, who believes that life is explainable. More often than not, the deficiencies of scientific rationalism are exposed; most of the events on The X Files are only partially explainable. But it’s in the interplay between the two agents (and not just the sexual chemistry) that makes The X Files work—a series that only featured Mulder would have been far less entertaining, since the series requires the presence of rationality in order to expose its weaknesses (but not discard it entirely). So, like the postmodern sacred generally, The X-Files is caught between belief and unbelief, unwilling to trust in rationalist meta-narratives, but equally unable to shed that legacy to truly believe in the supernatural.

Interestingly, in some ways, the alien has become more of an epistemologically sustainable belief than the sacred for some secularists. As Lynn Schofield Clark points out, by the 1990s some 27% of the American population believed that aliens had visited the earth (5). As scientists have discovered precisely
how large the universe is, the idea that life has only occurred on this one planet has become questionable. Of course, this belief in alien visitation—with a particular focus on the “alien crash” that supposedly occurred in Roswell, New Mexico25 in 1947—is fuelled in some part by a recurrent fictional representation of the alien in science-fiction narratives like ET, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, and of course The X-Files.

Throughout its run from 1993 to 2002, The X-Files doled out equal doses of conspiracy theorist paranoia about the American government and supernatural spookiness in the form of aliens, monsters and so on. Whilst New Age style narratives use a language appropriated from the New Age to gesture towards the transcendental, in The X-Files it is the alien which functions as the transcendental signifier—specifically the “little grey men” often associated with alien abduction narratives. Alien “encounters” in The X-Files are often rendered in the same way as encounters with the divine—deserted areas, a flash of white lights, mysterious occurrences, lapses in space and time. Alien encounters work as another version of Eliade’s hierophany—a fragment of a barely explainable transcendent. Alien encounters are literally transcendent; they come from above, and most definitely appear as “a reality of a wholly different order from ‘natural’ realities” (Eliade 10). Like the divine, aliens are both mysterious and powerful, unknowable, unpredictable.

An example occurs in the episode “Little Green Men” (2.01) in which we see a flashback of the kidnapping of Mulder’s sister. The room is bathed in white light, an alien appears at the doorway, and Samantha floats out of the window, never to appear again. Aliens in The X Files, particularly in Mulder’s search for meaning in his own life, in some ways recall what Hugh Ruppersberg calls “the alien messiah,” (32) the redemptive figure in films such as ET, Close Encounters of the Third Kind.
and Cocoon. Yet if those films largely invoke, as Ruppersberg says, “a messiah figure [. . .] whose numinous, supra-human qualities offer solace and inspiration to a humanity threatened by technology and the banality of modern life” (33), The X Files offers no such solace. The alien in The X Files may appear as transcendent and utterly Other, and as such as miraculous at times, but it is far from comforting. Instead, like Otto’s mysterious tremendium, alien abductions on The X Files provoke both awe and terror.

Thus, the line between The X-Files’ hyper-paranoid search for the extraterrestrial and American evangelicals is not as firm as one might think; both use the figure of a corrupt and secretive government, for instance. Read from another angle, The X-Files’ tag-line “the truth is out there” resembles nothing so much as an evangelical slogan, and Mulder’s quest for truth that of a prophet. Both conspiracy theory and evangelical survivalist are simultaneously invested in modern social forms (the nation, the government, capitalism, the nuclear family and so on) and estranged from them. The government creates these conspiracies—and it’s interesting to note the conspiracy theories surrounding September 11—but at the same time provides the possibility for recovering the truth. It’s hard not to think of this as a redemptive fantasy inherent in liberal democracy itself, that the State will redeem itself somehow.

Although the series does use the alien as a variation on the transcendental signifier, it should be noted that it also features New-Age styled transcendental gesturing to “spirit” as well. Generically speaking, The X-Files occurs somewhere at the intersection of conspiracy theories, UFO abduction narratives and New Age spirituality, and as such has a reverence for Buddhist and particularly Native American spiritual practises. The series three episode “The Blessing Way” (3.01), for instance, sees FBI agent Fox Mulder undergo a Navajo healing ritual. Mulder floats
in a bed in the middle of space, talking with his dead father and mentor. The presence
of the Navajo—codemakers for the US government in World War 2—is of course
given a conspiracy theory gloss suitable for the show’s pre-millenial paranoia.
Regardless, the episode and others like it suggest that real spiritual experience may
occur *anywhere* if you choose to see it. While the episode continues the tradition of
white American appropriations of Native American, it is characteristically New Age
in doing so, universalising “inner truth” even as it co-opts specific native traditions.

In the broadest sense, however, *The X-Files* is polytheistic, dramatising
countless versions of the supernatural to construct a strange, mysterious, even
occasionally sacred world. The supernatural people, animals and creatures found in
*The X-Files* produce an Weberian style enchanted world—not a sentimentalised pre-
modern Arcadia but a world brimming with capricious, even malign, inexplicable
powers. Almost every encounter with the supernatural provokes a *mysterious*
tremendium mixture of awe and terror, something most obvious in the
transcendentally signified alien abductions. More than any other text in the
postmodern sacred, and perhaps this is a function of its frequent references to the
horror genre, *The X-Files* retains some of the power the sacred has to terrify.
Significantly though, like many of the texts of the postmodern sacred, *The X Files*
maintains scepticism towards Christianity, yet it is unwilling to entirely discard its
symbolic power, or the possibility of a “real” Christian supernatural/spiritual
experience. We see this most clearly in “Revelations,” (3.11) an episode in which
Scully must deal with her discarded Catholic faith, and ponders whether there might
be something beyond the scientific rationalism through which she explains the world.
Fragments

Interestingly, although the postmodern sacred is notable for its suspicion, even hostility, towards traditional religious institutions, it nevertheless draws on those same traditions for its symbolic power. The question, then, is how to recycle religious motifs without an epistemological grounding that would tie the postmodern sacred to those suspect institutions. As I argued in my first chapter, one of the ways in which the postmodern sacred can be understood is through its use of the characteristically postmodern textual strategy of pastiche. The postmodern sacred, like the New Age, borrows liberally from many different traditions—Buddhist, Christian, Taoist, Native American, Celtic and Jewish—though perhaps because of the general suspicion with which the West holds Islam, it is far less likely to embrace elements of Islam. All of these traditions have similar textual elements available for symbolic appropriation—holy books and histories of interpretation, religious symbols and paraphernalia, rituals and ritualised bodily movements. Perhaps unsurprisingly given their origin in a post-Christian West, the texts using religious signifiers in a detraditionalised fashion such as Buffy have mostly used Christian signifiers. Similarly, fantasy epics like Lord of the Rings have used Christianity creatively in their parallel universes, from metaphoric Christ figures (Aragorn, Frodo, C.S Lewis’s Aslan) to sacramentals such
as Elvish lembas bread. The Taoist Ursula LeGuins’ writing remains a notable and significant exception within the genre, with her Earthsea series\textsuperscript{27} infused with Taoist concerns about the ethics and responsibility of (magical) behaviour.

Interestingly, the third Star Trek incarnation, Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, provides an indicator of the cultural shift involved in the postmodern sacred. Rather than the roving spaceships of the other four series (Star Trek, Star Trek: Next Generation, Star Trek Voyager,\textsuperscript{28} Star Enterprise), DS9 is set on a space station near the planet of Bajor. The series begins with the Federation taking control of an old Cardassian space station at the request of the Bajoran provisional government. Bajor had been occupied by the Cardassians for the previous 50 years, and the Bajoran people fought a guerrilla war. As such, DS9 is partly set in an estranged postcolonialist context. Whilst earlier versions of Star Trek largely provide an atheist, rationalist viewpoint, Deep Space Nine is the spiritual exception in the Star Trek mega-text.\textsuperscript{29}

In the first episode “Emissary” (1.01), Deep Space Nine Commander Benjamin Sisko discovers a wormhole to an undiscovered quadrant of space, the Gamma quadrant. Inside the wormhole, Sisko encounters a race of aliens who seem to exist outside of space and time. These aliens occupy a central place in the Bajoran religion, who call them “The Prophets,” and the wormhole itself “the Celestial Temple.” Over the course of the series, the Prophets are suggested to have sent “orbs” to communicate with the Bajoran people, and to intervene in their destinies. Indeed, in “Destiny” (3.15), their prophecies come true. Because of his encounter in the wormhole, Sisko becomes an unwilling religious figure for the Bajorans, who dub him “The Emissary.” Sisko finds it difficult to surrender (shades of New Age
language already) to his role as the Emissary, preferring the atheist rationality of Star Fleet, although over the course of the series he learns to adjust to his religious role.

Like many of the fictitious religions in the postmodern sacred, the Bajoran faith’s chief real-world referent is Buddhism, with Buddhist style robes, references to meditation and chanting. But if Buddhism seems the chief referent, references to Christianity nevertheless abound (say in the Catholicism-recalling *realpolitik* that occurs behind the scenes in the election of the Bajoran spiritual leader). While the series is limited by the necessity of conforming to an identifiably “*Star Trek*” style, it nevertheless suggests an interesting sea-change within science fiction—direct atheism is to be avoided, and an ambivalent relationship to the sacred, refracted largely through the New Age, is to be attempted.  

Peter Linford suggests that in *Deep Space Nine*, “religion is significant only to the extent it impacts on the [individual] believer” (99). In this, *Deep Space Nine* follows a New Age model of individualised spirituality, disconnection from history and wider cultures. Ultimately, “the position *DS9* finally holds is that where religion exists, then so be it. Where it is absent, so much the better” (99).

Slavoj Žižek makes the point regarding *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith*, that given *Star Wars*’ version of the New Age (and a certain kind of pop-Buddhism), that it is unsurprising that the metamorphosis of Anakin into Darth Vader is tinged with a Christology (2006: 101). Whilst it is true that the postmodern sacred quite often associates aspects of Christianity into its visions of evil (say in the use of King James Bible style language by vampires in Season 1 of *Buffy*, or perhaps the monotheism of the Cylons in *Battlestar Galactica*), it needs to be noted that this use of Christ as a figure for Evil is only one of a number of New Age-ised tropes in the postmodern sacred. The postmodern sacred is as likely to make use of Christ-figures in its
characterisation of heroes; to turn to Buffy again, say in the titular heroine’s quite literal “leap of faith” to her death at the conclusion of Season 5 (“The Gift” 5.22). Yet as Jana Reiss rightly points out, that Christ-coding redeems only Buffy herself, ultimately “on Buffy the redemption process starts—and ends—with the individual, an approach that has more in common with Buddhism than Christianity” (119). Whilst it is true that the New Age-ised postmodern sacred remains skeptical towards the institutions of Christianity, and even delights in the heretical speculation of texts such as the Da Vinci Code, one must not mistake that anti-institutional impulse as specifically or solely anti-Christian. One must instead recognise that the postmodern sacred remains highly indebted towards Christianity as its primary symbolic source, even as it looks elsewhere for an ontological foundation for its textual universes. It is thus best understood as post-Christian; even as it defines itself against religious institutions it remains fixated on such typically Christian themes of sacrifice and redemption, as well as Christian symbols like the Cross or holy water.

Avery Dulles’s insight about symbol, however, need not be solely applicable to a Christian tradition, for the idea that symbol suggests more than it can describe is quite clearly characteristic of the postmodern sacred. Those symbols, however, are freely appropriated from various spiritual traditions, often without any real contextualisation. Meaning, then, resides in the play of signification, or recognising spiritual signifiers without holding to their religious traditions of origin. Indeed, the postmodern sacred can often manifest the paradoxical relationship of relying on a religious tradition for its symbolic power—say in the evocative Christ-symbolism scene of the usually mocking Buffy the Vampire Slayer in which Spike drapes himself across a cross, asking Buffy “can we rest now” whilst his flesh steams (“Beneath You,” 7.02).
Jacques Derrida’s argument about trace texts seems particularly apt when considering the postmodern turn towards pastiche. He argues that, rather than signify to a “real world” outside the text, texts contain traces “that [continue] to signal not in the direction of another presence, or another form of presence, but in the direction of an entirely other text” (1982: 65). Whilst Realist epistemologies appeal first and foremost to a verisimilitude with the “real,” Derrida argues compelling that texts work as palimpsests of other texts. This argument seems most compelling in considering texts of an unreal nature, those that do not attempt to reproduce some version of the generally accepted real. This might also explain the often derivative nature of these texts, for they can have a stronger relationship with other texts of the same genre than they do with an estranged real-world referent. The texts of the postmodern sacred are even more indebted to their textual predecessors, they exist as the result of the textual sedimentation of signs (and indeed the history of interpretation of those signs). For example, one could choose to foreground any number of trace texts in the fantasy genre—children’s literature, medieval romances, pastorals, historical bodice-rippers—whilst some scholars have found resonances with Thomas Aquinas’s theology, amongst others. Even though one could argue that the genre attempts to present a version of the medieval, it is arguable that this comes first and foremost through the textual sedimentation of medieval literature through the aforementioned literary genres, as well as the inescapable influence of figures like Tolkien.

Perhaps it is fitting then that the postmodern sacred should emerge as so culturally vital in age that, as Fredric Jameson argues, has forgotten how to think historically. This inability to think historically is undoubtedly bound up in the inability to conceive of a real world outside of the text, and this is manifested in not only the un-noted simulation of other texts, but also in the constant and explicit
intertextuality of many postmodern texts. The postmodern sacred’s invocation of religious signifiers, then, is hardly exceptional. Indeed, while postmodern textuality may often be taken as a play on genre, and on the pleasure of recontextualising signs into new contexts, the postmodern sacred may also be taken as a play with belief—specifically the belief that those appropriated symbols imply. Symbols in this circumstance may then be taken as metonymic of the belief of the communities of the traditions that the postmodern sacred cannot quite allow itself to believe in, since the death of God narrative remains as important in the postmodern as the death of belief in the scientific meta-narratives that were supposed to replace him. As Mark C Taylor poignantly says, “postmodernism opens with the sense of irreversible loss and incurable fault. This is inflicted by the overwhelming awareness of death—a death that “begins” with the death of God and “ends” with the death of our selves” (1984: 6). The postmodern sacred’s vacillation between belief and unbelief is peculiarly resonant.

If as I have argued, the postmodern sacred refuses to make any epistemological claims about the nature of “reality,” then the question arises, what precisely is the point of both transcendental gesturing and the pastiche of religious signifiers? It is too easy, as many religious scholars have done, to claim popular culture as a new site of resurgent belief in religion, and highly simplistic to map textual consumption onto a real-world belief (say, Christianity with Lord of the Rings). Yet it is just as simplistic to entirely dismiss the rise of such texts in the context of a postmodern turn away from modernist atheism. The postmodern sacred needs instead to be understood as the play of belief, as a movement between belief and unbelief.
The transcendental provides an ontological framework from which the postmodern sacred feels free to pastiche religious signifiers from different and even contradictory traditions. These religious fragments are moments that are subsumed within the transcendental gesture. Even though they do, usually, come from religious traditions, they do not possess the same ontological value in the postmodern sacred; they are used instead to gesture to a transcendent distinguished from the God of organised religion. The question, then arises, what happens in postmodern texts when a corporeal God does appear?

Notes

1 though one could go back further and look at Cecil B DeMille’s Christian epics, for example.
2 There is an established body of scholarly work on the way Buffy treats religion, see for instance papers by Massimo Introvigne and Wendy Love Anderson. I turn to Buffy in greater detail in Chapter Six.
3 Writing in the late Sixties, Althusser separates ISAs that function by ideology from the Repressive State Apparatuses that function by violence or the threat of violence—the police, the courts, the army and so on. He argues that the ISAs “ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its ‘practice’” (133). Although it is clear that these apparatuses exert a continued cultural power, arguably the emphasis in postmodernity has shifted from the institutions to the information matrix of the media, which is now a more dispersed form of power, spanning not merely local media, but potentially sources from anywhere across the world on the Internet (and not only traditional forms like newspapers archived online but blogs or websites potentially run by any person with the computing ability to post their thoughts online).
4 Beck and Beck-Gernsheim say “people used to be born into traditional societies, as they were into social classes or religions. Today even God himself must be chosen” (23).
5 An example of this dispersal of centres of power would be the utter gap between the ultra-Right Fox News in the United States and the centre or marginally centre-left of the rest of the American networks. Depending on the media source, the “facts” of public and cultural life can be wildly differing, as manifested by the number of Fox viewers who believed in George W Bush’s mythical WMDs, the culpability of Iraq in September 11 and so on.
6 Žižek says that there is the “paradox of pleasure becoming duty in a ‘permissive’ society. Subjects experience the need to ‘have a good time’, to enjoy themselves, as a kind of duty, and, consequently, feel guilty for failing to be happy” (1999b: n.pag)
7 This kind of capitalistic religious pop culture has been skewered, again, by The Simpsons in the episode “She of Little Faith” (13.06) in which Mister Burns adds advertising to the town’s church and a giant Vegas-style façade that features Jesus as a kind of Marlboro man. Lisa asks “why is Jesus holding a lasso?” to which Homer
replies “because he’s all man.” The vignette is a deft critique of the American tendency to turn Jesus into a phallic action hero.

Although Long notes the tendency for otherwise a-religious straight people to slip into a religious language of “sin” in order to articulate their discomfort with homosexuality (7).

He says, “at the very moment when, at the level of the ‘economic infrastructure, ‘European’ technology and capitalism is triumphing world-wide, at the level of ‘ideological superstructure,’ the Judeo-Christian legacy is threatened in the European space itself by the onslaught of the New Age ‘Asiatic’ thought, which [...] is establishing itself as the hegemonic ideology of global capitalism” (12).

The one recurring guest who perhaps fits this New Age list the least is tough-talking psychologist Dr Phil, whose brand of “common-sense” pop-therapy holds the individual entirely responsible for the course of their lives. It’s arguable that the Texan Dr Phil is the Republican Red State counterpart to Oprah’s Blue State Democrat. Yet the commonality between Dr Phil and Oprah is the above-all primacy of the individual—which suggests that perhaps neo-conservative individualism and liberal New Ageism are not so far apart.

I should also note that Oprah’s brand of spirituality also, as Wendy Parkins points out, emerges as a response to the disenchantment of heterosexual women with the self-sacrificing ethic encouraged in discourses of romance and motherhood.

The Da Vinci Code takes a pseudo-feminist approach to spirituality from the New Age, arguing that there had been hidden tradition of secret spirituality, dedicated to celebrating a hazy version of the sacred feminine that has long been suppressed by the Church. Perhaps inevitably, given that he is not renowned as a feminist, Brown’s sacred feminine rests largely on the authority of recuperating heroic masculine figures like Leonardo Da Vinci.

Derrida suggests that one cannot make absolute distinctions between signifier and signified. However, “that this opposition cannot be radical or absolute does not prevent it from functioning, and even from being indispensable within certain limits—very wide limits” (19).

Derrida in “Des Tour De Babel” suggests the Tower of Babel story in the Hebrew Bible has traditionally worked as “the myth of the origin of myth, the metaphor of metaphor, the narrative of narrative, the translation of translation, and so on” (104). Curiously, however, he argues the sacred, however, is “transferable and untranslatable. There is only letter, and it is the truth of pure language, the truth as pure language” (133). He gives the example of prophecy, in which the event of the sacred merges with the act of language. This article is puzzling given Derrida’s penchant for demystifying the meta-narratives of a “pure” language, he seems in the concluding passages to re-establish ground for the sacred as transcendental signifier, as an untranslatable signature.

Though of course, some New Age movements will pastiche together some rather elaborate cosmologies to give themselves an ontological foundation.

Although it is arguable that a New Age transcendental signifier is at times like God, a sort of god after one has discarded the God of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The question of whether those Gods are, in fact, the same is one for those better suited to theological discourse, suffice to say, for the purposes of the average postmodern subject, the three are usually considered as one.

Though one should also note at this point the concurrent perception of New Age teachers as rip-off artists—cult-leaders intent on fleecing their followers for money,
power and sex. How this relates to the postmodern sacred is an interesting question, though the postmodern sacred is perhaps more comfortable in talking in a New Age vocabulary of personal happiness and fulfilment, it nevertheless must retain some scepticism towards the occasional attempt at a New Age meta-narrative.

Conversely, the postmodern sacred will also rely on a literalisation of metaphor or religious symbol, as in the oft-stated literalisation of the “high school is hell” metaphor in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

Suvin coins the term “estranged cognition” in order to describe the way that science fiction allows readers to perceive the world as new and unfamiliar. He argues that “in SF the attitude of estrangement—used by Brecht in a different way, within a still predominantly “realistic” context—has grown into the formal framework of the genre” (1979: 7). Suvin’s theorisation has been highly influential, Marxist theorists have followed his lead in suggesting that SF is constitutively more progressive than other fantastic texts, for its estrangement historicises the present more thoroughly. Carl Freedman for instance, distinguishes SF from the “irrationalist” estrangements of fantasy and horror (262); even as he seeks to find more properly historical estrangements in the fantasy work of Samuel Delaney.

We’re told exceptions do occur, that sometimes people don’t show up for their “appointment” with the Reapers. Rube says, “it’s rare but it happens” (“Reapercussions” 1.04).

Heelas argues that the New Age is marked by what he calls its perennialised outlook, the notion that “the same wisdom can be found at the heart of all religious traditions” (*New Age* 29).

Another example occurs in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. When a vampire asks Buffy, the champion of good and the subject presumed to know, if there’s any proof of the existence of God, she answers with characteristic irony, “nothing solid” (“Conversations With Dead People” 7.05). Importantly, this exchange occurs after she has died, gone to some kind of heaven and been returned by magic. In the postmodern sacred, death rarely provides concrete answers to theological questions.

The title of the series itself is interesting enough in positing a pop Buddhist or Hindu cyclical notion of time. Indeed, the central premise of the series is the that hero Rand is the re-incarnation of a legendary hero from another Age called The Dragon, who, now half-mad, has taken up residence in his brain. One should note the capitalisation of the names of Things and People is one formal feature of generic fantasy aimed at producing a sense of meaning, and is often tied to transcendental gesturing in the genre.

I exclude here the later series which did not feature both agents.

Roswell has become clearly the most recognisable of UFO locations, a fact played out for instance, in the television series *Roswell* which ran from 1999 to 2002. Set in the present, *Roswell* is the story of three alien teens with supernatural powers living in Roswell, New Mexico. The trio believe themselves to have been involved in the infamous alien incident, having been “incubated” on Earth for 40 years and found as human-appearing 6 year olds 10 years prior to the action of the series commencing. The series reads like a mixture of *The X Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer’s* teenage angst, albeit without the texture of either.

Paul Heelas makes this point about the New Age’s synthesis of differing traditions. He notes, though, that the New Age resolves these differences by recourse to the primacy of the self, a constant emphasis on “self-spirituality.” For New Agers,
“autonomy and freedom are highly valued; and authority lies with the experience of the Self, or more broadly, the natural realm” (Heelas 29).

27 Incidentally LeGuin’s series pioneers the idea of a wizarding school 20 years before J.K Rowling’s Harry Potter series.

28 See Darcee McLaren and Jennifer Porter’s “(Re)Covering Sacred Ground” article, for a discussion of New Age spirituality in Star Trek: Voyager. Chronologically, Voyager was brought into production after Deep Space Nine.

29 Robert Asa, for instance, suggests that “classic Star Trek, like the radical theologians of the 1960s, declared that God was dead and enthroned science in the Deity” (51).

30 Of course, the following series suggest other changes. Whilst Voyager is a return to Next Generation style adventuring, and is largely devoid of originality, the latest Star Trek spin-off Enterprise is interesting for another reason. Enterprise is a prequel to the original series, set several hundred years before, before the foundation of The Federation. As such, it avoids the utopian elements of the original series, and instead raises Star Trek’s usual subtextual imperialism into an explicitly American, jingoistic narrative.

31 Žižek says “since the ideological universe of Star Wars is the New Age pagan universe, it is quite logical that the central figure of Evil should echo Christ—within the pagan horizon, the Event of Christ is the ultimate scandal” (2006: 101).

32 See for an extreme example, the cartoon sitcom The Family Guy. Family Guy not only implicitly draws on The Simpsons and its referents in 1950s household sitcoms, but explicitly references many other shows (Star Trek, and The Brady Bunch to name just a few) in constant “flashes” on the family’s TV screen, memories etc.
Chapter Three

Of Gods and Monsters: Literalising Metaphor in the Postmodern Sacred

“God doesn’t want you… but I still do”
Darla, to Angel (Angel, “Dear Boy” 2.05)

“We separate angel and monster to our peril”
(Ingebritson, 2001: xiv)

Whilst in the previous chapter, I argued that the postmodern sacred’s truth claims in its fictional worlds consist largely of the transcendental signifier, in this chapter I shall look at how the postmodern sacred literalises metaphor—in particular, how the “real” textual presence of gods and monsters works. What precisely does it mean for the postmodern sacred to dramatise the presence of gods, demons, angels, and so on?
It is often hard to know what to make of the literal presence of Gods in the postmodern sacred. On the one hand, it often seems to confirm the lack of belief in anthromorphised Gods, since, as Darko Suvin points out, elements of religion only become available for textual appropriation once belief in them has in some measure died. The transformation from religion into “myth,” of course, already implies the loss of belief in the myth. It’s unsurprising that the living beliefs of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions have a certain kind of ambivalence towards representation since as Baudrillard points out, there is the sense that the simulacrum nature of representation will in some way dissolve the possibility of God (Baudrillard, 1994: 4). Jews and Christians maintain the impossibility of truly representing God, and the Muslim tradition adds the law against showing the Prophet. Of course, Western tradition has nevertheless represented God—one usually thinks of the patriarchal figure with white beard and booming voice—but as often as not, the fantastic texts that make up the postmodern sacred have tended to prefer the polytheistic pantheons of pagan mythologies such as the Greek, Norse, Celtic and so on.

Whilst the postmodern sacred will occasionally explicitly draw on “pagan” traditions such as the Greek or Norse myths, it is more generally polytheistic in the sense that it relativises religious traditions, each being equally valid. As Paul Heelas points out, the New Age has a perennialised outlook in which each tradition contains its own truths. In this kind of syncretic outlook, monotheisms remain powerful symbolic traditions, however their claims to exclusive purchase on the transcendental
truth are to be minimised and largely ignored (except of course as a reminder of the problematic history of organised religion that postmodern spirituality opposes. Arguably then, we are not dealing with simply a *return* to pre-Christian polytheism, we are dealing with a post-Christian polytheistic pop culture, one that feels free to pastiche from many different religious and mythical traditions. Of course, Judaism is haunted by the ghost of polytheism, since God’s “thou shalt have no other God before me” commandment clearly presumes the existence of other gods. Christianity, too, can be said to in some ways be polytheistic given the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity to the Christian tradition. However, what separates the two from postmodern polytheism is an ostensible commitment to the monism of the one true God.

A consummate example of postmodern polytheism would be the shifting employment of religious iconography by the pop singer Madonna. Born an Italian-American Catholic, Madonna’s earlier work (for example “Like A Virgin,” “Like A Prayer”) draws explicitly on Catholic Christian iconography. As time progresses, Madonna’s appropriations include a Hindu prayer on “Ray of Light” and Jewish Kabbalah on “Isaac” (and it’s striking that the celebrity approved version of Kabbalah often downplays its Judaism for a more New Age friendly pop-Buddhist version of “spirit” or “overcoming the ego”). Madonna’s shifts illustrate her exemplary postmodern ease with the deployment of religious images without the need to remain fixed in one religious tradition. Similarly, they illustrate the individualisation process as described by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, for the management of the “life biography” is best exemplified by the often contradictory and relativised meanings attached to the Madonna public persona. In the marketplace of postmodern religion and spirituality, today’s ultimate truth quickly becomes yesterday’s out-dated belief, thus the postmodern response is to not believe *too hard* (and for liberals isn’t that part
of the scandal of “fundamentalism,” that belief in any one truth remains possible in late capitalism?).

Given the heretical polytheism of postmodern polytheism, it’s not by accident that Slavoj Žižek savages the New Age as a contemporary form of Gnosticism, for the claims of contemporary New Agers and the Gnostics can be strikingly similar.⁶ Elaine Pagels’ groundbreaking work points out that the Gnostics themselves “claimed to offer every initiate direct access to God of which the priests and bishops might be ignorant,” (Pagels, 1979: 27) a claim also made by contemporary New Age mystics.⁷ The success of the Da Vinci Code has succeeded immensely in acquainting the general public with Gnostic ideas, indeed it is highly likely that the near future will see more pop-culture works drawing on the discoveries of Nag Hammadi. The postmodern sacred’s emphasis on the self, and the primacy of the self’s experience, means by its very nature it is able to absorb practically any religious or spiritual tradition for its textual pastiches.
The Corporeal Image

The mysterious return of the 4400 (“Pilot” 1.01)

“I pray the Lord my soul to keep, what about the rest of me?” (Her Space Holiday, “The Weight of the World,” The Past Presents the Future)

In an interview with the formidable triangle of John D. Caputo, Kevin Hart and Yvonne Sherwood, Jacques Derrida asks a number of pertinent questions to the subject of representing God(s). He says:

What are we doing when we name God? What are the limits of this naming? Now we know that in many Abrahamic traditions God is nameless, beyond the name. In Jewish traditions, God is the empty place, beyond any name. But we name the nameless. We name what is nameless. And when we name “what is not,” what is or is not nameless, what do we do? (Caputo et al 2005: 37)

Derrida is, of course, talking here in a theological sense, concerned with the possibility of talking of God in a theological or philosophical sense, the possibility of
God-as-truth. However, his questions illuminate a paradox of the postmodern sacred, the gap between the transcendental signifier and the frequent corporeal representation of Gods. To modify Derrida’s question into a pop-culture context, what do we do when we name and show what is not?

What is or is not nameless is often also a question of what is or is not corporeal, the real-world referent to which the sign refers. Corporeality is, after all, often the precondition through which objects are presumed to exist (and hence become nameable). If one can see or touch a thing then it exists, if not, then one must see its effects (as with the wind). Typically theologians and lay people alike have used the second reasoning by which to “prove” God’s existence, by pointing to his effect on the natural world, history and people. Of course, that proof lies largely in the eye of the beholder—the true believer might see God’s wrathful punishment in the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, whilst the sceptic might see a more prosaic combination of natural weather phenomena and human neglect.

Given that the literal presence of Gods (and their counter-balance monsters) has not been definitively proven to exist in the same way that, say, religious monuments dedicated to those Gods can be said to exist, it is arguable that Gods remain a construct of language and image. Whilst theorists like Foucault, Derrida and Butler have in various ways theorised the textuality of the “real world,” Gods remain as pure text—Baudrillardian simulations without a real-world referent. As Derrida’s concept of the transcendental signified suggests, much of religious tradition can be defined only by what it is not, the world of the profane and the corporeal. However, as Derrida argues regarding negative theology, that evacuation of the knowable corporeal nevertheless grounds itself in a transcendental referent, a restatement of a real divine Being in a way that Baudrillard, for instance, would certainly refuse. The
logic of negative theology is that we may not be able to describe God, since he is beyond our level of understanding and thus ultimately unknowable, but he nevertheless exists. For the secular West, however, and in this I would include people of religious belief as well, the possibility of a really existing divine is radically unthinkable in a certain sense, for if Jesus were to appear now, it is possible that he would be considered a cult-leader, a charlatan or even a madman. Or, possibly, given the postmodern condition, Jesus would become a celebrity.

Whilst it is true that many people believe literally in their religions, it is also true that religion exists as much as a metaphor than as literality. The appearance of the "body of Christ" in the Eucharist, for instance, is a metaphor; the body of Christ does not literally appear. Similarly, religion is almost entirely articulated through ordinary people (say, the Pope), the era of Gods, prophets, disciples and saints with supernatural abilities is long past. The appearance of a real, undeniable divinity—or even merely supernatural—would prove a massive rupture in the ontological foundation of reality, of scientific and philosophical knowledge.

The fact that the undeniable existence of the supernatural would considerably problematise our notions of "reality" is played out dramatically in the television series The 4400. The premise of the series is that 4400 people who have mysteriously disappeared over the last hundred years suddenly reappear on the shores of a lake in the American North-West. What makes this even more mysterious is that event begins by the tracking of what appears to be a comet, which then changes course and slows down until it appears as a ball of white light over the lake, then the ball seems to explode and a crowd of people appear through the mist. A conversation between two Homeland Security agents is suggestive of its X-Files-like slippage between the divine and the alien:
Diana Skouris: “there had to be some kind of intelligence behind it”

Tom Baldwin: “as in the hand of God? Or little green men?”

Skouris: “I’m not discounting anything” (“Pilot,” 1.01)

As the series progresses after this one, unexplainable event, it becomes apparent that the “returnees” have been endowed with superhuman abilities, such as healing, telekinesis, an ability to predict the future, and so on. In short, a not uncommon set of abilities of the sort often claimed in the real world by various prophets and holy figures. These abilities seem to have a largely positive, almost mystical, effect on the world; indeed one plot line centres on the immaculately conceived baby Isobel’s extraordinary powers.

The series thus initially investigates the implications of what a real, measurable (notably we see the event relayed through TV news reporting) supernatural event would actually cause. The uncertainty of the first episodes, however, is not sustained by the series, for by the end of the first season we find out that the 4400 were in fact taken by humans from the future and returned with superhuman powers in order to prevent the eventual demise of the human race. So what seems to be initially a radical rupture in Realist epistemology—the singular and unexplainable (re)appearance of the 4400—ends with the reassuring affirmation of human capability, as the superhuman abilities of the 4400 become explained by a narrative of the advanced technology of the future. Even this, however, is given a mystical spin, as the 4400’s abilities precipitate a kind of “butterfly effect” chain of events designed to improve the present.

What should be apparent, then, from the fictional treatment of the supernatural in texts like The 4400, is that even though postmodernity is marked by a noticeable anti-rationalist swing, nevertheless the burden of Enlightenment scepticism and
scientific rationalism remains heavy. There are many pre-modern beliefs that have been irrevocably banished as “superstition” (for instance, the magic powers of witches). What the postmodern sacred does, though, is temporarily suspend the “rational” laws of the universe that prohibit Gods and monsters from existence, dramatising for our pop-culture pleasure the possibility that such creatures can, in fact, really exist. It resuscitates some of those beliefs, albeit in modified ways, in the guise of the fictional (although if the texts themselves are fictional, the boundary between fact and fiction seems at times remarkably permeable in postmodern culture). While it frequently uses the transcendental signifier, the postmodern sacred also dramatises the existence of “real,” corporeal Gods. Gods, beings endowed with supernatural beings, walk on the screens of contemporary fantastic texts. Xena: Warrior Princess showed a host of Greek and Roman Gods, Buffy has Glory, an evil “hell-God,” and the two Stargate series have a complicated array of phoney Gods and transcendent beings. Constantine, which I shall turn to towards the end of the chapter, features a more Christian figuring of a transcendent unseen God, a very real Devil, and a duplicitous arch-angel Gabriel.

So, in the light of Enlightenment scepticism, the point is then that a corporeal God would require rather less belief than a transcendent one whose actions can appear second-hand. To represent a corporeal God or Goddess then, as the postmodern sacred so frequently does, is to attempt a text that in some ways mimics the holy texts of religious tradition, because it shows a more direct encounter between character and the sacred, unmediated by such texts as the Bible. It mimics the encounter of belief, but belief itself is always-already foreclosed by the generic expectation produced by reading and viewing fictional texts (and unreal texts most of all). One notable exception is the infamous “all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and
secret rituals in this novel are accurate” introduction to Dan Brown’s Da Vinci Code, which undoubtedly gave the book a veneer of non-fiction, thus shifting the boundaries of generic expectation for its readership. Largely however, the texts of the postmodern sacred are explicitly and unproblematically read as unreal. Thus the postmodern sacred’s representation of Gods is a play with the possibility of the corporeality of the transcendent, not an affirmation of itself.

Of course, Baudrillard would insist that the postmodern pastiche of religious symbols in fact dramatises the simulacral nature of religion. Paradoxically, in its seeming presence in the media, it exposes the death of God, for the divine has become just another symbol for appropriation. In that sense, Baudrillard is right, for the sacred has become another set of symbols for postmodern play. However, it does not therefore follow that postmodernism necessarily entails the death of belief—indeed it is arguable that religious fundamentalisms are inherently postmodern. Even as they rail against the postmodern world, they nevertheless use postmodernist strategies, relying on global media and the reign of the simulated symbol. However, the postmodern sacred is not to be confused with religious fundamentalisms, even as it is related to them in the same spiritual, post-rationalist postmodern turn. Unlike the various fundamentalisms which are marked by a seeming certainty, the postmodern sacred is caught somewhere between belief and unbelief, unwilling to discard or discount any symbolic tradition. The postmodern sacred, as I noted in my first chapter, is a play with belief, a belief by proxy diffused into a fictional text.

So that means of course that the postmodern sacred is different from religious texts such as the Torah or Qur’an in that it is not generally supposed to be believed in. For instance, the addition of “Jedi Knight” to the 2001 UK census list of religions does not in any way presuppose belief or practice (although talking with some Star Wars fans...).
Wars fans might lead you to believe otherwise!), merely a passionate attachment to the Star Wars text and a carnivalesque inversion of the categories of religion and entertainment. So the postmodern sacred’s representation of Gods and monsters must almost inevitably occur in non-realistic “secondary” worlds. This of course raises the question, is it now epistemologically possible to represent God in a Realist sense? Any postmodern representation must inevitably have to take into account the possibility, for instance, that the divine visitations of the past may have been undiagnosed mental illness (schizophrenia for instance).¹³

*Gods in the Postmodern Sacred*

*Bender talking with God (Futurama, “Godfellas” 3.20)*

The fantasy genre exemplifies the postmodern sacred’s use of Gods particularly well. While Gods are conspicuously absent from the genre’s most significant work, J.R.R Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings,¹⁴ more contemporary fantasy is not always so reticent. A number of interesting examples occur in the writings of the enormously popular David Eddings (and in his later works co-written by his wife
Leigh Eddings). Eddings’ initial, and most popular, fantasy series entitled The Belgariad features prominently the corporeal presence of Gods and other supernatural presence. The Belgariad is the fairly standard Sword-in-the-Stone style narrative of an orphan peasant boy named Garion (later known as Belgarion) who, over the course of the series, discovers that the Aunt who raised him and his itinerant grandfather are, in fact, the millennia-old disciples of the God Aldur. Garion learns that it is his destiny to slay the “evil” God Torak and become the ruler of a country named Riva and Overlord of the “good” countries of the West (as distinguished from Torak’s East). Readers will notice immediately the racial overtones of this geography, which is confirmed by the racial coding of Torak’s people as Asian(ised), and the West as white—variously, medieval English (the Arends), Viking (the Alorns), and Romanised (the Tolnedrans). As is common in many fantasy series, The Belgariad features an elaborate cosmology for its secondary world. The world of The Belgariad was created by the God “UL,” although it features 7 other Gods each worshipped by a race of people. All of these Gods appear at some point in the series, as well as in its sequel series The Mallorean, which concludes by replacing the dead Torak with a new God, Erriond.

Eddings’s series works in a number of ways. It provides firstly a comfortably conservative essentialist view of gender, race and sexuality. In doing so, it confirms Rosemary Jackson’s point about Tolkien-esque fantasy when she says that its historical perspective is that of the fairy tale, it does not have the ability to disturb the contemporary. Essentialism is, above all, unproblematic in Eddings—the series works not only to naturalise identity but to erase the conflict produced by hierarchies of gendered, raced and classed identities. In replacing one “evil” god with another “good” god, the 10 books of the Belgariad and the Mallorean work as a kind of racist
cosmological therapy, healing the wounds of a world disrupted by the appearance of racialised Other.

Secondly, the series works to produce an exceptional subject in the form of Garion, simultaneously ordinary (in terms of appearance, initial social status, egalitarian beliefs) and extraordinary (agent of prophecy, a King, slayer of a God). This fantasy of the ordinary/extraordinary arguably serves as a form of wish-fulfillment for the average, unexceptional postmodern reader. One wonders whether the postmodern egalitarian promise of celebrity—that anyone can be a celebrity given the right access to media, hence reality TV—is after-the-fact mapped back onto a pre-modern textual model of exceptional heroes selected by destiny.

Thirdly, the Belgariad is, like most fantasy series, highly generic, and thus makes heavy use of the characteristically postmodern method of textual pastiche.\(^{18}\) The Belgariad combines classical, medieval and invented tropes, endlessly pastiching, recontextualising and renaming various historical and mythical periods and figures to flesh out its world. These include: a Merlin style figure in the form of Belgarath the Sorcerer, heroic kings, medieval knights and damsels-in-distress, and various magical creatures such as trolls, harpies, unicorns, dryads, invented species such as “hrulgin” and “eldrakyn” and of course the ubiquitous dragon. Thus the pleasures of the Eddings text are to be found in the density of the secondary world building, the vertigo of cliché piled upon cliché, creating in the process a text seemingly built of sheer referentiality\(^{19}\) (although a conservative essentialist version of gender and a heteronormativity predicated on the utter expulsion of queers would probably explain much of its appeal as well).

Interestingly given the aforementioned absence of any kind of God in Lord of the Rings, the trope of corporeal gods (often taken from pagan pantheons) in modern
fantasy is fairly common. The existence of gods in The Belgariad is such that it is completely taken for granted—even though the gods have long since “withdrawn” from the world (only to re-appear intermittently). The gods may be considered capricious, and not worthy of worship, but their existence is not usually debated (although the heroes must at times manipulate various unbelieving skeptics with more worldly explanations). The heroes are largely disciples of a God, and interact with a number of other Gods, most prominently the “evil” God Torak. The Belgariad thus dramatises a world in which the “problem” of unbelief is entirely banished. For the postmodern reader, unable to trust with certainty in the meta-narratives of either scientific rationalism or traditional religion, the epistemological certainty of the corporeal God must be immensely seductive, providing the pleasure of the miraculous (not just tied to Gods but to the genre’s use of magic as well) without a real-world need for commitment or even belief.

Allied with the corporeal existence of Gods is a fundamental belief in Good and Evil. Garion lives with a “dry voice” in his head who guides him into his predestined place as champion of Good and fulfillment of prophecy. It should be noted that Garion’s shift in class status from farm boy to King in no way problematises the class structure, even as he espouses a more democratic ideal than the other medieval aristocracy. Like many fantasy texts, destiny is of extreme importance in The Belgariad, which is signaled by the chess referencing titles of the individual books. Prophecy guides Garion along his path, it is necessary. The various companions that aid Garion throughout his quest are all given significant names like “the Guide” or “the Eternal Man.” It is arguable that this notion of destiny is a vague reworking of a Christian notion of divine Providence, though it is just as clearly the legacy of heroic epics like Beowulf and the Iliad, in which superhuman heroes are
marked out by destiny from birth. Interestingly in Eddings there is the suggestion that
the Gods are as beholden to destiny as humanity, which seems to problematise the
radical separation between human and God that is presupposed by the notion of the
Judeo-Christian transcendental God. Regardless, the series can be seen as emblematic
of the tendency of much of the fantasy genre to explicitly stage the presence of real,
knowable, corporeal Gods in textual form.

Another example of the corporeal God occurs in the Futurama episode
“Godfellas” (3.20). “Godfellas” sees the robot Bender, adrift in space, become God to
a tiny race of aliens called Shrimpkins, who have become lodged on his stomach.20
Because robots in Futurama require alcohol to function, Bender gives his one
commandment to his faithful servant Malachi—“God needs booze.” The Shrimpkins
build a brewery which maims many of Bender’s followers, while pestilence kills
much of the rest. Bender is moved to tears by their plight, but his tear-drop is the size
of a river to the Shrimpkins, which washes away Malachi’s son. Bender saves the
child—“this looks like a job... for God!”—which results in the rest of the Shrimpkins
praying for miracles of their own. One village prays for wealth, so Bender flips down
a coin which accidentally crushes them to death. Farmers pray for sunlight, so Bender
gives them light which sets their fields on fire. He blows the fire out, which also
blows the people away into space. A breakaway “heathen” group on Bender’s
backside ceases believing him in him, so the faithful Malachi begs Bender to
intervene. By this point, however, Bender has decided to leave matters in the hands
of the Shrimpkins—“every time I intervene, I only make things worse. You’re better
off solving your own problems.” Non-intervention, though, ends with an apocalyptic
war between the two groups. Bender floats on in space, where he meets the real God,
who appears as a giant, flickering constellation of stars. God commiserates with
Bender about his struggles with divinity—“you were doing well until everyone died”—and proposes a surprisingly funny and sophisticated theory about divinity:

*God:* being God isn’t easy. If you do too much, people get dependent on you. And if you do nothing, they lose hope. You have to use a light touch, like a safe cracker or pick-pocket.

*Bender:* Or a guy who burns down a bar for the insurance money

*God:* Yes, if you make it look like an electrical thing. When you do things right, people won’t be sure you’ve done anything at all.

Though God sends Bender back to earth in what Leela calls “by a fair margin the least likely thing that’s ever happened,” the episode ends firmly with an affirmation of human agency. As Bender says, “you can’t count on God for jack. He pretty much said so himself.”

Whilst this episode renders the notion of a God active in human events decidedly suspect, it nevertheless suggests that miraculous is the true province of the divine. The episode concludes with God repeating, to the camera, “when you do things right, people won’t be sure you’ve done anything at all.” God’s intervention into the mundane (in the form of the unlikely event of returning Bender to Earth) works clearly as a (textual) hierophany, a brief intrusion of the sacred into the profane. Moreover, God’s repeated affirmation of divine inscrutability suggests that the sacred can *only* ever occur erratically; to do otherwise would interfere with free will. Most subversively, it affirms agnosticism as a legitimately spiritual position (since “people won’t be sure” of the existence of God).

“Godfellas” thus dramatises a number of interesting points about the sacred. Firstly, it has the postmodern sacred’s characteristic skepticism towards organised religion and dogmatic truth, as well as a fair helping of heretical humour. Bender’s attempts to be a good God for the Shrimpkins are a comedy of errors that only end in disaster. The genocidal sectarianism of the Shrimpkins might be somewhat of an
atheist cliché (atheists often cite religious wars like the Crusades as evidence against religion on the whole, rather than separating between violent, dogmatic interpretations of religion and the traditions themselves), but it is nevertheless a pertinent one in these days of the much-touted “Clash of Civilisations.” Like many other postmodern texts, the episode suggests that institutional churches are of little practical use. Fry visits the “First Amalgamated Church” (a combination of the Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist faiths) and asks the priest “is there anything religion can do to help find my friend?” The priest replies, “well, we could join together in prayer.” Fry asks, again, pointedly, “uh huh.. but is there anything useful we could do?” Not only are churches of little use on a day-to-day basis, but the episode suggests that real spiritual experience is to be found outside of church, anyway. Bender finds God alone in an unoccupied part of space, just as saints in the Christian tradition found God alone in the desert. Like other postmodern texts featuring corporeal Gods, Futurama at once affirms the possibility of God and distances itself with more than a dose of irony.

Of course, it would be a mistake to read Futurama utterly seriously—indeed to do so is to miss the point. The show is, after all, a science fiction comedy. Futurama is a postmodern text par excellence, redolent with irony, pastiche and lightning quick references to other pop-culture texts. Whilst Futurama, like all science fiction texts, has an estranged relationship to the real, the series frequently moves between a satirical comment on the real and a playful exploration of the possibilities of its fictional universe. “Godfellas,” one suspects, lies somewhere in between the two, a disavowed comment on real-world spirituality that begs not to be taken seriously.
The science-fiction series *Stargate SG-1* takes the motif of the corporeal God from another angle. Whereas *Futurama*’s God appears as a flickering constellation, many of *Stargate*’s “Gods” appear as human, albeit with deep, synthetically altered voices. *Stargate* provides an interesting mix between the transcendental signified and a rationalist, Realist demystification of “primitive” religion. The series dramatises Arthur C. Clarke’s Third Law, that “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,” taking the premise to its logical conclusion—that any sufficiently advanced technology would be indistinguishable from divinity. This occurs largely in the form of an alien species called the Goa’uld, a parasitic race that take control over their human hosts, who remain unable to speak or use their bodies in any way (though the original personality remains hidden deep in the unconscious). The Goa’uld use such advanced technology that they are able to pose as Gods to their pre-modern worshippers, enslaving much of the galaxy and of course threatening the Earth on a regular basis. Besides the usual SF props of interstellar space-ships
(shaped like pyramids in this case), personal shields and laser guns, the technology of the Goa’uld also gives them the superhuman seeming abilities of life spans of several thousand years, and the ability to die and then be brought back to life.\textsuperscript{26} The personae of the Goa’ud are taken for the most part from Egyptian mythology, although Hindu, Chinese and Babylonian Gods have also been used.

Significantly, \textit{Stargate} poses another alien race called the Asgard, who have themselves taken their personae from Norse mythology, as the “good aliens” to be opposed to the diverse but racially Othered Goa’uld. Although they are initially contacted in the form of holographic simulations of Norse Gods like Thor, the Asgard themselves appear as the familiar “little grey men” of alien abduction narratives. Being both powerful and benevolent, the Asgard in some ways fit what Hugh Ruppersberg calls “the alien messiah” (32) model. Colonel O’Neill’s first visit to the Asgard home world is rendered in blurry white, a definite numinous experience. And the Asgard do save Earth more than a few times over the course of the ten series. Yet the Asgard prove to be as fallible as the Goa’uld, unable to save themselves from their Replicator enemies without help from the SG:1 team. It is arguable that the redemption offered by the alien messiah struggles to fit the constraints of episodic television, which must continually affirm human capability instead.

Besides advancing a dubious politics of race\textsuperscript{27} and a largely benevolent American imperialist agenda,\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Stargate} at once affirms the real presence of supernatural beings from many of Earth’s religious (mostly dead) traditions, and works to demystify those apparent divinities, pointing out the fallibility and mortality of both the Goa’uld and the Asgard. On the one hand, it is a play with belief, namely, that the various religions were in fact literally true, albeit in disguised ways. In this sense, \textit{Stargate} seems an attempt to wed myth to post-Enlightenment rationalism, recalling
some of the more bizarre New Age alien-based versions of spirituality (Chariots of the Gods for example). But unsurprisingly, Stargate, on the whole, comes down on the side of an Enlightenment-based scientific rationality and works to problematise belief, although given its American context it takes pains to separate its critique from that of the Judeo-Christian God. 29

The episode “Absolute Power” (4.17) however, is a notable exception, featuring a mystic boy whose attire and demeanour clearly reference Tibetan Buddhism, with his supernatural wisdom, an ability to transform into pure white light, and a habit of speaking in cryptic metaphors. Similarly, “Meridian” (5.21) sees Daniel Jackson, one of the key characters of the show, die but “ascend” to a higher level of being. This event begins the series’ pre-occupation with a race called “The Ancients,” the race of aliens that originally built the Stargate system, who had themselves discarded their physical form and become pure energy. Builders of the lost city of Atlantis (which becomes the setting for a Stargate spin-off), the Ancients developed technology far more advanced beyond the Goa’uld, who were mere scavengers after the Ancients disappeared. When Jackson eventually re-appears, he has both supernatural powers and incredible knowledge, but the Ancients it seems, live by a code of non-intervention in the free will of “lower” beings. Needless to say, eventually the heroes of SG:1 find this ethic impossible to understand, and Daniel himself is sent back to the human plane after intervening in the Earth war with the Goa’uld Anubis.

In an interesting combination of pop-spirituality and scientific rationality, ascension in Stargate is suggested to be both a matter of evolution, and of meditation into the right psychological state. In a Stargate Atlantis episode entitled “The Tao of Rodney” (3.15), Dr Rodney McKay, the supreme scientific rationalist on Atlantis, is
caught in an accident with an Ancient machine that hastens his evolution, to the point where his choices are death or ascension. He says:

> the universe may seem mystical to those without understanding, when in truth anything and everything can be quantified. Look, all that hocus-pocus is just a way of getting the brain into the proper electro-chemical state to allow the final physical evolution, at which point the matter which makes up this body will turn into pure energy.

McKay attempts to give a rational explanation for what is otherwise suggested to be a mystical experience, measuring his brain’s synaptic levels to see that he reaches the right state for ascension. However, McKay struggles to “let go” enough to make the spiritual transformation that Daniel Jackson does in “Meridian.” The more sympathetically inclined Dr Weir argues with McKay, in which she makes the characteristically New Age distinction between spirituality and religion:

> **Weir:** I know, spirituality to you is a load of mumbo-jumbo, but it does help people find peace with themselves.
> **McKay:** but you have to believe.
> **Weir:** I’m not talking about religion. I’m talking about shedding yourself of guilt, of anger, of ill-feeling, of anything that makes you feel shame. And then you can focus all of your energy on ascending.

On the point of death though, McKay finds himself floating in a “big empty space”, where he “momentarily thought of how difficult it is to rid oneself of ego, and that existence without the individuality of consciousness would be pointless.” In that space, of course, McKay thinks of a way to return his body to its usual, non-evolved self, choosing to live rather than ascend. Both Weir and McKay’s descriptions clearly evoke a version of “Eastern” spirituality, suggesting spiritual progress to be about “letting go” of negative emotions. The episode sees a number of characters make New Age style comments—Weir suggests Rodney is struggling to accept the problem “can’t be solved with science,” military commander Shepherd advises Rodney
“release his burden” and helps him meditate, while the stoic soldier Ronan tries “not to let things I can’t change bother me.” So, whilst Stargate infrequently evokes “real” mystical experience (as opposed to the advanced technology which it usually uses), when it does so, it does so clearly outside of the bounds of traditional Christian theology. “Real” spiritual experience thus remains only possible within the terms of the amorphous transcendental signified “Spirit” that characterises New Age movements.

So, while the transcendental signifier tends to be the postmodern sacred’s attempt at an ultimate truth claim for its universes, the corporeal God is a much less grandiose claim, for the corporeal God is almost always merely one of a number of supernatural entities. Whilst the New Age-ised postmodern sacred sees almost any spiritual tradition as possessing some kind of truth (or of expressing the same eternal truth in a different fashion) it nevertheless retains the typical postmodern inability to hold firmly to any meta-narrative. It remains profoundly ambivalent as to the possibility of belief, playing with the corporeality of Gods but unable to truly concede their existence. Anthromorphic Gods are very much considered part of the past (and its attendant patriarchal, homophobic and racist baggage), the New Age vocabulary of Spirit much less so.

The postmodern sacred marks, then, not just the collapse of the separation between sacred and profane but the return of the supernatural to the (post)modern. Theorists of the Gothic have noted that the genre works in part as a return of the repressed, which is suggestive in both psychoanalytic and textual terms. It’s easy to see how the Gothic might betray a fear of the return of the aristocracy, or the French Revolutionary Reign of Terror, but it is just as easy to see the Gothic return of the aspects of the supernatural that the Enlightenment was said to have banished as
“superstition.” The postmodern sacred, however, takes that Gothic return and applies it not just to monsters, but to the monotheistic God, to angels and to “pagan”\textsuperscript{31} Gods as well. In doing so, it betrays an insight that perhaps Gods and monsters are not so far apart as has been traditionally thought.

\textit{Monsters}

Monsters occur throughout the postmodern sacred, they are the counter-balance to the super-natural “good” of these texts. These monsters are almost always taken from myths and legends—dragons, werewolves, vampires and so on—although some, like the Gravelings in \textit{Dead Like Me}, are original\textsuperscript{32} and specific to their texts. Literary scholar Edward J Ingebretson begins his work \textit{At Stake} with the insight that angels and monsters are more closely related than has typically been thought. He says:

Fear and dread, of course, are traditional markers of divinity. In this monsters are more like angels than not. On the other hand, angels, in the terror they inspire (see Titian’s \textit{Annunciation}, for example), are more akin to monsters than not. Indeed, a characteristic of all angelic visitations is that they are terrifying. Scripture tells us that ritual salutation of the angel is “Be not afraid!” The regularity of this greeting suggests that a bracing fear should mark the angel’s visit, since it betokens mystery as well as grace; since the angel challenges as well as comforts. (Ingebretson, 2001: xiii)

Ingebretson’s point is a well-made one, and suggests that any analysis of the sacred will need to take account of the co-mingling between religious awe and the awful that discourses of the spiritual should provide. The sentimentalising of angels as “guardian angels” clearly sees the sacred stripped of its potential for terror. As Mark Edmundson bitingly suggests, contemporary depictions of angels are the “spiritual equivalents of smiley faces” (80). Whilst the postmodern sacred is rife with examples...
of these sorts of “facile transcendence,” it is arguable, too, that the postmodern sacred is also an attempt at the sublime—that is, an attempt at presenting the unpresentable.34

The postmodern sacred, then, depends on both images of the transcendental and the monstrous, whilst there are indeed differences between the two; they are nevertheless necessarily dependent upon one another. Judith Halberstam points out that “monsters have to be everything that the human is not and, in producing the negative of human, make way for the invention of the human as white, male, middle class, and heterosexual” (22). This invention of the human clearly applies to the postmodern sacred’s heroes, whose heroism oftens lies in their affirmation of the normative (and concurrent banishing of the non-normative abject as embodied in monsters). And it’s not overstating the case to suggest that often the superhuman in the form of the hero is merely that same construction of the human writ large. Think of Superman, whose affirmation of “truth, justice and the American way,” is merely a celebratory version of straight, white, middle-class masculinity tied to discourses of criminality and the nation-state.

The television series Dark Angel ties together both senses of the monstrous that Ingebretson describes. The title refers not only to the black hair of the heroine Max Guevera, and to her Latino ethnicity, but to the dual status of the character. Max is both monster—she is the product of genetic manipulation by a secret government organisation called Manticore, bred and trained to be a supersoldier—and angel, as she works in traditional super-hero mode to correct the injustices of an post-apocalyptic near-future.35 Dark Angel at once plays with racist fears of miscegenation (not un-coincidentally, Max is part-cat, and goes into “heat,” literalising the stereotype of the animalised, over-sexed Latina) as well as suggesting
that traditional models of the human (white, male) have become insufficient. And of course, one can see in the dual figure of Max the simultaneously fear and desire that the “kick-arse” post-feminist heroine inspired for many straight male viewers, the interplay between the sexually-coded “hotness” and the fear of being dominated by the supernaturally strong heroine. Whilst Max is physically strong and psychologically capable, the straight white men of *Dark Angel* are either ineffectual—the rich, wheel-chair bound Logan and the uptight Normal—or Evil, the Bad Father head of Manticore, Colonel Lydecker.

The Buffy spin-off *Angel* shows the vacillation between monster and angel in even starker relief than *Dark Angel*, with its central conceit of the character Angel, the vampire with a soul. Angel is cursed by gypsies with a soul, which he can lose upon experiencing a moment of perfect happiness, in which case he transforms into the soul-less Angelus, a violent and brutal killer. Angel works as a private investigator to “help the helpless,” trying to atone for the crimes (sins?) he committed as Angelus. *Angel* is quite clearly a narrative of redemption. Whilst the series usually has a clear demarcation between the personas of Angel and Angelus, it nevertheless maintains a continuous tension between the two, contriving on numerous occasions to resuscitate Angelus. Angel must remain constantly vigilant, guarding against the desires that trigger his transformation into Angelus—namely, sexual desire, which effects his initial change in *Buffy* when he and Buffy sleep together. This fraught, guilt stricken relationship to sexual desire, needless to say, is remarkably Augustinian, where “spontaneous sexual desire [exists] as the proof and penalty for original sin” (Pagels, 1989: 112). In naming the distinct personalities, and maintaining a tension between the two, *Angel* foregrounds the dual nature of the monster and the angel, even as it points out that artificiality of the separation.
Nina Auerbach argues compellingly that vampires embody the particular fears of their immediate milieus into which they are published. She points out that that “since vampires are immortal, they are free to change incessantly” (5). Auerbach traces the cultural anxieties which vampires embody—from the “dangerously close friends” (6) of pre-Dracula English writers like Byron (11) to the Reagan-esque vampire of American films in the 1980s affected/infected by the AIDS epidemic. Vampires offer a dizzying array of cultural fears, from Marx’s famous image of the capitalism-as-vampire, to more predictable fears of racial miscegenation, the “monstrous” working class, phallic women and effeminate men and so on. Whilst it is beyond the remit of this thesis to fully explore the capacity of monsters to personify cultural fears, they are of course highly significant for the study of popular culture.

Judith Halberstam in Skin Shows suggests that, given their multi-significations, for critics to attempt to pin monsters to one specific meaning (say, Dracula as capitalist) is a reductive and flawed critical enterprise, one that the texts themselves refuse (84). She says, “What we should resist at all costs, therefore, is the impulse to make the monster stabilise otherness. What the monster does [. . .] is to call into question the project of interpretation that seeks to fix meaning in the body of the monster” (84). Implicit in Halberstam’s work is a warning that the attentive critic should not, in their haste to ascribe metaphorical readings, ignore the corporeality of monsters; that is, the affective response of the reader/viewer to the literal presence of creatures who do not, can not, exist in the real world (and in Realist texts of the same).

Halberstam’s Skin Shows, while problematically shifting its historical perspective from nineteenth century Gothic novels to late twentieth century splatter films with nary a point in-between, is nevertheless highly useful in thinking through
contemporary approaches to the monstrous. As she points out, late twentieth century films like *Silence of the Lambs*

reproduce the terms, conditions and technologies of nineteenth-century horror but tend to shift the position of monstrosity within those narratives. The monster, eventually, is no longer totalising. The monstrous body that once represented everything is now represented as potentially meaning anything—it may be the outcast, the outlaw, the parasite, the pervert, the embodiment of uncontrollable sexual and violent urges, the foreigner, the misfit. (27)

Implicit in Halberstam’s statement here is a Jamesonian acknowledgement of pastiche. Postmodern horror might pastiche older signifiers of monstrosity but the meanings of such monstrosity have shifted significantly. Postmodern monstrosity here is figured as an excess of meaning, a movement from one signifier to another to another (there *is* nothing outside of the text).

Halberstam approvingly quotes Oscar Wilde’s “those who go beneath the surface do so at their own peril” (178), which is indicative of her own argument that postmodern horror is a genre of surfaces, a play of signs, whether they be textual or corporeal. The monstrous is very much a monstrosity of technology, for as Halberstam says:

the appeal of the Gothic text [. . .] lies in its uncanny power to reveal the mechanisms of monster production. Like the bolt through the neck of Frankenstein’s monster in the modern horror film, the technology of monstrosity is written upon the body. And the artificiality of the monster denaturalises in turn the humanness of its enemies. (106)

Those Gothic technologies end up scrambling the binaries of a misogynist and heterosexist world—between self and other, male and female, straight and queer, white and black, human and inhuman. Halberstam argues that both the heroes (Stretch) and the monsters (Buffalo Bill, Leatherface) of postmodern horror films fashion posthuman bodies for themselves, suturing new technologies onto the old.
Halberstam’s project, then, is a similar one. She says that “by refusing to make the human into a refuge from monstrosity, this book imagines a posthuman monstrosity that is partial, compromised, messy and queer” (188). One wonders, however, that even given the potential of an affective response to such queer posthumanity, whether a still dominant humanism will largely re-inscribe those bodies as monstrous. The question, of course, hinges on whether the normative closure of many Gothic texts simply re-instates the “normal” or whether the Gothic code scrambling that Halberstam describes so vividly has problematised the normative beyond the hope of re-habilitation. Here I find myself perhaps more pessimistic than Halberstam, for though it is true that part of the pleasure of the Gothic is a partly (pre-dominantly?) disavowed affective response to a monstrosity of Otherness, just as surely part of the pleasure is the inevitable demise of the Other—the Other being violently put back in its place. While Halberstam’s reading is a sophisticated work arguing for subversive acts of reading by women, queers and people of colour, she also understates the ideological conservatism that Gothic texts can provoke.

Nevertheless, Halberstam’s work is an imaginative and intriguing reflection on the Gothic and the categories of human and monstrous. Skin Shows suggests that, first and foremost, one should resist the easy moralising that Gothic texts can provoke, the apparently straight-forward relationship between monstrosity and the immoral. Monstrosity is, all too frequently, the visible sign of a subject guilty even prior to committing a crime. Although many of the texts I have analysed are not specifically Gothic, that insight is nevertheless widely applicable, given that the postmodern sacred is always constructing monsters for its heroes to fight. The Gothic always arrives as a moment of utter terror in the postmodern sacred text, be it the demonic imagery of Mordor in Lord of the Rings, the intermingled awe and terror at
the appearance of the alien in The X-Files. Any analysis of unreal texts must account for the generic mixing between Gothic, horror, science fiction and fantasy. ⁴⁰

Whilst I have argued there is a strong link between Gods (and other sacred creatures like angels) and monsters, arguably Gods are less diverse in the meanings they carry. Whilst Gothic monsters contain our cultural anxieties writ large, Gods are precisely the inverse. They do indeed function as “meaning-making machines” as Halberstam terms it (22), but they are usually meanings of a very different kind—as images of “goodness,” desirability and cultural privilege. These privileges almost inevitably produce the ideal (angelic, pure) subject as the same straight white male subject that Halberstam argues is inversely produced by the Gothic—or produce a passive, desexualised and idealised white female subject (as personified in the Virgin Mary). Thus the conventional image of Jesus, for instance, betrays a racial bias at the heart of Christian representation. Whilst historians have argued that by today’s standards Jesus would be considered a person of colour, representation has and continued to portray Jesus as a white man.

It is not surprising, then, that Gods and angels are perhaps less likely to inspire the constant shift of meanings than monsters. Gender, sexuality, race and class are less fluid than in the Gothic, where multiple versions of these can exist in the same text, indeed the Gothic in its incoherence threatens to destabilise all meaning by simultaneously telling too much and not enough ⁴¹ (Halberstam 23). Gods and angels do, however, shift over time, if more slowly than monsters, indeed postmodern texts often take great glee in their revision. For instance, God has been envisioned as a woman in Dogma (played by Alanis Morissette), and as a black man in the woeful Jim Carrey “comedy” Bruce Almighty (played by Morgan Freeman). And, as my previous chapter has argued, most significant of all has been the New Age
precipitated shift away from the figure of God into an amorphous, non-corporeal conceptualisation of “spirit.”

Angels, too, have seen a shift in their representations. Whilst traditionally they have been the subject of both awe and dread, they have more recently been considerably domesticated (Edmundson 80). Indeed, while it is true that angels have been largely inherited from Christianity, today’s angels have been disconnected from that context and now, more often than not, are consumed in a detraditionalised and de-institutionalised fashion. Angels are frequently used as signifiers of the transcendent—for instance, in their sentimentalisation as “guardian angels”—without that necessarily implying the existence of a sovereign God, or Christ, and so on.

One text that explicitly restores the dread to angels is Tony Kushner’s Angels in America. Whilst Christian conservatives have been at pains to insist on the utter irreconcilability of Christianity and queers, Kushner foregrounds the homoerotic trace of Christianity. Angels appear as the harbinger of doom in Kushner, as well as hope for the queer community after the decimation of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. Interestingly, in imbuing angels with the dual sense of awe and dread, Kushner’s text is the exception; far more common is the sentimental and comforting image of the angel in such pop-culture texts as Touched By An Angel. Thus Kushner’s work is a kind of deconstructive reading of the Bible—simultaneously faithful and heretical. As a/theologian Mark C Taylor says, “an a/theology that draws on deconstructive philosophy will invert established meaning and subvert everything once deemed holy. It will be utterly transgressive” (1984: 6). Similarly, Ingebretson’s reading of the Matthew Shepard case inverts the economy of the sacred and the profane, showing how easily the profane queer “monster” Matthew Shephard can be transcribed into an angelic, Christ-inflected martyr.
It’s not surprising then, that the separation between Gods and monsters in the postmodern sacred begins to fall apart. The postmodern sacred returns the supernatural in a fundamentally polytheistic way—the simultaneous return of the God of fundamentalisms, the transcendental signified of New Age and pop-Buddhism, the rediscovery of Gnosticism, the co-mingling between monstrous and angelic. Whilst fundamentalists are at pains to distinguish themselves from the rest (and of course manifest a number of important differences), they are nevertheless part of the same cultural moment, a moment in which the postmodern distrust of Enlightenment meta-narratives has produced a vast number of post and anti rationalist offspring. Perhaps it is unsurprising then that we see sometimes a peculiarly literal approach to the text shared by both the postmodern sacred and the fundamentalists that generally oppose its “witchcraft.”
Literalising metaphor—making the text embodied—is another key textual strategy of the postmodern sacred. This occurs in terms of place as well as supernatural entities. The movie *Constantine*, starring *The Matrix*’s Keanu Reeves, is an interesting, if flawed, text that moves between cosmic “dimensions.” Adapted to film from the comic-book *Hellrazer*, *Constantine* is indicative of a supernatural comic-book approach to the after-life (see also *Hellboy*), a visual corporeality to heaven, hell, purgatory and so on. The titular character John Constantine is a supernatural detective, unable to enter heaven because of his own suicide. Constantine attempts to buy his way into heaven by killing as many demon “half-breeds” that cross-over into the human dimension as possible. The movie poses heaven and hell as literal places, dimensions of existence that both overlap with the human and that exist outside of it.
Like the TV series *Angel*, with which it shares some striking similarities, *Constantine*’s real world setting is Los Angeles, the City of Angels. Interestingly, *Constantine* imagines hell as a version of a Los Angeles freeway. In the DVD extras for the film, the director points out the hell scenes were conceived as a perpetual version of the first seconds after a nuclear explosion. Hell, then, could be considered a post-apocalyptic version of Los Angeles, or at the very least a Los Angeles in decay. In making Los Angeles hell, *Constantine* plays with some established conventions of religious visual texts. Throughout its history Los Angeles has been conceived as both heaven and hell, a place of eternal sunshine and apocalyptic disaster (especially in the form of earthquakes), the place where stars are born and dreams are shattered, and so on.

Naming is of some significance in *Constantine*, in suitably postmodern ways. We have of course the setting in Los Angeles, and to hammer the point home, John’s client/love interest is called Angela (that is, *Angel*). John’s name, too, has religious connotations, recalling both Constantine and in his initials, Jesus (JC). The Jesus coding is most striking in the scene in which John ascends to heaven, arms stretched out like an inverted Christ on the cross. This occurs after John’s decision to sacrifice himself in order to secure Isobel’s (Angela’s dead sister) place in heaven. More interesting than the Jesus coding, which recurs in a number of other texts in the postmodern sacred, is the Constantine reference. Constantine, of course, was the Roman emperor who converted to Christianity in 312, and legalised Christianity the following year, in doing so ultimately prompting Christianity’s move from marginal cult to state sponsored religion. Yet John Constantine, who is written more in the mould of a hardboiled noir character, is hardly helping to convert the world. Born with the powers to see the supernatural world, he is aware of the two worlds, yet he
hardly believes. “God is a kid with an ant-farm” he says cynically. It’s arguable then that the naming of Constantine is little more than a postmodern affectation, meant to signal a vague “religiousness” specifically linked to the Roman Catholicism it draws upon, but without any particular metaphorical resonance.

One influential text in this literalising of metaphor has been Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Post-Buffy, fantastic texts tend to label a great many monsters as “demons,” (see for instance, Charmed), and to refer to hell and heaven “dimensions.” Although it is hardly original in this, Buffy and (and its spin-off Angel) has certainly popularised the literal hells. Although we never see it (merely the threshold), Buffy refers frequently to heaven and hell. For instance, Buffy sends Angel to hell at the end of the second season, and goes to a heaven dimension after dying in “The Gift” (5.22). The high school setting itself is built over the literal boundary between Earth and hell (“The Hellmouth” as the show calls it). Then you add the abiding metaphor of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, which is that high school really is hell—you boyfriend really does turn into another person after you have sex (“Innocence” 2.13), mean kids really do hunt in packs (“The Pack” 1.06), the lunch lady really is trying to poison the students (“Earshot” 3.18), and so on. The heaven and hell “dimensions” show how Buffy and Angel combine Christian and New Age conceptions of the afterlife—the term “dimensions” is clearly New Age influenced.
Postmodernism and Metaphor

“God has become a sign; or, perhaps more precisely, the [. . .] sign has become God”
(Taylor, 1993: 170).

As Baudrillard argues, the camera in postmodernism flattens out the culture. Fredric Jameson, too, points out that “the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness [is] perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms” (1991: 9). It is arguable that in many ways the postmodern world has lost the ability to think metaphorically. Recall the characteristic tic of TV chef Jamie Oliver (“the Naked Chef”), who describes practically everything as “literally,” even though he is already discussing literal objects and subjects (eg, you put it in the oven and it is literally 5 minutes before it’s done). Indeed, it is unsurprising that the capacity for metaphor has been lost in a media which has seen the extraordinary boom of “reality” TV in the last decade or so. This is not to suggest that the “real” has returned in postmodernity (see Chapter Five for an in-depth discussion of this), rather, that it is precisely in this extraordinary fidelity to the “real” that a hyper-reality is introduced that paradoxically evaporates the real. As Baudrillard argues, “the collapse of reality into hyperrealism [occurs] in the minute duplication of the real” (1983: 141).

But while Baudrillard and Jameson trace this cultural movement much earlier, it is only through the judicious use of CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) technology that this has truly flourished on film. Along with other computer based technologies like Photoshop “re-touching” of photographs, Autotune pitch-correction in music, the rapid embrace of CGI by postmodern visual culture has arguably accelerated postmodern hyper-reality. Advances in CGI special effects have transformed film and TV in the last decade or so. This turn is especially relevant given that one formal
aspect that all of the visual texts of the postmodern sacred have in common is a reliance on special effects. CGI makes unreal texts, traditionally known for their unconvincing settings and models, appear far more “realistic.” Alec Worley suggests that “CGI affects a realistic texture often indistinguishable from photographed reality, allowing the physical world the mutability of a cartoon” (80). CGI means that texts can depict the supernatural abilities of Gods and monsters, or the demonic imagery of hell or supernatural whites of heaven more convincingly or at least with more “realistic” detail. Alien or futuristic worlds, spaceships, magic spells, and all the rest are rendered spectacularly in CGI. CGI has permeated the film industry—a great many contemporary films are filmed in front of blue screens and then have minor things like setting and even character added in post-production. Famously, George Lucas added the horribly bad Jar Jar Binks CGI character in *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*, an idea repeated in the form of the house-elf Dobby in the film version of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Importantly too, if less obviously, CGI has spread to other filmic techniques like the way the colour palette is adjusted frame-by-frame in post-production—more green in the case of Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings*—and this is hardly confined to the explicitly unreal genres of science fiction and fantasy.

But while this newest version of hyper-reality seems to make a certain kind of sense with regard to realistic texts—duplicating the real in extraordinary detail—what effect could it have for texts that are explicitly unreal? Paradoxically, I think hyper-reality makes unreal texts appear more “real” (fleshing out their details far more fully)—and in doing so confirms their own hyper-reality. Unreal texts are no longer in opposition to a reality principle; the real/unreal opposition has become collapsed. What CGI means, therefore, is that texts are made very obviously simulacra; there is
no real-world equivalent for the worlds these texts create, whether they are set in the “real world” or not. Although often the domain of the expensive big budget films, many of these film techniques are spreading to TV—if they’re not used already—an awful amount of shows already have that that filmic look to them generally (Angel for instance), and have CGI effects (for instance, the spaceships on the latest revival of Dr Who).

As well as the obvious postmodernist implications, what CGI means for the postmodern sacred is that texts are able to depict supernatural events in spectacular, hyper-real detail. The visual impact of the texts is arguably inextricably tied with their use of special effects; it is part of what makes audiences affectively respond. Annette Kuhn suggests that

in science fiction cinema, spectacle can become an end in itself: spectacular visual effects and sounds temporarily interrupt the flow of the narrative, inviting the spectator to contemplate, with awe and wonder the vastness of deep space or the technological miracles of future societies. (1990: 7)

Now, this might seem to suggest a kind of pop sublime, but it is hardly psychological in the sense that the Romantics would assume. This is the sublime as mere spectacle, immediate and ultimately forgettable. It is arguable that this is one way, perhaps the key way, that the postmodern sacred “does” religion (instead of merely citing it), as an ecstatic, peak experience for its audience. But capitalist re-enchantment is necessarily a temporally limited one; it has the built-in obsolescence required for repeated consumption.

The supernatural then becomes not a matter for imagination, or as something that cannot be quite grasped, it becomes very obviously, one more sign on the screen along with the setting and characters. The special effect, then, becomes supernatural in some sense; it makes the supernatural appear real. On the other hand, the
supernatural eventually becomes just another special effect. What is awe inducing one year becomes passé the next as the technology advances—and then there is the fact that at a certain limit where spectacle becomes numbing rather than wondrous (for instance, the 20 minute long freeway chase in *The Matrix Reloaded*). Textual producers thus have to continually up the ante, creating ever more epic sets and effects in an effort to re-produce the same awe.

So, although hyper-reality as described by Baudrillard clearly precedes CGI, CGI accelerates the cultural shift in postmodern approaches to the text. And by making the unreal appear *as* real, it expands the palette of the hyper-real. As we have seen in the various examples of *Constantine*, *Buffy*, *Stargate* and so on, the tendency of postmodern texts is to literalise concepts which are always in some way metaphorical. Heaven, Hell, purgatory, even God, have always been ideas as much as literal places. At times, as *Constantine* shows, this seems a return to a medieval Christianity, snipping off half-remembered fragments of Roman Catholic theology to pastiche a thoroughly postmodern collage.

Bizarrely then, even as it entirely bends the idea of the real, this literality embodies a curiously naïve approach to the text, similar in some ways to literalist fundamentalisms. Literalist Christian fundamentalism emerges precisely at a time that the mainstream Christian denominations have made their religions metaphorical. “Hell is a state of mind,” declared John Paul II. The cliché of the Anglican clergyman who doesn’t actually believe in the specifics of the Virgin Birth and so on is certainly not entirely unfounded.

But this literality of place and supernatural creatures is, interestingly, not really at odds with the transcendental signifier. The transcendental signifier is a way of gesturing “beyond” this existence, it is a signifier largely emptied of content. The
New Age’s perennialist habit of seeing disparate traditions as drawing on the same wisdom tends to disconnect signifiers from their ideological context. And as I have argued, the postmodern sacred occurs at the meeting point of New Age and Christianity (and less frequently drawing on Judaism and Islam), so inevitably different texts are bound to combine these aspects in different ways. It’s not that surprising that the more Christian text of Constantine imagines the after-life in far more corporeal terms than New Age-y texts gesturing to the transcendent. Significant too is the fact that the transcendent signifier is often gesturing towards an amorphous individualised transcendent—even those that are basically versions of the Christian heaven (modified, one imagines to be more inclusive of marginalised groups, less judgemental and so forth). These rather more corporeal images however are more oriented towards the Christian hell than heaven. Edward J Ingebretson has argued in Maps of Heaven, Maps of Hell that American Christian writers have often used the imagery of hell to chide the faithful towards the straight and narrow. Even without that moral purpose, it’s not surprising that the hell appears rather more fleshed out in the postmodern sacred than the vague gestures towards heaven, since it has rather more of a cultural imaginary to draw on. This interplay between Christianity and the New Age plays itself out in numerous ways, for instance, sometimes in apocalyptic forms. Apocalypse is a recurrent trope through-out Western culture, and is hardly restricted to religious belief—nuclear, environmental and viral civilisation-destroying apocalypses have all featured heavily in the recent imagination. In my next chapter I shall address in greater depth the problem of Christianised pop-culture as supplemental to the traditions from which it draws, in particular looking at Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings and Peter Jackson’s film adaptations.
Notes

1 He says “fantastic fiction is entirely—and more clearly than other genres—a creature of history: everybody (from Walter Scott on) agrees that it is not thinkable before overriding mythological or religious belief suffers an epochal political breakdown, as a consequence of which some of its aspects and elements become available for fictional manipulation” (2000: 216). Whilst Suvin is talking specifically here about the fantasy genre, it is arguable that this is true for the other supernatural genres that make up the postmodern sacred, science fiction and horror.

2 See, for instance, the story in Exodus in which Moses sees only the back of God’s body. Moses says "Oh, let me behold Your Presence" (Exodus 33:18) to which God replies, "I will make all my goodness pass before you...and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen...you cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live" (Exodus 33:18-23).

3 See for example, the highly unfaithful rendering of the Greek and Roman gods in Xena: Warrior Princess and Hercules: The Legendary Journeys.

4 Karen Armstrong notes the polytheistic belief implicit in early Judaism. She argues that the covenant between God and the Jews only makes sense in a polytheistic setting—“The Israelites did not believe that Yahweh, the God of Sinai, was the only God, but promised, in their covenant, that they would ignore all the deities and worship him alone” (1999: 31).

5 Kabbalah Centre director Michael Berger’s book Becoming Like God, for instance, never specifically mentions Judaism. On the relationship between Kabbalah and Judaism he gives a typically New Age perennialist response: “I don't know too much about Buddhism, but I know that there certainly are similarities. Of course since Kabbalah is such an inter-spiritual wisdom, it makes a lot of sense that there are a lot of similarities between it and other spiritual teachings” (Phillips, n.pag).

6 In particular, see the “Gnosticism? No Thanks!” section in On Belief. Žižek moves there from a discussion of Gnosticism to a discussion of New Age Buddhism as the “ideological supplement” of late capitalism (2001: 16). Interestingly, Žižek sees posthuman cyberspace as fulfilling the Gnostic dream of “the self getting rid of the decay and inertia of material reality” (33).

7 Paul Heelas points this out in his The New Age Movement.

8 Butler’s Gender Trouble, for instance, theorises the corporeal body as a product of language, problematising the pre-existence of a body before the intervention of the regulatory discourses that produce it as knowable.

9 Even as that simulation is taken by believers as truth, or indeed with the transcendental signified, as providing an ontological foundation for all truth.

10 This ignores, of course, the Catholic Church’s increased drive to canonise new saints under John Paul II’s leadership, though one is tempted to point out that it is precisely the lack of a credible supernatural element in contemporary Christianity that these saints are suppose to fill.

11 Although conversely, the media framing suggests the intrinsic role of the media simulacra—events strike as “real” only so far as they have been always-already mediated through the TV coverage. Hyper-reality is what strikes us as real now.
The BBC website carried the story at the time:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1589133.stm

This is an idea played with in the finale of the first series of Joan of Arcadia. Joan, who has been talking through-out the series with a very literal God, is diagnosed with Lyme disease and realises that the visitations may have just been a symptom of her illness.

It should be noted that Tolkien’s posthumously published The Silmarillion does prominently feature Gods in its creation story for Middle Earth, rendered in King James style language.

The Nyssians provide an interesting mediation between East and West, suggested to be dissolute in drugs and sexual excess, and generally suspicious (signaled by the use of the snake as Nyssian totem), but not Evil in the same way that the Angaraks are. Of course, the second series called the Malloorean complicates the matter considerably, bringing the Angaraks redemption in the form of their new God Erriond.

She says, “it is a form which discourages reader participation, representing events that are in the long distant past, contained and fixed by a long temporal perspective and containing the implication that their effects have long since ceased to disturb” (33).

Jackson’s argument holds true for Eddings and Tolkien, perhaps, far more than other forms of fantasy or fairy tales. Angela Carter’s feminist revision of fairy tales, for instance, can hardly be considered to not disturb its readers. See the Jack Zipes edited collection Don’t Bet On the Prince for feminist fairy tales and criticism by writers such Carter and Joanna Russ.

See my first chapter for a discussion of pastiche and postmodernism as described by Fredric Jameson.

A comparable musical analogy might be the work of the Australian group The Avalanches, whose album Since I Left You was made from the fragments of hundreds of samples.

Fans of Matt Groenig’s other more famous series The Simpsons will note the similarity of this episode to one of the vignettes in “Treehouse of Horror V11” (8.01), in which Lisa becomes God to a small race of people living on a tooth she had been doing a science experiment on.

Interestingly, this episode of Futurama in some ways recalls Terry Gilliam’s 1981 science fiction comedy Time Bandits, which features a bumbling God. In Time Bandits, God “refuses to let on whether He has a design in everything, or is just making it up as He goes along” (Worley 142). A similar kind of ambivalence to the divine is clearly at work in “Godfellas.”

Samuel Huntington’s theory, which appeared in the early 90s but was taken up more widely post September 11. See Chapter Five for more on this.

A key touch-point is the science fiction series Star Trek. The first Futurama episode begins with a Star Trek referencing monologue: “space. It seems to go on and on forever. But then you get to the end and the monkey starts throwing barrels at you” (“Space Pilot 3000” 1.01). The series 4 episode “Where No Fan Has Gone Before,” (4.11) features many of the cast members from the original series.

See, for instance, the episode in which a giant ball of garbage “old” New York had sent into space returns on a collision course with the Earth (“A Big Piece of Garbage” 1.08).

It is interesting to note that the effect of the vocal device on the female Goa’uld renders their voices decidedly masculine. Given that the Goa’uld are generally coded
as innately evil in the series, it is possible to read such an effect as either mobilising a fear of female masculinity, or of transgendered femininity.

26 True to Stargate’s demystifying position, these are explained by the use of an alien device called a “sarcophagus,” which revives the dead and increases the life of the living, albeit at the cost of rendering them evil. While this means resurrection is no longer constituted as miraculous within the textual universe, there is nevertheless something uncanny (if slightly predictable, given their status as villains) about the Goa’uld returning from death so often.

27 There are a number of examples of Stargate’s dubious racial politics besides the racial Othering of the Goa’uld. The episode “The Warrior” features the Jaffa rebellion leader Kytano (later revealed to be the Goa’uld Imotep), whose language recalls Martin Luther King and whose “fanatic” tactics simultaneously recall Malcolm X and suicide bombers. Also, one of the other chief enemies of SG1, the intergalactic mechanical pests the “Replicators,” are revealed to be the creation of Reese, an android who “turned out wrong” (played by African American actress Danielle Nicolet).

28 It is not coincidental that Stargate is currently the only show on television with US Army approval, to the extent of a 4 star general appearing on the show as himself.

29 The episode “Threshold” (5.02) sees the brain-washed Teal’c regress back to his earlier belief that the Goa’uld Apothis is his God. He has a conversation with Major Carter that deftly dodges critiquing the Christian God:

Teal’c: do you believe in a God, Major Carter?
Carter: this isn’t about me.
Teal’c: How would it be if you were punished for loving your God as I love mine?
Carter: It’s not the same.
Teal’c: I can’t help what I believe.
Carter: You believe in freedom, Teal’c, in justice, in protecting people from false Gods. You despise everything Apothis was.

30 For instance, Edmundson says “Gothic is the art of haunting, and in two senses. Gothic shows time and again that life, even at its most ostensibly innocent, is possessed, that the present is in thrall to the past. All are guilty. All must, in time, pay up” (5).

31 Despite its reclamation by New Age and/or Wicca communities, the word “pagan” is itself problematic, deriving as it does largely from an implicit Christian and Eurocentric view of the “real” God.

32 Well, as original as any postmodern text can be!

33 Edmundson uses this term to describe the ease with which pop-culture bestows transcendence on the American subject.

34 I take this idea of the sublime from Lyotard’s reworking of Kant. He says, “[the sublime] takes place [...] when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept” (Lyotard, 1984b: 78).

35 This is remarkably similar to the genetically mutated superheroes of X-Men, although Dark Angel ties the monstrous to the conspiracy theories familiar from The X-Files.

36 Of course, one could quite easily make a psycho-analytic reading here—the desire for/fear of castration by the phallic heroine. Clearly one can see a certain male masochistic economy of desire working here.

37 This boundary is occasionally problematised, for instance in the Buffy episode “Doppelgangland,” where we see Willow and an alternate-universe vampire double.
Willow frets over her vampire double being “kinda gay”, Buffy tries reassuring her by saying “just remember Willow, a vampire’s personality has nothing to do with the person it was.” Angel begins with an open-ended “well actually…” but then clumsily covers with “that’s a good point.” Of course, the vampire double’s queerness foreshadows Willow’s coming-out in the following season.

38 See, for instance, Eugenia Delamotte’s article “White Terror, Black Dreams,” which suggests that the nineteenth century’s process of essentialising race produced Gothic texts that both expressed white fears of a racialised Other as well as the fear that whiteness itself does not exist (17).

39 It is arguable that the queer and/or effeminate man has become the symbol of postmodern anxiety—from Silence of the Lamb’s Buffalo Bill creating a female “skin” for himself, to the homoerotic Tom Ripley in the film version of The Talented Mister Ripley. This is not in any way confined to strictly Gothic texts, the femme queerboy figures as a metaphor for ultimate Evil in the lisping Voldemort in the fantasy film Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, is conflated with a dissolute Frenchness in the Terry Gilliam’s woeful Brothers Grimm, and so on.

40 More alarmingly, Ingebretson’s work argues fairly conclusively that the presentation of “real life” news is largely a matter of Gothic monstrosity—and that rarely contains the ambivalence that Halberstam finds among postmodern horror texts, policing instead the boundaries of gender, sexuality, race and class.

41 Halberstam says “Gothic [. . .] is the breakdown of genre and the crisis occasioned by the inability to “tell,” meaning both the inability to narrate and the inability to categorise. Gothic, I argue, marks a peculiarly modern preoccupation with boundaries and their collapse.” (23)

42 Christianity is, of course, not alone in featuring angels, since Christianity inherits angels from the Jewish faith, and the Qu’ran too contains angels. However, in the West at least, angels are largely Christian or Christian-derived.

43 There is, of course, something very queer at the heart of Christianity. The focus on Christ’s body creates the conditions for a (usually disavowed) homoerotic gaze, one that is recognisable in the Christian tradition, say in the works of Michelangelo. Similarly, a focus on Christ’s suffering on the cross suggests a sadomasochistic economy of desire. As Žižek points out, viewed from another angle, Passion of the Christ resembles nothing so much as a gay S/M film (Žižek, 2006: 358). See also the thoughtful queer theological musings of Marcella Althaus-Reid on subjects such as the Bi-Christ, Mary as drag queen and vanilla theology and Ruth Vanita’s Sapphic reading of the Virgin Mary.

44 The well-publicised case in which a freshman student at the University of Wyoming was tied to a fence and struck 18 times in the head with a pistol, and left for dead. Shepard spent 5 days in a coma and then died.

45 Ingebretson says of Shephard: “to read the perverse implications of this body is to read against the grain of sentimental Christianity, which tosses the monstrum out, leaving only the bathos of a simpering Jesus, my best friend. Theologically Jesus who is The Christ is a hybrid—a bodied and bloodied Christ. In both its aspect of body and blood the image circulates a mixture of taboo, religiousness (blood, histrocially), monstrousness, as well as legal criminality” (281).

46 See the following chapter for more on apocalypse in the postmodern sacred.

47 Re-touched photos change a person’s appearance, Autotune changes a singers’ pitch to be more in tune. Both illustrate the same postmodern principle, artificially
removing the “blemishes” of the real to produce hyper-real simulations of appearance and singing ability.

This has played out in both scientific discussions and popular culture. Recent popular culture examples of these include nuclear apocalypse on TV series *Gideon*, environmental apocalypse in movies like *Armageddon* (giant meteor heading towards Earth), *The Day After Tomorrow* (global warming), and viral apocalypse in *Outbreak* and *28 Days Later*. 
Chapter Four

That Dangerous Supplement: Christianity and the New Age in Tolkien’s 

Lord of the Rings

Cate Blanchett as Galadriel in Peter Jackson’s Lord of the Rings

In my previous chapters, I have argued that much of the postmodern sacred can be considered a pop culture profoundly influenced by New Age thinking. However, I have also pointed towards a strong Christian influence, such that the postmodern sacred can also be considered a post-Christian discourse. While many critics would like to claim popular culture texts as one or the other (usually Christian), I argue that this is a reductive critical enterprise and instead prefer to consider both of the two as intrinsic parts of the postmodern sacred. Both positions tend to assume an already existing belief on the part of either textual producer or consumer (or indeed both), a position which simply cannot be assumed for the mass audiences of postmodern pop culture consumption of a text does not necessarily mean an
ideological affirmation—although it can—let alone a belief in the religious/spiritual
movements from which it draws. Rather than assume a real-world belief, it is
arguable that texts assume merely knowledge of the religious references. So, given
that cultural binary between Christianity and the New Age, I would in this chapter
like to consider how the two work together in terms of Derrida’s notion of the
supplement.

The critical usage of the supplement stems from Derrida’s famous reading in
Of Grammatology of Rousseau’s use of the word “supplement”. Derrida ascribes two
functions to the supplement. Firstly, as it is most commonly read, the supplement
“cumulates and accumulates presence” (144). The supplement is, firstly, an addition.
But, simultaneously, Derrida argues, the supplement

adds only to replace [. . .] it intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of. Compensatory and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern
instance that takes-(the)-place. As substitute, it is not simply added to the
positivity of the presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the
structure of emptiness. (1976: 145)

The supplement, therefore, both adds to and replaces the sign. Derrida argues that
this is the primary function of language itself, since “the sign is always the
supplement of the thing itself” (145). The supplement becomes opposed to the
referent, speech to writing, nature to culture and so on.1 It is no accident, then, the
supplement as described by Derrida is the figure of a certain kind of danger, for
supplements “transgress a prohibition and are experienced within culpability” (165).
Derrida argues that what he calls metaphysics “consists of excluding non-presence by
determining the supplement as simple exteriority, pure addition or pure absence”
(167). Yet as Derrida makes clear, the supplement also works to confirm the rules it
transgresses, making possible the production of metaphysics —“that within which
metaphysics can be produced but which metaphysics cannot think” (167). Given the impossibility of producing a pure presence, metaphysics must make recourse to the supplement of writing, bemoaning that fact even as it makes use of it.

Rousseau, of course, uses the figure of the supplement to describe his masturbatory habits. Masturbation is “that dangerous supplement” to (heterosexual) sex with a partner. My use of the supplement in a study of popular culture has a number of fortuitous resonances. First, one can see a number of interesting parallels between fandom (fan culture) and masturbation—often solitary pursuits, on the edge of a heterosexual reproductive economy. The stereotype of the male nerd is that of one who lives at home with his parents past adulthood, is unable to find a “real life” girlfriend, and is intoxicated with the seductions of pop culture babes—a stereotype that does not reflect the extremely varied forms of fandom which range across age, gender, race, sexuality and so on. Popularly however, the dangers of fandom are of perpetual male adolescence, of an inability to enter a fully sexual adult world. One should note the implicitly heterosexuality of the stereotypical male nerd, as well as the concurrent spectre of queerness needing to be banished by the public avowal of heterosexual desire (say in the cultish adoption of such sex symbols as the impossibly proportioned videogame/movie character Lara Croft). Recall the un-named Comic Book Guy on The Simpsons, overweight, sarcastic, pedantic, single and socially inept. Fandom becomes constituted as compensatory, defined by what it apparently lacks (social interaction, sexual relationships and so on). Thus overzealous fans are told to “get a life.” Fandom supplements, it adds (to the subject’s absences), and it replaces “a life.”

So the supplement brings with it a certain danger, for it challenges the ontological boundaries of the subject. I began this chapter by noting the binary of
New Age and Christianity in Western culture. For the New Age, Christianity is often seen as an out-dated, dogmatic faith. Christianity, on the other hand, can see the New Age as either invented mystifications, or at worst, as evil satanic practices (seen, for instance in the fundamentalist denunciations of Wicca as “witch-craft”). Yet despite this, they are nevertheless in dialogue with another, and neither remains unmodified by that dialogue. The supplement can work for both positions—New Age tropes can appear in the most “Christian” of texts, just as Christianity can unexpectedly appear in more New Age texts. Both will seek to exclude the presence of the other as supplemental and excessive; for Christians, the New Age as pagan, heretical, narcissistic and for the New Age, Christianity as patriarchal, heterosexist and so on. Yet both are necessarily entangled within each other, the point being the impossibility of a “pure” Christianity or New Age. A key example would be the common trope of angels, which I discussed in the previous chapter. While angels form a key part of Abrahamic religions, the New Age takes the angel and disconnects it from its religious, largely Christian history, in the West. That disconnection, however, is inevitably partial, for in using the angel signifier, the New Age cannot but also recall a Christian angel, even as it attempts to repurpose its meanings. Given that the New Age is polytheistic in the sense of a relativised sense of meaning; its attempts to oppose itself to Christianity are predictably flawed, with the inevitable appropriation of Christian signifiers. Similarly, Christian attempts to separate from the New Age are doomed, given the inter-relationship between the New Age, pop psychology and pop culture. Postmodern subjectivity is at least partly a New-Age-ised subjectivity, with such New Age derived ideas as “spirit,” “finding oneself,” and “being true to oneself” being an integral part of postmodern narratives of the self.
The postmodern sacred in itself can also be considered as supplemental, working in addition to “real” spiritual texts as well as intervening and replacing. The danger that pop culture can itself replace the holy texts is one that religious writers constantly feel the need to defend against. Pop culture can often seem to provoke a greater affective response than religious tradition proper, partly one imagines because of the greater need to entertain, though also a less ideologically restrictive dogma probably has its place as well. Pop culture produced specifically by and for a religious audience—for example Christian rock—is often “decaf” pop culture, pop culture with the “offensive” bits like sex and violence removed (which of course ignores the fact that most holy texts tend to have more than their fair share of those things). Similarly, the devotion to their chosen texts and attention to the smallest pop-culture minutiae that fans display is surely problematic for those who prefer that those devotions be restricted solely to religious traditions.

Warding against the danger of the supplement, or trying futilely to shore up the fictional “pure” presence of pop culture, Christianity or the New Age strikes me as particularly pointless for a critic to engage in. Although some writers (usually Christian) seek to claim particular pop-culture texts for their beliefs, I believe it is a more productive critical enterprise to trace the appearance/disappearance of both New Age and Christian tropes. In this chapter, I shall examine in detail J.R.R Tolkien’s fantasy epic *The Lord of the Rings* and its Peter Jackson-directed film adaptations. In particular, I shall examine the Biblical motif of apocalypse in the texts, before discussing the inter-relationship between *The Lord of the Rings* and the New Age.
Arguably Lord of the Rings has a singular impact on the modern fantasy genre, one cannot underestimate how influential Tolkien’s work as been. Though Ursula Le Guin, for instance, sees the earlier Lord Dunsany as a more significant writer to the fantasy genre (75), I find myself in agreement with Brian Attebery’s contention that The Lord of the Rings is the key defining text in the genre, its “fuzzy centre” (qtd Pennington n.p.). Whilst fantasy has been and remains a fairly elastic genre, many of the aspects of Tolkien’s work have been taken up as key facets of the genre. Tolkien’s creation of a “secondary world” has remained the dominant form of modern fantasy, relegating other forms such as the “alternative history of this world” model to secondary strands of the genre. Similarly Tolkien’s medievalism has become largely constitutive of the genre, though this has frequently been entangled with Celticised New Age medievalism. It should be noted that Tolkien is himself indebted to any number of sources; Nelson for instance finds echoes of Algernon Blackwood and Lord Dunsany, whilst the influence of Beowulf, medieval romances and indeed Tolkien’s contemporary and friend C.S Lewis have been noted by any number of writers. Yet, with the exception of Lewis’s Narnia series (which has proved a perennial children’s lit favourite), the fact remains that these influences have come to the fantasy genre largely through Tolkien.

As I mentioned earlier, Tolkien is the most widely theorised of fantasy writers, yet I find much of the theory singularly unhelpful in illuminating my thesis about the postmodern sacred. Jes Battis points out that current Tolkien studies, from literary and language studies, biography, religion to fantasy and science-fiction studies, “do not maintain any sort of meaningful dialogue with each other” (910). Perhaps this is
due to the fact that *Lord of the Rings* resists totalising readings, it “creates problematic and incomplete readings, for it occupies several literary modes—epic, romance, pastoral, and fantasy”—without firmly attaching itself to any of them” (Battis 909). Important theoretical work from Marxist, postcolonial, feminist and queer perspectives has been done on Tolkien, though these have frequently ignored the spiritual aspects of both the text(s) and their consumption.6

On the other hand, many theorists have noticed the religious aspects of Tolkien’s work, yet I find their work incomplete in explaining the postmodern reception of both books and movies. Much religious work has pointed to Tolkien’s own avowed Catholicism, using this to perform totalising readings of the books as definitively Christian—a reading that often ignores, for instance, the striking pagan aspects of Tolkien’s work, undoubtedly influenced by his work on Beowulf. This biographical approach (see for instance, Calderott’s *Secret Fire*) often relies heavily on Tolkien’s letters, which both explain his own approach to Christianity (Catholicism in particular) and provide readings of his work. This approach proves problematic in a number of ways. First, it relies on the author to provide definitive and totalising readings of his own work—an idea which has been thoroughly refuted by post-structuralists who argue that the meaning of a text always remains elusively outside the grasp of its own author. Secondly, these documents used to “prove” this reading of *Lord of the Rings* are themselves supplementary texts with their own contestable meaning. Calderott, for instance, relies on Tolkien’s letters, academic essay “On Fairy Stories” and minor stories such as “Leaf by Niggle.” Arguably these texts (particularly the letters) have only been read by a tiny minority of Tolkien’s audience and thus cannot considered to be providing the typical reading context for the *Lord of the Rings*’ general reception.
Work on Tolkien’s relationship to the religious has not been limited to an academic audience; many religious writers have written to assure moderate Christian audiences that fantasy and speculative fiction are not the Satanic works evangelicals have often claimed them to be. As with the aforementioned religiously inclined academic writing, works aimed at a non-academic religious audience have relied heavily on biographical readings of Tolkien’s own life. Importantly, too, these have used simplistic approaches to the text reliant on the notion that one can extract the theological “wisdom” from Tolkien’s vast works—a method that clearly lacks the nuances suitable for academic research.

Thus, my analysis of Tolkien and his place in the postmodern sacred is intended to argue a number of points. First, that Tolkien’s work displays a number of Christian religious signifiers, without this necessarily meaning that the work is Christian or that this reading refutes the frequent criticisms of Tolkien on the grounds of race, class, gender or sexuality. Second, that contemporary readers and viewers of Tolkien will consume in a postmodern fashion, meaning that there will inevitably be a slippage between written and visual text. Third, that contemporary consumption of Tolkien illuminates the “believing without belonging” detraditionalised method of spiritual consumption I find characteristic of the postmodern sacred. Lastly, that postmodern consumption of the *Lord of the Rings* works to incorporate both Christian and New Age symbols and ideas, without being tied definitively to either position.

*The Religious Trace*

As I argued earlier, there exists an ongoing dialogue in contemporary culture between the postmodern and the pre-modern. The Ancient texts that form part of the
Christian Bible—in particular, the *Book of Revelations*, or the *Apocalypse* as it’s also known—continue to be a vital part of the apparently post-secular West. Even almost two thousand years after it was written, *Revelations* continues to influence Western thought, both religious and secular. Even a show such as *Buffy* has Gothic paraphernalia (abandoned churches, fashion accessory crosses) which show the ineffectiveness of contemporary Christianity. But *Revelations* affects other modes of postmodern texts that lack *Buffy*’s insouciant irony.

Tolkien’s influence in the genre that he has helped spawn, fantasy fiction, means the genre can be intensely spiritual. For instance, Ursula Le Guin’s *Earthsea* series shows the strong influence of her Taoist beliefs, and many authors such as Katharine Kerr and Juliet Marillier draw heavily on Celtic mythology for a religious underpinning to their secondary worlds. However, due to the strong influence of the genre’s chief canonical text, *Lord of the Rings*, Christianity (or at least a Christian symbology) is the genre’s predominant religious system. C.S Lewis famously wrote his hugely popular Narnia series as a Christian allegory, with Aslan as his Christ-figure. Yet, because fantasy is set in secondary worlds, both like and unlike our own, it’s generally not appropriate to talk of a didactic Christian purpose, for fantasy usually presents an estranged version of “the real.” Rather, we should talk of the influence of Christian thought upon what Rosemary Jackson calls “marvelous” worlds. It is my argument that *Lord of the Rings* connotes different aspects of a Christian derived and inflected—if now post-Christian—epistemology, namely apocalypse and post-apocalypse.

Though one could use, perhaps, other theories of intertextuality to advance this argument, following on from my previous chapter, it is by using Jacques Derrida’s notion of the trace that I wish to interrogate the relationship between *Lord of the*
Rings and the Book of Revelations. Derrida refutes the appeal to “the real world” that both writers and readers of texts often make, arguing instead that all texts contain the traces of other texts encoded within them. The explicit unreality of the fantasy genre suggests why this method is appropriate, for if there is one genre that particularly illustrates the sedimentation of texts, it is the fantasy genre, pastiched as it is from many sources. Derrida consistently attacks the notion that philosophy, or indeed literature, can ever deliver the full presence the sign promises to deliver, texts “signal not in the direction of another presence, or another form of presence, but in the direction of an entirely other text” (Derrida, 1982: 65). And that text itself, rather than being that other form of presence, signals again to an entirely other text. Thus Derrida makes one of his more aphoristic comments that “there is nothing outside the text.” This is not to suggest that the world is a giant library, rather, that any text will inevitably rely on other texts in order to make meaning, no text can wholly supply its own context, so those texts will leave traces able to be drawn out by the careful reader. Though deconstruction has mostly been used within a general context of atheism—especially within the English and Cultural Studies that embraced it as a reading methodology—as Kevin Hart points out, “the viability of atheism as a context for deconstruction is not in question here; but what is in question is the often unspoken assumption that there is a natural or inevitable link between deconstruction and atheism: for that is exactly what transmutes a matter of context into a matter of totalisation” (43). In particular, Hart chides Gayatri Spivak for warning, in the introduction to Of Grammatology, that the vertigo of deconstruction is not mystical or theological—a supplemental warning in a text that deconstructs supplemental attempts to totalise meaning. Of course, Derrida’s own late “religious-ethical turn” (for instance, the extended reading of Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling in The Gift
of Death) perhaps serves to illustrate the applicability of deconstruction for religious study, but to re-read that definitively into Derrida’s earlier work like Of Grammatology (say, that différance is theological) is to mark another intervention of a different kind.

So the question then arises which traces will be foregrounded, and which will be foreclosed from the start by the critic. In Lord of the Rings, one could choose to foreground any number of trace texts—the Bible, medieval romances, pastorals—whilst some scholars have found traces in Peter Jackson's movies of kung-fu movies, amongst others. It is the project of this chapter to foreground those traces in Lord of the Rings that are of a spiritual nature, without necessarily arguing that it is being consumed, read or watched to affirm a theology of any kind. In the following section, I shall mostly make recourse to the Christian apocalyptic tradition in order to draw forth those spiritual traces.

**Traces in Lord of the Rings**

![Mordor as imagined in Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring](image-url)
As I pointed out earlier, much scholarship on Tolkien and religion has simplistically claimed the work as Christian because of its concern for good, evil and the responsibility of power. Claiming those beliefs as specifically Christian is incredibly patronising, suggesting that atheists and agnostics aren't concerned with morality. Still, regardless, it is quite clear that Lord of the Rings conceptualises Good and Evil in Christian-inflected binaristic terms. The goodness of many of its chief characters seems to be innate, for instance Aragorn's royal background functions as emblematic of his goodness. Likewise, Boromir's sin consists largely in confusing his family's stewardship, an assumed responsibility, with innate royalty. On the other hand, Evil is innate in the form of Sauron, and essentialised in the form of the Orcs. It should be noted that the mixing of races in the Orcs recalls fears of racial miscegenation, particularly dramatised in Peter Jackson's movies where Maori and Samoan actors were cast as Orcs. Whilst it is important to recognise the racist epistemology that underlines the use of colour in Lord of the Rings, it is also important to note that its imagery is also reflective of a long Christian tradition that privileges white and light as the source of goodness (think of Galadriel’s coding as a Virgin Mary figure) and similarly disparages darkness as the source of evil. As Sue Kim points out, Tolkien draws on a medieval palette that is largely devoid of racist connotations, however, it is clear that the modernity has produced a conflation between bodies and images, meaning that whiteness has been equated with moral goodness and blackness the reverse (898). Clearly the legacy of this colour-coding is unavoidable in the present. I do not wish to minimise in any way the damning criticisms of Lord of the Rings’ race constructions, merely to point out once again at this juncture Jane Bennett’s point about dissonant possibilities—Lord of the Rings is a
text large enough to encompass spiritual and racist readings, and many more. The strong coding of Good and Evil (drawing on the corresponding colouring of the Christian symbolic tradition) quite clearly has religious implications, as well as raced.

However, the closer one looks in Lord of the Rings, the more the Manichean characterisation comes apart, for all beings are corruptible and subject to temptation. Think of the twinning between Frodo and Gollum, in the end Frodo succumbs to the Ring's temptation. Boromir is tempted and attempts to take the ring for himself. And indeed the entire drama could have been prevented had the human king Isildur cast the Ring into Mount Doom in the previous War of Power. Yet though all are tempted, Tolkien is not so pessimistic as to suggest that people are irrevocably damned. What is the clear difference then is mercy. What separates Frodo and Gollum is mercy; Smeagol's path is set from his murder of his cousin, whilst Frodo inherits the ring from Bilbo, who had himself made the conscious choice not to kill Gollum. Here we see Tolkien's Catholicism assert itself in the form of an Augustinian original sin, yet characteristically Tolkien refuses to do more than suggest Christian or any real-world theology.

So it is that one must make recourse to Derrida’s theories of textuality, for though deconstruction has mostly had an a-religious history, it is a potent tool for drawing forth the religious trace in texts that have no explicit “real world” referent. James Gooderham argues that most fantasy is marked by an absence of overt religious terminology from “the real.” The trace of religious imagery is overtly disavowed in the fantasy text, then, for the logic of the world suggests this is a secondary world entirely Other to our own. Thus the trace of religion in most fantasy texts is under erasure as Derrida describes (Gooderham cites Phillip Pullman as an exception). It is, however, still present, displaced from the literal into the metaphorical. Gooderham
argues that fantasy functions as a metaphorical mode, so religion is “transpose[ed] into the landscape, beings and activities of the secondary worlds of the fantasies” (n. pag). We can therefore speak without paradox of the genre as being both spiritual and non-religious. It is that which makes it more consumable in a New Age framework than Christian—witness the way 60s counterculture embraced Lord of the Rings far more enthusiastically than Lewis’s overtly Christian Narnia series.

The notion of the trace might, to some, imply some sort of stability to the trace text, some sort of continuing presence which can be found in other texts. But though I am investigating the traces of Revelations in Lord of the Rings, this does not mean that Revelations is itself a static text. “Revelations” is constructed through a fluid history of interpretation. Gianni Vattimo points out that “the sacred texts which mark our religious experience are handed down to us by a tradition, [whose] mediation does not allow then to survive as unmodifiable objects” (Vattimo 88). The religious text has already been modified in the reading. This means that, theoretically, one could read Lord of the Rings into Revelations, our reading of the one influencing the other. And certainly historically various (if not all) religious groups have re-read their own socio-historical context back into the Christian Bible. The identification of various figures as the Anti-Christ—Hitler or Napoleon for example—not only reads the Bible into the “real” but reads “the real” back into the Bible.9

As I have pointed out, traces of Revelations are one such strong dialogue in Lord of the Rings, whether diffused through Dante’s Inferno or Milton or from the “original” Biblical text itself, yet indeed the Apocalypse itself did not emerge from nothing. It draws strongly on the Jewish apocalyptic tradition (Cohn 37). Revelations owes a heavy debt to the Hebrew Bible, with more than 300 references to it, most notably to the apocalyptic Book of Daniel. Just as with Christianity, the Jewish
apocalyptic tradition is strong, but only the one text, Daniel, was accepted into the Jewish canon. But however strong the traces of Jewish apocalyptic thought in Revelation, Cohn argues that “Revelations is nevertheless a profoundly Christian work throughout. Whatever is taken from the Hebrew Bible is reinterpreted in a Christian sense and integrated into a Christian world-view” (37).

Revelations is one of the key touchstones of Christian thought, and any discussion of Christianity inevitably must mention the marked apocalyptic tendency of the Christian tradition(s). In Anatomy of Criticism, Northrop Frye argues that the Bible provides “our grammar of apocalyptic imagery” (Frye 141). Indeed, “apocalyptic terms of reference are so deeply ingrained in Western culture that they have taken on an archetypal function.” (Carey 270). Though apocalypticism forms part of most religions to a lesser or greater degree,¹⁰ it is most prominent in Christianity. Arguably this is due to the inclusion of Revelation as a canonical text (Baumgartner 4), an inclusion based largely on the dubious tradition of apostolic authorship (Cohn 37).

The well-known Roman Catholicism of Tolkien, as well as the reworking of other Christian(ised) modes such as the medieval romance suggest a possible reason for apocalypse’s ubiquitous place in fantasy. There are, in fact, multiple apocalypses and Falls in Lord of the Rings—the whole world is, after all, in a state of decline.¹¹ The previous war with Sauron when the Ring was captured by the human king Isildur led to a withdrawal by the Elves from the general world, leaving the world to be run by “corruptible” men. And previously, again, at the beginning of the world there is an apocalyptic battle between Gods. So if apocalypse promises a devastating, if cleansing, singularity, then it rarely delivers it.
Prior to the destruction of the Ring, apocalyptic imagery in *Lord of the Rings* focuses mainly around Mordor and to a less degree its ally Isengard, the apostate wizard Saruman’s tower. The coding of Mordor, too, suggests a Hell-on-Earth, even before its apocalyptic destruction. Mordor is coded in the fire-and-brimstone imagery of *Revelations*, all fire and ash—“Darkness lay there under the sun. Fire glowed amid the smoke, Mount Doom was burning and a great reek rising.” Frye calls this demonic imagery, contrasting it to the cleansing purgatorial fire of the Jewish apocalypse *Daniel*. Mordor undoubtedly articulates Tolkien’s vision of ultimate evil, strongly inflected with modern industrialism, and heightened in the Isengard scenes in the movies. Though evil is a possibility for everyone on Middle Earth, for instance in the greed for the One Ring which caused Smeagol to murder his friend Deagol and thus his subsequent transformation into Gollum(52), Mordor is evil’s geographical focus and as such is the clearest example of Revelations’ images of destruction. Though Mordor itself is not in a state of apocalypse, for it would have long before collapsed, its presence elucidates the apocalyptic logic that the world “must end because in some crucial sense it has [already] ended” (Berger 7). Mordor is the apocalypse already in progress.

Yet though apocalypse recurs periodically, and incompletely, the destruction of the One Ring is quite clearly the apocalyptic moment of the series—it destroys and makes the world new again. The destruction of the Ring not only kills Sauron, but reduces Mordor to rubble:

> rising swiftly up, far above the Towers of the Black Gate, high above the mountains, a vast soaring darkness sprang into the sky, flickering with fire. The earth groaned and quaked. The Towers of the Teeth swayed, tottered, and fell down; the mighty rampart crumbled; the Black Gate was hurled in ruin; and from far away, now dim, now growing, now mounting to the Clouds, there came a drumming rumble, a roar, a long echoing roll of ruinous noise. (Tolkien 928)
The destruction of the Ring is truly apocalyptic in the sense Berger describes, an “absolute, purifying cataclysm,” (6) clearing away the remnants of Sauron’s Mordor. Quite clearly the destruction of the Ring marks an ending in Middle Earth, for as Frodo says to Sam “the Quest is achieved and now all is over. I’m glad you are here with me. Here at the end of all things, Sam” (926). In the appendixes, Tolkien marks the end of the story as the end of the Third Age of Middle Earth’s history with the departure of Gandalf, Frodo and Bilbo, with a fairly pessimistic prediction for the Fourth Age dominated by men. Interestingly, unlike the essentially good-hearted hobbits, men are shown to be basically sinful creatures, motivated by lust for power and greed, a characterisation undoubtedly influenced by Tolkien’s Catholic beliefs. The ending of this story, then, is the handing over of Middle Earth from the care-taking of the other-worldly Elves to the more suspicious care of men.

Yet Evil, in the Christian drama, requires a greater Good to defeat it. Christ is, quite naturally, an important figure of the apocalypse and it is inevitable that one would find references to him in Tolkien’s works. Remembering that Lord of the Rings contains the traces of religion—not full-blown allegory of the C.S Lewis sort—Christ-figures are multiple and necessarily incomplete. The three notable Christ figures are Gandalf, Frodo and Aragorn. Gandalf recalls the resurrected Christ because of his own return from death in the mines of Moria, and subsequent transformation from Grey to White. Frodo functions as a Christ figure because of his redemptive sacrifice in carrying the Ring. This sacrifice is played out on Frodo’s body, indeed one of the more striking aspects of the movie of Fellowship of the Ring is the repeated penetration of Frodo’s body, echoing perhaps the spearing of Christ on the Cross. 12
Yet there are of course differences in the characterisations of Frodo and Gandalf that make them only partial Christ-figures. Heroic epics, and indeed much modern fantasy, have tended to have larger-than-life heroes, but it is the very ordinariness of Frodo that enables him to succeed in his task. Frodo and his hobbit friends tend to illustrate the Christian dictum “the first shall be last, and the last shall be first,” meaning that these humble characters are most worthy in a Christian setting to be exalted. However, while this may, for Frodo, indeed imitate Christ’s role as the Son of Man, it hardly betrays the sort of supernatural beginnings or powers that Christ has historically be endowed with his dual nature as Son of God. Thus Frodo remains only a partial Christ-figure. Gandalf, on the other hand, exhibits a few other similarities to Christ besides his resurrection—his refusal of the Ring echoes Christ’s temptation by the Devil—yet, by and large, his antecedents lie more with the Merlin of the Arthurian romances than with Christ.

So it must be said that neither of these incarnations of Christ (Frodo or Gandalf) are particularly apocalyptic. The most obviously apocalyptic coding of a Christ figure is in fact Aragorn, the long-lost King of Gondor (946). The third book of the series is called Return of the King, and it is this aspect that marks Aragorn as a Christ figure—specifically Christ as he appears at the end of time, post-apocalypse. This is a King who is returning, after all, not appearing for the first time. Faramir says to him “I would not have you appearing like a beggar at the door” (843) clearly reminiscent of Christ’s “thief in the night” warning about his return. One can therefore read the stewards of Gondor, Boromir and Faramir’s family, as representative of the Church on earth, who can never properly replace Jesus, as Faramir replays this conversation between his father and Boromir:
“How many hundreds of years needs it to make a steward a king, if the
King returns not?” he asked. “Few years, maybe, in other places of less
royalty,” my father answered. “In Gondor ten thousand years would not
suffice.” (655)

Boromir’s betrayal of Frodo, of lusting after the power of the Ring himself
(390), bespeaks a failure to recognise a power more legitimate than his own
stewardship. One could easily see this as a rebuke of the Catholic Church’s own
stewardship, in particular that of the Pope, a warning not to seek to usurp Jesus’ place
as absent head of the Church.

The return of Christ is supposed to mark the end of Christian eschatology, yet
despite the common-place connotations of the word, apocalypse is not the end, since
apocalyptic thought almost inevitably contains within it the seeds of the post-
apocalyptic. As James Berger argues, “in nearly every apocalyptic presentation,
something remains after the end” (5-6). This holds true even in a comic apocalyptic
end to the Earth such as avowed atheist Douglas Adams’s Hitch-hiker’s Guide To the
Universe, which begins with the Earth’s demolition and continues with a post-
apocalyptic jaunt through an alien-inhabited universe. Christian eschatology, on the
other hand, generally promises heavenly, blissful kingdoms to come after the
apocalyptic “cleansing.” Revelations has the New Jerusalem and a new heaven and
earth descending (Berger 6). The good are rewarded, the evil are punished, and the
world is made over anew into perfection.

However, it’s hard to work out where exactly to place the post-apocalyptic in
Lord of the Rings, for it’s neither paradise nor dystopic wasteland. The victory over
Sauron and the destruction of Mordor is pretty complete, yet there is hardly raucous
celebration on the part of the heroes. The Shire might suggest itself as a post-
apocalyptic Promised Kingdom, for certainly it’s a reward for the hobbit heroes—
particularly Sam who goes on to live a long and contented life as its long-standing Mayor—yet the world in general after this victory is deeply melancholic. Even prior to this battle, outside of their Shire, hobbits have been relegated to the stuff of legend. The elves leave Middle Earth, never to return, as do Gandalf, Frodo and Bilbo, and magic itself seems to leave (Hinlicky n.pag). The answer to the incompleteness of the post-apocalyptic in *Lord of the Rings* is perhaps in its situation. Hinlicky argues that “all the struggles of the story, all the adventures in a much-loved world, build up to its own abolition” (n.pag). There’s no space for a post-apocalyptic good place in Middle Earth, even victory is apocalyptic. If not precisely the end, for Tolkien at his death had left unpublished reams of background information on his creation, *Lord of the Rings* finishes with the sense there is little more to be told of *this* story. Interestingly, the finality of this ending contrasts markedly from the modern fantasy genre Tolkien has helped spawn, where sequels and series of epic proportions flourish, partly for commercial reasons, and partly, I suspect, out of a desire to create worlds and stories as epic as Tolkien’s.

Yet despite all the traces of Christian theology I have found in it, Middle Earth is not, as is often simplistically read, a Christian secondary world. It is, as Ralph Woods points out, set in “a prebiblical period of history—a time when there were no Chosen People, no incarnation, no religion at all—from a point of view that is distinctly Christian” (n.pag). The sadness that permeates the world is perhaps due to the fact that there is no salvation in this world yet, a sort of pagan melancholy intuiting the absence (from a Christian perspective) of Christ. In Wood’s view, the whole Christian drama of Christ’s first coming and death, and the expected apocalypse before his second redemptive coming is yet to come. Wood points out that Tolkien’s writings on Beowulf could be effectively applied to the *Lord of the*
Rings, where Tolkien’s thesis that Beowulf was written by a Christian meant that it “showed forth that permanent value of that pietas which treasures the memory of man’s struggles in the dark past, man fallen and not yet saved, disgraced but not dethroned” (Woods n.pag). Equally then, this pagan pre-Christian epic plays out an incomplete version of Christianity, complete with apocalypse, yet without Christ the story is unable to be completed. This is, in a sense, the apocalypse before the real apocalypse comes.

The Shire then, the one respite in a pretty bleak finale, is more suggestive a pre-Fall Eden than of a post-apocalyptic Promised Kingdom, since it is predicated on its unknowingness. Hobbits are sheltered from the rest of the adult world, and move into it with a good deal of regret. And certainly the Shire has little adult sexuality, and in fact The Hobbit doesn’t actually feature a single female character. And just as the pre-sexual Eden fades away into long distant myth, the hobbits seem destined to end marginalised or to disappear completely (Hinlicky n.pag) from Middle Earth, leaving the planet for the human race. So for all of its strong apocalyptic overtones then, Lord of the Rings isn’t just a story of the end of time, it’s also a creation story about its beginning.

The apocalyptic fragments of the novels, then, illuminate the traces thesis rather well. A true eschatological meta-narrative in the Christian mould would have ended as C.S Lewis’s Narnia series does in The Last Battle, with the secondary world destroyed, with the post-apocalyptic paradise, with the punishment of evil and the reward of good. Yet as I have made clear, Lord of the Rings is not that kind of apocalyptic narrative. It only suggests, through images and motifs borrowed from the Bible, a Christian eschatology; it is not one itself. As Battis points out, Lord of the Rings lends itself to multiple and necessarily incomplete readings, and it is this aspect
of the text that makes it so easily consumable by postmodern viewers accustomed to
look for meaning in fragmented moments and images.

The Postmodern New Age Tolkien

In the previous section I have pointed out the relationship between Tolkien’s
novels and the Biblical book of Revelation, yet the textual relationship when one
considers the postmodern sacred is rather more complicated than the mere
sedimentation of texts. Complicating the matter further for contemporary readers is
the undeniable fact that the Lord of the Rings movies influence our reading of the
book. Though the movies have generally been received as faithful adaptations, they
feature a number of significant departures—most prominently in the love story
between Aragorn and Arwen, a plot-line lifted not from the books proper, but rather
from Tolkien’s copious footnotes. The movies make changes in other, less
noticeable, ways too. Who could ignore the powerful rendering of Gollum in the Two
Towers movie upon re-reading the book? Though Tolkien describes Gollum as a
“thin little black fellow”17 I think most readers would continue imagining him as
Peter Jackson’s pale white CGI-rendered character. Even though Tolkien himself is
an avowed Catholic and is writing a work that is quite clearly not postmodern, it is
arguable that current reception of Tolkien is in a detraditionalised fashion, and indeed
that current reception of Lord of the Rings is characterised by a slippage between the
movies and the books. Clearly, and in characteristic postmodern fashion, the movie
texts have rewritten the novels in their own image. Though there are indeed
significant differences between books and movies, arguably in the way the two are
received and consumed, those differences scarcely matter.
How does one consider these texts then, when the differences between adaptations are elided by a postmodern readership? One must remember Derrida’s point that some texts seem to totalise readings of others, though this can only ever be an incomplete totalisation. Given that postmodern society is so clearly an image-driven society, it follows thus that one must consider the recent Peter Jackson adaptations as totalising texts, reworking the ways in which Tolkien’s novels are read and consumed. The images provoked by the movies and their substantial merchandising spin-offs (books, posters, figurines, t-shirts) can in many circumstances to be seen to provide definitive readings of the novels, and provides yet another layer of traces through which to approach the texts, as well as their own distinct textual traces. Significantly too, those movies feature multiple versions themselves, having both a theatrical release as well as “extended edition” DVDs which feature at least an extra half an hour of new footage edited into the movies to form yet another narrative.

What this multiplication of texts—more supplemental texts—does, then, in a cultural sense, is illustrate the repackaging of culture under postmodernism. Even if one was to write a text with a didactic purpose, arguably in its reception it will have other unintended consequences—and this process is expedited by the repackaging of texts across multiple adaptations. What this means is that even texts written within established religious traditions can be used and reworked into de-institutional settings. Or on the other hand, texts written without spiritual purpose can nevertheless contain the religious symbols that makes for consumption of the postmodern sacred. The fact that Tolkien consciously invokes Christian symbols makes his texts quite easily appropriable as a postmodern sacred text. These texts,
however, can be just as easily consumed in the terms of New Age de-institutionalised spirituality than as a Christian text.

As a number of writers have noted, although published in the early 1950s, Tolkien’s trilogy was taken up by 1960s counter-culture, who saw in the texts a pastoral alternative to the military-industrial complex of the present. The counter-culture, however loosely defined, was in many ways influential in the popularisation of certain New Age philosophies and practices. It was arguably the absence of an overtly Christian message that made the counter-culture embrace Tolkien far more strongly than the similarly pastoral C.S Lewis—and it is arguable that remains true today (though of course, the greater scope of the series probably helps a great deal too). Tolkien’s enthusiasm for the pagan, too, endears him to a New Age that has often preferred to look for Celtic or Nordic spiritualities with which to oppose hegemonic Christianity.

Peter Jackson’s more recent film adaptations of *Lord of the Rings* clearly incorporate both Christian and New Age symbols. Besides the Nordic and Celtic, the New Age frequently appropriates from Eastern spiritual traditions like Buddhism and Taoism. Unsurprisingly, then, *The Lord of the Rings* adaptations reflect this eclectic borrowing. Kristin Thompson, for instance, points out that “the widespread impact of martial-arts choreography from Japanese and Chinese films is reflected in *The Twin Towers*” (49). She argues that Jackson’s adaptations re-write Legolas as a kind of “action elf” (49) and more improbably, Gandalf as a kung-fu monk. She says, “Gandalf the White’s costumes and make-up appear to be derived [...] from those of the white-bearded monk (or white-eyebrowed sifu) figure in kung-fu films” (52).

Gandalf, in Peter Jackson’s films, becomes a kind of hybrid figure, referencing kung-fu monks and Merlin-esque wizards alike. As a figure of wisdom and power, Gandalf
becomes disconnected from any one tradition—a perfectly decontextualised New Age character.

The New Age appears in less obvious ways too. The films frequently make New Age style gestures to the transcendent, in the form of transcendental signified “Spirit.” We see this most clearly in the scenes featuring the Lady Galadriel. It is arguable that the hazy, other-worldly rendering of the Elves functions as another form of the transcendent, literally transcending the human abilities of being and time (being incredibly long-lived). And of course, it is the Elves who leave Middle-Earth at the end of the story, moving on to what is suggested to be another plane of existence—but not, however, a Christian Heaven or Hell, this is clearly a New Age style “other” place.

The notion of cyclical time in Tolkien recalls the New Age far more than Christianity to a modern reader. Tolkien divides time up into Ages, and there is the definite suggestion of a repetition of events—Sauron “rose” at the end of the previous Age, which again ended with his defeat. Cyclical time, we will recall, was one of Eliade’s key ideas. Eliade argues that one can access sacred time through repeating pre-modern rituals appropriated from various non-Christian religions, an idea which has certainly been picked up by New Agers. New Agers have opposed cyclical time to the masculinist, environmentally destructive linear time of industrial capitalism. Cyclical time is considered more “in tune with nature,” the repetition of the seasons and so on. So there is something there in Tolkien’s repetitive history that recalls the more poetic versions of New Age thought. While Ralph Woods is quite right in suggesting that for Tolkien, this idea might have been more of an incomplete pagan intuition of the coming of Christ, it is arguable that a messianic promise coded in suggestive absence rather than presence is radically unthinkable in the postmodern
New Age-ised readings of The Lord of the Rings. So the nuanced apocalypse of Tolkien’s book becomes stripped off its religious meanings in the reception of Jackson’s films. The apocalyptic destruction of Mordor becomes sheer CGI spectacle. Destruction onscreen recalls other films—specifically the disaster movie genre—far more than it does any specifically Christian notion of the end of days. Thus even the apocalypse, the apparently ultimately singular shattering event (a decidedly un-postmodern notion, given that it is has been a prominent part of Judaism and Christianity for thousands of years), becomes part of the postmodern realm of simulation.

Another interesting cultural shift in the readings of the texts is in the notion of destiny. Destiny is a highly important idea in The Lord of the Rings, the destinies of Frodo as Ring-Bearer and Aragorn the Returned King seem to be writ large in the stars. But where the Catholic Tolkien may have been gesturing towards the idea of divine Providence—that God has a plan for all people—arguably the New Age has reworked and disconnected the idea from a Christian framework. Destiny in the New Age can appear as a form of pop-Buddhist “letting go,” or of evidence for the existence of a transcendent “Spirit.” One frequently notices the idea of destiny appear in the widely-held sentimentalisation of “guardian angels” or applied to “pre-destined” romantic relationships. While certain evangelical versions of Protestant Christianity have continued to use Providence as a means of re-assuring its believers of the existence of a benevolent care-taker God, arguably the postmodern New Age is currently far more influential in popularising the notion, such that the use of “destiny” in the Lord of the Rings films recalls the New Age before it recalls the Christian.

Another way one can consider the Christian and New Age together is through the predominantly Catholic notion of the sacrament. Richard McBrien describes
sacramentality as a way of seeing “God in all things [. . .] other people, communities, movements, events, places, objects, the environment, the world at large, the whole cosmos. The visible, the tangible, the finites, the historical—all of these are actual or potential carriers of the divine presence” (qtd Miller 189). Sacramentality is, as Vincent Miller points out, a “broad sensibility within Catholicism manifest in doctrine, liturgy, and popular culture” (189). A number of Catholic scholars have noted that Tolkien’s text exhibits sacramentality towards material objects. Sacramentality in Lord of the Rings can be found, for instance, in Galadriel’s phial of light, in the elvish lembas bread, in the homosociality of the Fellowship of the Ring, and so on.

However, while it is true that sacramentality indeed is a Catholic practice, a similar sensibility may be found in New Age movements and New Age-ised discourses, which privilege bodily experience above all, situating the divine in the corporeal. This very much sees “God in all things,” or at least the sacred, since as I have pointed, the New Age frequently discards the Godhead for a language of Spirit. The sacred emerges in the authentic corporeality of being (which raises of course the question of what is experienced as authentic and what is not). The opposition that often appears is between “manufactured” and “real” or “homemade,” though as we know, both may appear as commodities. The real is, after all, a sign, an exchange-value like any other. Regardless, the New Age, particularly in its environmentally friendly aspects (say, Goddess worship or environmental movements), shows an attitude towards the corporeal and in particular to the natural that is remarkably similar to the sacramental aesthetic. Thus we therefore see that the oft-opposed New Age and Christianity (exemplified in this instance by Catholicism) can be nevertheless entangled within one another. It is not unthinkable, for instance, to
imagine subjects imbibing the New Age style “reverence for all living things” by watching Oprah during the week and then attending church services over the weekend.

Both of these views point towards what Alain Badiou has called “the passion of the Real,” the attitude that so characterises twentieth and early twenty-first century culture. As the “real” seems to melt away into Baudrillardian simulation, it has produced an opposing postmodern desire for real lived experience. Baudrillard, of course, would no doubt point out the simulacral nature of that designated the “real” to be opposed to the apparently virtual—for instance his example of the Tasaday Indian tribe. The real is, after all, a sign, a value like any other. It’s highly problematic, therefore, to oppose as Miller does, a sacramental aesthetic to consumerist simulation, since what one might call the sacramental may indeed be merely the symbolic use value of the commodity. Sacramentality, whether Catholic or New Age, may simply be more fuel for the capitalist fire.

The blurring between a Catholic sacramentality, a New Age respect for life, and a general postmodern turn towards the authenticity of the corporeal therefore demonstrates precisely how flawed the project of critically producing an ontologically “pure” popular culture is, especially considering the postmodern textual strategy of pastiche. Texts like Lord of the Rings demonstrate how texts are constantly in dialogue with another, whether it be in the form of the palimpsest traces of older texts, or by being re-written by newer texts. Rather than maintaining an either/or approach to Christian monism and New Age polytheism, one should look at pop culture as the supplement in action, forever deferred from a single resting place. Lord of the Rings shows clearly how pre-modern ideas like apocalypse, or indeed the Manichean Good and Evil, can be modified by the cultural practices of postmodernism. In my next
chapter I shall look at how ideas of Good and Evil are mobilised in the postmodern sacred, particularly after what could be considered an apocalyptic event for the contemporary American imagination, the attacks on the World Trade Centre on September 11 2001.

Notes

1 This has been extended further by feminist and queer scholars to suggest that women and queers have been used as supplementary figures by which male and heterosexual centres define themselves against. Diana Fuss uses the supplement in regards to the homosexual/heterosexual opposition (qtd Spargo 45), and see Elizabeth Grosz for a discussion of the supplement and the use of Derrida’s ideas by French feminists.


3 Tolkien’s most obvious imitators include the hugely popular Robert Jordan, David Eddings, Raymond Fiest, Terry Brooks, L.E Modesitt, Sara Douglass. Though much Celtic fantasy undeniably re-writes conventional Western histories from feminist and pro-pagan perspectives (see the work of Katherine Kerr, Marion Zimmer Bradley’s Avalon series etc), it too takes Tolkien’s secondary world creation as a departure, and displays a similar fascination with aestheticising the past.

4 J.K Rowling’s Harry Potter series has also been written about heavily, and is likely to remain so for some time, though besides these two flagship series, much of the rest of the genre is barely critically noticed at all.

5 I should point out that Battis’s usage of “fantasy” next to the more venerable modes of pastoral, romance and epic is misleading, arguably modern fantasy as it has emerged from the 19th century has drawn on those other modes, though their use in Tolkien has undoubtedly led to their becoming constitutively generic characteristics.

6 For an interesting Marxist reading of Lord of the Rings see Ishay Landa’s “Slaves of the Ring” Tolkien’s Political Unconscious.” Landa argues that while “there could be be little doubt that Tolkien’s basic ideological intent, as well as effect, have been to bolster the present hegemony” (121), Lord of the Rings nevertheless presents a largely unspoken radical potential. For postcolonial readings see Sue Kim’s “Beyond Black and White: Race and Postmodernism in the Lord of the Rings Films” and Jes Battis’s "Gazing Upon Sauron: Hobbits, Elves, and the Queering of the Postcolonial Optic." For queer readings of Tolkien, besides the aforementioned Battis, see Anna Smol’s "'Oh...Oh...Frodo!': Readings of Male Intimacy in the Lord of the Rings.”

7 This is not limited to Tolkien, other popular fantastic texts have prompted a similar Christian defense—see for instance, The Gospel According To Harry Potter, the back cover of which proclaims its anxieties about HP and witchcraft.


9 Sadly one can see this trend continuing in the present day, for example in the United States in the Christian Right’s encouragement of the Bush administration’s pro-Zionist tendencies, in order to fulfil the Biblical prophecy that God’s Chosen People must be safe in their homeland before Jesus can return. Needless to say, that people will petition the White House in order to adjust the foreign policy of the world’s most
powerful nation in the hopes of fulfilling an apocalyptic prophecy is scary in the extreme.

For instance, the Jewish messianic figure Shabbetai Zevi. Zevi proclaimed himself as the Jewish messiah in 1665, but was imprisoned by the Sultan of Istanbul in 1666. Given the choice to convert to Islam or to die, Zevi scandalously chose apostacy, devastating his followers (Armstrong 375-77). And one must remember of course that the Christian messianic cult of Jesus arose out of the Jewish people, and that his teachings need to be understood first and foremost as part of a Jewish tradition that includes mendicant holy men in Galilee and rabbinic theological dispute (Armstrong 98), though obviously over time the Christian religion takes on an increasingly distinctive goy tone and theology (for instance Karen Armstrong points out that both Jews and Muslims have found the doctrine of the Trinity to be blasphemous, p 152).

And simultaneously also opening the text up to a queer reading. The possibility of a queer Christ, while undeniably scandalous to a great many Christians, is taken up in theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid’s *Indecent Theology*.

It should be noted that Frodo’s passivity creates an interesting tension with the text. Tolkien largely frames the works as epics, which in general terms requires an active hero. Given Frodo’s near capitation at the climax on Mount Doom, Tolkien thus requires other characters to take up the heroic role—Sam, and Aragorn.

Slash fans will note with interest that Frodo leaves, in part, because Sam “cannot be always torn in two” between Frodo and his wife and family (1006).

See for instance, Terry Pratchett’s 27 book comic fantasy *Discworld* series, or Katherine Kerr’s 11+ *Deverry* series, though these series are by no means alone in their generous sizes.

For example, despite a few references to his genetic pre-disposition to adventure, Frodo predominantly spends his time longing for home.

Tolkien’s rendering of race is dubious at best, the glorification of the blonde-haired and blue-eyed Elves, contrasted with the horror of the human-animal hybrid Orcs has meant that a number of far-Right neo-Nazi organisations have held up both books and movies as exemplary Aryan texts. Sue Kim in her article “Beyond Black and White: Race and Postmodernism in the *Lord of the Rings* movies” gives Tolkien more leeway than the films, saying that “partly due to the novels’ ability to explore symbolism, diplomacy and war, culture and history in greater depth and subtlety, the novels’ black-and-white coding, while still strongly apparent, is more ambivalent than in the films.” It’s easy to see that Tolkien, writing in the 1940s and 50s in the dying days of Empire, has a text underpinned by a racist paternal epistemology, which given the historical context, most scholars have found understandable though not excusable. On the other hand, working 50 years later on the films, Peter Jackson should have known better.

Such as the aforementioned “kung-fu monk” motif

See, for instance, the movie adaptation of Lewis’s the *Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, which was quite directly influenced by Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Downplaying overt religious moralising in favour of suggestive symbols is just good commercial sense for capturing a mass-market post-Christian audience, although the movie also benefited from a post-*Passion of the Christ* tapping into an overtly religious pop-culture market.
I’m thinking here, once again, of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, whose creator Joss Whedon is a self-described “angry atheist.”

He says, “sacramentality is an interesting example of a religious resource for countering consumer culture, because it challenges consumer culture not by critiquing consumption but by challenging the abstracting dynamisms of consumption itself” (Miller 189).
Chapter Five

Good, Evil and All That Stuff: Morality and Meta-Narrative in the Postmodern Sacred

“I stand for truth, justice… and other stuff” Clark Kent, Smallville, “Drone” (1.18)

The texts of the postmodern sacred seem at first glance to resemble heroic narratives, epics. They often construct very strongly an opposition between good and evil, “good” being of course the position of the hero with whom we are supposed to identify. As such they seem to present an anti-postmodern nostalgic re-articulation of meta-narratives. In short, a return of modern and sometimes even pre-modern narratives of legitimation. A heroic narrative like Lord of the Rings seems to present the fantasy of an ultra-essentialist world in which not only does everyone know their place—hobbits in the Shire, dwarves, men with noble lineages and so on—but miraculously, knowing those places doesn’t create any conflict. Evil is Out There,¹ in the irreducibly Evil of Mordor and Sauron, it is not something to be found in the
maintenance of inequitable power relationships. Marxist SF theorist Carl Freedman, for instance, damns the trilogy by saying

Tolkien’s world is one in which the great majority of the actual material interests—economic, political, ideological, sexual—that drive individuals and societies are silently erased, to be replaced by the dominant obsession of [. . .] the abstract and essentially vacuous metaphysical battle between good and evil” (264).

For some readers, there is undoubtedly something seductive about the apparent appearance of worlds without the conflicts posed by economic marginalisation or identity politics. Heroic narratives—of which Jesus provides one key example, if not the sole by any means—serve a different kind of purpose in the postmodern world than they have done in other points in history. In some cases, they prove to be nostalgic fantasies, dedicated to pre-capturing pre-lapsarian worlds. Such nostalgia may be in the service of conservative versions of gender and sexuality (as in phallic fantasies like the aforementioned David and Leigh Eddings), race (for example, the racial politics of Peter Jackson’s Lord of the Rings film are decidedly dubious) and class, or all of the above.

Nostalgia, however, can also be productive at times in thinking through alternatives to modern capitalism, most prominently in the long tradition of Marxist and feminist utopia writers. It’s my argument, then, that the postmodern sacred’s use of heroic narratives encompasses both conservative, even reactionary, and critical textual possibilities. While these heroic narratives seem to suggest a return of the meta-narrative, they are nevertheless situated in a postmodern era in which belief in meta-narratives is epistemologically problematic, and are thus haunted by the prospect—even fore-knowledge—of their own failure. To argue therefore that
the postmodern sacred represents an unmitigated return of meta-narratives is problematic.

The quote that heads this chapter from *Smallville*, the Superman prequel television series that traces his evolution into the familiar superhero, is indicative in this regard. Rather than triumphantly saying Superman’s catchphrase “truth, justice and the American way” as one could expect (in an articulation that would be both for the first time, and a repetition), Clark equivocates. Whilst one could read his “other stuff” as the inarticulate mumblings of the average high school student, it is arguable that the statement also reflects an ambivalence towards the kinds of modern meta-narratives that other incarnations of Superman have reflected. The epistemological certainty of a singular “American way” might be is clearly problematic now.

The contemporary, therefore, is still marked by a radical skepticism towards any meta-narrative, and postmodern textual strategies are powerful as before. Indeed, the closer you look, the more shades of grey there seems to be in these texts. Most particularly in the two responses to September 11 I analyse—the Ori are on *Stargate SG:1*, and the new series of *Battlestar Galactica*—the Evil Out There becomes the Evil In Here too. It seems at times to resemble how Mark Edmundsen characterises the Gothic—“All are guilty. All must, in time, pay up” (5). It’s my argument that an ethical good in the postmodern sacred is not necessarily, or at least not merely, a matter of immutable, innate goodness (although it sometimes is in some texts), it is also the result of ethical action, and of the results of those actions. What I want to do in this chapter, then, is look at what role morality plays in the postmodern sacred, specifically in terms of the notion of meta-narrative. As we shall see, the heroic narratives of the postmodern sacred are not, of themselves, meta-narratives, neither does a concern with morality necessarily imply some kind of pre or anti-postmodern
position. Postmodernism is not lost so easily, even by those who claim to be against its “relativism.”

The Meta-Narrative Strikes Back

Though it is clear that much of the postmodern sacred consists of heroic narratives that posit very strongly moral positions of good and evil, it is my argument that this does not necessarily involve a return to a pre-postmodern world. Indeed, in many ways it works to conceal its own hidden postmodern positions underneath a surface of pre or anti postmodernism. One key cultural context to the apparent return of the meta-narrative is the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in September 11, 2001. September 11 seems in some ways to provoke the return of a number of meta-narratives—those of nationality, Good and Evil, the West versus the Rest. The simplistic “clash of civilisations” thesis between the Christian West and the
Muslim Middle East advanced by Samuel Huntington in the early 90s was taken up and repeated by media and politicians alike. Edward Said’s scathing rebuttal of the notion in *The Nation* was sadly out of step with the jingoistic spirit of the times. Particularly in the early days after September 11, a certain kind of “patriotic” nationality was on display. That patriotism was, of course, scarcely ideologically and culturally neutral in terms of the ideal subjects it presented—for instance Judith Butler notes in *Precarious Life* that Lebanese restaurants were held to be suspicious if not flying American flags in their windows (2004: 77). The ideal subject was inevitably cast as normatively white and heterosexual, for as Sara Ahmed notes, “some bodies more than others represent the nation in mourning” (13), and heterosexual familial ties had the considerable advantage of being publicly and culturally legible in a way that queer did not.

After September 11, a popular neo-conservative notion circulated that 9/11 represented an end to our postmodern “vacation from history.” New York mayor Rudolph Guiliani denounced “cultural relativism” in an address to the United Nations, whilst Roger Rosenblatt declared in *Time* magazine that the “age of irony” has ended (Fish 27). Where the rise of postmodern theory at its most extreme had suggested to some that nothing could be considered real anymore, September 11 for many Americans provides an unambiguously Real event. The shock of September 11 (and indeed, if slightly bizarrely considering it occurred *in another country*, the Bali bombings for many Australians) is that the mass violence that occurs through the rest of the world has finally occurred in the United States. This notion, of course, displays a hideous parochialism given the number of disasters, natural and man-made, that occur in the rest of the world. And what makes that mindset even more bewildering is that for September 11 to be a singular event of the Real one must ignore the
Oklahoma bombings, the attempted bombing of the World Trade Centre in 1993, and the fact that America has long been the home of the gun-toting mass killer (Columbine et al). Yet none of these managed to trouble the hitherto apparent American ease with simulation?°

The notion, therefore, that somehow the media techniques that birthed postmodernism have somehow disappeared with the destruction of the World Trade Centre is merely wishful thinking, facile and simplistic analysis. Death, especially televised death of the sort found in the endless looping of the Twin Towers, proves no barrier to the simulated spectacle of postmodernism. As any regular viewer of nightly television news knows, the death of real people is a Gothic spectacle to be consumed as readily as those of any fictional horror text. Baudrillard had already pointed this out in his analysis of the Gulf War, pointing out that the deaths of Iraqis were erased and rendered as movie/video game spectacle, though interestingly he seems to suggest at times in The Spirit of Terrorism that September 11 should be considered a real event of symbolic exchange. Is one to regard this as a failure of nerve for Baudrillard, an intellectual buckling to the American rhetoric that this is an event like no other?° I would suggest however that September 11 has clearly been brought into the reign of the simulated spectacle, for the Two Towers footage has been aestheticised to the point of over-familiarity—indeed, the most powerful moment of Michael Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11 relies on this fact, when instead of showing the planes crashing into the towers, the screen goes blank and we merely hear the screams of dying people. Indeed, the attacks rely on a postmodern media-scape, for as Žižek points out, “the ‘terrorists’ themselves did [. . .] not do it primarily to provoke real material damage, but FOR THE SPECTACULAR EFFECT OF IT” (2002: n.p.). Arguably, the various fundamentalisms must suppress some of their usual antipathy towards capitalism and
modern technology in order to function; say in the use of mobile phones by terrorists, or the simulated presence online of church websites. *Even movements that are anti-postmodern cannot but help be postmodern in some sense,* for the pre-postmodern “Reality” principle (as Baudrillard calls it) is not truly recoverable in the wake of the media’s destabilising influence. And even in the very midst of the September 11 coverage, it is interesting to note the ‘too real’ spectacle of people falling from the Twin Towers. Footage of this seemed to be shown on the day only but was swiftly removed from public view, rarely if ever repeated again by the media. So even the traumatic repetition of the destruction of the Twin Towers becomes selectively cut so as to avoid this stain of reality, becoming a spectacle of collapsing buildings and only an implied human element.

So the argument that the real has returned with a vengeance misses precisely the ways in which “real” life becomes a spectacle for the media, is experienced—mediated—through reference to pop culture simulations. To point this out is *not* to elide or erase the deaths of the people who died on September 11, or in Iraq, rather it is to point out that the postmodern condition is not so easily lost; it is not a position that can be consciously taken up or put down after tragedy. For example, Republic American president George W. Bush is surely no friend of postmodern theory. His electoral success, like Ronald Reagan before him, seems based upon an appeal to conservative versions of meta-narratives of nationality, gender, heterosexuality, race and so on. Yet Bush’s presidency is nevertheless postmodern in that it presumes that media representation is more important than “reality” off-screen. Of the many examples that one could cite, Bush’s declaration on the USS Abraham Lincoln in May 2003 that Iraq was “one victory in the war on terror,” standing beneath a sign that read “Mission Accomplished,” seems somewhat premature three years later given the
ongoing death toll in Iraq today. And of course, one scarcely can forget the “borrowed kettle” (as Žižek puts it) of the non-existent Weapons of Mass Destruction that justified the invasion of Iraq in the first place.

Regardless, this apparent return of the real seems to suggest that meta-narratives have returned, for good. Of course, talk of the nation state, and indeed of morality, had hardly disappeared from the postmodern world prior to September 11, yet this is the clear implication, an indictment of postmodernism as nihilistic and amoral. Post 9/11, now one can apparently talk of Good and Evil, the nation-state, those absolutes that the postmodern skepticism had problematised. Yet this clearly ignores the way in which “spin” and “management speak,” the language of marketing, bureaucrats and the like has become the predominant mode of political discourse. A modern discourse of universal human rights is practically unheard of now—think of the calls to “rethink” human rights to allow torture by the US (Žižek, 2004: 53). The postmodern “language games” that Lyotard describes are as widespread as ever, indeed they have become ever more specialised.

The swing towards meta-narrative may also be considered to be part of the wider conservative backlash to the social movements of the 1960s and 70s (the Civil Rights movement, feminism, gay liberation and so on). Susan Faludi in Backlash argued strongly that the 1980s was marked by a strong discourse dedicated to erasing the steps towards gender equality that feminism had made through-out the Seventies (say, in the form of Equal Opportunity legislation, access to birth control and so on). The 2004 elections in the United States, in which many states voted to enact bans on gay marriage, is arguably a reaction to the gains gay, lesbian and bisexual people have made in gaining such basic legal rights as the right to have sex (in states or countries with anti-sodomy laws) and to have relationships recognised legally, as well as an
increased media visibility in the form of television shows like *Will & Grace* and *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy*. Tellingly, many of the arguments against gay marriage relied on the logic that to legally recognise same-sex relationships would be in some way to diminish the value of heterosexual relationships. In short, the granting of equal legal rights for people who have been historically marginalised—such as women, queers, people of colour and people with disabilities—is suggested to diminish the rights of those who already possess those rights. The argument is even made, with gob-smacking chutzpah, that those same people whose rights have never been in question are now being actively oppressed by “minorities,” whose oppressive behaviour it seems, is largely to demand equal rights and refuse to allow hate speech to be directed at them. This is the conservative backlash in full swing, and it is clearly in part what is fuelling the neo-con “return” of the meta-narrative—the desire to re-instate the oppressions that modern universalisms produced (and of course, largely concealed beneath the rhetoric of rationality and progress).

Although it is not entirely reducible to religious fundamentalism, this backlash has taken many of the anxieties of the religious Right about race, nationality and sexuality. Karen Armstrong argues that:

Protestant fundamentalists and Christian conservatives in most denominations seem to have felt deeply unmanned by the evil forces of secular humanism [. . .] the reason for this was the new self-assertion of women; even fundamentalist women were infected by this cultural virus and, as a result, men were becoming “feminised” or even “castrated.” This fear also underlay the fundamentalist hatred of homosexuality, which like feminism, they regarded as an epidemic, the cause of America’s decline. (312)

The alliance in the United States from the 1980s onwards between Christianity and the Republican Right is significant in that it yoked together the backlash rhetoric of the Right with the sanctifying power of Jesus. Christianity and a conservative version of gender, sexuality and race have become almost synonymous in the present. This
has inevitably produced some theological inconsistencies—the Christian Right’s pro-
gun, pro-war stance seems ill at ease with Jesus’ message of peace. As Armstrong
points out, this seems linked to “buried worries about what they considered an
emasculating tendency in Christianity itself, which had become a religion of womanly
values: forgiveness, mercy and tenderness” (312). That particular aspect of the
Christian Right seems to have been lost in translation in Australia and the UK, where
the “right to bear arms” has never been constitutionally enshrined in the same way as
the U.S, yet the broad strokes of the conservative backlash rhetoric remain largely the
same. Marion Maddox for instance, convincingly argues that the Australian Howard
government has been incredibly successful in harnessing the rhetoric of religious-
neutral “family” values in order to pursue Christian Right social policies of race,
gender and sexuality.\footnote{12}

It is arguable that conservatives have presented all of these narratives—
gender, race, sexuality, nationality—as marked by an incredible loss, not merely of
power, but of the privilege of maintaining an ignorance of the Other.\footnote{13} The “return”
of the meta-narrative invoked by the neo-conservatives after September 11 is
therefore a return profoundly permeated by nostalgia. Conservatives posit a
nebulously dated “golden age” before the traumatic events of civil rights, feminism,
gay liberation—not to mention the Vietnam war and the Watergate scandal, both of
which made an unproblematic nationalism that much more difficult.\footnote{14} Australian
Prime Minister John Howard used his Australia Day address in 2006 to criticise the
evils of postmodernism plaguing contemporary history teaching. The problem for
Howard is that contemporary history in Australia no longer teaches the uncritical
celebration of British imperialism and colonialism with which Howard himself clearly
identifies.\footnote{15} So one should hardly take the conservative rhetoric at face value—it is
not that the apparent singularity of September 11 has shocked the West out of its postmodernist daze. Rather, September 11 merely gave a convenient pre-text around which to hang an already-existent conservative project in the United States and Australia dedicated to the nostalgic reclamation of meta-narratives of nation, race, gender, class and sexuality (although the UK remains slightly different given that the Centre-Left Blair government has been in power both during the 90s and post-September 11). The backlash politics in both Australia and the US, as Marion Maddox and Karen Armstrong show, are implicitly linked to the rise of the Christian Right.

Paradoxically, considering the free market economic policies of the Right, backlash plays on the fears created by the precariousness of jobs and communities in global capitalism (the risk society as Ulrich Beck called it). As Wendy Brown argues:

Modern empire mobiles fear on a mass scale; it is above all parasitic on the fear incited by the spectre of terrorism, but it is also dependent on the fear related to the porousness of modern nation-states and to the exposure of vulnerable individuals and deracinated communities to the vicissitudes of global forces. Empire promises protection from dangers that it rhetorically magnifies in order to secure itself, a magnification that intensifies our fear in the dark (10)

So the “return of the real” is arguably related to the maintenance of power, it mobilises fears produced by terrorism and by the postmodern turn more generally. As Baudrillard said long before September 11, “order always opts for the real [. . .] it always prefers this hypothesis” (1994:21). That is to say, it prefers the real as a narrative for legitimating its power, not that power itself functions on the level of the real. So, given that, the questions for this study of pop culture are: how does the postmodern sacred play out the apparent return of the meta-narrative, how does this nonetheless conceal its hidden postmodern positions, and how are questions of morality tied (or not tied) to the heroic narrative in the postmodern sacred?
Direct questions of morality can often seem slightly out of place in modern Literature and Cultural Studies critical practice. Yet by theorising that texts both explicitly and implicitly construct inequitable power relations, such cultural theory has traced the ways in which textual practice translates into real-world marginality. In other words, texts always work to privilege some reading positions and not others, and that process works to culturally disempower certain groups. Although there are of course major differences between the fields, this is an insight more or less applicable to many of the disciplinary “streams” that intersect with CS practice—post-colonialism, critical race theory, feminism, queer theory, disability studies, and so on. The oft-made accusation that Cultural Studies displaces morality into a morass
of cultural relativism in which no ethical judgments can be made is, frankly, ludicrous. Such studies are at their heart highly ethical projects. Nevertheless, direct discussions of ethics are rare (compared to, say, philosophy), often displaced into a meta-analysis of what cultural concepts of ethics do, what and who they work in the service of.

The texts of the postmodern sacred, however, are not so bashful when it comes to morality. SF, horror and fantasy do not merely feature protagonists, they feature heroes. That’s a key difference when it comes to discussing morality. Whilst in general we are supposed to identify with heroes, they are nevertheless extra-ordinary people (or indeed aliens) able to perform feats beyond ordinary human capability. As such, they shoulder a super-human responsibility to protect the rest of the populace. Superman’s strength derives from his being born on another planet, Krypton (and though Superman and his “truth, justice and the American way” may not have begun as postmodern, by the time the prequel television series Smallville had arrived in 2001, he had certainly become so16). Buffy, we will remember, “stand[s] alone [to] fight the vampires, the demons and the powers of darkness” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth” 1.01). Witches and wizards are a favourite trope of the postmodern sacred (to name just two, Charmed, Harry Potter). Robots, demons, Slayers, sometimes even traditionally “evil” beings like vampires and werewolves (Blade, Underworld) may be recruited in the service of fighting evil and protecting the vulnerable.

As we saw in Chapter Three, gods and monsters are far closer than are often thought. They require each other to define themselves against. Both are separated from “ordinary” humanity by virtue of their superior strengths and abilities. Heroes often exist in a liminal space on the edge of society, protecting the world but not
necessarily being entirely *of* it. So their separation is often not merely a metaphoric separation, but literal. This is a trope of both “classic” comic books—Clark Kent has his Fortress of Solitude, Batman his cavernous mansion—and of newer texts that have drawn equally from comic-book sources as from the mythic (*The League of Extraordinary Gentleman*, for instance draws characters from 19th century literature like Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Dracula*, and *Tom Sawyer* and refracts them through a postmodern comic sensibility).

The trilogy of films that make up *The Matrix* provide an interesting case of the interplay between religion and ethics in the postmodern sacred—in particular with the way in which they foreground an action movie Christ-figure in a seeming restatement of pre or anti postmodern meta-narratives. Whilst the first movie was made before September 11, the follow-up sequels were released after, meaning that the series reflects an enduring cultural ambivalence towards postmodern simulation that both precedes 9/11 and continues after. For those unfamiliar with the three movies—*The Matrix, The Matrix Reloaded* and *Matrix Revolutions*—the story is relatively simple. Sometime in the future, around 2199, mankind has been enslaved by a race of powerful aliens, and living in capsules feeding a giant machine. They’re unaware of this however, inhabiting mentally a shared computer simulation of the year 1999. Neo, played by Keanu Reeves, is a hacker who in the first film finds out the nature of “reality” in the Matrix, and then leads a human rebellion against the machines and a rogue computer program called Agent Smith (played by Hugo Weaving). The series has been variously read by critics as Buddhist and Christian, as well as a postmodern critique of simulation and dystopic vision of a mechanised future. Following on from my argument in Chapter Four about the two-way supplementary relationship between Christianity and the New Age, I believe that both Christian and
Buddhist are equally valid readings, the text(s) are suggestive of both in different ways, as well as significantly influenced by Greek and Roman mythology. The series provides a cornucopia of symbols and names pastiched from various religious and mythic traditions—characters Trinity (Christian) and Morpheus (the God of dreams in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*), the ship Nebuchadnezzar (a Babylonian king mentioned in the Book of Daniel), the city Zion (Jewish and Christian), the Oracle (a possible reference to the Greek Oracle at Delphi) and so on. Indeed, Gregory Bassham criticises *The Matrix*’s treatment of religious themes for its “cafeteria pluralism,” (118) that “while fashionable, is very difficult to make sense of, or to defend” (125). Bassham’s critique seems to miss the point, for spiritually inflected pop culture cannot presume any one religious belief in its mass audience. As a matter of capitalistic pragmatism textual producers must strive to avoid alienating their audiences, as any overt reference is likely to do. Religious pluralism provides a sense of mythic grandeur precisely because of its inability to be pinned to any one religious credo.

*The Matrix* provides on the one hand a hero in the form of Neo, a properly mythic hero resonant with Christ symbolism. Neo is called “The One” throughout the three movies by Morpheus, the prophesied saviour for mankind. The messianic overtones are in the series right from the beginning, from Trinity’s speech to Neo in the club. She says:

You’re looking for him. I know because I was once looking for the same thing. And when he found me, he told me I wasn’t really looking for him; I was looking for an answer. It’s the question that drives us, Neo. It’s the question that brought you here. You know the question, just as I did. Neo: what is the Matrix? Trinity: the answer is out there Neo. It’s looking for you, and it will find you if you want it to. (*The Matrix*)
The “him” being referred to in the speech is, of course, Morpheus, the John the Baptist figure to Neo’s Jesus (Morpheus, in return, “has spent his entire life looking for [Neo]”). The pre-figuring of the “real” Messiah with another is a common trope in Christianity, in which the coming of Jesus is intuited by Jew and pagan alike, played out in an incomplete fashion. Like most Hollywood Messiahs, Neo is an action-movie Christ, a phallic hero without many of those inconvenient ethical demands traditional religion tends to make.

On the one hand, then, The Matrix seems to present a meta-narrative of morality, a demand for human sovereignty couched in messianic terms. Like Star Wars before it,19 The Matrix draws more or less self-consciously on religious and mythic structures. As such it’s unsurprising that it gathered a fanatical response in some fans. While the first movie was a sleeper hit, it seems likely that writer/directors the Wachowski brothers had hoped the mythic elements would produce the kind of fanatical following for the film that SF and fantasy have been known to produce.

The Matrix and the postmodern

The Matrix series maintains an ambiguous position towards the postmodern. On the one hand, much of the force of the first movie derives from its lay-postmodern “revelation” of the simulated world of the matrix (and by inference, the implication that today’s world is just as simulated). In that sense, The Matrix is a nostalgic, anti-postmodern piece. The fight, after all, is on behalf of a human sovereignty unmediated by simulated technology. That technology is parasitical, draining humans of their energy, literally and metaphorically. The unreality of the simulated world in
the first movie is suggested to be a “splinter in your mind” needing to be removed, yet this is increasingly complicated by the following two movies.

The ambivalences in the text run much deeper than a simple rejection of postmodern simulation. It is not merely anti-postmodern, even as it may at times verge towards a trite affirmation of “reality.” Baudrillard himself sees that as a sign the films mis-read his work, keeping a “real” outside of simulation in a way that the theory refuses. Yet, the “real” world that the rebels inhabit is often a dank, lifeless existence, scarcely an affirmation of unmediated experience. Recall the traitor Cypher’s speech in the first movie about how he would rather eat fake steak than real porridge. Similarly, much of the movies’ appeal derives from the spectacular, unreal, effects and abilities that the computer Matrix endows both Neo and Agent Smith with. The computer Matrix provides the pretext for the bending of “real” life—the amazing “bullet time” effect, the famous kung-fu move in which the actors pause mid-air while the camera rotates disorientingly, Neo’s ability to fly, the “cool” accoutrements of leather jackets, sunglasses, impressively phallic guns and so on. In short, the action inside the Matrix provides much of the visceral thrills of the series. Such a play of “surfaces” is not to be dismissed easily, for in foregrounding the aesthetic to the point of fetish, The Matrix is clearly postmodern in the pleasures it attempts to evoke. And to state the obvious, The Matrix pastiches a great many other texts, notably Blade Runner, Hong Kong kung-fu flicks and Japanese anime like Akira and Ghost in the Shell. The Wachowski brothers, after all, explicitly stated their goal was to create a live action anime (and indeed went on to hire a number of anime directors to create an anime series of short films called The Animatrix that bridged the first and second films). Thus, even as it attempts to find a way out of the postmodern world of simulations through a heroic Christ figure, The Matrix remains profoundly enmeshed
in the postmodern, unwilling or even unable to imagine a world outside textual referentiality.

*Harry Potter*

![Image of Daniel Radcliffe as Harry Potter in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*](image)

The immensely successful *Harry Potter* series of books and movies provides an interesting point of comparison to *The Matrix*. Whilst it was initially targeted at children and young adults, *Harry Potter* has since found an enormous, mass market audience and is arguably one of the more influential fantastic texts. While *The Matrix* (especially the first movie) series is arguably one of the key touchstones of contemporary SF, *Harry Potter*, along with the perennial favourite *Lord of the Rings*, occupies a comparable position in the fantasy genre. Interestingly, perhaps because of its young audience, *Harry Potter* is currently second to none in terms of provoking evangelical anxiety about the evils of “witch-craft” and Satanism.

An at-times uneasy blend of jolly-hockey-sticks style boarding school stories and fantastic elements, the titular hero Harry fights foes both powerful and mundane, from the evil sorcerer Lord Voldemort to the various childhood and teenage dramas of mean teachers and peers, social exclusion, heterosexual romance and social exclusion, heterosexual romance and so on. In its
blending of source texts like boarding school stories such as Enid Blyton’s *Mallory Towers* and *Twins at Saint Claire’s* series, Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*, and the presence of other characteristic fantasy tropes like dragons and magic spells, *Harry Potter* is clearly a postmodern pastiche. And the films take that pastiching impulse in other ways too; for instance, the books describe wizard’s clothes as brightly coloured, yet the wizards in Diagon Alley are imagined in the first movie (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*) as dressed in the clothes of a Dickensian style London—a pastiche which certainly rang true to Rowling’s nostalgic textual impulses. Indeed the literary critic Harold Bloom has criticised the series for its profound lack of originality (which is, I suspect, to miss the point of where a critique of the series could or should be made. The racial and class politics involved in unearthing the merry old days of Empire embedded in the public boarding school story, for instance, are scarcely progressive). Andrew Blake, too, argues that the success of Harry Potter is due to its New Labour style “retro-lutionary” aesthetic, in which the new is sold by simulating the aesthetics of the past. He says, “the stories explore the old, and a little under the surface deal with the new: past literary forms and present concerns exist side by side” (17).

Like *The Matrix*, *Harry Potter* features an apparently preternaturally gifted protagonist fighting the forces of evil. Like many properly mythic heroes, Harry is marked out as special from birth. He is known throughout the wizarding world as “The Boy Who Lived,” having survived an attack by Voldemort as a mere infant at a time in which few were able to survive a confrontation with him. Harry’s separation from the other students is visually coded with the lightning bolt scar on his forehead from his attack by Voldemort as a child. When he first begins at the wizard school Hogwarts in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, Harry is treated with
reverence and respect by the other students. Despite her clear superiority in using magic, Hermione’s speech to Harry at the end of the first book makes clear that it’s he who is truly heroic.

Conversely, evilness is usually easily readable in the series; there is often a clear slide between unpleasantness and evil (in the form of Professor Snape, Draco Malfoy and his family, and other Slytherins). Thus despite the assurances of Hogwarts headmaster Dumbledore, Professor Snape remains continually ethically suspicious largely because he is nasty to Harry—his eventual defection to Voldemort in *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince* is completely unsurprising. In this, the notion advanced by Susan Nieman that much modern evil stems not from personal malevolence but rather systemically produced violence (as exemplified by the Holocaust, or corporate neglect, and so on), in which good, nice people nevertheless contribute to the perpetuation of injustice and even evil, is a profoundly foreign notion one to Rowling. But if this at times suggests a kind of moral simplicity, then *HP* is by no means alone in either children’s literature or adult fantasy in doing so.23

And yet while Harry seems at first glance to be innately heroic, author J.K Rowling makes that heroism ethical, the product of love and altruism. Although they are by no means perfect, and fall out a number of times, the friendship between Harry, Ron and Hermione is consistently affirmed as one of the series’ central themes. And it is in fact the love of Harry’s mother, Lily, which prevents Voldemort from killing him, rather than Harry’s natural heroism. Good emerges not merely from heroic action, but from the consequences of those actions. Nicholas Flamel, creator of the Philosopher’s Stone of the first book, and his wife both make the ethical choice to die at the ripe old age of 665. As Dumbledore says to Harry:
To one as young as you, I’m sure it seems incredible, but to Nicholas and Perenelle, it really is like going to bed after a very very long day. After all, to the well organised mind, death is but the next great adventure. You know, the [Philosopher’s] Stone really was not such a wonderful thing. As much money and life as you could want! The two things most human beings would choose above all—the trouble is, humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things that are worst for them (297).

Here the desire to artificially extend one’s life—what in other circumstances may be desperately fought against in HP—is subjected to ethical scrutiny. And of course, for the religious scholar, there seems a clear significance of dying at 665 instead of 666. In what amounts to a magical euthanasia argument, there seems a clear ethical line between the grace of Nicholas and Perenelle’s surrender to the inevitable and Voldemort’s desperate desire to remain alive.

Unlike Dumbledore, the evil Voldemort is unable to imagine a worse fate than death. Voldemort will do anything for immortality and power. As Jerry L. Walls puts it, “rather than sacrifice himself for others, he is willing to sacrifice innocent beings for his own selfish purposes. This is shown in the fact that he was willing to perform the monstrous act of slaying a unicorn in order to keep himself alive” (75). Whilst it makes for exciting and epic battles in fantastic narratives, such an utterly self-centred disregard for others is rarely helpful in conceptualising real-world evil. In its characterisation of evil, Harry Potter is perhaps far less sophisticated than, say, The Sopranos, in which the lead character is a mafia boss who loves his wife and children and nevertheless commits acts of horrible violence, sometimes for business reasons, sometimes because of his explosive temper. Harry Potter is, however, also far more comforting in that it posits evil as something Out There and irreducible different rather than the friendly neighbour who attends church and his daughter’s soccer matches and just happens to run a mafia family.
So while HP offers shades of nuance in the way it conceives of heroism and duty, it provides a far less nuanced reading of Evil—a position that is typical of postmodern sacred texts. In Stargate SG:1, you will recall, the alien race Goa’uld are almost entirely evil from the very moment a symbiote enters its host.\textsuperscript{25} Excepting the vampires-with-souls Spike and Angel, the same is true of vampires on Buffy and Angel. So while there are indeed shades of grey in some areas of the postmodern sacred, in many ways the texts offer black-and-white comic book texts. However, these are not necessarily to be taken at face value, of themselves the presence of polar Good and Evil do not entail a refusal of the complexity of postmodern life. In fact, the desire to recapture a lost world of simple morality and real experience is a characteristically postmodern desire.

\textit{Responses to September 11 in the Postmodern Sacred 1: Stargate SG:1}

\textit{An Ori Prior on Stargate SG:1}

The postmodern sacred’s restatement of the singularity of heroes, and the heroic narrative is one, arguably its chief, response to the crisis of the meta-narrative
in postmodernity. Those texts like *Harry Potter* and the first *Matrix* that were produced before 2001 might seem to intuit a shift towards a post-September 11 re-statement of the meta-narrative. However, as we shall see, a number of texts of the postmodern sacred have made explicit responses to September 11 and the increasingly authoritarian policies of the West. These texts, in particular, the new version of *Battlestar Galactica* and series 9 and 10 of *Stargate SG:1* present critiques of the politics of fear being utilised by politicians, affirm the democratic rights of the general public, and present and critique fundamentalist versions of spiritual experience.

I have mentioned on a number of occasions the SF television series *Stargate SG:1* (in particular Chapter Three treats *Stargate* in some detail with regard to its corporeal “Gods”). Although it retains common elements through-out, *Stargate* series nine and ten can be considered quite distinct from the previous eight. This is partly due to significant changes in the cast—star Richard Dean Anderson leaves at the end of series 8, replaced by Ben Browder, former star of cancelled SF series *Farscape* (though thankfully not in the same role as Anderson, soap opera style). Fellow *Farscape* alumni Claudia Black joins SG:1 as the alien Vala, while a new General (General Landry) takes control of the base. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, the series shifts emphasis thematically. In the first eight series, the plucky Earth adventurers from the U.S military step through wormholes built by super-powerful aliens thousands of years before and do battle with a parasitic alien race called the Goa’uld. However, at the end of the eighth series, the Goa’uld are largely defeated by SG:1 and their allies, and are replaced by another nemesis—an enemy called the Ori. The Ori are beings who have “ascended” to a higher plane of existence, like the Ancients who built the Stargate system. However, unlike the Ancients, who pursue an ethics of non-action and regard the pain of life as necessary for each being’s path towards
enlightenment, the Ori demand worship from humans. We find out that the Ori in fact
derive power from the strength of their worshippers, and that while they promise their
followers ascension they do not in fact deliver it. Series 9 and 10 see the Ori spread
from their universe of origin into the Milky Way, where they begin conquering and
converting people by force, exterminating *en masse* those who do not convert to their
faith.

The shift in the series in the series, then, is an interesting one. The Goa’uld
were a multi-racial group of power-hungry feudal rulers, who by virtue of their
advanced technology were able to pose convincingly as Gods. The task of SG:1 was
usually scientific de-mystification, to expose the Goa’uld as frauds. The Ori, on the
other hand, do legitimately possess mystical powers, and bestow some of these on
their followers. The issue is thus not about whether the Ori are Gods—or at least
supernatural beings—so much as about fundamentalist interpretations that produce
invasions and mass-murders, as well as the Ori’s falsehoods and blatant self-interest
in demanding the faith of their human subjects. Indeed, it is arguable that where the
Goa’uld provoke a fear of the racialised Other, the Ori are more about a fear of the
rise of the fundamentalist Christian Right as much as Muslim fundamentalism. As the
picture of the Ori Prior that heads this section suggests, the followers of the Ori are
almost uniformly white; indeed the make-up on the Priors is an exaggerated
whiteness. Significantly too, the “quotes” from their holy texts recall firstly the
Judeo-Christian Bible. In “A Line in the Sand” (10.12), Tobin, a follower of the Ori,
tries to prevent a Prior from destroying a village. The episode hinges on a theological
argument between the two in which the Prior re-interprets the holy text in order to
justify mass murder.
Prior: they have been touched by evil. There is no salvation for them.
Tobin: but we eliminated all of the unbelievers
Prior: not all of them
Tobin: I thought the village had capitulated, if you’ll allow me
Prior: Markon walked away from the Ori to satisfy his hunger, but no matter how much he ate he did not feel full. Realising his mistake, he ran back to the Ori, but they denied his pleas and struck down the village that welcomed him back.
Tobin: forgive me Prior, but I was reviewing that very passage just this morning. Markon prayed for forgiveness, and took the first step.
Prior: and the hands of the Ori enveloped all those who welcomed him back. The village was destroyed. All those who stand by and accept transgressions must be punished.
Tobin: that is not the implication of the text, Prior. The Ori granted forgiveness when Markon realised his mistake, and blessed the village with their light for showing him the way back to the path.
Prior: you dare question my judgement?
Tobin: no, it’s just not how I was taught.
Prior: there are many words but only one truth. (“Line in the Sand” 10.12, italics added)

The arc of series 9 and 10 is an estranged critique of rigid fundamentalist codes of belief and, as the exchange shows, absolutist interpretative strategies. However, the series is at pains to affirm the right of individuals to their own private beliefs. Dr Jackson says to Adrea, the leader of the Ori army, “there’s a difference between devotion and blind submission, you can’t expect to win the faith of your followers through fear and intimidation [. . .] give people a choice” (“Counter Strike” 10.07).

So, given that the series has previously affirmed individual spiritual experience in the form of the “ascended” race of Ancients, there is hardly an unmitigated dismissal of spiritual experience at work here. Rather, the series provokes an implicit contrast between the Ancients and the Ori. Like Bender’s God in Futurama (who “you can’t count on for jack”), the Ancients are unwilling to intervene directly in the affairs of humans—although they do offer some cryptic help and advice along the way. Dr Jackson says of the Ancients, “they’re not going to help us. We’re in this alone” (“The Pegasus Project” 10.03). While the characters find this
frustrating, the point is that the struggle of life towards enlightenment, towards “ascension,” is one that only the individual can take. Stargate thus affirms human action, for even if supernatural beings exist, it is up to us to change the world (or universe, as may be). In comparison, the Ori offer their followers a short-cut towards enlightenment, granting their Priors supernatural powers, yet in the end, their promise of ascension after death is false.

What is interesting is that the majority of the series 9 and 10 arcs present a fairly disguised critique of the Bush administration—it is the alien Ori who are the religious fundamentalists, our heroes SG:1 are after all the best representatives of the American military. In effect then, we have a battle in which both sides are coded as American, albeit Americans of very different kinds (shades of the bitter “red state/blue state” division between Republican and Democrat in the 2004 US election). In “The Road Not Taken” (10.13) the series’ critique of the Bush administration becomes most pointed. In the episode, the explicit subject of the critique becomes the American government itself, when Colonel Samantha Carter, one of the show’s main characters, is sucked into a parallel universe when experimenting with an alien device. In that universe, the Stargate program has become public knowledge, causing riots, widespread panic and strife amongst the nations (compared to the SG:1 universe where a multi-national group makes up the team on the spin-off series Stargate Atlantis). In this alternative universe, General Landry has become the U.S president and has implemented a number of highly authoritarian policies—a unilateral “foreign” policy in the universe (compared to the regular SG:1’s various alien allies), martial law, a suspension of the usual democratic rights of the American public. After saving the planet from Ori attack, Carter asks Landry about a protestor who has interrupted her congratulation party:
Landry: not everyone is happy about some of the compromises we’ve had to make
Carter: compromises like martial law
Landry: Believe me Colonel I have no desire to go down in history as the man who destroyed civil liberties in America. But I think you’ll agree that compared to other presidents I have faced some pretty unique challenges. (“The Road Not Taken,” 10.13)

It’s highly significant that General Landry is the new President—the point is not that these policies are the result of a power-hungry leader, rather the result of good people letting fear control their actions (and in turn marshalling fear to justify their own policies, as Brown suggests). “The Road Not Taken” suggests that the fear engendered by September 11 (or the Ori attacks) is understandable, but that the rights of American citizens should not be surrendered in exchange for security. As the series generally affirms a benevolent, collaborative American imperialism, the critique is most definitely a centrist liberal one (as distinct from a radical critique which might question the foundations of military intervention). Of course, such is to be expected from an American show designed for a mass market, one should scarcely expect entertainment to do the work of activist politics.

Still, the episode is extremely pointed in making its critique of post-September 11 anti-terror legislation. Carter argues with General Hammond, the former commander of the Stargate program in the “real” Stargate universe, suggesting that fear-mongering authoritarian policies may be as motivated by political aspirations as much as concern for the safety of the nation:

*Carter:* why be hasty, especially when those 302s are so handy in putting down your political enemies?
*Hammond:* Now I understand you’re coming to see certain things about this world that you don’t like. To tell the truth, we don’t much like it either. But you weren’t here for the riots; you didn’t see American citizens shooting each other over food, water and gasoline. Hank Landry brought us back from the brink of chaos.
Carter: that was three years ago.
Hammond: the threat is still out there!
Carter: that’s the problem. It always will be.

Such a conversation clearly poses a critique of the post September 11 “war on terror” by America and its allies. As a number of writers have pointed out, the war on terror poses an expanding definition of threat (Afghanistan, Iraq, the prospects of war on Iran or North Korea), especially taking into consideration the doctrine of pre-emptive strikes which has arisen to justify war. And as Wendy Brown argues, postmodern empire (to use Hardt and Negri’s term) is illegitimate in terms of notions of democracy and legal sovereignty and “can be justified only through fear, by declaring a perpetual state of emergency that allows conventional democratic principles to be overridden [. . .] it is above all parasitic on the fear incited by the spectre of terrorism” (10). Although antagonistic, the new forms of global empire and terrorism remain in some way complicit with another, and it is this inter-dependence which is tackled further in the new adaptation of SF series Battlestar Galactica.
The new version of Battlestar Galactica, presents a similar approach to Stargate SG:1 to the post-September 11 world, albeit with some interesting contrasts. The series’ premise is relatively simple. Humans created a robot race called the Cylons, who eventually rebelled and overthrew their masters. This new series is set 40 years after the original, an intervening period during which no contact between human and Cylon occurred, and the Cylons “evolved” to take on human form (as can be seen by the picture of Number Six which heads this section). These human appearing Cylons have multiple copies; indeed, some are sleeper agents, unaware themselves that they are not human. The mini-series which commences this new saga begins with the Cylons resuming hostilities by decimating the 12 human colonies with unprovoked nuclear attacks. The remaining 50 000 members of the human race flee into space, where they are followed by the Cylon fleet.
With the mini-series beginning on 2004, this new *Battlestar Galactica* clearly emerges as a response to 9/11, the Iraq war and the post-September “war on terror.” Beginning, lest we forget, with a catastrophic attack on Caprican home-world, *Battlestar Galactica* is clearly post-traumatic. The human race is battling for its very survival, dispossessed from its homes, besieged by enemies both inside and out. If that seems hardly to equate with the continued American world-wide hegemony, it nevertheless arguably resonates emotionally with a post-September 11 American sense of defenselessness. *Battlestar Galactica* begins from a post 9/11 sense of “Fortress America” and as such addresses Islam more than most of the other texts in the postmodern sacred (if not always particularly positively, given that is usually an estranged comment on Islamic terrorism).

Like in “The Road Not Taken” *Stargate* episode, *Battlestar Galactica* walks the fine line between security and democracy—a typical post 9/11 conceptualisation in which democracy is deemed to be in some ways antithetical to protection from terrorism. Indeed, with martial law and the suspension of elections it’s as if September 11 has suspended the normal workings of democracy. Democracy on *Galactica* is held to be slightly suspicious, the necessary evil with which the benevolent leadership of President Roslin and Commander Adama must engage. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the election of Doctor Baltar at the end of season two ends disastrously, with his decision to abandon the mythic search for Earth and settle on a dank, remote planet ending predictably in the enslavement of the human race by the Cylons. As such, *Battlestar Galactica* illuminates a palpable contemporary American ambivalence towards democracy—as Žižek points out, for the neo-conservatives, the problem is the “overdoing” of democracy, both at home and abroad (2004: 58).
Similarly, post-September 11 human rights, which are abstractly affirmed by politicians such as Bush and Howard as the fruits of “freedom,” in practice are routinely abrogated in the pursuit of the “war on terror.” The status of the prisoners in the American prison at Guantanamo Bay illustrates this perfectly, designated as “enemy combatants” outside of the bounds of either the Geneva Convention, American domestic law, or the rule of international law. In Battlestar Galactica, the legal status of the Cylons is exactly that of the enemy combatants, without recourse to rights. When the (human) Chief is being interrogated by his own people, he says “I’d like to exercise my Article 21 rights at this time,” to which the reply rapidly comes, “I’m sure you would. I guess you haven’t heard—Cylons don’t have rights” (“Resistance” 2.04). Such post-September 11 extra-legal governmental powers do not extend merely to the “proper subjects” of terror legislation—terrorists—but to potentially anyone unfortunate to come to the attention of the military. As Georgio Agamben points out, the Patriot Act enacted in the U.S after September 11 effectively creates the “state of exception” as the ground level of functioning for the law, “which radically erase[s] any legal status of the individual, thus producing a legally unnamable and unclassifiable being” (3). Battlestar Galactica is canny enough to represent this cultural context, as well as filling out the picture with the continuing ethical negotiations of those in power.

Similarly, the Cylons dramatise a post-September 11 shift in conceptualising evil. Whereas the Cylons in the 1978 series were entirely synthetic robots and thus not human appearing, the new Cylons appear human. At the beginning of every episode, the following text appears:

The Cylons were created by Man.
They Rebelled.
They evolved.
They look and feel human.
Some are even programmed to think they are human.
There are many copies.
And they have a plan.\textsuperscript{29}

The new “human” Cylons thus dramatise two linked conflicts—first, about identifying evil, and second, about humanity; an identity crisis, if you will. The Cylons, who look and feel human—like “us”—make simple visual identification of evil obsolete. That implied “us” is interesting enough in itself; for the show’s interpellated American audience,\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Galactica} makes humanity and American-ness synonymous. Yet, evil in \textit{Battlestar Galactica} is no longer visually signified, one cannot look to the scar or other visible signs of “evil.” This is not evil as utterly external, the inhuman Other. \textit{Battlestar Galactica} is about the post September 11 shift towards internal vigilance, in which the enemy is already among us. As the opening reads, some even think they are human. No one can absolutely guarantee their humanity, even to themselves. Similarly, it dramatises an anxiety about the individuality of subjects—there are many copies—which recalls not only the anxieties raised by the prospect of cloning, but also the proliferation of fundamentalisms and terrorism. After all, terrorism has been constituted as a virus, one that proliferates, multiplies, one that is suggested to erase the subject’s own identity.

\textit{Battlestar Galactica} introduces terrorism as an explicit theme early on, for instance the episode “Bastille Day” (1.03) sees an interesting discussion between Lee Adama (Apollo) and Tom Zarek over the terminology of terrorism (as opposed to “freedom fighter”). Zarek is initially posed as a freedom fighter, a writer Apollo had greatly admired in college:

\begin{quote}
Zarek: I thought you respected me, read my book
Adama: that was before you resorted to violence and hostage taking
Zarek: Always better when the oppressed don’t fight back, isn’t it?
\end{quote}
Yet if the episode seems to attempt to make terrorism legible as a political response to oppression, it nevertheless resolves itself in individual pathology, for in the end, Lee comes to believe that “you’ve been saying that everything you’re doing is for freedom but, the truth is, it’s all about Tom Zarek and his personal death wish.”

Unsurprisingly, Zarek remains an enigmatic, untrustworthy figure throughout; his alliance with the traitor Doctor Baltar’s disastrous presidential campaign (even with Zarek’s being unaware of Baltar’s duplicity) is symptomatic of this. “Freedom,” then, remains the domain of *Galactica*’s American-coded leaders, *even though* they suspend legal freedoms like elections, the right to abortions and human rights. Similarly, in the “real world,” freedom after September 11 has become more a matter of ontological freedom—“we” are always-already free, “they” are always-already not—rather than human rights enshrined in law.

In its third and most recent season of *Battlestar Galactica* though, the series takes an interesting turn in revisiting the terrorism/freedom fighter argument. In the finale of the second season, Doctor Baltar is elected president and decides to settle the fleet permanently on a dank planet called New Caprica. After a year’s peace, the Cylons invade, and the human population on New Caprica surrenders. The military on Battlestars Galatica and Pegasus flee with a small number of ships who’ve managed to escape the invasion. So whereas the first two seasons depict a human, American coded, race on the run from the Cylons, the third begins with an occupation that uncannily resembles the American invasion of Iraq. “Insurgents” plan suicide bombings and the Cylons “crack down” heavily with imprisonment, torture, and eventually executions. The Cylons detain people indefinitely without charge, a clear reference to the American “state of exception” politics for “enemy combatants.” The use of the word “insurgents,” a favoured euphemism of the Bush administration,
makes clear the analogy the series is drawing. We see, for instance, quite graphically, the torture of Colonel Tigh (shades of Abu Girab perhaps). Here, 

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Galactica abruptly switches the position of identification for the viewer, creating an implicit (and perhaps even unwanted) identification with the people of Iraq—our “heroes” are now the “terrorists.” But even here, the series walks an ambivalent line between humanising “terrorism” and condoning violence. Roslin says “desperate people take desperate measures,” but is unable to tell Baltar that she approves of the suicide bombers (“Precipice” 3.02).
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But if the bitter fight between humans and Cylons seems all too easily a post-September 11 “clash of civilisations,” it is interesting that the series complicates those politics by posing a very real spirituality not exclusively the province of either. The Cylons (particularly Number Six who has taken up residence in Doctor Baltar’s head) make similar religious claims to the Ori on 

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Stargate. Very early on in the series, Number Six challenges Dr Baltar’s scientific rationalist beliefs:
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Number Six: You have to believe in something
Baltar: I believe in a world I can and do understand, a rational universe,
explained through rational means
Number Six: I love you, that’s not rational
Baltar: I know. No, but you’re not rational (“33” 1.01)
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What’s interesting here is that it is the artificial, robot race of Cylons, who are espousing a religious creed. Religion, typically regarded as one of the more irrational forms of human experience, meets up with its opposite, the mechanical, the rational. Interestingly, the humans practice a version of Greek polytheism. In “Flesh and Bone” (1.08) Artemis and Aphrodite are specifically mentioned, and humans talk more generally of “the Gods.” The Cylon religion, on the other hand, is monotheistic. As the Cylon prisoner says in “Flesh and Bone” (1.08), “I look to one God, not too
The clash between human and Cylon then seems to be between poly and mono theism, which would interestingly ally the American-coded humans with New Age pagan polytheism.

But if the emphasis on terrorism and Cylon infiltration seems to suggest that the Cylons are in some sense coded as disguised Muslims, this is hardly total. Except for Sharon, played by Grace Park (an American-Canadian actress of Korean descent), the Cylons are played by white actors like Tricia Helfer and Lucy Lawless (familiar to SF audiences from her role as Xena: Warrior Princess). The Cylons are generally not characterised through the expected tropes of Orientalism (say, exoticism in the form of food, music, incense etc, the veil for Muslim women, feminised masculinity for the men). This paradox is most apparent given that Cylon religion is mediated through the hyper-sexualised body of Number Six. Number Six embodies an excessive feminine sexuality, she is highly sexually coded, often wearing a red dress and red lipstick, and most of her early scenes with Doctor Baltar are sexually charged, if not the sexual act itself. Unsurprisingly perhaps, she suggests to Doctor Baltar that they have a baby, since “procreation is one of God’s commandments” (“33” 1.01), a thought which clearly horrifies him. Both human and artificial, sexual and maternal, Number Six is textually over-determined. It’s fitting then that like all the human appearing Cylons, there are multiple copies of her, dramatising her excessiveness—not only multiple copies in the “real” world, but then there is the phantom Six who appears to Doctor Baltar. That Six could be, a sign of Baltar’s disintegrating mental state, a Cylon implant in his brain, or even as she suggests, an angel of God. In contrast to the proliferating Sixes, there seems a much clearer demarcation between the two chief Sharons. The Sharon (codenamed Boomer) on board Galactica is unaware that she is in fact a Cylon until she shoots Adama, whilst the one on Caprica
for the first series is aware and chooses out of love for Helo to defect to the human cause. Later when the Caprican Sharon joins the crew of Galactica, she is codenamed “Athena” rather than Boomer. Not inconsequentially, the two Sharons are involved with different men, one with the Chief of the deck crew on Galactica, the other with Helo. While Sharon, who has “always been a flawed model” is the most human of the Cylons, in contrast, Number Six is marked by her indecipherability, slightly human, slightly not—an ambiguity aptly captured in Homi Bhabha’s “not quite the same, not quite the Other” formulation (qtd Ahmed 149). Cylon religion would seem to vacillate between Islam and Christianity (with few specifically Jewish references I think), but more usually, to conflate the religions of the Book together under the rubric of “God.”

However, this seeming critique of monotheistic religion is scarcely an atheist, rationalist dismissal of the spiritual altogether. Typically for a text of the postmodern sacred, Battlestar Galactica also endorses real, usually individual, spiritual experience. In “The Hand of God” (1.10), President Roslin, dying of cancer, begins to hallucinate in seeming fulfillment of a 3500 year old prophecy. Under the influence of “kamala extract,” a herbal remedy treating her cancer, Roslin discloses to a preacher that she had had prescient dreams of the Cylon prisoner captured in “Flesh and Bone” (1.08), and hallucinates a nest of snakes during a press conference. The preacher tells her that the prophecy foretells of the exile and the renewal of the human species, and that the leader of the time would die of a “wasting disease” before they enter the Promised Land. The prophecy clearly recalls the story in Exodus in the Hebrew Bible in which the Jews are exiled to Egypt and return to Israel under Moses’ direction, although Moses himself dies before entering the land. Such a reference has an undeniable mythic resonance in our post-Christian world, even as the series makes contemporary
revisions such as a female leader, a polytheistic faith of “the Gods,” and of course a massive space fleet. Clearly the spirituality of *Battlestar Galactica* is that of the postmodern sacred, drawing on a supplementary relationship between New Age and Christianity spiritual symbols and affirming individualised spiritual experience.

Yet inevitably in drawing on Christian, pagan and New Age symbols, *Battlestar Galactica* puts its human religions in part in dialogue with real-world Christianity. Whilst in general the Cylons present an estranged version of Islamic terrorism (or at least, of American fears engendered by September 11), the coding of the one particular colony, the Geminons, is that of Christian literalists. Roslin, who has publicly declared herself a messianic figure, has from that moment in “... been most vociferously supported by the Gemini colony, who believe in a literal interpretation of the holy scriptures. In the episode “The Captain’s Hand” (2.17), a pregnant girl from the Gemini colony stows aboard the Galactica. The Geminons consider abortion a religious obscenity, and alone amongst the colonies, have made abortion illegal. Significantly, too, they seem to be a strict patriarchal society—“under Geminon law, the girl is still the property of her parents.” Ultimately, and despite her own personal beliefs (“I’ve fought for a woman’s right to control her body my entire political career”), the President makes a ban on abortions in the fleet out of pragmatic concern for the dwindling human population, but to the disappointment of the Gemini representative, allows the girl to escape prosecution for her abortion. Roslin says, bitterly, “you have your pound of flesh, and I suggest you take your victory and move on.” Abortion, of course, has been a hugely divisive issue throughout the Western world, and most violently in the United States amongst its “fundamentalist” variants (Catholics and Protestants alike). Whilst the episode stops short of truly critiquing fundamentalist Christians, it presents a skeptical attitude
towards both pro-choice and pro-life positions, and is instead another ethical examination of the rights/survival dichotomy the series has run with. Of course, in the real world, the human race is in danger of over-population, not under, but this is population boom is occurring largely in non-Western countries such as China and India. So Galactica’s this use of “human” disguises an implicitly Western struggle to reproduce. In Australia, the conservative Liberal government has placed a strong emphasis on “baby bonuses” (that is, financial incentives for Australians to have children), and the UK is considering a tax break for married couples (reference?). So the critical interrogation of abortion in Galactica is at best flawed, and perhaps more conservative from a feminist perspective than one might expect from a series that typically depicts women in positions of power without much fanfare.

Meta-narrative?

So, whilst it is clear that the postmodern sacred does indeed indulge in heroic narratives, it is hardly an unmediated return of the meta-narrative or of an unproblematic “morality.” Rather, it is impossible to attempt to disconnect the meta-narrative from nostalgia. Meta-narratives cannot return, for in placing authenticity in the past, by its own terms, the nostalgic discourse of the postmodern mediascape make true authenticity, true experience, forever out of reach. The heroic narrative as it appears in the postmodern sacred then needs to be understood as nostalgic pastiche, a play with belief in a world which finds belief difficult to maintain. Rather than the unmitigated return of the meta-narrative, the postmodern sacred’s use of heroic narratives is about the heroic as aesthetic. The Manichean Good/Evil binary of much fantasy, for instance, becomes as much about the aesthetic demands of the genre for
Tolkien-esque grandeur than about a true affirmation of the simplistic moral binary. Rather than escaping the simulated world of capitalist exchange, as these texts are often suggested to do, the postmodern heroic narrative shows precisely how unrecoverable the meta-narrative really is. *The Matrix*, which seems to attempt to recover the real in a vaguely Leftist critique of postmodern capitalism, proves unable to get past its own intoxication with simulation. The ending of the trilogy in *Matrix Revolutions*, in which Neo makes a pact with the machine creators of the Matrix to destroy Agent Smith, seems to point towards the rapprochement the Left has made with global capitalism—even Hardt and Negri talk about destroying empire from within.

In another way, the two responses to September 11 I have analysed in *Stargate SG:1* and *Battlestar Galactica* show precisely how complicated the relationship to meta-narrative has become. On the surface, one would think this would be stuff of heroic narratives—Good versus Evil—but, in different ways, both show how the meta-narratives of enlightenment and progress have been displaced into managerial speak and political spin. The ambivalent relationship *Galactica* has to modern universal narratives of democracy and human rights is clearly symptomatic of this—uneasy at the chipping away at human rights that terror legislation has brought, *and* keenly aware of the possible “threat” that democracy brings (the neo-con idea of “overdoing” democracy). Like *Stargate*, *Battlestar Galactica* is not unsympathetic to the fear produced by 9/11, but it retains some form of critical edge against authoritarian post-September 11 politics. But if it seems clear that the meta-narrative cannot return, it is equally clear that postmodernity is marked in a number of ways by a nostalgia for modern and pre-modern narratives and texts, and it is this complicated relationship that we shall tackle further in the last chapter.
Notes

1 One can see a similar conceptualisation of Evil as entirely external, for instance, in the gated communities of the United States. This of course ignores the fact that the perpetrators of most violent crimes are generally known by the victim, endemic amounts of domestic violence and so on. Indeed it is arguable that such violence is a part of the functioning of the heterosexist, patriarchal family. My thanks to Candy Robinson for this point.

2 See Chapter Three for more on Eddings.

3 Jackson’s slide from the estranged racism of the Lord of the Rings movies into the colonialist nostalgia of his King Kong re-make is entirely unsurprising from this angle, then.

4 Thomas More’s Utopia itself, written in 1516 provides the model for utopia as a political critique. Of all the many utopias since, a utopia like William Morris’s late 19th century work News From Nowhere is particularly exemplary—being both nostalgic in its desire for pre-modern arts and crafts and making a Marxist critique of the inequities of modern industrialism. See Fredric Jameson’s recent Archaeologies of the Future for an in-depth look at Marxist utopian writing.

5 Huntington advances this argument in his article “The Clash of Civilisations” in 1993, later adapted and expanded into a book several years later.

6 Said says of the clash of civilisation thesis: “the personification of enormous entities called "the West" and "Islam" is recklessly affirmed, as if hugely complicated matters like identity and culture existed in a cartoonlike world where Popeye and Bluto bash each other mercilessly, with one always more virtuous pugilist getting the upper hand over his adversary. Certainly neither Huntington nor Lewis has much time to spare for the internal dynamics and plurality of every civilization, or for the fact that the major contest in most modern cultures concerns the definition or interpretation of each culture, or for the unattractive possibility that a great deal of demagogy and downright ignorance is involved in presuming to speak for a whole religion or civilization. No, the West is the West, and Islam Islam” (n.pag). Said’s point becomes particularly clear in the aftermath of the London bombings, which were committed by British-born Muslims. The possibility of separating the West from “the rest” as Huntington does seems a fundamentally flawed intellectual project, one that does not account for multiple kinds of identifications and allegiances—religious, national, cultural and so on.

7 It’s arguable that the discourse developed to explain the mass-killer—as the product of video games, Goth-rock like Marilyn Manson, and so on—is itself an anti-postmodern discourse, the argument being that killers have confused texts for “reality” itself.

8 For example, New York mayor Rudolph Guiliani’s comment that “there is no moral equivalent for this attack” (Butler, 2004: 12) is suggestive, given that the largely unreported, un grievable deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan probably outweigh the victims of S11 many times over. Butler points out that this remark occurs in response to a Saudi prince’s suggestion that United States’ foreign policy attempt to intervene in the Israeli slaughter of Palestinians. She says “here the two views could not be said together, and it has to do with the utterability of the word ‘slaughter’ in the context of saying that Israelis have slaughtered and do slaughter Palestinians, in large numbers” (13). In some ways, the insistence that September 11 is an event like no other makes
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it so—that perception means it holds a unique power in the American collective imaginary.

9 In Iraq: the Borrowed Kettle, Žižek argues that the United States’ explanation for the non appearance of the Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction can be explained using the Freudian three part justification for borrowing a broken kettle—"(1) I never borrowed a kettle from you, (2) I returned it to you intact, (3) the kettle was already broken when I got it from you. Such an enumeration of inconsistent arguments, of course, confirms exactly what it endeavors to deny - that I returned a broken kettle to you” (1).

10 Neither of which, in my opinion, is particularly progressive in showing queer lives in anything other than the most one-dimensional, stereotyped of ways.

11 Judith Butler in “Is Kinship Always-Already Heterosexual” (2004b) raises the question of whether queers should marry given the profoundly conservative nature of the institution. Butler’s work suggests that it is possible to be opposed to gay marriage and to the homophobic arguments which conservatives have raised against it. In any case, the question of whether one should have civil rights and whether one should choose to exercise them are quite obviously not the same.

12 Maddox argues persuasively that one of the chief strategies of the Howard Government has been to scapegoat groups like single mothers, queers, Aboriginals, Muslims, and so on. She says, “one hallmark of the ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ strategy in relation to family, sexuality and the terminally ill was to pick on a group too small to wield much electoral clout but which could be brought to symbolise an issue close enough to many hearts to induce fear” (109).

13 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues in Epistemology of the Closet, for instance, that part of the privilege of heteronormativity is the ability to not know about queer life, in which any indication of queerness is considered too much for some straight people. The privilege for dominant groups to maintain their ignorance can be manifested in other ways with regards to race or gender—for instance, the demand that immigrants learn to speak “our” language and not their own native tongue.

14 It is arguable that, even as conservatives like Bush and Howard make nostalgic appeals to unproblematic nationalism, they are profoundly reliant on the postmodern cynicism of the electorate. For example, both seem remarkably scandal-proof. A scandal like Watergate is profoundly unthinkable now, for even if one has been caught lying on public record, not only is that unlikely to topple a contemporary politician from power, but indeed often barely diminishes their popularity ratings. Appeals to a meta-narrative of Truth—say, whether the US presented their case for war in Iraq truthfully—are easily responded to in the micro-narratives of utilitarian management-speak.


16 As previously mentioned, the series clearly works in part as a pastiche of The X Files with its array of “meteor caused” monsters. Clark’s friend Chloe, editor of the student newspaper, pins those stories onto her “Wall of Weird.”

17 See James Ford’s article “Buddhism, Mythology and The Matrix.”

18 The first movie directly references Baudrillard’s theories of simulation. We see Neo with a copy of Simulations, and Morpheus cites Baudrillard’s “welcome to the desert of the real.” Needless to say, this has generated some interest in the movies amongst postmodern critics.
George Lucas, of course, infamously used Joseph Campbell’s theories on myth in structuring his original trilogy. Interestingly, Lucas had the courage to include incest in the form of the Luke/Leia relationship, which while suitably mythic was scarcely likely to endear him to many audiences. And in keeping with the mythic overtones, the first Star Wars series has sometimes been called, mock seriously, “the holy trilogy” by fans.

See Carl Silvio’s work on The Animatrix for how the anime films handle the questions of post-humanity raised by the films.

As with the majority of the texts I have analysed, Harry Potter has a large and devoted fan fiction following, producing both hetero and homoerotic slash. Because of the anxiety about being arrested for peddling child pornography, much HP fiction is set after the characters have turned 18.

Released as Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone in the United States. Presumably (and slightly depressingly), the publishers must have felt the mention of philosophy would confuse American audiences. All references are to the version released in the UK and Australia.

Indeed, it’s arguable that many adult fantasies veer far closer to Manichean, even fascist, conceptualisations of good and evil, in which evil is often racialised in the form of non-human races such as Orcs or goblins that must be slaughtered for the good of humanity etc.

Just to make clear, The Sopranos is not a text that I consider part of the postmodern sacred, for the simple reason it does not contain any of the supernatural elements of the other texts I have been examining. It’s possible that of itself makes it a more sophisticated and realistic text, given that it has to locate evil in humanity, rather than the supernatural or demonic.

This is suggested to be genetic, the result of the Goa’uld being born with the full memories of their parents. The Tok’ra, who are an offshoot of the Goa’uld and who live in truly symbiotic relationships with their hosts, are all descended from the one rebel Queen. Even so, despite their rhetoric of peaceful co-existence, the Tok’ra are on a number of occasions shown to have little regard for the wishes of their hosts (for example, “Abyss” 6.06), uncomfortably resembling their Goa’uld enemies.

See Jan Johnstone-Smith’s chapter in her American Science Fiction TV (153-184) for more on the wormhole in Stargate and other series like Farscape. In particular, she looks at the ways in which the CGI involved in creating the wormhole reconfigures audience reception of SF. She says that Stargate “points to and denies its artifice, creating in its wake a new kind of formal engagement for the audience” (180).

This is a familiar enough plot in Stargate, alternate universes feature in “There But For The Grace of God” (1.19), “Point of View” (3.06), “2010” (4.16) and “The Changeling” (6.19).

The suspension of democratic elections on Galactica, not the US—though perhaps the dubious legality of George Bush’s election in 2000 lingers somewhere in the American unconscious.

This text is modified in series 2 and 3 removing the “look and feel human/some are even programmed” aspects of the text.

Like a great deal of contemporary shows and movies (Stargate among them), Battlestar Galactica is in fact shot in Vancouver, Canada, and screened worldwide. Nevertheless, it remains clearly within the domain of American popular culture. If not specifically American, it is hard to place anywhere else.
Bhabha makes this statement about mixed-race subjects, but it captures the ambiguity of other liminal subjects equally well—Sara Ahmed, for instance, applies the phrase to queerness as “almost normal, but not quite” (149).
Chapter Six

Nostalgia and the Sacredness of “Real” Experience in Postmodernity

*The Really Really Realness of Postmodernity*

“Do you remember a time when chocolate chip cookies came fresh from the oven? Petridge Farm remembers. [. . .] Do you remember a time when women couldn’t vote and certain folk weren’t allowed on golf courses? Petridge Farm remembers”

*TV advertisement on Futurama (‘A Fishful of Dollars 1.06)*

It’s arguable that the apparent return of meta-narratives after September 11 is nevertheless highly enmeshed in postmodern strategies. Indeed, postmodern simulation produces its seeming opposite, a desire for real life; or to steal a phrase from Slavoj Žižek, “the Passion of the Real.”¹ This passion for the real emerges as a response to postmodern simulation, yet inevitably becomes simulated itself, for as Mark C Taylor notes, “what is promoted as ‘genuine culture’ always turns out to be ‘simulacra of genuine culture’” (1997: 204). There is no pure “outside” from postmodernity. Yet nevertheless authenticity in the postmodern remains a highly sought after, a prized, if problematic, value. As a perusal of any supermarket shelf
will tell you, the ubiquitous use of images of domesticity and “real” food (the
“homestyle” to be opposed to those other “manufactured” products) makes clear that authenticity is a part of the system of symbolic exchange of the postmodern world.

The opposition between real and fake, or authentic/inauthentic, is one means of distributing value, it is hardly disinterested, often provoking a moral judgment as well as an aesthetic one. This is an immensely charged opposition, “the real thing” as the Coke slogan once went, is that which is valued. To be inauthentic, however, is to in some sense to not quite be—which is not to doubt its actual materiality, but rather the truthfulness of what it claims to be. When we call a painting fake, for instance, it doesn’t imply that it doesn’t exist in a material sense, but rather, that the painting has not been painted by the person who it is claimed to have been done by. It still exists, but it doesn’t exist in quite the same way that the “real” painting does. This opposition between real and fake, between being and not-quite-being, holds true right across the culture, working to privilege one set of objects or values against another.

For, when something is perceived to be authentic, this is generally considered to be a positive attribute. But where this authenticity actually derives from, however, is more of a slippery slope. Often, as the example of “homestyle” soup suggests, it is nature, or at least the natural, to be opposed to the fakeness of culture. That apparent esteem for nature seems odd considering it hardly impedes the clearing of natural areas like rainforests for “development.” In one, the natural or the authentic attaches a certain value which aids in capitalistic transactions; in the other, it impedes it (and is hence ignored). So, however powerful it can be at times, the symbolic significance attached to the “natural” in postmodern capitalism is clearly highly selective. Authenticity, then, remains only partially applicable, which is ironic given that, as we shall see in examining nostalgia, it is so often about the impossible dream of organic wholeness.
The search for realness, however, is a highly elusive one, for any gesture remains trapped in the aestheticising, simulacral world of postmodernity. Postmodern attempts at authenticity are often focused on the body, for as Taylor puts it, “when reality becomes virtual, the body disappears” (1997: 127). For example, one finds in youth culture a series of spectacular, seeming transgressions, aimed at producing some kind of real experience.³ This is articulated through various musical genres—the nihilism of punk, hip-hop’s never-ending quest for “realness”—and through sub-cultural practises like body piercing and dress. As Taylor maintains:

many people who regard modernisation and postmodernisation as a fall rather than an advance attempt to resist the march of history by recovering the body. When the body appears to be endangered, it becomes an obsession. This is one of the primary reasons that tattooing (as well as piercing and scarification) has become so widespread during this particular historical and cultural period. Tattooing represents the effort to mark the body at the very moment it is disappearing. (1997: 129)

Taylor rightly points out that bodily centered practices like tattooing may often be employed in the service of anti-postmodern reclamation of the body. Yet, paradoxically, tattooing intriguingly may also be considered postmodernism incarnate, for “when the sign becomes embodied, the body becomes a sign” (Taylor, 1997: 123). Taylor’s work points to an ambivalence within postmodern culture as to the effects of simulation.

That ambivalence means that even apparently anti-postmodern gestures remain profoundly entangled within postmodern aestheticism. Practices like tattooing, as well as the other aforementioned spectacular transgressive fashions, remain primarily aesthetic practices, able to be disconnected from the socio-political contexts that produced them as signs of “authentic” bodily experience and pastiched into new, seemingly less authentic modalities of being. So while authenticity
becomes the subject of a desperate search for real being in the postmodern (see Žižek’s discussion of self-harming “cutters,” for instance\(^4\)), this is co-mingled with the knowledge that such authenticity will be inevitably fleeting in a postmodern world of simulation, in which everything is reduced to the aesthetic in one way or another.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, the desire for realness underlines a postmodern infatuation with transgression. While it is inaccurate to say that postmodernity is entirely de-centred, it is nevertheless intoxicated with Otherness—race, class, gender, and non-normative sexuality are all fuel for aestheticisation. Postmodern eclecticism amounts in many instances to little more than a cultural tourism of Otherness, appropriating the most easily assimilated signs—food, dress, language, and so on.\(^5\) The increasing incorporation of BDSM (that is, sado-masochism) into normative “vanilla” heterosexuality proves another interesting case in point, assimilating a sexual practice historically regarded as “perversion” by the psychological profession into the mainstream of heterosexual monogamy, and losing along the way some of the safety protocols (“safe words”, the use of gloves, lube and so) that BDSM “players” have developed. That incorporation (in the form of fetish clothing for instance, or “light” play like spanking) still retains a privileged centre from which appropriation can occur—the oft-repeated criticism of the appearance of leather queers in Pride parades, for instance, is that they “throw their sexuality” in straight faces. Here BDSM and queerness overlay each other, for the always-already perversion of queerness is redoubled by the non-normative BDSM, implicated as a category in a way in which heterosexual monogamy never is.\(^6\) What both do, however, is to signal that the postmodern move towards transgression is motivated by a desire for real, often heightened or excessive, experience, the sense that only the body (whether in pleasure, pain or both) can truly guarantee authenticity—and isn’t that the desire
working explicitly in *Fight Club*, albeit disconnected from a blatant sexuality (though there is of course a clear undercurrent of homoeroticism running through both movie and book)? That link between the body and postmodernism is made clear in Baudrillard’s *America*, where he says that the body has become the site of considerable anxiety, where he says the goal of Americans (the consummate postmoderns for Baudrillard) is not to have one’s body, but rather to be *into* it—a position that already presumes a disconnection from the body far more profound than a Platonic mind/body split.

Now, there may seem to be a fair distance between BDSM and *Lord of the Rings*, but the same impetus underlies postmodern consumption of the spiritual. Both take as their starting point a disconnected postmodern subjectivity, and both are consumerist solutions to problems created by consumerism itself. The postmodern produces subjects who feel in some measure alienated from the material, not only from their bodies but from an authentic “real” life experience of the material (in the form of food, clothing, and so on). The difficulty is that the material is never disconnected from the symbolic realm of simulation in the postmodern, indeed the postmodern subject is haunted by the knowledge of that impossibility. The example of “homestyle” food again works to illuminate this mediation rather well. The desire for “real” food—namely, food prepared “outside” of capitalist simulation—produces a simulation of the real, thus perpetuating the cycle once more. The desire for “realness” may be partially or temporarily satisfied by the simulation of the “authentic” home-style food, *but at the same time*, the simulacral nature of such a product ensures that that the nostalgic desire for “real” life is produced once again.

So the material—the bodily—is mediated by the symbolic, the textual, in postmodernity. Yet paradoxically, the textual offers itself as an attempt at an
authentic materiality in the postmodern. Popular culture is, of course, highly visceral, experienced as image and sound in the case of visual texts, the seductiveness of the image in written. In the unreal texts of the postmodern sacred, the desire for real life is displaced into new, secondary worlds. Baudrillard points towards the excessiveness of simulated postmodern visual culture when he terms it “hyper-real.” The media image, in postmodern culture, has become more real than “real life” (which can only now be bracketed, mediated as it is by the textual). Postmodern culture is therefore trapped in its own circular logic, where the hyper-reality of the image offers itself as a solution to a problem of its own making—the search for “real” bodily experience.

Postmodernity, then, needs to be understood as not merely the victory of the simulacral symbol over the real—or at least, not only that—but a concurrent desire for the real that works as the supplemental underside to the postmodern media. I argued earlier in the previous chapter that the “return of the meta-narrative” discourse of conservative politicians was underpinned by their own hidden postmodern positions and strategies. But it is not just in the stage managing of the political “events” that putatively anti-postmodern leaders like Bush reveal their own hidden postmodern positions. Brian Massumi argues that the rise of the mass media has meant that contemporary leaders work through affect, from Reagan onwards the “functions of head of state and commander in chief fused with the role of the television personality” (Zournazi 233), something readily apparent in not only the folksy charm of George “Dubya” Bush, but in Bill Clinton’s “feeling” our pain, and so on. Massumi argues powerfully that, rather than a Foucaultian institutionary disciplining of the subject:

Power is no longer fundamentally normative, like it was in its disciplinary forms – it’s affective. The mass media have an extremely important role to
play in that. The legitimisation of political power, of state power, no longer goes through the reason of the state and the correct application of governmental judgment. It goes through affective channels. For example, an American president can deploy troops overseas because it makes a population feel good about their country or feel secure, not because the leader is able to present well-honed arguments that convince the population it is a justified use of force. (Zournazi 232)

Massumi’s foregrounding of the role of the mass media suggests the intimate relationship this affective shift has with postmodern, for the politics of affect relies clearly on postmodern simulation. It is most definitely not the “real” world that produces this affective role; rather it is the image on the television screen. The tabloidisation of the news media is indicative of this shift, the mark of tabloid news is, after all, that it tells us how to feel about any given news event or personality.

The affectivity of the media is starkly capitalistic, as Massumi points out, “one of the biggest fears after September 11 was that the economy would go into recession because of a crisis in consumer confidence. So everyone was called upon to keep spending, as a proud, patriotic act” (233). The link between capitalism and “feeling good” was made readily apparent in the gushing media biographies for Ronald Reagan upon his death that repeated, *ad nauseum*, the statement that he allowed Americans to “feel good about themselves again” after the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam war.8 Not un-coincidentally, the Reaganite 80s are renowned for their “greed is good” capitalistic ethos and the aforementioned conservative appeals to meta-narratives of nationalism, gender, race and sexuality. All of this is about politics as a form of textual consumption, wherein truth and authenticity are guaranteed not by Enlightenment meta-narratives of Reason, Truth and so on, but by one’s own individual feelings. Patriotism, now, is a form of fandom.
Nostalgia and the linking of text and body

Unsurprisingly perhaps, this affective shift has a significant nostalgic element to it—what is suggested to be a link to unmediated experience and feeling through the consumption of products or images. Nostalgia is a pervasive element of the postmodern mediascape, discernible in many forms. Nostalgia often occurs in “realistic” texts, like that for a Small Town U.S.A in such TV series as Gilmore Girls or Ed. Such texts present idealised versions of American small town life, lacking many of the concerns about violence, law and order and the like that loom so large in contemporary political discourse (and perhaps as significantly, largely feature an absence of people of colour and queers). Such nostalgia is not limited to the lost, “real” world, though, it is mediated through the textual representations of the past—as Baudrillard says, “the cinema is fascinated by itself as a lost object as much as it (and we) are fascinated by the real as a lost referent” (1994: 47, italics original). Indeed, as I have argued earlier, postmodern culture is profoundly unable to think the “real” without recourse to “fictional” texts.

The postmodern longing for true authenticity often manifests itself in nostalgia, which is as Susan Stewart argues, “sadness without an object” (23). Fredric Jameson has argued that postmodern culture is notable for its nostalgic perspective towards history, mourning the lost authenticity of the past. His oft-mentioned theory of pastiche clearly suggests that, for much postmodern culture, little exists besides the texts and styles of the past. As Susan Stewart puts it, “nostalgia is the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of repetition” (23). Yet that repetition collapses the very historical perspective—the groundedness of a specific time, place and aesthetic—that nostalgia would seem to long for by rendering history as merely a series of aesthetic
styles. Such a perspective is remarkably well encapsulated by a dire pop song popular in 2006, “I wish I was a punk rocker, with flowers in my hair,” in which the radically opposed 60s hippie counter-culture and 1970s punk rock are conflated together into one lost authentic past.

To steal a phrase from Derrida in *Spectres of Marx*, “the time is out of joint” in postmodernity (though he himself rarely uses the term postmodern). Derrida himself is referring to a messianic promise in Marxism yet to come, but perhaps the time is out of joint in postmodernity in other ways. Aesthetic and temporality become, if not entirely disconnected, then estranged in some sense. In some sense, postmodernity makes *all* of history accessible through its aesthetic recreation, and in doing so exposes its own estrangement from history. Taylor argues apropos of the fashion industry:

Fashion recycles images. All fashion is retro even when it claims to be innovative. Since the new can only be affirmed by negating the old, the out-of-date forever haunts the up-to-date. The cycles of fashion, which attempt to naturalise artifice by appearing seasonally, form a specular system in which this year’s trends take shape by rejecting, appropriating, or reforming the styles of previous years. The passé is always passing away in a fashion that eternally disrupts the “just now.” (1997: 206)

Fashion, the quintessential postmodern industry, in continuously reworking the past, pastiching and recontextualising signs, exposes the postmodern crisis of history. It is not that history has ended *per se*, but rather that aesthetic and history have been disconnected from one another. Taylor reminds us that “modern derives from the Latin *modo*, which means ‘just now’ and by extension, ‘of today’ (1997: 169), but how can one say what is specifically of *today*, when one is listening to simulations of 50s girl-group pop, wearing 60s-hippie-meets-70s-punk clothes, and watching medievalist fantasy? Everything in postmodern culture, in that sense, is a period
piece of a sort, whether set in the contemporary or not, and the aesthetic’s place in history (“oh that is so last year”) becomes a question of the types of pastiche one is currently doing. In reducing history to the aesthetic, postmodernism unwittingly releases the haunting presence of the past—since the past, is, as hyper-real, somehow more real than the present. Where some kinds of theory suggest the present to be disconnected from the past (the loss of meta-narratives in Lyotard, the disintegration of class, family and other social categories in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s individualisation theory), the spectral presence of the past—the ghost in simulation—exposes its opposite, the fact that the present is overwhelmed by the weight of aesthetic history.

Of course, the awareness of that history is still often experienced as a loss. Stewart argues in her On Longing that nostalgia relies on a set of contradictory assumptions:

First, the assumption that immediate lived experience is more “real,” bearing within itself an authenticity that cannot be mediated; yet second, the assumption that the mediated experience can be known through language and the temporality of narrative can offer pattern and insight by virtue of its capacity for transcendence [. . .] By the narrative process of nostalgic reconstruction the present is denied and the past takes on an authenticity of being, an authenticity which, ironically, it can only achieve through narrative (23).

So we see in nostalgia a number of elements of postmodern culture coming together. Textuality, which is above all the key postmodern motif, is simultaneously affirmed and denied, both in written and visual forms of representation. The mediating force of narrative is held to be both problem and solution—that which virtualises our “real” world, and that which offers us the chance of a vicarious experience of another, more real, world. Paradoxically, however, it is the very nostalgia of postmodern culture that leads us towards an awareness of its simulated nature, and hence towards the
nostalgic past as a symbol of true experience. So nostalgia makes a double move—it foregrounds the inauthenticity of the present against the perceived authenticity of the past. In doing so, it frequently opposes the commodity status of the present as proof of their inauthenticity, and it erases the commodification of the past’s beloved texts, preferring to see them as “pure” and unmediated. Thus there is a distinction produced between “commercial” present and real past, when actually both are equally commodified. It is a commodity fetishism of a particularly limited kind—erasing the traces of production from the texts of the past, whilst bemoaning the commodity status of the present.

*Primitivist nostalgia and the New Age*

![A typical “tribal” tattoo](micktomo.com)

Of course, nostalgia of itself is scarcely a postmodern phenomenon; for instance, one finds Ancient Greek pastoral nostalgia, medieval nostalgia, early
modern (the hobby farm of Marie Antoinette for instance\textsuperscript{12}), and so on. Yet it is has become inextricably linked to postmodernism; if the postmodern can be always be considered in some measure nostalgic, then nostalgia too has become postmodern. This is as apparent in religious and spiritual consumption as it is in apparently secular contexts. In the first chapter, I argued that in New Age spirituality, personal spiritual experience was held to be key. It’s unsurprising, however, that given its rapacious appetite for textual appropriation, New Age discourses inevitably in some fashion construct nostalgic textual simulations of lost pasts—Celtic druids, Native American shamans, and so on. When, as Taylor argues, “modernism presupposes primitivism; indeed, they are two sides of the same coin,” (Taylor 1999: 53) he is pointing to the fact that modernity, and its successor, postmodernity, requires primitivism as a space on which to project its own anxieties and contradictions. “The primitive” is a construction of modernity simultaneously “harmonious, whole, unified and fulfilled [and] uncivilised, violent, horrifying and savage” (53). The New Age tendency towards primitivist nostalgia, then, draws quite clearly on pre-existing modes of nostalgia, even as it utilises them in a postmodern fashion.

It’s perhaps unsurprising then that there is a fair amount of primitivism in the aforementioned body modification practices of tattooing, piercing and scarification.\textsuperscript{13} This becomes obvious simply from a perusal of store names, for instance, some of the local tattooing/piercing stores here in Perth are called Primal Urge, Exotic Piercing and so on. The primitivist impulse\textsuperscript{14} is most obvious when one considers the ethnic Otherness that the designs themselves often trade on—Celtic crosses and bands, Maori, Japanese lettering and so on. The incoherent modern construction of the savage as harmonious \textit{and} violent then comes together in the tattooing and piercing parlour through vicarious postmodern textuality—firstly, through the direct citation
and pastiche of various tribal tattoos, and second, through the notion that only the
violent rite-of-passage can produce the sense of harmonious self the savage is
supposed to have. But like any nostalgic act, body modification is haunted by the
knowledge of its own failure, one cannot truly (re?) assemble the self into a
harmonious whole, hence one must either repeat the act, gathering body mod after
body mod, or abandon the project of “reclaiming” the body altogether.

Postmodern nostalgia often directs itself at the pre-modern, for its perceived
authenticity, its “erasure of the gap between nature and culture” (Stewart 23). Thus
we see most of the fantasy genre set in pre-modern, often barely changed medieval
European worlds. While the influence of Tolkien here is not to be under-estimated, it
is also, I suspect a result partly of its generic blending between the medieval romance
and the pastoral.15 Yet the pastoral nostalgia for the simple bucolic life of the Shire in
The Lord of the Rings for example is not merely a convenient pre-text for the action
(and the return of the Good/Evil meta-narrative), rather it is necessary. As Alec
Worley points out, in Tolkien-style epic fantasy, “the setting [. . .] becomes a focal
point of the story. [In] this type of fantasy, its secondary world [is] wholly imagined,
yet rigorously detailed in terms of history and politics” (14). This is not textually
necessary, for one could easily shift the action and begin with the lives of the kings
and wizards, but it is perhaps ideologically necessary, since fantastic nostalgia seeks
to deal with the broad scope of pre-modern life. In this sense, fantasy is nostalgia for
the medieval Great Chain of Being, where everyone had a pre-defined place, knew
their place, and all was right in the world. In this, needless to say, this strain of
fantasy is deeply conservative, and such nostalgia has the unfortunate effect as Carl
Freedman notes, of creating worlds “miles wide but only inches deep” (263).
Of course, the question is, if nostalgia aims at reclaiming a lost “real,” how does this apply to texts that are clearly unreal? After all, unreality would seem to be a given. Baudrillard in a suggestive chapter on simulacra and science fiction argues that “it is no longer possible to fabricate the unreal from the real, the imaginary from the givens of the real” (1994: 124). If the “real” world is unable to be distinguished from its simulation, then previously unreal texts have become merely one simulation amongst many. Instead of the mirror image of the real, or extrapolations from present scientific knowledge, we have only texts that refer to other texts, simulations referring to other simulations. We surely continue to refer to these texts—and to the worlds within—as real or unreal as a convenience, critical short-cuts, but without a sure ontological foundation.

So if the unreality principle of science fiction has been lost, its inverse relationship to the real, then we are back in the symbolic exchanges of postmodern textuality, and hence, nostalgia. What has arguably been lost, it seems, is a “real” unrealistic text. So, nostalgia in popular culture is scarcely confined to realistic texts; it is clearly present in the postmodern sacred’s “unreal” texts as well. Of the genres that make up the postmodern sacred—science fiction, fantasy, horror—science fiction may seem the least nostalgic, considering it is often concerned with conceptualising new futures and alternatives to the present. Generically, SF would seem to retain the most critical potential, to produce a distance from the present that renders it both strange and changeable (Suvin’s “estranged cognition” 1979). Yet SF has had a significantly nostalgic element since at least the 50s Buck Rogers pastiche of Star Wars (as Jameson calls it), and that has only deepened. By the early 90s, nostalgia in
SF was such that G’Kar could complain that “the future is not what it used to be” on *Babylon 5* (“The Long Dark” 2.05), an articulation that speaks as much to a nostalgic dissatisfaction with the genre as to an ostensible plot. Similarly, the recent SF series *Farscape*, owes significant debts to *Star Wars* and to *Star Trek* and its numerous spin-offs (say, in the strong resemblance of D’Argo to the Klingon Worf on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the “voyage home” arc of Creichton16 that *Star Trek Voyager* had recently also used, and so on). That *Farscape* would make reference to those texts is unsurprising, considering that *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* clearly exist as privileged referents amongst fans in the SF genre.

In the fantasy genre, much of the appeal of the *Harry Potter* series lies in its nostalgic recreation of boarding school stories, of creating a timeless and eternal Merry Old England existing parallel to the present. Ironically given the insistence with which J.K Rowling and Bloomsbury protect the Harry Potter copyright, *Harry Potter* draws on a whole host of older texts. First and foremost, as I have mentioned, Hogwarts recalls the boarding school stories of Enid Blyton and Frank Richards’ Billy Bunter stories (Blake 19). The idea of a magical boarding school was used by Ursula LeGuin in *The Wizard of Earthsea* in 1973, and Jill Murphy’s *Worst Witch* series.17 The investigations carried out by Harry and his friends owe something to the child detectives of the Famous Five. Then there are the references to Tolkien—the giant spider of Chamber of Secrets recalling Shelob from the *Lord of the Rings*. *Harry Potter* recalls a whole assortment of older texts, presenting those aesthetics as part of the awe-inducing wonder of a “magical” world running parallel to contemporary England.

Andrew Blake calls the series deliberately “retro-lutionary,” a surface aesthetic simulation of past literary forms, co-existing with the social concerns and
perspective of the present (17). “Retro-lutionary,” itself an advertising term coined to sell Jaguar cars (16), is a good way of encapsulating the postmodern nostalgia for old aesthetics. After all, advertising has become the lingua franca of postmodernity, and Blake rightly points out the links between advertising, the neo-liberal politics of Britain’s New Labour government and nostalgic texts. Blake suggests that Harry Potter became such a phenomenal success because of the postmodern times we live in—in which museums and “schools offered simulations of past experience rather than curricula centred on interpretation; pupils would dress up as medieval peasants rather than learn about the causes of the War of Roses” (10). Harry Potter, like most nostalgic texts, can elide or even completely jettison those elements of the past that do not fit with contemporary norms—the racism, class elitism, misogyny, homophobia and so on of the past that present-day subjects find impossible to ignore—and foreground the aesthetic.18 Importantly, as well as whitewashing politics (in all its multifarious forms) from history, this produces an individual, consumerist experience of “the past.” So, we are on the same individualised terrain as the New Age, and it becomes difficult to tell the difference between nostalgia and spirituality, given that both pose the past as the source of authentic being. And in the case of Harry Potter, this past-in-the-present grants a glimpse of the supernatural in the form of magic, something to marvel at in awe—but this is hardly any different from the “ancient” New Age style spell books marketed to teen girls.

However, as with many of the texts of the postmodern sacred, Harry Potter moves ambivalently between a nostalgic desire for an “outside” to postmodern capitalism and a celebration of it. While the magical world Harry Potter at times suggests a longing for an alternative to the mundane suburbia the Dursleys inhabit—“I love magic!” Harry exclaims ecstatically in Goblet of Fire—its imagining of this
parallel world is often fairly prosaic. Besides the bureaucracy of “the Ministry of Magic” who largely run the wizarding world, much of the enchantment of the texts seems blatantly capitalistic. Magic and magical abilities take on a capitalistic edge; for instance, in the branding of flying brooms the wonder of flying is rendered as little more than a playground contest to have the latest consumer goods (“Nimbus 500s” and so on). Ron’s brothers George and Fred become entrepreneurs, peddling what are in effect magical practical jokes. Similarly, the “magic” of the Quiddith World Cup in Goblet of Fire seems little different from the spectacle of Muggle sporting events. Rather than positing a pure “outside,” the desire at work in such moments seems to be attempting an estranged recovery of the magic of capitalism itself.

Pastiching texts which are already themselves pastiches shows the tremendous tiredness of postmodernity, the inability to truly think through the new without referring to other texts. For example, the most popular children’s animated series of the last decade, Shrek, is itself a meta-riff on the fairy tale genre, interspersed with popular cultural references (visual, say in Princess Fiona’s Matrix style kung-fu moves, dialogue, musical and so on)—postmodernism for children. And because nostalgia has become a characteristic aspect of postmodern cultural life, it can be directed towards relatively recent texts or trends—say for instance, the “real life” example of twenty-somethings going to “School Disco” club nights in fake school uniform to dance to the songs popular when they were at school. Unsurprisingly given he wrote the first book at the age of 16, Christopher Paolini’s Eragon books and movie read like a pastiche solely of other recent fantasy texts—the medieval setting of Lord of the Rings, the obligatory epic destiny of a small rural boy of countless fantasy series (David Eddings, Robert Jordan, Raymond E. Feist and so on) and the dragons of Anne MacCaffery’s Pern series. Such a limited perspective is of course excusable
in a writer so young; much less so for the publisher, movie studio and audiences that have made *Eragon* so successful. The pleasures of *Eragon*’s narrative, such as they are, seem to derive from the second-hand wonder of other, older fantasy texts, as well as what is an almost constitutive pastoral medievalist nostalgia in the genre. Genre and nostalgia seem increasingly difficult to tell apart in postmodern culture.

*Nostalgia in the Postmodern Sacred 1: Xena Warrior Princess*

The television series *Xena: Warrior Princess* provides an interesting version of postmodern nostalgia. A spin-off of *Hercules: The Legendary Adventures*, *Xena* ran between 1995 and 2001, and like Hercules was ostensibly set in ancient ur-Greece, “in a time of myths and legends” (that is, before history proper commenced). Both shows, however, balanced their mythic settings with a knowing postmodern referentiality. In this, *Xena* is squarely a 1990s text, an exuberant (if trashy) re-figuring of myth and history. Whilst the setting could, in other hands, lend itself to a portentous, humourless mythic rendering (for instance, the dire sword-and-sandals
epics *Troy* and *Alexander*), *Xena* maintains an ironic distance to its subject material. Whilst many postmodern texts produce their hyper-reality through the absolute fidelity towards reproducing the real (and this most particularly in nostalgic texts), *Xena* abandons the search for authenticity, and instead creates an ahistorical play with signifiers. As Joanne Morreale points out, “*Xena* may be regarded as a pastiche in the way it weaves a tapestry of images and themes from different cultures, mythological and Biblical traditions, and historical time periods” (82). *Xena* is myth and history refracted through a postmodernism more versed in B Grade movies than it is in classics. And as David Adcock argues, it is clearly a Baudrillardian simulation of mythic “Greece,” a copy without an original.

In “Athenian City Academy of the Performing Arts” (1.13), what seems to be in part a standard “clip show” is playfully reworked. In the episode, Xena’s companion Gabrielle enters a story-telling contest, and it is this metaleptic device (as Genet terms it) that frames the episode. The episode begins with a moonlit fight scene from a previous *Xena* episode, but the footage is stopped and “rewound” when an audience member interrupts Gabrielle to point out that she’d said the action had occurred during the day. The scene then recommences, this time set in day-time. When other storytellers in the episode tell stories, the footage for their story is drawn from old epic movies—and then critiqued as “lacking in character development.” The climax of the episode features a story by Homer, whose story is merely an extended clip from Kirk Douglas’s *Spartacus* movie. The episode is a play with the overt fictionality of *Xena*, explicitly drawing on its own generic history in using other Greek style texts.

The fictionality of the text is also foregrounded in the episode “The Xena Scrolls” (2.10). The majority of the episode is set in the 1940s. The actors play
descendants of their usual characters. Mell (Xena) and Janice (Gabrielle) are archaeologists who uncover the “Xena Scrolls,” which tell of Xena’s exploits (that is, the series’ episodes). It is suggested that, rather than being fictional myths, the episodes are in fact real history. This is of course a claim not to be taken seriously, given the overt textuality of Xena’s pastiche of various, often contemporary, sources. The episode concludes by shifting further into the future to a scene in which a writer (played by Ted Raimi, who more usually Xena’s erstwhile companion Joxer) uses the Xena scrolls to pitch an idea for the series to a producer named Robert J Tapert. Robert J Tapert is, of course, Xena’s real-life producer, and the episode ends the Xena opening credits rolling. The episode thus weaves together the fictional elements of the Xenaverse with a play with it being “really” history, and the real-world knowledge of its status as a produced commodity.

The explicit unreality of Xena is produced in other ways as well. In “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” (2.04), Gabrielle wanders into a nightclub style dance, complete with hip-hop music in the soundtrack. The music on Xena more usually tends towards the combination of classical film scores, and Celtic and vaguely “exotic” (that is, Eastern or African) sounding instruments—the Bulgarian gaida and kava, the dhol and tabla percussion of Indian bhangra music—an amorphous blend meant to signify “pre-modernity.” This musical blend is postmodern in itself, an unobtrusive eclecticism that repeats in other texts of the postmodern sacred (the early series of Buffy, Dead Like Me). The theme for Xena is a reworking of the Bulgarian folk song “Kaval Sviri” and combines a gaida (a Bulgarian bagpipe) with the more usual film instruments of horns, strings and timpani percussion. In “Girls Just Want To Have Fun” however, the music for the dance scene is unambiguously postmodern, with the rapping and hip-hop drum loop setting the song clearly in the present.
So if it is clear that Xena is a postmodern text, its religious content of Xena is equally obvious. Like Stargate and Constantine, Xena provides a literal, corporeality to its spirituality. The Gods on Xena are the very real Gods of Greek myth, who both reside in transcendental realms (Mount Olympus and the underworld) and interact with humans. The Gods on Xena are capricious, even malicious at times, especially Ares, the God of war, who often seeks to lure Xena towards her dark side. Ares loses his divinity in “Ten Little Warlords” (2.08), causing ordinary people to become aggressive, and Xena is forced to help him regain his stolen powers. Hades, God of the underworld, appears in a number of episodes (“Death In Chains,” and “Mortal Beloved”). In “Mortal Beloved” (1.16), Xena travels to the underworld, where Hades’ rule has been usurped by a serial killer named Atyminius, who has stolen Hades’ helmet, the source of his power. The episode replays all the classic tropes of Greek myths, from the journey with the boat keeper Charon on the river Styx, to Tartarus and the Elysian fields. In “Death In Chains” (1.09), Celesta, Death personified, is imprisoned by King Sisyphus. Whilst this might initially seem positive, the episode suggests that the absence of death only prolongs the pain of the sick and dying. It is only with the intervention of Xena who frees Celesta that the necessary balance between life and death can be restored (shades of New Age Taoism perhaps?). Other divine appearances include Aphrodite and Cupid in “For Him The Bell Tolls” (2.16). So Xena provides another example of the corporeal God in the postmodern sacred, and of literal heaven and hells. Yet given the postmodern production and consumption of Xena, the corporeal God is hardly one to believe in.

Like most of the other texts of the postmodern sacred, Xena neither discards the Judeo-Christian legacy nor holds faithfully to it. In “The Giant Killer” (2.03), Xena helps David kill the giant Goliath, rewriting the Biblical story. Goliath is
refigured as an old friend of Xena’s, a giant hired to work for the Philistines. Goliath is given a sympathetic back-story—10 years previous, he and Xena had fought side-by-side, in a battle in which Goliath had saved Xena’s life only to have his wife and children killed. Ignoring a warning from Xena, Goliath works for the Philistine leader Dagon to find the information that would help him avenge his family’s deaths, a path which leads him to conflict with Xena and the Israelites. This of course leads to his eventual death at David’s hand, but it is hardly the triumphant Israeliite victory more usually told. Goliath is pitiable, foolish in seeking revenge, but not evil. Xena regrets Goliath’s death, calling him “a great warrior, a loving husband and my friend.”

*Xena* re-writes the Jewish and Christian religions in “The Giant Killer” along with its characterisations. Rather than assert the singularity of Biblical God, David says that he is “greater than Zeus, Ares, *all the lesser Gods* put together” (italics added). Some hints of Hebrew spirituality are included, David reads a Psalm, and during the climactic scene, whilst a heavenly choir sings on the soundtrack, there a few strategic shots of clouds that might suggest the existence of a transcendent God. Given the polytheistic context of *Xena*, this introduction of a Jewish story only serves to relativise the Biblical monotheisms. It serves to displace the exclusive Judeo-Christian purchase on spiritual truth even as it includes it, and in doing so renders the Bible as just another myth amongst the Greek and Roman myths more usually told on *Xena*. As David Adcock suggests, “Xena appropriates ‘authentic’ cultural tropes, mythemes and icons, but in the recontextualised fabric, the entire ‘original’ is called into question” (n.pag). *Xena* as a simulation exposes the simulacral nature of not only its popular culture and pagan sources, but the Judeo-Christian traditions as well.

There are other, more veiled, references to Christianity too. In its third series, *Xena* begins a long story arc involving the God “Dahak,” a derivation of the Persian
god Zahhak. Dahak recalls both Christian and pagan worship at the same time—
Dahak is termed “the one true God” by its adherents. Gabrielle becomes pregnant by
a worshipper of the God. Whilst Xena is convinced that the child is evil, Gabrielle is
not so sure. Rather than kill the child as Xena suggests, she secretly puts the child in
a basket and floats her down a river—definite shades of Moses. Her child, Hope,
grows at a supernatural rate and is a young woman the next time they meet. But
Hope, of course, is evil, and it is only when she murders Xena’s son Solan that
Gabrielle realises her daughter’s true nature. So, the arc recalls both pagan worship,
and an inverted Christian coding. In some ways, it recalls Žižek’s argument regarding
Star Wars, where he says that “since the ideological universe of Star Wars is the New
Age pagan universe, it is quite logical that the central figure of Evil should echo
Christ” (2006:101). However, Xena’s relationship to Christianity is more ambivalent
than that of Star Wars.

In its final two seasons, Xena begins its most obvious Christian plot trajectory.
Xena herself gives birth to the immaculately conceived Eve, who it is suggested will
bring about a change that will end the time of the Greek Gods. The pagan polytheism
of Xena is thus suggested to give way to a (Christian-coded) monotheism
(“Motherhood” 6.01). Ivar Kvistad argues that the concluding seasons of Xena
suggest that because of

the structural logic of the series’ representation of epochal succession, the
Judeo-Christian tradition becomes the rightful successor and antidote to the
pagan world [and that] construct it as the superior religious and moral
paradigm amongst its competitors. (n.pag).

Kvistad goes so far as to suggest that Xena’s Judeo-Christian turn fits easily into a
neo-conservative framework. Kvistad makes an interesting point, however it is
difficult to definitively position the series into a Judeo-Christian framework. But
Xena’s blank irony is hardly affirmative of any one strand of its texts. The presence of such Christian figures as the arch-angel Michael appears as just another trope in Xena’s stylised, hyper-real versions of religion. Christianity thus becomes as simulated as the Greek myths it is supposed to have superseded. Importantly, too, *Xena* enters into the supplementary relationship between the New Age and Christianity. If its concluding season suggests that it tipped more strongly towards Christianity, its earlier seasons problematise that reading, relativising and re-writing the Judeo-Christian tradition. Screening for 6 seasons, *Xena* contains enough ambivalences and ironies to encompass a multiplicity of readings. As a pastiched simulation, it creates incomplete and fragmentary readings, which is, I suspect, part of its appeal.

Then there is the decidedly un-neo-conservative takes on gender and sexuality. As it gleefully re-writes myth, *Xena* shows its postmodern positions ethically too. Xena herself is most definitely a post-feminist heroine—a strong, fighting action hero with a spectacularised, often sexualised body. Whilst this is not an unproblematic development for some feminist writers, it is nevertheless interesting and preferable to classically passive heroines waiting to be saved by men and heterosexual romance. Morreale, for instance, suggests that *Xena*’s textual excess may be regarded as camp, giving the series a feminist potential for a critical estrangement on gender. And of course, the homoerotic relationship between Xena and her companion Gabrielle gathered the series a devoted lesbian following, something the series clearly played to but never tipped into a definitive textual reading of the two as a couple. While of course same-sex love was a feature of the ancient world, *Xena* hardly features the many queer-coded characters one would expect to find in the mythic Greek milieu. Instead, it walks the line between subtext and text dictated by the generally
homophobic norms of contemporary TV and film. *Xena* thus very definitely disguises its postmodern ethics towards gender and sexuality beneath its pre-modern setting. As Kvistad makes clear, the Sapphic relationship between Xena and Gabrielle is as important to the series as its religious underpinning. The lesbian text/subtext sits ill at ease with an American neo-conservative religious reading.

So there are a number of nostalgic tendencies at work in *Xena*. There is a muted pastoralism, a virtue of its real-world filming in New Zealand. Then, there are the lost heroic narratives of postmodernism. Every episode begins with the voice-over “in a time of ancient Gods, warlords and kings, a land in turmoil cried out for a hero.” In postmodernism, which begins as Taylor says, “with a sense of *irrevocable* loss and *incurable* fault,” (1984: 6) there is very definitely the sense that real-world heroes are difficult to find. But if an unproblematic hero has been lost, then it is a traumatic loss which the postmodern sacred returns to, again and again. The postmodern condition serves to qualify heroism—for instance, in the way that doctors are sued by their patients, or the suspicion directed towards altruism (what’s in it for *them*?). Even given some temporary revivals of real-life heroes (the fire-fighters of New York in September 11), it still remains difficult to imagine heroes like *Xena* in a Realist setting. So the estranged setting of *Xena* in the distant, mythic, past, is perhaps the only solution to the postmodern nostalgia for heroic figures.

But the chief nostalgia at work in *Xena* is that of cinema, for itself as a “lost object” as Baudrillard puts it (47). As episodes like “Athenian City Academy of the Performing Arts” (1.13) show, *Xena* foregrounds its own inauthenticity and textuality. So this strain of nostalgia is hardly mournful. *Xena* is very definitely in the “end of history” celebratory mode of postmodernism dominant in the 1990s. In contrast to *Harry Potter*, *Xena* is postmodern nostalgia at its most *inauthentic*, an intentionally
inaccurate rendering of Greek myths that has discarded fidelity for postmodern eclecticism and revision. In this, Xena is perhaps more indicative of the 90s than any other text in the postmodern sacred.

_Nostalgia in the Postmodern Sacred 2: Buffy the Vampire Slayer_

_Buffy and the Sunnydale swimming team (“Go Fish” 2.20)_

Nostalgia can be a multifaceted thing. While as Susan Stewart argues, it is always marked by loss, it can be celebratory or depressed. It may be pro or anti postmodernism, but in either case, it remains profoundly postmodern in perspective. In general, nostalgic texts like Harry Potter and Xena have a tendency to elide the ethically unpalatable aspects of the past, preferring to revel instead in aesthetics. The wilfully unfaithful reading of myth on Xena makes the series a very obviously pre-September 11 text. On Buffy the Vampire Slayer however, we see a television series that straddles 9/11, and that makes an immense difference in tone in its later seasons. Buffy, the jarringly titled Joss Whedon created cult series, offers up a cornucopia of nostalgia, most frequently a nostalgia for the lost referent of film. Indeed, Whedon has gone on record stating he envisioned the series as a “cull-from-every-genre-all-
the-time thing” (qtd Albright 65). Over its 144 episodes, the series often seems awash in postmodern irony and self-reflexivity, painfully aware of its own textuality, but also at key moments provides an anti-postmodern nostalgia for real experience (see chapter two for more on Buffy and the transcendental signified). As such it provides the perfect example for the two duelling nostalgic tendencies I have described in this chapter. The premise of the series, for those unaware, is that Buffy Summers, a high school student, is a supernaturally gifted killer (“a Slayer”) of vampires and other supernatural entities like demons. She, along with Giles, her “Watcher” from a Council in England dedicated to fighting evil, and some close friends, fights to save mankind from various supernatural beings out to do us harm. As the title suggests, the series plays off a contrast between the horror and the teen lifestyle of Buffy and her friends in the fictional small Californian town of Sunnydale. Buffy is a television series largely about vampires, especially in its earliest seasons, however the series also makes use of many other film and mythological creatures and references. Its chief referent is clearly the horror genre,24 yet it also takes in other fantastic elements, weaving in fairy tales and science fiction motifs into its own invented mythology. Richard S Albright rightly points out that Buffy “rejoices in its postmodern refusal to be pinned down to a single generic formula” (65).

Whilst the dialogue frequently re-works the language of game-shows25 and advertisements, the series’ postmodern referentiality goes deeper than dialogue. AS well as its pop culture references, Buffy liberally weaves in references to fairy tales and classic literature. Hansel and Gretel appear as demonic entities goading the Sunnydale adults into a literal witch-hunt in “Gingerbread” (3.10), in a clear metaphor for contemporary hysteria about child abuse. In “Go Fish,” (2.20) the Sunnydale swim team become monsters reminiscent of The Creature from the Black Lagoon, a
reference the series is only to quick to knowingly point out. Buffy re-imagnes Dr Jekyll and Mister Hyde in “Beauty and the Beasts” (3.04) as an allegory for domestic abuse. Adam, the “Big Bad” (ie the main evil antagonist) of Season Four, is a version of Frankensten’s monster, an amalgam of demon and human parts.

In “Buffy Vs Dracula,” (5.01) we see the series’ mythology square up, finally, to the vampire genre’s most famous text. When Buffy meets Dracula, she says “get out,” as if to purge the series of the one referent it has hitherto circled but never named. She asks, in disbelief,

Buffy: so let me get this straight, you’re Dracula. The guy, the Count. Dracula: I am
Buffy: and you’re sure this isn’t just a fanboy thing? Cause I’ve fought more than a few pimply, overweight vamps who called themselves Lestat. (“Buffy Vs Dracula” 5.01)

While the episode replays a number of classic vampire tropes that the series has otherwise eschewed—Dracula turns into mist, bats—it maintains its sense of irony towards its subject matter. Xander asks Dracula sarcastically, “where’d you get your accent, Sesame Street?” yet the excitement of the characters after their first meeting with the Count is clearly that of fans meeting an idol (and very much a fanboy and fangirl thing). While Buffy itself is a meta-riff on the horror genre, this episode, which comes after four seasons, folds the series back on itself, playing with the genre’s source materials part-mockingly and part-seriously. Once again, the postmodern sacred is caught somewhere between belief and unbelief.

Interestingly, Buffy only features Dracula once, as though the incorporation of the Dracula mythology into the series renders anything more than a superficial selfreferential encounter redundant. Yet Buffy’s nostalgic tendency is hardly limited to pastiching the horror genre; the dialogue frequently makes quick-witted references to other shows and movies, not to mention popular culture ephemera like game-shows
and ads. In “Once More With Feeling,” (6.07) the series’ infamous musical episode, the referent shifts to Broadway musicals as a demon’s spell compels people to break out into song and elaborate dance numbers. Indeed, Anya complains that her number is a “retro pastiche, it’s never going to be breakaway pop hit.”29 “Superstar” (4.07) features an alternate Sunnydale in which the geek Jonathon has transformed himself into a suave James Bond style character, complete with suit and bow-tie—a published author, accomplished musician, consultant for the U.S Army and so on. The Bond references occur too in the soundtrack, which clearly allude to John Barry’s famous scores. “Dirty Girls” (7.18) features an original series Star Trek sequence in which Faith fights a Vulcan.

The series is well known for its lightning quick dialogue, in particular for the creative ways it makes use of pop culture references. For instance, in “The Wish,” (3.09) Cordelia refers to the alternative universe she now inhabits as “Bizarre-o World,” one of many references the series makes to the Superman comics.30 In the same episode, Xander refers to his and Willow’s feelings of guilt (for having been caught cheating) as “Guiltapalooza.” The reference is here is to Lollapalooza, a massive music festival tour that featured many different acts, yet Buffy characteristically twists the reference into a new phrase of its own, playing on the audience’s presumed knowledge of the festival in order to create a new phrase. This kind of language usage, dubbed “Slayer Slang,” has attracted the notice of a number of scholars.31 Richard S. Albright suggests that “correspondences between the Buffyverse and our world are hyperrealised through a sharing of imaginary works between both worlds” (64). In other words, the popular culture references in Buffy work to ground the fictional universe in our postmodern referentiality. Albright argues, for instance, for the villains of season six, the Evil Trio of Andrew, Jonathon
and Warren, “the boundary between fantasy and reality is permeable and they seem motivated to make their lives imitate art, to live in the imaginary worlds that supply so much of their dialogue” (64). The Trio argue over such geek topics as SF and comics (Star Wars, Star Trek: The Next Generation, Superman and Spiderman), and who makes the best Bond (“Life Serial” 6.05).

So referentiality on Buffy then becomes a matter of explicit discussion as well as textual incorporation. Postmodern pastiche, after all, can function in a number of different ways—for instance, the seamless unacknowledged retreads of the sort that Jameson talks about with regard to Body Heat, Chinatown and so on. Then, there is the self-referentiality of genre, in which a text points self-consciously towards its own generic features. Finally, there is explicit referentiality, in which texts either self-consciously recreate scenes from other texts (visual quoting, if you will), or have characters discuss other texts. Buffy, unsurprisingly, does all of these at times. The “Once More With Feeling,” episode both signals un-specifically to Hollywood musicals of the 1940s and 50s (Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers?), as well as having its characters explicitly discuss the conventions of the genre.32

Yet the series also plays out the underside of postmodern simulation, the desire for “real” experience. This occurs most dramatically in the series 6 arc. At the end of Series 5, Buffy dives dramatically into a dimensional portal, closing it off, saving the world, and dying in the process. Convinced, however, that Buffy is in a “hell dimension,” her friends work a spell to bring her back (“Bargaining” 6.01 and 6.02). Of course, this being television, nothing is ever simple, so that hell dimension turns out to have been heaven. The heaven described resembles not so much a Christian heaven as a Buddhist state of nirvana, a world free of hurt and pain. By contrast, this world is “hard… and bright… and violent,” (“After Life” 6.03) an
excess of sensation too much for Buffy to cope with. “Hard and bright and violent” seems a succinct way of describing some of the negative experiences of postmodern simulation.

Not unexpectedly then, she comes back from heaven withdrawn, unable to feel anything. “Give me something to sing about” she sings in “Once More With Feeling.” Paradoxically, this world is too much, and too little, for Buffy. In between working shifts at a burger joint, Buffy starts having rough, BDSM sex with the vampire Spike, just to feel something. Their first sexual encounter in “Smashed” (6.09) begins with the pair fighting, then having sex, as a building collapses around them. Much like Taylor’s tattooed and pierced anti-postmoderns, Buffy attempts to recover her lost sense of self by recovering her body through rough sex. Tellingly, Jana Reiss suggests that Buffy’s “misery, her profound despair, makes it impossible for her to crack jokes” (45) in the sixth season—this turn towards the body coincides with her inability to trade in postmodern referentiality. But this does not mean that Buffy has suddenly exited postmodernism for “the real,” rather, it has shifted gears into a postmodernist nostalgia of a different sort.

Ignoring for the moment the theological implications of Buffy’s falling from heaven (which I have already dealt with in chapter two), the arc illuminates a peculiarly postmodern approach to the body. Disconnected from itself, yet unable to break out of the circularity of postmodern simulation and self-referentiality—the knowingness of singing “Give me something to sing about,” while the seeming outside of rough sex becomes just another move in the postmodern commodification of the body. Once again, “what is promoted as ‘genuine culture’ always turns out to be ‘simulacra of genuine culture’” (Taylor, 1997: 204), and this is as true for bodily
experiences as it is for culture (and most especially bodily experiences being simulated on-screen).

It’s no accident that the storyline coincides with the most regularly shown job Buffy has on the series (she works part time as a school counsellor in Series 7, but this is infrequently shown), indeed a number of episodes played viscerally on the fast food angle before agitation from sponsors forced the producers to abandon the storyline. Fast food, as we know, combines modern forms of discipline with postmodern forms of simulation. George Ritzer argues that employees’ ability to interact with costumers in such jobs has become so heavily scripted— the ubiquitous “have a nice day!”—that human interaction itself has become a form of simulation in postmodern capitalism. Such interactions are produced by the combination of explicit surveillance (on the part of managers, supervisors and so on) as well as internalised discipline. Thus postmodern forms of capitalism are often highly reliant on modern rationalist forms of organisation, surveillance and discipline. For Buffy, working in such an environment, where she is told she is “one of the lifers,” is clearly motivation for her to use violent sex to get “out” of herself (not to mention her job). The arc swings between the two extremes of postmodern extra-textual “reality” and simulation, and while the violent sex might at first glance seem ill-at-ease with Buffy’s playful postmodern referentiality, it instead condenses a dynamic at the heart of the postmodern condition. It’s arguable that the graphic sex and violence emerge as a response to the anaestheticising effects of postmodern simulation, a way to reclaim the material from the symbolic. Does that, then, mean that “realism” to us has become only reduced to the most visceral experiences of life? Do we need sex and violence to be this “real” and graphic precisely because our lives are so fake; or is it the opposite, Buffy as
simulation, textual copies without originals? Or possibly, and this is particularly
evident in the post-September 11 discourse on the “real,” it may be both.

A deep-seated ambivalence towards simulation is clearly at work in the series,
since the postmodern referentiality in *Buffy*, whilst often a matter of glib banter, is
also occasionally interrogated more deeply than perhaps one would expect from a
fantastic television series airing on a major network. The remarkable episode
“Storyteller” (7.16) is a case in point where the series rises above its generic
limitations. Andrew, after fleeing Sunnydale at the end of Season Six, has returned
and murders his friend Jonathon at the bidding of his (dead) friend.crush Warren in
“Lessons” (7.01). He has now joined Buffy and her team, part prisoner, part guest.
The episode begins with an elaborate Masterpiece Theatre style set and Andrew’s
mock poetic narration, and features multiple textual frames—the glossy TV look of
Andrew’s pop-culture fantasies, the grainy video-camera look of the documentary
Andrew is making about Buffy, the “real world” shots of the characters in the show’s
usual style. Andrew’s narration provides a direct self-referential textuality to the
episode. In the climactic scene, Buffy has taken Andrew to the Sunnydale High
school basement where Andrew murdered Jonathon and threatens him with a knife:

Andrew: So this is my redemption at last, buy back my bruised soul with the
blood of my heart but [falters] not enough to kill
Buffy: Stop! Stop telling stories. Life isn’t a story [ . . . ] you always do this,
you make everything into a story so no-one’s responsible for anything because
they’re just following a script
Andrew: Please don't kill me. Warren said Jonathan would be OK. I trusted
him, and I lost my friend.
Buffy: You didn't lose him. You murdered him.
Andrew: I know, but you don't need to kill me. You said we could all get
through this.
Buffy: I made it up. I'm making it all up. What kind of hero does that make
me?
Buffy: Yeah? Well, I don't like having to give a bunch of speeches about how
we're all gonna live, because we won't. This isn't some story where good
triumphs because good triumphs. Good people are going to die! Girls. Maybe me. Probably you. Probably right now.

Of course, Buffy doesn’t actually kill Andrew (she is, after all a hero). The episode ends with Andrew speaking directly into the camera, in the toilet, saying “here's the thing. I killed my best friend. There's a big fight coming, and I don't know what's going to happen. I don't even think I'm going to live through it. That's, uh, probably the way it should be. I guess I'm.” and then he turns the camera off. The episode proves remarkable for its strained relationship towards narrative, at once affirming the pleasures of textuality, and then swiftly undercutting itself. Andrew’s storytelling is pleasurable, and his postmodern referencing is hardly dissimilar to any other character on the show. The episode’s apparent confirmation of “reality”—Andrew admitting he really did kill Jonathon, and that cannot be easily moralised away into a redemption narrative—is not merely a trite, easy affirmation, rather it is an examination of the consequences of the postmodern turn. But even as it seems to raise a critique of narrativising away reality, Buffy is painfully aware of its own textuality, its own unreality—and indeed the unreality that the postmodern hyper-real has produced of its own world—and self aware enough to realise how much pleasure its audience takes from the nostalgic aesthetic.

This is made abundantly clear in the one truly Realist episode of Buffy’s seven seasons. In “Normal Again” (6.17), the entire foundation of the series is undermined. Buffy is poisoned by the Trio and flicks back between realities, between the familiar “reality” of her life as a Slayer in Sunnydale, and her life as a patient in a mental hospital. It is suggested that all of Buffy’s adventures onscreen are the result of psychosis, that her friends, sister and supernatural powers are simply figments of her imagination—a Realist interpretation of the text if ever there was one. The doctor
tells Buffy that she needs to kill her friends, but this proves too difficult and
eventually, she chooses Sunnydale over the mental institution. The conclusion of the
episode is deeply ambivalent; it ends not in Sunnydale and the resumption of “real”
life, but in the mental hospital, with the doctor telling Buffy’s mother that “we’ve lost
her” and Buffy staring blankly in her catatonia. Whilst this could easily fall into the
clichéd “it was all just a dream” explanation for fantastic texts, Buffy is more nuanced
a text than that. It’s important to note that the episode occurs towards the end of the
sixth season, there are another 27 episodes after this one. So clearly this episode is
not a mere Realist denouement that retrospectively re-writes the series as a psychotic
delusion. But “Normal Again” does however offer the one plausibly Realist
explanation for the series, and it is characteristic of the text that it neither ends firmly
on one side or another—neither reality nor fantasy. We end, predictably, back in
Sunnydale, but more uncertainly than when we began.

Buffy, as a nostalgic postmodern text, knows the pleasures of its viewers lie in
playing with unreality, with both belief and unbelief. The serial form of episodic TV
usually means an equilibrium is disturbed and then recovered, but Buffy persistently
challenges that. Instead of the Realist closure that “Normal Again” promises (and
indeed many fans speculated that the final episode would revisit the mental
institution), the series ends with Buffy and her friends looking out on a destroyed
Sunnydale. Willow asks Buffy “what are we going to do now, Buffy?” and Buffy
answers wordlessly with an inscrutable smile (“Chosen” 7.22). This ending too is
open-ended, leaving the viewer to answer the question instead. This is one text that
does not “always [opt] for the real” (1994:21) as Baudrillard puts it, but neither can it
so easily banish the weight of skepticism, even for itself in an explicitly fantastic text.
One final reference to sum up this discussion of Buffy’s postmodernist sensibility. In “I Only Have Eyes For You,” (2.19) 50s school nostalgia ala Happy Days returns in the form of phantom lovers, who are doomed to replay their deaths through possessing human proxies. As the title suggests, the old Flamingos doo-wop song features prominently in the episode, as do a number of flashbacks to the period. We see a number of standard tropes of 50s nostalgia—the fashion, the language (“he’s dreamy”), a high school yearbook. Of course, Buffy is hardly alone in re-visiting the period, for as Fredric Jameson reminds us, the 1950s remain the privileged referent for American nostalgia (1991: 19). Metaphorically, though, the episode works as reminder of the haunting the past (and most especially the 1950s onwards for Americans) works on the contemporary. 

However ambivalent we may be towards postmodern referentiality, and even as we seek to find real experiences outside of the textual, like the lovers on Buffy we seem nevertheless doomed to repeat the past again and again, trapped eternally in a nostalgia mode. If the earliest seasons of Buffy seem to exhibit a more celebratory mode of postmodern nostalgia, the sixth and seventh seasons mark a post-September 11 shift towards an ostensibly anti-postmodern postmodernism. The loss of nostalgia remains a constant, but this is more bitter than sweet, and the search for a pure authentic experience remains as elusive as ever.

Notes

1 Žižek himself in “Welcome to the Desert of the Real” borrows this phrase from Alain Badiou. One should note here the Lacanian valences of Žižek’s use of the term “Real.” In general I have eschewed a psychoanalytic framework, although in this case the term works well enough without the psychoanalytic connotations.

2 Just as conservative appeals to “natural” heterosexuality have to selectively ignore the wide array of same-sex eroticism found in the animal kingdom.

3 Though I should note that these transgressions are ultimately contained, socially licensed as part of a teen liminal space prior to entering the adult world of work and a reproductive heterosexual sociality.

4 See his “Welcome To the Desert of the Real” essay.
Lyotard gives a typical example of postmodern eclectism, doing all of the following: eating McDonalds for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, listening to reggae, wearing Paris perfume in Hong Kong and so on (76).

It is unsurprising, therefore, that our culture’s image of ultimate Evil—Nazi Germany—is often coded as queer and sado-masochistic, what Laura Frost aptly calls “sexual scapegoating as a means of defining fascism” (99)—despite the wide-spread Nazi persecution of homosexuals. It is hard to imagine heterosexuality being pathologised in quite the same way.

Interestingly, the comedienne Margaret Cho makes this point about BDSM and speculative fiction in Notorious C.H.O when she says “there’s this really creepy connection between BDSM and Star Trek. And the Renaissance fair.”

His inactivity towards the growing AIDS epidemic through-out his presidency presumably helped many Americans feel good too.

“I Wish I Was A Punk Rocker (With Flowers In My Hair)” by Sandy Thom. The full chorus goes:

“Oh I wish I was a punk rocker with flowers in my hair
In 77 and 69 revolution was in the air
I was born too late and to a world that doesn't care
Oh I wish I was a punk rocker with flowers in my hair.”

For example, British group The Pipettes, with their polka-dot dresses and Phil Spector “Wall of Sound” style production.

We see these threads coming together in Sophia Coppola’s postmodern Marie Antoinette, which which features a vignette dramatising Marie Antoinette’s grotesque pastoral nostalgia in the midst of a movie that aestheticises simultaneously 18th century French decadence and 1980s pop music like Adam Ant.

See Taylor’s chapter in Hiding (74-145) and Victoria Pitts for an in-depth scholarly reading of body modification practices.

Of course, no movement so based on individualising and customising people’s bodies can be entirely generic, there exists simultaneously in body mod a post-human approach to the body that seeks not to reclaim some primal sense of self, but rather to abandon the limitations of the human. This strand of body modification is embodied most obviously by the performance artist Stelarc.

One does find, of course, other versions of fantasy that are not set in medieval European worlds—for instance, the estranged Orientalist world of Raymond Fiest and Janny Wurts’ Daughter of Empire novel series.

Of course, one could easily suggest this to be a re-working on Homer’s Odyssey, the archetypal “journey home.” Yet arguably contemporary texts are as invested in re-working other “just past” texts than engaging with myth and legend.

Interestingly, both of these series have been adapted into visual texts, quite likely because of a fantasy market fuelled by the success of Harry Potter. The Worst Witch was developed into a British television series, and LeGuin’s Earthsea into a film by anime giant Studio Ghibli.

Life On Mars, a recent British series, proves an interesting exception, however. The premise of Life On Mars is that Sam, a present day policeman, is injured in a car accident and is sent back to 1973. The SF elements on Life On Mars are minimal, however, this time travel fantasy is little more than a Todorov style hesitation as to whether Sam has travelled back in time or is in a coma. Sam is paired with DCI Gene
Hunt, an old-style misogynistic, homophobic, racist and corrupt policeman. Hunt roughs up witnesses, makes back-door deals with gangsters and plants evidence on people he believes to be guilty. Unsurprisingly though, he is still portrayed as extremely charismatic, as a policeman with his heart in the right place. Sam protests Hunt’s ways, but it is clear that the enjoyment derived from the program is in the nostalgia for the racism, sexism and homophobia of the past. Sam’s presence there seems to be largely to speak for the present, a way of accessing the “pleasures” of racism and so on whilst appearing to condemn them. Tellingly, Hunt says to him, “you like it here more than you care to admit.” There are of course a series of nostalgic cues—old clothes and cars, David Bowie’s “Life On Mars” song that the series takes its title from, a meeting with glam rock star Marc Bolan, reminiscences about Sam’s childhood days going to the football with his father—but rather than fixate on these, Life On Mars is besotted with the usually disavowed ideological elements of the past. Thus, it is deeply retrogressive, a sad comment on the contemporary backlash against “PC.” Life On Mars provokes a different kind of nostalgia to the Harry Potter sort—if Harry Potter conceals its present-day perspective beneath an old aesthetic, Life On Mars seeks to truly abandon it, knowing full well the lessons of feminism, gay liberation and so on, and not caring. Life On Mars is the most nihilistic of postmodern nostalgic texts, a conservative backlash scarcely covered by an ostensibly liberal surface. Life on Mars has none of the supernatural elements or religious symbols of the postmodern sacred. Instead, it is the authenticity of the “real” that is sacred in Life On Mars, a real so unrecoverable in the present that Sam prefers to stay comatose (in the present) in order to stay in the 1970s world of his mind.

The utter aesthetic barrenness of this trend surely reaches its apotheosis in the “parody” movie Scary Movie, which was a redundant parody of postmodern horror movies like Scream and I Know What You Did Last Summer, which were already ironic riffs on slasher films. Depressingly, Scary Movie has now spawned three sequels.

You know, when music was, like, really really real.

Although not absolute, there seems few exceptions to Tolkien-esque medievalist nostalgia, certainly in fantasy’s most commercially successful areas. However, Samuel Delany’s Nevéryon series, Sherry S Tepper and Joanna Russ provide a few welcome, if not exactly culturally ubiquitous, exceptions. All of these, interestingly, work within a broadly feminist tradition that engages with the utopian/dystopian modes, and as such are interested in issues of social transformation that are more usually elided in medievalist nostalgia.

Clip shows are television episodes cut largely together out of other older episodes.

This contemporary heteronormativity is obvious too in Xena’s parent series Hercules: The Legendary Journeys, which transmutes the relationship between Hercules and his lover Iolus into friendship.

Creator Joss Whedon states in the commentaries of the pilot “Welcome to the Hellmouth” (1.01) that the premise of the show was based upon a reversal of the standard horror movie formula in which a blond girl walks into a dark alley and is attacked by something monstrous. Whedon’s revision has attracted praise from some feminists, although others have their reservations.

For instance, this exchange:

Buffy: Ok, what do I want?
Angel: To kill them, to kill them all.
Buffy: Sorry that’s incorrect, but you do get this lovely watch and a year’s supply of Turtle Wax. What I want is to be left alone. (“Welcome to the Hellmouth” 1.01)

Cordelia: You, you, you. What about me? It’s one thing to be dating the lame unpopular guy, but it’s another to be dating the creature from the Blue Lagoon.

Xander: Black Lagoon. The creature from the Blue Lagoon was Brooke Shields.

Fanboy or fangirl is another term for fans of SF, fantasy, horror, anime and so on, sometimes pejoratively, sometimes affectionate or self-description.

Lestat, of course, being the main character of Anne Rice’s immensely successful late 80s/early 90s vampire series. The books spawned two movies, Interview with a Vampire, which starred Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt and Antonio Banderas, and Queen of the Damned, which featured the late R&B singer Aaliyah in the titular role.

See Richard S. Albright’s article “‘Breakaway pop hit.. or book number?’ ‘Once More With Feeling’ and Genre” for a more in-depth look at the episode’s use of the musical genre. See also, Jeffrey Middents for a look at how the episode configures race.

Amongst others, Xander’s Jimmy Olson joke in “The Zeppo” (3.13), Oz and Xander’s discussion of the various types of kryptonite in “Helpless” (3.12)


Tara: We were talking and then... it was like..

Buffy: Like you were in a musical

Giles: Of course, that would explain the huge backing orchestra I couldn’t see and the synchronised dancing from the room service chaps (“Once More With Feeling” 6.07)

The series has persistently coded fighting as a metaphor for sex, and vice versa. For instance, Faith, the other Slayer, has sex with Xander after an unresolved, unsatisfying fight in “The Zeppo” (3.13)—“a fight like that and no kill... I’m about ready to pop.” It should be noted that, as Justine Larbalestier points out, “in the Buffyverse sex in the context of a loving relationship is good, and sex that is not about love is bad, or at the very least, empty” (216). The rough sex of the Buffy/Spike relationship is coded as a self-destructive flirtation with the dark side that she must repent from, well before his attempted rape in “Seeing Red” (6.19).

Buffy’s inability to take a human life has already been established in “The Gift” (5.22), when Giles kills the innocent Ben, who shares his body periodically with the evil hell-god Glory. Giles tells us, “sooner of later Glory will re-emerge and make Buffy pay for that mercy [of not killing Ben]...and the world with her. Buffy knows that, and she still couldn’t take a human life. She’s a hero, you see.” Giles himself then makes the pragmatic decision to kill Ben, to do what Buffy could not.

SF fans call these types of radical re-writings of texts “retcons.” A ret-con retrospectively changes the premise of a show or comic.

Interestingly, the Buffy spin-off Angel features an episode almost entirely set in the 1950s (“Are You Now, Or Have You Ever Been” 2.02), which shows the dark side of the period—McCarthyism, racial discrimination, homophobia and a lynching. Those aspects of the 1950s are, needless to say, rarely featured in nostalgic depictions.
Conclusion

_The Real is Sacred/The Real as Sacred_

In summing up, it seems especially necessary to weigh the ideological implications of the postmodern sacred. Slavoj Žižek in *On Belief* argues that Buddhism works as the ideological supplement to late capitalism. He points out that the Buddhist logic of “letting go” enables its practitioners to surrender to the inevitability of postmodern capital and to maintain the illusion of not participating in the game of capitalistic accumulation (2001: 12). Buddhism is, in the Freudian-Lacanian terminology, a fetish by which subjects disavow their own complicity in postmodern capitalism. Buddhism and the New Age, in Žižek’s opinion, thus produce a-political subjects, “who fully participate in the capitalist dynamic whilst retaining the appearance of mental sanity” (2001: 13). Žižek instead argues through his characteristic use of Hegel and Lacan that one should instead look towards the monism of Christianity.

Now Žižek’s initial point is a well-made one, for it is not by accident that Buddhism in the West has been largely popularised by that most capitalistic industry, the entertainment industry (one only has to think of celebrity Buddhists like Richard Gere or the Beastie Boys), and of course, the aforementioned pop New Ageism of Oprah. Yet he arguably overstates his case, for though Buddhism is no longer on the New Age fringe, Christianity remains ideologically hegemonic, especially in the United States—and it is the more fundamentalist forms of Christianity that are, ironically, some of the most capitalistic. What Žižek has overlooked in his haste towards one of his famous reversals of Leftist orthodoxies, of course, is how Christianity itself functions not so much as the ideological supplement of capitalism
in the United States but the very pre-condition for its existence. America, of course, has famously considered itself “God’s own country,” yet has, traditionally, seen little conflict between rampant capitalism and Christianity. God blesses America with its wealth—therefore, God loves capitalism (and never mind some of those unfortunate commandments in the Bible about justice that might be extended to, say, worker’s civil rights). The second Bush administration has made explicit the latent connections made between capital, “patriotism,” evangelical Protestant Christianity and an aggressive foreign policy. This contrasts strongly to an Australian political climate that has largely considered public expressions of faith and patriotism gauche or even inappropriate but even here, it is the Right which is allying conservative Christian and free market dogmas in increasingly visible ways (for instance, the oft-mentioned conservative Catholicism of Federal Health and Aging minister Tony Abbott). Žižek suggests playfully that, were he alive today, Max Weber would probably write a sequel to *The Protestant Ethic* on the late capitalist Buddhist ethic (2001:13)—but Weber could just as easily write a sequel on evangelical Christianity and how it informs the American spirit of global capitalism. It is one of the strengths of Žižek’s thought that he provocatively questions the presumptions of the intellectual Left, so it is unsurprising that Žižek has mercilessly pilloried the common “respect” for New Age pop-spirituality, and conversely the disdain for organised religion, as “watered-down” belief. He suggests that it is true belief, in whatever form that occurs, that is incompatible with the secular West.

Žižek’s recent work on religion and belief poses some interesting questions for any consideration of popular culture spirituality—particularly one such as my own, which considers both the New Age and the Judeo-Christian as entangled in a supplementary relationship. It is doubtful however that the Left could truly engage
with the Christian legacy as Žižek suggests (especially through a Hegelian-Lacanian framework). Key Leftist struggles such as feminist and queer rights are, if not irreducibly incompatible with Christianity, then certainly at odds with it. The queer feminist theology of Marcella Althaus-Reid, for instance, is in stark contrast with the all-too-common misogyny and homophobia of the Roman Catholic tradition she writes in. The conservative reigns of Popes John Paul II and Benedict has seen Catholicism retreat from progressive approaches to gender, sexuality and other religions.¹

Then there is the problem of actually believing in God under postmodernity. It is arguable that the secular and religious in postmodernity have become difficult to tell apart. It is not merely that Christian belief has become “watered down” into New Age obscurantism—many people who once called themselves atheists now prefer agnostic. Recall once again Mark C Taylor’s work. Taylor argues that the problem of postmodernity is not merely belief or unbelief, it is that, for many people, they are caught somewhere in between. The postmodern religious culture finds itself somewhere between a fundamentalist belief in a singular God, a pagan belief in everything, and a modern skeptical disbelief in anything—three often incompatible belief systems. Yet, even given the significant differences between those positions, it is interesting to see how they begin to incorporate elements of each other—Oprah’s spirituality which speaks of “‘karma’ and ‘grace’ in equal parts” (Parkins 149). And even with their oft-stated antipathy towards the New Age, it is not unusual to even hear evangelical Christian fundamentalists to speak of their faith in characteristically New Age terms (as “self-fulfilment” and so on).

It is unsurprising then that a fictional popular culture has evolved which makes equal use of the New Age, of Enlightenment skepticism, and the traditions of Judaism
and Christianity. I have argued throughout this thesis that, while eclectic in its use of spiritual symbols, the postmodern sacred persistently draws on a New Age style method of consumption, one in which spiritual experience and truth “come by way of one’s own experience” (Heelas 21). As we saw in the case of Peter Jackson’s Lord of the Rings adaptations, the New Age is retrospectively re-writing Christian figures like sacraments, angels, and even God. But, if it seems to more strongly depend on a New Age framework, the postmodern sacred is not reducible to it, and it is hardly necessarily an indicator of real-world belief or practice. As I have argued throughout, an engagement with popular culture requires neither belief nor unbelief. Those people systematically excluded from organised religion can find themselves, through acts of adept reading, the fragments of an inclusive postmodern spirituality. Those who do have religious beliefs can find echoes of their beliefs in popular culture. Yet this consumerist shift is not unproblematic, given that it is individually focused and driven by the logic of postmodern global capitalism.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman asks the question of whether “one can legitimately recognise the orgasmic experience of postmodern sensation-gatherers as essentially religious?” (180). There are striking similarities to be sure, yet I am hesitant to uncritically equate the transcendent experiences of saints and the like with the various postmodern ecstasies fuelled by the needs of the market. It is debateable whether “orgasmic experience” is necessarily essentially religious; it tends to be one aspect of religious cultures amongst many. The question for me, is not so much, is postmodern sensation-gathering religious, as is postmodern sensation-gathering being consumed as religious? That question seeks to find not the ontological status of postmodern consumption—is pop culture spirituality really religious—but the functionality of it, what it does. Bauman says that:
Postmodern cultural pressures, while intensifying the search for ‘peak experiences,’ have at the same time uncoupled it from religion-prone interests and concerns, privatized it, and cast mainly non-religious institutions in the role of purveyors of relevant services. The ‘whole experience’ of revelation, ecstasy, breaking the boundaries of the self and total transcendence, once the privilege of the selected ‘aristocracy of culture’ – saints, hermits, mystics, ascetic monks, tsadiks or dervishes – and coming either as an unsolicited miracle, in no obvious fashion related to what the receiver of grace has done to earn it, or as an act of grace rewarding the life of self-immolation and denial, has been put by postmodern culture in every individual’s reach, recast as a realistic target and plausible prospect of each individual’s self-training, and relocated at the product of life devoted to the art of consumer self-indulgence

As Bauman points out, one can hardly regard the process of spiritual consumption as religious in and of itself. There is nothing very other-worldly about the everyday practices of global capitalism. If the postmodern sacred provides a vicarious experience of belief, or the supernatural, then it is only that. One cannot presume consumption to necessarily be an affirmation of real world belief in any faith, but neither can presume the opposite.

One form that this search for “peak” experience takes is the search for “real” life. If “real experience” seems so difficult to access in postmodernity that subjects feel compelled to raid the cultural artefacts of the past, even the cultural representations of the unreal, then it should be hardly surprising that “the real” begins to take on a quasi-spiritual aura. As Baudrillard says, “paradoxically, it is the real which has become our true utopia—but a utopia that is no longer in the realm of the possible, that can only be dreamt of as one would dream of a lost object” (1994:123). But if this search for the real seems to have some similarities with classical theology—God as pure Being—then it differs equally, looking for this-worldly authenticity rather than other-worldly transcendence. It is also the reverse, pure Being as God, a way of rendering consumerism as spiritual. Once again, then, the
spiritual seems to appear in postmodernity, only to dart away upon closer examination.

So the utopic dream of truly recovering the real through consumption, in the form of the postmodern sacred, is simply not possible. That it is not should be unsurprising, considering the considerable paradoxes at work here—and most especially, consuming to treat the alienation produced by postmodernist consumerism. Yet this hardly discounts the postmodern sacred from being culturally vital or significant. It might seem slightly bizarre that contemporary subjects would aim at experiencing the sacred through popular culture; however, such are the paradoxes of postmodern life. Yet, as I have argued, there is no true outside from the virtual postmodern media culture, thus consuming the spiritual through it makes about as much sense as anything else. Most especially after September 11, religion and spirituality are important concerns for every subject; whether one believes or not, and it is in the popular culture of the postmodern sacred that we find the contradictions of contemporary spiritual life coming together in an important, if not unproblematic, way. Searching for lost heroes, authenticity and meta-narratives, the postmodern sacred finds only fragments and traces of the transcendental, and the endless deferral of spiritual satisfaction to another episode, another show, another movie.

1 For instance, the recent announcement of Pope Benedict that Protestants do not worship in “real” churches, and the decision to resuscitate a form of liturgy that had been removed by the Vatican II council. This outraged Jewish leaders, for the understandable reason that the liturgy calls for the conversion of Jews. See John Hooper and Stephen Bates for more on the Protestant comment, and Jason Burke on the liturgy revival.
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