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Virtually Real:  
Problems of Authenticity in Religion on the Internet

By

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A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award  
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*Declaration*

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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## Abstract

This study explores the vexed problem of authenticity in religion. In making that exploration, the study uses for its data the multitude of diverse and disparate religious formations found in the relatively disordered and anarchic spaces created with Internet technologies, formations that I have tentatively called virtual religions. The theoretical framework applied here is developed from the unique and original critical theory of Walter Benjamin. This study is therefore located at a number of important intersections: between religion and popular culture, between religion and politics, between religion and philosophy, and between religion and art.

The argument is comprised of three major parts, corresponding to Chapters Two, Three and Four respectively. The first part approaches authenticity from the perspective of empiricism, with its scientific methods of verification and falsification. The keyword here is forensics because it implies both the scientific paradigm and police detection. This second implication is an important addition to the first because it draws attention to power in the vexed problem of religious authenticity. The suggestion that authenticity involves detection shifts attention to the problem of identifying inauthenticity. The forensic detection of inauthenticity draws critical attention to the discourses and discursive strategies that maintain an idea of authenticity against the constant threat of inauthenticity's corrupting influence. Forensic approaches to authenticity necessarily

mean to distinguish and separate authentic from inauthentic. The limits of empiricism, and consequently, the limits of the approach's usefulness to exploring the problem of authenticity in religion, is found where contradictory and paradoxical objects coexist that scientific procedures are unable to separate.

The second part of the argument develops an alternative approach to the problem of authenticity in religion. Rather than interrogating the claims of objects of disputed authenticity, the argument developed here acknowledges that the boundary distinguishing and separating authentic from inauthentic is unstable and porous. Consequently, the argument advanced in this part of the study is that a fruitful exploration of authenticity needs to work productively with the tensions that describe this indeterminate and shifting boundary. The argument develops and applies Walter Benjamin's theory of dialectics at a standstill. Benjamin's theory is useful not merely because it accommodates instability and porous boundaries in its structure of dialectics, but because it develops and even reinvigorates a Marxist-Hegelian critique of modernity by working productively with the tensions between its unstable and ambivalent dialectical poles. As applied in the present study, the dialectic developed here is between authentic and fake religion, the latter being the most intensified form of inauthentic religion. At the same time that this dialectic traces a series of constellating movements through a case-study developed in Chapter Three, Benjamin's critique of modernity becomes in the present discussion a focussed critique of empiricism and the scientific method, signified by the keyword forensics. This is where forensics' connotations of detection and police work becomes important,

because it connotes regimes that authorise what is and what is not of authentic religion, that polices the boundaries, to speak.

In the third part of the argument, corresponding to Chapter Four, these twin concerns, an exploration of authenticity in religion that finds its method in Benjaminian dialectics and a critique of modernity's valorisation of the scientific method, converge. That convergence involves locating Benjamin's theory of dialectics within the aspirations of his unfinished life's work on the Parisian arcades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and more broadly, relating dialectics at a standstill to his critique of modernity. Crucial here is Benjamin's refutation of the idea of authenticity, understood as a quantitative and independent attribute of objects, in favour of the idea of critique; for Benjamin, there is no such thing as authenticity, only authentic critique. Far from being a procedure of abstract and rational reflection, Benjamin thought that authentic critique requires the involvement of the body of the perceiver in the image they perceive. In other words, bodily involvement is Benjamin's measure of authenticity in critique, a measure he theorises through his notion of tactile appropriation. The convergence is achieved when it is recognised that virtual religions on the Internet often, if not usually, provoke laughter. The argument developed here is that this uncontrollable bodily eruption suggests a kind of bodily involvement with the image of critique and evidences a measure of tactile appropriation that in turn authenticates the critique conveyed by the dialectic between authenticity and fakery in religion. Far from dismissing virtual religions on the World Wide Web as jokes conceived by people with too much time on their hands, these religious formations deserve attention for the way in which they open a new frontier in the ongoing critique of

modernity, including late-modernity, which I prefer to the designation post-modernity. The discussion of humour in religion is built around Peter Berger's theory of redeeming laughter. Berger's thesis is that the experience of the comic is an adumbration of religious experience and that in the moment of humorous experience the separation from the divine is temporarily overcome. In other words, the comic signals transcendence. Following Berger's theory, it would seem that there are two registers in which virtual religions can be authentic; the first pertains to a critical orientation toward modernity while the second obtains in a theological reading of humour. The culmination of the argument is the matching of Berger's theory of the comic with Benjamin's political messianism.

The concluding chapter of this study amplifies the claim introduced in Chapter One and that is a subtext throughout the three main parts of this study, that the problem of authenticity in religion has historically and continues to present an opportunity to the discipline of religious studies. That opportunity consists in the demonstration that religion offers a significant and unique critical orientation toward modernity, and especially late-modernity, which is an intensification of the former. This thesis should therefore be read as a seizing of this opportunity as well as a contribution toward this larger project.

## Acknowledgement and Thanks

It is often said that researching and writing a thesis is an all-consuming and lonely process. Indeed, researching and writing this thesis has sometimes felt like that. Yet for the past three years I have been fortunate to be supported and encouraged by many friends and colleagues. Gratitude is owed to Anthony, for providing a space at Salem where I could work out the limits of empiricism; to Mandy, Word!; to René, for your conversation and for sheltering me from the storm; to Careen, for giving me a stern talking to just when I needed it most; to Jonathan, my co-conspirator during the Eden Road madness, for putting up with it; to Hetta, for your wonderful company during many memorable evenings raising the bar; and to Derek, for periodically whisking me away on well-timed and strategic adventures, for introducing me to aesthetics, and for providing the soundtrack. Special thanks are due to Rico, who at various stages and in different ways has been an accomplice, mentor, subversive influence, and nemesis. Thank you for knowing me so well. I am especially indebted to my supervisor Prof. David Chidester. Though I am sure that he wondered at times whether this study would ever be concluded, the fact that it is I credit to his enthusiasm, gentle encouragement, patient confidence and fantastic sense of humour.

If researching and writing can sometimes feel like a solitary and all-consuming project, the corollary is that it is also somewhat autobiographical. I have drawn and continue to draw great inspiration from my mother Anne-Louise. Through many highs and some very deep lows, her interest, support, love, and faith in me has been unstinting and unqualified, for which I will be ever grateful.

Due to a synchronistic conspiracy of sublime elegance, I have over the past year been fortunate to find in my partner Joanne a kindred spirit. I can say with absolute certainty that the argument that takes shape in the course of these discussions, although entirely my own, has been inspired and confirmed by conversations and adventures with her. This work is therefore dedicated to Joanne, with whom I hope to share many more adventures.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

It is a common approach when writing about the World Wide Web to emphasise the dramatic impact that Internet technologies have wrought on society and the world at large. Inevitably, talking about the World Wide Web is linked with globalisation. Globalisation is generally characterised as a process whereby the world effectively shrinks in time and space and the World Wide Web is often cited as the example par excellence of this kind of shrinkage.<sup>1</sup> Though these technologies have undoubtedly dramatically changed the world in which we live, and setting aside for the moment considerations of different degrees of access to these new technologies or the differential benefits derived from these technologies by different people around the shrinking world, shouldn't the celebration of the newness of these technologies be waning rather than persisting? Has the World Wide Web not become for many people what microwave ovens became for middle class homes many years ago already: technology so familiar that we cannot remember how we made do without it? It is worth noting that many people today recall posting and receiving hand written letters with nostalgia as for a previous age. A decade after the public launch of the World Wide Web, it might be time to recognise that already a generation has grown up with net access. The average undergraduate university student today, at least in the developed world, does not remember a world without the web. Indeed, since the launch of the web, the

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<sup>1</sup> I use "often" here to evoke the idea of a knee-jerk tendency that evidences the essence of globalisation as the intensification of connectedness by pointing to how Internet technologies give expression and substance to interconnectedness. Recently, this tendency has received the critical attention it deserves. See for example Christopher Lloyd, "Globalization: Beyond the Ultra-Modernist Narrative to a Critical Realist Perspective on Geopolitics in the Cyber Age," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 24, no. 2 (June 2000): 258-73.

world has already witnessed an economic boom and bust and news agencies are speculating that a second economic cycle relating to “new technology” is about to imitate the dot.com cycle of the late nineties.<sup>2</sup> It might be time to recognise that the World Wide Web has been with us for some time already.

Of course, religion has been with us far longer. Yet religion and the Internet’s relative difference in age and experience has not tempered their enthusiasm for one another. Religion has proliferated on the Internet and reciprocally, religion has contributed to the prolific expansion of the Internet; statistics that a quarter of web users in the United States are searching for religious and spiritual materials bodes well for both the expansion of religion and the expansion of the Internet.<sup>3</sup> In light of this, it is perhaps appropriate that a large part of the scholarly reflection on this intersection is concerned with how religious traditions in the offline world use the Internet technologies of cyberspace as a strategic resource for their religious activities in realspace, for want of a better word. Another portion of the scholarship looks at the migration of religion onto the World Wide Web and explores how religion is actually practiced online. I will look at this scholarship in greater detail later in this introduction. For the moment, however, I want to note that this kind of scholarship is premised on a working concept of what religion is. It is a central contention of this dissertation that one of the crucial dimensions of the intersection between religion and the World Wide Web is the manner in which many religious claims articulated on the web draw critical attention to the problem of authenticity in religion. Further, I submit that

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<sup>2</sup> See, Tim Weber, “Wi-fi Will be ‘Next dot.com Crash,’” *BBC News*, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/3006740.stm> (accessed: 16 August 2003).

<sup>3</sup> See Gill Donovan, “A Quarter of Web Surfers are Looking for Religion,” *National Catholic Reporter*, vol. 38, no. 10 (1 November 2002): 6.

attention to this problem is underrepresented in the scholarship on religion's intersection with Internet technologies and with popular culture.

### **1.1 Religion and Authenticity**

As “new” as Internet technology may be, the kind of challenges it poses to how we understand religion is not necessarily as recent. Throughout its history, religion has had to contend with challenges to its bounded space and controversies over what does and what does not count as religion surely date back as far as the recognition of religious difference. For it is religious difference that is crucial here, that makes all the difference here, so to speak. Defining religion is not merely a question of separating a religious sphere from a secular one; it is that and more. Attendant to the indeterminacy of the boundary's location is a question of separating authentic religion from inauthentic religion. In previous ages, such separations were made by religious and political authorities. But with the advent of the European enlightenment and that continent's subsequent age of imperialism, a new constellation of authority emerged. Imperial power was wedded with the authority of reason and the methods of empirical science. The emerging disciplines of the natural sciences thrived in their confluences and as the European empires expanded, Europe's intellectual elite enjoyed no shortage of things to sort and classify. It was in this mix that the academic study of the history of religions was born as an exercise in comparisons.

Yet as David Chidester has expertly shown,<sup>4</sup> if religion was theorised by European comparativists at the metropolitan centre, these comparativists used for their raw materials the reports and travel writings of missionaries, colonial agents, and travellers on the colonial frontiers. Comparative religion that found its theoretical exposition at the metropolitan centre found its practice on the frontiers of difference. For it was on these frontiers, the indeterminate and porous boundary between “savage” and “civilised” societies, between colonized and still-to-be colonized territories, between indigenous and alien orientations toward the world and people’s place in it, where difference remained palpable, which is to say, embodied. At the metropolitan centres of knowledge production, difference was not embodied, or at least, this was not the form of its exposition. There its form was extensive treatise that, through sorting and classifying, outlined totalising theories of religion’s evolution and relation to the trajectory of human progress, not coincidentally fitting in neatly with the imperial project’s underpinnings in natural history. The frontiers of difference, however, were the location of comparative religion’s discursive practices. Not surprisingly, the overarching comparative practice at this location was between what was thought to be authentic religion and what was not. As Chidester has argued, the contours of this emerging discourse paralleled the changing contours of colonial control. Simply put, prior to the closing of the colonial frontier and the imposition of the colonial administration’s authority, it was denied that indigenous people had any kind of religion. After authority had been extended over these territories, indigenous people subjugated, the frontier closed, and a fixed boundary established, local people were discovered to have religion after all. We will have reason to return to Chidester’s work on frontier comparative religion later in this introduction. For the moment, however, I want to note that disputes over religious authenticity go

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<sup>4</sup>David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

to the heart of the academic, comparative study of religion and are implicated in its discourses from its founding moment. I also want to note that power is implicated in these discourses - hardly a novel assertion, but nevertheless of the greatest significance, as will become apparent. Lastly, I want to hold on to this image of a porous frontier, an indeterminate contact zone of discursive denials and discoveries, for I think it captures much of what is at stake in the present inquiry.

Controversies over religious authenticity in the modern era have not been limited to the origins of comparative religion on the colonial frontiers. If in the colonial era the authentic religion of European conquerors was contrasted with the superstitious beliefs of indigenous communities, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century authentic religion is contrasted with coercive, brainwashing cults. The cult controversies of the 1970s and more recently the examples of the Branch Davidians and Heavens Gate, again raised the problem of authenticity in religion. This distinction between authentic and inauthentic and the designation of the inauthentic as cult behaviour or superstitious belief has not dissipated in the popular imagination. Though the formal organisation and influence of the anti-cult movement has mostly fallen apart, one need only recall the morbid fascination David Koresh or Marshall Applewhite seem to exert in the popular imagination. Should the Raelians sect, who claim to have cloned a number of humans, ever come to a violent end, Claude Vorilhon, a.k.a. Rael, will likely become a similar object of fascination. Outside of Western Europe and North America, Aum Shinrikyo, responsible for the Tokyo subway gas attack in 1995, and Falun Gong in China, attract similar fascination. Yet it has long since been appreciated that the designations “cult” and “sect” when used in opposition to “religion” are problematic terms and more often than not betray the pejorative and partisan positions of their users. At any rate, they are of very limited technical use, especially if employed to separate authentic from inauthentic religion. And

yet the ease with which these categories perform their separating labours surely reveals something about how religion is imagined.

It seems that agreement on examples of inauthentic religion is more easily achieved than agreement on what constitutes authentic religion. Perhaps this is a case of comparing apples with pears; comparing examples of inauthenticity with authenticity's constituting elements. I do not propose such a comparison. I'm looking for an alternative way into the vexed problem of religious authenticity and note that perhaps a better way in is via inauthenticity on which there seems to be greater agreement, than via authentic religion, in which confusion and disagreement persists. The challenge posed by inauthentic religion to religious authenticity - and remember that these categories are produced out of collective social agreement and are empirically arbitrary - is one of accommodation. Of course, the rub is that while these categories are empirically arbitrary, collective social agreement is not politically neutral. The problem of accommodating Heaven's Gate, the Branch Davidians, or for that matter the Peoples Temple of Jim Jones in the 1970s and especially following the catastrophe in Guyana in 1979 within the space of authentic religion, is not merely a question of criteria and constituting elements. As the disputes over religious authenticity on the colonial frontier demonstrate so well, this kind of accommodation that calls for defining anew the territory of authentic religion is a question of managing and administering boundaries. On empirical grounds, the challenge posed to authentic religion is whether it can accommodate within its authentic self-understanding a religious formation that appears different from itself. But the perception of difference is the grounds for political mobilisation and more often than not, the boundaries of authentic religion are ardently defended against moves to redraw them.

The designation “fake religion” might be helpful here because it denotes exactly those formations that appear to be religious in character but in which agreement as to their essential inauthenticity seems easily achieved. In this sense, fake religions are similar to cults and sects. Indeed, cults such as the Branch Davidians and Heaven’s Gate might also be called fake religions. Yet I have in mind examples of religious formations in which agreement as to their essential inauthenticity likely comes even more easily. The Church of Bullshitology, for example, is “a religion based entirely on falsehood.” McChurch describes itself as “a real religion ... that makes membership as easy as picking up a burger and fries on the way home from work.” The Center for Duck Studies advocates the pursuit of Duck Consciousness and the attainment of Duck Mind. The Church of Virus variously described itself as “a memetically engineered atheistic religion,” “Darwin’s dangerous idea out of control,” and “an extended phenotype of the Virion Council.”

The Church of Bullshitology, McChurch, the Center for Duck Studies, and the Church of Virus are virtual religions. The designation virtual religion describes a range of religious innovations found at various websites on the World Wide Web. In describing that range, I follow David Chidester’s extensive survey.<sup>5</sup> All of these virtual religions look like religion, in the sense that they display features of historical religions, such as founders, belief systems, mythical narratives, ritual objects, deities, sacred texts, and so on. Yet one cannot shake the nagging suspicion that, as Chidester says, they may be messing with us. Take for example the Church of Reality that works out their belief system with the simple assertion: “if it’s real, we believe in it!”<sup>6</sup> It is this kind of

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<sup>5</sup> David Chidester, “Fake Religion: Ordeals of Authenticity in Virtual Religions on the Internet,” *Journal for the Study of Religion*, vol. 16, no. 2 (forthcoming 2003). The following discussion adopts the typology devised by Chidester and used to structure his survey. Citations of specific virtual religions in the following discussion will refer to the url of that religion’s website.

<sup>6</sup> Church of Reality: <http://www.churchofreality.org> (accessed: 18 August 2003).

ambiguity that I find so intriguing. Perhaps most significantly, it is also this kind of ambiguity that destabilises the ease with which the cybernaut might be accustomed to adjudicating questions of authenticity in religion. Standing on its own, it might seem easy to dismiss the Church of Reality as a parody or satire of religion, as the hobby of someone skilled in Internet technology and with too much time on their hands, or perhaps nothing more than an oddball invention of a solitary soul in cyberspace. While any of these assumptions might be true, the collective social agreement that might dismiss virtual religions such as the Church of Reality as inauthentic becomes more difficult to negotiate when this religious articulation is contextualised among a range of similarly ambiguous formations. Taken together, the proliferation of virtual religions on the Internet should cause some hesitancy among those who would rush to agree that they lack authenticity. It will become apparent as the survey proceeds that fake religions are inherently ambivalent forms. Chidester observes that central to this ambivalence is a question as to whether these religious formations are in opposition, in counterpoint, or in collaboration with the religious formations they imitate. In following Chidester's survey, the reader is alerted to this recurring question.

## **1.2 Virtual Religion**

Chidester groups fake religions into the following categories: communities bound by particular beliefs, symbols, myths, and traditions; communities bound by anti-belief systems; satirical imitations of Christian themes; imitations of New Age, spiritual, or consciousness-raising movements; imitations or satires of cults; religions located in popular culture, including film, television, music, and sports; religions related to economy, including consumerism, anti-

consumerism, commodities, and money; sacred animals and sacred objects; and religions related to science. A brief survey of these categories will provide an overview of virtual religion on the Internet.

The first category refers to communities and traditions that express a belief system. The distinguishing feature common to religions in this category is their emphasis on community. Demonstrating this point and by far the largest such community is that united in Discordianism. Discordianism, we are told, began in southern California in 1957 when two friends sipping coffee in a bowling alley “experienced a dramatic break in the time-space continuum.” In the space of that rupture they realized that the underlying principle in everything is chaos. This realization was reinforced by a vision of Eris, the ancient Greek goddess of discord, conflict, and chaos. Significantly, Eris is not only the source of chaos, but also of the “happy anarchy” of freedom, creativity, and laughter. All this is revealed in the many editions of Discordianism’s central text, *The Principia Discordia*. During the 1980s the new religion of Discordianism was spread through cabals established across the US. But it was the invention of the World Wide Web that most dramatically expanded the Discordianist community. Today there are numerous Discordianism related websites. Discordianism claims that everybody is a member, even if they don’t know it yet, making it the world’s fastest growing religion because it grows at the exact same rate as the population. In this regard it competes with similar claims from other religions, such as The Universal Life Church, which is a legally recognised religious institution in the US. The Illuminated Knights of Otis illustrates an interesting intervention in the notion of authentic religious community united in common worship. Every week they choose a different sacred object to worship. The object is “celebrated in a two color (read ‘black and white’) Xerox collage” which is sent to all members. The object is worshiped for exactly a week and then

ignored. Other examples of religions in this category are: The Abstract Ministry, dedicated to the worship of the god Ikon; Andersianism, that simply affirms that Anders is God; Asaism, a word for word copy of Andersianism, except for its central belief that Asa is God; Superchurch, that believes in The Benign All that flows through all good things; and Church of the Holy Spork that believes that God is a spork (a spoon and fork in one) because like God, sporks are perfect.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to this category, Chidester introduces a category for religious communities and traditions expounding what he terms anti-belief systems. These religions are distinguished by the absence and renunciation of doctrine. So for example, the Agnostic Church claims to hold “VERY STRONG” religious beliefs that “just happen to be of the agnostic persuasion.” The Last Chance Cathedral and Discount House of Worship ask the question: “is NOTHING sacred anymore?” “The answer of course is a resounding NO.” The Church of Nothing at All has no congregation and no ordained priesthood and recommend this prayer to God: “Thou art a big fat zero and are not there at all. Amen.” As Chidester observes, religions in this category use ethical considerations, ritual observances, or performance to subvert formal doctrine. Wauism, for example, advises prospective members: “all you have to do is whatever you want.” Similarly, The Church of the Covert Cosmos encourages members to design their own belief system. They offer a list of items members may blend together into a kind of “roll-your-own catechism.” The First Church of the Last Laugh is dedicated to St. Stupid and appropriately celebrates its holy day

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<sup>7</sup>Universal Life Church: <http://www.ulc.net>; Illuminated Knights of Otis: <http://www.ighf.org/iko.html>; Abstract Ministry: <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/9183/araman.html>; Andersianism: <http://www.d.kth.se/~nv91-asa/andersianism.html> (accessed: 21 April 2002); Asaism: <http://www.users.wineasy.se/johansson/Mikael/asaism/asaism.html>; Superchurch: <http://www.superchurch.net>; Church of the Holy Spork: <http://www.geocities.com/TimesSquare/Labyrinth/7275/00index.html>. Except where indicated, all these websites were available online on 19 August 2003.

on 1st April. This ritual celebration takes the form of a festive parade through the streets of San Francisco. The performance aspect to the parade emphasises costumes, musical instruments, and chanting. During the 2000 parade, marchers chanted, “we’re here, we’re stupid, we’re not going away.” During the 2001 parade, marchers chanted, “no more chanting, no more chanting.”<sup>8</sup>

As Chidester observes, whether one emphasises complex mythological narratives, worship, ritual, performance, or the promotion of ethical norms, any of the religions examined above can look like religion and would appear to be making claims on the legitimacy and authority of authentic religion. Yet in other situations, some websites would appear to be intervening in the legitimacy and authority normally vested in authentic religion via parodies and satires of religious authenticity. There has emerged an entire genre of satires on Christian religious formations, a category Chidester calls Christianesque fake religion.

Religious innovations in the mould of Christian tradition sometimes construct alternative histories that then intervene in those histories authorised by the Christian church. For example, the websites of True Catholic Church and His Holiness Pope Gregory XVII separately accuse the papacy in Rome of fraudulently usurping the chair of St. Peter and both claim to represent the authentic Roman Catholic Church. The Landover Baptist Church admits to being a satire of firebrand Baptist ministries typical of the southern United States. Yet a glance at their mail, which they dutifully publish on their website, reveals that many visitors to their site fail to

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<sup>8</sup> Agnostic Church: <http://www.agnostic.org>; Last Chance Cathedral and Discount House of Worship: <http://dragonet.com/all saint>; Church of Nothing at All: <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Square/1692/church.html>; Wauism: <http://www.tftb.com/deify/wauism.htm>; Church of the Covert Cosmos: <http://home.onestop.net/braxton/cotcc> (accessed: 3 December 2002); First Church of the Last Laugh: <http://www.saintstupid.com>. Except where indicated, all these websites were available online on 19 August 2003.

recognise the parody and interpret their outrageous, provocative, and often extremely funny articles and religious claims to be an authentic reflection of this church's faith.<sup>9</sup> A different intervention in authentic Christian tradition sees Jesus Christ posting an advertisement online in the form of a personal advertisement for "a special woman" who "would rather have an authentic life instead of one guided by the pursuit of modern trends." According to Jesus, he has created "the most extravagant personal ad in the history of civilization" because the "rare woman" he seeks is "unlikely to be found without great effort." On his website, Jesus endorses to a range of products in categories ranging from "fruit juices as a symbol of capitalism's spiritual resignation," including R.W. Knudsen's juice that "keeps the wisdom of the past alive," to "well designed products that make life easier" such as I-D Glide, "a wonderful water-based, latex-friendly lubricant for people who enjoy the slippery side of life." Perhaps the most startling statement on Jesus' homepage is the offer to bathe with Jesus, though a shower can be exchanged for the usual bubble bath if requested. Jesus confirms that he is willing to speak about spirituality if that is his bathing partner's wish. However, if they are not spiritual, he is quite willing to "share a beer and pleasant existential banter."<sup>10</sup>

In a different category of fake religions, though no less ambivalent, are those websites that appear to be imitating new age, spiritual, or consciousness-raising movements. Vendramism, for example, advocates the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment through the pleasures of eating food, enjoying sex, smoking tobacco, and watching television. Enjoying these pleasures represents the

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<sup>9</sup> True Catholic: <http://www.truecatholic.org>; His Holiness Pope Gregory XVII: <http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Lair/7170/ibio1.htm>; Landover Baptist: <http://www.landoverbaptist.org>. Both these websites were available online on 19 August 2003.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.jesus.com> (28 November 2002). This site has since been removed from the Internet and the url redirects browsers to <http://www.ufmcc.com>, the website of Metropolitan Community Churches.

slow way to enlightenment. The fast way involves much of the same, but requires the renunciation of family and possessions except one's pipe, lighter, and tobacco pouch, and taking up residency in a Vendramist ashram at least one hundred kilometres from home. As Chidester has noted, partaking in food, sex, tobacco, and television here involves a transformation of normal pleasures into sacred techniques. He notes a similar kind of transformation in the worldviews of Alchodise, the Beer Church, and the Church of Our Lady of Malted Barley and Hops where the consumption of beer is the object of ritual devotion.<sup>11</sup> Other virtual religions in this category include two websites dedicated to the mysticism of poet William Blake, Blakeism and Blaketashi Darwish, the Temple of the True Inner Light, and the Society for the Attainment of Total Abstinence.<sup>12</sup>

Chidester designates the next category of fake religions "cults." These religious formations are especially interesting because if cults demonstrate an intervention in authentic religion, as noted earlier, then these fake cults intervene in that intervention. Where conventional anti-cult websites allege brainwashing, corruption, political subversion, and sexual perversion, fake cults intervene in cult controversies by imaginative imitation. As Chidester has noted, Scientology is a target of ridicule for many fake cults and is imaginatively reconfigured as Diarrhetics, Clarity is Confusion, First Church of Appliantology, Dianetech: Applied Spiritual Linguistic Technology,

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<sup>11</sup> Vendramism: <http://members.tripod.com/~vendra/>; Alchodise: [www.alchodise.com/](http://www.alchodise.com/); Church of Beer: [www.beerchurch.com/](http://www.beerchurch.com/); Church of Our Lady of Malted Barley and Hops: <http://www.branwen.com/01>, cited in Chidester, "Fake Religion," are no longer available on the web. Vendramism, Alchodise, and the Church of Beer, were available online on 19 August 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Blakeism: <http://blakeism.homestead.com/index.html> (accessed: 15 October 2001); Blaketashi Darwish: <http://www.blaketashi.co.uk> (accessed: 15 October 2001); Temple of the True Inner Light: <http://members.tripod.com/~psychede> (accessed: 19 August 2003); Society for the Attainment of Total Abstinence: <http://www.totalabstinence.com> (accessed: 19 August 2003).

and Apelomatics: The Modern Pseudoscience of Mental Dentistry. Yet the archetypal parody of cults must be The Kick-Ass Post-Apocalyptic Doomsday Cult of Love. This cult is formed around the charismatic personality of “Demented Psychopathic Meglomanic” Rev. Sum Dum Guy who leads a band of heavily armed “toadies and sheep,” pictured in white robes, above a notice informing us that all the weapons pictured are “fully licensed” and that explosives and nerve toxins are “kept securely under lock and key in our impregnable bunker of death.” Also pictured on the site are the reverend’s five wives, similarly clothed in white robes, below a sign informing the prospective convert that they will do anything to get you to join the cult, but “once your’re in and brainwashed they won’t even give you the time of day.” Finally, below pictures of the cult’s children, photographed in karate uniforms and fighting poses, the cult’s homepage informs us that the children are the cult’s most valuable asset because “if we really get hard up for money, we can sell them.” As Chidester notes, though the The Kick-Ass Post-Apocalyptic Doomsday Cult of Love is not a genuine religion, its satirical intervention in the cult controversies does assert a real position on the legitimacy of new religious movements. In this sense, even satires perform a kind of religious labour.<sup>13</sup>

In counterpoint to these attempts to limit what might count as religion, another category of virtual religions expands the circumscribed space of religion by celebrating the industries of film, television, music, and sports as if they were religious enterprises. Leading the field here are those

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<sup>13</sup> Diarrhetics: [http://home.snafu.de/tilman/cos\\_fun/diarrhetics/lamp1.html](http://home.snafu.de/tilman/cos_fun/diarrhetics/lamp1.html); Clarity is Confusion: [http://home.earthlink.net/~imfalse/hcu\\_annex.html](http://home.earthlink.net/~imfalse/hcu_annex.html); First Church of Appliantology: <http://home.online.no/~corneliu/extreme.html>; Dianetech: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/5616/main.htm>; Apelomatics: <http://www.apelord.com/apead.html>; Kick-Ass Post-Apocalyptic Doomsday Cult of Love: <http://welcome.to/doomsdaycult>. All these websites were available online on 19 August 2003.

religions devoted to Elvis Presley, the King, including the Church of Elvis, the 24 Hour Church of Elvis, the church at The Elvis Underground, The First Church of Elvis, The First Church of Jesus Christ Elvis, and the First Presleyterian Church of Elvis the Divine.<sup>14</sup> While some religions find inspiration in the visual mediums of film and television, such as the First Church of Shatnerology, the Second National Church of Shatnerology and the Jedi Religion originating in Star Trek and Star Wars respectively,<sup>15</sup> other fake religions find religious inspiration in the aural medium of rock and roll. Examples here include the Church of AntiChrist Superstar devoted to Marilyn Manson, the David Bowie Temple, and the Partridge Family Temple, the latter devoted to an entirely fictional, made-for-television family of musicians.<sup>16</sup> Other religions in this category include the Church of the Heavenly Wood, dedicated to the B-movie maker Edward D. Wood, Jr, and the First Church of Tiger Woods, dedicated to the supernatural abilities of the world's best golfer.<sup>17</sup> As Chidester notes and as these religions demonstrate, popular culture can appear to be religious.

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<sup>14</sup> Church of Elvis: <http://www.churchofelvis.net>, (accessed: 27 November 2002); 24 Hour Church of Elvis: <http://www.frankwu.com/elvis1.html>; church at The Elvis Underground: <http://www.elvisunderground.org>; First Church of Elvis: <http://bull.dumpshock.com/sr/fcoe.html>; The First Church of Jesus Christ Elvis: [http://jubal.westnet.com/hyperdiscordia/sacred\\_heart\\_elvis.html](http://jubal.westnet.com/hyperdiscordia/sacred_heart_elvis.html); First Presleyterian Church of Elvis the Divine: [http://www.geocities.com/presleyterian\\_church](http://www.geocities.com/presleyterian_church). Except where indicated, these websites were available online on 19 August 2003.

<sup>15</sup> [www.shatnerology.com](http://www.shatnerology.com); <http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Set/1931/shatner.html>; <http://www.jediism.org>. These websites were available online on 19 August 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Church of AntiChrist Superstar: <http://www.dewn.com/mm>; David Bowie Temple: <http://members.tripod.com/~DragonLadyL/dbtemple.html>; Partridge Family Temple: <http://www.partridgefamilytemple.com>. These websites were available online on 19 August 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Church of the Heavenly Wood: <http://www.geocities.com/ReverendSteveG>; First Church of Tiger Woods: <http://www.tigerwoodsismgod.com>. Both websites were available online on 19 August 2003.

A different orientation toward the transcendent is found at the Church of the Almighty Dollar who find in money a reminder of who we really are and what it means to be human. As the currency that redeems our souls, money is a token of God's affection and his way of making us feel good about ourselves. Yet as a reminder that in God we trust, money is also God's way of thinking about himself. Money is God's way of telling us to make more money and ultimately is the meaning and mystery of life. If the Church of the Almighty Dollar suggests that money is the essential bond between human beings and God, the Church of the Profit\$ attacks how religion can appear to be a money-making business. The main tenet of this religion is Truth, says Rev. John L. Ferri; "You give me money, and I keep it – similar to most other religions, except I'm honest about it."<sup>18</sup> As the Church of the Almighty Dollar and the Church of the Profit\$ demonstrate, religion can also appear as if it were essentially about money, commodities, and consumerism. In this category of fake religions, as Chidester notes, religion appears as a consumer product and consumerism appears as a religion. At the Holy Temple of Mass Consumption, the Shrine of Our Lady of Mass Consumption, and Jesus Christ Superstore, adherents of this kind of religious faith can revel in the ecstasy of commodity consumption. In counterpoint to this kind of religious orientation, however, is the Church of Stop Shopping that assumes a religious stance against the religion of the market. Between a religious fervour for consumption and a religious opposition to consumption is the Church of Secularistic Holidayism that suggests that, as Chidester puts it, "moments of relief from the cycle of production and consumption is all that we have left of the sacred." Yet if these orientations find religion at different moments in the economic arc between production and consumption, still another religion sees the levels of productivity and efficiency achieved by modern transnational

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<sup>18</sup> Church of the Almighty Dollar: <http://www.museumofconceptualart.com/church.html>; Church of the Profit\$: <http://home.epix.net/~jlferri/profit.html>. Both websites were available online on 19 August 2003.

corporations operating within that arc as an inspiration to their own religious efforts; consequently, McChurch endeavours to make mcworship as easy as picking up a burger and fries on the way home from work.<sup>19</sup>

If, as Chidester speculates, these religions emerge out of the prevailing discourse of the late-capitalist market economy, it is not surprising that a number of Internet religions single out a specific commodity object for worship. Examples here might include the Church of Volkswagenism and the Cult of Macintosh, dedicated to Volkswagen motor cars and Apple Macintosh computers respectively. Yet these examples properly belong to another category of Internet religions gathered around sacred objects, sacred animals, and sacred foods. What is surprising here is the extent and diversity of religious innovation evidenced here. For example, among religions devoted to sacred objects we find the Church of the Big Plastic Fork, the Church of the Chainsaw, the Church of the Rotate Your Envelope Stock, the First United Church of the Fisher-Price Record Player, and of course the Church of Volkswagenism, and the Cult of Macintosh.<sup>20</sup> Among religions venerating sacred animals are the Center for Duck Studies, the Church of Beaver Christ, The Church of the Bunny, The Church of the Gerbil, the Church of the

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<sup>19</sup> Holy Temple of Mass Consumption: <http://www4.ncsu.edu/~aiken/>; Our Lady of Mass Consumption: <http://members.aol.com/olomc/olomc.htm>; Jesus Christ Superstore: <http://www.jesuschristsuperstore.net>; Church of Stop Shopping: <http://www.revbilly.com>; Church of Secularistic Holidayism: <http://tisiphone.dhs.org/~tschap/cosh/>; McChurch: <http://mcchurch.com>. All these websites were available online on 19 August 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Church of the Big Plastic Fork: <http://bigplasticfork.faithweb.com>; Church of the Chainsaw: <http://clubs.yahoo.com/clubs/churchofthechainsaw> (accessed: 10 October 2001); Church of the Rotate Your Envelope Stock: <http://www.globe-guardian.com/dogma.htm>; First United Church of the Fisher-Price Record Player: <http://www.misty.com/people/penny/church.html>; Church of Volkswagenism: [www.mvoc.com/vwism](http://www.mvoc.com/vwism); Cult of Macintosh: <http://web.singnet.com.sg/~taipan/cult>. Except where indicated, these websites were available online on 19 August 2003.

Quivering Otter, the Cult of the Great Serpent, The Dolphin Sky Foundation, the Holy Church of Moo, the Holy Reformed Church Of The Later Day 'Roos, Holy Turtle, the Kult of Hamstur, a range of denominations of the Invisible Pink Unicorn, including the Holy Religion of the Invisible Pink Unicorn, the Virtual Temple of the Invisible Pink Unicorn, the Invisible Pink Unicorns Exist, and The IPU Lives, the Restored Church of the Star Goat, the Sea Monkey(r) Worship Page, the Temple of the Sacred Cat, and the Virtual Church of the Blind Chihuahua.<sup>21</sup> And finally, among sacred foods we find the Church of the Avocado, the Church of the Burnt Onion Ring, the Church of Beer, the Church of Ice Cream, the Church of Saint John the Baptist of the Alien Artichoke, and a site instructing visitors to worship the Potato, "as he is known to his friends."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Centre for Duck Studie: <http://www.jagaimo.com/duck/>; Church of Beaver Christ: <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Studios/5284/beaver.html> (accessed: 10 October 2001); Church of the Bunny: [http://www.themightyorgan.com/short\\_story\\_bunny.html](http://www.themightyorgan.com/short_story_bunny.html); Church of the Gerbil: <http://www.corg.org/main.htm>; Church of the Quivering Otter: <http://triggur.org/coqo>; Cult of the Great Serpent: [http://pages.prodigy.net/snake\\_worshipper/greatserpent.html](http://pages.prodigy.net/snake_worshipper/greatserpent.html); Dolphin Sky Foundation: <http://www.eyefohawaii.com/dolphinsky/index.html>; Holy Church of Moo: <http://members.aol.com/DailyCow/indexhcom.htm>; Holy Reformed Church Of The Later Day 'Roos: <http://www.fi.uib.no/~alsaker/Skippy>; Holy Turtle: [www.angelfire.com/ma2/holyturtle](http://www.angelfire.com/ma2/holyturtle); Kult of Hamstur: <http://www.end.com/~niko/Texts/kult.html>; Holy Religion of the Invisible Pink Unicorn: <http://www.palmyra.demon.co.uk/humour/ipu.htm>; Virtual Temple of the Invisible Pink Unicorn: [http://www.geocities.com/ipu\\_temple](http://www.geocities.com/ipu_temple); Invisible Pink Unicorns Exist: <http://www.geocities.com/SiliconValley/Bit/6458/pinkunicorns.html>; The IPU Lives: <http://world.std.com/~apl/Humor/shat.html>; Restored Church of the Star Goat: <http://www.skeptictank.org/hs/stargoat.htm>; Sea Monkey(r) Worship Page: <http://www.seamonkeyworship.com>; Temple of the Sacred Cat: <http://www.vcnet.com/valkat/temple.html>; Virtual Church of the Blind Chihuahua: <http://www.dogchurch.org>. Except where indicated, these websites were available online on 19 August 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Church of the Avocado: <http://members.tripod.com/~cotav>; Church of the Burnt Onion Ring: <http://zcbor.fateback.com>; Church of Beer: <http://www.churchofbeer.com>; Church of Ice Cream: <http://members.aol.com/Nailhead00/index.html> (accessed: 10 October 2001); Church of Saint John the Baptist of the Alien Artichoke: <http://www.mods.com/artichoke/>; worship the Potato:

If these religions manage to transform ordinary objects, animals, and foods into extraordinary religious orientations, a different kind of intervention transforms an apparent opposition between religion and science into a religion of science. For example, a website dedicated to Lord Kelvin celebrates the absolute truths that Kelvin has bestowed on humanity, through his reflections on the laws of thermodynamics, entropy, and the “knotic æther.” It is with deference to Lord Kelvin that the absolute temperature has been seen at 0° Kelvin. If the Lord Kelvin website celebrates Lord Kelvin’s commitment to conserving humanity from entropy, the Church of Euthanasia advances a different kind of interest in humanity’s well-being. Build around the four pillars of suicide, abortion, cannibalism, and sodomy, the church has only one commandment: “thou shalt not procreate.” As Chidester as noted, the church advances an environmental agenda with its slogan, “save the planet, kill yourself.” Contrasted with this kind of advocacy, the Church of Virus, dedicated to the reproductive capabilities of memetics, advocates the pursuit of immortality. Drawing on the transhumanist discourses of Extropianism, the church melds evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins’ theory of memes with a contemporary utopianism premised on the promises of recent advances in computer technologies and artificial life research. Between the opposing interventions in humanity’s well-being advanced by the Church of Euthanasia and the Church of Virus, Digitalism defines itself as “an acceptance of the state of your mind.”<sup>23</sup> Clearly, for some virtual religions, science does appear as a religion.

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<http://www.angelfire.com/pa2/potatogod>. Except where indicated, these websites were available online on 19 August 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Lord Kelvin: <http://zapatopi.net/lordkelvin.html>; Church of Euthanasia: <http://www.churchofeuthanasia.org>; Church of Virus: [www.lucifer.com/virus](http://www.lucifer.com/virus); Digitalism: <http://digitalism.8m.com>. These websites were available online on 20 August 2003.

### 1.3 Religion, Popular Culture, and the Internet

These kinds of virtual religions clearly involve aspects of both religion and popular culture. The religious aspects are self-evident, though their essential authenticity might be disputed. Yet as participations in popular culture, virtual religions pose a challenge to how we might relate their kind of popular culture with religion. One way of thinking through that relationship might be to think of virtual religion as a kind of popular religion, a grouping of religious expressions and formations originating in the organic religious life of the ordinary people rather than the clergy, the lower classes rather than the elite, the rural peasantry rather than the urban citizenry.<sup>24</sup> Of course, one can hardly imagine a rural peasantry inventing any of the religions surveyed above. Yet the implication that these virtual religions might exist in an oppositional relationship with another kind of religion that can be said to hold sway over the territorial integrity of authentic religion is a useful way to begin thinking about virtual religion on the Internet. Virtual religions therefore stand not only at the intersection of religion and popular culture, but also at an intersection between religion and politics.

In his introductory essay to a volume he jointly edits with Jeffrey Mahan,<sup>25</sup> Bruce Forbes echoes this idea of the popular when he suggests that “the notion of ‘popular culture’ draws out attention to the widespread, common, frequently commercial, and often entertaining aspects of our cultural

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<sup>24</sup> Chidester, “Fake Religion.” See also Charles H. Long, “Popular Religion,” in Mercea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 11: 442-452.

<sup>25</sup> David Bruce Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, eds., *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 2000).

context as worthy of attention and reflection.”<sup>26</sup> Forbes is interested specifically in the intersection between religion and popular culture and notes that “approaching the study of religion through popular culture can help us learn more about widespread perceptions of religion, and the role religion plays in the everyday lives of people.”<sup>27</sup> Forbes and Mahan develop a four-way typology that describes this intersection. Their first type they name “religion in popular culture.” This kind of intersection refers to representations of religion in the different media of popular culture, including movies (Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments*; Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Little Buddha*), television (*The Simpsons*’ Christian neighbour Ned Flanders), and music (the legendary band Black Sabbath, Madonna’s hit “*Like a Virgin*”). The second type, popular culture in religion, refers to “the appropriation of aspects of popular culture by religious groups and institutions.”<sup>28</sup> Forbes gives televangelism as an example. He also notes that these kinds of appropriations often go hand in hand with the commercialisation of religion and the marketing of “new age” doctrines. Forbes’ example is Leonard Sweet’s *The Jesus Prescription for a Healthy Life*.<sup>29</sup> The third type they name “popular culture as religion.” Here we see how “popular culture serves as religion or functions like religion for many people.”<sup>30</sup> An obvious example is *Star Trek* fandom. More recently, the resurgence of interest in George Lucas’s *Star Wars* series saw Jedi Knights gaining official recognition for the purposes of the general census of the United Kingdom in 2001.<sup>31</sup> Forbes gives other examples of this type; the pilgrimage to Graceland undertaken every year by

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<sup>26</sup> Bruce David Forbes, “Introduction,” in *ibid*, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> “Jedi makes the Census List,” BBC News, 9 October 2001. Available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/1589133.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/1589133.stm), (accessed: 24 August 2003).

fans of Elvis Presley and the fanatical enthusiasm shown by many fans for their favourite sports teams. The fourth and final type is named “religion and popular culture in dialogue” and refers to the exchanges between religion and popular culture that don’t necessary fit easily into the other three categories. Forbes’ gives a good example in the issue of representations of violence in the popular media, for which religion often criticises popular culture.<sup>32</sup> It might be worth noting that in this and the other examples Forbes gives, the conversation seems decidedly one way, more of a monologue than a dialogue, with religion more often than not taking a critical position against popular culture. At any rate, Forbes does not give any examples of popular culture explicitly addressing religion. Yet recalling the first type of intersection, it may be argued that representations of religion in popular culture amounts to a degree of reciprocity and exchange in that such representations might be considered a form of popular culture talking back to religion.

In attempting to relate religion and popular culture, Forbes and Mahan have set themselves a formidable challenge. Yet their work is not especially theoretically innovative. As one reviewer put it, their four-way typology “offers few surprises and does not go far in providing an overarching framework of interpretation.”<sup>33</sup> That said, a footnote to Forbes’ introductory essay does provide a theoretical innovation that might in turn assist in situating virtual religions at an intersection of religion and popular culture. Forbes introduces the possibility of a 5<sup>th</sup> type of relationship that he tentatively calls “religion as popular culture.” If popular culture can function as religion, Forbes asks whether it is possible that “religious activity not only take on the features

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<sup>32</sup> Bruce David Forbes, “Introduction,” p. 15-16.

<sup>33</sup> R. Marie Griffith, review of *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, by David Bruce Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, *Journal of Religion*, vol. 81, no. 3 (2001): 522.

of popular culture, but function fully as popular culture?"<sup>34</sup> Though he briefly points to pre-Lentern festivals in medieval Europe and camp meetings in nineteenth century America as examples of religious activity that is simultaneously of popular culture, to the detriment of their book, Forbes unfortunately leaves this question unexplored. Nevertheless, of all of Forbes and Mahan's types, I think that this fifth type most accurately describes the kind of intersections between religion and popular culture that virtual religions on the Internet represent. Religion as popular culture offers the broadest understanding of what might constitute religion and it captures the qualities of indeterminacy and ambivalence that virtual religions seem to revel in. This characterisation of the intersection of religion and popular culture is also appropriate to the political implications of popular religion not only because its broad concept of religion assimilates the organic developments within the popular faster than narrower concepts can, but also because that assimilating advantage positions it in critical relation with narrower concepts of religion.

Unfortunately, much literature that explores specifically the relationship between religion and the World Wide Web seems reticent to expand the scope of what might legitimately count as religion. Though there is a willingness to acknowledge that Internet technology is changing the way that we think about religion, this interest appears to stop short of actually acknowledging that Internet technology might be changing what we think religion actually is. To put it differently, much of the (English, western) discourse about religion and the Internet transposes a narrow understanding of what constitutes religious activity in realspace onto cyberspace to explore how the enhanced communications afforded by Internet technology might benefit or

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<sup>34</sup> Bruce David Forbes, "Introduction," p. 18, note 14.

otherwise impact offline religious formations. This kind of discourse might be said to take its cue from Pope John Paul II's message on World Communications Day in 1989: "It is clear that the Church must also avail herself of the new resources provided by human exploration in computer and satellite technology for her ever pressing task of evangelization."<sup>35</sup> Though not focussed exclusively on the proselytising opportunities provided by Internet technology, much of the discourse reflects on how religious communities in the offline world use cyberspace as a resource in their religious lives, from advertising their services online to using online communications to organise offline gatherings, and of course as a means to fulfil "the prophetic vision of God's Kingdom or Presence on earth."<sup>36</sup> A related branch of this discourse looks at how religious communities that don't necessarily exist in realspace gather and are sustained in cyberspace. For example, much of the recent scholarship on neo-paganism's resurgence notes that it is a resurgence located primarily in cyberspace, and further, that where it is practiced in the offline world, it draws on online resources.<sup>37</sup> It is but a small step from here to looking at participation in religion via the Internet. In this regard, some attention has been given to the

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<sup>35</sup> Pope John Paul II, message on the occasion of World Communications Day, available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_24011990\\_world-communications-day\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_24011990_world-communications-day_en.html) (accessed: 25 August 2003).

<sup>36</sup> See for example Charles Ess, "Prophetic Communities Online? Threat and Promise for the Church in Cyberspace," available at <http://www.drury.edu/ess/church/church.html> (accessed: 25 August 2003). See also Reid Goldsborough and Loraine Page, "When Technology and Spirituality Meet," *Information Today*, vol. 20, no. 6 (June 2003): 41-3; Phil Zabriskie and Nelly Sindayen, "I Once Was Lost, But Now I'm Wired," *Time Europe*, vol. 157, no. 22 (6/4/2001): 82-3; Lorne L. Lawson, "Doing Religion in Cyberspace: The Promise and the Perils," *Council of Societies for the Study of Religion Bulletin* vol. 30, no. 1 (2001): 3-9; Stephen D. O'Leary, "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* vol. 64 (Winter 1996): 781-808.

<sup>37</sup> See for example, Bruce B. Lawrence, "God On Line: Locating the Pagan/Asian Soul of America in Cyberspace, in Susan L. Mizruchi (ed.), *Religion and Cultural Studies* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton, 2001); Shawn Arthur, "Technophilia and Nature Religion: the Growth of a Paradox," *Religion*, vol. 32, no. 4 (October 2002): 303-14; Brenda E. Brasher, *Give Me That Online Religion* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

performance of ritual and ceremony in cyberspace.<sup>38</sup> In much of these discussions, an implicit question is how these performances manage to retain their efficacy and authenticity when transported from offline environments to online environments. This kind of implication is typical of much of the general discussion on religion and the Internet; the approach assumes a concept of religion that it transposes onto an Internet environment and then sets about exploring how the concept holds up in disembodied cyberspace. Of course, not all approaches are as cynical; sometimes the intention is to examine how religion adjusts to the needs of this new environment and capitalises on its possibilities. Brenda Brasher's recent book *Give Me The Online Religion* is a case in point. Brasher claims that online religion holds a "revolutionary importance" and acknowledges that "online religion triggers notable changes in religious experience that cannot help but transform the character of religion itself."<sup>39</sup> These discussions are important and useful, but it is equally important to recognise that they are limited by their assumptions about what counts as religion. Brasher is actually conservative in her assessments of Internet religions, claiming that "against the onslaught of commercialisation in cyberspace, online religion could rapidly become an Internet endangered species."<sup>40</sup> Her concern leads her to advocate that Internet religion should be protected by legislation comparable to the kind of "public acknowledgement" and institutional support given to offline religion in the form of tax rebates and similar protections.<sup>41</sup> Brasher works with a narrow definition of religion. Though she does not define

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<sup>38</sup> See for example Helland's category "online-religion," in Christopher Helland, "Surfing for Salvation," *Religion*, vol. 31, no. 4 (October 2002): 293-303; Mark W. MacWilliams, "Virtual Pilgrimages on the Internet," *Religion*, vol. 32, no. 4 (October 2002): 315-35; Susan L. Mizruchi (ed.), *Religion and Cultural Studies* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton, 2001); Brasher, *Give Me That Online Religion*; David Bruce Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, eds., *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 2000).

<sup>39</sup> Brenda E. Brasher, *Give Me That Online Religion* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> Brenda E. Brasher, *Give Me That Online Religion* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001): 11.

<sup>41</sup> Brenda E. Brasher, *Give Me That Online Religion* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001): 7.

religion, she is clearly interested in religions that fall within the ambit of social formations collectively acknowledged to be of authentic religion. These kinds of limitations in the scholarship, however, can be seen to be a by-product of their focussed enquiries; they are carried over from the offline world where a collective social agreement about what is and what is not religion provides a kind of working definition for investigations into religious things on this “new frontier,” as one reviewer recently put it.<sup>42</sup>

Against this background, I think it is important to recognize that the Internet is challenging not only the “character of religion,” but is foregrounding again a historical problem that has shadowed the study of religions through all of its achievements and failures since its founding moment on the colonial frontiers. In a sense, the advent of the World Wide Web has opened another and a different kind of frontier in struggles over religious authenticity. As Chidester has noted, indigenous religion, popular religion, and folk religion have always born the burden of authenticity.<sup>43</sup> Virtual religion, which is a kind of popular religion, finds itself similarly burdened. And like many similar instances drawn from indigenous and folk religions where the essential authenticity of their formations is doubted, virtual religions have risen to the challenge. When Discordianism found itself classified under “Parody Religion” in Yahoo’s search directories, Discordianists inundated Yahoo with emails demanding that their religion be reclassified under “Religions and Faiths.” Three weeks later they won a partial victory when Yahoo reclassified them under “Entertainment,” a compromise found to be far more agreeable; as one Discordianist noted, “Well, we are funny ...” Despite not winning the classification they

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<sup>42</sup> Peter L. Edman, review of *Give Me That Online Religion*, by Brenda E. Brasher, *Christianity Today* 43, no. 10 (8 June 2001): 69-70.

<sup>43</sup> Chidester, “Fake Religion.”

demanded, Discordianists celebrated that the word parody does not appear anywhere in their new classification.<sup>44</sup> Yet this kind of compromise also marks a distinction between disputes over religious authenticity in virtual religions and similar disputes found in indigenous or folk religion. With the latter, it is usually implicit that indigenous and folk religions take themselves very seriously as they contest claims against their authenticity. Yet it is far from certain that any of the virtual religions surveyed previously share the same attitude toward their claims to authenticity. This is one of virtual religion's most interesting and most significant features: that while visiting their websites and participating in their practices, one is not entirely sure whether they are serious in their claims. Take for example The Illuminated Knights of Otis. It is difficult to shake a nagging suspicion that they may not be entirely serious in following their weekly ritual observance of circulating among the faithful a photocopied image of an object that then becomes the focus of worship for that week before being replaced by the next week's sacred object. In response to this problem of seriousness as a requirement for authenticity in religion, the Center for Duck Studies hosts a page dedicated to "the question on everyone's mind," and it is worth noting that again the burden of authenticity is carried by virtual religion. The desire to know with certainty whether the Center for Duck Studies is serious or joking, suggests the author of this page, stems "from assumptions that religion must be boring or stable to be real." Yet the duck must contend with "the random wind and the changing nature of the water;" "even land is in a constant state of flux." Therefore, suggests the anonymous author, while everything else around it is changing, it is only the duck that remains stable; "If you take the Duck seriously, then It is serious. If you take the Duck as a joke, It is a joke. It remains the Duck." On the problem of laughter, the author writes: "One cannot assume that something that makes us laugh is not true.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

Comedians make us laugh sometimes, but no one is seriously challenging their existence ...” Yet at the same time, s/he continues, we cannot assume that what makes us laugh is true. They go on: “But if a religion doesn't have the power to make us laugh, what power does it have? If the truth is never funny, why would anyone want to discover the truth?”

An attempt to engage virtual religions as the subject of serious inquiry needs to accommodate this kind of instability and indeterminacy if it hopes to be fruitful. What is required is an approach to these religious formations that accepts them on their own terms. The success of Richard Lloyd Smith's attempt is limited because he fails to take this imperative adequately into account. Smith attempts to make sense of the religious claims of Discordianism, The Church of the Subgenius, and the various movements devoted to Cthulhu.<sup>45</sup> Yet in developing a descriptive theoretical framework, he applies to these religions Starke and Bainbridge's category of “audience cults,” an application that brings with it many of the assumptions that underscored Starke and Bainbridge's work and that cause for Smith many of the same problems for which Starke and Bainbridge were criticized when their text was published eleven years previously.<sup>46</sup> Smith's method is a kind of participant observation. He would hang around online discussion forums and chat rooms to see what he could discover. Implicit in Smith's interest is his questioning of whether these groups are in fact religious. As he observes:

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<sup>45</sup> Richard Lloyd Smith III, “*Neophilic Irreligions: Audience Cults and the World Wide Web*” (masters diss., University of Virginia, 1996), available at <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/neophile.html> (accessed: 25 August 2003).

<sup>46</sup> See for example, Steve Bruce, review of *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation*, by Rodney Starke and William Sims Bainbridge, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 25, no. 3 (Sept 1986): 387; John A. Saliba, review of *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation*, by Rodney Starke and William Sims Bainbridge, *Theological Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1 (March 1986): 179-80.

They have beliefs in supernatural forces, are organized to the extent that they can be named, and are committed to chaos. They've been around for a while and have enough resolution among members to keep dialogue, gatherings and literature in the public domain. Yet they frown upon stability, spit upon dogma, and continue to change scripture held 'sacred' by members. They gather together, but never at periodic sessions (except on the Web, which is itself not fixed in any spectrum except the use of programming language). Anyone can declare themselves a Reverend in either Discordianism or the Church of the SubGenius. Anyone can take the risk of reciting arcane magickal spells in the name of Cthulhu. In the end, it is the groups themselves that decide whether they're religions.

But Smith has his suspicions. Smith works with a concept of religious authenticity that includes commitment, solidarity, stability, and security. On a few occasions, he devises a series of questions that he posts on the discussion forums of these respective groups questioning members about these indicators of religious authenticity. For example, on the Discordianism message board, he posts: "I don't get it. If you guys call yourselves a religion, how can you foster commitment among members if you like chaos so much? A faith is built upon solidarity and stability, not discord and strife." On another occasion he posts: "A faith needs to provide stability and security among its members, not spread discord, strife, and confusion." Smith is not being deliberately provocative; he outlines his interest in what commitment, solidarity, stability, and security means to these groups under a section of his paper ominously titled "Religious newsgroups madness and irreverent rants." So he is understandably frustrated at the "classic, ironic, tongue-in-cheek glibness" that characterises much of the response to his questions. He sounds relieved when he says: "George finally got around to responding seriously to my message concerning commitment." George answered that "we don't try to foster commitment ... The

Church of the Subgenius is one of the first religions (palatable to western tastes) that emphasizes what YOU believe, not what is written in official texts” (original emphasis).

In trying to fit Starke and Bainbridge’s category to virtual religions, Smith adjusts the category and renames it “neophilic irreligions.” This designation “refers to the quality in individuals that accepts or relishes the ‘new’ or unfamiliar by actively participating in its construction. The neophile is not opposed to altering this belief structure, or the organizational structure of his group, so long as it aids in the dispersal of stagnation and eternal truths.” While Smith’s theoretical innovation contributes to the legacy of Starke and Bainbridge’s work and in a sense updates it for the Internet age, I don’t think it is particularly helpful or useful as an approach to the problem of authenticity in religion. For one thing, his category addresses only three virtual religions, and as the earlier survey of these religions demonstrates, virtual religions are numerous and diverse. What this category suggests of these groups in terms of playful dispersals of absolute truths does carry some merit in some cases, but noting this playfulness and determination to destabilize eternal truth, so often taken to be the currency of authentic religion, only begins to pick up on the potential significance of these kinds of religions formations. Essentially, Smith is interested in what sense these three virtual religions think of themselves as religious. He then devises a marginal category to accommodate their religious claims. In contrast to this approach, I am interested in how virtual religions, in all their breadth, challenge the discursive ways religion is imagined to operate in popular culture. Virtual religions that carry the burden of authenticity thereby assume a critical position in relation to religious authenticity. This kind of critical positioning is independent of their intentions; whether they are intended seriously or as a joke, it is their inherent ambivalence that causes pause and consideration. In a sense, the arguments developed in the course of this discussion are situated in this pause.

In developing these arguments, I also use a category, borrowed from Chidester.<sup>47</sup> I use the designation “fake religion” to describe any of the virtual religions introduced earlier. Though “fake religion” is not a technical term in any sense and is of very limited substantive descriptive value, it does describe the basic tension between these virtual religions and the concept of authentic religion that causes us to wonder whether these fakes are serious or joking, or perhaps serious about joking. Besides describing this basic tension, the designation “fake” also describes a crucial feature of these kinds of “ordeals of authenticity”<sup>48</sup> that distinguishes it from other, similar disputes. A significant portion of the mystery and intrigue surrounding virtual religions is their mimetic quality. Quite simply, virtual religions look like authentic religions and seem to be self-consciously imitating authentic religion. This poses a problem: if a good fake is difficult to distinguish from the authentic thing of which it is a copy, then how is one to know what is authentic religion? Though popular religions, indigenous religions, and folk religions all carry the burden of authenticity in relation to the concept of authentic religion, ordeals of authenticity involving virtual religion as a kind of popular religion differs from similar ordeals involving indigenous and folk religion. The difference is that where indigenous and folk religions make claims on the status of authenticity from their relatively marginal positions on the periphery, thereby involving themselves in disputes with authenticity’s defenders at the centre that would keep them at bay, virtual religion deposits its challenge at the centre to be grappled with there. By their nature fake religions are already located at the centre; they assume the status of authentic religion as part and parcel of their mimicry; recall Discordianism’s outrage at Yahoo’s classification and their partial victory after a campaign premised on the essential truth of their

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<sup>47</sup> Chidester, “Fake Religion.”

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

claim to authenticity. Indeed, the most important attribute of authentic religion that fake religion imitates is its claim to the status of the authentic. In an essential way, it is this most crucial aspect of its mimicry that makes it fake. To put it another way, if indigenous and folk religions mount a frontal assault on authenticity from the peripheries of its bounded territory, or at least are perceived to do so by authenticity's defenders, fake religion is like a Trojan horse; it uses mimicry as a kind of camouflage that penetrates to authenticity's centre. It is in this sense that the World Wide Web is a different kind of frontier between the discursive spaces of authentic and inauthentic religion than the frontiers on which indigenous and folk religions struggle. It is the all-consuming nature of fake things that they are similar to and lack distinction from authentic things of which they are a copy. Mimicry therefore becomes a key term for this discussion. The difficulty in distinguishing fake things from authentic things introduces ambivalence as another key term. But ambivalence is crucial here not only because it causes hesitancy amid the automaticity of collective social agreements about fake religion's essential lack of authenticity. I use ambivalence here to exert a critical leverage in the vexed problem of authenticity in religion.

The argument developed here is this: The point of distinction between authentic and fake is empirically indeterminable. A distinction is maintained by way of a collective social agreement that is empirically arbitrary but politically relevant. Setting the political question aside for the moment, if authenticity's distinction from inauthenticity is empirically inconclusive, then the separating boundary between their two territories can be characterised as a kind of contact zone, an ambivalent threshold that might unwittingly be traversed back and forth. The mimetic flow of ambivalent images of authentic religion back and forth across this threshold signifies this kind of unwitting movement. What makes the problem of religious authenticity so ambivalent is not only that the location of the boundary it shares with and distinguishes it from inauthenticity is

indeterminable, but that - and this is the political problem - this movement across the boundary goes both ways. Recognising this dialectic between authenticity and fakery introduces the possibility that a locus of authenticity in fake religions might be found in its critique of authentic religion. It is with this locus that the present discussion is concerned.

#### **1.4 Chapter Overview**

Chapter Two begins with an exploration of authenticity from an empirical perspective. The key word here is forensics because its dual connotation of science and police work describes the empirical paradigm that sees fakery as a matter of detection. The intention with this discussion is to find the limits of empiricism's usefulness as an approach to the problem of authenticity generally. If the methods of independent verification and falsification are useful at all, they are limited by the difficulties of temporal contingencies and the affective properties of objects of disputed authenticity. To put it plainly, the status pertaining to the authenticity of an object can change with time; objects previously thought to be authentic are later discovered to be fake. Perhaps more interesting are those objects of disputed authenticity that begin life as fake but gain authenticity with the passage of time. An object's affective properties can leave the forensic detective guessing as to the motives or intentions of the author of the disputed object. At least these variables - and no doubt there are more - frustrate empiricism's demand that all doubt be eliminated and conclusive statements and definitive adjudications be forthcoming. Having determined at least some of the limits of a forensic method, the problem of authenticity in religion would seem to have multiplied, for now not only is the problem of determining

authenticity still out of reach, but the most popular approach to resolving its challenge is shown to be limited and therefore unsuitable.

The second half of the chapter begins with a close reading of Michael Taussig's essay on the apparently harmonious co-existence of faith and scepticism in Kwakiutl shamanism. In the context of the double problem presented by authenticity and empiricism, Taussig's essay is useful because at the centre of his discussion is a paradox that would seem to make a case for inauthenticity, yet does not because its constituent terms manage a harmonious coexistence, despite an empirical method that demands they be separated. The discussion of Taussig's analysis of Kwakiutl shamanism I link with his work on defacement and sacrilegious unmasking thereby setting the parameters of the argument development through Chapters Three and Four. The key idea that Taussig, following Walter Benjamin, introduces and that runs through the argument developed here is that exposure along the lines of forensic detection destroys authenticity. Instead, for authenticity to be meaningful requires what Benjamin calls a just revelation. Such a revelation in turn requires that authenticity be imagined as a dialectic between revelation and concealment. The concealing aspect of authenticity is the quality of deception and mimicry in objects of disputed authenticity and the sense in which one is simply uncertain of an object's status pertaining to authenticity. In this sense, concealment is related to ambivalence. Since the problem of authenticity in religion is more often characterised by ambivalence than by confident pronouncements on an object's authenticity, the appearance of an object can be understood as a concealing surface. The just revelation of authenticity means a showing on the surface of appearance the mysterious movements within its concealed depths. This showing, though more frequent than we might assume, requires a certain kind of vision that has lost its currency in an age of empiricism and forensics. Still, such a showing can be induced with the assistance of

certain techniques of vision. It is a case study of such a showing that is the subject of Chapter Three.

The visual technique required here is given theoretical expression by Walter Benjamin in his notion of dialectics at a standstill. Chapter Three begins with an exposition of Benjamin's theory, before applying it to a particular constellation of authenticity and fakery configured around the case of Landover Baptist Ministries. Mimicry and ambivalence are key terms here, for where the mimetic aspect establishes the dialectical relation between fakery and authenticity, the ambivalent aspect characterises the tensions that structures that relation. Dialectical tension is essential to Benjamin's critical theory because it is the ambivalent tensions inherent in the mimetic flow back and forth across a threshold between dialectical opposites that powers the reconstellating movements of the dialectic. According to Benjamin's theory, when the dialectic becomes saturated with tensions, it comes to a sudden standstill, thereby creating the conditions for authenticity's revelation. The discussion traces a dialectic between authenticity and fakery through a series of constellating movements involving the websites of Landover Baptists, Objective Christian Ministries, Adult Christianity, Blessed Quietness, and even the popular Internet search engine Google. Yet though the conditions for authenticity's revelation are implicated in dialectics at a standstill, the revelation itself is dependent on both the dialectical composition of the image of perception as well as the involvement of the perceiver with the image perceived. The importance of the perceiver in the drama of authenticity's revelation is the subject of Chapter Four.

Benjamin uses the notion of tactile appropriation to theorise the importance of bodily involvement with the image of perception. Chapter Four begins with an overview of Benjamin's

theory of authentic critique and a discussion of the importance of tactile appropriation to that theory. Thereafter, the discussion explores how humorous laughter as a response to fake religions might evidence the kind of tactile appropriation that Benjamin's theory argues is necessary if the revelation is to be successful. The second and third discussions of the chapter reflect on the theological and critical messianic possibilities of laughter. If the key word for Chapter Three is dialectics, the key word in Chapter Four is incongruity, for it is an incongruity theory of humorous laughter that the chapter develops. Picking up on Peter Berger's suggestion that comic experience is an adumbration of religious experience, the discussion revisits the Benjaminian suggestion that in the modern era, instead of authenticity there remains only authentic critique. The argument developed here affirms Benjamin's suggestion by matching Berger's theory of comic experience with Benjamin's political messianism.

Having travelled through forensic investigations into authenticity, explored authenticity's dialectic with fakery, and reflected on the critical possibilities afforded by dwelling in incongruity, Chapter Five concludes the argument. A recurring theme running through these discussions is a critique of reason and empiricism. This critique is first introduced in Chapter Two and then subsumed under Benjamin's general critique of modernity, developed in Chapters Three and Four. Chapter Five relates this critique to the problem of authenticity in religion by making the argument that authenticity is fundamentally implicated with critical reflection. Authenticity in fake religions resides in their capacity to draw attention to the non-dialectical claims to authenticity advanced by so-called world religion and to critically challenge the manner in which empirical reason is called upon to deny the veracity of alternative claims, at the same time that this distorted version of authenticity obfuscates empiricism's unsuitability to the problem. However, this does not mean that authenticity does not exist. As a corollary to the

argument that virtual religions issue a critique against religious authenticity, the concluding discussion also develops an argument for authenticity in religion that is aligned with the concept of authenticity in art.

In religious studies scholarship of the past few decades, there has lingered a sense in which religious studies needs to justify and defend its disciplinary integrity against a combination of arguments that it is merely a branch of cultural studies and that creeping secularisation will gradually shrink the religious realm, until eventually it will disappear in a puff of logic, to borrow a phrase from Terry Pratchett. And though the secularisation thesis has been comprehensively disproved by events, the modernist sentiment that religion is an irrational, illogical, and unreasonable hangover from a previous age and is destined to disappear still persists.

Consequently, under the coercive influence of these and similar sentiments, the study of religion is often pursued with apology. The problem of authenticity in religion therefore offers an important opportunity to religious studies. If the critique of modernity, in all its manifestations, is the overarching critical philosophical enterprise of the humanities, critical reflection on the problem of authenticity in religion makes an important contribution. That contribution, while of considerable benefit to the on-going critique of modernity, turns the table on modernity, so to speak, and also thereby presents a special opportunity to religious studies. The critique of modernity, implicit and explicit in critical reflection on the problem of authenticity in religion, is a kind of critique that can be issued only if it is simultaneous with a disciplinary commitment to religion as a legitimate and important field of study, no matter how interdisciplinary the approach. This kind of commitment is not simply by default of the critique; it entails recognising and ratifying that religion can assume a non-theological and intellectually rigorous critical orientation toward modernity - including late-modernity otherwise known as post-modernity - its

premises, and its view of the world and human destiny. In this sense, perhaps it is more accurate to say that it is not the table that has turned, but rather the seating at the table that has been switched. For like the duck, the table remains a table; it is only our orientations that change. The problem of authenticity in religion, while presenting an important opportunity for reflecting on that orientation, fundamentally demonstrates the continuing importance of religion as a seat of critical reflection in the modern era.

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## Chapter Two: Forensics

We ought never to allow ourselves to be persuaded of anything unless on the evidence of our reason.<sup>1</sup>

As to proofs of authenticity or fakery, the matter involves confession, testimony and forensics.<sup>2</sup>

The key word here is “forensics” because it signifies the methodological framework that reason, evidence, testimony, confession, and proof establish. Forensics in its noun form refers to “the use of science and technology to investigate and establish facts in criminal or civil courts of law,” or in a related definition, “the art or study of formal debate; argumentation.”<sup>3</sup> “Technology” here is variously understood as “a body of knowledge” or “a discipline ... of applying scientific knowledge so solving practical problems.”<sup>4</sup> A “problem” here is “a question posed for solution.”<sup>5</sup> Authenticity therefore is a question that demands resolution; it is posed with the assumed confidence that it can be proved scientifically. Proof is arrived at by reasoned argument, of which the juridical realm, with its confession and testimony, is exemplary. Authenticity therefore is something that can be proved, can be established, as a fact, by way of reasoned argument. In this scientific formulation, authenticity’s opposite is fakery and can be similarly determined as a fact by a forensic method. Authenticity and

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<sup>1</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Laurence J. Lafleur (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1950), part iv.

<sup>2</sup> Seymour Howard, “Fakes, Intention, Proofs and the Impulsion to Know: The Case of Cavaceppi and the Clones,” in Mark Jones (ed.), *Why Fakes Matter: Essays in Problems of Authenticity* (London: British Museum, 1992), p. 52.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dictionary.com> (accessed: 3 February 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

fakery are understood as opposite sides to the same coin and can therefore be distinguished as easily and definitively as the gambler distinguishes heads from tails. Such positivist ideals of authenticity also need to be recognised as allied with moral ideals; the aspiration to authenticity is simultaneously a rejection of deception and fakery's currency in fraud is abhorred for exactly this quality. And so proofs of authenticity and especially fakery necessarily involve confession, not only because confession aids the forensic inquiry, but because confession aids redemption. I take first Descartes' axiomatic statement on the method of reason and then Howard's statement on the method of testimony, confession and forensics that is the formers' descendent to be emblematic of a prevailing notion of authenticity that assumes authenticity and its opposite, fakery, to be knowable, accessible, and transparent, that operates in the singular, and that therefore treats authenticity as if it were the object of forensic inquiry, in other words, emblematic of the notion that the pursuit of authenticity is similar to police work.

In this chapter I will develop a critique of this formulation to show that rather than knowable, accessible, and transparent, authenticity can in certain, even most, circumstances appear illusive, secretive, and opaque; that rather than operating in the exclusive singular, authenticity may be inclusive and plural; that rather than abhorring contradiction, authenticity can accommodate paradox. In short, I want to show that authenticity is a significantly less stable object of inquiry than is often assumed. More than that, I want to show that the very notion of authenticity is inherently ambivalent. In making this my intention however, I do not intend to be disparaging of authenticity's usefulness as a description attributed to objects. Rather, this problematising of authenticity's ambivalence at the limits of forensic science fits in with a larger claim pursued throughout this dissertation: that if authenticity is to retain its usefulness in cultural studies in general and religious studies in particular, it needs to

accommodate in its authentic self-understanding a dynamic quality and an ability to be flexible and adaptable.

The present chapter therefore is structured into two parts. The first pursues the limits of authenticity in search of authenticity's inherent ambivalence. The discussion that follows here will begin by looking at different objects of disputed authenticity comparatively so as to play up contradictions for which forensic methods are unable to account. As the discussion will demonstrate, these contradictions stem from the differing emphases of two methods employed to establish scientifically, that is to say, to prove, an object's authentic status. The first of these seeks a locus of authenticity in the content of the object itself by means of independent verification. The second method is falsification and is focussed on the origins of the object. In pursuing that exploration, I will begin with the infamous case of George Psalmanazar who, in 1704, published *An Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa*. That brief taster of authenticity's vexations is followed by the case of Emmanuel Swedenborg and his science of correspondences, a complex and ingenious metaphysical scheme he received through an extended discourse with angels as well as in the course of his own visitations to and travels in heavenly realms. These two examples illustrate how proofs of authenticity pursued through attempts to independently verify claims implicit and explicit in an objects' content can become very difficult. They also introduce the possibility that some relief from these frustrations may be provided by attempts to falsify claims of origination, thus falsifying claims to authenticity and arriving at a scientific solution. Yet the example of Carlos Castaneda demonstrates the difficulties that this approach can encounter. The pursuit of Castaneda's controversial Don Juan takes us from Mexico's Sonoran Desert in the 1960s, to Japan in the 1920s, then to Germany on the eve of the nineteenth century.

The comparison between proofs of authenticity pursued through independent verification of an object's content and proofs pursued through falsification of claims to origin introduces the possibility that authenticity is neither stable nor consistent. By way of reflection on this possibility, I will explore two particular aspects of authenticity that aid such instability and inconsistency. The first of these is authenticity's temporal contingencies. An object's authentic status is responsive to the changing circumstances of its environment. The turbulent moods of fashion, and the march of technological advancement and science may suddenly make appear new knowledge, at a moment's notice showing objects once considered authentic to be fake. More troubling is those rare instances (though arguably decreasingly so) where previously fake things become authentic. Here the discussion will explore the once entirely fictional language of Klingon, a collection of arbitrary noises uttered by actors portraying the fierce, war-mongering aliens of the same name in the fantastical galaxy of *Star Trek*. After thirty years of Star Trek fandom, Klingon is today a systematised, spoken and written language with its own language institute, expanding list of publications in Klingon, and an increasing number of speakers.

The significance of temporal contingencies to the pursuit of authenticity is that it breaks the either/or binary of authenticity and fakery. While authenticity and fakery remain opposites, there is a quality of indeterminacy introduced here and along with it a sense of relish as agents to this problem apparently deliberately play with this indeterminacy in self-consciously ironic ways. This kind of self-reflective subversion is linked with a second category of examples that frustrates the confidence invested in scientific methods. Whether an object is ironic, or satirical, or is a parody or caricature of something else, introduces a critical concern with an object's affective properties. This critical concern shifts attention to the affected subject and

simultaneously introduces the possibility that forensic methods that focus on objectivity to the exclusion of subjectivity may be methodologically flawed.

This first part of the chapter is structured into four parts: the first looks at independent verification of an object's content; the second, at falsification of an object's origins; the third, at authenticity's temporal contingencies; and the fourth, at affective aspects that then introduces the problem of subjectivity. The exploration of contents and origins finds the limits of forensic methods. This grouping stands in contrast with temporal contingencies and subjectivity which together point to the territory where authenticity's locus may lie. But before rushing headlong into that territory, I want to dwell on the threshold a little longer because I suspect that some indication of the way forward may lurk here. At the limits of science and reason, the forensic method faces a paradox for which it is unable to account. The starkest formulation of this paradox in both theory and practice is where authenticity can be seen to coexist harmoniously with fakery. Much of the playful relish remarked on a moment ago stems from this incongruity and is the source of ambivalence in authentic pronouncements. But if a way can be found whereby such a coexistence is possible, then the limits are transcended and a way forward is found.

The second part of this chapter dwells at that limit. Here I follow Michael Taussig's excellent essay on the coexistence of faith with scepticism, a seemingly intractable paradox at the heart of Kwakiutl shamanism. From this essay as well as his work on defacement and sacrilegious unmasking, I distil certain key ideas that I suggest indicate an alternative approach to the vexed question of authenticity in religion. These I collect together at the conclusion of this chapter and as a way of introducing the way forward that is the subject of Chapter Three.

## Verifying Content

One way of defining authenticity is to describe it as a quality attached to objects that distinguishes those objects from fake objects. Whether this is a useful definition can be debated, but it does allow us a way to begin thinking about authenticity because it asserts that authenticity is distinguishable, not just in itself, but from something else. It is in the act of distinguishing, in this space between the authentic and the fake, that an image of authenticity takes form. One way of distinguishing authentic things from fake things, which is to say a strategy to interrogate an object's claim to authenticity, is to look at the contents of the object, what it consists in. In the case of say a pair of athletic shoes, one could examine the materials used in its construction, the pattern of its stitching, the quality of its soles. A trained investigator would quickly distinguish the fake sports trainer from the genuine article. Indeed, branding, the purview of the advertising industry, is often intimately related to the promotion of the quality and uniqueness of the materials used in the production of a particular line of consumer products. Yet the seeming ease with which assessments of authenticity may be conducted on these and similar objects can be attributed to the availability of certified genuine objects with which objects of disputed authenticity may be compared. A difficulty emerges when one considers objects for which such authenticating benchmarks do not exist. For example, how does one assess the authenticity of accounts of people's adventures where little or no data exists independently, of which the archetypical example is the fish that got away? How does one establish the authentic status of an object by independent verification without the benchmarks required for that test?

One can imagine that this kind of difficulty occupied the popular imagination of European society in the era of that continent's encounter with North and South America, Africa south of the Sahara, the Far East, Australasia, and the South Pacific, as travellers returned with accounts of what they had seen as well as artefacts possessed along the way. No doubt much of what these accounts claimed was embellished and imaginatively elaborated. And no doubt European audiences, suspecting as much, did not believe everything they heard. Yet accounts of exotic places and people surely presented a particular problem to the European imagination: to what extent should such accounts be taken as factually accurate and truthful? This ambivalence inherent in the expanding genre of the exotic can be usefully positioned alongside the confidence invested in the nascent genre of the ethnographic record. The practice of ethnographic research that was so firmly grounded in the shift toward positivism meant that the emerging standards of social scientific research added an aura of authenticity to accounts of exotic things presented under the banner of ethnographic description.

This brings to mind the particular example of George Psalmanazar, author of *An Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa*, first published in 1704. Psalmanazar, who claimed to be a Fromosan, went into considerable detail in his account; *The Description* was some 182 pages long, spanned 32 chapters, and covered subjects including: government, religion, fasting days, ceremonies, priests, objects of worship, postures of adoration, ceremonies at birth, marriages and deaths, afterlife, vestments, manners and customs, physical appearance, clothes, habituations, commodities, weights and measures, superstitions, diseases, revenues, natural produce, foodstuffs, animals, language, shipping, money, weapons, musical instruments, education, liberal and mechanical arts, and the vice-regal retinue.<sup>6</sup> There is clearly considerable data with which to make an assessment of the authenticity of

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<sup>6</sup> Rodney Needham, "Psalmanazar, Confidence-man," *Exemplars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 91.

Psalmanazar's account. The difficulty of course was the lack of reliable accounts with which to compare it. There did exist prior to Psalmanazar's a handful of descriptions of Formosan society and customs, provided by missionaries, travellers and traders. Yet none of these seemed as complete nor comprehensive as Psalmanazar's, whose account of Formosa enjoyed the added authority that its author (Psalmanazar) claimed to have been born there, spoke the Formosan language fluently, and continued in his daily life the Formosan customs of eating uncooked roots and raw meat.<sup>7</sup> The sheer magnitude and detail of *The Description* aided its plausibility, not least because of the assumed difficulty of inventing an entire society and social system. Faced with little previously verified data on Formosa, it must have been tempting to accept this detailed description, presented by a self-authenticated Formosan, as what it claimed to be: a detailed description of the island and its people, an ethnography of Formosa.

As is now so infamously known, *The Description* was entirely a fiction, a product of Psalmanazar's imagination. Even his name was not his birth name, but adopted, presumably for its exotic sound, to improve the plausibility of his account.<sup>8</sup> It has never been established who the man history knows as Psalmanazar in actual fact was, though from his own memoirs wherein he admits his deception, it appears he came from somewhere between Avignon and Rome.<sup>9</sup> In the years since, there has been considerable debate as to how successful

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 80; Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 34.

<sup>8</sup> It seems that Psalmanazar acquired his name from the Assyrian king Shalmaneser named in 2 King 17:3. Exactly how a Japanese living in Europe came to be named after an Assyrian king Psalmanazar never explained, though it doesn't seem to have caused him too much trouble in his lifetime. As for as his name adding to the plausibility of his account, clearly it was its exotic qualities that performed certain authenticating labours here. For a full discussion, see Stewart, *Crimes of Writing*, pp. 31-65; and Needham, "Psalmanazar," pp. 80-84.

<sup>9</sup> Stewart, *Crimes of Writing*, p. 33.

Psalmanazar's fraud was, thought there is a fair amount of evidence to urge hesitancy. *The Description* was greeted with skepticism when it first appeared in 1704 and the Preface to the 1705 edition contained answers to objections provoked by the first. For a number of years it seems public opinion remained undecided, but ultimately, facing incredulity and ridicule from many quarters, Psalmanazar withdrew from public notice, later finding employment as a tutor, fan painter, and literary assistant to a printer. Yet despite his fraud weighing heavily on his sense of personal integrity, *The Description* seems to have met with some commercial success: the first edition sold out (prompting the second edition in 1705), a French translation was prepared and printed in 1708 and again in 1712, and a German edition in 1712 and 1716. Despite this, Psalmanazar recorded in his memoirs that he "deserved no other name than that of imposter."<sup>10</sup>

The example of Psalmanazar demonstrates one version of the difficulty inherent in assessing an object's claim to authenticity by independent verification of its content when authenticated, independent data is not available for comparative purposes. We will have cause to return to this example again in a moment. But there is a second version of this problem, one that finds endless examples in the realm of things religious, though not exclusively so. The problem is how does one assess the authenticity of transcendent claims, that Jesus was the Son of God; that Mohammed was the last in a series of God's prophets traced back to the patriarch Abraham; or the countless claims over the centuries of a personal, intimate, and profound relationship with God, angels, demons, the dead. The problem here is that the transcendent nature of the claim means that no scientific procedure can verify its authenticity. Take for example the case of Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688 - 1772) who, in a series of publications printed at his own expense, presented a carefully worked out metaphysics of correspondences

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<sup>10</sup> Psalmanazar, quoted in Needham, "Psalmanazar," p. 116.

between divine things and natural things, such that: “there is not a thing that is not a type, image and likeness of some one among spiritual things, all of which are exemplars.”<sup>11</sup>

Swedenborg’s metaphysical scheme contained in his science of correspondences is far to elaborate to give an account of here and contributes little to the present concern with authenticity. From the point of view of the present discussion however, what is interesting about his metaphysics is his concomitant claim that this doctrine was revealed to him by angels with whom he had frequent and lengthy conversations. It might have been tempting to Swedenborg’s contemporaries to dismiss him as mad, as was done with so many before and so many since, yet this option must have been tempered by the reputation and stature of the man: a student of astronomy and anatomy and a leading mathematician, a Cartesian rationalist and natural philosopher, an assessor to the Royal College of Mines, a social reformer in the House of Nobles, and an engineer of considerable repute.<sup>12</sup>

Far from being dismissed as mad, Swedenborg’s claims found fertile ground in America between the 18<sup>th</sup> and nineteenth centuries. There his claims found extensive support amid protestant revival movements that placed much emphasis on material manifestations of the divine. Swedenborg’s claims sat well with these trends in religious practice and his work attracted considerable admiration. Yet if Swedenborg’s accounts were often cited to lend credibility to similar claims emerging in American Protestant devotionalism, it is not surprising that we find among these claims descriptions of encounters with Swedenborg’s spirit too.<sup>13</sup> The issue at stake is authenticating authority. For the revivalists, that authority

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<sup>11</sup> Swedenborg, quoted in Rodney Needham, “Swedenborg and the Science of Correspondences: God’s Secret Dictionary,” *Exemplars* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1985), p.121.

<sup>12</sup> Needham, “Swedenborg and the Science of Correspondences,” p. 118; Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 204.

<sup>13</sup> See Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, pp. 223-224.

resides in heaven. And so every material manifestation reasserts and legitimates that authority. Contrasted with the authority of heaven is the authority of reason, championed by enlightenment rationalists.

Yet Swedenborg and surely thousands of similar examples demonstrate where this authority reaches a limit, for it is clear that to proceed by a method of independent verification is not to proceed at all. Obviously, Swedenborg's claims cannot be verified, not even hypothetically, as was the case with Psalmanazar in his day who impudently replied to a detractor: "The best advice I can give him is, to go to Formosa, and, if he can, confute me."<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that reason has lost its authority. There remains an alternative scientific method. For if it can be shown that Swedenborg derived his doctrine from a source other than angels, or that the voice of a channelled spirit did not emanate from the "speaking trumpet" as many American protestant devotionalists claimed,<sup>15</sup> the case for inauthenticity could be made and the question of authenticity settled. In contrast with a method that seeks to independently verify the content in which a disputed object consists, this approach, which can be named falsification, examines the source and origin of the disputed object.

### **Falsifying Origins**

It seems reasonable that something claiming a source or origin that in fact is not its own is inauthentic. The obvious category of example is plagiarism. But things are seldom clean-cut and assessments of authenticity conducted by methods of falsification, like assessments via methods of independent verification, are also marked by ambivalent grey areas. Something does not come from nothing; the imagination must have something to work with, some speck

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Needham, "Psalmanazar," p. 94.

<sup>15</sup> On speaking trumpets and spirit mediums, see Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, p. 241.

of an image or concept that will serve as inspired catalyst for a creative idea. So then creations are in some sense constructions, the bringing together of already existing things to produce new formations in their confluences. As “new” as these new formations may be, they are nevertheless derived of pre-existing ideas, concepts, objects, things themselves the products of similar creative processes. An example of this kind of logic comes to mind in the case of an artist who ceased her creative output altogether, incapacitated by the sudden realization of the impossibility of authentic originality. Yet it would be a grave error to conclude that because everything is in some sense derived of pre-existing things, or combinations of such things, that authenticity is therefore an impossibility. Such a conclusion would be forced to dismiss outright any notion of uniqueness, a patently absurd proposition. For in forgetting the imagination that brings pre-existing things into proximity with one another, such a conclusion against the possibility of authenticity denies the specific and unique authorship of these constellations, authorships that open authentically original spaces where new meanings may take shape, new formations derived of pre-existing ideas. Still, if such constellations are at least partially derivative, in the sense that a creation exists as a constellation of pre-existing things prior to a catalytic moment that opens uniquely original spaces, then what is the critical mass at which an imaginative constellation of things becomes an authentically new and unique creation? Following this inductive method for the moment, I want to pursue this problem of origin in the search for a locus of authenticity and propose doing so by reversing the question just arrived at by asking: what is the critical mass, the moment, when something loses its authenticity and slips into fakery? The problem of plagiarism is useful here exactly because the plagiarized work is an object that misrepresents its source or sources, a case of fakery located not with the object’s content, but with its origins. The example of plagiarism demonstrates the kind of ambivalent tensions between derivation and originality alluded to earlier, presenting an instance of the kind of grey areas that are so frustrating to positivist

demands in assessments of authenticity. Take for example the case of Carlos Castaneda, celebrated author of the Don Juan saga. Beginning with *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, first published in 1968 (hereafter referred to as *The Teachings*), the story continued with the 1971 publication of *A Separate Reality*, and *Journey to Ixtlan: The Lessons of Don Juan* in 1972. There have been more titles,<sup>16</sup> but for the purposes of the present discussion, these three will suffice. In addition to earning their author a Master's degree in anthropology from the University of California at Berkeley (*The Teachings* consisted of his dissertation submission), the series made Castaneda a millionaire and celebrity hero among the counter-culture of the late 1960s and 1970s. The stories of Castaneda's adventures with Don Juan are presented as a true and accurate account of Castaneda's experiences with Juan Matus, the hero of the narratives, in Mexico's Sonoran Desert. They include accounts of hallucinogenic and similar other-worldly experiences that precipitated sharp and profound insights into the nature of reality and our lived engagement with our existence.

In his excellent essay on Castaneda, Rodney Needham observes that in many ways the Don Juan books reflect the difficulties and challenges their contemporary audiences struggled with. According to Needham, there is a strong correlation between the themes and other aspects of content in each book and the dominant concerns of its particular audience: *The Teachings* echoed the anti-establishment emphasis of the drug culture and sought alternative realities; *A Separate Reality* reflected, in its careful structure of explicit "lessons," "a move in youth culture ... toward a more sober and reflective approach to the quandaries of life;" *The*

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<sup>16</sup> These first three titles were followed by *Sorcery: A Description of the World* (1973); *Tales of Power* (1974); *The Second Ring of Power* (1977); *The Art of Dreaming* (1977); *The Way of the Shaman* (1980); *The Eagle's Gift* (1981); *The Fire From Within* (1984); *The Power of Silence: Further Lessons of Don Juan* (1987); *The Art of Dreaming* (1993); *Magical Passes: The Practical Wisdom of the Shamans of Ancient Mexico* (1999); *The Active Side of Infinity* (2000); *The Wheel of Time: The Shamans of Ancient Mexico, Their Thoughts About Life, Death and the Universe* (2001).

*Eagle's Gift*, published "in a time of forceful feminism," gives the leading part after Castaneda as narrator to a woman and contains more female characters than earlier books. Needham concludes: "... it is as though the potential readers first voiced their concerns and the ethnographer then responded to them."<sup>17</sup> Such reciprocity is not in itself objectionable, a point Needham concedes, but it does warrant notice in a text that claims to be written as a true account of actual people and events. With notice comes scrutiny and from the first publication the Don Juan books quickly became the focus of close inspection. The most forceful and sustained critique issued from Richard de Mille in his book *Castaneda's Journey: The Power and the Allegory* and then in a volume De Mille edited ominously titled *The Don Juan Papers: Further Castaneda Controversies*.<sup>18</sup> In these and other publications the essential truth of Castaneda's account is challenged by employing the method of falsification, identifying instances of remarkable similarity between features and anecdotes contained in Castaneda's narrative and literary works pre-dating Castaneda's. The suggestion in these and other, similar articles and monographs is that Castaneda invented Juan Mathus / Don Juan and the experiences, adventures, and insights attributed to him, first for the purposes of his studies, and then for personal gain. In his essay "An Ally for Castaneda," Rodney Needham implies a similar charge, though his purposes for doing so stem from a different line of inquiry than simply testing the veracity of Castaneda's claims. Setting aside Needham's interest to Castaneda for moment, his essay is of particular interest for the present inquiry into the origins of textual objects as a basis for assessing their authenticity because his analysis takes matters a step further, as will become apparent in a moment. In doing so Needham demonstrates the problematic relation of originality to authenticity and thereby throws into

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<sup>17</sup> Rodney Needham, "An Ally for Castaneda," *Exemplars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) p. 190-1.

<sup>18</sup> Richard de Mille, *Castaneda's Journey: The Power and the Allegory* (London: Sphere Books, 1978); Richard de Mille (ed.), *The Don Juan Papers: Further Castaneda Controversies* (Santa-Barbara, California: Ross-Erikson, 1980).

greater relief the difficulties and ambivalences of authenticity, both as ideal and as attribute of objects.

Needham notes marked similarities between the Don Juan writings of Castaneda and two texts on Zen Buddhism written by Eugene Herrigel. Working from the reasonable assumption that Castaneda did not read German, Needham only concerns himself with the English translations of Herrigel's books. The first of these is *Zen and the Art of Archery* (1953) (hereafter referred to as "*The Art of Archery*"). The second, published five years after his death, is *The Method of Zen* (1960) (hereafter referred to as "*The Method*"). With regard *The Art of Archery*, Needham contends that "there are such correspondences between Herrigel's monograph and the first two Castaneda titles as to make it appear that the former may have been a prime source of certain characteristic features of the latter."<sup>19</sup> As regards *The Method*, Needham suggests that it "also could have been a formative influence on Castaneda's description of Don Juan and his teachings."<sup>20</sup> The points of correlation set down by Needham are many and do make for a strong argument,<sup>21</sup> but in themselves they are not of concern here, suffice to recognize that they do call into question the authenticity of Castaneda's project. What is more interesting about Needham's discussion from the point of view of the present inquiry, is the manner in which Needham, having dispatched with Castaneda, turns his critical eye toward Herrigel, subjecting Herrigel's texts to the same penetrating analysis previously metered out against Castaneda.

The German-born philosopher Eugene Herrigel traveled to Japan in 1924 where he stayed until 1929. During his tenure at Tohoku University he took up the practice of archery, under

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<sup>19</sup> Needham, "An Ally for Castaneda," p. 195.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>21</sup> For a full description of these correlations, see Ibid., pp.197-204.

the tutorship of Master Kenzo Awa. It is out of this experience that Herrigel's knowledge of Zen method and its relationship to archery proceed. The first apparent cause for doubting the veracity of Herrigel's accounts is immediately apparent even from this brief bit of background: Herrigel's first book recounting this experience was published two decades after what it describes actually transpired. (The original German edition of *The Art of Archery* appeared in 1949.) Yet in it Herrigel quotes conversations between himself and his master verbatim. The first edition of *The Method*, compiled of Herrigel's papers left at his death, was published posthumously in 1958, without the benefit of Herrigel, or Kenzo Awa for that matter, confirming its accuracy. There is also the problem of language and translation. Herrigel did not speak Japanese before arriving in Japan and was forced to resort to a translator until he acquired the necessary language skills. Also, Herrigel wrote his accounts in German, with the first English translation appearing only two years before his death, and the second translation, of a book he never saw in its entirety, appearing in 1960. Amid all these translative acts, first from Japanese to German, later into Herrigel's "unforgettable memories and notes which I made at the time,"<sup>22</sup> then decades later from these memories and notes, which we can reasonably assume were recorded in Herrigel's native German, into the first German edition of *The Art of Archery*, from this edition into an English edition, and finally, after Herrigel's death, by his editor, again from Herrigel's notes, into *The Method*. It seems reasonable to acknowledge that a gap may have widened between what factually transpired between master and student and what Herrigel, his translators, and editors decades later report transpired. But if these and other observations offered by Needham speculatively pose the question of authenticity without offering conclusive evidence to doubt Herrigel's account, the most interesting aspect of Needham's discussion follows. Needham identifies a possible source of Herrigel's anecdotes and metaphorical images in Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, the

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<sup>22</sup> Herrigel, quoted in Needham, "An Ally for Castaneda," p. 211.

German physicist and aphorist admired by such German philosophers as Goethe, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein, and almost certainly well known to Herrigel, the German philosopher reflecting on his Japanese education. Needham points to a number of anecdotes offered by Herrigel and attributed to his master, who Herrigel quotes verbatim in his attribution. Needham remarks on their “distracting echo,” the sense in which they have been heard previously, before going on to identify identical images in the writings of Lichtenberg, phrased with uncanny similarity and dated around 1784.<sup>23</sup> Needham’s essay draws a parallel between the formative influences of Herrigel on Castaneda’s work and in its turn the similar influences of Lichtenberg on Herrigel’s monographs; Lichtenberg is to Herrigel as Herrigel is to Castaneda.

It has not been an intention of the preceding discussion to charge either Castaneda or Herrigel with plagiarism. Plagiarism implies deliberate intention to deceive. In the case of first Castaneda and then Herrigel, the evidence cited by Needham is far from conclusive on this point. Rather, the discussion has sought to show just how tricky, nuanced, and often outright ambivalent, is the adjudication of authenticity on criteria of an object’s origins. For if it is argued that Herrigel’s monograph is essentially inauthentic, on account of its similarity to Lichtenberg’s work, and in its turn Castaneda’s work is inauthentic on account of its similarity to Herrigel’s work, are we to conclude that Castaneda’s work is therefore a fake of a fake? What is a fake of a fake and how are such objects positioned in relation to authenticity? Is a fake of a fake more or less authentic than a fake of something authentic, the imitation of an imitation of an original more or less authentic than an imitation of an original? Or is Don Juan a sort of bastard cousin, a fake Lichtenberg once removed? And how does the adjudication of authenticity on criteria of an object’s origins weigh against a similar

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<sup>23</sup> Needham, “An Ally for Castaneda,” pp. 215-216.

adjudication on criteria of an object's content? For if the crucial criterion in the case of the former is the object's uniqueness, the corresponding criterion in the mode of content analysis is the object's factuality, which is to say that its content exists authentically and independently elsewhere, such that that which is posited as fact may be measured against this benchmark. Enter the problem of the original fake, for which Psalmanazar's ethnography is a good example. *The Description* is beyond any doubt a fake on account of it being entirely a fiction, made-up, a product of Psalmanazar's imagination. Yet these are the same qualities we seek in that mode of authenticity that privileges originality as the arbiter of authenticity's status.

This brief discussion of dimensions of content and origin in adjudications of authenticity seems to suggest that far from the transparent and conclusive ideals to which notions of authenticity so often aspire, authenticity is actually more complex in its finer nuances and more often beset by contradictory tensions. And authenticity is still more difficult, for not only is it embroiled in internal contradictions and tensions, the very possibility of authenticity is inherently unstable, as is well demonstrated by the hugely popular and successful television and film series *Star Trek*.

The phenomenon that is *Star Trek* has received much attention from an array of disciplines in the nearly 30 years since the first episode appeared, including psychology,<sup>24</sup> industry and consumption,<sup>25</sup> ethics,<sup>26</sup> feminism,<sup>27</sup> identity and representation,<sup>28</sup> and sexual violence.<sup>29</sup> A

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<sup>24</sup> Debra L. Long and Chantel S. Prat, "Memory for *Star Trek*: The Role of Prior Knowledge in Recognition Revisited," in *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, vol. 28, no. 6 (2002): 1073-1082.

<sup>25</sup> Gary Westfahl, "Where No Market Has Gone Before: 'The Science Fiction Industry' and the *Star Trek* Industry," *Extrapolation*, vol. 37, no. 4, (Winter 1996): 291-301.

great deal of this attention has also explored religious aspects of Star Trek fandom.<sup>30</sup> Different though related discussions have explored problems of authenticity in Star Trek fandom, trying to make sense of affirmations of authenticity implied in fans dressing as and otherwise imitating Star Trek characters, maintaining networks of fan clubs that are referred to as individual “starships” operating in different “sectors” and internally structured by hierarchies of commanders, lieutenants and so on. Fans themselves are very conscious of their reputations as “nerds” and “geeks” who need to “get a life.” Consequently they are sensitive to their portrayal in the popular media. Admiral Arizhel zantai Kehoz (a.k.a. Teresa Tyler) warns her club members: “sections of the press and the media are always on the lookout for the nerdier specimens of Trek fans that they can ridicule and use to make any science fiction follower look socially deprived.” In dealing with the media, she advises club members to “concentrate on the fact that you know it is all fantasy, that you are just in it for the fun and to help raise

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<sup>26</sup> Judith Barad, with Ed Robertson, *The Ethics of Star Trek* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000); James J. Hughes and John D. Lantos, “Medical Ethics Through the Star Trek Lens,” *Literature and Medicine*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2001): 26-38.

<sup>27</sup> Lynne Joyrich, “Feminist Enterprise? Star Trek: The Next Generation and the Occupation of Femininity,” *Cinema Journal*, vol. 35, no. 2, (Winter 1996): 61-84.

<sup>28</sup> Kathy Ferguson, “This Species Which Is Not One: Identity Practices in Star Trek: Deep Space Nine,” *Strategies: Journal of Theory, Culture & Politics*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2002): 181-195; Taylor Harrison, and Sarah Projansky, Kent A. Ono, and Elyce Rae Helford, (eds.), *Enterprise Zones: Critical Positions on Star Trek* (Bolder: Westview Press, 1996); Ziauddin Sardar, “Orientalism in Star Trek Voyager,” *New Statesman*, vol. 128, no. 4438 (May 31 1999): 35-7.

<sup>29</sup> Robin Roberts, “Rape, Romance, and Consent in Star Trek: The Next Generation,” *Extrapolation*, vol. 40, no. 1, (Spring 1999): 21-35.

<sup>30</sup> See for example: Michael Jindra, “Star Trek Fandom as a Religious Phenomenon,” *Sociology of Religion*, vol. 55, no.1 (1994): 27-51; Thomas Richards, *The Meaning of Star Trek: An Excursion into the Myth and Marvel of the Star Trek Universe* (New York: Doubleday, 1997); Jennifer E. Porter, and Darcee L. McLaren, (eds.), *Star Trek and Sacred Ground: Explorations of Star Trek, Religion, and American Culture* (New York: State University of New York, 1999); Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984); Jon Wagner and Jan Lundeen, *Deep Space and Sacred Time: Star Trek in the American Mythos* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998).

money for charity.”<sup>31</sup> There can be little doubt that fans enjoy being fans. Similarly, there isn’t any doubt that vast amounts of money have been raised for charities through Star Trek related fan activities, including charity auctions and charity premiers. Whether “it is all fantasy” however, is less clear. Firstly, it is less than clear just what the “it” in this advice refers to, and secondly, it is far from clear just what “fantasy” means in this context. For if fantasy means something in opposition to reality, something that is made up, that is a fiction, that doesn’t really exist as a tangible thing, what can we say about the massive range of Star Trek merchandise, manufactured by tangible machines, earning their manufacturers authentic money to be spent on other tangible products, representing authentic currency as commodities for either trade or purchase? What do we make of all the charity work carried out with funds donated by the labours of others’ fantasies?

A simple way out of this quandary is to assert that fantasy and authenticity are not incompatible; something that is fantasy may still be authentic. A way into this proposition is to look at the “real” consequences of “imaginary” things, for which the fundraising labours performed by fans is a good example. Perhaps a better example is the massive industry sustained by the imaginations of Star Trek fans, an economy of millions, perhaps billions, of dollars spent and earned over many decades. One way in which objects of fantasy can become objects of reality therefore is through the tangible and otherwise measureable and quantifiable consequences of the labours of the fantastical imagination. This perspective might even issue a challenge to the assertion that the Star Trek universe does not exist. Yet this question of real consequences flowing from imaginary things itself flows from a more fundamental observation, which is that the status of authenticity is able to change with time: fake things

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<sup>31</sup> Teresa Tyler, “The Image We Don’t Want,” *Beyond The Lines: The Magazine of the Klingon Strike Force*, vol. 97, no. 2, available at <http://www.geocities.com/area51/corridor/8480/APRIL-ED.TXT> (28 February 2003).

can become authentic. The consequences flowing from this observation are simply shattering to that notion of authenticity that confidently assures us of a given-for-all-time quality to authenticity. The entire project that seeks a locus of authenticity determined by established criteria is thrown into doubt. It means that any pronouncements on an object's authentic status can be no more than a snapshot, a moment in that object's unstable history. Star Trek again offers an exemplary case of this kind of problem.

### **Temporal Contingencies and Affective Uncertainties**

In the Star Trek universe, the fierce, war-mongering Klingons are cast as the antagonists to the Federation of Planets, who envision an alliance between different civilizations that will facilitate the further exploration of space, "to boldly go where no man has gone before."<sup>32</sup> Klingons specifically have stimulated their own cult following among Star Trek fans, or Trekkies as they are generally known. Like other Trekkies, Klingon fans participate in fandom by imitating the objects of their fascination, which means dressing up as Klingons and even talking like Klingons, imitating their language. Given the fierce temperament of authentic Klingons, it seems only natural that Klingon fans dressed as Klingons should provide the requisite security at Star Trek conventions; another example of real consequences flowing from fake things. But in what follows I would like to focus on the Klingon language as an example of how fake things may become authentic with the passage of time. For Klingon that started as a series of arbitrary grunts, groans, hisses and similar sounds uttered

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<sup>32</sup> As Star Trek's patriarchal configurations changed, this famously stated objective was rephrased in the 1990s to state: "To boldly go where no-one has gone before." For a discussion of how women are portrayed in Star Trek, see Gwen Kelly and Edwina Kelly, "Refusing the Ruby Slippers: Women in Star Trek's Fictive Space," *Outskirts*, vol. 1, May 1996, available at <http://www.artsmmc.uwa.edu.au/hostsites/chloe/outskirts/archive/VOL1/contents.html> (accessed: 19 January 2003).

by James Doohan (“Scotty” in the first *Star Trek* movie) and thought to be in keeping with the ferociousness of Klingon nature, is today a systematized language, spoken fluently by a few “Klingonologists” and read extensively by a few hundred more enthusiasts. There has even been published a Klingon-English English-Klingon dictionary as well as translations in Klingon of a number of Shakespeare’s plays and other literary works, including portions of the Christian bible.

The movement of the Klingon language from an exotic, alien language devoid of a particular structure to the systematic, internally consistent language that it is today has largely been due to the efforts of linguist Marc Okrand. Okrand became involved with *Star Trek* in 1984 when he was asked to “create realistic sounding dialogue” for *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*.<sup>33</sup> “The first thing I had to do,” he explains, “was make sure the language matched any Klingon spoken before I got involved” (interview: 13).<sup>34</sup> Referring to the earliest Klingon spoken by Doohan, Okrand continues: “I took those lines as a starting point and added sounds and imposed a grammatical structure” (interview: 16). He recalls that while on set he realized the extent of interest in things Klingon and so pitched a proposal for a Klingon dictionary to publishers Pocket Books. The proposal was accepted and an English / Klingon Klingon / English dictionary was published in 1985 and reprinted in 1992. The dictionary provided much vocabulary to the rules worked out by Okrand and together offered anyone interested resources with which to explore and develop the language further. More resources followed in

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<sup>33</sup> Greg Oliver, 1996, “*vaj tlhIngan Hol Dajatlh ‘e’ DaneH (So You Want To Speak Klingon)*,” available at [http://www.canoe.ca/JamBooksFeatures/okrand\\_marc.html](http://www.canoe.ca/JamBooksFeatures/okrand_marc.html) (accessed: 19 January 2003).

<sup>34</sup> Marc Okrand was interviewed online on 13 August 1996. Where the transcript of this interview is referenced, the convention will be to indicate “interview” followed a number, which will refer to Okrand’s statement in the order corresponding to the 53 statements he contributed to that discussion. A full transcript of the interview is available at <http://hotwired.com/talk/club/special/transcripts/96-08-13-okrand.html> (accessed: 17 January, 2003).

the form of books and audiotapes: *The Klingon Way: A Warrior's Guide* (1996), *Klingon for the Galactic Traveller* (1997), *Conversational Klingon* (audio cassette, 1992), and *Power Klingon: Mastering the Language of the Warriors* (audio cassette, 1993). Okrand is the first to recognize the importance of users to the success of Klingon: "For the language to grow and work, you have to have a bunch of people who are using it."<sup>35</sup> But he is just as quick to credit the Internet, presumably for the practical assistance of bringing that bunch of people together as well as for facilitating the easy distribution of Klingon resources: "The Internet is the thing that's making it work, there's no question about that. If there weren't an Internet, it wouldn't be growing the way it is."<sup>36</sup>

The largest community of Klingon language enthusiasts is found online at the Klingon Language Institute (hereafter referred to as the KLI).<sup>37</sup> The KLI is a not-for-profit, public service corporation based in Philadelphia, USA. Started in 1992, the KLI is into its second decade with more than 1500 paying members. The site positions itself as a hub for the scholarly study of the Klingon language. The KLI's founder and director is Dr. Lawrence M. Schoen, previously a psychology professor at Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia and a Star Trek fan since adolescence.<sup>38</sup> A sense of the seriousness with which the KLI go about their mission of "bringing together individuals interested in the study of Klingon linguistics and culture and providing a forum for discussion and the exchange of ideas"<sup>39</sup> can be gathered from the research projects of the institute. The Klingon Shakespeare Restoration Project (hereafter the KLI) sees as its goal "the restoration of the complete works of Shakespeare to

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<sup>35</sup> Okrand, quoted in Oliver, "*vaj tlhIngan Hol Dajatlh 'e' DaneH (So You Want To Speak Klingon).*"

<sup>36</sup> Okrand, quoted in Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> The website of the Klingon Language Institute is at [www.kli.org](http://www.kli.org).

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.bobw.com.au/BOBW5/Lawrence.htm> (3 February, 2003);

<http://higbee.cots.net/~holtej/klingon/hamlet.htm> (3 February, 2003).

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.kli.org/kli/> (accessed: 3 February, 2003).

the original Klingon”. This goal follows the claim by Chancellor Gorkon, former leader of the Klingon Empire, made in *Star Trek XI: The Undiscovered Country*, that Shakespeare originally wrote his verses in Klingon. The accuracy and essential truth of that claim may be disputed, but the outputs of the KLI cannot; *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark: The Restored Klingon Version* (Pocket Books, 2000) and *paghmo’ tIn mIS*, which translates literally as “the confusion is great because of nothing,” Nick Nicholas’s “restoration” of *Much Ado About Nothing* (Wildside Press, 2001). A Klingon restoration of *MacBeth* is also proceeding. Not confined to restoration, the KSRP staged a performance, in Klingon, of act five scene two from *Hamlet* at their annual qep’a’ (general meeting) in 1996. The Klingon Bible Translation Project is similarly ambitious: “the immense task” of translating both the old and new testaments into Klingon, “a project worthy of our efforts for purely secular reasons.” The Klingon Writing Project encourages and supports the writing of original compositions, whether epics, stories, songs or poetry, in “the warrior’s tongue.” The Klingon Writing Project publishes an annual literary supplement *Jatmey* compiled of the project’s work. Finally, the Extended Corpus Project consists in “an effort to compile a comprehensive glossary of all Klingon names, terms, and phrases from the multitude of canonical fiction published.”<sup>40</sup>

In addition to the publications produced by these projects, the KLI publishes *HolQeD*, a quarterly scholarly journal of “artwork, feature articles, and regular columns discussing Klingon linguistics, language, and culture.”<sup>41</sup> *HolQeD* is now in its eleventh year and is registered with the Library of Congress and catalogued by the Modern Languages Association. Compiled from the first four years of *HolQeD* and available for purchase though the KLI online is *The Grammarian’s Desk: A Collection of Grammatical Opinion and*

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.kli.org/stuff/projects.html> (accessed: 3 February, 2003).

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.kli.org/study/HolQeD.html> (accessed: 3 February, 2003).

*Wisdom of the Warrior's Tongue* (Klingon Language Institute, 1997), later released in a limited run *Deluxe Edition*, and *GhllghameS*, a translation of the ancient Sumerian classic *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Wildside Press, December 2000). The institute's website also promotes Simon & Schuster's range of Klingon-related publications, including three instructional and reference books by Okrand, three audiotapes featuring Okrand, Michael Dorn (who plays the Klingon character "Lieutenant Commander Worf" in the television series) and Roxann Bigg Dawson (who plays the Klingon character "Lieutenant B'Elanna Torres" also in the television series), two novels useful for understanding some of the background, and an interactive CD-ROM with language instruction.<sup>42</sup> Clearly the KLI takes itself and its subject very seriously and have invested a great deal of time, effort, and resources into the promotion of the Klingon language. So how successful is the Klingon language? In 1996, when the KLI was only four years old, Okrand estimated that "probably 700 people, maybe more ... have been studying the language in one form or another" [interview: 5], later clarifying that "the number of people who can speak somewhat or that can read easily and who are getting better ... is in the hundreds [interview: 41]. "A group of them" he claims "are really expert speakers," [interview: 6] substantiating his claim later by describing the language skills of a few he has met as "just amazing" [interview: 41]. Still, the number of really fluent speakers is probably under ten" [interview: 41]. But that was in 1996. In 2002 the KLI membership stood in excess of 1500. And the KLI is not the only association of Klingon language enthusiasts.

The Interstellar Language School (ILS) is the initiative of Glen F. Proechel, a licensed language teacher from Minnesota, USA. The ILS states as its aim simply "to teach the Warrior Tongue and to create materials pertinent to its use and mastery."<sup>43</sup> The ILS is markedly more focused than the KLI in pursuing this aim, in the sense that the ILS seems

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<sup>42</sup> <http://www.kli.org/stuff/Merchant.html> (accessed: 3 February, 2003).

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.khemorex-khlinzhai.de/e/faqs/kli-faq.html> (accessed: 15 January 2003).

solely occupied with translation work. Unconstrained by the labours of maintaining an extensive website offering online transactions, funding and administering discrete research projects, or compiling, revising, and submitting financial and other reports in compliance with the legislation under which the KLI exists, the ILS can get on with translating as many texts into Klingon as they are able. To this end they have reportedly published a three-volume series of teaching materials and literature called *tlhIngan Hol: Alien Language Primer*, a translation of the new testament called *Good News for the Warrior Race*, their own translation of Hamlet, called *Homlet: Prince of Denmark* (sic), a phrasebook *Warrior Tongue at Warp Speed*, and an exercise and colouring book. On the way are *A Warrior's Unabridged Dictionary*, an epic poem *Kahless Cycle*, a Klingon translation of "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" called *K'huq tai Fin'* as well as a Klingon translation of Chaucer's works.<sup>44</sup> The personage of Glen Proechel, however, is as interesting as the labours of his language school. In addition to being a language teacher, Proechel, is also an ordained Lutheran minister who reportedly claims to have delivered sermons as well as conducted a choir in Klingon.<sup>45</sup> Proechel's interest in the religious possibilities of Klingon has in the past come up against the secular, intellectual aspirations of the Klingon Bible Translation Project at the KLI. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on a controversy raging between Proechel and Schoen relating to how to translate the bible into Klingon. Proechel reportedly resigned from the collaborative effort, led by the Klingon Bible Translation Project, citing "deep philosophical differences with fellow scholars." Proechel objected to the literal translation advocated by Schoen, arguing that the literal translation "will be describing things that don't exist in their [Klingon's] culture." So for example where literalists substitute for loaves and fish generalised terms like "grain food" and "water animal," Proechel advocates using

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<sup>44</sup> <http://www.members.aol.com/JPKlingon/kfaq.htm> (accessed: 16 January 2003).

<sup>45</sup> Reported in the diary of Roger Nygard, maker of the documentary *Trekkies*, on 10 October 1996. The diary is available at <http://www.digiserve.com/eescape/library/On-the-Trekkie-Trail.html> (accessed: 16 January, 2003).

concepts Klingons would be more familiar with: “serpent worms” and “blood pies.” A suitable term for “lamb” presents a particular problem for biblical translations because of the frequency of its occurrence. Proechel suggests “targh,” “a vicious, furry, piglike animal.”<sup>46</sup>

Silly or irreverent as this dispute may appear, it does demonstrate just how independent of its television and film origins the Klingon language has become. Joel Anderson, a security coordinator at the University of Minnesota and a Klingon language enthusiast, offers this warning on his personal website about television Klingon: “Televised Klingon is known far and wide throughout the galaxy for constructing terrible Klingon phrases. I mean REALLLY. Stinko. Klingon gutter talk, absolutely wrong and absolutely incorrect grammar.”<sup>47</sup> Marc Okrand puts similar distance between Klingon written and spoken by enthusiasts and Klingon seen written and spoken on television: “When I write Klingon, I use the regular Roman alphabet ... I don’t know who invented the fancy letters that you see on the Klingon ships and such” [interview: 19, 20]. The writing system used to represent Klingon sounds is the area of greatest discrepancy between television Klingon and Klingon taught by the KLI and ILS and used in the numerous Klingon translations already published. The Klingon used by the latter was devised by Okrand, uses a Romanised alphabet, and reads from left to write. But Okrand concedes that he isn’t certain whether Klingons would use an alphabet; their writing system might use a character set, like Chinese. The written Klingon characters depicted on television is the work of graphic designer Mike Okuda who Okrand reports is similarly undecided whether Klingon is read from left to right or from right to left. Okrand and Okuda have discussed the issue and according to Okrand, “Mike likes the idea of starting in the middle and reading out towards the ends” [interview: 23]. There are two

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<sup>46</sup> <http://ussgryphon.freewebsites.com/1994-10/23.htm> (accessed: 16 January, 2003);  
<http://www.oreilly.com/people/staff/sierra/flum/9406.htm> (accessed: 16 January, 2003).

<sup>47</sup> <http://members.aol.com/jpklingon/mrk/who.html> (accessed: 17 January, 2003).

movements here. The first is a marked divergence and consequent tension between television Klingon and off-screen Klingon. The second is a seemingly deliberate playfulness that works with this tension, oscillating between the contradictory trajectories of this divergence. Yet the divergence is in some senses limited because television representations need to appear plausible to audiences to avoid reducing into farce. In other words, the divergence cannot be so great as to lose its tension. And it is this tension, or perhaps this tension-filled space opened between, that presents the challenge to scientific adjudications of authenticity. For one is never sure which way the tension is tugging; is Okuda serious? After all, why shouldn't aliens from another galaxy read their lines from the middle outwards? And yet there is a sense that Okrand, reporting Okuda's suggestion, is winking at his audience.

This presents a particular kind of problem: how to relate an object's affective properties to the proof of its authenticity. Or more interestingly – though following Howard's championing of forensic science, it amounts to the same thing – how are an object's affective properties related to the proof of its fakery? Is Okrand being deliberately ironic when he taunts his audience of avid Trekkies and Klingonologists with this insider information? D. C. Muecke notes that irony "is the art of saying something without really saying it."<sup>48</sup> Is Okrand being ironic? There is a tone here that suggests he is revealing something by concealing it. Perhaps in a roundabout sort of way he is saying nothing more profound than that *Star Trek* is all made-up. Yet I think there is something to his conspiratorial wink here; Okrand is the architect behind the language, the instigator of this hoax, if that is what it is. And after all, the suggestion that Klingons may read their lines from the middle to the two ends is only rendered plausible by the assumption that these aliens read and write, as if this and sign language were the only form of non-verbal communication in a fantastical universe of infinite

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<sup>48</sup> Douglas Colin Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969), pp. 5-6.

possibilities. It is almost disappointing that of all the ways the creators of *Star Trek* could imagine Klingons communicating non-verbally, reading from the middle outwards was the best they could come up with. And so is revealed that these aliens may not be so alien after all. Minus their foreheads and squinting eyes, authentic Klingons may as well be humans, dressed as aliens, imitating humans. If that is so, then fans' imitation of Klingons conceals a hidden truth. It is this reciprocity in the viewer's complicity with the viewed that in its mutually implicating movements casts a simulacrum of authenticity about objects that allows the really made-up to become efficacious in a world no less made-up and no less real. Irony, as Muecke reminds us, "is an art that gets its effect from below the surface, and this gives it a quality that resembles the depth and resonance of great art triumphantly saying much more than it seems to be saying."<sup>49</sup> Okrand's wink seems to me to be playing on this secret knowledge secreted in the deceptively lazy loopings, to borrow a phrase from Michael Taussig, between a profound knowledge of this artifice concealed in hidden depths and a superficial knowledge that allows us to go about our daily lives.

All this talk of divergences and tensions, surfaces and depths, illustrates the limitations of forensic science that confidently promises to distinguish authenticity from fakery. At the same time, exploring this problem has introduced some concepts that may provide the crucial terms for an alternative attitude toward authenticity and its relation to fakery: tension and reciprocity between surfaces and depths might mediate the movements of revelations and concealment; transparency and opacity in this spatial metaphor might mediate secrecy and revelation. In this second part of the chapter, I want to distil a theoretical framework that may give expression to this alternative attitude. Here I will follow a close reading of Michael Taussig's

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 5-6.

essay on “Viscerality, Faith and Skepticism.”<sup>50</sup> In this excellent essay Taussig sets about tackling “the vexatious problem of faith, as in religious and magical faith” by drawing attention to “the fact that faith often seems to coexist with scepticism ... a relation ... that has escaped notice in some classic illustrations of magical healing made famous, indeed iconic, by an earlier anthropology.”<sup>51</sup> Taussig is being polite when he suggests it escaped the notice of such eminent investigators as Franz Boas and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, for his discussion seeks to resolve what Boas and his peers encountered as an intractable paradox for which their science could not account. Such a paradoxical coexistence exists exactly at the limits of scientific empiricism, and it is fitting that this is where Taussig begins.

### **Faith and Scepticism can Coexist**

Lucas Bridges in Tierra Del Fuego among the Ona,<sup>52</sup> Waldemar Bogoras in Siberia among the Chukchee and Franz Boas among the Kwakiutl each report on a seemingly intractable paradox at the centre of these community’s respective shaman practices. Bridges reports a “fear of magic and the power of magicians, even on the part of those who, professing that art, must have known that they themselves are humbugs. They had great fear of the power of others.”<sup>53</sup> Says Franz Boas: “It is perfectly well known by all concerned that a great deal of the shamanistic procedure is based on fraud; still it is believed in by the shaman as well as by his patients and their friends. Exposures do not weaken the belief in the ‘true’ power of shamanism. Owing to his peculiar state of mind, the shaman himself is doubtful in regard to

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<sup>50</sup> Michael Taussig, “Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism: Another Theory of Magic,” in Nicholas B. Dirks (ed.), *In Near Ruins: Cultural Theory at the End of the Century* (University of Minnesota: Minneapolis, 1998).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>52</sup> The Ona are also known as the Selk’nam. In Taussig’s subsequent book *Defacement* he uses the name Selk’nam by convention.

<sup>53</sup> Bridges, quoted in Taussig, “Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism,” p. 225.

his powers and is always ready to bolster them up with fraud.”<sup>54</sup> In Bogoras’s account: “To describe any considerable number of tricks carried out by the shaman, both Chukchee and Eskimo, would require too much space.”<sup>55</sup> The paradox reported here Taussig relates as the coexistence of faith with scepticism, the problem being why faith in magical healing is continued simultaneous with a public knowledge that such healing practices are predicated on deception and fraud. We would do well to note that this is not an abstract problem, but a pre-eminently material problem. The locus of this paradox is the body itself: healing efficacy is addressed to the body, and so it is in and on the body that this problem of an apparent paradoxical coexistence of faith with scepticism works itself out, the abstract qualities of faith and scepticism embodied in skin and flesh.

In seeking a way into this problem Taussig casts about for “strategies one might pursue to understand the fraudulent as not only true but efficacious, the trick as technique.”<sup>56</sup> Taussig briefly identifies four strategies that we can label statistical, linguistic, institutional and mimetic. He skirts across the first three, giving each no more than a sentence or two. A statistical approach looks at quantitative proportions to suggest that “not all but only a (great) part of the shamanistic procedure” is fraudulent, hoping that “the lesser may turn out to be the more important.”<sup>57</sup> A linguistic strategy centralises the meaning of “belief” as in the conundrum of *believing* in magical healing while affirming knowledge of fraud. Such a strategy would force the distinction “between belief as a personal psychological state and belief as ‘tradition’.”<sup>58</sup> A third strategy centralises the institution of shamanism, applying procedures of verification or falsification to the efficacy of magical healing. Such an approach

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<sup>54</sup> Boas, quoted in Taussig, “Viscerality, Faith, and Scepticism,” p. 228.

<sup>55</sup> Bogoras, quoted in Taussig, “Viscerality, Faith, and Scepticism,” p. 228.

<sup>56</sup> Taussig, “Viscerality, Faith, and Scepticism,” p. 229.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

Taussig observes would likely conclude that while particular shamans may be frauds, the institution of shamanism remains valid.<sup>59</sup> Though each of these strategies can accommodate the coexistence of faith with scepticism, they require some contortion to achieve a comfortable co-existence. Yet none of these candidates hold much strategic appeal for Taussig, who opts rather for a strategy that substitutes for the word fraud the word simulation or mimesis. The practitioner of magical healing acts mimetically, rather than fraudulently, “a performance that through its perfection, spirits will copy.”<sup>60</sup> With this strategic substitution the paradox seems to evaporate; “the tricks turn out to be models or scenes for the spirits to follow, and it is the spirits who ultimately supply the cure.”<sup>61</sup> This does seem a neat manoeuvre with which Taussig unslips this knotted paradox at the limits of scientific accounts of shaman healing practices.

While this brief example is not remarkable in itself, its importance lies with its demonstration of a way of approaching things differently, thinking through things differently. It anticipates the different kind of approach the vexed question of authenticity in religion might require. Tellingly, Taussig notes “the remarkable fallout poetically no less than philosophically”<sup>62</sup> resulting from his neat substitution. This remarkability is the locus of the difference between Taussig’s preferred mimetic strategy and rejected alternatives. We have a hint at the direction Taussig is taking when he alludes to its poetic and philosophical implications. More clues emerge later when he remarks: “It is as if the paradox is an artefact of the Enlightenment, of the way of looking at human and social phenomena that comes from a disenchantment with the world and that therefore, so the stream of thought goes, spirits are to be explained rather

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 235.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 235.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

than providing the explanation.”<sup>63</sup> Emmanuel Swedenborg might have replied with the same to critics of his science of correspondences. Both Taussig’s comments anticipate that implicit and explicit in this different vision of the world is a critique of Enlightenment reason. Also implicit here is a hint as to the origins of that critique as well as the origins and formulation of this alternative vision. I state these questions here at the outset because they usefully contextualise the image of theory that will be developed in the discussion that follows. These questions of a critique implicit in what follows, a critique against an image of authenticity received as an inheritance of Enlightenment reason, will be revisited in greater detail in a moment.

In his discussion of the implications, “poetically no less than philosophically,” two key ideas emerge. The first of these is movement, what Taussig terms flow, as in the movement of the shaman as s/he performs their tricks, now understood as mimetically charged therapeutic techniques. Stanley Walens, who, following Boas, also studied Kwakiutl Indians, emphasises movement when he urges that “[the] critical part of the cure is the fluidity, skill, and physical perfection with which the shaman performs his tricks, for it is the motions of the tricks (reinforced by their exact duplication by the spirits) that effect the cure.”<sup>64</sup> It is the “motions of the tricks” that effects the cure. The trick, understood as mimetic technique, needs to be understood as movement, with an emphasis on concealment rather than deception, if we in turn are to understand healing efficacy. The second key idea in Taussig’s discussion is his notion of bodiedness, particularly a metonymic power that flows from the body. He says: “This reminder as to flow and its immense importance in building the simulacrum that is the trick that is technique has the merit of sensitising us to the play of metonymy with and extending beyond metaphor, in other words to a certain play of bodiedness, contagion, and

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 235.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

physical connection as the co-component of the mimetic alongside the idea, the symbol, the distanced visual or quasi-visual dimension of things.”<sup>65</sup>

Taussig’s discussion of the paradoxical coexistence of faith with scepticism in Kwakiutl shamanism, a discussion that usefully problematises a theoretical concern with movement in relation to the metonymic powers of the body, should be read as a precursor to and continuous with the body of theory he develops more comprehensively in his subsequent book *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labour of the Negative*.<sup>66</sup> In what essentially amounts to an anthropology of the aesthetic of sacrilege, Taussig elaborates on the poetic and philosophical fallout resulting from tracing the movements of meanings, invoking the metonymic powers of the body in making those tracings. Therefore in what follows I will draw on both his discussion of viscerality, faith and scepticism as well as his subsequent discussion of defacement, distilling from both conceptual resources that will assist with the development of theoretical tools more useful to the present inquiry into religious authenticity than those limited tools offered by a scientific, forensic method.

*Defacement* develops an anthropology of what Taussig terms “the labour of the negative,” looking at what happens when something precious is despoiled. Taussig is very aware that by looking at precious things he is moving on the terrain of the extra-ordinary, and from the outset frames his endeavour in terms of the sacred, stating his subject quite simply as “the characterisation of negation as sacred surplus.”<sup>67</sup> Taussig observes that in defacement, in the act of negation, there is a suddenness of movement, the negated object being activated and

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>66</sup> Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labour of the Negative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

becoming animated. By way of example Taussig looks at monuments. Pointing to how these usually large, cold, inanimate objects become contested and charged in the moment of their defacement, Taussig notes that this “uncanny capacity to animate dead matter” works by “magically fusing the representation with what it represents.”<sup>68</sup> Here Taussig looks at statues, that special kind of monumental representation. A particular example catches his critical eye in the incident of Australian artist Greg Taylor’s statue of the British royals naked. The statue of the queen and her consort were created in cement and painted with an iron oxide material to promote the onset of rust and decay. The statue was installed beside the waters of Lake Burley Griffin, in front of Australian’s two houses of parliament and on the opposite shore from the National War Memorial. On the one side stands the High Court and National Gallery, on the other, the National Library and National Science and Technology Centre. Installing a representation of naked and rusting British royalty on the topography of Australian colonial history and postcolonial nationalism clearly sharpened its comment, Taylor summing up: “They’re just sitting there rusting away and I love it. They don’t even know they are irrelevant.”<sup>69</sup>

And herein lies the magic that fuses the representation with what it represents: Greg Taylor loves that the Queen and her consort are irrelevantly rusting away in the centre of Australia’s postcolonial nationalism, as if it really is the queen and her husband sitting naked beside the lake. And it is in this magic, in this fusing of the representation with the represented, where we find surfacing a power that animates inanimate objects, presencing the real thing behind the object-representation. Greg Taylor’s sculpture provoked a nation-wide outrage and was variously described as “profanity,” “vulgar,” “grotesque,” “rot,” “a distasteful effigy of my

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

queen,” “a revolting display.”<sup>70</sup> Then came the attacks. Typifying the kind of response in the popular press at the time, one journalist wrote: “The attacks began on Thursday evening when the queen was beheaded. By early yesterday she had lost her legs. On Friday night vandals attacked Prince Philip’s head, leaving it dangling until event organisers took it off with a hacksaw. By yesterday his left arm also had been severed and his chest smashed.”<sup>71</sup> In these and similar descriptions, there is a certain playful oscillation, describing the representation in a way that draws on the powers of the represented in such a way as to set up a humorous, if not grizzly, contradiction. And so, invoking the fantastic imagery of that other representation of royalty described in *The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland*, the queen is beheaded, while Prince Phillip has his head smashed and finally removed with a hacksaw blade. Thus is the defacement defaced in a magical suspension of disbelief that allows the statuary to really be what it formally represents.

One could argue that the example of statues is a suggestive example of objects activated and animated by this labour of the negative because usually there is a real person signified by the monument, behind its monumental representation. This question of the magical presencing of an object behind can be perplexing in the case of representations that don’t have a tangible object-thing behind them, as is the case say with national flags or money. Picking up on this, Taussig pointedly asks: “what life, what real reality, lies behind these fetish objects spoliated by the defacing act that all the more effectively establishes their fetish status?”<sup>72</sup> Taussig suggests that the notion of fetish here involves an active forgetting; that through repeated usage, familiarity dulls us to the knowledge that “the very facts of our existence are not facts,

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

but artefacts.”<sup>73</sup> In other words, the more fixed and inflexible these meanings attached to objects become, so do they take on a more augmented fetish character, at once both becoming what they previously merely signified, thereby establishing the given facts of existence, and simultaneously masking the artifice that lies behind them.

But if such a form of fetish is a mask, such a mask is also a surface, concealing depth. Taussig posits the face as an ideal type for thinking through this problem of surface and depth, because the face that is both mask and window to the soul stands at the intersection of revelation and concealment. From here Taussig develops a notion of de-facement as a crossing of the face, a tearing at the surface, a cutting across the active-forgetting that maintains the habitual and mundane, that hardens “the mysteries and fragilities of fantasies” into “workaday facts,”<sup>74</sup> that fetishises artifice into the given facts of existence. Furthermore, Taussig suggests this notion of defacement is appealing exactly because it desires transgression. This paradoxical character at the heart of the labour of the negative Taussig names the Law of the Base; self-consciously he plays on the word base “as both substantial support and as obscene or abject which, in a cavalier gesture, I regard as the base of holiness itself.” He continues: “such a ‘law’ defines taboo not simply as prohibition ... but as the prohibition that ... contains hidden yearning, an appeal, even a demand, within itself to transgress that which it prohibits.” This, he emphasises, “is the whole and consuming point;”<sup>75</sup> his subject: “the characterisation of negation as sacred surplus.”<sup>76</sup> Defacement, spoiling something precious, desecrating something of extra-ordinary power, unmasking this artifice fetishised as the given facts of existence in the production and reproduction of

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

meaning. In the rush of surfacing, animating energy that welds the object behind the fetish mask to its representation is a momentary liberation from the power of the fetish that portrays itself as the given facts of existence. For in the movements of defacement we catch a glimpse of the internal workings of objects, a momentary vision that alerts us to the knowledge that the cement statue of the queen and her consort is produced out of a tension between an apparent surface and the movements within a hidden void, and that this is constantly reproducing itself as the statue that defaces British royalty is defaced to protect royalty, then in its defaced form becomes a monument to intolerance, before eventually being removed from the bench where weeks later people are still gathering to look at the empty seats.

Transgression that tears at the surface, that cuts into the fetish that is mask, penetrates into a hiddenness behind. Truth that is so crucial to scientific accounts of authenticity must reside here, in the hidden depths, below the surface, behind the mask. Thus we may speak of truth as secret, hidden and concealed. This seems counterintuitive; automatically we think of truth as surface, available to our ready apprehension, or at the very least we claim that truth *ought to be* transparently apprehendable. But herein lies the critique. Following Taussig, this familiar notion of truth as surface skates across the mask that is the habitual and mundane. Part of the fetish that transforms artifice into workaday facts is the deception that renders this mask as The Transparent Truth, on the surface of things. But this deception is discovered in its inability to account for mystery, for whence the animating power, the surplus of sacredness that surfaces from within defaced objects, producing a suddenness of movement in the moment of transgression? A reading of truth as secret offers a critique against a central premise of scientific methods: that truth may be arrived at by way of reason and forensic investigation. Truth as secret also offers an instructive lesson in authenticity.

Here our theorist is Walter Benjamin who suggests that the Platonic understanding of the relationship of beauty and truth is indispensable to any definition of truth itself.<sup>77</sup> For Benjamin, as for Eros, truth is not a process of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it.<sup>78</sup> Benjamin sets up a tension between a reading of truth as secret that requires a just revelation and truth as an object of knowledge. The former conveys a critique against the latter, where he suggests an error lies in the equation of truth with objective knowledge.<sup>79</sup> Benjamin's critique resonates with Taussig's approach toward understanding the paradoxical coexistence of faith with scepticism in Kwakiutl shamanism, demonstrating and amplifying the critique implicit in Taussig's choice of a mimetic strategy to understand the paradox reported by Boas and his peers over strategies that emphasise statistical, linguistic or institutional aspects. Following Benjamin, we could group these three strategies rejected by Taussig under the rubric of exposure, and associate Taussig's preferred mimetic strategy with Benjamin's notion of just revelation.

Recall Boas' observation that "exposures do not weaken the belief in the 'true' power of shamanism;"<sup>80</sup> recall Stanley Walens' centering of "the motions of the tricks"<sup>81</sup> in his account; recall Taussig's rendering of the trick as mimetic technique and the sense in which the paradox seemed to evaporate with Taussig's substitution of fraud with mimesis; recall that truth might be more usefully understood as secret, concealed in a hiddenness beneath the familiar surface of appearance, behind the fetish mask of the habitual and mundane. I think that theatricality emerges here as a key problem, specifically, a momentum that derives from

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<sup>77</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977), p. 30.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>80</sup> Boas, quoted in Taussig, "Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism," p. 228.

<sup>81</sup> Walens, quoted in Taussig, "Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism," p. 236.

the motion of a theatre of skilled revelation of skilled concealment. This statement bears some elaboration. We can begin with concealment. Shaman healing therapies involve concealment of a trick, not a deceptive trick, but a trick in which the motions of its perfect performance would cast a simulacrum about this theatre such that the trick becomes technique, activating a mimetic correspondence between shaman, spirits, and afflicted body. The motions of this trick as technique animate a momentum within this simulacrum emanating no longer from the shaman at the centre of this performance, but from within the object of this theatre itself, a theatre that now extends beyond the triangulation of shaman, spirit, and afflicted body to include the community of which they are a part. As faithful and sceptical participants in this theatre of revelation of a hiddenness activated and animated by the movement of mimetic technique, it is they who render this revelation visceral and efficacious. Where Boas and his peers erred was in understanding the concealment of a trick as a concealment of deceptive fraud. They failed to understand how a community who acknowledged the concealment of a trick might understand the trick differently, understand the skill of the movements of this performance of concealment as crucial to the perfection of a mimetic technique that would bring about a successful revelation and therewith a cure. This failing on their part inevitably led Boas and his peers to perceive an intractable paradox. But where these anthropologists and ethnographers perceive a paradox and the deception of truth, an analysis that begins with the notion of truth as secret comes to perceive instead of paradox, a dramatic theatre of skilled revelation of skilled concealment.

For Taussig secrecy is tied to sacrality in a similar way that secrecy is tied to truth.

Commenting on the theatre of skilled revelation of skilled concealment at the heart of the mimetic workings of Kwakiutl shamanism, Taussig observes: “secrecy is infinitely mysterious here because it is allied with and creative of what we might call the sacredness of

a hiddenness within the theatricality that mediates between the real and the really made up, no less than between trick and technique and therapeutic efficacy.”<sup>82</sup> This mediating role performed by this theatre, a kind of meta-theatre in which theatricality itself plays the leading role, is familiar and continuous with the preceding discussion, as is the notion of a hiddenness residing within this theatre, necessary if the movements between revelation and concealment are to be efficacious. Yet Taussig’s claim that this hiddenness is sacred in character, and further, that secrecy is creative of this sacredness, is continuous with his theorising of defacement, what he relates as sacrilegious unmasking, a transgression of the fetish surface that masks the infinite hidden depths behind the appearance of the habitual and mundane. As noted previously, in the moment of defacement there is a suddenness of movement, the defaced object animated. This Taussig suggests is because defacement releases a surplus of sacred energy from deep within the defaced object itself, a sacredness concealed behind the mask, a surfacing sacrality welling from the depths. In Taussig’s words: “it is the cut of de/facement that releases this surplus, the cut into wholeness as holiness that, in sundering, reveals, as with film montage, not only another view via another frame, but released flows of energy.”<sup>83</sup>

It will be useful to draw from the preceding discussion the salient points before continuing. The architecture of this theory is built around two key ideas distilled from Taussig’s discussion of Kwakiutl shamanism, being firstly movement, and secondly, the metonymic powers of the body. Positing the face that is both mask and window to the soul as an ideal emblem for thinking about these movements within objects, Taussig sets up a dialectic between surface and depth, where the surface of things conceals the movements within the hidden void. The truth of any object resides in these hidden depths and is thus allied with

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<sup>82</sup> Taussig, “Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism,” p. 234.

<sup>83</sup> Taussig, *Defacement*, p. 3.

secrecy. But secrecy here is allied with sacredness, a suggestion demonstrated by the problem of defacement where we are witness to a suddenness of movement as the defaced object is activated and animated by what can be characterised as a surplus of sacred energy emanating from within the defaced object itself. Defacement can be understood as sacrilegious unmasking, a tearing at the surface that releases this surplus that activates ordinary objects and, in a suddenness of movement, charges them with extra-ordinary power, as is demonstrated by the workings of sympathetic magic in the burning of national flags, money, and similar effigies. Truth that is allied with secrecy therefore requires a theatre that in the perfection of its movements will mediate between surface and depth, a mimetic theatre that can mediate the release of sacrality concealed behind the fetish surface of the habitual and mundane, and so bring about a revelation that will do justice to truth. This notion of a just revelation of truth that is concealed, a surfacing of a sacred surplus, stands in contrast to exposure. For where revelation works with a productive tension between surface and depth, bringing mysterious insides outside, exposure operates on the surface of things, denying the existence of a behindness, or at the very least calling for its abolition in a positivist claim to transparency. Revelation will do justice to truth; exposure will destroy it.

This image of a dialectical tension between surface and depth is brought into sharper focus by considering that antithetical image against which our dialectical image issues a consistent critique. A recurring theme in Taussig's theory is a critique against the scientific method that originates in Enlightenment reason. Having resolved the apparent paradox in shaman healing efficacy, he characterises that point of view that sees a paradox as an artefact of Enlightenment thinking,<sup>84</sup> as if it were an out-of-place leftover from a previous age. Of the four strategies he briefly surveys to understand the paradox, it was the fourth strategy that

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<sup>84</sup> Taussig, "Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism," p. 235.

innovatively works with mimesis, movement, and metonymy, that would provide a resolution, rather than strategies pivoted on quantitative proportions, psychological dispositions, or procedures of verification and falsification. His work on theory both in his *Viscerality, Faith and Skepticism* essay and *Defacement* is peppered with iconic contrasts between his own method and a more scientific approach, the most stark of these, borrowed from Walter Benjamin, being his contrasting of revelation with exposure. Yet I would like to return to his discussion of faith and scepticism to draw out the contrast more succinctly with the assistance of two emblematic statements he makes there. The first concerns “the slippery fish of Kwakiutl shamanism” as narrated in Boas’s anthropology; “the more you try to pin this fish down, the more it wriggles.”<sup>85</sup> The second is the notion of the driving wedge of scientific reason that lent such confidence to Evans-Pritchard in southern Sudan in the early 1930s: “In the long run, however, the ethnographer is bound to triumph. Armed with preliminary knowledge nothing can prevent him from driving a deeper and deeper wedge if he is interested and persistent.”<sup>86</sup>

Dealing with the wedge first, the wedge in question is the illuminating light of reason that, in cleaving open its object, will lay bare the truth, a getting-to-the-bottom-things that promises fraud’s exposure. The illuminating light of reason seeks to reach the end of that series of questions beginning with “why?” and thus arrive at a complete explanation that leaves nothing unaccounted. In this sense it could be said that reason’s illuminating light seeks to expose any dark corners that may hide secrets. Relating this image to the image of surface and depth outlined earlier, it could be argued that reason seeks to render depth transparent, driving its wedge ever deeper, until a moment when it has effectively reduced depth to surface, a moment of exposure that in the same instant abolishes depth, no more secrets. In this moment

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 228.

<sup>86</sup> Evans-Pritchard, quoted in Taussig, “Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism,” p. 242.

of exposure the elusive truth is apprehended transparently, is captured by scientific reason.

With no depth and no space to move, not even in secret, its movement arrested and “meaning” is apprehended. Yet it was demonstrated earlier that movement is essential to the success of this mimetic theatre. In other words, the scientific method of causal reason precludes the possibility that the paradoxical coexistence of faith with skepticism in Kwakiutl shamanism can be understood because it cannot conceive of its object as dynamic, cannot accommodate movement as a quality implicit and absolutely imperative to its authenticity.

Methodologically incapacitated in this manner, Boas, Evans-Pritchard and their generation of anthropologists and ethnographers could perceive only a succession of individuated deceptions as they drove their wedge persistently deeper, tying themselves in ever tighter knots as the paradox appeared to become ever more intractable the deeper they drove.

The slippery fish, however, presents an alternative vision of an object whose incessant movements strains the pins that try to apprehend it, slipping past the wedge that would cleave it open to illuminate its mysterious insides; an object that cannot be pinned down or otherwise apprehended without becoming something else, a specimen or exhibit perhaps; an object where movement is intrinsic to its authentic being. No doubt this is why Taussig, in examining the fallout poetically no less than philosophically of his neat substitution of fraud with mimesis that slips the knotted paradox reported by Boas, comments that “with this, perhaps, our fish would stop wriggling and start to swim,”<sup>87</sup> thereby resolving the paradox and retaining its authenticity, “a resolution I find preferable to strains and pins.”

The lesson learnt in this juxtaposition of the driving wedge and the slippery fish is that applying a scientific method founded in causal reason to a captured, arrested and apprehended

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<sup>87</sup> Taussig, “Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism,” p. 230.

Kwakiutl shamanism reveals nothing of significance about its practice. Methodologically impoverished scientific reason is forced to conclude that fraud is central to shamanism, in which case it rubs up against an affirmed faith in shamanism's efficacy, a paradoxical coexistence for which it is unable to account. For it is exactly in the movements of this theatre of trickery, the skilled revelation of skilled concealment, that the authenticity of an affirmed faith in healing's efficacy is revealed, and if its authenticity is to be witnessed, it can only be in the flow of its movements, the swimming fish.

Movement as an essential aspect of an objects' authenticity is a suggestion that resonates with a formulation famously distilled by Friedrich Nietzsche between the dionysian and apollonian impulses whose dialectic is the originator of authentic art. As with the contrast between the driving wedge and the slippery fish, Nietzsche offers a similar critique, here exemplified in his notion of the theoretical man, of whom Socrates is Nietzsche's archetype. Nietzsche argues that with Socrates came "the imperturbable belief that, by means of the clue of causality, thinking reaches to the deepest abyss of being, and that thinking is able not only to perceive being, but to correct it."<sup>88</sup> Socrates is here identified as "the mystagogue of science," the exemplar of this "profound illusion" that diverts attention away from the ecstatic conciliation between the dionysian and apollonian impulses, the primordial unity. Theoretical man is the enemy of Dionysian wisdom and art, seeking to dissolve myth and

(substitute) for metaphysical comfort an earthly consonance, ... a *deus ex machina* of its own, namely the God of machines and crucibles, that is, the powers of the genii of nature recognised and employed in the service of higher egoism; it believes in amending the world by knowledge,

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<sup>88</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy or Hellenism and Pessimism*, trans. W. A. Hausman (Edinburgh and London: T. N. Foulis, 1909), p. 116.

in guiding life but science, and that it can really confine the individual within a narrow sphere of solvable problems where he cheerfully says to life: I desire thee: it is worthwhile to know thee.<sup>89</sup>

This previously “unheard of form of existence” that would centuries later drive a wedge into Kwakiutl shamanism began its development by first diverting ancient tragedy from its origins in the dionysian-apollonian dialectic. This “restlessly onward-pressing spirit of science” annihilated myth with its displacement of metaphysical depth with an “earthly consonance” between knowledge and scientific optimism, thus driving poetry “as a homeless being from her natural ideal soil.”<sup>90</sup> Thus Nietzsche suggests: “For if the artist in every unveiling of truth remains cleaved with raptured eyes only to that which still remains veiled after the unveiling, the theoretical man, on the other hand, enjoys and contents himself with the cast-off veil, and finds the consummation of his pleasure in the process of a continuously successful unveiling through his own unaided efforts.”<sup>91</sup> It is exactly the divergent approaches to authenticity exemplified by the artist and scientific man that I want to develop through the following chapters. Yet the approach developed here is neither that of the artist nor the art historian, though it does contain elements of both. Though we will have reason to revisit Nietzsche’s distinction again, in the following chapter I want to develop these themes in a more materially grounded discussion of fakery in religion.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

### Chapter Three: Dialectics

The previous chapter explored some of the difficulties encountered when attempts are made to separate fakery from authenticity. Assessments of an object's claim to authenticity on criteria of its content or its origination turn up inconclusive. Scientific procedures of verification and falsification lead to frustration as the exclusive possibilities of either an authentic or fake status seem to slide into one another or simply move beyond the reach of forensic science. When it is considered that an object's status pertaining to authenticity or fakery is capable of changing with time, a conclusion can be drawn that a pronouncement on such status can be no more than a snapshot framed by its temporality. Yet these frustrated attempts to grasp a locus of authenticity are each founded on an assumption that authenticity and fakery are mutually exclusive categories, an assumption given expression in the image of a driving wedge that would cleave them apart. The example of Carlos Castaneda demonstrates that determining just where authenticity ends and fakery begins can be more difficult than is implied by an image of reason separating exclusive categories. The self-ironical playfulness and conspiratorial wink that appears so crucial to the successful emergence of Klingon as a written and spoken language introduces the possibility that a productive tension between the two concepts' mutual determinacy (rather than mutual exclusion) might offer a more useful direction of inquiry. Michael Taussig comes to a similar and more critical conclusion in his study of Kwakiutl shamanism, a slippery fish he prefers to see swimming that constrained by the pins of empirical reason.

From that discussion I want to carry forward into this chapter certain key ideas. The first of these is a synthesis of mutual exclusion and mutual determinacy into the relatively simpler concept of opposition. At their extreme poles, authenticity and fakery are related as opposite categories. Yet between the poles, authenticity and fakery can configure positively. Simply put, viewed from different angles, the same object, the Klingon language for example, can be both authentic and fake at the same time. This idea of opposition that accommodates different configurations of mutual determinacy I then want to relate as a dynamic tension whereby different configurations of authenticity and fakery are imagined as constellating movements of the elements that compose the image. Such constellations use the tensions of opposition and contradiction in the reconfiguring of those compositional elements. With this image of configuring elements in oppositional tension, whether abstractly conceived as constellations or concretely imagined as tricks that activate mimetic correspondences, I use the imageric language of Walter Benjamin deliberately to invoke his theory of the dialectical image.

### **3.1 Dialectics at a Standstill**

Benjamin's theory is a valuable analytical device because it draws critical attention to the fetish character of the surface of appearance, the knowledge that the facts of life, so immutable and essentialised, are actually so many artefacts, arbitrary and temporal constructions that derive their facticity only from the powers of our imagination. This power of imagination can, in a certain sense, be recognised as a religious imagination; an imagination that creatively authors the world, or at least a particular orientation toward that world, with attendant commitments. Some sense of the strength of such commitments to a particular worldview can be garnered from the previous

chapter's discussion of sacrilegious unmasking where it was shown how an animating power, what Taussig characterises as a sacred surplus, surfaces from deep within socially mediated objects in the moment of their defacement, demonstrating the object's fetish character in a suddenness of movement that brings cold, inanimate statues to life. This surfacing sacredness bursting through a tear in the transgressed surface of the habitual and mundane Taussig suggests points to "the *mysterium tremendum* of a primal religiosity."<sup>1</sup> The fetish character of artefacts that concretises them into "workaday facts" is indeed a mysterious movement. Yet the dialectical image, firmly grounded in materiality and therefore on 'this side' of mystery, may provide some critical leverage: "we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognise it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday."<sup>2</sup> Later in this chapter, the mysterious workings of the 'artefact' of authenticity will be recognised in the constellating movements of Landover Baptist Ministries, Objective Christian Ministries, Adult Christianity, and even the Internet search engine Google, as they dialectically reconfigure an image of authenticity, an image for a long time assumed to be a stable, given, fact of life.

Benjamin's dialectical image is valuable not only because its optics alerts us to the mysterious workings of the fetish and the surplus of sacrality stored therein, but also because by maintaining its gaze on material, everyday objects, it implicitly cautions thought against abstraction. The

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<sup>1</sup> Taussig, *Defacement*. The notion of a tremendous mystery at the base of sacredness is Rudolf Otto's classic understanding of religion. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* trans. John H. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1926).

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), p. 190.

visual metaphor implied in Benjamin's dialectical optic stems from its methodological imperative. This emphasis on vision in Benjamin's theory, as in the "long-sought image sphere"<sup>3</sup> opened with his dialectical optic, is appreciated by Susan Buck-Morss, who named her excellent study of Benjamin "The Dialectics of Seeing."<sup>4</sup> Here I have in mind Benjamin's unfinished work on the Paris arcades of the nineteenth century, the intellectual project for which this dialectical optic was designed. Benjamin attempted a critique of modern progress through the dialectical relation of nature and history. He thought that the distortion resulting from a conflation of nature and history into the modern concept of progress fulfilled ideological functions. Taking its cue from social Darwinists' distortion of Charles Darwin's theories of evolution,<sup>5</sup> a notion of progress that originates in industrial capitalism is inserted into this conflated formula so that progress comes to mean the progress of humanity itself, rather than merely advances in ability and technology.<sup>6</sup> This conception of progress understood the nature of history to be an unfolding of a singular, "straight or spiral,"<sup>7</sup> trajectory of infinite human perfection, the progression of a predetermined and inevitable course of constant improvement. In a fragment from the Arcades Project, Benjamin writes: "The doctrine of natural selection ... popularized the notion that progress was automatic. Furthermore, it promoted the extension of the concept of progress to the entire realm of human activity."<sup>8</sup> Progress itself came to be identified with "a measure of the span

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 58-59.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 260.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, "N: [Theoretic of Knowledge; Theory of Progress]," trans. Leigh Hafrey and Richard Sieburth, *The Philosophical Forum*, vol. 15, no. 1-2 (Fall-Winter 1983-84), p. 25 (N11a.1).

separating a legendary beginning from a legendary end.”<sup>9</sup> As such, progress enters into the world of myth where the passage of time takes the form of predetermination; the course of events is said to be “predestined by the gods, written in the stars, spoken by oracles, or inscribed in sacred texts.”<sup>10</sup> Against the utopian image of a heaven-on-earth promised by progress Benjamin posits the direct counter-image: “Modernity, the time of Hell.”<sup>11</sup> Benjamin characterises the nineteenth century’s Golden Age as a catastrophe [ref: 1935 expose, n7] and progress as the catastrophe’s eternal return; “the fact that ‘everything just goes on’ is the catastrophe.”<sup>12</sup> Benjamin’s characterising of modernity in mythical terms continued a nineteenth century German philosophical critique that would culminate mid-twentieth century with Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno’s classic, “Dialectic of Enlightenment,” but still feature prominently in the work of later theorists, most significantly, Jürgen Habermas. Yet Benjamin’s approach to the myth of automatic, historical, progress was unique because he intended to articulate his critique with the material objects of progress themselves: “The work must raise to the very highest level the art of quoting without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately linked to that of montage.”<sup>13</sup> In another fragment he states: “The method of this project: literary montage. I need say nothing. Only show.”<sup>14</sup> In this sense, Benjamin’s ideal book would consist exclusively of quotations, with no commentary.<sup>15</sup> Such quotation of material objects (“the trivia, the trash”) Benjamin assures he

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 27 (N13.1).

<sup>10</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 78.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin, quoted in Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin, quoted in Jürgen Habermas, “Consciousness Raising or Redemptive Critique – The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin,” *New German Critique*, vol. 17 (Spring 1979), p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin, “N,” p. 3 (N1.10).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 5 (N1a.8).

<sup>15</sup> Françoise Meltzer, “Acedia and Melancholia,” in Michael P. Steinberg (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 162-163.

does not want to inventory, “but let it come into its own in the only way possible: use it.”<sup>16</sup>

Benjamin’s idea of quotation is the literary equivalent of configuring constellations where the constellated elements are allowed to speak for themselves, a method of literary montage that allows the object to come into its own. This idea of forming montages by “quoting” material objects fits into what Benjamin calls the pedagogic side of the Arcades project: “to train our image making faculty to look stereoscopically and dimensionally into the depths of the shadows of history.”<sup>17</sup>

With this theoretical innovation of quoting material objects to image the dialectic, Benjamin drew an instructive lesson from Surrealism. He thought that the surrealist techniques of deliberate anachronism and montage allowed them to occupy a threshold between what he termed waking and dreaming.<sup>18</sup> The origin of Benjamin’s concept of dream versus waking consciousness probably comes from Marx’s correspondence with Arnold Ruge. Benjamin prefaces his index of notes from the Arcades Project dealing with the theory of knowledge and the theory of progress with the following extract from Marx’s correspondence: “The reformation of consciousness lies *solely* in our waking the world ... from its dream about itself.”<sup>19</sup> Following Marx, Benjamin characterises as “dream consciousness” the uncritical, non-dialectical mode of thinking that accedes to a mythical, predetermined notion of progress, an ideological mode of thought that confuses technical progress with the “nature of history.” Dream consciousness then is a kind of

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<sup>16</sup> Benjamin, “N,” p. 5 (N1a.8).

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin, quoting Rudolf Borchardt, *Ibid.*, p. 2 (N1.8).

<sup>18</sup> Ackbar Abbas, “On Fascination: Walter Benjamin’s Images,” *New German Critique*, vol. 48 (Fall 1989), p. 47; see Benjamin, “Surrealism,” p. 178.

<sup>19</sup> Marx, letter to Arnold Ruge, quoted in Benjamin, “N,” p. 1, original emphasis. See Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Chapter 8: “The Dream World of Mass Culture.”

false consciousness. Benjamin wanted to configure dialectical constellations by quoting the material objects that gave life to myth and thereby exert a critical leverage in “the multitudinous images flooding back and forth”<sup>20</sup> to awaken this dream consciousness. Thus Benjamin says: “The utilisation of dream elements upon waking is the canon of dialectics.”<sup>21</sup>

Benjamin’s theory of the dialectical image is a useful approach to the problem of authenticity in Internet religion because it takes fakery seriously. It holds out the possibility that fakery may actually perform a kind of religious work, rather than existing as a kind of frivolous and silly sideshow to religion with a capital “R”. Taking religion seriously entails recognising that fakes that are copies of authentic things are not merely imitations of religious forms, say the institution of a clerical order or the veneration of one or more deities. Crucial to the success and persistence of fake religions is that its imitations must include the religious claims represented by formal objects, of which the most essential and powerful is the claim to authenticity. Fake things don’t merely imitate authentic things; they imitate authentic things’ claim to being authentic. This is why fake things deserve serious attention, because fakery destabilises and subverts the power of authenticity to put forth its own image. This is the same reason why authentic religions, in the sense of religious objects whose claim to authenticity is taken seriously, refuse to treat fake religions seriously and dismiss them as nagging irritations that get in the way of their authentic, serious, religious work. Looking at fakery through the optics of Benjamin’s dialectics offers a way to trace the implications of fake religion through the twists and turns of its subversive imitations to the critical moment of recognition when the dialectic is “saturated with tensions.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, “Surrealism,” p. 178.

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin, “N,” p. 10 (N4.4).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 24 (N10a.3).

In this moment, “found wherever the tension between dialectical oppositions is greatest,”<sup>23</sup> the configuration of fake and authentic “flash into a constellation,”<sup>24</sup> marking “the caesura in the movement of thought.”<sup>25</sup>

This is Benjamin’s notion of dialectics at a standstill. It marks the moment when the dialectical image appears, a moment “identical with the ‘moment of recognition,’ in which things put on their true – surrealististic – face.”<sup>26</sup> Here Benjamin is alluding to the threshold between dreaming and waking that he thought the surrealists managed to occupy and for which effort he commended them. Yet Benjamin also criticised the surrealists for not going far enough. While he drew inspiration from the surrealist techniques of montage and deliberate anachronism that alerted attention to the dream nature of the materials so juxtaposed, he remained critical of what he perceived as the surrealists’ inability to get out of the dream world and back into waking consciousness.<sup>27</sup> Benjamin’s practice of historical materialism wanted to use the energies released in this transgressive moment of waking recognition for critical, transformative action, “to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution.”<sup>28</sup> This is the important next step that the Surrealists’ failed to take: the appreciation that this moment of recognition involves not one, but two transformations. The first is the transformation of the object of perception, a transformation successfully problematised by the surrealists’ liminal position on the threshold. The second is a

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 7 (N2a.3).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 24 (N10a.3)

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 9 (N3a.3).

<sup>27</sup> Abbas, “On Fascination,” p. 49.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin, “Surrealism,” p. 190.

transformation of the recognising self, of “the very percept of recognition.”<sup>29</sup> This is not merely an abstract theoretical idea, but is also very much embodied, as Taussig’s discussion of Kwakiutl shamanism so emphatically demonstrates – deceptive tricks are transformed into prototypical healing therapies designed for spirits to copy. The first kind of transformation, that of the object of perception, will be the broad subject of this chapter. The discussion will trace the reconfiguring movements of the dialectic and map the transformations of objects as those movements constellate a critical image. The second kind of transformation, that of the recognising self, will be the broad subject of Chapter Four.

In tracing the dialectic, the discussion will follow reconfiguring movements through three case studies of websites that claim an authentic religious character. The tracing begins with Landover Baptist Church. Landover is a parody of Baptist fundamentalism in the U.S.A. and is the creation of an organisation calling itself Americhrist, Ltd. A Terms of Service Agreement on their website runs to some 1300 words and asserts that by browsing the Landover website, the browser, or more technically, the user, enters into an agreement with Landover Baptist Church or Americhrist Ltd. whereby they consent to the terms and conditions outlined in this document.<sup>30</sup> These include limitations on the use of content and materials, a disclaimer that disavows Landover Baptist Church of any warranties whatsoever, and a reservation of the right to use any ideas or manuscripts submitted to the site without acknowledging or compensating its author, and an automatic transfer of ownership of such articles from the submitter to Landover Baptist Ministries where such submissions are used. The Terms of Service Agreement specifically asks

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 40.

<sup>30</sup> The Terms of Service Agreement can be found at <http://www.landoverbaptist.org/tos.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

users not to submit any unsolicited material to the website. Yet for this discussion, the most significant statement in the Terms of Service Agreement is that “The Landover Baptist Church is a complete work of fiction. It is a satire/parody.” We can reasonably assume that the Terms of Service Agreement is an authentic disclaimer and that the Landover website does not refer to a real congregation existing on 35 acres in Iowa, USA, as is referred to in the site’s main introduction. Significantly, if the content and claims contained in this Service Agreement are authentic, all other content on the website is admitted to be entirely fictitious. That said, Landover is beyond reasonable doubt a fake Baptist ministry.

What is so interesting about Landover is the response its website provokes among browsers, almost all of whom seem taken in by its deceptive fakery, at least on their first visit. This is certainly testimony to the success of their parody and sets the stage for the next movement in this dialectical choreography. A website calling itself Objective Christian Ministries that claims to be the online presence of an offline fundamental Baptist congregation, has launched a campaign to shutdown the Landover website. Landover responds by parodying their campaign in an article calling for the removal from the Internet of a progressive Christian website. Then things take a sudden turn when it is widely claimed that the Objective website is a fraud, a hoax, a “meta-parody” of Landover, and further, that it is conceived and managed by Americhrist, the same group claiming credit for the Landover site. The final movement in this tracing comes in the example of Steve van Nattan whose critique of Baptist fundamentalism likens their leadership to fascists in league with Satan. In Van Nattan’s view, he is defending the authentic fundamentalist faith against the fascist’s deceptive brand that tricks zealous Christians into championing Satan. A crucial moment comes when Van Nattan is discounted as another invention of Americhrist, prompting a browser’s lament that she has lost the ability to discern a distinction between

authentic and fake things. Though the dialectic can certainly be traced further, for the purposes of this discussion, the case-study will stop here. With this case-study, I want to draw attention to a quality of mysteriousness, in the sense of “not knowing,” that seems to be crucial to the working of the dialectic. Rather than understand mystery as an obstacle to the discovery of an object’s authentic status, as a forensic, scientific method conceives it, it may be that mystery is the crucial quality that allows authenticity the possibility to reveal itself through the subjectivity of the recognising self. This is the argument proposed in the present chapter and continued in the next.

### **3.2 Flooding**

The website of Landover Baptist Church promises “a Christian perspective on local, national, and world news!” The website describes Landover as,

a Bible-believing, Fundamentalist, Independent Baptist Church. We are 125,000 members strong. Our Church Campus is located in Freehold, Iowa and rests on 35 acres of some of the most beautiful country you'd ever care to set your eyes upon. Our church holds 23 paid pastors, 124 paid deacons, 343 full time staff members, LCA (Landover Christian Academy), LCU (Landover Christian University), 12 fully equipped chapels, Four 2,000 seat sanctuaries, Two 5,000 seat main sanctuaries, the world's largest Christian Mall, a Christian Amusement Park (Landover Bible Theme Park and Red Sea World), A PGA 18 Hole Golf Course, 3 Fitness Centres, 4 Olympic sized swimming pools, Landover Village, Landover Towers, Landover Retirement Community, Centre For 2 Churches On Every City Block Foundation, Leviticus Landing (A Gated Christian Community), Exodus Acres (Silver Gated Community), 27 Developments, Landover All Purpose Multi-Temple, Spa and Resort Centre,

Fire Department, 100,000 seat amphitheatre, 12 Television studios, 2 radio stations, A Christian Circus Camp, Retreat Centre for Republican Candidates, 3 Corporate Christian Office Parks, hot springs, 8 cemeteries, and 243 fully certified Christian police officers.<sup>31</sup>

Landover Baptists claim to believe in “the WHOLE Bible (1611 KJV)”<sup>32</sup> (original emphasis). They see the strict adherence to and practice of this belief as the key to salvation in Jesus Christ: “As most churches liberalize themselves and reject the commandments written by God in the Holy Bible, the Landover Baptist Church continues to do exactly what scripture teaches every Christian to do. And that is to keep the temple of the living God a clean vessel, untarnished by even a hint of fellowship with the unrighteous.”<sup>33</sup> Practically, this means that “the unsaved” are not allowed to enter Landover’s churches. This “Bible-based policy against the unsaved” asserts that the unsaved defile “God’s vessel” and make the church a less than perfectly safe environment for Christians to practice their faith. “Why would an unsaved person want to go to church anyway? ... Church is not a place for unsaved people. It is a place for Christians to gather and be edified in Bible teaching. It is a place for Christian worship and fellowship. An unsaved person wouldn't feel comfortable in Church. ... If you want to get someone saved, do it outside of the church. It's called ‘evangelism’.”<sup>34</sup>

Landover claims to evangelise to “over 5000 souls a month outside our church” through 16 different strategic ministries. For example, Homosexual Outreach Ministry Operation was started in 1995 by “ex-sodomite, Brother Bobby” and operates a Landover extension church in San

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.landoverbaptist.org/beliefs.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

<sup>32</sup> “1611 KJV” refers to the King James Version of the bible inaugurated in England in 1611.

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.landoverbaptist.org/beliefs.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.landoverbaptist.org/news0100/unsaved.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003)

Francisco. This ministry is supplemented by the Homosexual Deprogramming Ministry and Christians Are Saving Homosexuals. The ministry to gay men has taught Landover the lesson that if “God can change the behaviour of homosexuals, He has shown the people of this church that He can change the behaviour of Negroes as well,” hence the Ex-Negro Ministry. Other ministries include Christian Crackwhore Ministry that offers “Compassionate Conservativism to Crack whores,” the Personal Testimony Improvement Centre that “allows church members to intentionally backslide in order to gain high impact testimonies from the Lord,” Bringing Integrity to Christian Homemakers, a Puppet Ministry, and a Christian Hypnotist.

The extent and success of Landover’s various ministries is surely attributable to its dedicated staff, “the greatest Church staff in all Christendom.” Pastor Deacon Fred is both pastor and deacon of the church, heads Media Relations at Landover, and is official spokesperson to the unsaved world. Saved at the age of four years, Pastor-Deacon Fred holds a degree in Applied Presuppositionalism, four degrees in theology, a degree in Angelology, a PhD in Apologetics, a Masters degree in Post Umbilicism, and a BA in Elementary Education. Pastor Deacon Fred is assisted by Rev. Wilkins who is completing his fourth book titled, “For the 100<sup>th</sup> Time, Here’s the Gospel.” Rev. Wilkins also heads up the “One Church On Every City Block Foundation.” Little Rev. Nathan De’Angelo is Landover’s youngest minister. Rev. De’Angelo first came to notice at age four years for his tremendous talents at scripture memorisation and recitation. He spent three years at Landover’s Gifted and Talented Fundamentalist Baptist Children’s Retreat Centre before entering the seminary at age seven years to become a fully licensed Baptist minister two years later.

The Ladies of Landover deserve special attention, not least for their alleged influence in the halls of political power. The Ladies of Landover was founded 200 years ago as the Landover Ladies Club. Since its humble beginnings in a prayer group meeting, the Landover Ladies Club and later the Ladies of Landover have grown in influence, spending “an annual budget in the millions.”<sup>35</sup> One member of the United States Congress reportedly has described them as “a political force to be reckoned with” and they are widely held to be “the largest single voting force in the United States today.”<sup>36</sup> The power and success of the Ladies is largely attributable to the tireless work of a few key women. Mrs. Taffy Davenport-Crocket is granddaughter of Georgia Sue Gaines in whose memorial honour the prayer meeting that became the Landover Ladies Club was established. Mrs. Davenport-Crocket, or Sister Taffy, as she is known to “friends of Jesus,” holds a Doctorate in Christian Home Economics and a Masters Degree in Women’s Leadership from Landover Biblical College. Most recently, Mrs. Davenport-Crocket was titled ‘Mrs. Christian USA’. Judy O’Christian, we are told, spends 16-20 hours per day rebuking lost souls and returning them to the fold, or discarding them to Satan, “depending on the severity of their actions against God.”<sup>37</sup> Mrs. O’Christian has no formal theological training, but instead received “the holy gift of Knowledge” directly from God, earning her a Doctorate in Spontaneous Theology. Mrs. O’Christian is Board President of the Ladies of Landover ‘First Stone’ Club, a board member of the Anti-Sodomites League, and Co-chair with Mrs Davenport-Crocket of the Ladies of Landover. In contrast to the characters of Taffy Davenport-Crocket and Judy O’Christian, Mrs. Betty Bowers is archetypal in her materialism and utterly decadent in her luxury. Before turning to God, Mrs. Bowers spent many years selling multi-million dollar

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<sup>35</sup> <http://www.landoverbaptist.org/thestaff/ladies> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> <http://judyochristian.8m.com> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

mansions. Mrs. Bowers recounts that “God called me out of pandering to the needs of the inexplicably wealthy and promised that if I devoted my fabulous business instincts to Him, I would one day never have to share a formal, Italianate living room, much less a German SUV, with someone more wealthy than I. Praise the Lord!”<sup>38</sup> Thus Mrs. Bowers established the Christian Crackwhore Ministry: “As soon as I realized how much cash these industrious little tramps were dealing in, it wasn't long before I introduced them to the one thing that could save their sullied souls – tithing.”<sup>39</sup> The Ministry now operates franchises in all the States of the US, except Nevada, and recently opened an international Franchise in Bangkok, Thailand, netting Mrs. Bowers \$200 million on its initial public offering. Mrs. Betty Bowers Ministries Holdings exercises complete ownership of its privately-held subsidiaries; Bringing Integrity To Christian Homemakers, Saving Love Until The Sacrament, Christians Are Saving Homosexuals, Femininity Rescues All Unladylike Dykes, Traditional-families Raging Against Sluts & Homos, and Christian Religious Ideas Moulding Education.

Recalling the Service Agreement outlined earlier, we know that Landover Baptist Church is a parody website, an imitation of authentic fundamental Baptists. So what of authentic Baptist ministries does Landover imitate? Landover begins by imitating Southern Baptists' strict distinction between the saved and the unsaved. Recalling Landover's Bible-based policy against the unsaved, evangelism is the religious activity reserved for this category of people. To this end, Landover operates an extensive range of evangelical projects and ministries to witness to the unsaved. Yet each of these establishes a platform for a further ridiculing of southern Baptists. Landover ridicules southern Baptists' social and political conservatism (Homosexual Outreach

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<sup>38</sup> <http://www.landoverbaptist.org/thestaff/ladies/bowers.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Ministry Operation; Brewers Homosexual Deprogramming Ministry; Christians Are Saving Homosexuals; Ex-Negro Ministry), the extensive financial interests often tied up with church ministries (Christian Crackwhore Ministry), the zeal that informs a by-any-means-necessary evangelical enthusiasm (Richardo Frezno, Christian Hypnotist), and the folly of the southern Baptists laity (Puppet Ministry). Landover also uses acronyms to ridicule Baptists; Homosexual Outreach Ministry Operation becomes HOMO, Christians Are Saving Homosexuals becomes CASH, Bringing Integrity to Christian Homemakers becomes BITCH and so on. Landover also ridicules hypocrisy in Baptism with the Personal Testimony Improvement Centre. Recalling the infamous incidents of Rev. Billy Graham's adventures with prostitutes, the Centre "allows church members to intentionally backslide in order to gain high impact testimonies for the Lord."<sup>40</sup> Within the category of "the saved", Landover describes characters in the congregation that in their achievements and activities would seem to vie for the title of "the most saved." Landover's parody uses various devices as indicators here, with each measure parodying an attribute of real southern Baptist fundamentalists. Consider the number of titles and degrees held by Pastor Deacon Fred, Sister Taffy, and Judy O'Christian. Landover parodies so-called mail-order titles to suggest that such titles are gimmicks employed to enhance the credibility to Baptist ministers. Yet Landover's parody carries such titular usages to the extreme, for example Judy O'Christian's Doctorate in Spontaneous Theology. The example of Little Nathan De'Angelo ridicules Baptists' tendency to cite the youth of the people through whom God supposedly works as evidence of God's unlimited powers: he must be a very powerful god if he can equip a nine year old child with the knowledge to preach his holy word. The effect is to elevate the ideal of Christian piety to absurd heights. A related device used in this parody is lineage. This device goes to the heart of

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.landoverbaptist.org/ministries.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

familial networks of the southern states and the so-called Bible Belt states of the U.S. Landover Church is over 200 years old, and the Ladies of Landover is proud to trace its origins back three generations. We are repeatedly told that Sister Taffy, the current co-president of the Ladies of Landover, is the granddaughter of Georgia Sue Gaines. In important ways, this fundamentalist Christian ministry is portrayed as matriarchal: it appears that women are more active in ministry work and substantially more zealous in their Christian faith. This is itself ironic and no less satirical since Landover repeatedly affirms the fundamentalist view that men are superior to women, even posting a news item to the effect that theological deliberations have established that since women were created to be companions to men, women “probably don’t have souls”. Upon entering the kingdom of heaven, men will no longer have need for such companionship: “women, like the members of the animal kingdom, will fall by the wayside.”<sup>41</sup> The corollary is a disguised homoeroticism implicit in a heaven where men are companions to each other. A theme running throughout Landover’s parody is that of the proximity of Baptist faith to financial and political power. Consider the litany of assets and prestige attached to possession of, or proximity to, this wealth: 12 fully equipped chapels, Four 2,000 seat sanctuaries, Two 5,000 seat main sanctuaries, and a 100,000 seat amphitheatre. Consider the various ‘villages’ and ‘gated’ communities: Landover Village, Landover Towers, Landover Retirement Community, Leviticus Landing, Exodus Acres, and Apostles Grove that offers “Fine Equestrian Estates For Discriminating Christians.”<sup>42</sup> The character of Betty Bowers, multi-million dollar real-estate dealer-turned-entrepreneurial-Baptist who leads the unsaved to the Lord via tithing, is particularly useful in this aspect of the parody. Betty Bowers has her own website, linked to the Landover site, at [www.bettybowers.com](http://www.bettybowers.com) where she is proudly proclaimed “America’s Best Christian” above a

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<sup>41</sup> <http://www.landoverbaptist.org/news0500/femsoul.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.sistertaffy.com/MarlaJenningsRealty.htm> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

banner that begins: “love the sinner, hate their clothes.” She is portrayed as narcissistic, self-deceptively sophisticated, and ultimately trashy. This materialism in the character of Betty Bowers is echoed in the gambling resort “The Golden Plate, Christian Casino and Resort,”<sup>43</sup> where all losses are counted as tithes paid to Jesus; as Pastor Deacon Fred says: “quite frankly, if a Christian sitting at one of our tables is willing to tithe away their entire life savings, we’re not going to stop them.” At The Golden Plate “it’s always Jesus who wins.” Much of this parody surely has in mind Rev. Pat Robertson, the firebrand southern Baptist minister and televangelist who owns a racehorse.<sup>44</sup>

But the ongoing aspect of Landover’s parody is found in its new articles, film reviews, sermons and online merchandise, and it is these often updated and added to categories of content that ensure Landover’s longevity and impact on authentic religion. Crucially, although Landover’s terms of Service Agreement specifically admits that it is a fiction and entirely made-up, few users actually read this document. This is apparent from the amount of mail the Landover site receives and that they dutifully publish: every published letter writer takes Landover to task for their invective speech and distortion of Christian teachings. In other words, authors of these letters believe the Landover web site is authentic, in the sense that they take the site’s claims seriously. Take for example the response to a review of the recent film version of Tolkein’s classic *The Twin Towers*, the second in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, published in December 2002.<sup>45</sup> The review argues that on the one hand, the gratuitous violence of the film is appealing to true Christians because it is suggestive of God’s final judgement, “the glorious barbecue of burning

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<sup>43</sup> <http://www.landoverbaptist.org/news0502/goldenplate.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

<sup>44</sup> See Cal Thomas, “Pat Robertson’s High Horse,” *The Washington Times*, 29 April 2002, available at <http://www.washtimes.com/commentary/20020429-9022051.htm> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.landoverbaptist.org/news1202/twotowers.html> (accessed: 20 May, 2003)

flesh that God has promised for all those who don't worship Jesus." On the other hand, this violent appeal masks a hidden sexual agenda advocated by the hobbit characters of Tolkien's epic. Pastor Deacon Fred points to the "sinful act" that "led to both their palms *and* feet becoming so hairy" (original emphasis). Furthermore, this agenda is homosexual: "sodomy is now suggested in nearly every scene where the two creatures appear together." The twin towers themselves represent the aroused genitalia of the two most powerful beings in the movie, "The imagery is kept discrete only by the merciful fact that both creatures are uncircumcised." This review attracted an avalanche of letters to the site.<sup>46</sup>

The responses can be classified into four broad themes; those that express indignation and outrage, those that take Landover's interpretation of The Twin Towers to task by trying to persuade them otherwise, those that are simply confused and not sure whether the article or church is serious in what it is saying, and those that refute Landover's claim to Christian authenticity. The first two themes pertain more directly to the review article, the third and fourth to the website in general. Yet more often than not, offence at the review article served as a springboard for a more sustained critique of the Christian claims of the site as a whole. Typical of letters expressing outrage is an excerpt from 'Gogeta's' letter: "Holy shit man, this isn't a fucking review of The Lord Of The Ring, this is just a sorry excuse to show that you're homophobic ... if you're not gay then why do you care if Frodo and Sam are? I bet you like little boys!!!!!" Brian Luining says, "to compare [the movie] with some sexual background is pretty sick. I think you should seek help, because if a person like yourself sees the filthy and dirty in each and

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<sup>46</sup> Landover has published about 30 messages from its December mailbox, "a small sample" of the total received. These can be read at <http://www.landoverbaptist.org/mail/1202.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003). The extracts quoted in this discussion can all be found here.

everything, there is something wrong with your mind.” Other responses sought to engage Landover’s interpretation seriously. One anonymous submission asks: “why is this website the only place I’ve seen that relates LOTR to homosexuality? I can’t remember the topic coming up at all when we studied the books at school.” James Gayson argues, “The things you wrote on the Lord of the Rings have no honest justification. The author of the series J. R. R. Tolkien was a Christian. The hobbits have no homosexual attributes.”<sup>47</sup> These responses appear confused and incredulous and unable to make sense of what they have stumbled across. Other responses, particularly from Christians, are addressed to the Landover site in its entirety and are angry. Cody and Emily Van Pelt charge, “You give us Christians a bad name. Have you read the Bible ...” Tina Buchanan thinks Pastor deacon Fred is “the most ignorant person I have ever seen. You need to pray long and hard ...” And Michael Berry of Kansas City pleads: “Please remove this insane site from the Internet. You people are monsters! ... You can still redeem yourselves in a real and meaningful sense by cleaning your thoughts of this kind of destructive superstition, myth and supernaturalism.” In an extract worth quoting at length, S. G. challenges Landover’s understanding of the messianic promise of Jesus Christ and claims that Landover is a fraud in need of a revival:

You, sir, are in need of a revival! The welcome banner to your site states that you are ‘The Largest, Most Powerful Assembly Of Worthwhile People To Ever Exist’ That is a load of crock! All, not one or two, or a select few, but ALL PEOPLE ARE WORTHWHILE! GOD MADE ALL PEOPLE AND ALL PEOPLE DESERVE TO BE TREATED EQUALLY! ... I believe that you are a fraud! (original emphasis)

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<sup>47</sup> This claim begs the obvious question: what are the attributes that describe an authentic homosexual?

In fact, so angry has the Christian response been at Americhrist's imitation of their faith through websites such as [landoverbaptist.org](http://landoverbaptist.org), [bettybowers.com](http://bettybowers.com) and [sistertaffy.com](http://sistertaffy.com) that a Baptist Ministry called Objective: Christian Ministries has launched a campaign against Landover. Called Objective: Landover Baptist Shutdown, Objective has dedicated a page on their website to a campaign to remove Landover and Americhrist from the Internet.<sup>48</sup> From the Progress Report posted on their website detailing the successes and failures of the protracted battle against Landover, it seems that Objective has been campaigning at least since March 2000, the first entry in the journal, though from the context of that entry it is apparent that the campaign had been operating for some time previously.<sup>49</sup> The progress report reads like a timeline of an epic struggle over religious authenticity, marking both highs and lows as authenticity, here signified by Objective who would seek to defend it, wrestles to break free of fakery, signified by Landover, whose imitation seems to stick to authenticity like a shadow.

Objective sees the Landover website as "a blasphemous atrocity."<sup>50</sup> Objective acknowledges that Landover is "all make believe" and cite this as their reason for objecting to it: "Landover is trying to pass itself off as a real Baptist church in order to spread misconceptions about Christians in general and Baptists in particular." Landover is not a Christian website, but rather one dedicated to "anti-Christian hate-speech." Neither is Landover satire: "real satire serves a social good,

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<sup>48</sup> The webpage can be found at <http://crossspot.net/objective/shutdown.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

<sup>49</sup> The first entry in the Progress Report, dated 1 March, 2000, reads: "It is clear that we've got Landover on the defensive. Just recently, our protests have resulted in them being forced to add a disclaimer on entrance to their site. While this is a victory for our side, it is still not enough. The disclaimer makes no mention of the site's deception (the whole point of our protest), it merely warns away children under 18 - which we all know will only make them all the more desirous to view the site." The entry concludes with the final stanza of The Lord's Prayer.

<sup>50</sup> <http://crossspot.net/objective/shutdown.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

highlighting wrong-doing via exaggeration.”<sup>51</sup> With Landover’s satire however, there is no social good. It is “more dangerous than any pornography site since it leads people to reject their only hope for salvation!”<sup>52</sup> More than this, Landover deliberately perverts Jesus’ message “so as to make it unpalatable to people ignorant of the Lord.”<sup>53</sup> “What Landover is attempting to do is not humour, but to trick people into hating Christians and Christ.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, although Objective accepts that Landover is not an authentic church, it resists the real consequences that flow from its mimicry, consequences it perceives as anti-Baptist – and probably rightly so.

By way of contrast, the Objective website links to baptist.org, helpfully adding: “this is what a real Baptist website looks like.”<sup>55</sup> The contrast of Landover’s website with baptists.org presented a particular problem to Objective over the course of a year from March 2002. In that month a search for ‘Baptist’ in the popular search engine google.com positioned landoverbaptist.org at number three in their ranking of sites most relevant to the search term. Yet by September 2002, Google ranked Landover’s website number one. And much to Objective’s consternation, “Google still refuses our request to rectify this situation.”<sup>56</sup> Thus Google, “the de facto gatekeepers to the Internet” according to Objective, became the de facto arbiters of religious authenticity online. But the January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2003, entry in the Progress Report cautiously celebrates that the website of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) has taken the number one position in Google’s ranking, displacing Landover’s website to the number two position. Objective claims that this victory was

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<sup>51</sup> <http://crossspot.net/objective/faq.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

<sup>52</sup> <http://crossspot.net/objective/shutdown.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

<sup>53</sup> <http://crossspot.net/objective/faq.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> <http://crossspot.net/objective/shutdown.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

<sup>56</sup> <http://crossspot.net/objective/progress.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

achieved by using the same strategy Landover allegedly used to win the number one position: members of the SBC were encouraged to place more prominent links to other 'authentic' Baptist websites on their own site. Thus "Google's software was forced to return the SBC to the top spot." But this is a cautious celebration; "the battle is not won" – "how long before Google – who are known to have secular leanings – decide to change their software so that it favours Landover?" Interestingly, an option to search the Objective website with the Google search engine is provided at the bottom of each of their web pages.

This titanic struggle over religious authenticity has not been confined to the Internet. The progress report claims that Objective has pursued their aim to remove Landover from the Internet through the channels of the World Intellectual Property Organisation, based in Geneva. The substance of their case is reported to be that Landover makes illegal use of Baptist intellectual property. Their claim took some encouragement from the similar case of Jerry Falwell who claimed that a website parodying him violated a trademark on his name.<sup>57</sup> Other avenues of protest have seen pickets outside what was thought to be the San Francisco office of Americhrist Ltd. The picket is reported at the March 24<sup>th</sup> 2000 entry in the Progress Report, with an accompanying picture of placard-waving demonstrators. The report also admits however, that the offices turned out to be those of an orthodontist unrelated to Americhrist or Landover; "our undercover sources were mistaken." The June 7<sup>th</sup> 2000 entry reports that Objective was fed false information and that "we think we may have a traitor in our midst."

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<sup>57</sup> Fox News, available at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,49585,00.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

### 3.3 Flooding Back

For all the indignation and spirited determination to shut down the Landover Baptist website, Objective does not seem to have met with much success. If anything, their efforts appear to have strengthened Landover. Amid all the attraction that Objective's campaign has drawn, a website calling itself Operation: Objective Landover Baptist Shutdown has emerged.<sup>58</sup> This website dedicates itself as "an organisation" to stopping "other 'organisations' from silencing other people's words and opinions."<sup>59</sup> If this sounds a little contradictory, an explanation is provided: "We would not be targeting Objective: Landover Baptist Shutdown if it wasn't for the simple fact that they are trying to shutdown a website that is expressing their opinion, if it is even their opinion." Exactly who's opinion is at stake here - Objective? Landover? Operation: Objective? - is not entirely clear. Yet what I find appealing about this statement is its demonstration of the kinds of paradoxical patterns of thought imitation reproduces. And the pivot seems to remain the increasingly vexed problem of authenticity, as when the author of the Operation website claims that many of the writers of the Landover website are Christians, even Baptists, and follows this by claiming that Jim Carlson, the campaign organiser at Objective, and his colleagues "are false Christians." Amid these imitations and reversals, it is wonderfully complimentary to note that the Operation website is signed by Rev. Jorge Pataki, seemingly an imitation of New York's Republican Governor George Pataki.

This kind of fakery by impersonation is not limited to the example of Rev. Jorge Pataki, if this is an example of impersonation. Over the years that Objective has waged its campaign, messages

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<sup>58</sup> See <http://www.oobbs.tripod.com> (accessed: 26 April 2003)

<sup>59</sup> <http://www.oobbs.tripod.com/about.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

have appeared on discussion boards on the Landover website and elsewhere in cyberspace purported to be posted by Jim Carlson. As a result, the Objective homepage posted a warning framed in a large red box that begins, "BEWARE OF IMPERSONATORS." The notice continues:

...Certain elements in the anti-Christian movement have decided to launch a character assassination campaign against Jim Carlson and other OBJECTIVE: Ministries members. This campaign is being waged in the Landover guest book, as well as forums on third party websites, and consists of impersonated messages involving all manner of obscenities. This is the sort of villainy that we have come to expect from the goons behind Landover. *Any message you read claiming to be from Jim Carlson or any other OBJECTIVE: Ministries member that contains vulgarities, sexual innuendo, bad poetry, or other un-Christian sentiments is to be considered a FRAUD and ignored.* (original emphasis)

The flooding of images back across the surrealist threshold becomes a steady flow in the next reconfiguring movement of authenticity and fakery. Landover has published an article calling for the shutdown of the popular website Adult Christianity, supposedly the creation of Poppy Dixon, a thirty-something, California-based web designer.<sup>60</sup> In a brief biography available on the Adult Christianity website,<sup>61</sup> it is reported that she was born and raised in Idaho. She was "bullied" into accepting Jesus Christ as her personal saviour at the age of 11 years. She was involved with a Christian youth group through her teenage years until she began attending university at age 17. At age 21 she "escaped" to San Francisco before taking up her current residency in Hollywood. It would therefore appear that the Adult Christianity website gives expression to her critical

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<sup>60</sup> <http://www.jesus21.com> (accessed:: 26 April 2003).

<sup>61</sup> The biography can be found at <http://www.postfun.com/pfp/info/dixonbio.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

reflections on these experiences and her movement from an 11-year old reborn Christian girl from Idaho to the Christian professional adult woman of cosmopolitan California. Adult Christianity bills itself as “post-fundamentalist” and “an antidote to the Christian right” and promotes a self-consciously inclusive brand of Christianity. For example, a central tenet is that since neither proof nor belief are implicated in a notion of the existence of God, Adult Christianity encourages the participation of doubters, agnostics, atheists and “unbelievers of every kind.”<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Adult Christianity affirms the social and human value of diversity and “the differences between us” and consequently devotes itself to practicing tolerance and “protecting the rights of individuals, especially those with the least resources.”<sup>63</sup> The website rejects establishing gender as a criterion for judgements; “What happens between people's legs is nobodies' business but their own.” Though this statement confuses gender with sex, in the context of Adult Christianity’s critique of the fundamentalist Christian right, it can be taken to indicate a rejection of that tradition’s patriarchy.

In a Special News Report on the Landover Baptist Ministry’s website Landover announces its campaign against Adult Christianity under the heading: “Landover Calls for Immediate Shutdown of Shameless ‘Adult Christianity’ Website.”<sup>64</sup> The article is accompanied by two photographs, the first of a crowd of demonstrators marching behind a banner that reads “We Love Poppy Dixon’s Adult Christianity – Gays for Jesus,” and the second, of Poppy Dixon and a man seated in a limousine above a caption informing us that this “older man” is about to “lose his salvation.” The article begins with the revelation “by reliable sources” that “former crack whore”

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<sup>62</sup> <http://www.postfun.com/pfp/tenets.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> This article can be found at <http://www.landoverbaptist.org/news0699/ac.html> (accessed: 26 April 2003).

Dixon conceived of the idea for Adult Christianity while “under the care of Devil loving nuns, recovering from a 12 day drinking binge at a seedy convent somewhere in New York City.” The article goes on to charge Dixon with being friend to “the limp wristed man and broad shouldered woman,” smoking cigarettes, wearing her hair short, being bossy, not respecting authority “of any kind,” wearing short skirts, and sometimes dressing like a man. All of this, we are assured, is done “just to upset people.”

The parody here is double-edged. First, the parody mimics Baptist fundamentalists, in keeping with the theme of the Landover Baptist concept. In terms now familiar to us, Landover draws on homophobia and patriarchy to parody southern Baptist’s conservatism by establishing sexual taboos and structured gender relations as criteria for founding an objection to Poppy Dixon and Adult Christianity. Yet the parody draws its critique and elicits its humour from the incongruity of establishing such criteria, though sometimes legitimate terms for articulating difference, alongside smoking, being bossy, and wearing short skirts. The humour here is compounded to some extent in that Poppy Dixon, antidote to the Christian right, would probably approve of this description. Yet Landover’s call is surely also a parody of Objective’s campaign to shut down Landover. One can imagine Objective’s consternation; first they are derisively mimicked, then, when they object, their objection is mimicked. Along the way their claim to authentic Baptism is picked up, carried away, and set adrift on the rising tide flowing back in the mimicking of mimicry. For if Baptist fundamentalism is founded on their following to the letter the King James Bible, in other words, their mimicking of the exemplary Christian lifestyle set-out therein, then Landover, with their “KJV 1611,” is mimicking this fundamentalist mimicry. And if fundamentalists’ objection to this mimicry of themselves is then mimicked, as is surely the case

with Landover's campaign against Adult Christianity, then we have something of a second order mimesis.

There is a sense here of multitudinous images flooding back as an image of an authentic Christian lifestyle, so ardently defended by Objective's imitation of it, returns to us in the image of Landover's imitation of Objective's imitation. Yet the tide is about to turn again. In the next movement of this configuring choreography, Objective is claimed to be a satirical send-up of Christian fundamentalism and "a meta-parody" of Landover, winning Objective admiration for the sophistication and careful planning of its imitation!

### 3.4 Flooding (Again)

To track this movement requires visiting a different part of the Objective: Christian Ministries website. In addition to the campaign against Landover, Objective identifies Objective: Creation Education as another of its strategic projects.<sup>65</sup> Managed by Dr. Richard Paley, a Creation Scientist and expert in "Divinity and Theobiology," Paley's page on the Objective website lists numerous articles outlining the creation science position, refuting arguments for evolution, and critiquing the "propaganda" of "those wacky evolutionists." Paley warns against "subliminal propaganda" sneaked into popular culture where "constant reiteration" inculcates the "unacceptable message" of evolutionism's "false doctrine."<sup>66</sup> According to Paley, the "pro-

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<sup>65</sup> The Page for Objective: Creation Education can be found at <http://crossspot.net/objective/creation.html> (accessed: 27 April 2003).

<sup>66</sup> <http://crossspot.net/objective/propaganda.html> (accessed: 27 April 2003).

Darwinism propaganda” of the popular Japanese animated character Pokemon is inescapable, though he doesn’t elaborate. Similarly, blockbuster movies such as Jurassic Park and X-Men contribute to evolutionism’s “cultural fog.”<sup>67</sup>

However, it is Paley’s focussed attack against Apple Computers that has won him credit for perpetrating a fraud and a hoax. Apple’s pro-evolutionist subliminal propaganda issues from two important aspects of the popular operating system’s design. The first is that the programming on which the operating system is based, called UNIX, is referred to among Apple aficionados as Darwin. The choice of name is linked with the second aspect, which is that the Mac operating system is provided under open source licence. “Open source” means that the code in which the programme is written is available to the user and general public to modify and improve at their discretion, i.e. it is open. Programmes that use open source code are generally collaborative. Diversely experienced and differently skilled users facilitate the programme’s constant improvement, i.e. its evolution. For Paley, open source means communist. Paley’s charge: “Apple Computers promotes Godless Darwinism and Communism.” Having set these parameters, Paley explores some of the “subliminal” techniques of Apple’s propaganda. The most striking feature here is Apple’s logo and branding. An apple with a bite taken from it is “clearly a reference to the fall.” Paley then notes that Apple was founded by “long-haired hippies” and has consistently supported “60s counter-cultural ‘values,’” has attracted a “cult-like following,” and exhorts its followers to “think different,” which Paley takes to mean “think different from our Christian upbringing, to reject all the values that we have been taught and to heed not the message of the Lord Jesus Christ!” Further evidence for Apple’s propagandistic

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<sup>67</sup> <http://www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/movies/pre2000/i-jpark.html> (accessed: 27 April 2003).

efforts is that the Darwin operating system is represented by a cartoon mascot named Hexley, a platypus character carrying a trident. The case against Hexley is confirmed by the UNIX mascot that preceded Hexley, a “child-indoctrinatingly-cute cartoon mascot” of a devil complete with trident, horns and pointed tail.

Apple Computers is certainly a big player in the personal computer industry: 800 000 units of Apple’s iMac were sold in the 139 days following its launch in August 1999, a rate that equals one iMac sold every fifteen seconds. A proud Steve Jobs, Apple’s interim CEO announced: “iMac is truly the Internet-age computer for the rest of us, and it is bringing a lot of new people onto the Internet.”<sup>68</sup> If Paley is correct about MacIntosh’s cult-inclined followers, and Jobs is correct about the rest of us, it is not surprising the amount of interest Paley’s article has attracted. An online discussion board hosted by The Mac Observer struggled to decide whether Paley’s article was serious or a parody, with commentators posting arguments for both positions.<sup>69</sup> “Wsmiii” argues that the intent to parody Baptist fundamentalists and creation science is immediately apparent in the name of Richard Paley. Wsmiii points out the similarity with William Paley, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Christian philosopher, who authored the now famous metaphor of creation by design with his analogy to a watchmaker: “the watch must have had a maker - that there must have existed, at some time and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer, who comprehended its construction and designed its use.”<sup>70</sup> Other responders have noted details on the Objective website and in Paley’s article that they think points to a tongue-in-cheek humour. For example, Paley’s email

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<sup>68</sup> [http://www.apple.com/uk/pr/0105\\_imacsales.html](http://www.apple.com/uk/pr/0105_imacsales.html) (accessed: 27 April 2003).

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.macobserver.com/article/2002/04/22.4.shtml> (accessed: 27 April 2003).

<sup>70</sup> William Paley, *Natural Theology: or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, collected from the appearances of nature* (Houston: St. Thomas Press, 1972).

pseudonym is drdinosaur, presumed to be too self-ironical for a creation scientist. Similarly, a footnote at the bottom of one of Paley's pages states that the fruit Eve was tempted with was more likely to have been a fig than an apple, a detail "666" is convinced "diehard creationist fanatics" surely would not introduce. Elsewhere in cyberspace discussion boards clocked up responses refuting Paley's authenticity as a creationist, convinced that Paley and the entire Objective Christian Ministries enterprise is a parody and satire. "Lef:lyman," "thought the site was authentic at first, too." That was before he browsed the campaign against Landover. Now he thinks that "the whole point of the site is to ridicule Creationism."<sup>71</sup> "Chowler" was similarly taken in by Objective's apparent deception: "it seems this was an elaborate hoax ... Darn. That was funny, if not a bit dark."<sup>72</sup> "It's a spoof," "Feòrag NicBhrìde assures us. Then, with the self-confidence of one who has seen a few things in their time, he informs us: "The site's been around for a while, meta-parodying Landover Baptist," before quoting from an article by Paley where Paley claims that "a strange, persistent, low-frequency waveform" detected by seismic instruments on the moon's surface was discovered to be an "echoing voice" speaking ancient Aramaic.<sup>73</sup> The claim certainly is as outlandish as anything Landover has offered. Yet, while some people admit at having been taken in by what appears to them on reflection to be an obvious a fraud, others are confident they caught on immediately: "Oh c'mon. I thought everyone could figure out that page is obviously a joke. Some people are way too uptight."<sup>74</sup> A different strategy that proves the essential fakery of Paley's anti-Macintosh article is offered by Kaye

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<sup>71</sup> <http://www.macopinion.com/columns/intelligence/02/04/25/talk/3.html> (accessed: 27 April 2003).

<sup>72</sup> [http://www.oreillynet.com/cs/user/view/cs\\_msg/7074](http://www.oreillynet.com/cs/user/view/cs_msg/7074) (accessed: 27 April 2003.)

<sup>73</sup> Feòrag NicBhrìde's post can be found at <http://www.quicktopic.com/boing/H/VrjGirvhsVA> (accessed: 27 April 2003). Paley's article, "The Moon Testifies," is available at <http://crossspot.net/objective/moon.html> (accessed: 27 April 2003).

<sup>74</sup> <http://www.macopinion.com/columns/intelligence/02/04/25/talk/4.html> (accessed: 27 April 2003)

Uiterwyk who argues that “fundamentalist Christianity couldn’t be this much fun!” “Folks,” Kaye assures us, “it’s gotta be a hoax.”<sup>75</sup>

At this point, perhaps a thorough examination of the Objective site is required. Paley maintains an archive of articles refuting and otherwise addressing evolution from a Christian perspective. In an article “Kangaroos of the Middle East,”<sup>76</sup> Paley considers the problem posed to creation science by kangaroos. Since the Middle East is the region where Noah’s Ark supposedly came to rest atop Mount Ararat, and since in the creation science view of the world the Bible is believed to be factually correct, Kangaroos must have once inhabited that region. Paley’s article intends to refute Biblical skeptics’ assumed refutation that kangaroos ever lived in the Middle East. His argument includes a refutation of the skeptics’ supposed argument that the word “kangaroo” does not appear in any Arabic language: kangaroos were incorrectly named by Aborigines who “had lost all knowledge of their Biblical heritage and thus would not have known the name given to the animal by Adam (Gen 2:19).” Paley is in agreement with Biblical skeptics about a prior single landmass comprised of the continental jigsaw. This was the “postdiluvian earth,” which he claims probably broke up “due to the effects of rapid soaking and drying of the land.” He doesn’t specify how “rapid” this process was, but his argument is that Kangaroos migrated to what would become Australia in the interval between alighting from the Ark and the break up of the Pangaeon supercontinent. Paley intimates that the same argument is applicable to Pandas, now resident in central Asia, and presumably sloths, now resident in South America (though he

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<sup>75</sup> <http://www.macobserver.com/comments/commentindivdisplay.shtml?id=14438> (accessed: 27 April 2003).

<sup>76</sup> <http://crossspot.net/objective/kangaroo.html> (accessed: 27 April 2003).

doesn't cite the specific example). Is Paley serious or is he parodying creation scientists, playing up absurdity and pouring on ridicule? "Kluit" claims this story kept him/her laughing for hours.<sup>77</sup>

If Objective: Creation Education is a parody of Baptist Fundamentalism and a meta-parody of other parodies of fundamentalism, then other strategic Objective ministries must demonstrate similar skilful and strategic imitations of Fundamentalism. Viewed from the perspective that the entire Objective website might be a parody, it rapidly becomes apparent just how plausible that charge is. Take for example Objective: Halloween Reclamation, headed by Dr. Troy Franklin, Objective's "anti-occult expert."<sup>78</sup> Halloween Reclamation begins with the observation that Halloween is a period of spiritual danger, a time "when Satan is out in force." In the next movement, we are asked to remember that "all things are created by the Lord," and this includes Halloween. The challenge to Christians therefore is to understand how Halloween might have been created by God to help Christians further spread his Good News. The direction being taken here becomes more apparent when Franklin asks us to "Consider this: at what other time of the year do throngs of unsaved children come to your door begging for a treat?" Franklin emphasises the vulnerability of "unsaved children" who are being "spiritually abused" by their "atheist and pagan" parent's withholding of salvation. With the stakes set at nothing less than spiritual salvation, it is the true Christian's duty to reach these children by whatever means necessary. Thus does Halloween Reclamation aim to reclaim Halloween for God, turning the "witching season" into the "witnessing season."

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<sup>77</sup> <http://www.macopinion.com/columns/intelligence/02/04/25/talk/9.html> (accessed: 27 April 2003)

<sup>78</sup> <http://crosspot.net/objective/halloween.html> (accessed: 27 April 2003).

Franklin's introduction is followed by a tutorial on "how to HalloWitness." Given that dressing up in costumes is central to the Halloween ritual, it makes sense that Hallowitnessing should begin here. Dressing up as John the Baptist, Moses, and other biblical characters can "involve your whole family." Another possibility is to appropriate familiar Halloween costumes: "a white sheet with eye-holes worn over one's head isn't an occult spirit, it's the Holy Ghost." This Christian reclamation of Halloween turns on a mimetic theatre of imitation, where the mimetic representation takes on not only the outer appearance of the object that it imitates of, but the power vested in the object as well. And so children dressed to mimetically represent John the Baptist dramatises nothing less than a Christian promise of salvation through the figure of the man that John famously baptised in what would become a dramatic ritual theatre of rebirth. Mimetic theatre here becomes a stage for a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil. And just as the restoration of cosmic order in the Kwakiutl worldview requires a deceptive (which is to say, mimetic) trick, so to in the Objective worldview is a deceptive trick required to successfully combat the forces of evil. In other words, to offer "spiritually abused" children the Lord's gift of salvation may necessitate trickery to out trick Satan's tricks. Franklin advises Christians to conceal "personalised Bible tracts" in sweet wrappers along with the phone number of a local church. Helpfully, he suggests mini-Kit Kat bars; their easily unwrapped and re-wrapped foil lining works well for this purpose. The deception is elaborate; not only does this trickery entail writing Bible tracts in miniature to conceal in rewrapped sweets, but also displaying "more secular Halloween decorations," a strategic deployment of camouflage that will "make your house seem non-threatening to those brainwashed by the occult."

Entertaining for the moment the possibility that this may be a parody of a by-whatever-means-necessary evangelical Christianity, one is left speechless at the movements here of a mimetic

theatre of deception. The twists and turns of trickery are fantastical. The first trick is Halloween itself. For all the innocuous fun of dressing-up, collecting sweets, or playing tricks that allegedly are harmless and mischievous, Halloween is actually a time of occult dangers. Secular forces that play pawns to Satan's trickery that cheats innocent children out of their salvation mask this essential truth of Halloween. Countering Satan's tricks requires a Christian theatre that gives primacy to Christian role-models, John the Baptist, Moses, The Holy Ghost, and so on. In extreme cases however, countering Satan can also mean resorting to deceptive trickery, complete with camouflage that will deceive Satan's secular forces and allow children to the treat of salvation wrapped up in a trick that out-tricks Satan's tricks, complete with telephone number where the prize may be collected.

But if this theatre of trickery and counter-trickery is an elaborate parody of fundamentalism and evangelism, then the deception is more complete. The trickery we are alerted to in content conceals a trick of form, a trick perpetrated by the mimetic movements back and forth between real evangelism and fundamentalism, and an imitation through parody of the authentic form of evangelism and fundamentalism. One way we can speak about Objective is that it is a copy of Landover's copy of American southern Baptist's copy (albeit with a fundamentalist flavour) of authentic Christianity. Consider Feòrag NicBhrìde's assurance that Objective: Landover Baptist Shutdown is a "meta-parody" of Landover Baptist. NicBhrìde alerts us to the most deceptive trick of all: that hallowitnessing and similar strategies that out-trick Satan's tricks are part of a still greater trick that deceives us, the visitors to the Objective website, into thinking that Objective is an authentic, fundamentalist, Baptist website referring to real people in real places, when in fact it is a parody of a parody of fundamental Baptists. NicBhrìde and others point to Objective's accusations against Apple and claims that kangaroos migrated to Australia from the

Middle East to evidence their view that Objective is fake. For NicBhríde, as for others, it is asking too much to believe that the characters at Objective believe these things; for them, these claims are simply too outlandish to be taken seriously. It seems more plausible that Objective belongs in a category of similar claims confirmed to be inauthentic. The exemplar of this category is of course the confirmed fakes at Landover Baptist.

This is an intriguing configuration in the development of the dialectic and certainly a highly tensioned one. What is so intriguing here is exactly this quality of outlandishness, because it requires a careful balance between outrageous excess and plausibility. Where this balance is achieved, it is the incongruity of the match that establishes the success of the parody. From this point of view, Landover appears a clumsy parody, sometimes so excessive that it sacrifices plausibility. A telling example is the character of Betty Bowers and her Christian Crackwhore Ministry. Yet as we have seen, many Internet users understand this excess to be utterly plausible, thereby ensuring its enduring success. Be that as it may, it is this quality of outlandishness that I want to retain for the moment because it is the observation of the same quality in Objective Christian Ministries that is cited as evidence that Objective is a fraud, a hoax, a deception, a meta-parody of Landover. The characterisation of the relation of Objective to Landover as meta-parody positions Objective's claim that kangaroos migrated to present-day Australia from the Middle East as a parody of Landover's outlandish claim that Tolkien's classic conceals a homosexual agenda. The accusation of fraud then emerges from the doubt that Objective's claim is actually serious; "just a bit too over the top parodic to take seriously" (sic), says Charles Moore in his exposé of Objective's "hoax."<sup>79</sup> Yet while netizens across the Internet dismiss Objective's

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<sup>79</sup> Charles W. Moore, "Anti-Apple 'Christian' Website a Hoax" in *Applelinks*, 23 April 2000, available at <http://www.applelinks.com/articles/2002/04/20020423140855.shtml> (accessed: 13 March 2003).

claims to authenticity as “over the top,” in other words, too outlandish to be seriously considered, Steve van Nattan accuses Baptist Fundamentalists such as Objective Christian Ministries of fakery on the basis that they are not serious enough. Van Nattan invites us to witness still more constellating movements of a dialectic that is reconfiguring in the mimetic flow back and forth across a threshold between fakery and authenticity.

Van Nattan is a piano tuner from east Tennessee, USA. His piano business “practices the ethics of The Carpenter of Nazareth” and offers a discount if the client offers home-made pie and coffee.<sup>80</sup> Yet Van Nattan’s greatest labour is a website he maintains and the journal he edits, both named Blessed Quietness,<sup>81</sup> though more familiar to Internet users by its former name, Balaam’s Ass,<sup>82</sup> after the Old testament parable (Numbers 22:21-34). Van Nattan describes his website as “Fundamental, Baptist without apology, Friendly, Researched.”<sup>83</sup> I want to use the example of Steve Van Nattan, specifically, an article he wrote and published in his journal, to trace another configuring movement in the dialectic developed in the course of the present chapter. This tracing will be the last before the chapter concludes with a brief discussion. Van Nattan’s article is direct and unapologetic in its argument and gives sufficient indication to the character and temperament of Van Nattan’s website and his person to warrant no further introduction here, suffice to say that Van Nattan positions himself in opposition to the leadership of Fundamental Baptists in the US whom he considers to be fascists in league with Satan.

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<sup>80</sup> <http://www.stevespianoservice.com/tuneturf.htm> (accessed: 13 March 2003).

<sup>81</sup> <http://www.blessedquietness.com> (accessed: 13 March 2003).

<sup>82</sup> <http://www.balaams-ass.com> (accessed: 13 March 2003).

<sup>83</sup> <http://www.blessedquietness.com/journal/balaam.htm> (accessed: 13 March 2003).

In an article titled "Jackboot Baptists: The Deeper Facts," Van Nattan claims "there is a powerful cultic and antichrist quality in this late phase of Fundamental Baptist activity."<sup>84</sup> He likens "Fundamental Baptists in general" with "the followers of Adolf Hitler" and claims that "the guruistic nature of Fundamental Baptist leadership is primed for a man to rise up in the seat of Caesar," before pointing to the eagerness of Fundamental Baptists who "follow hard on the heels" of US president George W. Bush, "totally ignoring his hugging of sodomites." The first part of Van Nattan's article is a sustained attack against American Baptist leadership. He begins by attacking "jackboot ministers" who "micromanage" the lives of their congregation, or "the Saints" in Van Nattan's lexicon. Such micromanaging includes the demand that Saints seek the jackboot's approval of their dress patterns before sewing the garment. Also, the insistence that men wear a three-piece suit to church despite that the congregation is rural and poor. Van Nattan asserts they would "all look 100% better if they wore clean coveralls" than appear as "Bozo the Clown" in their 1950 suits, the only ones they can afford. He rages: "Fundamental Baptist pastors are turning men into snivelling little scum."

Fundamental Baptists' exclusive deference to the King James Bible comes in for a similar lashing. Van Nattan argues that this exclusivity is a "decoy" chosen to lure "the unsuspecting and sincere sheep into the fold of the antichrist." Again deceptive trickery is at stake: "what better way to deceive a trusting soul than to play on their zeal for the word of God?" Van Nattan quotes a friend who expects the antichrist to carry a King James Bible in order to attract the most zealous Fundamentalist followers. Van Nattan is not against the King James version; for him it is "the only correct Bible." But he argues that the exclusion of "perverted" Bibles precludes the

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<sup>84</sup> <http://www.balaams-ass.com/journal/housechu/deeper.htm> (accessed: 13 March 2003).

opportunity to teach *why* the King James Version is the only correct one. “How many perverted Bibles do you have on your shelf for such research?” he asks, before claiming to own about forty.

Also in his sights are pastors and missionaries who abuse their positions for personal – and evil – gains: criminal fraud, use of pornography, child abuse, and so on. These and other strategies that attack fundamental Baptist leadership in the U.S. forms the substance of the first part of his article, which he concludes with a case-study of Jehovah’s Witness. He concludes with a call for a return to authentic origins: “I do believe that so many of these Jackboot Neo-Nazi churches exist now that it is time to abandon this whole pattern of church life and return to the homes where the New Testament Church began.”

Van Nattan begins the second part by saying that he has not given up on church-based religion altogether, but urges extreme caution. He then offers a twenty-point guideline detailing “how to find a true Bible Based Fundamental Baptist Church.” Each point should be met completely if one is to have any confidence at all. A selection of considerations include: age of pastor and congregants – at least over 40 years; size – less than 100 members; missionaries – no more than five; meetings – no more than three times a week, though congregants will “be in and out of one’s homes regularly;” temperament – plenty of singing, “dignified” shouting, in a “subdued church, down a country lane;” witnessing – no “(running) to sinners just to amuse themselves,” but instead one to one “as they turn up in the flow of life;” and humility – men line up second, “ladies” thoughts are “sought without inviting them to take authority,” and children are included “as family, not as a nuisance.”

This template for authenticity in Baptist Fundamentalism stands in stark contrast to the allegedly inauthentic and fascist temperament of the kind of Baptist Fundamentalism practiced by the likes of George W. Bush, who was witnessed by Rev. Billy Graham before beginning his ascent to the seat of Caesar. Where the former is described as humble, contained, and private, the latter, which has its home in congregations like the Southern Baptist Convention, so ardently defended by the Objective Christian Ministries website, is characterised by large, media productions of mass public theatre. In Van Nattan's view, the former is authentic because it is focussed on God, while the latter is a fake because it pretends to focus on God when in fact it focuses on its own desires and aspirations.

If Van Nattan's argument seems straightforward and uncomplicated, its significance for the reconfiguring of the dialectic is found in an online discussion at Unks Wild Wild West.<sup>85</sup> A contributor to that discussion claims Van Nattan's article is "a very subtle parody." "Anita" counters that "Betty Bowers is a parody website. I don't think this one is," before outlining her reasoning and referring along the way to other articles on Van Nattan's website. The first contributor responds: "Balaam's Ass is affiliated with the same group who produced the Landover Baptists page, Americhrist, Ltd., as well as Betty Bowers and Sister Taffy," and in an apparent reference to Objective Christian Ministries continues, "They've even produced pages that are critics of these pages (parodies of course)." Here we are moving closer to the constellating moment as this flooding back and forth across the threshold saturates the dialectic with tension. Anita replies:

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<sup>85</sup> "Neo-Nazi Jackbooted Baptists," available at [http://www.greenspun.com/bboard/q-and-a-fetch-msg.tcl?msg\\_id=005625](http://www.greenspun.com/bboard/q-and-a-fetch-msg.tcl?msg_id=005625) (accessed: 13 May 2003).

I must be desensitised. I'm sure I started out thinking 'You MUST be joking. Nobody really believes stuff like that, right?' Next thing ya know ... I might even learn that the Jim Jones thing was just another fraud like that moon landing. That wasn't meant as sarcasm, BTW. I REALLY am questioning now why I read some sites and threads and actually think some folks are serious. I've lost the ability to discern. (original emphasis).

Anita's lament is anticipated by both Benjamin's theory of the dialectical image and Taussig's understanding of the workings of mimesis: that the flash of recognition at the constellation of the dialectic entails a transformation of the recognising self, "the very percept of recognition,"<sup>86</sup> so that Anita, who started out thinking she could distinguish a joke from a serious commitment, complains that she has now lost the ability to discern. Anita is not alone. "Peter Errington," who admits he also thought Van Nattan's article was authentic in the sense of being intended seriously, says in his post to the forum that he sympathises with Anita's lament, as surely did everyone else reading the forum when they noted the aptly named Mr. Errington's email address at [petere@ricochet.net](mailto:petere@ricochet.net).

It seems to me that mystery, the kind of not knowing implicated in an inability to discern authentic from fake things, along with transformation, the kind of movements that keeps one step ahead of attempts to arrest their movements and otherwise capture their illusive meaning, emerge as central to the problematic of authenticity in religion. I want to conclude this chapter with a discussion that brings together these important aspects of the problematic.

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<sup>86</sup> Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, p. 40.

### 3.5 Mystery and Transformation

We penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognise it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday.<sup>87</sup>

The tracing of a dialectic of authenticity through the reconfiguring movements of Landover, Objective Christian Ministries and Van Nattan's Blessed Quietness has brought with its constellations an appreciation that mystery, in the sense of "not knowing," may be a crucial quality of the dialectic itself. There is a distinct sense of anticipated wonder at what the next configuring movement may reveal. At the same time, as the tracing proceeds, the dialectician learns from experience that this revelation is unlikely to resolve the mystery. On the contrary, the revelation attendant with each turn of the dialectic likely will deepen mystery still further. Following Benjamin's theory of dialectics at a standstill, the dialectician perseveres, confident that this deepening of the mystery with the intensification of dialectical tension is preparing them for a flashing moment of recognition wherein the mystery will be revolved and something comparable to authenticity's magical aura will be revealed. Mystery therefore seems central to the problem of authenticity, not in the negative sense that overcoming "not knowing" is the central goal of authentic knowledge, but in the positive sense that it might be mystery that allows authenticity its remarkable transformative power.

Mysteriousness is of the utmost importance. It speaks of a space behind the apparent surface of things, a space that has captivated the imagination of philosophy, art and religion, among other

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<sup>87</sup> Benjamin, "Surrealism," p. 190.

disciplines, for a very long time. Some might say that it is the fundamental concern of these pursuits. The captivation is surely due in no small part to the seeming resistance of appearance to penetration. And so the surface of appearance, where most of us spend most of our time, is also a concealing surface. Occasionally we think we catch a glimpse of “the hidden void,” as Taussig has called it, in dreams, through psychoanalytic techniques, with the assistance of hallucinatory drugs, or, for want of a better term, through religious experience. Yet while access to that mysterious space is gained by these routes, I think the mystery is less concealed, though no less mysterious, than we may think. We are witness to its magic everyday. Few things are as commonplace in the everyday world as the vexed problem of authenticity. And few things are as mysterious in their everyday ability to bring about magical transformations as fake things, be they sculptures that are fake queens that somehow, mysteriously, as if by magic, become real queens reclining in naked splendour beside an Australian lake, or religious websites that are fakes that magically and mysteriously become so real that their transformation transforms even criticism of their deception into deceptive fakery. Mysterious indeed!

I have conveyed this idea of mystery with the image of hidden movements beneath a familiar surface to suggest that an authentic understanding of an object cannot be content with the familiar and similar surface of appearance, but rather must comprehend that surface as constantly reshaping in response to the movements beneath it. In a similar way that the surface of the ocean is reshaped by the movements within its vast, hidden depths, so must the search for authentic understanding engage in a kind of physiognomy to arrive at a truth, however transient it may be. And as the sailor at sea must be flexible in their adjustments to the moving ground beneath their feet, so must an authentic understanding be flexible to the shifting contours of the surface upon which it moves. Yet the imperative to pay attention to the familiar and similar surface of

appearance as both a concealing surface and a moving surface is anathema to an empirical rational notion of authenticity that backs up its demand for transparency with a promise to expose anything that remains concealed. Such an operation of exposure attempts to penetrate the concealing surface as if it were a veil to be lifted, an image so enticing in the ease with which it promises knowledge of mystery that advocates of this formulation may be forgiven the confidence they invest it with. The difficulty of course is that the image of a veil as the surface of appearance concealing mystery is flawed for the simple reason that it does not conjure an image of that surface as in contact with what is concealed. In fact it deliberately separates the surface of concealment from what is concealed with the deceptively alluring image of a concealment that can be abolished with a tug. This is why the imperative to appreciate the concealing surface as a moving surface falls by the wayside: in this erroneous formulation, whatever movements take place behind the veil do not disturb the blank impassivity of the veil itself, like a curtain that conceals the movements of stagehands as they prepare the next act. Yet from the preceding tracing of mysterious imitations in the examples of Landover, Objective Christian Ministries, and even Steve van Nattan, we know that the surface of appearance is a dynamic surface shaped by the dramatic movements within its concealed depths. The correct image is one that perceives the surface of appearance as *the surface of mystery itself*, an image that reminds us as we skate across its dramatically changing surface that we truly are at sea, both with regard to the incompleteness of our knowledge of the great mysteries concealed beneath its fluctuating surface as well as with regard to the imperative to be flexible if we are to retain our balance and perspective.

I have argued that mysterious transformations of objects can be read off the changing contours of its everyday surface. The dialectical process that traces these movements by paying attention to the surface of mystery culminates in a moment of recognition of the impenetrability of the

everyday world and the everydayness of impenetrable mystery. Michael Taussig points to the next step: that this moment of recognition also precipitates a transformation of the recognising self. If that is the case, I wonder how one would know? What does a transformed self look like? And if it is something that we are looking at, we are confronted with the same problem of appearance that we now know is also a concealing surface. Then we can expect that the changing surface of the subject will give some indication of the mysterious movements within its hidden depths, where transformations are worked out. In this sense, the transformation of the self sparked by their recognition of the impenetrability of everyday appearances and the everydayness of concealed mystery might contain an intuition that is itself the key to revelation, the disclosure of a mystery concealed by the everyday surface of appearance. The prospect that the key to discovering, if not uncovering, a locus of authenticity resides in the body of the recognising self rather than with the object of disputed authenticity marks the definitive break between a forensic, scientific method of inquiry into problems of authenticity, a method that would go about exposing all claims to authenticity to the illuminating light of reason, and a method that would allow authenticity the space to reveal itself.

In following this shifted emphasis, in the following chapter I want to explore the question of humour in fake religions. Humour is after all a welling of energy deep within the belly before forcing itself out in a rush of surfacing energy that in its release transforms the body's surface via an uncontrolled bodily eruption. If the suggestion is that the moment of recognition necessarily implies a transformation of the recognising subject, and that this transformation may be read off the surface of their body, then the transformations of the body's surface brought about by an eruption of laughter may be of the greatest significance in identifying a locus of authenticity in fake religion.

If the image of authenticity and fakery's dialectic traced in the previous chapter achieved nothing else, it likely brought at least a smile to the readers face, perhaps even a chuckle or two, if not outright thunderous laughter. What else is one to do when faced with Objective's strategic appropriation of Halloween that advocates secular camouflage for Christian homes while their enthused tenants copy bible tracts in miniature on the inside of unwrapped sweet wrappers? Or the fascist tendencies of fake Baptist fundamentalists, as evidenced by President Bush's hugging of sodomites? Or the homosexual agenda purportedly advanced by the film version of *The Twin Towers*? This laughter producing effect of the dialectical image is not frivolous or incidental. As will be shown, laughter is crucial to the completion of the dialectic's critical circuit, and therefore of the utmost importance in uncovering, even discovering, a locus of authenticity in fake religion on the Internet.

In this chapter, I want to move the argument advanced in the previous chapter from a concern with the surface of appearance that conceals to an exploration of the surface of appearance that reveals. In making that movement I want to activate a mimetic correspondence between the concealing surface of the image and the revealing surface of the body. The connection mediating this mimetic correspondence is laughter, the kind that wells up from deep inside the belly, transforming the surface of the body as it rises. In turn, the surface of the body transformed by this interpenetration of image and body reveals, physiognomically as it were, a transformed self.

In making this argument, I pick up Chidester's suggestion that laughter is an index of comparison.<sup>1</sup> But I want to develop this claim further with the suggestion that laughter is also a register of transformations within the body of the recognising self. As an index of comparison, laughter responds to the image composed of dialectical tensions; as a register of transformation, laughter reveals something of the mysterious movements within the recognising body and thereby becomes a kind of physiognomy of the recognizing self.

There are then two movements perceived here, or perhaps a double movement. The first involves seeing laughter as a movement on the surface of the body that is mimetically connected with concealed movements within a dialectically constellated image of fakery. At the same time, a second movement sees laughter as a kind of physiognomy, an opening of the body that reveals within its concealed depths an interpenetration of body and image. Seeing these movements in the connections and correspondences between body and image then requires a kind of double vision, an ability to see the mysterious workings of the dialectic upon the surface of the body and at the same time to see upon the surface of the body a transformation of the recognising self within the body. Significantly, though these twin movements can be separated conceptually, it is important not to lose sight of their mutual implication.

Yet if laughter is so crucial here, how can this importance be theorised? In Chapter Three it was shown that the dialectical image emerges when the tension between dialectical oppositions is greatest. This image, saturated with contradictory and ambivalent tensions, is the constellation of waking. And it is in this moment, when the perceiving subject recognises

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<sup>1</sup> David Chidester, "Christmas in July: Laughter, Pain, and Incongruity in the Study of Religion," in Dan Cohn-Sherbok and Christopher Lamb (eds.), *The Future of Religion: Postmodern Perspectives* (London: Middlesex University Press, 1999).

the constellation of waking, that the dialectical image emerges. The importance of laughter is signalled by the observation that this moment of recognition is simultaneous with a burst of laughter. To grasp the significance of laughter that occurs at the moment of waking requires a digression to Benjamin's critique of surrealism, briefly introduced in the previous chapter. As was seen there, this critique is double-edged, at once praising the "anti-aesthetic impulse" of surrealist techniques that achieved a "profane illumination,"<sup>2</sup> and at the same time criticising the surrealists' failure to get out of the dream and back into waking consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Benjamin lauded the surrealists for working out the method of a revolutionary dialectic of seeing, but criticised them for not transforming that method into "bodily collective innervation," an interpenetration of image and body geared for "revolutionary discharge."<sup>4</sup> From Benjamin's critique of surrealism, we learn that without bodily involvement in the image, the image is not dialectical. Bodily involvement in a sense authenticates the dialectical image.

In the opening discussion of this chapter, I use Benjamin's critique of Surrealism's shortcomings to demonstrate that the locus of authenticity in Benjamin's image of revolutionary critique is the interpenetration of image and body that completes the critical circuit between the recognising subject and the object of recognition. Such a dynamic is then correlated with the interpenetration of image and body that laughter physiognomically reveals. I argue that: 1) the mysterious and concealed transformations of an image of authentic Baptists traced previously registers on the surface of the body of the recognising subject as laughter; 2) the physiognomy of laughter reveals an interpenetration of image and body and

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<sup>2</sup> Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology,'" *New German Critique*, vol. 40 (Winter 1987), p. 193

<sup>3</sup> Abbas, "On Fascination," p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin, "Surrealism," p. 192.

thereby a transformation of the recognising self, “the very percept of recognition;”<sup>5</sup> and 3) the embodied recognising self, now skilled in the mimetic play of images, is thus awakened from their dream. This first discussion of the chapter therefore draws critical attention to the problem of laughter and humour in fake religion.

The chapter’s second discussion looks more closely at this problem of humour. In developing Peter Berger’s incongruity theory of humour it will be shown that laughter is produced out of the contradictory tensions between concepts and the objects thought through them. This observation opens the possibility that laughter might be an implicit quality of dialectical images which are, if nothing else, structured by incongruities. Yet an unexpected twist to the story is discovered via Berger’s theory that the experience of the comic adumbrates authentic religious experience. Berger’s suggestion is quite simple: that when we laugh, we dwell in a counterempirical world without pain. To laugh, according to Berger, is to see the world from the divine point of view, which is to say, the transcended perspective. Laughter is redeeming. This is indeed an unexpected twist because it opens the possibility that fake religions, widely acknowledged to be extremely funny, may be a gateway to authentic religious experience.

Consideration of this possibility returns the discussion to Benjamin’s theory of dialectics at a standstill, the third discussion of the chapter. That discussion will reconsider Benjamin’s theory from the perspective of his theology, which we will discover, by his own admission, soaks his critical thought. The chapter will conclude with a transposition of Berger’s theory of redeeming laughter onto Benjamin’s theory of dialectics at a standstill. That concluding discussion will show that authentic religious experience is central to both.

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<sup>5</sup> Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, p. 40.

The chapter then is structured by three discussions. The first looks at the recognising subject's bodily involvement with the dialectical image and points to a locus of authenticity in the image of critique. The second discussion theorises this bodily involvement under the rubric of humour and laughter which we unexpectedly find leads us back to authentic religion. The third discussion returns us, appropriately, to Benjamin's dialectics, now considered from a religious perspective. The central argument developed through these discussions, both implicitly and explicitly, is that fake religions may encapsulate authentic religion, not in their imitation of religious forms, but in the crucible of subjective experience levered out of the space between incongruently related objects. For if religious experience invokes transcendence, between empirical and counterempirical worlds, surfaces and depths, concealment and revelation, fakery and authenticity, then incongruity may emerge as central to religious experience. Both Benjamin's theory of dialectics at a standstill and Berger's theory of redeeming laughter pivot on incongruity. So if fake religion's claim is to be authentic, then this claim can be proved – as much as I am suspicious of that word – on the theoretical grounds provided by the transposition of Berger's theory onto dialectics at a standstill. This argument, developed implicitly throughout this chapter, will take centre stage in Chapter Five.

#### **4.1 Bodily Involvement Authenticates the Image of Critique**

Much of the formulation of Benjamin's theory of dialectics at a standstill is recognisable in his critique of surrealism. In significant ways, Benjamin's reflections on the profane illumination promised by surreal art helped him clarify his idea of the dialectical image. For Benjamin, the suffocating pressing of commodity objects and the intoxicating effect of dream

consciousness meant that the only authentic form of critique is via the dialectical construction of images. Yet it was via his critique of surrealism that Benjamin arrived at the crux of his theory of dialectics: that the emergence of the dialectical image is dependent on bodily involvement in the critical image composed of juxtapositions.

In the discussion that follows, I want to unpack Benjamin's critique of surrealism to show how he arrives at this crucial formulation. Yet this critique of surrealism also prepares the ground for a new argument. If the dialectical image is the authentic form of critique and if the emergence of the dialectical image is dependent on bodily involvement in the image, then this quality of bodily involvement may point to a locus of authenticity in the image of critique. If this hypothesis is correct, then it would be of the greatest significance to find instances of bodily involvement of the perceiver in the image of fakery. Testing this hypothesis will be the subject of the discussion following Benjamin's critique of surrealism. First, however, it is necessary to understand why and how bodily involvement in the image is significant.

#### *4.1.1 Benjamin's Critique of Surrealism*

An explanation of Benjamin's critique of the surrealist project must begin with what Benjamin admired in it. Benjamin was drawn to surrealism because he identified with the surrealist's critical understanding of modernity. Against the nineteenth century's established belief that modernity's essence was the rational demythification and disenchantment of the social world, Benjamin identified with the surrealists when he argued that under conditions of capitalism, industrialisation had brought about a re-enchantment of the social world and with

it “a reactivation of mythic forces.”<sup>6</sup> The advent of capitalism, with its plethora of commodity fetishes, meant that Europe had fallen into “a new dream-filled sleep”<sup>7</sup> in which commodified objects appeared as dream images. For Benjamin, this signalled a threat of the greatest magnitude because not only did it subvert the ideals of reason, but it also imperilled the very possibility of criticism. In a short, but important piece from *One Way Street* Benjamin writes:

Criticism is a matter of correct distancing. It was at home in a world where perspectives and prospects counted and where it was still possible to take a standpoint. Now things press too closely on human society. The ‘unclouded,’ ‘innocent’ eye has become a lie.<sup>8</sup>

If the ever-closer pressing of modernity’s dream images meant that gaining an appropriate critical distance had become an impossibility, the Marxist critique, with its “overwhelming valorization of rational forms of representation”<sup>9</sup> became impossible. As such, the Marxist critical enterprise had reached an impasse and was unable to proceed with rational demystification in the orthodox Marxist mould. Benjamin recognised that this kind of rational demystification was no longer the critic’s task. Instead, the critic should appropriate the authority of such mystifications for deployment against ideology, should “appropriate the distorted and distorting powers of ideological transposition for ideologically disruptive ends.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedeman, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevyn McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Belknap Press, 1999), p. 391 (K1a.8); Buck-Morse, *Dialectics of Seeing*, pp. 253-4.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 391 (K1a.8).

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street, and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: NLB Verso, 1979) p. 89.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Cohen, “Walter Benjamin’s Phantasmagoria,” *New German Critique*, vol. 48 (1989), p. 87.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

Benjamin saw a way forward in the immanent method of Surrealist art whose writings he distinguished from literature; “demonstrations, watchwords, documents, bluffs, forgeries if you will, but at any rate not literature.”<sup>11</sup> These forgeries, in Benjamin’s analysis, were not to be read in the sense that one reads literature, but instead were geared for experience, specifically, for what Benjamin termed profane illumination, “a materialist, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson.”<sup>12</sup> As we have seen previously, Benjamin praised the surrealists’ techniques of deliberate anachronism and montage, imagistic techniques by which they managed to enter dream consciousness and make a home on the threshold of flooding images. This kind of immersion Benjamin equates with intoxication and regards as necessary if one is to trace the dialectic to its moment of fission where it comes to a standstill in a moment of critical recognition, at which point one is awakened from dreaming and is able to step outside of intoxication. This kind of “loosening of the self by intoxication” that then allows one to “step outside the domain of intoxication”<sup>13</sup> Benjamin uses as a metaphor for the Marxist revolutionary project: “To win the energies of intoxication for the revolution – this is the project which Surrealism circles in all its books and enterprises.”<sup>14</sup>

Benjamin thought that access to the long-sought image sphere, where “nearness looks with its own eyes,”<sup>15</sup> was through the profane illumination promised by surreal art. But Benjamin went further than the surrealists when he theorised that this image sphere to which profane

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<sup>11</sup> Benjamin, “Surrealism,” p. 179.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. On this question of intoxication in Benjamin’s work, see Hermann Schweppenhäuser, “Propaedeutics of Profane Illumination,” in Gary Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: MIT Press, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin, “Surrealism,” p. 189.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 192.

illumination would initiate us opens a revolutionary space “in which political materialism and physical nature share the inner man,”<sup>16</sup> a space where the collective becomes a body.

Remember that Benjamin is interested in how the new technologies of photography and cinema, with their variety of close-ups, slow motion and multiple angles, open critical possibilities in their montage-like image of reality. To recognise this critical potential then requires a certain kind of perception, for which Benjamin thought dada art gave an excellent training. With dada, art “became an instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality.”<sup>17</sup> With the advent of these new technologies, film becomes that ballistic instrument. It banishes the contemplative mode of perception and replaces it with moving images whose motion perception cannot arrest, “the distracting element of which is also primarily tactile.”<sup>18</sup> So too with the advertisement in a world of commodified things pressing ever closer: “[The advertisement] abolishes the space where contemplation moved and all but hits us between the eyes with things as a car, growing to gigantic proportions, careens at us out of a film screen.” Now notice how Benjamin links authenticity, criticism, and tactility: The “genuine advertisement” that “hurtles things at us with the tempo of a good film” is a critical image of “the most real, the mercantile gaze into the heart of things.”<sup>19</sup> This notion of tactile appropriation that mimetically connects image and body is missing from the theory of profane illumination in the surreal concept of art. Recognising this is the crucial next step that the surrealists failed to take. This quality of tactility is so important because it signifies bodily involvement in the image, the crucial interpenetration of body and image that leads to bodily collective innervation. In the concluding few lines of his essay on surrealism, Benjamin gives this important formulation:

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 238, my emphasis.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin, *One Way Street*, p. 89.

Only when in technology body and image so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the Communist Manifesto.<sup>20</sup>

Benjamin's critique of surrealism is that this interpenetration of body and image, theorised through tactile appropriation, was not fully realised; that the new subject-object relation that such an interpenetration promised could not properly materialise; and therefore that the critique issuing from surrealist artworks did not transcend reality to the extent demanded by the orthodox Marxist programme. Hemmed in by things pressing ever closer and unable to manage a critical distance suitable to rational demystification, Benjamin praised the surrealists' approach to history via myth and dream that managed to open (as opposed to recover) a space for critique. But he criticised their failure to appreciate that a complete critique of modernity's dream consciousness cannot be achieved by contemplation alone; it must implicate the body of the subject if it hopes to bring about the kind of innervation required to awaken from the dream. This failure to "take the important next step" meant that the surrealists never got out of the dream and back into history.<sup>21</sup> Benjamin, however, is concerned with "the dissolution of 'mythology' into the space of history;" he wants to find "the constellation of waking."<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, his complaint against surrealism is that surrealism's failure to include a notion of tactile appropriation in the theory of profane illumination made any critique issuing from its art undialectical and therefore incomplete.

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<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, "Surrealism," p. 192.

<sup>21</sup> Abbas, "On Fascination," p. 49.

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin, "N," pp. 2-3 (N1.9).

Tactile appropriation is crucial to Benjamin's theory of dialectics at a standstill and upon scrutiny it is clear why. Bearing in mind that the moment of recognition is in the moment when the dialectic is at a standstill and that this moment is transitory and fleeting, it is crucial to Benjamin's theory that there should be a remainder after the moment has passed. Without a remainder, the critique that emerges with the dialectical image would be similarly fleetingly and transitory and dream consciousness would persist as before. Without a remainder, the entire theory of dialectics at a standstill becomes nonsensical; the constellation composed of dialectically related opposites becomes saturated with tension whereupon the dialectical image emerges in a flashing moment of recognition and mimetic connection between body and image – and then what? No remainder. No waking. Dream consciousness persists. In other words, it is crucial to waking consciousness that a residue of the recognition remain with the recognising subject. This remainder is the appropriation and it is tactile because it resides on the surface of the body.

I want to correlate surrealism's incomplete understanding of dialectical criticism and Benjamin's theory of the dialectical image that completes it with fakery's critique of authenticity being imaged here. If we characterise as authentic Benjamin's theory of the dialectical image that dissolves myth and awakens the perceiving subject in a moment of recognition, and characterise as deceptively inauthentic the surrealists' incomplete concept of criticism that only managed to plunge them further back into myth and dream, we note that the distinguishing element is this question of bodily involvement in the image. An argument can then be made that this quality of bodily involvement with the object of perception that allows the dialectical image to emerge (and also distinguishes it from incomplete critiques such as that issuing from surreal art) presents a locus of authenticity in Benjamin's theory of dialectics. If that is so, it would be very interesting to look for and find instances of bodily

involvement in fakery, for if such instances can be found, then we might have identified a locus of authenticity in the image of fakery itself. Benjamin theorises this crucial quality of bodily involvement with the idea of tactile appropriation, and so tactile appropriation is a useful way to begin thinking about bodily involvement in the image of fakery.

Looking back at the argument formulated so far, it is clear that a variation of tactility has been implicit and sometimes explicit throughout. Yet the instances I have in mind occur in the earlier discussion about imaging fakery, before the argument shifted focus to bodily involvement in that image. Since tactility is a special kind of contact reserved for speaking of the body, the appropriate characterisation of these earlier examples is the more general idea of contact that includes but is not limited to tactility. Copying, for instance, suggests a kind of contact between the copy and the thing copied. In a sense, copying is the glue that binds together the forces in the dialectic, a kind of mimetic contact adhesive that relates them as oppositional. The surrealist threshold between waking and dreaming similarly suggests a kind of contact, an edge where waking consciousness and dream consciousness meet. The image of a concealing surface shaped by the mysterious movements within its hidden depths is also suggestive of contact, and is complimented by the brief critique of a counter image of mystery concealed behind a veil. There it was argued that the image of a veil is inappropriate exactly because a veil is not in contact with what it conceals. Yet contact between fake and authentic, between dreaming and waking, between surface and depth, are all examples drawn from the image of fakery itself. Although these examples demonstrate that this idea of contact has been more extensively implicated in the preceding argument than might previously have been appreciated, the argument being made here requires a quality of contact be found between the image of fakery and the body of the perceiver. This is where the question of contact is refined into a question of tactility. It may be that the imaging of contact by way of spatial metaphors,

as with these three examples, distracts us from noting the obvious fact that when fake religions on the Internet often provoke laughter and that such laughter is a thing of the body. Humorous laughter then surely signifies the involvement of the body in the image and thereby opens the possibility that a measure of tactile appropriation may transpire.

In the following section of this discussion I want to develop this idea further by looking at laughter provoked by images of fakery. I argue that laughter may be understood as a transformation on the surface of the body that is mimetically connected with transformations of the dialectically constellated image of authenticity and fakery. This laughter reveals, physiognomically as it were, the requisite interpenetration of body and image that allows the dialectical image to emerge. As such, laughter that completes the critical circuit between body and image establishes a locus of authenticity in the image of fakery's critique.

#### *4.1.2 Laughter and Tactile Appropriation*

Fake religions constitute many if not most of the listings under categories of religious humour in web directories such as maintained by Yahoo! Google, and many others.<sup>23</sup> Fake religions are humorous. People laugh at fake religions. Recall Kluit's post at The Mac Observer forum that Richard Paley's claim that kangaroos migrated to Australia from the Middle East kept him/her laughing for hours.<sup>24</sup> Kaye Uiterwyk's comment that "fundamentalist Christianity couldn't be this much fun!" and that the Objective website "is a real pisser" makes a similar point.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Landover's review of The Twin Towers or Objective's Christian

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<sup>23</sup> <http://sg.dir.yahoo.com/Entertainment/Humour/Religion;>

[http://directory.google.com/Top/Society/Religion\\_and\\_Spirituality/Humor/](http://directory.google.com/Top/Society/Religion_and_Spirituality/Humor/) (both these websites were accessed 3 July 2003). Similar listings can be found on the websites of altavista.com and lycos.com,

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.macopinion.com/columns/intelligence/02/04/25/talk/9.html> (accessed: 27 April 2003)

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.macobserver.com/comments/commentindivdisplay.shtml?id=14438> (accessed: 27 April, 2003).

reclamation of Halloween provoke laughter. Whether they intend to or not, these things are funny.

I think that this kind of humorous laughter evidences tactile appropriation. This might seem intuitive; laughter is after all seen on the surface of the body and an image of fakery is the object of that laughter. It therefore seems natural to conclude that something has passed between image and body. Yet to theorise this argument is somewhat more difficult. Still, contrasting the image of fakery that is a dialectical image and therefore an authentic image of critique with surreal art that is not is a useful way to begin. Initially, fakes are not that different from surreal art, at least theoretically: both appropriate the most essential claim of the objects of their critiques (authenticity, for fakery; progress, for surrealism); both compose montages with their appropriations; for both, these montage-like compositions are structured by ambivalent and contradictory tensions that draw critical attention to these claims; ultimately, their montage images become critical constellations that problematise and destabilise the self-assured confidence with which religious objects or commodity objects of 130 years ago puts forth its own self-image, which is to say, images its most essential claim. But this is where fakery leaves surreal art behind and emerges as a dialectical image. Where surreal art fails to find the constellation of waking, fakery seeks the flashing moment of mimetic connection between image and body so that its critique may be completed and, in a sense, authenticated. Fakery uses the play of mimetic images flooding back and forth across a threshold between fakery and authenticity to tighten the ambivalent tensions that hold together the reconfiguring constellations of its dialectic. In this way, fakery pushes toward the critical moment of recognition. Ultimately the constellation becomes saturated with tension and comes to a standstill in a flashing moment of mimetic connection between image and body, whereupon the perceiver laughs. This laughter that is simultaneous with mimetic

connection signals a recognition on the part of the perceiver and at the same time reveals a new self transformed via their bodily involvement in the image. The transformation of the recognising subject with the emergence of the dialectical image establishes a new subject-object relation. The completion of this critical circuit between body and image marks the completion of the critique.

Laughter clearly is of the greatest significance in this formulation. Recalling Taussig's characterisation of the face as both mask and window to the soul and therefore at the intersection of revelation and concealment,<sup>26</sup> the significance of laughter in this formulation returns attention to the problem of double vision introduced at the beginning of this chapter. To theorise the importance of laughter in the emergence of fakery as a dialectical image requires an ability to see the mysterious workings of the dialectic upon the surface of the body and at the same time to see upon the surface of the body a transformation of the recognising self within the body. Yet is this not what tactile appropriation means? If the critique emerges from the juxtapositions of claims to authenticity attached to religious objects copied from the realm of authenticity, and the recognition of this critique then registers on the surface of the body, then clearly tactility is at stake. And if laughter reveals, physiognomically as it were, a recognising self transformed via their interpenetration with the image, and transformed in such a way that they are now engaged critically with the most essential claim of religious objects, then clearly a kind of appropriation has transpired between self and image.

Previously it has been suggested that bodily involvement in the image of critique points to a locus of authenticity in the image of fakery. I want to conclude this discussion of laughter and tactile appropriation with an explanation of this idea of authenticity in fakery. Following

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<sup>26</sup> Taussig, *Defacement*.

Benjamin's observation that the method of rational demystification is made impossible by the suffocating pressing of the commodity form, the immanent method of dialectical images becomes the only method of critique still possible. The dialectical image is therefore the image of an authentic critique. Yet Benjamin's critique of surrealism shows that the emergence of the dialectical image is dependent on the involvement of the body of the perceiver in the image of perception; without this involvement, the critique is incomplete and even deceptive, as is the case with the surrealists whose incomplete critique plunged them deeper into myth and dream despite their allusions to waking. It is in this sense that bodily involvement via tactile appropriation can be said to authenticate fakery's image of critique: tactile appropriation distinguishes fakery as a dialectical image, which, under the suffocating conditions of the commodified world, we know is the image of an authentic critique.

Laughter, in this formulation, is the key to understanding how tactile appropriation works. And tactile appropriation, as has been said before, is the key to transforming the recognising subject and thereby bringing about a new subject-object relation. That new relation is naturally the goal of the critique and the reason for its articulation in the first instance. And so it is tempting to say that we have come full circle and back to the beginning. But this is only half the story. The flashing moment of recognition that is simultaneous with a mimetic connection between body and image is significant in ways beyond marking the emergence of the dialectical image.

As was seen at the conclusion of chapter three, the moment of recognition contains an intuition of an immense and powerful mystery residing within and animating everyday objects. If Rudolf Otto is correct that religious experience is the intuition of the tremendous mystery at the base of the holy, could it be that the dialectical image of religious fakery, now authenticated as a critical image of religion, could be the gateway to authentic religious

experience? If the play of mimetic images frustrates the demands of reason for transparency in its objects, then such play also intensifies the mystery and increases its allure. And as with the intensification of dialectical tensions that finds resolution in the flashing moment of recognition, this moment also resolves the mystery, however fleeting such a resolution may be. For in the transitory and fleeting moment of recognition, the perceiving subject can comprehend the tremendous mystery at the base of the holy. But unlike the emergence of the dialectical image, with this fleeting comprehension there is no remainder, at least not in the critical sense that restructures the subject-object relation as with Benjamin's notion of authentic critique. What remains is what was there all along, which is the attraction of concealment driven by the desire for revelation – the allure of the tremendous mystery residing within and animating everyday objects. However misplaced reason's methods often are – for example, imposing criteria on religious objects so that fakery may be exposed, rather than exploring people's embodied involvements with objects so that religious authenticity may be revealed – it is this desire for a revelation that cannot be more than fleeting without destroying its very mysteriousness that ensures the persistence of religion. Far from being the frivolous and silly entertainment that Google, Yahoo! and other custodians of the Internet imply, fake religions are crucial to religion as a realm of authentic human experience. This is not because their authentic critique attempts to subvert that realm and do away with it altogether (although often that is their explicit intention), but because, independent of their intentions, fake religions contribute to the mystery of religion and thereby increases its allure.

This idea that humour in fake religion might be a gateway to authentic religious experience is similar to Peter Berger's argument that the experience of the comic can signal transcendence

into religious experience.<sup>27</sup> Yet Berger's theory is a particular instance of a broader category of theories that locate their explanation of humour and laughter in a recognition of incongruity between objects. Berger's theory is also a departure from these theories because it links the recognition of incongruity with a theologically formulated conception of the relationship between god and man (albeit in a narrowly Judeo-Christian vision). But to appreciate the relevance of his theory for the argument being made here, it is necessary to understand the general formulation of incongruity theories of humour. The following discussion will therefore begin with a brief sketch of the incongruity theory and how it fits into the broad discourse on theories of laughter and humour, before focussing attention on Berger's theory which uses the incongruity theory to theorise a link between the comic and religious experience.

## 4.2 Incongruity and Redeeming Laughter

### 4.2.1 Humour and Incongruity

Theories of humour that look for humour's explanation in a recognition of incongruence between objects and ideas are classified as incongruity theories of humour. This theory simply states that our sense of humour is the recognition of incongruity in the order or pattern of things. In Pascal's words: "Nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which one sees."<sup>28</sup> Similarly for Schopenhauer, laughter is caused by "the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the

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<sup>27</sup> Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> Blaise Pascal, quoted in John Morreal, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), p. 16.

real objects which have been thought though it in some relation, and laughter is itself just the expression of this incongruity.”<sup>29</sup> Certainly this kind of incongruity accounts for a great deal of humour. For example, a joke that did the rounds a few years ago asked: Did you see me at Princess Diana’s funeral? I was the one who started the Mexican wave! Pascal probably would have laughed at a discrepancy between the solemn mourning one would expect at the princess’s funeral and the image of a Mexican wave rippling through the crowds. For Schopenhauer, humour results because the object (Mexican wave) being subsumed under the concept (funeral) is incongruous.

Early versions of the incongruity theory, before humour became an independent subject of study, are found in the philosophical treatise that emerged with modernity in Europe. The earliest version of an incongruity theory is probably Kant’s.<sup>30</sup> Schopenhauer added to Kant’s theory,<sup>31</sup> but, in keeping with his general metaphysics, is disparaging of the elevation of concepts above perceptions.<sup>32</sup> For Kierkegaard, humour marks the boundary between the ethical and religious spheres, just as its close relative, irony, distinguishes the aesthetic from the ethical sphere.<sup>33</sup> During the twentieth century humour became a subject of study on its own. Henri Bergson’s book-length treatment of the topic similarly conceives of humour as a kind of incongruity. His theory that laughter is a social corrective against people who don’t behave in a flexible and context-sensitive way points to an incongruity between people and

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<sup>29</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, quoted in Morreal, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p. 17.

<sup>30</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, c1952), Part 1, Div. 1.54.

<sup>31</sup> See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. R. B. Haldane and John Kemp (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1896), Book 1, §13.

<sup>32</sup> This observation is made by John Morreal in his introduction to an extract from Book 1, §13 of Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Idea*, in John Morreal (ed.), *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

<sup>33</sup> See Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans David F. Swenson (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, for American Scandinavian Foundation, 1944).

machines in the machine-like behaviour of human beings.<sup>34</sup> Freud's theory of psychic energy, often classified in another category of humour theories called hydraulic or relief theory, also demonstrates an incongruity, in Berger's words, "between the demands of censorious morality and the blind urges of our libidinal nature."<sup>35</sup> Most contemporary theories of humour pivot on a recognition of incongruity and are variations on the incongruity theory.<sup>36</sup>

Of course, incongruity theories are not without their difficulties. For example, Roger Scruton points out that satire depends on congruity between two objects.<sup>37</sup> Also, it is plain that not all laughter results from humour; people laugh when tickled or when a sudden fright has passed. The common and enduring critique is that incongruity does not account for all examples of humour. Conversely, not all instances of incongruity are humorous. These are fair comments and merit attention. Yet for all the merits of these and similar criticisms, one cannot help but be struck by a resonance between the incongruity theory of humour that theorises the production of humour in the recognition of incongruity between objects, and the dialectic at a standstill marked by a recognition of a critical constellation saturated with ambivalent and contradictory tensions; both pivot on an incongruous and tensioned relation between objects.

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<sup>34</sup> See Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brareton and Fred Rothwell (London: Macmillan, 1921). Bergson's theory is also often cited as an example of another popular theory of humour called the superiority theory. Bergson's laughter is mocking and suggests that the person laughing feels superior to the person laughed at. Bergson's theory is an instance of the superiority theory, but can also be analysed as an instance of the incongruity theory and be applied as such, as Chidester has profitably done (see Chidester, "Christmas in July.") For a discussion of the superiority theory of humour, see Morreal, *Taking Laughter Seriously*.

<sup>35</sup> Berger, "Redeeming Laughter," p. 208. See Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge, 1960).

<sup>36</sup> See for example, Michael Clark, "Humour and Incongruity," in John Morreal (ed.), *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour* (Albany: State University of New York, 1987); and John Morreal, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York, 1983), pp. 139-155.

<sup>37</sup> Roger Scruton in John Morreal (ed.), 1987, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour* (Albany: State University of New York), p. 162.

This resonance poses two questions: Does the burst of laughter that marks both these moments suggest that completing the critical circuit between body and image amounts to “getting the joke”? Following on from here, if the moment of recognition contains an intuition to the tremendous mystery lurking beneath or behind the surface of appearance, could “getting the joke” contain such an intuition as well?

Thinking on the first question posed, the moment of recognition that marks the emergence of the dialectical image does mean “getting the joke.” In this sense, we can say that the outraged authors of the many letters received at Landover Baptists did not get the joke. Similarly, we might say that many readers of *The Mac Observer* perceived an incongruity when they laughed at Objective’s equation of Apple computers with godless communism. But in tracing fakery’s dialectic to a standstill and looking for a tactile appropriation in the moment of recognition, the intention was to find in fakery an authentic image of critique, not to theorise humour. In this sense the moment of recognition at the flashing moment of mimetic connection amounts to more than simply getting the joke. But the resonance between the dialectic at a standstill and incongruity theories of humour that find their common ground in a burst of laughter is significant in ways beyond the narrow intentions of either theory. Here I have in mind the implications of such a resonance suggested by the second question above.

It has previously been shown how the reconfiguring movements of fakery’s dialectic is seen upon the surface of the image; how with each new constellating movement, the appearance of the image is transformed. Along the way, the Internet surfer oscillates between convictions that they are looking at an authentic religion, then fake, then back again, until eventually they lament their lost ability to discern. Yet a mystery is surfacing with each oscillation, or alternatively, each tightening reconfiguration of the dialectic. So too for the web browser

surfing across the transforming surface of appearance whose intuition of this tremendous mystery is sharpened at each tightening turn. Though they are ultimately left guessing and confused and lament their lost ability to discern, the dialectic at a standstill is pregnant with the possibility and potential that the emergence of the dialectical image will also herald the revelation of this concealed mystery. From the historical materialist's perspective, the constellation of waking does herald a revelation of sorts, what Benjamin has theorised as a profane illumination, which, in a register different from Benjamin's Marxist one, may be closer to the intentions of many of the fake religions we are concerned with here. But I am interested in how fakes might contribute to religious mystery, might contribute to mystery as the source of religious experience. Peter Berger's suggestion that the experience of the comic signals religious experience is therefore of particular interest.

#### *4.2.2 Redeeming Laughter*

Berger's central argument is that the comic, which is the proper object of the sense of humour, can be a signal of transcendence (208).<sup>38</sup> I say "can be" because Berger is adamant that often the comic contains no such signal at all, or at least, the person enjoying the comic experience does not recognise this signal and fails to pick it up, so to speak. The brief summary of his argument below is followed by the discussion of its implications for the present inquiry into religious authenticity. I will therefore reserve my comments and analysis for that discussion.

Berger observes that the comic posits "a different reality in which the assumptions and rules of ordinary life are suspended" (205). For a brief moment, what was previously familiar

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<sup>38</sup> Berger, "Redeeming Laughter." For the duration of this discussion, where this text is cited the convention will be to indicate the page number in brackets in the text.

becomes unfamiliar, previously natural becomes unnatural. "At its most intense," Berger says, the comic "presents a counterworld, an upside down world" (207). But he is quick to point out that there is nothing overtly religious in this kind of transcendence; that it is a transcendence of a secular kind, a "transcendence in a lower key" (205). In making this point, Berger emphasises the transitoriness of this kind of transcendence. Ultimately, the empirical world must reassert itself and show that this counterempirical world is an illusion, and so the painless world of the comic is proved illusionary by the hard facts of tragedy (210). In this transitory moment, however, one stands in another reality, in a world without pain. This transitoriness therefore contains an intuition of transcendence "in a higher key," (205) of redemption in the full religious sense. People speak of "redeeming laughter," meaning that jokes make life easier to bear, because they recognise in the transitory comic moment qualities of redemption. There are then two meanings that can be attached to the comic, one secular, the other religious. And while there is no automatic nor necessary passage between them, there is a basic link that might or might not be recognised in that brief moment, which is the intuition in the lower key of transcendence in the higher key.

Berger's formulation poses the obvious question: how does one move from the secular to the religious meaning? The key for Berger is what he terms "an epistemological reversal" (210) brought about by faith. To understand this, it is necessary to recall what the world looks like from the perspective of faith. Faith reverses the reality-illusion dualism so that the empirical world appears to be a temporary reality that will be superseded in due time. In Berger's words, faith "puts the empirical in question and denies its ultimate seriousness" (210). The world from the perspective of faith is a world redeemed, is a world where people's alienation from god is overcome, is a world without pain. Seen from the perspective of faith, the counterempirical world of the comic anticipates the redeemed world posited by faith. To

laugh, therefore, is to see the world as if from God's point of view. It is in this sense that Berger suggests that the painless world of the comic adumbrates the religious world (210) and the experience of the comic presages religious experience.

Berger then examines three archetypal instances of the comic that never cease to amuse very young children – and probably many adults too. They are the pratfall, jack-in-the-box, and peekaboo. Berger suggests that the pratfall is an exemplar of “the incongruence between human pretensions and human reality.” He illustrates his claim with the example of Thales of Miletus who fell into a ditch while pondering the stars. Says Berger: “The Thracian maid's laughter implied an insight into the human condition that went far beyond this particular philosopher's momentary embarrassment” (211). In other words, in the moment of the philosopher's embarrassment, the Thracian maid enjoyed an intuition of a counterworld without pain, a world made whole again. The jack-in-the-box is the reverse figure; Jack denies the pratfall, repeatedly jumping up no matter how often he is pressed down. The jack-in-the-box therefore is an image of redemption, a soteriological paradigm that stands in contrast to the pratfall's anthropological one. In this “slightly reckless formulation,” Jack becomes Christ and the whole game of jack repeatedly jumping out of his box becomes a symbol of the resurrection (211).

But Berger reserves special attention for the game of peekaboo. The game, as most people know, involves a child and a mother. The child sees the mother, then the mother disappears. The child becomes anxious until after a brief moment, the mother reappears. The child expresses their relief by laughing or smiling. This scenario, for Berger, contains “in a wondrous nutshell” “the drama of redemption as seen in the light of faith” (211). He explains that God's dealings with humanity amount to “a cosmic game of hide and seek. We catch a

glimpse of him and then he promptly disappears” (211). Religious faith, in this scenario, is the hope that he will reappear, “providing that ultimate relief, which precisely, is redemption” (211). Existence then is the pain of estrangement, to which reunification is the joy of redemption. It is in this sense that Berger makes his argument for the comic experience as a signal of transcendence: “... the painless worlds of the comic can now be seen as an adumbration of a world beyond this world. The promise of redemption, in one form or another, is always a world without pain” (p. 210).

This image of a cosmic game of hide and seek dramatised in the game of peekaboo I find the most compelling image of Berger’s theory because it is exactly the image of a movement between revelation and concealment with which this discussion of authenticity in religion has been concerned. I want to hold onto this image and the dramatic movements it contains for a minute while I pick up another aspect of Berger’s argument: that this image of the comic world in tension with the empirical world resonates with Benjamin’s dialectical image composed of similar tensions. Such a resonance has been remarked on previously, where it was noted that humour emerges out of the recognition of incongruity between objects and that the dialectical image emerges at a moment of recognition of a constellation saturated with tensions. For both, it is the relation of objects that precipitates this critical moment. This resonance can now be further elaborated, for there is surely a resonance between the movements between worlds that Berger suggests and the transformation of the recognising self that is central to Benjamin’s theory. At the recognition of humorous incongruity, the recognising self is transported from the empirical world of everyday familiarity to the counter-empirical world presented by the comic, the latter disclosed as “lurking behind or beneath” (207-8) the former. For Benjamin, the transformation of the recognising self is marked by a waking from the dream that is the false consciousness of progress. The counter-

empirical world of the comic is identifiable with waking consciousness and in its turn dream consciousness is identifiable with the empirical world. With this formulation in mind, recall the image of peekaboo and the cosmic game of hide and seek that it encapsulates. The empirical world is the surface of appearance where most of us spend most of our time. But it is its very empiricism that denies that it is a concealing surface. This denial is perpetrated by the method of forensic science that would drive reason's wedge ever deeper, a violent getting-to-the-bottom-of-things that in its relentless exposures denies mystery any space to move. Yet we know that the empirical claim is essentially false and that mystery does lurk concealed behind empiricism because we transcend this surface when we laughingly enter the comic's counter-empirical world lurking beneath it. In that moment, when we see the world from God's perspective, that is, from the transcended perspective, we feel as if awakened from a nightmare dream where we were estranged from God, our mother in Berger's description of peekaboo, and can now revel in the joy of their reappearance and our redemption.

At this juncture an objection to this formulation might be proposed. As Berger warns, the empirical world does reassert itself and the painless world of the comic is displaced by the empirical experience of pain. The comic experience is transitory; one does stop laughing. An objection to the transposition of Benjamin's dialectical image onto Berger's image of the comic may be raised at this juncture: that the authenticity of Benjamin's image of critique is dependent on tactile appropriation and most significantly, that a residue remain. Waking consciousness is not theorised as transitory, as with Berger's comic experience. This is a mistaken objection, as the concluding discussion of this chapter will show. My argument is that this transposition is valid. In making this argument, this objection will be refuted in due course.

If Berger is explicit in his explanation of how comic experience is related to religious experience, Benjamin is as explicit about how his theory of dialectics relates to theology. Yet somehow Benjamin's explicitness seems less helpful:

My thinking relates to theology the way a blotter does to ink. It is soaked with it. If one merely read the blotter, though, nothing of what has been written would remain.<sup>39</sup>

There is something beautifully fitting about this statement from a writer who eschews descriptive inventories in favour of literary montage on the grounds that the former arrests the mysterious movements of the objects so exposed, while the latter's constellations uses mysterious movement in a way that allows mystery to reveal itself. But if Benjamin's thinking is soaked with theology, his work is by no means typically theological. As Marsha Hewitt has noted,<sup>40</sup> his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin's most deeply theological work, uses explicitly theological language for thoroughly materialist purposes. These materialist purposes, we have seen, constitute Benjamin's critique of modernity's re-enchantment of social experience via a conception of human progress that assumes the character as well as authority of myth. In the closing discussion of this chapter, I want to consider Benjamin's image of dialectics at a standstill as a theological formulation and the flashing moment of recognition as an image of redemption.

### 4.3 Benjamin's Political Messianism

If Benjamin's general concern is a critique of the modernist understanding of history, it seems that a consideration of the structure of his understanding of time in relation to history is a

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<sup>39</sup> Benjamin, "N," p. 18 (N7a.7).

<sup>40</sup> Marsha Aileen Hewitt, *Critical Theory of Religion: A Feminist Analysis* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), p. 153.

useful place to begin this enquiry into Benjamin's political messianism. With a grasp of the structure of Benjamin's thesis, the discussion will then look at subjective experience, which, under the conditions of modernity's abstractions and reifications, Benjamin theorises as the crucible for revolutionary action. It is this moment of a transforming subjective experience that is the locus of his political messianism.

#### *4.3.1 Empirical History and Messianic Time:*

"The authentic concept of universal history is a messianic one. Universal history, as it is understood today, is the business of obscurantists."<sup>41</sup> This short fragment contains the basic structure of Benjamin's thesis. Clearly, there are two registers of time employed here; the first is messianic, the second is empirical.<sup>42</sup> Importantly, these two registers are not one above the other or one superimposed onto the other, as in an allegorical formulation. Benjamin understands them as distinct and disconnected, at least until revolutionary political action cuts across history's secular continuum to blast it open, "a leap into the open air of history."<sup>43</sup> This dual register of time is represented in figure 1.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Benjamin, "N," p. 36 (N18.3).

<sup>42</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 242.

<sup>43</sup> Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," p. 261.

<sup>44</sup> This figure has been adapted from Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 242.

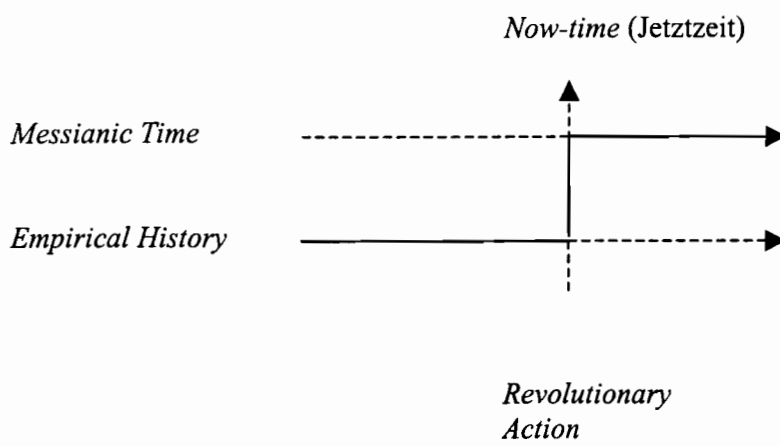


Fig. 1

Empirical history is the view of the past from the perspective of the historicist. This perspective sees history as a chronological accumulation of events and the historicist as chronicler of that accumulation. The attitude of the historicist is one that “lets history run its course.” Crucially however, “its discourse imitates that course,”<sup>45</sup> which is to say that the historicist sees in history humanity’s future, a necessarily utopian vision that in the same instant obscures the present. “The historicist chronicler of world history” obscures history by confusing the present with “the age of its messianic redemption.”<sup>46</sup> The critique of inauthentic empirical time is that historicism is “premature,” in the sense that “it takes for granted that history can already be told in its totality.”<sup>47</sup> Historicism’s approach to empirical history assumes that the present is history’s culmination. Historicism, today’s understanding of history, is therefore tantamount to ideology. As Irving Wohlfarth has succinctly put it: “In identifying the utopian telos with the present, historicism betrays it.”<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Irving Wohlfarth, “On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin’s Last Reflections,” *Glyph*, vol. 3 (1978), p. 166.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

Messianic time is the second register of time in the structure of Benjamin's thought. As the authentic concept of history, it is a corrective to the historicist's ideologically inflected understanding of history and is the perspective of the dialectical materialist who regards it as their task "to brush history against the grain."<sup>49</sup> If historicism characterises the discourse of today's empirical understanding of history, then historical materialism can be characterised as the discourse of messianic time. The dialectical materialist sees it as their task to disrupt the course of empirical history and therewith to bring about a "reformation of consciousness" that for Benjamin, following Marx, consists in "waking the world ... from the dream about itself."<sup>50</sup> As we have seen, Benjamin's notion of dialectical thinking seeks the flashing moment of recognition and mimetic connection. Yet the full significance of dialectics at a standstill now comes into focus, for with the emergence of the dialectical image comes "a revolutionary chance to fight for the oppressed past."<sup>51</sup> Articulated in theological terms, the dialectical materialist in this moment "recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening,"<sup>52</sup> a disruption of the course of empirical history that blasts open history's continuum. This kind of disruption is the figure of a movement from the register of empirical history to the register of messianic time, accomplished through revolutionary action that cuts across the straight path of history's continuum (see fig 1).<sup>53</sup> Dialectics at a standstill is the theoretical statement of this transcendent revolutionary action; how Benjamin conceived the actualisation of this action bears some explanation.

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<sup>49</sup> Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," p. 257.

<sup>50</sup> Marx, letter to Ruge, in Benjamin, "N," p. 1. This quote from Marx's correspondences prefaces "Konvolut N" of Benjamin's notes on the theoretical aspects of the Arcades Project and is thought to be the source of Benjamin's formulation of dialectics as a tension between dream consciousness and awakened consciousness.

<sup>51</sup> Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," p. 263.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 263.

<sup>53</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 242.

Before tracing Benjamin's political messianism through the actualisation of revolutionary action, it is important to clarify at the outset an objection that might be raised at this point. Clearly this formulation of revolutionary action that cuts across empirical history and into messianic time implicates a utopian vision. Since it is the utopianism of historicism's account of history that renders it inauthentic, it stands to reason that such utopianism is equally problematic in the historical materialist's account of history. This is a valid, but mistaken point. As Buck-Morss has expertly shown, though utopian desire is the motivation for revolutionary action, revolution should not be understood as the culmination of history.<sup>54</sup> Rather, it is "a Messianic break from history's course."<sup>55</sup> In other words, revolutionary action is the disruption of the straight path of empirical history and therewith a liberation from its oppressive ideological powers. Utopianism for the dialectical materialist emphasises the urgency of the present, rather than the promise of the future. With this distinction in mind, the emphasis on "now-time" in Benjamin's notion of revolutionary action brings into focus his political messianism that little bit more.

#### *4.3.2 Revolutionary Action and Experience*

The crucible of revolutionary action is a personal, subjective experience. It is the uniqueness of this experience, wherein the dialectical materialist "grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one," that gives the lie to historicism's image of a fixed and "eternal" past.<sup>56</sup> Benjamin distinguishes between the discourses of empirical history and messianic time: "Historicism gives the 'eternal' image of the past; dialectical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past."<sup>57</sup> A crucial distinction comes into focus here: on

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<sup>54</sup> See *Ibid.*, p. 240-245.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>56</sup> Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," p. 263.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

the one hand is the historicist who is orientated toward a utopian future that can be discerned in the present because contemporary progress, measured in straight trajectory of improvement from the “eternal past,” promises to deliver that utopia; on the other hand is the historical materialist who remains orientated toward their subjective experience of the present by forming constellations between present and past that in turn becomes a crucible for revolutionary action. This kind of experience achieves a rescue of a past oppressed by historicism’s image of a fixed eternal, and at the same time achieves a “reformation of consciousness” along the lines of Marx’s aim to wake the world from the dream about itself. In formulating this notion of critical experience, Benjamin found critical leverage in Marcel Proust’s idea of memory, specifically the *mémoire involontaire*, which Benjamin adopted as the image of a unique experience of contact between present and past.

Memory is a constellation between present and past. Yet the difficulty with memory is that it involves intellection, which means that the memory is thought through concepts that in turn obscure the quality of sensuousness that is the memory’s magic and the reason for its significance in the first instance. Samuel Becket articulates this problem in a passage from his extraordinary work on Proust:

The most successful evocative experiment can only project the echo of a past sensation, because, being an act of intellection, it is conditioned by the prejudices of the intelligence which abstracts from any given sensation, as being illogical and insignificant, a discordant and frivolous intruder, whatever word or gesture, sound or perfume, cannot be fitted into the puzzle of a concept. But the essence of any new experience is contained precisely in this mysterious element that the vigilant will reject as an anachronism. It is the axis about which the sensation pivots, the centre of gravity of its coherence.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Samuel Becket, *Proust* (New York: Grover Press, 1970), pp. 53-4.

Benjamin is interested in memory as a sensuous experience. In pursuing this experience, he is not only concerned to avoid the prejudices of intelligence, he is determined to use the sensuous experience of memory's constellation between present and past as a means to critique the act of intellection, for it is this modernist tendency toward intellection and abstraction at the expense of sensuousness that conceives of history as a chronology, a continuum, and an object of empirical knowledge. The difficulty then is how to tap into the "mysterious element" and experience memory sensuously as a direct and unmediated contact between present and past. This is where Benjamin drew inspiration from Proust's *mémoire involontaire*.

The *mémoire involontaire* is a spontaneous recollection triggered by an encounter in the present with a seemingly insignificant object from the past. Proust's famous example is the taste of a Madeleine; "I raised to my lips a spoonful of the cake . . . a shudder ran through my whole body and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place."<sup>59</sup> Proust is flooded with memories of his childhood, his aunt, and the "taste of dead leaves or faded blossom she so relished." In his poem "Proust's Madeleine," American poet Kenneth Rexroth recounts his experience of idly performing a coin trick for his daughter, whereupon "Suddenly everything slips aside."<sup>60</sup> He sees his father, hears him whistling a tune, smells the cigars and whiskey on his breath. Becket describes this kind of recollection:

... the central impression of a past sensation recurs as an immediate stimulus which can be instinctively identified by the subject with the model of duplication (whose integral purity has been retained because it has been forgotten), then the total past sensation, not

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<sup>59</sup> <http://www.foodreference.com/html/qmadeleine.html> (accessed: 17 July 2003).

<sup>60</sup> Kenneth Rexroth, "Proust's Madeleine," available at <http://www.cs.berkeley.edu/~richie/poetry/html/aupoem146.html> (accessed: 17 July 2003).

its echo nor its copy, but the sensation itself, annihilating every spatial and temporal restriction, comes in a rush to engulf the subject in all the beauty of its infallible proportion.”<sup>61</sup>

For Proust, this kind of direct and unmediated contact between present and past is not merely the fortuitous return of the past in memory; it resurrects the sensations of objects, which then become like ciphers, “hieroglyphic characters,” a “magic scrawl,” an “inner book of unknown symbols.”<sup>62</sup> The recollection of these tactile sensations therefore entails a kind of self-transformation as one sets about deciphering the significances, for Proust, the taste of dead leaves or faded blossom, for Rexroth, the smell of whiskey and cigars. The *mémoire involontaire* is a kind of engagement with the very essence of things that Becket likens to religious experience, the “stunned by waves of rapture” that flood the subject.<sup>63</sup> In this fleeting moment the “radiant essence” of the thing the *mémoire involontaire* metonymically invokes, Proust’s childhood, Rexroth’s father, “emerges from the series of forgotten days.”

One can see in Proust’s *mémoire involontaire* Benjamin’s image of dialectics at a standstill as well as his fascination with the smallest items of history, the seemingly insignificant “trash.” Yet notice that the image of the *mémoire involontaire* contains all the crucial qualities that later would constitute the terminal points of Benjamin’s theory of dialectics: constellations – in memory, the present era forms a constellation with the past; a flashing moment – the suddenness of the *mémoire involontaire* and rushing sensation that comes with it; tactility – the taste of a Madeleine or flipping a coin recalls the taste of dead leaves or the smell of

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<sup>61</sup> Becket, *Proust*, p. 54.

<sup>62</sup> Proust, quoted in Max Pensky, “Tactics of Remembrance: Proust, Surrealism, and the Origin of the *Passagenwerk*,” in Michael P. Steinberg (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), p.174.

<sup>63</sup> Becket, *Proust*, pp. 51-53.

whiskey and cigar on breath; sensuous contact – direct and unmediated, between present and past; a disruption of movement – “I stopped,” “suddenly everything slips aside;” a transformation of the experiencing (recognising) self – Proust shudders and becomes intent upon “the extraordinary changes,” Rexroth is moved to write a poem. But if these elements constitute terminal points for his theory, Benjamin is most interested in the subjectivity of the experience, specifically, the brooding melancholia of Proust himself. Recall that Benjamin the dialectical materialist is interested in the reformation of consciousness through the immanent method of dialectical images that brush history against the grain. Benjamin therefore is interested in how Proust’s brooding subjectivity that appears necessary to his *mémoire involontaire* can be transformed for critical purposes. As Max Pensky has put it, Benjamin is interested in “the reconstruction of mournful subjectivity as an optical equipment in the laboratory of time.”<sup>64</sup> Benjamin reconstructs this mournful subjectivity into “heroic melancholy,” a reconstruction whereby subjectivity becomes an optical apparatus that in turn presents an opportunity for a “truly disclosive relation with objects.”<sup>65</sup> In the image of Proust, Benjamin finds “a model for a historiographic sensibility” that is “based on memory as the moment of awakening;”<sup>66</sup> says Benjamin: “Proust’s method is actualisation, not reflection.”<sup>67</sup>

Benjamin develops and applies the Proustian “presence of mind” for his own purposes. In Benjamin’s hands, this mind is not so much orientated toward the past as much as toward our *relation to the past* from our subjective location in the present. Benjamin knows that “to be plunged in memory is to be lost to the present.”<sup>68</sup> His intention is actualisation in the present,

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<sup>64</sup> Pensky, “Tactics of Remembrance,” p. 176.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>66</sup> Pensky, “Tactics of Remembrance,” p. 177.

<sup>67</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Image of Proust,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 211.

<sup>68</sup> Wohlfarth, “On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin’s Last Reflections,” p. 164.

not reflection on the past, and it comes “in a flash too instantaneous to be called self-reflexive.”<sup>69</sup> This image of a flash is familiar from the discussion of dialectics at a standstill in Chapter Three and elsewhere in the present chapter; in the present context, this flash assumes the character of the actualisation of an authentic and direct relation with the past, one that is not filtered by historicism’s cognitive processes, but instead mediated by tactile sensation. This kind of actualisation is Benjamin’s concept of “genuine historical memory,” and it “takes the form of messianic contacts between the present and specific moments of the past.”<sup>70</sup> It is the same flash that marks the moment of recognition and the establishment of a mimetic connection between the object perceived and the body of the perceiver, and therewith the emergence of the dialectical image. If Benjamin’s reflections on Proustian memory are “dedicated to the salvation of the present,”<sup>71</sup> then it is not surprising that Gershom Scholem should describe Benjamin’s dialectical images as “theological symbols.”<sup>72</sup> The issue at stake with both Benjamin’s use of Proustian memory and his own innovation of dialectical images is that they brush history against the grain, they both cut across the path of empirical history and a mythically conceived trajectory of progress. By disrupting the continuum of empirical history in this manner, the experience of the *mémoire involontaire*, thought through the optics of Benjamin’s dialectics, enters into the parallel register of Messianic now-time. It is to a consideration of this concept of now-time that our attention should now turn.

#### 4.3.3 Now Time (Jetztzeit)

The messianic import of historical materialism’s critique of “today’s understanding of history” is succinctly captured in the following sentence from Thesis Fourteen of The Theses

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>72</sup> Gershom Scholem, quoted in Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 241.

on the Philosophy of History: "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]." <sup>73</sup> In a footnote to this statement, Benjamin's translator notes that his concept of "now" (*Jetztzeit*) is closer to the mystical *nunc stans* than *Gegenwart*, which simply means "present." In an important essay on Benjamin's contemporaneity, Jürgen Habermas, who thought this statement expressed the central tenet of Benjamin's idea of a present in which time comes to a standstill, uses both *Jetztzeit* and *nunc stans* to indicate the concept of "now time." <sup>74</sup> At the messianic cessation of happening, the historicist's constellation of natural history and eternity gives way to the historical materialist's constellation of history and *Jetztzeit*. <sup>75</sup> These constellations, or rather, the crystallising of the former into the latter, marks the transcendence between secular history, "the sequence of (catastrophic) events that mark human times without fulfilling it," and revolutionary "now-time," wherein every moment "is irradiated with the anticipation of redemption." <sup>76</sup>

It is the personal experience of a unique subjectivity in this moment, earlier theorised as the transformation of the recognising self, which heralds the reformation of consciousness that wakes the world from the dream about itself. This moment is the culmination of dialectical thinking and the crux of Benjamin's theory of dialectics at a standstill. Everything comes down to this crucial moment and timing is of the utmost importance. Benjamin writes in Thesis Eleven: "To articulate the past historically ... means to seize hold of the memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger." <sup>77</sup> The danger here is not merely that the moment may pass before the memory is perceived in all its tactile sensuousness. The urgency to experience the

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<sup>73</sup> Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," p. 261.

<sup>74</sup> Habermas, "Consciousness Raising or Redemptive Critique," p. 38.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>76</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 242.

<sup>77</sup> Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," p. 255.

sudden metonymic rush of the memory as tactility is attributable to the oppressive powers of historicism's consciousness that would abstract the experience into concepts and processes of intellection. Bowing to this false consciousness is to be complicit with historicism's reification of experience and to perpetuate the utopian myth of progress; "the same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling class."<sup>78</sup> It is not an understatement to say that for Benjamin, the history of the world and the salvation of humanity pivots on this moment, for the passing of this opportunity without seizing it amounts to handing victory to the Antichrist:

The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of the Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.<sup>79</sup>

This then is the image of Benjamin's political messianism. Yet it remains to be directly addressed how Benjamin's theology is related to his thought. From the preceding discussion, it is clear that questions of redemption situated within a cosmic battle against evil are at stake. Yet I don't think the problem of theology in Benjamin's thought is as cryptic as his analogy with an ink-soaked blotter implies.

#### 4.4 Redeeming Laughter and Political Messianism

In this concluding discussion of the chapter I want to relate Benjamin's political messianism with Berger's redeeming laughter. Before I do that however, it is useful to recall the opening

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., original emphasis.

discussion of the chapter. There it was shown, via Benjamin's critique of surrealism, that the element of dialectics at a standstill that authenticates the image of critique is the involvement of the body of the recognising subject with the image of perception. Benjamin theorises this element of bodily involvement through the notion of tactile appropriation, an interpenetration between body and image whereby the mysterious reconstellating movements concealed by the image's surface of appearance registers on the surface of the body. In turn, the surface of the body reveals, physiognomically as it were, the mysterious transformations within the recognising self. Drawing on Taussig's notion that the face that as both mask and window to the soul stands at the intersection of revelation and concealment, this formulation of tactile appropriation opens the possibility that laughter may evidence the kind of bodily involvement that authenticates Benjamin's image of critique. In Chapter Three it was noted that many browsers of fake religions' websites reported that they found these sites and their content extremely funny. Indeed, fake religions are routinely categorised in the humour and entertainment directories maintained by Google and Yahoo. It therefore may be that the dialectical image of fakery in religion conforms to a Benjaminian concept of authentic critique.

The second discussion of this chapter sets out to further explore this humorous quality. Following the incongruity theory of religion, the first significant discovery here was a correlation between the structure of humour and the structure of the dialectical image; both pivot on a tensioned and contradictory relation between objects. Yet Berger's theory of the comic initiated an unexpected loop back to an encounter with religious authenticity via his suggestion that the comic is an adumbration of religious experience. I say odd because if fake religion is comical and the comical adumbrates authentic religious experience, the possibility is presented that fake religions may adumbrate authentic religion via their humour. On

reflection however, it was appreciated that perhaps this is not so unexpected after all. Recalling the concluding discussion of Chapter Three, there it was shown that with the reconfiguring movements of the dialectic comes a growing intuition of a tremendous mystery surfacing from deep within the object of perception. This observation was the point of departure for the third discussion of the chapter, where Benjamin's dialectical image was reconsidered from the point of view of Benjamin's theology. There it quickly became apparent that Benjamin's dialectical critique of modernity's re-enchantment of social experience is soaked with messianism. Dialectics at a standstill, theorised in secular terms in Chapter Three, finds its theological counterpoint in now-time (*Jetztzeit*). Similarly, the transformation of the recognizing self finds its counterpoint in redemption, and the political critique of ideology finds its counterpoint in a confrontation with the Antichrist, who has never ceased to be victorious.

By way of concluding this chapter, there are two significant relationships between this chapter's 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> discussions that I want to bring into focus. The first is between Berger's comic and Benjamin's dialectical image; the second is between their respective experiences of religion. This second relationship returns attention to an objection anticipated at the end of the discussion of Berger's comic experience (discussion two) where it was suggested that Berger's emphasis on the comic as an adumbration of the religious might temper the transposition of his theory of redeeming laughter onto Benjamin's theologically-soaked theory of dialectics at a standstill. In the context of Benjamin's political messianism, this objection can now be properly addressed. Before doing so however, I want to relate Berger's comic and Benjamin's dialectical image.

There is a structural correlation between Berger's understanding of the comic and Benjamin's image of dialectics in that they both pivot on a relation between objects. By pivot I mean to suggest that the comic and the dialectical image come into focus when the tension in the relation between their constitutive objects becomes untenable. For Berger, this untenability is captured in the concept of incongruity; for Benjamin, it is captured in the idea of saturation. For both, at this critical moment there is a transcendent departure from empirical reality and an entrance into a different world (Berger's counter-empirical world) and register of time (Benjamin's messianic time). Both transcendent realms are conceived in religious terms. Recalling the enduring metaphor of surface and depth, it might be said that this movement from empirical reality to a theologically conceived counter-empirical world with its own messianic register of time is a penetration through the surface of appearance into the mysterious concealed depths. Recalling that Berger says that the counter-empirical world is disclosed as lurking behind or beneath the empirical surface, this penetration heralds a revelation that can be likened to religious experience.

In addition to these structural similarities, Berger's and Benjamin's theories are similarly focussed on their subjects' experience of transformation. For Berger, this is the experience of dwelling in a counter-empirical world without pain. Recalling Berger's suggestion that to laugh, that is, to enter into and dwell in a counter-empirical world, is to see the world from the divine perspective, the central argument of Berger's thesis comes into focus: the experience of this counter-world is the joy of reunification with the divine. The crucial image that conveys this experience is the game of peekaboo that dramatises the cosmic game of hide and seek that God plays with his creation. Benjamin describes the corresponding experience in his theory through the image of Proust, specifically, the experience of the *mémoire involontaire* that short circuits the obfuscations of intellection and abstraction to provide an unmediated

experience of direct contact, an engagement with and participation in the very essence of the object. For Benjamin, Proustian subjectivity reconstructed for purposes of revolutionary action and theorised through the idea of heroic melancholy becomes an optical apparatus suitable for a truly disclosive relation with objects. This theme of disclosure is a central motif in both Berger's and Benjamin's theories and is pictured in explicitly religious terms. It is clearly a revelation of sorts; that the separation from the divine is temporary (Berger's argument) and that the utopian present touted by progress is fallacious and deceptive (Benjamin's argument). In other words, the empirical world is a false world that conceals divine truth. This divine truth concealed by the surface of appearance cannot be seen in the ordinary sense. Rather, it is disclosed in a transcendent moment in which the recognising self is transformed. The joys of reunification, dramatised in the cosmic game of peekaboo, and the stunned waves of rapture that encapsulate the experience of the *mémoire involontaire*, find common ground in the reformation of consciousness that consists in the world waking from the dream about itself.

A second relationship between Berger's theory of redeeming laughter and Benjamin's theory of dialectics at a standstill links their respective ideas on religious experience. Berger emphasises that the comic is an adumbration of reunification with the divine. In other words, for Berger, the comic is an anticipation of the purest form of religious experience and is a sampling of what is to come. Yet if Berger means only that the comic is an anticipation of reunification, an objection might be raised to the transposition of Berger's theory onto dialectics at a standstill. This objection might go something as follows: if the comic is only an adumbration of religious experience, an anticipation rather than the experience itself, it surely cannot sit well with Benjamin's political messianism and his image of authentic critique that insists on the actuality of the religious experience if the transformation of the recognising self,

so crucial to waking, is to be achieved. There are two approaches available here that will refute this criticism. The first focuses on Berger's understanding of adumbration, the second focuses on Benjamin's understanding of now-time.

Berger's understanding of adumbration as anticipation does not preclude authentic religious experience. The distinction, in Berger's theological formulation, between the comic and the joy of reunification as authentic religious experience is one of temporality, which is to say that the experience of ultimate reunification with the divine is permanent whereas the comic experience that adumbrates it is transitory. Berger makes this distinction himself when he notes that the empirical world does reassert itself, one does stop laughing. Yet in that transitory moment in which one dwells in the counter-empirical world, the upside-down world without pain, one does see the world as if from God's perspective and one is reunited with the divine. It is its transitoriness that gives the experience of reunification its anticipatory character; what is anticipated is not reunification per se, but rather, reunification's permanence.

A second refutation of this objection should point out that Benjamin's notion of religious experience, articulated through the image of Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, is itself impermanent and therefore transitory. For Benjamin, the crucible for religious experience and subjective transformation is now-time, the messianic cessation of events wherein history is redeemed and the Antichrist subdued. Yet now-time is transitory. The Antichrist, who has never ceased to be victorious, must in the next moment be subdued again. The utopian vision of reunification with the divine, as Buck-Morss has shown, is the motivation for revolutionary action, not the revolution itself. Now-time must be transitory, for if it were not, then his theory would perpetrate the same confusion that the historicist's account of empirical history

perpetrates, which is to confuse the utopian telos with the present. In a sense, Benjamin's notion of dialectics at a standstill and the transformation of the recognising self in this moment of messianic time is a kind of adumbration of the revolution to come, the revolution that will defeat the Antichrist and end history, which in Benjamin's theologically-soaked thinking, must equate with ultimate and permanent redemption and unification with the divine.

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### 5.1 Of Churches and Cults

The Church of Virus describes itself as “a memetically engineered atheistic religion.”<sup>1</sup> It positions itself in opposition to irrational religion, by which it means “traditional religion.” The core ideas informing this religion are evolution and memetics, which together establish a platform for one of the religion’s “primary design goals:” the objective of survivability through adaptation. Taking its cue from the observation that religions fade “because they become obsolete,” David McFadzean, the inventor of the Church of Virus, designed this new religion on the premise that it should be able to continuously integrate “better (more accurate, more useful) concepts” so that the religion’s relevance is maintained. By continuously integrating “better concepts,” the religion “could conceivably achieve true immortality.” The intention is to build into the religion’s design an evolutionary mechanism, similar to Darwin’s natural selection. Since the kind of natural selection at stake here is not competition between species of animals, but instead between ideas, Richard Dawkin’s theory of memetics is employed to give expression to the conceptual framework. Briefly, a meme is an evolutionary replicator that replicates through imitative behaviour. As such, a meme is also often defined as a unit of cultural information. Most commonly, “meme” is used in the notion of a meme-complex, a group of mutually supporting memes that together form an organised belief system. Fashion styles, social movements, and political and religious beliefs are all examples of meme-complexes.<sup>2</sup> McFadzean’s Virus religion is a meme-complex, drawing on ideas from

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<sup>1</sup> The website of the Church of Virus can be found at <http://virus.lucifer.com> (accessed: 1 August 2003).

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1989); more recently, see Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2000).

philosophy, science, technology, politics, and religion. McFadzean names his new religion Virus because, he admits, he deliberately wants to antagonise people through the negative connotations associated with “virus.” He wants people to know that this idea is “designed to infect them” so that they may replicate it and contribute to its evolution. Hence the welcome message on the church’s homepage: “closed irrational minds may be offended; open rational minds may be infected.”

If McFadzean’s “neo-cybernetic philosophy” is exceptionally innovative in the way that it synthesises religion, evolution, and memetics, it still does exhibit some features of the more familiar form of religion. For example, the church canonized Charles Darwin, St. Charles, on February 12<sup>th</sup>, 1996, the 186<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth. McFadzean also outlines three qualities that mark a good Virion, the so-called Three Virian Virtues. The first of these is Reason; “if truth is the goal, rationality is the way.” “A good Virion,” says McFadzean, “will endeavour to hold a consistent set of beliefs and act in accordance with those beliefs.” The second virtue is Empathy; “the glue that binds society.” Empathy is so important because it is the basis for many of the qualities that people hold in the highest regard, such as kindness, charity, and forgiveness. The ability to be empathetic “confers a distinct advantage in any social situation.” The third virtue is Vision, by which is meant the capacity to think beyond the wants and needs of the individual.<sup>3</sup> These Virian Virtues stand in opposition to the Three Senseless Sins. Dogmatism signifies “the abdication of reason,” and the convictions to which it leads “are the enemy of truth more than lies.” The second sin is Apathy. McFadzean’s

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<sup>3</sup> Though McFadzean does not elaborate, it seems that with this idea of vision, he means something along the lines of a perspective that will resolve the tension between perfectly rational individual action and perfectly rational collective action. This tension and even contradiction was famously theorised by Garret Hardin’s concept of the tragedy of the commons, and has been used to explain the logic of the Cold War nuclear arms race and more recently, global environmental degradation. See Garret Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science*, vol. 162 (1968), pp. 1243-1248.

statement here is brief: "There can be no logical argument against apathy;" obviously, if one is apathetic, one has no interest in arguments against apathy. Apathy, says McFadzean, is the key to leading a meaningless life. The third sin is hypocrisy. One has committed this sin when one's behaviour is inconsistent with one's beliefs. Hypocrisy therefore undermines the first Virion Virtue, which is to maintain a consistent set of beliefs and act in accordance with them. Besides these virtues and sins, and the canonisation of Darwin, the other obvious feature of Virus that signifies its religious character is that it is brought together under the name of a church. This seems contradictory for an innovation that styles itself in opposition to the traditional image of religion. Unfortunately, McFadzean does not explain this, and so we can only surmise that he chose to gather his religion under the idea of a church because that is the dominant image of religion in North America, where McFadzean lives.

Clearly, the Virus religion is centred on praise for reason and rational thought. This exaltation of reason is, however, linked with a central concern of religion, which is to provide a sense of meaning and purposefulness to its followers. In the Church of Virus, this sense of meaning is found in a super-rationalist orientation toward the world that understands everything as a system. In this worldview, all systems are comprised of components that are themselves systems. The upper limit therefore is the universe (since there is no rational way of knowing whether the universe is not a component of a still larger system, a multiverse), and the lower limit is a quark (since quarks are the smallest known units of energy and therefore cannot be comprised of components.) The view of the world from the Virion's perspective is of physical and temporal patterns, which is to say, information. At all levels, this system is changing. Yet in the Virion's worldview, change is not accidental or chaotic, but rather a function of processes of variation and selection. In other words, what is witnessed at the level of biological species evolution is only a manifestation of an underlying principle that permeates

all systems, from cellular development to human culture. Evolution is the single activity occurring at all levels of the system.

As a view of the world, this is not problematic. But if a feature of religion is to provide participants with a sense of meaning, one may wonder where meaning fits into the Virion worldview. Following the logic of this broad concept of systems evolution, things simply mean what they cause. So, the meaning of something is the effect that thing has wrought on the system at different scales. The meaning of an individual's life is the sum total of how that person's existence has influenced, either directly or indirectly, people around them and the environment in which they move. The trick to creating a meaningful life therefore lies in how one influences the world around you.

There is nothing inherently problematic in claiming a religious character to this worldview, and it is a worldview that has in one form or another been expressed prior to the invention of the Church of Virus. Yet some more of this worldview may be discerned through the numerous websites and information pages that the church's website links to, a large proportion of which are to pages dealing with memetics and transhumanist philosophy. Transhumanism, as will be shown, emerges as the anchor of the Virion worldview. Specifically, the goals of the Extropy Institute, where David McFadzean is Electronic Communications Officer responsible for administering and maintaining the archives of their mailing lists and discussion boards, seem to have inspired a great deal of the Virion worldview.<sup>4</sup> According to extropian philosophy, humanity is a transitory stage in the evolutionary development of intelligence. Extropianism advocates the use of science to

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.extropy.org/about/index.html> (accessed: 3 August 2003).

accelerate human evolution into a “transhuman” phase, or “posthuman condition.”<sup>5</sup> The posthuman is defined as a “human descendant who has been augmented to such a degree as to be no longer a human.”<sup>6</sup> Physically, the posthuman body will enjoy infinite youth and energy and will be marked by an increased capacity to author how one wants to be in the world, including factors such as one’s physical shape, size, appearance and location. Other programmable variables might include preferences of environments, experiences, and sensations. Yet actually having a body is only one among a range of possibilities available to the posthuman. More generally, the posthuman condition is marked by the absence of physical, biological, neurological, mental, or emotional deficiencies and limitations. The posthuman will be self-constituting, will be in control of their own destiny and able to define their own reality.<sup>7</sup> Extropianists represent a branch of transhumanist thinking and like other variants of transhumanism, “favor reason, progress, and values centered on our well being rather than on an external religious authority.”<sup>8</sup> The institute defines an Extropian as someone “who seeks to overcome human limits, live indefinitely long, become more intelligent, and more self-creating.”<sup>9</sup>

Besides McFadzean’s longstanding involvement with the Extropy institute, he also names himself a staff member at Internet Infidels, the managers of the popular web portal The Secular Web. The goal of The Secular Web is “to defend and promote a nontheistic worldview which holds that the natural world is all that there is, a closed system in no need of

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.extropy.org/faq/index.html> (accessed: 2 August 2003).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.imminst.org/twa/goframe.php?adm=0&id=15&ids=20> (accessed: 3 August 2003).

<sup>7</sup> For overviews of transhumanism, see the Transhumanity website, published by the World Transhumanist Association, at <http://www.transhumanism.com>. Also, see the *Transhumanist Links Exchange* at <http://www.imminst.org/twa> (accessed: 3 August 2003) and *The Incipient Posthuman* pages at <http://www.imminst.org/twa/goframe.php?adm=0&id=15&ids=20> (accessed: 3 August 2003).

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.extropy.org/faq/index.html> (accessed: 2 August 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

a supernatural explanation and sufficient unto itself.”<sup>10</sup> McFadzean professional background is engineering; he holds a Master’s degree in Science from the University of Calgary, Alberta, and is a member of the Association of Professional Engineers, Geologists, and Geophysicists of Alberta, a member of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, and a member of the Planetary Society.<sup>11</sup>

The worldview of the Church of Virus, following the influences of its creator, shares the same basic orientation toward the world as the transhumanist philosophy of extropianism: a super-rationalist orientation that sees the world as essentially made up of evolving patterns of information, which taken together, add up to the evolution of intelligence; a perspective on humanity that sees it merely as one of those patterns, composed of subsystems, or meme-complexes, and itself part of still larger system; a championing of scientific endeavour as a means to speed up the rate of evolution of these patterns at all scales; a commitment to transcending humanity and bringing about a posthuman condition.

Certainly, more could be said about intersections between the transhumanist worldview of the Church of Virus and certain structural features of religious worldviews in general. For example, parallels may be drawn between the church’s advocacy of a posthuman condition and images of redemption in Judeo-Christian scripture. Alternatively, ideas of immortality and omniscience in the Virion worldview could be said to echo notions of enlightenment and transcendence of human limitations in models of religion drawn from central and East Asia. To pursue these kinds of structural comparisons might compliment an approach to Virus that looks for typical features of religion, such as saints and the prescription of certain do’s and

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.infidels.org/index.shtml> (accessed: 1 August 2003).

<sup>11</sup> This and all other personal information I have obtained at McFadzean’s personal website, except where otherwise indicated. His website is at <http://www.lucifer.com/~david/> (accessed: 1 August 2003).

don'ts. Fruitful as these inquiries might be, I want to follow a different approach. I want to contrast the Church of Virus with another religion drawn from the realm of fake religions on the Internet, which is to say religions whose authentic status is ambivalent. As with the Church of Virus, I will give a brief overview of this religion, and then unpack some of it's background. Thereafter, I will compare and contrast this religion with the Church of Virus.

The Cult of the New Eve is a religious group formed around the shared belief that the world is enjoying the Second Genesis that marks the dawn of the Second Biological Age.<sup>12</sup> According to the cult, the Second Genesis is “a time of glory” and “tremendous liberation” when the impossible becomes possible and the supernatural becomes natural. The key to this liberation is genetics and molecular science. According to the cult's view of things, after science corrected the “misconceptions” surrounding the “fairy tale Eve of the Bible,” Biblical Eve was replaced by Mitochondrial Eve, named after the genetic trait that traced her DNA to Africa between 100 000 and 400 000 years ago. Mitochondrial Eve heralded the First Biological Age. Today that age is ending as the Second Biological Age is ushered in by genetic science. The Second Genesis began in 1953 with James Watson and Francis Crick's discovery of DNA and culminated with the Human Genome Project that mapped the blueprint of human genetic structure. The New Eve, “the vessel of knowledge that is spawning the 2<sup>nd</sup> Genesis,” is the unnamed woman whose blood was the sample for the Human Genome Project. It is this blueprint for humanity that will liberate humanity from its limitations coded in its genetic structure. With the advent of the Second Genesis, humanity is at last in a position to realise the promises of religion. The Second Biological Age will be a time of “miraculous cures, the elimination of disease, the conquest of death,” all achievable through “gene therapy.” With the Second Genesis, humankind has been reborn, able to engineer life in

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<sup>12</sup> The website of the Cult of the New Eve can be found at <http://www.critical-art.net/biotech/cone/coneWeb> (accessed: 2 August 2003).

whatever manner it decides; says the cult, “We will remake all the plants and animals to serve our needs more efficiently. Essentially, we will reseed the earth and change the nature of life.” On the cult’s website are listed a number of the New Miracles already witnessed around the world, including animal cloning, mice that glow in the dark, the incubation of a goat’s foetus in an artificial womb of synthetic amniotic fluid, and the choice now available to prospective parents to choose the sex of their child.

On the cult’s website, the browser will also find a link to words of inspiration from Genomic Scripture, “a collection of wisdom, prophecy, and inner vision from leading scientists in medicine and molecular biology.” There the visitor will read how Dr. Lee Silver of Princeton University likens DNA with the Christian concept of the soul, and Dr John H. Campbell who predicts that it is human destiny to elevate itself to the level of a god and beyond. On the same menu on the cult’s website, visitor can read prophecies of the New Eve, including one of a “The Woman Clothed in Cathode Rays” who holds in her hand “the sacred vial of redeeming blood.” As a trumpet proclaimed her name, a voice was heard saying: “The New Eve has come among you to heal your wounds and renew your tissues. There shall be no more death there, no suffering, no pain. There shall be no more weeping, or mourning. New Eve will wipe away all tears.” Another prophecy is of the Sacred City: “And Behold! A lovely and shining light: the New Eden; and the city was like a crystal, with myriad facets, gleaming towers and glittering domes; To the East stood Roswell, the sacred Temple of the letting of the Blood; to the West sparkled the waters of the holy lake; To the North thundered the Great Fall of healing baptismal waters; To the South lay the road to Eden the place of origin of the New Eve.” This prophecy configures a sacred landscape that places the city of Buffalo at its centre. The Temple of the letting of the Blood refers to the Roswell Park Institute where the New Eve donated her sample; the Great Fall of healing baptismal waters is a reference to

Niagara Falls; Lake Erie lies to the west; and the rest of the United States to the south. On the main page of the cult's website is a link to the Buffalo Campaign. Visitors are invited to add their names to a petition to the mayor of Buffalo requesting that a monument be erected to "the Unknown Donor (known to us as the New Eve)" in the city's centre. The petition further calls on the mayor to change the city's name to New Eden and thereby "claim its rightful place as the New Jerusalem of the Second Biological Age."

Perhaps most interesting on the cult's website is a notice to beware of the false Eves. Under a section titled "Exposing the False Eves," the cult describes four pretenders to the title of Eve. These are Biblical Eve, Goddess Eve, Android Eve, and Virtual Eve. According to the cult, of all the false Eve's, Biblical Eve has the largest following, despite the absence of any evidence of her existence. In the absence of evidence, her followers turn to the "delusions" and "fantasies" of faith. The cult's chastisement of Goddess Eve is tempered to some extent by their recognition that Goddess worship has had some practical value "as a means to galvanise women and reinvest them with a sense of the divine feminine principle." Still, the cult argues that Goddess worship "must now be fully secularised," a task they suggest the New Eve is perfectly suited to. The New Eve heralds an age where the instability of race and gender has a literal meaning, not merely a social construction. Android Eve, who's heyday was the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is the least threatening of all the false Eves for the simple reason that robotic technology reached its end some time ago and has become a "harmless piece of nostalgia for the mechanical age."

Yet it is Virtual Eve on which the cult pours scorn and fury. Of all the false Eves, Virtual Eve is to be feared and despised the most. Though she has yet to appear, "her simulacra sit on the throne of the posthuman." One reason to be especially fearful of Virtual Eve, according to the

cult, is because although she has appeared only in the crudest of virtual forms – “cheap prototypes” and “various feminine avatars” – she has already attracted numerous followers. Each follower hopes to fulfil the “evil Cartesian prophecy,” the suggestion that mind can be separated from matter, by following Virtual Eve into cyberspace and so beginning the migration of human consciousness from the body to “a virtual elsewhere.” In the cult’s view of things, the separation of mind and body is the promise of death: “consciousness is decentralised throughout the body; it cannot be gathered and transferred.” The cult alerts visitors to its site that “uploading” is the name given the technique whereby this separation of mind and body is achieved and that the people preparing for this “demonic process” are the extropians. According to the cult, the extropians’ “psychotic babble” is a menace; there’s is not a cult of life, but a cult of death; they are suicidal, “like lemmings running toward a cliff.” They are also heretical. From the perspective of the Cult of the New Eve, the extropians deny the wonders and New Miracles that have been brought about by the New Eve. The religious zeal of the cult’s critique of extropianism is captured well in an extract worth quoting at length:

... people still believe that uploading is our posthuman future ... What outrage! The body is not a prison; it does not stop consciousness from expanding. We are limited only by our capacity for knowledge. Thanks to the New Eve, we now have the knowledge to grow the Tree of Life. We can shape the body so that it is the most perfect phenomenon on the planet. No one will want to leave it for the pleasureless silicon universe of ones and zeros. The New Eve is our future. The extropian menace is nothing but death, and the posthuman era nothing but the lie of techno-fetishists. We invite you to join to Cult of the New Eve, and help us eradicate the foolish ideology of self-destruction that the extropians have unleashed. The Virtual Eve shall never be born! All praise to the new Eve!

This tension between the competing worldviews of the Cult of the New Eve and the Church of Virus is instructive to the present inquiry into the problem of authenticity in religion in a number of significant ways. But before I turn attention to these tensions, I want to catalogue some of their contrasting features. Most strikingly, we notice that where the cornerstone of the worldview of Virus is memetics, for the Cult of the new Eve, it is genetics. As cornerstones of their respective worldviews, these terms signify the general orientations respectively of each of these religious groups. Where the former is orientated toward a disembodied world that sees human bodiedness as an impediment to human evolution, the latter's orientation is toward a view of the world that gives primacy to the human body as the site of religious conviction. Both religions develop this distinction further. The Church of Virus claims that the body needs to be abandoned if human limits are to be overcome; the Cult of the New Eve claims that with the recently acquired knowledge of human genetic code, it is through the human body's very materiality that any limitations on human development will be transcended. Their respective orientations toward the human body in turn signify these religions' respective views on the nature of religion. For Virions, religion is about evolution, not only in the narrowly biological sense, but in all the temporal patterns of information that are the essential structure and nature of reality. Significantly, the human body holds little importance for religion, except insofar as how the body as a pattern of information influences other patterns it interacts with. For followers of the New Eve, however, the body is pivotal to their religion; it is the site of religious manifestations, the medium through which the new miracles and wonders are revealed.

I want to transpose this image of contrasted religious worldviews onto the argument that has been advanced through the preceding four chapters because I think it illustrates a number of key issues discussed at different stages of this study. One such issue is the suggestion that

fake religion can be understood as issuing a critique against the concept of authentic religion, in much the same way that the Cult of the New Eve issues a critique against the extropian menace. However, to appreciate the full significance of the cult's critique and its illustrative encapsulation of the central arguments of this thesis requires that we take a closer look by, somewhat paradoxically, stepping further back.

The Cult of the New Eve is not a fake religion in the sense that the Church of Virus or any of the other fake religions surveyed in the introduction to this thesis represent fake religions. The Cult of the New Eve is an installation piece created by Paul Vanouse and Faith Wilding, both members of The Critical Art Ensemble (CAE).<sup>13</sup> The art work is intended as a critique of the promissory rhetoric of biotechnology in the public sphere. In a position paper published on the CAE's website,<sup>14</sup> Vanouse and Wilding begin with the assertion that under the hegemony of capital, "science is the institution of authority regarding the production of knowledge." As the key knowledge producer for capital, science is embroiled in capital's mystifications of social reality. Science comes to define the human role in the cosmos and supplants religion as "a key mediator of the public's relationship with nature." This usurpation of the place of religion, while secular in rhetoric, is religious in its utopian vision. Vanouse and Wilding identify four main categories of this promise: democracy, liberty, efficiency, and progress. Democracy is the suggestion that everyone will be empowered by technology; to which Vanouse and Wilding counter that class structure replicates itself in technology. Liberty is the suggestion that technology will free people from drudgery; countered with the argument that workloads always increase with the intensification of technology. Technology supposedly also improves efficiency; countered by the argument that increased efficiency is desirable to

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.critical-art.net/> (accessed: 4 August 2003).

<sup>14</sup> The position paper can be found at <http://www.critical-art.net/biotech/cone/index.html> (accessed: 3 August 2003).

increase the speed of capital accumulation. Taken together, these promises add up to a definition of progress that presents itself as an advancement of the common good when in fact it means little more than the expansion of capital.

With this critical perspective, Vanouse and Wilding turn their critical eye toward the biotechnology industry and its scientific specialists. They note that biotech has attempted its parade of utopian promises previously, when Darwin's theories of evolution, truly Copernican in their implications, made a crucial contribution to science's supplanting of religious authority. Yet the science of biology then was not yet powerful enough to act in favour of the social revolution that the theory of evolution offered. Instead, "the horror show of eugenics" came to pass and with it, "the utopian mask fell from capital's face." The atrocities perpetrated in the name of eugenics have come to be collectively identified with the Nazi project, with the consequence that for the new generation of geneticists and molecular biologists, as Vanouse and Wilding put it, "the utopian rhetoric that once served other science and technology producers so well is now tainted." In response to this, they suggest that the biotech industry, including not only scientists, but also capital's media and marketing agents, has appropriated the promissory rhetoric of Christianity to persuade the non-specialist public of the utopian nature of the new biotechnologies. This is a fascinating turn of events because science, a new religion according to some, is not merely analogous to religion in the sense that it defines humanity's relation to the cosmos in utopian terms. Rather, science now assumes religion's rhetoric in giving expression to that relation. The symbol of that rhetoric, according to Vanouse and Wilding, is Eve, for Eve, as symbol of primordial beginnings, holds the key to unlocking utopian ends. And so the quest for the New Eve begins. The first instance of such an appropriation is Simian Eve, an African australopithecus believed to be the oldest human ancestor. Simian Eve was followed by Mitochondrial Eve, introduced

previously. Now, at the dawn of the Second Biological Age, Vanouse and Wilding introduce the New Eve, their critical commentary on the appropriation of this Christian promissory rhetoric by biotechnology in the interests of capital. The CAE choose to image their critique in a cult deliberately to draw attention to the problem of authority and legitimacy:

The CAE has taken this rhetoric and moved it from the context of the most legitimate and authoritative socio-economic constellations, and placed it in the context of the least legitimate of all social constellations – a cult – in order to give the public a new perspective of this peculiar strain of social representation.

This is a crucial statement, for it contains all the elements that have made up the argument advanced through the preceding five chapter's discussion of the relationship between fakery and authenticity in religion; constellating movements re-place and re-contextualise and so create incongruities out of which emerge new perspectives that ask critical questions of the legitimacy and authority of unquestioned hegemonic regimes. This statement also implies that self-representations put forward by these regimes can be deceptive and that to perceive what these representations may deceptively conceal requires a different perspective, one brought about by the movements of re-placing and re-contextualising that in turn rearrange the surface of appearance and therewith reveal, physiognomically as it were, a kind of knowledge that might break the regime, though crucially, without destroying the mystery of knowledge itself.

## 5.2 Of Forensics and Incongruities

I submit that the Cult of the New Eve relates to the Church of Virus in the same way that fake religion relate to authentic religion, which is to say that the former represents a critical intervention in the regime of the latter. In this formulation, authenticity is identifiable with a scientifically designed paradigm that adjudicates authenticity's claims against certain criteria. The method of this adjudication is scientific and empirical and is founded on the assertion that reason and rational reflection, for example via independent verification or falsification, will produce only positive results, which is to say, conclusive judgements. In this sense, the adjudication of authenticity can be likened to police work, where the detection of deception and fraud is the defining labour. This conception of authenticity I have previously gathered under the idea of forensics. Yet the signifier of forensics is appropriate in ways besides denoting police work, for like a police force, this scientific rendering of authenticity also exerts a certain force in the way that it orders reality. And like police forces, this ordering is undertaken in such a way that it reinforces its own authority. It is in this sense that authenticity might be likened to a regime and fakery to a critical intervention in that regime's self-perpetuating authority. Fakery's intervention does not identify alternative criteria for authenticity's adjudication. Instead, fakery destabilises the very possibility that such criteria may be established. The importance of instability can be conveyed with the image of incongruity between things and can be positioned in counterpoint to forensics. And if I may be permitted to extend the analogy still further, if forensics that connotes police forces signifies the regime of science's ordering of reality, incongruity that destabilises that order signifies its overthrow. To put it simply, if authentic reality designed in the image of science is a police state, then fakery's intervention is the coming revolution. Fakery does not intend to usurp authenticity's authority, for with the destabilisation of the possibility of criteria, the

status of the authentic is shown to be a dream, an impossible ideal. It is via this showing that the authority to which authenticity lays claim simply evaporates. In this sense, there is no such thing as authenticity, only authentic critique.

The possibility of this critique originates in the critique's deliberate identifying itself with the least legitimate of social constellations. So, the Cult of the New Eve's critique of biotech's appropriation of Christian promissory rhetoric is possible because its critique is identified with a cult, the dialectical opposite of Christian institutions and, in a religiopolitical sense, the least legitimate of religious formations. In a similar manner, the critique issuing from fake religion is possible because as fake, it is identified with the dialectical opposite of authenticity and therefore occupies the least legitimate of positions under authenticity's hegemonic regime. If the possibility of this critique originates with its incongruous positioning in relation to the object of its critique, the strength of this critique originates in its appropriation and incongruous recontextualisation of the central problematic of its object. The Cult of the New Eve appropriates the Christian promissory rhetoric of biotech and recontextualises it in the relatively illegitimate social constellation of a cult. Fake religion lays claim to the status of authentic religion and in so doing recontextualise this most essential of all religious claims in incongruous constellations of imitation and parody. Similarly, we might recall that the surrealist critique appropriated images of progress that were then recontextualised in anachronous montages.

If the origin of authentic critique is incongruity and the strength of its critique flows from incongruous recontextualisations, the success of these critiques pivots on their respective audience's recognition of this incongruous recontextualisation of their object's most essential claim. As Benjamin's critique of surrealism has so expertly demonstrated, this recognition is

the crucible of authentic critique. That discussion showed that the involvement of the body of the recognising subject with the incongruous image composed of recontextualised appropriations was essential to the authenticity of the critical image. If the surrealists' critique of modernity's trumpeting of progress failed on account of their inadequate attention to bodiedness, the humorous quality attached to fake religion offers the authenticating leverage to sustain its critique. It is therefore more than a fortuitous coincidence that bodiedness is central both to the Cult of the New Eve and to the image of fake religion theorised through Benjamin's dialectical optic and Berger's redeeming laughter; the Cult of the New Eve is emphatic that their religious worldview is not merely focussed on materiality, of which the body is their archetypal example (this is the perspective of coincidence), but additionally, that their focus on the body as the site of religious orientation stands in counterpoint to a scientifically formulated religious orientation focussed on abandoning the body for the pleasures of a "virtual elsewhere" (the "more than fortuitous" perspective). The fact that the Cult's religious orientation is similarly scientifically formulated through the discourses of genetic science and molecular biology does not undermine this reading, but instead reinforces it; remember that the cult is an art installation rather than a fake religion and that their use of "genomic scripture" is the imitative deployment of its appropriation.

The tension between the Cult of the New Eve and the Church of Virus therefore neatly demonstrates the tension between fakery and authenticity in religion theorised and argued through the preceding discussions. Having succinctly encapsulated this tension in this manner of analogous emblematic contrasts, we are now in a position to step back from the emblems and consider the contrast thereby signified.

From this wider perspective, one such contrast that demands consideration is between the emphasis and de-emphasis of the body. The primacy of the body has been a recurring theme throughout the discussions of this thesis. Yet it is surely significant that the question of bodiedness recurs wherever the issue of paradox, contradiction, of incongruity is raised. From Taussig's discussion of the paradoxical coexistence of faith and scepticism in Kwakuitl shamanism in Chapter Two, through Benjamin's reflections on the dialectical image that emerges in a flashing moment of mimetic connection between body and image in Chapter Three, to Berger's analysis of redeeming laughter that is a variation of an incongruity theory of humour in Chapter Four, bodiedness is allied with incongruity. We have also seen the nature of this alliance, for if incongruity is the crucible for subjective critical engagement with social reality, the quality of bodiedness in that engagement is the locus of its authenticity. If body and incongruity together make up the defining elements of authentic critique, the critique itself gives the lie to the forensic claim that authenticity exists as a stable category of knowledge independent of its social mediation. In other words, the body-emphasising perspective of authentic critique draws critical attention exactly to the body de-emphasising tendencies of forensic perspectives on authenticity. And so we return to a central argument of this extended discussion; that there is no such thing as authenticity, only authentic critique.

From this brief discussion, it becomes clear here that a number of correlations and oppositions are emerging, for example, church and cult; forensics and incongruities; disembodiedness and bodiedness. In each of these binaries, the correlations are between the first terms of each, and the oppositions between first and second terms. We might note that some of these oppositions and correlations have been recurring themes in many discussions throughout the preceding chapters. It will be useful to tabulate a list of such correlations and oppositions, for as will be

shown, such a tabulation instructs us further. With the exception perhaps of the first and last pair, the tabulation below is in no particular order.

authenticity	fakery
forensics	incongruities
reason and rationality	dialectical images
disembodiedness	bodiedness
driving wedge	swimming fish
exposure	revelation
surface	depth
transparency	concealment
arrest / apprehension	movement
trick as deception	trick as technique
abstraction	sensuousness

Perhaps it is because of the centrality of Benjamin's thinking throughout the present inquiry, yet looking at this tabulation, I am struck that these terms appear to form a constellation. No doubt more pairs could be added. Still, I think this constellation as it stands images the argument developed through the preceding four chapters. This constellation therefore is my conclusion.

### 5.3 Of Constellations and Conclusions

The principle idea that has guided these discussions is the argument that authenticity as a qualitative attribute of religion can only be recognised through revelation. This idea of revelation should not be understood in a theological sense, but in its aesthetic sense, which is its proper meaning and the source of theology's borrowing. The emphasis on "only" here is crucial, because – and this is the difficulty with authenticity – attempting to apprehend authenticity by any other means renders it inauthentic in the same instant. Authenticity is sublime; one is struck by it unexpectedly, it happens to you. And in the following moment, when one gathers one's wits and turns attention to it, it is gone. One is left to make do with the traces, which, like any record, can only approximate the authentic object, but never recreate it. And herein lies the catastrophe: the heroic quest for authenticity goes about collecting these traces, cataloguing them, assembling them, ordering them, even exhibiting them, and so building out of authenticity's traces an elaborate edifice. The catastrophe is the mistaken belief that with these traces, a locus of authenticity may be found. And it is catastrophic because authenticity's edifice demands that this locus be actively sought, as a matter of the utmost urgency, an ultimate concern of sorts. And so with a great rush, these new heroes set about the world armed with authenticity's traces for yardsticks. Yet we know that their quest is doomed, for authenticity will not be exposed. Therefore, at every turn our heroes find more traces, but not the illusive Holy Grail itself. And so the edifice looms greater still, until soon the imposing presence of the edifice replaces authenticity's absence. Our heroes are no longer concerned with finding authenticity, but instead tinker with its traces and develop out of them still better methods for exposing the illusive object of their efforts, now long since forgotten. At the same time that authenticity's edifice is transformed into a monument to the valorous efforts of its heroic investigators, authenticity itself is transformed

into a villain, judged guilty in absentia for the crime of resisting arrest. And how else can it be, for the new regime's laws, the same that govern the on-going construction of the heroic monument, do not tolerate the kind of dynamism and spontaneous movement that are essential to the kind of revelation that will do justice to authenticity. With this judgement, authenticity, out of whose traces the new regime's monument to itself is built, is separated from Authenticity, the new god, always out of sight, always out of reach, never experienced, but always praised with the faith that one day the faithful will be reunited with their god. This faith also says that this day draws closer with every heroic contribution to Authenticity's monumental edifice.

At the same time, authenticity moves about largely undetected, waiting for opportune moments wherein it may reveal itself to unsuspecting passers-by. In that briefest of moments, they are transported outside of the tyranny of reality, which is to say, the view of the world determined by their new god's oppressive regime. In this sense, the recognition of authenticity is a gift and the recognising subject is its grateful recipient. The gift itself is an intuition that reality is tyrannical and that authenticity is concealed by its surface. The new gods and their heroic investigators are oblivious to this fact, while authenticity, who prefers to remain concealed, is more than satisfied with this arrangement. For behind the surface of appearance, there is infinite space to move. And with the entirety of appearance as its canvas, authenticity can paint the most beautiful aesthetic experiences for whomsoever is fortuitous to move across its surface at that moment.

Yet the fortuity of receiving authenticity's gift is not merely a question of accident; a question of being in the right place at the right time. In this regard, the story told above is somewhat misleading in the way that it personifies authenticity. A part of the intuition that comes with

the sublime experience of authenticity is that authenticity may be less concealed than we may often think. The recognition of authenticity is a sense that can be trained and developed. What it requires is the critical capacity to recognise the tyranny of reality, or at least, to recognise the regimes that structure how we perceive the real; the pedagogic side to Benjamin's Arcades Project: to train our image making faculty to look stereoscopically and dimensionally into the depths of the shadows of history. And this is where the really made up becomes so helpful, because fakery, both really made up and self-consciously imitative of the real, draws attention to the essential quality of artifice that weaves the surface of appearance, where most of us spend most of our time. By drawing attention to artifice in this way, fakery disrupts these regimes. And by resisting the ability of these regimes to make definitive pronouncements on their authenticity, fakery subverts these regimes.

With all of this in mind, what can we say about the vexed problem of authenticity in religion? On the issue as to whether there is such a thing as authentic versus fake religion, there is both a positive and a negative answer. As an abstract concept, obviously the answer is no. There is no way to make that distinction, no criteria to be derived, no measure to be applied. But this is not the question with which this thesis has been concerned. The affirmative answer is a little closer to what these discussions have been concerned with and is established by the perspective that likens religious authenticity to aesthetic experience. But this perspective is a somewhat deceptive approach to the question because it is focussed on individual and subjective experience rather than the social institution or phenomenon of religion; to talk about authentic versus fake experience rapidly becomes absurd and so talk about phenomena and social institutions in non-abstract ways is impossible. Which returns us to the point made earlier, that there is no such thing as authenticity. At the same time, the point has also been made that while authenticity does not exist, there is such a thing as authentic

critique. This is where fake religions become significant, for following Berger's theory of redeeming laughter, we have seen that fake religions can meet the criterion of authentic critique established by Benjamin's critique of surrealism. So where do authenticity and religion intersect? Religious authenticity resides in its capacity for providing critical self-reflective engagements with that overarching and dominating experience called reality. But if religion, phenomenologically speaking, is a significant feature of the social, political, economic, and other structures of that overarching experience and more often than not contributes significantly to its tyranny, this critical capacity is challenged to find ways to critique itself as a part of its enduring critique of the whole. And this is where fake religion finds its moment. For through our laughter, religion's misappropriated and fetishised power is broken at the same time that its revelatory, critical, authentic powers are reaffirmed.

From surrealism, through aesthetic experience, to religion's role as mediator of critical, self-reflective engagements with the tyranny of reality, religion and art have been mutually implicated through much of the preceding discussions. Indeed, both deal in a notion of truth as secret and concealed and consequently subsist in revelatory experiences. Following the argument imaged in the constellation described above, their similar concern with revelation finds its counterpoint in scientific exposures. Nietzsche knew this distinction when he wrote:

If the artist in every unveiling of truth remains cleaved with raptured eyes only to that which still remains veiled after the unveiling, the theoretical man, on the other hand, enjoys and contents himself with the cast-off veil, and finds the consummation of his pleasure in the process of a continuously successful unveiling through his own unaided efforts.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 115.

While we may note here how theoretical man, by which Nietzsche means scientific man, having heroically exposed truth, remains content with its traces at the same time that he casts about for a new unveiling with which to consummate his pleasures, it is really with the artist that Nietzsche is concerned. For the artist knows, along with Nietzsche, that to “see” truth requires the development of physiognomic skills. Benjamin is a little more cautious, though he agrees with Nietzsche’s artist. His caution stems from his materialism, which alerts him to the fact that the veil in question is not merely the distinction akin to that between the physical and metaphysical. For whatever claims this veil might have on metaphysical status, Benjamin knows very well that its maintenance and perpetuation is the material empire built of abstract thought. Still, both Benjamin and Nietzsche’s artist know that to break its power entails sensuous knowledge, the kind of bodied knowledge available only through revelatory experience.

In this vision of things, sublime experience appears increasingly indistinguishable from religious experience. For one thing, both religion and art share a torturous relationship with authenticity. And yet art and religion’s relationship with tyrannical reality is similar if not the same. For one thing, authentic religion, camouflaged by fakery in which it takes refuge, is a bit like Nietzsche’s artist who cleaves to that which remains concealed and mysterious. Authenticity, in this sense, consists in concealment. At the same time, while both religious formations and artworks are often, if not usually, significantly short of authentic, when they get it right, they disrupt reality’s tyranny. This kind of disruption they achieve by tearing the surface of appearance, defacing it so to speak. This kind of defacement is not an exposure or dramatic unveiling that destroys authenticity, but rather, a renting of the surface of the habitual and mundane, which is to say, the ordinary and coercive, that allows the tremendous mystery welling within its concealed depths its release. It is this release, this overflowing

surplus of sacred substance, that disrupts tyranny. At the same time, however, the recognition of this tremendous disruption reinvigorates social experience with religious significance. The vexed problem of authenticity in religion subsists in the confluences between an impulse toward critique and the signifying of the experience of the real with transcendent possibilities.

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