

The Common Vernacular of Power Relations in Heavy Metal and Christian Fundamentalist Performances

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Abstract

Wittgenstein's comment that what can be shown cannot be said has a special resonance with visual representations of power in both Heavy Metal and Fundamentalist Christian communities. Performances at metal shows, and performances of 'religious theatre', share an emphasis on violence and destruction. For example, groups like GWAR and Cannibal Corpse feature violent scenes in stage shows and album covers, scenes that depict gory results of unrestrained sexuality that are strikingly like Halloween 'Hell House' show presented by neo-Conservative, Fundamentalist Christian churches in the southeastern United States' 'Bible Belt'. One group may claim to celebrate violence, the other sees violence as a tool to both encourage 'moral' behaviour, and to show that the Christian church is able to 'speak the language' of young people who are fans of metal, gore, and horror. Explicit violence, in each case, signifies power relationships that are in transformation. Historically, medieval morality plays and morality cycles had been used as a pedagogical tool. In the modern-day context of fundamentalist religious education, these Hell House performances seek to exclude outsiders and solidify teen membership in the Christian community. Hell House performances are marketed to the young church members, and are seen as a way to reinvigorate conservative Fundamentalist Christianity. Women and girls routinely take part in, and often organize Hell House events.

In the context of heavy metal, violent performances do not seek to exclude, but provide an outlet for a variety of socially unacceptable or unpopular feelings. In each context there is an apparent, if not actual, empowering of women who are willing to play particular kinds of roles. The use of violence and gore has a value beyond merely shocking the audience, it is arguably a way that some women find their voice, both for fundamentalist Christians and fundamentalist gore metal fans.

Key Words: Aesthetics, conservative Christianity, gore metal, politics, power relations, psychoanalysis, religion, religious studies, social theory, violence

1. Religion and Theatre

Wittgenstein's adage that what can be shown cannot be said has a special relationship to performance, especially performance intended to

invoke images and ideologies. I will illustrate how religious performance, religious theatre, and heavy metal performance share common references to violence. In both contexts, the use of explicit imagery is intended to cement community connections and attract young, new members to the group.¹

The use of theatre as a pedagogical tool for religion and religious studies is a growth industry. For centuries, mystery cycles and medieval morality plays have been utilized as a pedagogical tool in religious contexts.² Interactive, performance-based approaches are also used in a variety of university courses, such as World Religions and Introduction to Religious Studies.³ In the past five years there have been a growing number of articles in religious studies journals arguing that empathy and somatic experience through religious theatre will heighten our pluralistic cultural understanding. However, there is a double edge: in the case of inter-religious dialogue and religious pluralism, these performances take one shape; in the case of religious education in one particular theology or liturgy they take a very different, less inclusive shape.⁴

Current religious studies pedagogy often involves active performance of prayer and song, and an emphasis on the lived embodied experience of religious practitioners. This is rooted in the idea that physical performance will raise students' consciousness and broaden their appreciation of other religions and other cultures. Historically, dramatic performance has also been used to teach practitioners about their own religion and reinforce their membership in closed religious communities.

Medieval morality plays, for example, were meant to welcome non-believers into the teachings of the Christian faith, whether or not they were able to read. Such plays often involved a character standing as the everyman, struggling with his relationship to God. Other plays involved a retelling of Biblical narratives, featuring actors portraying Cain, Abel, Noah, Abraham, and a variety of other prophetic figures in dialogue with God. This everyman figure provides a way for an audience member to identify with the characters in the play, and in turn to identify with the presented religious ideology.

2. Playing for the Everyman, or Localized Interests

The everyman in mystery cycles and medieval morality plays has continued to be a recurring theme when the plays are restaged and adapted to modern theatre. For example, the Court Theatre group adapted and performed the 1958 edition of the York Cycles mystery plays in 1992. Their staging and costuming included current references, with God dressed as a construction foreman, raised above the crowd on a forklift. All other characters were dressed specifically to provide familiar physical contextualisation of the story of mankind's relationship to God, to welcome the average person into the story, showing the average person's world on stage.⁵ In Salzburg, the 'Jedermann' story is performed in the Domplatz square every year.

Casting the mystery cycle with God and Lucifer as construction workers in Chicago was intended to reach out to the audience, a means of connecting the audience with the story. The staging also sent the message that the events could just as easily happen to a person from modern times as it could happen to someone from the current 90's atmosphere of Chicago.

Similar staging was used in morality plays during the Spanish Civil War, as discussed by James McCarthy in his article 'Drama, Religion and Republicanism' from *Contemporary Theatre Review*.⁶ In this context, the everyman stood as an exemplar for young men to follow as they joined the war effort. The performances sent the message that everyone was welcome to join the fight, that everyone would be welcomed into the same brotherhood.

In terms of the question of audience, both the medieval morality plays and their modern day reproductions are meant to welcome both members and non-members of the Christian church. The stories can be understood metaphorically (as the serpent representing evil, the apple representing temptation) or as an open invitation to the everyman - providing examples of human beings engaged in day to day life communicating with God.

The emphasis on the everyman brings about a certain tension in the political motivations of theatre used to teach ideologies and religion. Depending on the specific outcomes of the morality play, the everyman may be welcomed to salvation, usually after an experiential reminder of the unavoidable depravity of human nature, or the dependence on grace for righteousness and redemption.⁷

Arguably, the everyman was a necessary device for illustrating mankind's moral education - an Aristotelian exemplar of virtuous character development, the individual battling with drives and desires that could drag one down into depravity. The tri-partite soul of the ancient Greek philosophers still instantiates in the everyman figures of religious performance. The rational soul seeks to control the emotional, appetitive soul; and in the process the everyman seeks redemption and salvation. This process involving the soul of the everyman on the path to redemption is reflected in the notion of the Trinity. One example of the everyman and the Trinity in current Christian writing is the book *The Shack*, which will soon be made into a film.

In *The Shack*, a man named Mack, grieving over the murder of his daughter, is called by God to the scene of the crime. There he meets—there is no delicate way of putting this—the Trinity. The Father is an African-American woman named Papa who likes to cook. Jesus is a Jewish man wearing a carpenter's belt. The Holy Spirit is an elusive Asian woman named Sarayu. Together, over a long

weekend, these characters force Mack to face his anger and his emptiness. Mack eats delicious feasts; with Jesus, he takes a walk on the water. Finally, God convinces Mack of his deep and everlasting love. 'I don't create institutions,' says Jesus in *The Shack*. 'Never have, never will.'

Some orthodox Christians are calling *The Shack* heresy. On his radio program in April, Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said it was 'subversive' and 'incoherent'. Concerned that *The Shack* might adversely influence readers, LifeWay Christian Stores, the Southern Baptist Convention's bookstore chain, in June pulled *The Shack* off shelves to review its theology. Two weeks later the books were for sale again, this time with a warning label that says READ WITH DISCRETION. A LifeWay spokeswoman says she expects *The Shack* to be high on its best-seller list for August.⁵

3. Like A Brat Out of Hell (House)

The negative reception of *The Shack* in conservative Christian communities reflects a split between two preferred types of religious performance. In the southeastern United States, the struggle for morality plays out with an extra emphasis on neoconservative political agendas. Instead of medieval morality plays, there are 'Hell House' performances, most notably in the area south of the Mason-Dixon line known as the Bible Belt. Hell House performances tell the stories of individuals who have fallen from grace, using direct terms and explicit visual effects, with no metaphor and no attempt to portray a time and place other than the 'here and now.' The fallen individuals have all made choices that relate to political issues that are central to neoconservative politics. A Hell House performance might feature a teenage girl in an abortion clinic, covered with blood; or a car accident caused by teenagers who drank and drove. Since the Columbine High School shootings, many Hell House performances feature loner high school students engaged in violence in their high schools. Those playing the shooter will usually be costumed in clothing that references media coverage of high school shootings, for example long black trench coats. An innocent victim character might be asked if she believes in God before she is shot.

Central to each performance is the realistic portrayal of blood and violence, and lots of it. The staging looks like it would work for an album cover of a gore metal band, or a scene from a horror movie. Hell Houses are traditionally understood to have a limited audience because they are usually advertised to the young, teenage members of the particular church congregation that arranged the event. The purpose is not to bring new

Christians into the fold, but to control the behaviour of the young who are already at least nominally members of the congregation.⁹

The Hell House performances are also specifically offered as an entertainment, with a two-fold purpose: the Hell House is meant to show that the church can entertain in a way that is as current and pop-culture savvy as the film and music industries, i.e., that the church is keeping up to date with Hollywood, and to show that the church can compete with other available entertainments, i.e., 'if we can get them out of the concerts we can strengthen their Christian resolve'.

As such, the Hell House is claimed to have a special role in moral education of the young members of a church, providing a visceral experience that allegedly helps teenagers to moderate their behaviour from the beginning, a visual representation of vices. It is also central to the Hell House performance that the participants cannot be saved or achieve grace after they give in to vice - the girl having an abortion, or the drunk driver are lost to the fires of hell by the end of the performance and never find their way back. Thus the Hell House emphasises that one should not do these things in the first place, that moderating one's drives and desires from the beginning can ensure that one does not fall from grace at all.

In the article 'Modern Morality Plays,' Karen Roebuck holds that the current hell house performances involve indoctrinating prejudice and simplistic theology/ideology. The Christian church is bifurcated into communities that can be described as welcoming and liberal; or insular, closed off, and conservative. These two types of communities inform which aspects of Christianity are put forward to the audience. The Old Testament notion of a judgmental and vengeful God fits well with the modern hell house, in which an eye for an eye becomes a damned soul for an abortion. In contrast, the everyman of the medieval morality plays experiences the welcoming messages of the New Testament and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The medieval morality play emphasises the possibility of spiritual uplift and escape from depravity; not hell, damnation and punishment. The essential moment of this 'welcoming Christianity' would include the figure of the thief on the cross next to Christ asking if he would be allowed in to the Kingdom of Heaven also. The response Jesus gives ('...today you will be with me in paradise...') is one of inclusion, even for the fallen. These moments of redemption are not included in hell house performances. The hell house emphasis on damnation and punishment of the wicked would trump any message of possible salvation and redemption.¹⁰

It seems that conservative Christians are consciously choosing the shift from welcoming inclusive performances of mystery plays to the less welcoming and more violent hell house performances. They make the counterargument that it is a mistake to discuss and emphasize medieval morality plays such as the York cycle mysteries and their modern day re-

adaptations. The community building, they argue, has simply taken a different form of fellowship activity, and that there is no less community building among Christians, it is simply packaged differently. However, this counterargument does not hold for all Christian communities in the United States. There, the community of the faithful may have changed and bifurcated with an increasingly vocal neo-conservative side that wants to see judgment, damnation, and a renewal of what they perceive as Christian values. This conservatism seems to have divested itself from the portrayal of the Church as a welcoming family, and prefers to retain Calvinist conceptions of predestination into the 'elect,' rather than the possibility of moral education through positive exemplars. It appears to be a classic case of all-or-nothing: either one learns not to have an abortion by seeing a vivid and gory hell house depiction of an abortion, or, one learns not to have an abortion through 'abstinence-based sex education' and little discussion of abortion and birth control at all.

The rise of Hell House performance as ideological tool has happened concurrently with neo-conservative fundamentalists self-definition as victims. This particular notion that Christians are victimized in the current US political context rests on the assumption that the 'founding fathers' were Christians who shared their political and ethical views, and that today's Christians have been ignored by the United States emphasis on religious freedom, and that the current Christian must struggle to re-place God as the centre of United States politics. The hell house not only teaches specific fundamentalist Christian beliefs, it also teaches a specific neo-conservative political ideology.

4. Edification and Education vs. Judgment and Warning

The neo-conservative Christian notion of victimization and its ideological hell house performances can be analyzed through the framework of Bahktin's concept of 'carnival.' Bahktin describes carnival as a context in which individual voices, as well as group ideologies, are heard and interact with each other. But more importantly, carnival implies that the power relationships between voices and ideologies are fluid. This fluidity creates moments of power reversal. A classic example of a power reversal in the carnival setting is Mardi Gras in New Orleans, Louisiana. Residents of the city who are typically categorized as members of lower economic status dress as kings and queens for the Mardi Gras celebrations. In philosophy, these reversals of power can be compared to Hegel's inverted world, and the relationship of master and servant, reversing as the master realizes that he or she is profoundly dependent upon the servant. In the case of Bahktin's carnival, the servant is also highly aware of the dependence of the master, and celebrates or revels in the knowledge that the master would be helpless without the servant.

A situation similar to the carnival is now apparent among neo-conservative Christians, as they engage in specific types of religious performances. In the postmodern context, Christians often cast themselves as displaced victims - witness rhetoric in the media about the 'founding fathers' of the United States allegedly upholding Judeo-Christian values. The claim is made that America must return to its original Christian values. The neo-conservative Christian thus inscribes their group as the subverting leaders in a Bakhtinian carnival, celebrating victory over pluralist religious culture. As a result, they embrace the idea that postmodern drama in the church need not be done for building community; it can be done simply as entertainment for a small group who already think alike. In the case of hell houses, the intention might be to limit specific behaviours of young people while at the same time providing them with entertainment that is commensurate with horror and violence.

The conservative Christian theatre prefers to use direct moral claims as opposed to metaphor. Conservatives feel a distrust of metaphor, while the more 'open' liberal Christian theatre uses metaphor and allegory (akin to the parables of Jesus and the sermon on the mount) rather than specific labelling of individual characters' morality. This narrative of 'straight talk' and 'plain talk' parallels phrases used by conservative political candidates during election season. The concern seems to be that metaphor is a device of the elitists and that 'real' people say what they mean and mean what they say. Rather than be burdened by interpretation and metaphor, it seems that the average person would rather be engaged with explicit stories of bad behaviour, complete with bloody portrayals of evil acts.

5. The Commonality with Heavy Metal Performance

Performances at metal shows, and performances of 'religious theatre', share an emphasis on violence and destruction. For example, groups like GWAR (God What an Awful Racket) and Cannibal Corpse feature violent scenes in stage shows and album covers, scenes that depict gory results of unrestrained sexuality that are strikingly like Halloween 'Hell House' show presented by neo-Conservative, Fundamentalist Christian churches in the southeastern 'Bible Belt'. One group may claim to celebrate violence, the other sees violence as a tool to both encourage 'moral' behaviour, and to show that the Christian church is able to 'speak the language' of young people who are fans of metal, gore, and horror.

Explicit violence, in each case, signifies power relationships that are in transformation: women and girls routinely take part in, and often organise Hell House events. Teenage girls involved in the pro-life movement often look forward to playing a girl suffering the after effects of an abortion, complete with fake blood and screams worthy of gore metal imagery. The apparent sexism if of little concern: note the female figures in passive

positions, with legs spread. Acting out violent scenes is providing a type of empowerment for the young women who take part in the Hell House, as they take part in and conquer a hyper-reality.

In the context of heavy metal, violent performances do not seek to exclude, but provide an outlet for a variety of socially unacceptable or unpopular feelings. There is a clear emphasis on marketing that which will be popular with teenage and young adult fans - to a certain extent, gore and blood *sells*, explicit violence *sells*. Bands using violence also emphasize the idea that these are rituals that fans are a part of, something special that only those who buy tickets to the show can experience. The irony is that the same ritualized horror experience is also used in conservative Christian circles to cement membership in a religious community during Hell House performances.

Perhaps to some extent young adults fulfil a psychological need for an outlet or a catharsis during these performances. Psychologists have expressed a variety of opinions on the issue; with many commentators since the high school shootings at Columbine making an inference that violent music and violent behaviour are connected, especially among teenage males. The theme of music and violence was developed in a play that debuted this autumn at the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre in London, entitled 'Punk Rock.'¹¹ On the other side of the debate, psychologists have argued for the therapeutic value of emotional musical performance for adolescent males experiencing social isolation.¹² This perspective upholds the benefits of catharsis in response to 'safe violence' as part of a scripted performance, such as the live stage shows of gore metal bands like GWAR. For example, some would argue that US high school shooters, such as Kip Kinkel, would benefit from expression through music providing outlets for anger, such as Mahler; an important counter-argument to the common media assumption that the violent music may cause violent acts.

The primary examples in the literature tend to be young men, but the notion of violent performance having potential benefits can also be applied to women. In the book *Qualitative Research and Practice*, the chapter 'Hard and Heavy-Gender and Power in a Heavy Metal Music Subculture' by Leigh Krenske and Jim McKay, provides an ethnographic and autobiographical analysis of a heavy metal club and its denizens. It illustrates how female heavy metal fans negotiate power relationships and define themselves, asserting themselves into an atmosphere of (controlled) male aggression, and symbolic oppression of females.¹³ The most challenging situations involve women as performers, and the quest to be taken seriously as a performer. But this may not be specific to the metal context; it may be a part of the ethos of musicianship present among many professional musicians (having the right skill level, 'the chops'.)

In each context there is an apparent, if not actual, empowering of women who are willing to play particular kinds of roles. The use of violence and gore has a value beyond merely shocking the audience, it is arguably a way that some women find their voice, both for fundamentalist Christians and fundamentalist gore metal fans.

6. Summary and Conclusion

In sum, Christian theatre performance, taken broadly, negotiated the difference between 'everyman' theatre (meant to welcome newcomers) and localized performances meant to reinforce specific religious communities. The reaction of the Christian communities in the United States became bifurcated along political lines, with some communities emphasizing a theory of conservative Christian political issues, and other Christian communities opening to a wider and more diverse population base. The conservative Christian performances emphasized direct, even explicitly violent stories, and cautionary tales. The welcoming Christian communities instead reinvigorated the use of metaphor and allegory, dating back to the New Testament and medieval morality plays.¹⁴ Given the shift in the neo-conservative political atmosphere of modern day Christianity, perhaps it should come as no surprise that the popular vernacular of violent films, video games, and heavy metal/gore metal performance has taken on a new significance in the recruitment strategies of conservative Christian communities. For them, the gore featured in heavy metal performance is used to illustrate what can happen if one strays from the fold and engages in immoral behaviour, while simultaneously welcoming young members to the Christian community. For metal audiences, the violence featured during a performance is also a form of welcoming and uniting fans of the music, while at the same time, mocking conservatives who would be afraid of the performance. The politics of membership in each case are rich with irony.

Notes

¹ In using performances to address specific issues of religion, pedagogy and the transmission of ideologies, I take inspiration from the work of Hannah Arendt on irony and comedy and its relation to violence. For example, see H. Arendt, *On Violence*, Harvest Books, New York, 1970.

² J McCarthy, 'Drama, Religion and Republicanism, Theatrical Propaganda in the Spanish Civil War'. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 7(2), 1998, pp 47-59.

³ G Baldwin, 'From Sole Learning to Soul Learning'. *Teaching Theology and Religion*, vol. 9(3), 2006, pp 165-174, 2006.

⁴ L Collins-Hughes, 'Articles of Faith: Can Conservative Christianity Find Expression on the Stage?'. *American Theatre*, Sept. 2006.

⁵ B Sahlins and N Rudall, *The Mysteries: Creation. A New Adaptation by Bernard Sahlins of the Medieval Mystery Play, The Plays for Performance Series*, Ivan R. Dee Publishers, Chicago, 1992, p. 5.

⁶ Spanish Civil War morality plays also discussed in J McCarthy, 'Drama, Religion and Republicanism, Theatrical Propaganda in the Spanish Civil War'. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 7(2), 1998, pp 47-59.

⁷ This is a distinction frequently addressed in terms of Calvinism and Arminianism, which hold very different conceptions of salvation, and its relation to grace and depravity.

⁸ L Miller, 'A Close Encounter With God: In 'The Shack', God is an African-American woman who likes to cook. Jesus is a Jewish man with a carpenter's belt'. *Newsweek*, 8 September, 2008, p. 15.

⁹ Pastor Keenan Roberts, co-founder of The New Destiny Christian Center in Colorado, notes 'Hell House' visitors are escorted through a series of graphic scenes which illustrate the agonizing results of such sinful behavior as gay marriage, abortion, and dancing at raves. The intent, according to Pastor Keenan's website, is 'to shake your city with the most in-your-face, high-flyin', no denyin', death-defyin', Satan-be-cryin', keep-ya-from-fiyin', theatrical stylin', no holds barred, cutting-edge evangelism tool of the new millennium!'

<http://gothamist.com/2006/10/02/hell_house_1.php>, accessed 16 June 2009.

¹⁰ For further discussion of the modern liberal critique of current morality plays such as hell houses and judgment houses, see K Roebuck, 'Modern Morality Plays'. *US News and World Report*, vol. 125(17), 1998, p55.

¹¹ K Fricker, 'Punk Rock Review'. *Daily Variety*, 11 September, 2009, pp. 6, 34.

¹² F Lachmann, 'Violations of Expectation in Creativity and Perversion'. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, Vol. 26(3), 2006, pp. 362-385.

¹³ L Krenke and J McKay, 'Hard and Heavy-Gender and Power in a Heavy Metal Music Subculture', in *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis*, S. Meriam (ed), Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Company, San Francisco, CA, 2002, pp. 262-282.

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