CONTENTS

The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture
Volume 13 Number 1
 https://doi.org/10.1386/ajpc_00083_2
Published Online xx xxxx

EDITORIAL

ANGELIQUE NAIRN
Auckland University of Technology

JUSTIN MATTHEWS
Auckland University of Technology

Beyond the veil: Popular culture, morality and the afterlife in contemporary society

ABSTRACT

Ongoing interest in the afterlife serves to navigate existential crises by offering solace or amplifying anxieties about death. Popular cultural narratives, deeply intertwined with religious doctrines, serve as interpretative frameworks for understanding human experiences, ethical conduct and the mysteries of death. This Special Issue, then, explores how, in an increasingly secular world, the afterlife is portrayed in media narratives, which, while primarily aimed at entertainment, also respond to deep-seated existential and moral questions. It discusses how these portrayals offer a mix of hope, happiness and moral guidance, reflecting broader societal values and beliefs about life, death and what lies beyond. This collection of scholarly contributions aims to dissect the portrayal of morality and religion in media representations of the afterlife, examining how these portrayals reflect,

KEYWORDS

religion
life after death
immortality
entertainment media
representation
theology

critique or reinforce societal norms and values. By focusing on themes such as digital immortality and the supernatural, the Special Issue not only highlights the evolving nature of afterlife narratives but also underscores the role of popular culture in navigating and negotiating the existential dilemmas of the twenty-first century.

INTRODUCTION

Bennett contends that society tells stories of the afterlife because it continues to hold emotional urgency and cultural resonance (2012: 2). This is typified by Nortey et al.'s (2021) survey, that found almost three-quarters of Americans believed in the existence of Heaven and Hell, while 70 per cent believed they some interaction could take place between the living and the dead. Although Britons are not as convinced in the belief that there is an afterlife (roughly 46 per cent think a 'beyond' exists), younger people are the ones most inclined to believe in an afterlife regardless of religious affiliation, suggesting attitudes may shift (Sherwood 2023). Although these numbers have fluctuated over the years, there are clearly sections of the population that consider the place of the afterlife in contemporary society. Often conceptualizations of the afterlife abound in response to people feeling 'adrift in an absurd world' (Johnstone 1975: 69). These widely communicated beliefs of the afterlife can 'assuage fears of personal extinction' or 'magnify anxieties about the specifics of post-death experience, identity, and relationships' (Bassett 2014: 67). People, therefore, construct understandings of the unknown to interpret the human experience, but to also explain the meaning of death. For example, Christianity's assertions about death, judgement, heaven and hell, can justify why people should conform to normative guidelines such as forgiveness, responsibility and reciprocity, in order to be advantaged in the afterlife and to avoid eternal punishment (Geertz 2002; Johnstone 1975).

Yet, with a push towards secularization and religions such as Christianity, losing some of its influence and potency (particularly in western society) in the wake of the Enlightenment (Gedicks 2005), such interpretations of the afterlife manifest and are readily disseminated in the offerings of entertainment media. With its often-fictional narratives, the media can and does respond to 'the immediate cultural and social concerns of the living' (Bennett 2012: 1), grappling with the existential crisis experienced by humans and various points in their lifetimes (Bassett 2014). Thus, media representations imaginatively and creatively grapple with what constitutes the afterlife, helping to rationalize the existential, support and challenge religious doctrines, and entertain and educate so that society might live life to the fullest or feel assured that there is something more (Garrett 2015), sometimes in a 'more accessible and populist way' (Deacy 2012: ii) than religions can.

POPULAR CULTURE AND THE AFTERLIFE

Popular cultural offerings either directly or indirectly exploring the afterlife challenge and question understandings of resurrection, death, the soul, supernatural beings including angels, ghosts, the Devil and God(s), purgatory and immortality (Bennett 2012; Deacy 2012; Garrett 2015; Rankin 2020). According to O'Neill (2022), at their crux, these representations hinge on hope and the prospect of happiness, permeable boundaries that see a blurring of 'here' and

'there', self-determination as key to understanding the afterlife, and acts of sacrifice and love that forge the conditions of eternal happiness. And although these popular cultural representations may not be developed with the intention of engaging in theological discussions, with the ultimate motive instead being to entertain, they nevertheless 'can reflect authentic values' (Rankin 2020: 2) that explain and teach how people should act within a general order of existence (Decay 2012). At the very least, Deacy (2012) suggests that media representations of the afterlife can introduce or stimulate people's interest in their own beliefs and attitudes about the world.

These popular cultural representations, then, present 'a range of narratives, consumer choices, moral dispositions and selected rituals of conduct' (Saenz 1992: 43), which people 'may adopt, adapt, criticize or reject as components in our implicit knowledge' (Dant 2012: 24). With media such as *The Good Place*, *Upload*, *The Inbetween*, *Afterlife of the Party*, *Coco*, *Soul*, *Reaper*, *Elsewhere*, *If I Stay* and *Boo Bitch* (to name but a few), focused on the afterlife, it seems timely to explore the messages promulgated in such texts about morality and/or religion. This is especially given media can prompt questioning and reasoning that aids self-reflection (Hawkins 2001) and integrate people into an established order offering models of appropriate ways of being (Krijen and Verboord 2016).

To this end, this Special Issue sought contributions from scholars exploring representations of morality and/or religion in twenty-first-century popular cultural texts that feature and emphasize the afterlife. Interest was placed on considering how the afterlife is understood and yielded articles that considered pressing issues, such as digital immortality alongside ongoing fields of interest such as the supernatural.

THE CONTENTS OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The first article of the Special Issue: 'Holographic Afterlives: Deceased Performers as Technological Ghosts', written by Matthews and Nairn explores the complex interplay between nostalgia, innovation and ethics in the reanimation of iconic performers through holographic technology. It delves into the profound moral complexities that arise from resurrecting artists like Elvis Presley, Amy Winehouse and Whitney Houston for holographic performances, questioning consent, authenticity and the commercialization of their legacies. Highlighting the technical evolution from Pepper's Ghost illusions to AI-driven renderings, the piece scrutinizes the ethical and philosophical implications of digital immortality. The burgeoning market for 'Delebs' or digital celebrities, underscores the commodification of deceased artists, sparking debates over exploitation, consent violations and the impact on artistic legacies. Their article advocates for an interdisciplinary collaboration to navigate these challenges, emphasizing the need for a conscientious approach that respects the dignity of the departed. It warns against the dangers of creating 'digital zombies' trapped in a form of 'digital purgatory', urging for ethical practices that preserve artistic integrity and autonomy in the digital afterlife.

A consideration of digital afterlives is also present in the second article, 'The digital afterlife between hypersecularisation and postsecularity in contemporary speculative TV seriality: *Devs, Upload* and *Black Mirror's San Junipero*'. Here, Biano investigates the depiction of the digital afterlife in speculative TV series such as *Devs*, *Black Mirror's San Junipero* and *Upload*, and their commentary on contemporary religion and secularism. It explores how these narratives

present varied perspectives on religion's role in society and the ongoing secularization, intertwining secular, religious and moral questions. These series reflect the current transitional phase in western societies, where traditional secularization narratives coexist with intricate deconstructions of the secular–religious divide. By envisioning the digital afterlife in near-future scenarios, these texts articulate postsecular and hypersecularized visions of society, using the concept of digital afterlife to probe diverse world-views, ethical dilemmas and notions of life and human existence. The study underscores the digital afterlife as a critical tool for examining the evolving interplay between religion, morality and secular thought in contemporary culture.

In keeping with portrayals of afterlife on television, Wilson considers immortality in supernatural fiction. In this third article, 'Bonnie Bennett and the beyond: An exploration of one representation of the afterlife in *The Vampire Diaries*', Wilson examines the portrayal of immortality, the afterlife and metaphysical dimensions within contemporary vampire narratives, drawing parallels to Christian theology, specifically through the series *The Vampire Diaries*. It highlights how the concept of a vampire's 'maker' mirrors the Christian God and explores immortality's similarities with Christian afterlife beliefs. The analysis focuses on the character Bonnie Bennett, a witch whose narrative offers a unique perspective on these themes, rather than the vampires typically central to such stories. Bonnie's sacrificial love, her death and existence in a concurrent dimension, and her interactions with Jeremy Gilbert resonate with the New Testament's teachings on love and sacrifice. Her story in Seasons 4 and 5 is proposed as an allegory for the biblical conception of heaven and the afterlife, suggesting a broader commentary on divine presence and the nature of the afterlife according to Judeo-Christian scripture. This analysis positions *The Vampire Diaries* as a contemporary medium for exploring complex theological concepts through the lens of supernatural fiction.

The supernatural is also present in the fourth article, '"Where are we?": The ghost as interrogative haunting in *The Others*'. Yeo explores the ghost's role as a critical element in questioning reality, identity and knowledge, particularly through the film *The Others*. It suggests that ghosts challenge our understanding of life and permanence, proposing that perhaps our tangible reality is the true illusion. The film uses the Gothic tradition of deferring death's finality to highlight how ghosts serve as reminders of life's value. *The Others* uniquely presents the living as simulations of the dead, engaging in a postmodern examination of belief, truth and religious doctrine. The narrative transforms the haunted house into a purgatorial space, underscoring themes of self-loss and the clash between religious and supernatural perspectives. The film concludes with existential questions that extend beyond the physical to the ontological, prompting a re-evaluation of established religious narratives regarding the afterlife. Thus, Yeo argues that in subverting the ghost story genre, *The Others* challenges the viewer's perception of reality, positioning the cinematic as a simulacrum through which the essence of reality is questioned.

In our fifth article, 'Ads from HELL: Complaining about the use of religion in advertising', Fastnedge and Gould offer a scrutiny of HELL Pizza's advertising in Aotearoa New Zealand. HELL Pizza is known for its provocative art and bold strategies that engage with cultural norms, often sparking controversy due to its religious references. By analysing official complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) from 2005 to 2021, this study investigates the public, ASA and the brand's navigation of 'offence' and Christianity in 79 rulings. The findings indicate HELL Pizza treads a delicate balance between

edgy humour and potential offence, with ASA rulings reflecting a societal shift towards valuing freedom of artistic expression. This trend is evident even in cases involving religious undertones, suggesting a broader acceptance of such approaches within the context of a brand's established identity. This analysis offers insights into the evolving cultural and moral sensitivities regarding Christianity's portrayal in advertising in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Finally, Guinibert and Page consider the relationship between depictions of the afterlife and anime in their article 'That time I was reincarnated as a problematic trope: Viewer preferences and cultural trends in reincarnation Isekai anime'. This article explores the reincarnation Isekai anime genre, where protagonists are reborn into fantastical worlds, highlighting its rise in global popularity and the normalization of controversial themes such as mental health, violence and sexualization of virtual minors. Utilizing a data-driven analysis of themes coded by English-speaking fans, the study investigates the genre's paradoxical appeal, the ethical complexities of sexual content, and the growing attraction to 'zero-to-hero' narratives post-pandemic. The findings indicate a complex relationship between the popularity of 'trashy' content, ethical concerns over sexual themes, and the pandemic's influence on empowerment motifs' appeal. This research prompts a re-evaluation of anime's societal impact, questioning regulatory practices in global media landscapes. It underscores the necessity for deeper insights into the genre's influence beyond Japan, advocating for ongoing scrutiny into its societal and ethical implications.

The Special Issue is rounded out by two book reviews. The first is by Dr Angelique Nairn on *Marveling Religion: Critical Discourse, Religion, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe.* Her review considers how *Marveling Religion* explores the interplay between religion, culture and the MCU, asserting it as a modern 'sacred text'. Her book review offers an evaluation of the themes of the book like sacrifice, identity and societal norms, the collection critically examines superhero narratives through a religious lens, reflecting on humanity and societal challenges. The second is by Dr Enrique Ajuria Ibarra on *The Superhero Multiverse: Readapting Comic Book Icons in Twenty-First-Century Film and Popular Media* documents how this edited collection examines how superhero narratives evolve across media, highlighting cultural impacts on character reinterpretation. He finds that the essays included in the collection explore adaptations' nuances, media specificity's role, and how changing formats influence superhero perceptions and character development.

CONCLUSION

The Special Issue canvases several perspectives on the afterlife from varying disciplines. It includes articles that explore different popular cultural texts: from holographic concerts and social media, to advertising and screen productions, with each helping to define contemporary understandings of life after death. Given the prevalence of entertainment offerings that highlight narratives of the afterlife, we anticipate that this academic field will continue to be worth ongoing research.

We are deeply thankful for the honour of serving as guest editors for this journal issue and appreciate the opportunity to shape its content. Special thanks to the editorial team at the *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture* for letting us take the reins for this Special Issue and for your advice. Additionally, we are grateful to our anonymous peer reviewers for their valuable feedback

and encouragement, which greatly improved the quality of this issue. Finally, a heartfelt thank you to our esteemed contributors. Your commitment, enthusiasm and perceptive analyses of popular culture and the afterlife have truly brought this Special Issue to fruition.

REFERENCES

Bassett, Jonathan F. (2014), 'Fears of finitude and eternity: Attitudes about immortality and the afterlife in selected movies', *Studies in Popular Culture*, 36:2, pp. 67–84.

Bennett, Alice (2012), *Afterlife and Narrative in Contemporary Fiction*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dant, Tim (2012), *Television and the Moral Imaginary: Society through the Small Screen*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Deacy, Christopher (2012), *Screening the Afterlife: Theology, Eschatology and Film*, London: Routledge.

Garrett, Greg (2015), *Entertaining Judgment: The Afterlife in Popular Imagination*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gedicks, Fredrick M. (2005), 'Spirituality, fundamentalism, liberty: Religion at the end of modernity', *DePaul Law Review*, 54:4, pp. 1197–235.

Geertz, Clifford (2002), 'Religion as a cultural system', in M. Labeck (ed.), *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, Boston, MA: Blackwell Publishers, pp. 61–82.

Hawkins, Gay (2001), 'The ethics of television', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4:4, pp. 412–26.

Johnstone, Ronald (1975), *Religion and Society in Interaction: The Sociology of Religion*, Hoboken, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Krijnen, Tonny and Verboord, Marc (2016), 'TV genres' moral value: The moral reflection of segmented TV audiences', *The Social Science Journal*, 53:4, pp. 417–26.

Nortey, Justin, Lipka, Michael and Alvarado, Joshua (2021), 'Few Americans blame god or say faith has been Shaken Amid pandemic, other tragedies', Pew Center Research, 23 November, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/11/23/views-on-the-afterlife/. Accessed 17 March 2024.

O'Neill, Kevin (2022), *Heaven, Hell, and the Underworld in the American Imagination*, Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood.

Rankin, David (2020), *Film and the Afterlife*, London: Routledge.

Saenz, Michael (1992), 'Television viewing as a cultural practice', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 16:2, pp. 37–51.

Sherwood, Harriet (2023), 'Hell, yes: Younger Britons more likely to believe in damnation, study finds', *The Guardian*, 19 May, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/19/younger-britons-more-likely-to-believe-in-eternal-damnation-study-finds. Accessed 17 March 2024.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dr Angelique Nairn is an associate professor in the School of Communication Studies (SCS). Angelique has been involved in a myriad of research projects that have hinged on organizational communication, identity construction, rhetoric and/or the creative industries. She is also interested in popular culture and particularly the representation of women, creative people and morality as they appear on-screen. Her recent work has explored issues of racism, sexism and technological determinism. She teaches courses in

the public relations department, specializing in digital public relations and persuasion.

Contact: Auckland University of Technology, 55 Wellesley Street East, Auckland 1010, New Zealand.
E-mail: angelique.nairn@aut.ac.nz

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5609-2627

Justin Matthews is a senior lecturer in the Digital Communication Department within the School of Communication Studies at the Auckland University of Technology. His research is primarily focused on the area of user interfaces and experiences, future studies, gaming studies and narrative design and popular culture. He is currently completing a Ph.D. exploring speculative user interface designs from science-fiction moving image and their relationship to contemporary technology experiences.

Contact: Auckland University of Technology, 55 Wellesley Street East, Auckland 1010, New Zealand.
E-mail: justin.matthews@aut.ac.nz

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3508-6564

The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture
Volume 13 Number 1
 https://doi.org/10.1386/ajpc_00084_1
Received 16 January 2024; Accepted 27 February 2024; Published Online xx xxxx

JUSTIN MATTHEWS
Auckland University of Technology

ANGELIQUE NAIRN
Auckland University of Technology

Digital eternity: The holographic resurrection of music icons

ABSTRACT

Holographic reincarnations blend the allure of the past with the possibilities of modern technology, navigating through ethical quandaries and the redefinition of performance art. Central to this exploration is the fusion of memory and digital perpetuity, pushing the limits of what constitutes a live performance. The holographic rebirth of legends such as Elvis Presley, Amy Winehouse and Whitney Houston sparks debate over the ethics of posthumous consent, the authenticity of such representations and the implications of monetizing the afterlife of artists. This shift towards digital eternity prompts a critical assessment of the moral dimensions involved in resurrecting artists through technology. Exploring the history and development of holography, from historical illusions to contemporary artificial intelligence-enhanced presentations, reveals both the technological achievements and the ethical challenges presented by these endeavours. The drive behind these resurrective projects shines a light on a lucrative industry focused on 'Delebs', turning the legacies of deceased celebrities into profitable ventures. Yet the quest to immortalize artists digitally invites scrutiny over potential misuse, privacy breaches and the erosion of the true essence of their legacies. Addressing these complex issues demands a concerted effort from ethicists, legal scholars, technology experts and cultural commentators. The journey into this uncharted domain

KEYWORDS

holography
live music
artificial intelligence
music industry
virtual concerts
digital legacy
ai resurrection
avatars

highlights the necessity of balancing innovation with respect, advocating for a principled approach to honouring those who have passed. The concept of confining artists to a 'digital purgatory', where they exist solely for entertainment devoid of self-determination, emphasizes the urgency of establishing ethical guidelines. This digital afterlife, fraught with the risk of diminishing the soul of artistic works to mere commercial assets, calls for a vigilant approach to safeguard the dignity and volition of artists in the realm of digital legacy.

The reanimation of icons via holography weaves together nostalgia, cutting-edge innovation and moral dilemmas, reshaping people's engagement with the digital afterlife. At the core of holographic performances – realized via advanced projection technologies – lies the cultural interplay between legacy, memory and the digital expansion of life. Such an interplay is particularly notable when the boundaries of live performances are being reshaped by introducing holographic renditions of dead iconic figures such as Elvis Presley, Amy Winehouse, Roy Orbison and Whitney Houston (Forbes 2021; Cull 2015). The reanimation of iconic figures posthumously prompts significant queries regarding consent, authenticity and the commercial aspects of an artist's afterlife. As digital resurrections, especially through holography, become more prevalent, they bring pressing implications for society, culture and ethics to the forefront of public discourse (Stojnić 2016). Furthermore, the digital revival of the personas of deceased icons can alter perceptions of their legacy, sparking discussions on the sanctity of an artist's essence post-mortem and whether their 'reincarnation' is, in fact, an act of subjectification (Stojnić 2016). Since technology can create immersive experiences that defy temporal limits, consideration needs to be given to how such reanimations impact on the immortality and oblivion of deceased music artists.

In essence, resurrecting deceased artists via holographic music performances presents a dilemma: reconciling the wish to immortalize these icons while upholding their autonomy and dignity. Establishing digital immortality introduces ethical dilemmas regarding the deceased's autonomy, dignity and agency. The risk of creating 'digital zombies' (Bassett 2015: 1127) or 'enslaved ghosts' (Myers 2019) potentially confines musical artists to a perpetual digital purgatory. In this digital afterlife, artists are both celebrated and remembered but also commercialized and manipulated, falling under the control of others who dictate their posthumous existence (Anson 2014). The balance between safeguarding an artist's legacy and avoiding exploitation becomes increasingly complex with artificial intelligence (AI)-driven holographic renderings, thus compelling society to reassess cultural and commercial ecosystems. Given the interlocking dimensions of ethics, commercial interests and technology, there will be an unavoidable repeating of pertinent ideas across this article. The purpose of this work then is to explore the digital afterlives of stage performances, from Pepper's Ghost optical illusions to contemporary AI-driven holographic renderings, revealing the escalating complexities of digitally resurrecting deceased performers.

THE ART AND SCIENCE BEHIND HOLOGRAPHIC PERFORMANCES

The evolution of holographic technology within the entertainment industry finds its roots in the nineteenth-century optical illusion known as Pepper's Ghost. This technique has captivated audiences since its first notable

application by John Pepper at London's Royal Polytechnic Institution in 1862. This innovative method used a strategic arrangement of glass and lighting to reflect the image of a hidden actor onto the main stage, creating the ethereal presence of a ghostly apparition. A concealed space below or beside the main stage was used to illuminate the actor, who was then reflected onto a glass sheet angled towards the audience, resulting in a realistic figure onstage ('More About Pepper's Ghost' n.d.; Rowell 2019). Such an illusion, which bridged the realms of magic and science, marked the inception of a profound transformation in stagecraft and visual storytelling. Over time, the principles underlying Pepper's Ghost have been significantly enhanced with digital advancements, leading to the development of modern holographic concerts. These contemporary performances represent a sophisticated amalgamation of historical techniques and digital innovation, coalescing in holographic concerts that revive and reimagine the work of creative people, especially deceased music artists (Matthews and Nairn 2023).

An advancement in rendering technology, notably through digital morphing and text-to-speech innovations, has paved the way for resurrecting iconic figures, providing them an afterlife within the digital realm (D'Rozario and Bryant 2013). This new form of existence transcends traditional boundaries, allowing artists to maintain a presence beyond their physical lifespans, engaging in what can be considered as *digital immortality*. One such means of digital reincarnation is the holographic concert. Despite conjecture about what constitutes a hologram, modern concerts labelled 'holographic' primarily rely on advanced projection technologies and digital videography. These concerts utilize the principles of the Pepper's Ghost illusion rather than being true holograms, which are three-dimensional images created by the interference patterns of light beams (Rowell 2019).

Nevertheless, the holographic representation creates a nexus where the artist's presence resonates digitally, granting them an immortal existence that defies death. For example, companies like Eyellusion and Base Hologram are pioneering this field. Eyellusion integrates holographic images with live musicians for immersive experiences. For example, they worked with Frank Zappa's estate and former bandmates to develop and tour 'The Bizarre World of Frank Zappa' holographic concert (Virtue 2019). Similarly, Base Hologram uses translucent screens to facilitate interactive performances between the holographic artist, live musicians and the audience and are responsible for 'An Evening with Witney Houston', and the Roy Orbison holographic concert experiences (Ifeanyi 2019; Matthews and Nairn 2023).

Increasingly, holographic representations and experiences are evolving through the use of AI (Dey 2024). AI now enables the integration of big data representing an artist's essence, personality and style into holographic constructs, thereby transforming their legacies into dynamic forms. The big data draws upon a diverse array of the artist's personal and legacy materials, including audio and video recordings, social media posts, interviews and cherished personal family moments. This innovative approach transcends digital methods of animating or simplistically puppeteering the likenesses of deceased artists, heralding a new era of sophisticated, immersive experiences that expand the posthumous possibilities (Sone 2022). That is, the AI produces holographic experiences that not only reflect the voice and movement of the deceased artist, but the AI can also use this big data that has been uploaded to develop, change and even reimagine how the deceased artist may be represented in contemporary society. For example, although not a musician, James

Dean is to be resurrected in an upcoming motion picture, and his likeness is expected to move beyond 'passive digital reconstruction or deep fake technology' allowing the James Dean digital clone to 'walk, talk and interact on screen with other actors in the film' (Velasquez 2023). As such, AI poses creative solutions for artists seeking new forms of expression and interaction without traditional constraints (Brown 2022). The potential of AI-enhanced holographic technology in redefining live entertainment offers innovative opportunities for fan engagement and the reimagination of performances. This technology proffers a future where the distinction between the digital and the real is increasingly blurred, setting the stage for a new era of live entertainment experiences (Matthews and Nairn 2023). According to D'Rozario and Bryant (2013), such advancements significantly increase the ability to bring these artists back to life digitally, providing them with an opportunity to continue their legacy. However, the shift from animated Pepper's Ghost techniques to advanced AI-driven holographic simulations for resurrecting deceased performers raises significant legal questions. As noted by Orita (2022), this leap demands robust legal frameworks to protect deceased artists' post-mortem privacy and digital legacies. These fully realized digital embodiments – moving beyond mere visual trickery to interactive digital representations – introduce challenges around consent, potential reputational harm and the ethics of exploiting an artist's digital persona (a point we revisit later). As Moser contended, if a hologram is 'an entirely original work, created with entirely new content, the restraints presented by copyright law are less clear' (2012: 3). In essence, copyright holders (often the estate in the case of deceased celebrities) will find it difficult to challenge the replications of these music artists, meaning the proliferation of both positive and negative holographic renderings that no longer uphold the moral rights of the deceased. As Anson (2014) suggests, these new technologies challenge the expectations of intellectual property and copyright laws, making deceased celebrities susceptible to replication for nefarious purposes. Intellectual property, publicity rights and new digital afterlife laws need updates to meet the challenges of digital immortality. Balancing artist legacy protection with public access to cultural heritage demands a flexible legal approach to keep pace with technological evolution enabling digital resurrections (Truby and Brown 2021).

HOLOGRAPHIC CONCERTS, MUSIC CONSUMERS AND FAN ENGAGEMENT

There are advantages to using these new technologies to develop realistic holograms. The fusion of art and technology in holographic performances redefines audience experiences and aligns with the music industry's shift towards live experiences as key revenue streams (Forbes 2021). That is, audiences can experience feelings of nostalgia (Hughes 2020; Matthews and Nairn 2023) and the works of those who have passed can be revived for the cultural consumption of new audiences (Cull 2015). Such a revivification process goes beyond simple replication; it allows artists to interact with today's audiences and partake in the cultural discourse anew. Thus, holographic concerts highlight a broader trend towards experiential consumption, where technological advancements meet commercial motivations, shaping the future of entertainment in the digital landscape.

Amidst the evolving landscape of live music, holographic concerts have emerged as a significant innovation, blending cultural entrepreneurship with

technological advancements. These performances not only respond to live music's inherent allure – characterized by its immediacy and co-presence – but also offer novel experiences that transcend traditional entertainment formats (Naveed et al. 2017). As Holt (2010) articulates, the authenticity and spontaneity inherent in live performances serve as a unique selling point, distinguishing them from the refined production of studio-recorded tracks. The pursuit of genuine experiences encompasses the visual and performance aspects that magnify the appeal of live concerts, playing a major role in their attractiveness (Holt 2010). Accordingly, the introduction of holographic technology into live performances has expanded the financial incentives for bringing performers back to life, leveraging the cultural significance of live music while addressing the obstacles presented by digital disruption.

The music industry has responded to the craving for new concert experiences by harnessing holographic technologies, crafting meaningful market spaces where music consumers and fan experiences converge with fresh expressions, thus amplifying engagement beyond conventional live music settings (Chang et al. 2021). Utilizing holographic concerts to revive living performers like ABBA or KISS has exemplified a strategic opportunity for the music industry, simultaneously paying tribute to the artists' legacies and unlocking new avenues for audience engagement (Chang et al. 2021). The use of holographic performers adds a layer of artistic novelty that shapes new cultural values, inviting audiences to create new intersubjective meanings (Chang et al. 2021). Holographic concerts, then, mark a pivotal shift in live music, blending commercial success with cultural innovation to adapt to the digital age, thus rejuvenating the music industry and broadening the scope of live performances. The success of concerts like 'ABBA Voyage' has unsurprisingly hastened the appeal to digitally resurrect deceased artists, coupled with the growing capabilities of AI technologies. This phenomenon highlights a critical intersection of technology, commerce and ethics, driven by economic interests in holographic concerts and the commercialization of live music, revealing a growing market for immortal digital representations. In fact, the market for deceased celebrities, known as 'Delebs', is substantial and expanding, valued at $2.25 billion in annual licensing and royalty revenues (D'Rozario 2016). This growth market in Delebs underscores the vast commercial potential in digitally resurrecting artists, leveraging their legacies for ongoing profit. This consideration takes on heightened importance when contemplating the potential revenues accessible to the estates and representatives of Delebs (Cook 2005: 2). Furthermore, the intertwining of post-mortem marketing with the 'curious phenomenon' (D'Roziaro 2016: 486) of artists gaining increased popularity posthumously explains the burgeoning market for digital resurrection. For example, as a Deleb, Michael Jackson remarkably transitioned from a $500 million debt to his estate now being valued at $1.5 billion (Halperin 2014).

There is an obvious tension between commercial gain and maintaining an artist's legacy, but equally, a tension exists between technological mediation and the quest for authentic live music experiences that govern audience perception of holographic performances. While advancements in immersive technologies promise a new form of live music engagement (Charron 2017), these mediated performances often face scepticism over their ability to deliver the 'unexpected, iterative, and expansive experience' (Harper 2015: 22) intrinsic to live events. Charron (2017) argues that although technological developments may enhance presence, they cannot fully realize the unique sense of 'being there' that live performances, particularly with live artists, present.

Furthermore, the proliferation of holographic concerts that depict deceased artists poses additional problems when it comes to retaining and appealing to audiences. Holographic concerts, with their capacity to be endlessly repeated, can herald audience fatigue and the subsequent need for innovation (Klein et al. 2017). For instance, the traditional practice in the music industry is for an artist to compose and release a new album that they subsequently tour (Papies and van Heerde 2017). The deceased artist is clearly unable to create new content, rendering the concert obsolete over time. Should AI technology be used to manufacture new music, then the concert can be subject to accusations of performance mediation and inauthenticity, which, as Weisethaunet and Lindberg (2010) suggest, can emerge when originality and individual expression are removed from the concert experience. As Mael and Le Guern (2014) also argue, when the lines between authenticity and artificiality blur, audiences are inclined to view the performance as cynical exploitation, adversely impacting on the potential success of any future concerts that include the deceased artist.

The resurrection of artists such as Elvis, Amy Winehouse and Whitney Houston through holographic shows, then, is a critical juncture of cultural enterprise and tech-driven creativity. These case studies exemplify the commercial motivations behind digital resurrections, leveraging the legacies of deceased artists to generate revenue and engage fans in new and immersive ways. For instance, the posthumous hologram tours of artists like Whitney Houston and Roy Orbison have not only honoured their musical legacies but also presented new fresh avenues for audience interaction and revenue generation through licensing, estate management and the monetization of performances (Rowell 2019). However, pursuing holographic concerts is not without issues. Forde (2019) argues that holographic concerts illuminate the ethical and economic dimensions of resurrecting deceased artists. As hologram performances transition from one-off spectacles to commercialized touring enterprises, the term 'ghost slavery' emerges, suggesting a contentious debate on the rights and dignities of these digital representations (Myers 2019). The reality of artists like Buddy Holly, Roy Orbison, Maria Callas and Frank Zappa touring the world posthumously in hologram form can prove contentious amongst audiences and critics, who may, as Sone (2022) and Matthews and Nairn (2023) demonstrate, object to the exploitation of these beloved artists because their re-emergence is attributed to commercial imperatives rather than intrinsic and creative motivations.

Additionally, the impact of holographic concerts featuring deceased artists can affect the burgeoning careers of new and smaller artists, potentially freezing their growth and diminishing their visibility within the industry (Myers 2019). The allure of holographic reincarnations of revered artists could monopolize live event spaces and audience attention, relegating emerging talents to the periphery. This phenomenon risks creating an entertainment ecosystem where innovation and fresh perspectives are overshadowed by the nostalgia and novelty of holographic performances, stifling diversity and the evolution of artistic expression.

BALANCING AUTHENTICITY, COMMERCIALIZATION AND THE EVOLUTION OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Instead of being accepted as part of the evolving narrative of these deceased celebrities, the holograms are raising questions regarding the self-governance

and core characteristics of these digital beings. The creation of 'digital zombies' – entities that resemble life yet evoke a sense of unease due to their lack of autonomy – pinpoints the delicate balance required in crafting digital artist experiences that are both engaging and respectful to audience sensibilities (Bassett 2015, 2021). This concept is exemplified through various instances where deceased celebrities are brought back to life digitally, such as Bob Monkhouse in a prostate cancer awareness advertisement and Tupac Shakur and Michael Jackson in posthumous performances (Bassett 2015). These representations are not mere static memories but are interactive, allowing for a continued social presence that challenges traditional notions of death and legacy. Forbes poignantly observes, 'the semantics of death are cancelled within such parameters, whereby the artist never dies, and their legacies are subject to revival, remix, and re-appropriation' (2021: 166), capturing the ethical complexities surrounding digital afterlives. Therefore, the digital form of immortality, facilitated by technology, raises critical ethical considerations about manipulating and exploiting these digital personas. The blending of past and present through digital resurrection not only offers a new form of engagement with the deceased's work but also prompts a re-evaluation of consent, identity and the preservation of legacy in the digital age (Bassett 2015).

The manipulation and exploitation of artists' personas speak to a broader issue highlighted by Bassett (2021), where the uncanny valley effect – a sense of unease evoked by digital entities that closely resemble living beings without fully capturing their essence – becomes a critical point of contention. While technically impressive, the creation of these digital simulacra often fails to replicate the nuanced expressions of human emotion and spontaneity, leaving audiences in a liminal space between fascination and discomfort. Resurrecting the dead in response to commercial motivations and, in some cases, audience desires highlights the importance of carefully navigating the ethical and perceptual pitfalls associated with digital resurrections, ensuring respect for the artist's legacy and the audience's experience. By examining digital continuations of individuals after death, Harbinja (2020) raises crucial concerns regarding post-mortem privacy and autonomy. Their research is vital for understanding the dynamics of Delebs, emphasizing the necessity for legal and ethical frameworks to safeguard the digital identities and legacies of artists beyond their lives. Aligning with Forbes's (2021) discussion on digital immortality, Harbinja's (2020) work calls for a thoughtful strategy in curating digital afterlives that respect the deceased's legacy. For example, the postponement of the Amy Winehouse hologram tour, as reported by Snapes, illuminates the 'unique challenges and sensitivities' (2019) encountered in commemorating artists through holographic performances. The decision to delay the project reflects a conscientious approach to the ethical implications and public perceptions surrounding digital resurrections. The Winehouse example serves as a poignant reminder of the complexities inherent in balancing innovation with respect for the deceased artist's autonomy and dignity. The controversy surrounding this tour reflects broader societal concerns regarding permission, genuineness and the possibility for exploitation in the digital afterlife, illustrating the need for a nuanced and respectful dialogue in the realm of holographic recreations (Snapes 2019).

The challenge lies in crafting engaging and respectful experiences, acknowledging the profound differences between resurrecting deceased artists and leveraging the digital likenesses of those still living as per the holographic creations of ABBA and soon-to-be KISS. The latter retains a sense of

agency and ownership over their digital selves, fostering a genuine connection between the artist and their audience – an element distinctly absent in the posthumous exploitation of deceased artists. In this context, the work of companies like Eternime and LifeNaut, as Bassett (2015) mentioned, becomes particularly relevant. These organizations strive to offer digital immortality via AI algorithms to transform your digital footprint – tweets, messages, vlogs and photos – into an AI 'you', purportedly mirroring your living persona. Yet their endeavours also prompt us to question the implications of such immortality on the collective memory and reflect on occurrences of performers and their cultural legacy. While offering a semblance of continuity, the quest for digital endurance necessitates critically examining how these technologies impact the bereaved and the broader societal perception of death and remembrance. Crafting digital afterlives that respect artists' legacies and enrich audience experience calls for a careful balance between technological innovation and ethical integrity, thereby honouring the deceased's memory and enhancing our cultural heritage.

Digital resurrection not only challenges understandings of authenticity and threatens the opportunities for new and emerging artists to break into the creative marketplace, but it also transforms artists into figures of immortality, reshaping cultural memory and perceptions of death. Forbes's insight into how technology allows for extending an artist's legacy beyond physical death introduces a shift in 'death semantics' (2021: 166), where the integrity of cultural heritage and the ethical implications of perpetuating an artist's presence in the digital realm challenges traditional views on mortality. Such changes can have a societal impact, influencing how communities remember, mourn and celebrate deceased artists. The ability to 'revive' artists for performances or new artistic creations alters traditional mourning processes and the collective memory of cultural figures. This shift has profound implications for cultural heritage, as it challenges the finality of death and redefines the boundaries between the past and the present.

Conversely, the technology's capability to create enduring and accurate digital representations offers significant benefits, ensuring that the legacies of historical performers, akin to Mozart and Beethoven, remain accessible and undistorted. By creating precise digital representations, their contributions can remain unaltered and accessible, serving as an educational resource and cultural link for future generations that transcends temporal limitations (Truby and Brown 2021). However, this balance between safeguarding heritage and fostering current artistic development stresses the dual impact of holography and AI in maintaining the authenticity of past contributions while navigating its implications for contemporary creative expression.

PRODUCTIZATION OF DELEBS: ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN THE MARKETPLACE

Floridi's 'informational bodies' (2013) concept further affirms the imperative for moral rights and genuine representation. This concept illustrates the preservation and continuation of deceased artists' digital personas, compelling us to re-evaluate our perceptions of life, death and legacy in the digital era. Floridi's 'informational body' (2013) redefines human existence in the digital age, positing that our identity is an informational structure constituted by the big data that defines us – for example social media activity, digital memories and search history that we create as we live. This notion of a vast informational

structure that follows us and persists after we die extends to post-mortem privacy. It suggests that the digital remnants of an individual should be treated with the same respect and dignity as their physical body, even after death (Öhman and Floridi 2017).

Harbinja's (2020) adoption of informational bodies in their work on post-morality sheds light on the ethical intricacies of digital afterlives and for us 'Delebs'. Harbinja's examination of post-death digital personas brings to light important issues of privacy and autonomy in the afterlife. This research is crucial to grasp the intricacies of Delebs, underlining the imperative need for robust legal and ethical structures to safeguard the online personas and heritages of performers after their passing. Aligning with Forbes's (2021) digital immortality and the risk of distorting an artist's legacy, Harbinja's (2020) research advocates for a considered approach in crafting digital afterlives, one that honours the legacy of the deceased while navigating the ethical complexities associated with life after death.

Exploring holographic concerts and Delebs against the backdrop of Forbes's death semantics reinforces the complex stewardship of an artist's digital legacy, requiring collaboration among stakeholders to honour their intentions and cultural impact. Managing a Deleb's legacy demands a deep understanding of the artist's work and cultural significance to ensure that digital representations remain authentic and true to their essence. Forbes (2021) highlights that digital afterlives allow for endless reinterpretation of an artist's legacy, risking distortion of original narratives and meanings, thus emphasizing the importance of maintaining authenticity in posthumous projects. Hence, addressing the commercial exploitation of an artist's digital likeness necessitates enhanced legal, societal and academic scrutiny. Ensuring that profits derived from their digital afterlife align with their wishes and equitably benefit their estate or designated heirs is crucial. Tackling these issues is essential for safeguarding an artist's moral rights and ensuring authentic representation.

Forbes (2021) and Harbinja (2020) underscore the importance of consent, privacy and ethics in the creation and management of Delebs, highlighting the crucial need for protective frameworks to respect deceased artists' personas and integrity. Harbinja proposes a framework for dignified treatment of the deceased in the digital realm. Addressing consent challenges requires collaborative policy efforts to honour artists' legacies while maintaining ethical and legal rigour, ensuring that digital afterlives are managed with consent and respect. The societal and cultural implications of digital resurrections, highlighted by Forbes's (2021) analysis of death semantics and Harbinja's (2020) informational bodies, showcase the complex interplay between technology, law, ethics and cultural heritage. This crossroads calls for continuous discussion among stakeholders to guarantee that artists' digital afterlives enhance cultural heritage and shape societal perceptions of death. It underlines the imperative for united, principled handling of digital legacies, emphasizing the crucial role of developing detailed frameworks. These frameworks must skilfully address the complexities of digital immortality while protecting cultural legacy in the digital landscape.

In the context of Deleb digital resurrection, the utilization of AI and holography to mimic elements of a deceased individual's persona for either entertainment or memorialization gains significant importance. At the heart of resurrecting AI Delebs is the appropriation of their informational bodies – digital compilations of their identities, including works, public records, social

media and other digital interactions, aimed at posthumously preserving or reconstructing their presence. These compilations, transformed into comprehensive data sets, are then integrated into AI models to craft a Deleb simulacrum – a digital persona that emulates the original artist. This process raises pivotal concerns regarding the rights and autonomy of such digitally resurrected entities. These issues intensify when viewed through the lens of Delebs productization.

Turning these resurrected entities into commercial products presents lucrative opportunities for businesses to market and repeatedly utilize a Deleb as a perpetual asset. Delebs, reimagined as marketable commodities, can be utilized by estate owners, copyright holders and music labels for financial benefits, leading to critical discussions about the commodification of digital afterlives. This dynamic introduces a crucial debate on finding equilibrium between preserving the memories of deceased celebrities and navigating the ethical challenges posed by their digital commodification.

DIGITAL RESURRECTION OR DIGITAL PURGATORY

Given the preceding discussion, a further consideration of the ethical integrity of digitally resurrecting artists reveals how technological capability blends holographic performances, technological progress and the societal impacts of digital afterlives. While enabling remembrance and engagement, it prompts significant ethical considerations regarding respect for the artists' autonomy and legacy.

As mentioned above, digital resurrection of music artists pivots around the profound question of whether the digital perpetuation of artists subjects them to a digital purgatory, a state of being that might be likened to 'digital zombies' (Bassett 2015: 1127) or 'enslaved ghosts' (Myers 2019). Such digital purgatory sees a loss of personal agency, with the deceased artist existing merely at the behest of commercial interests and technological whims. These digital manifestations, then, while captivating in their promise of immortality, invite us to reconsider the boundaries of ethical practice when preserving the essence and dignity of the artist beyond their physical life. The concern expressed by Bassett (2015, 2021) about artists being stuck in a digital limbo showcases the need to critically assess the motivations, methodologies and moral implications of technological pursuits.

To understand the nature of the issues, we offer a conceptual model that delineates the intricate interplay of technology, ethics and commodification inherent in the digital resurrection of iconic figures. Detailed in Table 1 and illustrated by Figure 1, this framework serves as an indicative but pivotal guide for dissecting the nuanced tapestry of holographic afterlives. The model delineates four principal types of holographic renditions: simple animations, basic holograms, advanced holograms and AI-powered holograms. This categorization is examined through lenses of complexity, interactivity, affordance (the increasing capabilities offered by each technology) and the pivotal ethical considerations. This structured approach allows us to peel back the layers of each form, providing a granular understanding of their contributions to the domain of digital afterlives and the potential for commodification.

Beginning with simple animations, we enter holography's basic tier, featuring non-interactive, straightforward visuals. Progression to basic holograms introduces improved visual realism confined to looped actions, lacking live engagement. The leap to advanced holograms incorporates enhanced

Table 1: Holographic types, capability and their ethical implications.

Types of hologram	Description	Complexity	Interactivity	Affordance	Ethical considerations
Simple animations	2D/3D projections without lifelike movement	Low	None	Static image projection No real-time interaction	Minimal due to basic representation
Basic holograms	3D visuals with predefined loops, no audience interaction	Moderate	None	Lifelike 3D image projection Predefined visual loops	Increased with more lifelike visuals
Advanced holograms	Enhanced 3D visuals with motion capture, limited interactivity	High	Limited	Motion captured movements Pre-programmed interactions	Significant for realistic representation
AI-powered holograms	AI-driven interactivity simulates personality and behaviours	Very high	Dynamic	Real-time responsiveness Simulated performances Audience interaction adaptation Complex behaviour simulation	Highly complex, involving autonomy and personality simulation

Source: Authors.

imaging for a more realistic experience, though still limited to pre-set content. The apex, AI-powered holograms, integrates real-time interaction and personality emulation, marking a significant ethical and technological shift in digital representations. Particular note is drawn to the 'Affordance' column within our model, which illuminates the path from static projections to entities capable of dynamic interaction, reflecting the leap towards digital personas that transcend mere replication to embody a semblance of autonomy and personhood.

This technological evolution invites deeper ethical contemplation on consent, autonomy and dignity, highlighting the complexity of digital afterlives. Each step reflects a gradual increase in complexity, ethical considerations and commodification and commercial value, culminating in a 'Tipping Point' indicated via the dashed line (see Figure 1), representing the critical juncture where the holographic representations begin to approach a sense of personhood, significantly raising ethical considerations and the judgement of commercial exploitation. This model aims to highlight how the complexity of technology correlates with ethical and commercial implications, especially as we move towards more sophisticated and lifelike digital resurrections.

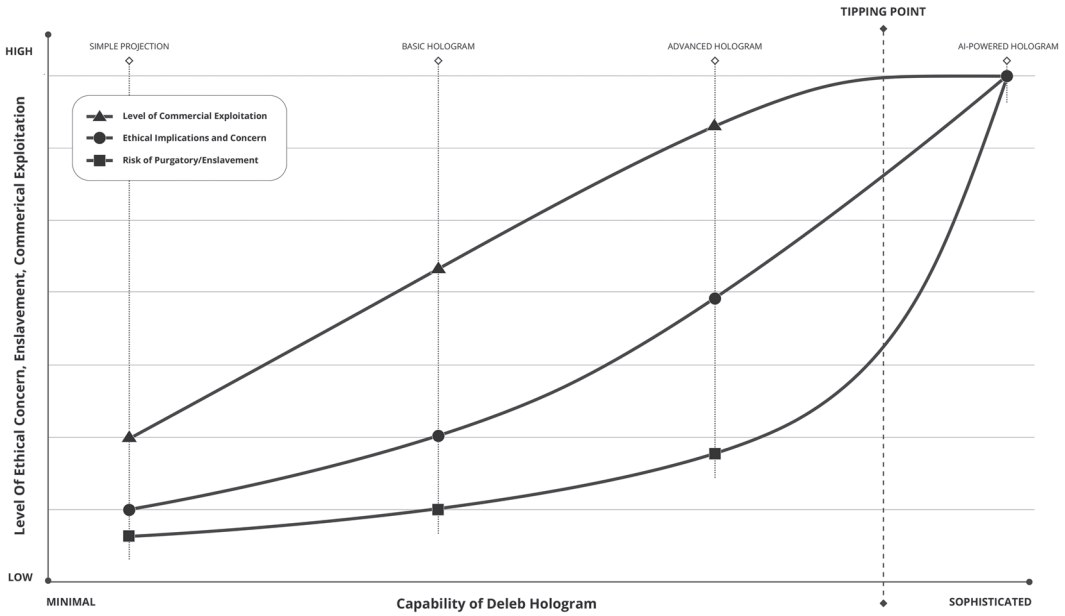

Figure 1: Spectrum of Holographic Technologies and their Implications. Courtesy of authors.

CONCLUSION

The core of this exploration lies in acknowledging the dual-edged nature of technological progress within the arts. The capability to resurrect and perpetuate the legacies of deceased artists through digital means presents unprecedented opportunities for cultural enrichment and engagement. However, they also necessitate a vigilant approach to ethical stewardship. The essence of respecting the artist's legacy intersects with the audience's perception, challenging us to navigate the delicate equilibrium between innovation and ethical integrity. Our collective journey forward requires a conscientious commitment to honouring the artist's memory. We must ensure that their afterlife, as depicted digitally, serves as a tribute rather than a testament to our ethical oversights.

Moreover, the commercial exploitation of deceased artists' images and performances, especially in the lucrative 'Delebs' market – which generates billions annually in licensing and royalty earnings, as D'Rozario (2016) notes – demands a critical examination of our intentions and practices. The relentless pursuit of profit from an artist's legacy poses intricate ethical dilemmas, underscoring the need to address the unbridled greed of commercial machinery that disrespects boundaries, even after death (D'Rozario and Bryant 2013). To navigate these ethical complexities, initiating cross-disciplinary conversations is crucial, engaging ethicists, legal experts, technologists and the general public. Such dialogues are vital for protecting artists' rights and legacies after death, ensuring that the digital afterlives we craft reflect their preferences, honour their contributions, preserve their legacies and uphold their dignity.

Hence, the primary question extends beyond the technical possibility of crafting digital afterlives to the ethical framework guiding these endeavours. It probes whether our actions in perpetuating the legacies of the deceased

honour their contributions and adhere to their wishes or if they veer into exploitative territory that transcends mortality. This reflection urges us to evaluate our role as guardians of cultural heritage in the digital era, compelling us to find an equilibrium between safeguarding historical legacies and forging the future.

REFERENCES

Anson, Stephen (2014), 'Hologram images and the entertainment industry: New legal territory?', *Washington Journal of Law, Technology & Arts* 10:2, pp. 109–24.

Bassett, Debra J. (2015), 'Who wants to live forever? Living, dying and grieving in our digital society', *Social Sciences*, 4:4, pp. 1127–39.

Bassett, Debra J. (2021), 'Ctrl+Alt+Delete: The changing landscape of the uncanny valley and the fear of second loss', *Current Psychology*, 40:2, pp. 813–21.

Brown, Lane (2022), 'Holograms, and bands who can't stand each other', ABBA, Vulture, 11 October, https://www.vulture.com/2022/10/abba-voyage-london-holograms.html. Accessed 18 January 2024.

Chang, Yu Yu, Potts, Jason and Shilh, Hui-Yui (2021), 'The market for meaning: A new entrepreneurial approach to creative industries dynamics', *Journal of Cultural Economics*, 45, pp. 491–511.

Charron, Jean-Philippe (2017), 'Music audiences 3.0: Concert-goers' psychological motivation at the dawn of virtual reality', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, pp. 800–10.

Cook, John (2005), 'Corbis finds lively market for dead stars', Seattle PI, 5 April, https://www.seattlepi.com/business/article/corbis-finds-lively-market-for-dead-stars-1170232.php. Accessed 28 March 2024.

Cull, F. (2015), 'Dead music in live music culture', in A. Cresswell-Jones and R. J. Bennett (eds), *The Digital Evolution of Live Music*, Amsterdam: Chandos Publishing, pp. 109–37.

Dey, Somdip (2024), 'Four ways AI will impact music, from Elvis holograms to interactive soundscapes', *The Conversation*, 22 January, https://ray.yorksj.ac.uk/id/eprint/9258/1/four-ways-ai-will-impact-music-from-elvis-holograms-to-interactive-soundscapes-221260. Accessed 15 March 2024.

D'Rozario, Denver (2016), 'The market for "Delebs" (dead celebrities): A revenue analysis', *Journal of Customer Behaviour*, 15:4, pp. 395–414.

D'Rozario, Denver and Bryant, F. (2013), 'The use of dead celebrity images in advertising and marketing – review, ethical recommendations and cautions for practitioners', *International Journal of Marketing Studies*, 5:2, pp. 1–10.

Floridi, Luciano (2013), *The Ethics of Information,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Forbes, Kenny (2021), 'Researching live music, gigs, tours, concerts and festivals', in C. Anderson and S. Pisfill (eds), *Researching Live Music: Gigs, Tours, Concerts and Festivals*, New York: Routledge, pp. 156–69.

Forde, Eamonn (2019), 'Touring goes beyond the grave: Behind the business, technology and ethics of the hologram concert revolution', *Synchtank*, 23 July, https://www.synchtank.com/blog/touring-goes-beyond-the-grave-behind-the-business-technology-and-ethics-of-the-hologram-concert-revolution. Accessed 26 January 2024.

Halperin, Ian (2014), 'How the king of pop made $1.5billion... over his dead body', Daily Mail, 8 June, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2651584/How-king-pop-1-5billion-dead-body-Five-years-Michael-Jacksons-posthumous-fortune-broken-records-Now-brilliant-report-asks-IS-making-mint-death.html. Accessed 15 March 2024.

Harbinja, Edina (2020), 'The "new(ish)" property, Informational bodies and postmortality', in S.-B. Maggie and V. Mason-Robbie (eds), *Digital Afterlife: Death Matters in a Digital Age*, New York: Routledge, pp. 89–105.

Harper, Tauel (2015), 'Aura, iteration, and action: Digital technology and the jouissance of live music', in A. Cresswell-Jones and R. J. Bennett (eds), *The Digital Evolution of Live Music*, Amsterdam: Chandos, pp. 17–27.

Holt, Fabian (2010), 'The economy of live music in the digital age', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13:2, pp. 243–61.

Hughes, Alan (2020), 'Death is no longer a deal breaker: The hologram performer in live music', in T. Rigg, L. Gillon and E. Mazierska (eds), *The Future of Live Music*, New York: Bloomsbury, pp. 114–28.

Ifeanyi, K. C. (2019), 'The hologram concert revolution is here whether you like it or not', *Fast Company*, 19 June, https://www.fastcompany.com/90365452/hologram-concert-revolution-like-it-or-not-meet-company-touring-whitney-houston-buddy-holly. Accessed 12 February 2024.

Klein, Bethany, Meier, Lelsie M. and Powers, Devon (2017), 'Selling out: Musicians, autonomy, and compromise in the digital age', *Popular Music and Society*, 40:2, pp. 222–38.

Mael, Guesdon and Le Guern, Philippe (2014), 'Retromania: Crisis of the progressive ideas and pop music spectrality', in K. Niemeyer (ed.), *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 70–80.

Matthews, Justin and Nairn, Angelique (2023), 'Holographic ABBA: Examining fan responses to ABBA's virtual "live" concert', *Popular Music and Society* 46:3, pp. 282–303.

McLeod, Ken (2016), 'Living in the immaterial world: Holograms and spirituality in recent popular music', *Popular Music and Society*, 39:5, pp. 501–15.

Moser, Jana M. (2012), 'Tupac lives! What hologram authors should know about intellectual property law', *Business Law Today*, 9, pp. 1–4.

Myers, Owen (2019), '"It's ghost slavery": the troubling world of pop holograms', *The Guardian*, 1 June, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/jun/01/pop-holograms-miley-cyrus-black-mirror-identity-crisis. Accessed 16 March 2024.

Naveed, Kashif, Watanabe, Chihiro and Neittaanmaki, Pekka (2017), 'Co-evolution between streaming and live music leads a way to sustainable growth of music industry – lessons from the US experiences', *Technology in Society*, 50, pp. 1–19.

Öhman, Carl and Floridi, Luciano (2017), 'The political economy of death in the age of information: A critical approach to the digital afterlife industry', *Minds and Machines* 27:4, pp. 639–62.

Orita, Akiko (2022), '"Resurrecting" dead celebrities: Editing and using remnant data of the deceased through AI', *2022 IEEE International Symposium on Technology and Society (ISTAS)*, 1, pp. 1–4.

Papies, Dominik and van Heerde, Harald J. (2017), 'The dynamic interplay between recorded music and live concerts: The role of piracy, unbundling, and artist characteristics', *Journal of Marketing*, 81:4, pp. 67–87.

Theatrecrafts.com (n.d.), 'Pepper's Ghost and holograms', Theatrecrafts.com, 25 January, https://www.theatrecrafts.com/pages/home/glossary-of-technical-theatre-terms/more-about-peppers-ghost. Accessed 22 November 2023.

Rowell, David (2019), 'The spectacular, strange rise of music holograms', *The Washington Post*, 30 October, https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2019/10/30/dead-musicians-are-taking-stage-again-hologram-form-is-this-kind-encore-we-really-want. Accessed 12 March 2024.

Snapes, Laura (2019), 'Amy Winehouse hologram tour postponed due to "unique sensitivities"', *The Guardian, 22 February*, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/feb/22/amy-winehouse-hologram-tour-postponed-unique-sensitivities. Accessed 10 March 2024.

Sone, Yuji (2022), 'Dead stars and "live" singers: Posthumous "holographic" performances in the US and Japan', in R. Savery (ed.), *Sound and Robotics: Speech, Non-Verbal Audio and Robotic Musicianship,* London: Taylor & Francis, pp. 317–36.

Stojnić, Aneta (2016), 'Live or living dead: (Un)setting the stage for the hologram performer', in Ž. Cvejić, A. Filipović and A. Petrov (eds), *The Crisis in the Humanities: Transdisciplinary Solutions*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 174–82.

Truby, Jon and Brown, Rafael (2021), 'Human digital thought clones: The Holy Grail of artificial intelligence for big data', *Information & Communications Technology Law*, 30:2, pp. 140–68.

Velasquez, S. J. (2023), 'How AI is bringing film stars back from the dead', BBC, 19 July, https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20230718-how-ai-is-bringing-film-stars-back-from-the-dead. Accessed 3 March 2024.

Virtue, Graeme (2019), 'The Bizarre World of Frank Zappa review – toking poodles and holographic necromancy', *The Guardian*, 10 May, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/may/10/the-bizarre-world-of-frank-zappa-review-edinburgh-playhouse. Accessed 6 March 2024.

Weisethaunet, Hans, and Lindberg, Ulf (2010), 'Authenticity revisited: The rock critic and the changing real', *Popular Music and Society*, 33:4, pp. 465–85.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Nairn, Angelique and Matthews, Justin (2024), 'Digital eternity: The holographic resurrection of music icons', *The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, Special Issue: 'The Afterlife in Popular Culture', 13:1, pp. 11–26, https://doi.org/10.1386/ajpc_00084_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Justin Matthews is a senior lecturer in the Digital Communication Department within the School of Communication Studies at the Auckland University of Technology. His research is primarily focused on the area of user interfaces and experiences, future studies, gaming studies and narrative design and popular culture. He is currently completing his Ph.D., exploring speculative user interface designs from science fiction moving image and their relationship to contemporary technology experiences.

Contact: 55 Wellesley Street East, Auckland 1010, New Zealand.
E-mail: justin.matthews@aut.ac.nz

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3508-6564

Dr Angelique Nairn is an associate professor in the School of Communication Studies. She has been involved in a myriad of research projects that have hinged on organizational communication, identity construction, rhetoric and/or the creative industries. She is also interested in popular culture and particularly the representation of women, creative people and morality as they appear on-screen. Her recent work has explored issues of racism, sexism and technological determinism. She teaches courses in the public relations department, specializing in digital public relations and persuasion.

Contact: Auckland University of Technology, 55 Wellesley Street East, Auckland 1010, New Zealand.
E-mail: angelique.nairn@aut.ac.nz

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5609-2627

The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture
Volume 13 Number 1
 https://doi.org/10.1386/ajpc_00085_1
Received 4 October 2023; Accepted 21 December 2023; Published Online xx xxxx

ILARIA W. BIANO
University of Turin

The digital afterlife between hypersecularization and postsecularity in contemporary speculative TV seriality: *Devs*, *Upload* and *Black Mirror*'s 'San Junipero'

ABSTRACT

This article explores representations of the digital afterlife in contemporary speculative TV seriality within the broader context of their attitudes towards the fate of religions and religiosity in contemporary society. Specifically, it examines the miniseries Devs, the Black Mirror episode 'San Junipero' and the dramedy series Upload. Set in a near future, these series present distinctive and contrasting views on the future of religion in the public sphere, as well as in private life, and on the development of secularization processes, along with the entanglements between secular, religious and moral concerns. The article highlights how texts such as those considered exemplify the current transitional phase western societies are experiencing, wherein conventional narratives of secularization and more complex deconstructions of the secular–religious divide coexist. Through the various ways in which a futuristic yet imaginable setting like the digital afterlife is envisioned

KEYWORDS

digital afterlife
TV seriality
posthumanism
transhumanism
secularization
speculative fiction

and represented, these texts articulate postsecular and hypersecularized accounts of near-future societies. The digital afterlife thus emerges as a tool for exploring different world-views, forms of morality and conceptions of everyday life and the meaning of human existence.

1 INTRODUCTION

In his exploration of various concepts of the afterlife across different cultures, author Pico Iyer (2023) reflects on one common thread that runs through these diverse conceptions: death is the one aspect of existence that will forever elude our understanding. This reflects upon our lives too. We can never fully comprehend the entirety of our existence because we are unable to discern the nature of our final act and subsequently incorporate it into our understanding. Iyer then concludes, '[t]he fact that nothing lasts is the reason why everything matters' (2023: 196). But what if our life could extend beyond our death in an unbroken continuum? How would this affect our valuation of life, death and our quest for meaning?

This is the kind of situation in which the characters of the two TV series under consideration find themselves. These series explore a specific type of afterlife, the digital afterlife. In this article, we will focus on *Devs* (FX 2020) and *Upload* (Amazon Prime Video 2020–present), as well as on *Black Mirror*'s episode 'San Junipero' (Netflix 2016), in the context of their attitudes towards the fate of religions and religiosity in contemporary society. These series, in fact, elaborate distinctive and contrasting views on the future of religion, spirituality and seeking/meaning making experiences in the public sphere, as well as in private life. They also delve into the development of secularization processes and the entanglements between secular, religious and moral concerns.

The analysis of these shows will be conducted within the context of two main frameworks. First, the main narratives related to secularization and religious change in contemporary culture. Second, the role of religious representation in contemporary TV seriality. Garrett, in his exploration of narratives of the afterlife in Western culture, noted how 'death is an irrevocable boundary' whether we conceive of what happens after on religious grounds or not: dying always signifies 'passing on either to nothingness or another form of existence' (2015: 30). But, as Wheatley adds, 'How we imagine this "other side" depends, of course, on a whole variety of things' (2022). By analysing the selected series within the context of the two mentioned frameworks, this article seeks to illustrate how these texts exemplify the current social and cultural context in which United States and western societies find themselves. They are undergoing a transitional phase in which both conventional narratives of secularization and more complex deconstructions of the secular-religious divide coexist. Culture, pop-culture and TV seriality thus represent privileged sites in which to explore this situation. Through the various ways in which a futuristic yet nowadays imaginable setting, such as the digital afterlife, is envisioned and represented, the considered texts respectively articulate a postsecular and a hypersecularized account of near-future societies.

Thus, the posthuman imaginary appears to function as a tool for exploring different prospects over not only the future of religion and spirituality but also the possible development and transformation of moral and ethical concerns.

2 THE MASTER NARRATIVE OF SECULARIZATION AND ITS ALTERNATIVES

It has been now two decades since anthropologist Talal Asad wrote 'If anything is agreed upon, it is that a straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular is no longer acceptable' (2003: 1). The secularization theory has been a cornerstone in understanding the evolving relationship between religion and modernity. It posits that as societies advance economically, technologically and socially, they become less reliant on religious institutions and beliefs. However, over the course of the years, scholars have begun to challenge this dominant narrative, offering alternative perspectives that provide a more nuanced and complex view of the relationship between religion and modernity (Casanova 1994).

If the theory of secularization, from its 'founding fathers' of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the theorists of the 1960s, was structurally based on the assumption of an inextricable and necessary connection between modernization and decline of religions, the progressive questioning of what had come to be configured as a paradigm in the social sciences has insisted since the 1970s and increasingly in the 1990s on a reworking of this relationship. Contemporary religious pluralism, far from being a spurious element of modernity, emerges as part of the more general fragmentation of institutions on a global level, based on the gradual disappearance of the typically modern coincidence between sovereignty, state and law. Rearticulating the modernization–secularization nexus thus constitutes the starting point for the analysis of the contemporary world and the role of religious phenomena within it.

However, rethinking the relationship between religion–modernity–secularization does not necessarily mean following a single path, and indeed, different approaches have emerged over the decades. Many sociologists and scholars, based on data and surveys, continue to argue that secularization, characterized by the weakening influence of religious institutions on societies and individuals, as well as the decline in individual belief and belonging, remains a constant factor in all modernizing societies (Bruce 2020; Kasselstrand et al. 2023). Consequently, the outlook for future, highly modernized and technologically developed societies, continues to resemble that of a form of hyper-secularization. By contrast, ideas such as de-secularization and postsecularity emerged at the turn of the millennium, seeking to diagnose similar ferments, but embodying opposite worldviews. De-secularization, in fact, suggests that the religious dimension would have initially disappeared with the advance of modernity and then re-established itself in pre-modern ways (Berger 1999). Contrastingly, postsecularity not only does not designate a decline in the processes of secularization but does not even indicate an overcoming or chronological posteriority in relation to a supposed secular age. Instead, it points to more complex processes of change in the religious and secular spheres that does not imply any incompatibility between religion and modernity.

3 POSTHUMANIST AND TRANSHUMANIST NARRATIVES

If Max Weber, who is widely regarded as the primary proponent of the original secularization thesis, famously depicted the inextricable link between technological development and, at the very least, a shift in traditional values and frameworks through the iconic image of the 'iron cage', contemporary perspectives on the evolving relationship between humanity and burgeoning,

almost autonomous domains such as information technology and artificial intelligence, propose diverse developments in the future role of religions and spirituality.

In the perspectives of authors such as Rosi Braidotti (2008) and Elaine Graham (2016), the postsecular, in particular, has been closely intertwined with a broader epistemological turn that is labelled as posthumanism. This connection is especially significant, as the narratives discussed in the subsequent pages delve into issues concerning technological advancements, human–machine relationships and the intricate and multifaceted realm referred to as 'The Posthuman', which encompasses a range of diverse and sometimes opposing tendencies.

Transhumanism and Posthumanism, in this sense, share a common interest in exploring the evolving relationship between humans and the environment they inhabit, particularly with regard to technology. However, these two philosophies are founded on contrasting premises when it comes to defining and understanding the role of the Human within these relationships. Transhumanism places its focus on human enhancement and the expansion of biological limits, thus maintaining an anthropocentric, speciesist and exceptionalist perspective. In contrast, Posthumanism criticizes transhumanism's inclination towards disembodiment and dematerialization, It 'rests on the assumption of the historical decline of Humanism but goes further in exploring alternatives' (Braidotti 2013: 37); it rejects Western Humanism's conception of the dualist rational, self-governing subject and ultimately it works 'towards elaborating alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject' (Braidotti 2013: 37). Emphasizing 'the material and biological entanglement between human and nonhuman life at a planetary level' (Herbrechter 2022) and how Human systems have co-evolved with other systems within which it is embedded (Hobden 2014), posthumanism considers humans as 'immanent – embodied and embedded relational – entities […] in constant connection with others, both human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic' (Braidotti 2020: xii) in a move towards the overcoming not only of humanism, but more broadly anthropocentrism, human exceptionalism and essentialism, and speciesism.

In this sense, the postsecular lens and the posthumanist approach share a common lineage in critiquing the assumptions that have underpinned Western modernity, particularly the elevation of the human subject conventionally seen 'as autonomous and self-determining, distinguished from animals, nature and machines but also uniquely rational and unconstrained by the bounds of superstition, tradition, and religion' (Graham 2016: 51).

4 RELIGION, TELEVISION AND NEAR-FUTURE NARRATIVES

The realm of television series offers a promising area for study, especially concerning religious themes. This is primarily because of the growing significance in terms of quantity, quality, investments and the cultural impact of this form of artistic and cultural expression over the past decade. Terms like Quality, Complex and Prestige TV have been utilized over many years to identify distinct Golden Ages in the history of US television, particularly focusing on serial storytelling (Dunleavy 2017; Mittell 2015; Thompson 1997). Since at least the late 1980s, as underscored by Thompson, the concept of Quality TV, characterized by a desire for realism, artistic recognition, controversial subject matter and critical acclaim, has evolved into a genre of its own

(Thompson 1997: 16). Nevertheless, during the 2010s, a significant transformation took place. Referred to as TVIV or the Third Golden Age, this era emerged due to increased financial resources, the participation of well-known performers, filmmakers and writers who were predominantly associated with the film industry before, intricacies in storytelling, distinctive and fresh artistic approaches, novel and inventive methods of creating and delivering content, and the conclusive rise of streaming services.

Religious representations have also undergone transformations during these different phases. Scholars have emphasized the close interconnection between media and religion, influencing one another (Campbell 2013; Stout 2012). Moreover, 'media treatments of religion can be seen as a kind of indicator of the broader role of religion on the contemporary scene' (Hoover 1998: 12). TV seriality, as a pervasive element of popular culture, functions as a platform, according to Lynn Schofield Clark (2007), for people to contemplate and discuss their own beliefs and practices. Examining this phenomenon helps us gain insight into how individuals derive meaning from the content they consume and potentially how it relates to spirituality and religion.

However, this was not always the case. Television has long been regarded as indifferent to, or even opposed to, religion. Numerous studies have highlighted that religion within television, particularly within serial storytelling, was 'a rather invisible institution' and how 'the exploration of religion and spirituality in the lives of fictional characters [was] nearly invisible' (Skill et al. 1994: 265). Even when religious portrayals were present, particularly during the 1990s when there was a gradual increase, they were often depicted in a flat, non-controversial and generalized manner (Clarke 2005; Roof 1997). Nonetheless, the portrayal of religion on television began to shift in the early twenty-first century, influenced not only by the profound impact of the events surrounding and following 9/11 but also as part of more intricate and overarching trends concerning heightened attention towards religious matters. Over time, religious depictions 'morphed from safe (and) inoffensive […] to diverse, challenging, and even edgy' (Howell 2020: 9). In what remains one of the few extensive works on the subject, *Small Screen Big Picture: Television and Lived Religion*, Diane Winston and the authors in her edited collection analyse shows that aired in the first decade of the twenty-first century through the lens of lived religion. This perspective captures 'the practice and personal experience of religion in everyday life […] examining how television serves as a platform for shaping both individual and communal religious identities' (2009: 3). The TV shows scrutinized within the book delve into traditional, but generic expressions of religion and spirituality, exploring how characters navigate ethical challenges and showcase their commitment to spirituality in their daily lives.

However, over the last decade, with the emergence of Peak Prestige TV, another profound transformation in religious representations has unfolded, primarily along three axes. Firstly, there are productions that still engage with lived and everyday religion, but in a more explicit and less generic manner. These productions place emphasis on themes of identity and authenticity. They predominantly fall within the comedy or dramedy genre. A second cluster of series revolves around nonreligious subjects and characters (Biano 2023). The third trend can be labelled as postsecular TV, referring to shows that navigate the intricate intersections and blurred boundaries between the religious and secular realms. These shows often intertwine with scientific

elements, reflecting contemporary spirituality and experiences of finding meaning. Examples include *The Leftovers*, *The OA* and *Sense8*.

A few authors, including Wheatley and particularly Hodkinson, have focused on representations of the afterlife in TV series aired over the past decade, integrating a postsecular perspective. Hodkinson (2020), in his analysis of TV narratives centred on themes of the undead and resurgence from death, such as *Les Revenants* and *Glitch*, has brought attention to the emergence of a unique postsecular televisual aesthetics and narrative. Specifically, he highlighted how these narratives redefine the depiction of the afterlife within television's postsecular context by both referencing and reimagining established visual and auditory norms linked to earlier forms of representing death, resurrection and mourning. These portrayals, conveyed through imagery, soundscapes or ritualistic practices, draw upon 'the return of seemingly religious trope to an ostensibly secular world', generating a fascinating interplay where theological, scientific and aesthetic discourses intersect and intermingle (Hodkinson 2020: 395). By reinventing 'how afterlives can be represented within the medium of television' these shows use the tool of the afterlife as an instrument for 'an increasingly self-reflexive exploration' (Hodkinson 2020: 407). Similarly, Wheatley has focused on the 'incorporation of religious ideas of post-death experience into the secular visions of the afterlives' in order to explore how TV series like *The Good Place* and *Forever* 'draw on multiple sources to construct their visions of the afterlife in order to make sense of death and dying for characters in these programmes, and for the television audience' (2022).

The cases examined in the next section are related to this context, simultaneously exploring a wider array of moral and value issues through the imagination and depiction of near-future society and technology. As emphasized by Erickson, speculative televisual fiction offers 'alternatives to traditional religious understandings and concerns' while delving into questions of identity and the definition of humanity and inquiring about 'the role of religious faith, narrative, and ritual' in the near future (2022: 15). While highly advanced technological societies have conventionally been depicted in science-fiction narratives as leaning towards secularization, more recent examples in the field of speculative fiction have started to explore the theme of religion and spirituality in more intricate ways. In this regard, perspectives on the future of religion vary along a spectrum that ranges from hypersecularized societies to more nuanced and multifaceted depictions. Addressing matters such as morality, death, mourning and the afterlife, *Devs* and *Upload* position themselves along this continuum in complex and thought-provoking ways.

5 THE POSTSECULAR DIGITAL AFTERLIFE OF *DEVS*

Themes related to ultimate beliefs and the meaning of life lie at the heart of Alex Garland's 2020 miniseries, *Devs*, produced by FX for Hulu. Known for directing movies such as *Ex-Machina* and *Annihilation*, and for his screenwriting contributions to the adaptation of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and to Danny Boyle's *Sunshine* and *28 Days Later*, Garland has developed in his work a coherent and intricate discourse. Garland's oeuvre consistently explores themes of human enhancement, technological progress, as well as humanity's relationship with otherness in nature and the universe, thereby offering a nuanced perspective on both transhumanist and posthumanist viewpoints on these subjects.

The FX mini-series, initially presents itself as a thriller but gradually evolves into a narrative exploring determinism and free will, entwined with the realms of quantum physics and the multiverse hypothesis – or the 'many-worlds' hypothesis as it is here framed. Sergei, an employee of a prominent tech company in Silicon Valley called Amaya, specializing in artificial intelligence, receives a promotion that grants him access to a highly secretive sector within the company known as DEVS, apparently as in 'development'. A select group of computer scientists and physicists works within a laboratory enveloped by a magnetic field. Their mission revolves around the creation of a quantum supercomputer for an undisclosed project. Sergei is caught stealing code and is subsequently killed by the head of the project, Forest, in an orchestrated suicide. The narrative then unfolds along two trajectories. One follows Sergei's girlfriend and co-worker Lily as she embarks on a quest for the truth, while the other delves deep into the final stages of the DEVS project's development. These parallel narratives gradually converge towards a gripping climax.

The primary objective of the DEVS project is to create a system capable of processing vast amounts of data in order to recreate and screen the past and predict future events. The main pursuit is to ascertain whether the universe adheres to a deterministic framework, a belief held by the project's creators, Forest and Katie. Employing the many-worlds hypothesis – a point of contention between the two – the team refines these projections, validating the hypothesis's accuracy. Forest, however, harbours a deeply personal motivation. He carries the weight of guilt for the tragic loss of his daughter in a car accident, an incident for which he feels responsible. His driving force is twofold: to demonstrate that her death could not have been prevented through deterministic means and to create an afterlife within the system where she is alive once more. This is why he opposes the many worlds concept, as he yearns for the truth and the resurrection of what he regards as the sole authentic reality. However, it becomes evident that, within the multiverse, all realities are equally valid and governed by determinism.

The digital afterlife depicted in *Devs* is indeed a distinctive one, deeply entwined with the series' overarching narrative, aesthetics and message. The approach taken by *Devs* can be aptly described as postsecular, both in its storytelling and aesthetics. It embodies a tendency to resist rigid constructions and interpretations of reality that are exclusively secular or dogmatically religious (McClure 2007). It explores existential questions that affirm, challenge and re-evaluate both secular and religious categories and practices. Despite its pervasive infusion of technology, digitization and media, the landscape presented in *Devs* is characterized by fluid boundaries between the religious and spiritual realm and the secular and scientific domain. It presents technological advancement progresses in tandem with human and spiritual evolution. This is evident in both the narrative approach – addressing thematic concerns related to omniscience, determinism and free will – and the stylistic and aesthetic elements of the series.

Forest is portrayed as a grieving father who employs quantum computing to transmit consciousness to a digital afterlife, allowing individuals to reunite with their loved ones as if they had never passed away. His goal revolves around defeating death, not by avoiding it, but by achieving a resurrection in a world that, despite being a simulation, represents a genuine projection of the past within an intensely emotional dimension. However, the backdrop of the multiverse hypothesis, which serves as the foundation for the entire narrative, introduces a profound ethical and moral dimension. The digital

afterlife portrayed in the series is presented as the best of all possible worlds – a paradise, according to Forest. Yet, Forest is acutely aware that countless other parallel worlds exist simultaneously, and some of these are nightmarish, serving as punishments for past transgressions.

From the very outset, Garland establishes a reference landscape in which 'the atmosphere feeds the narrative and vice versa' (Travers 2020). The first episode for instance, features a soundtrack of Gregorian chant. Along the path leading to the DEVS laboratory, trees are adorned with circular neon illuminations reminiscent of halos. Some characters are framed in a way that achieves this effect, and the DEVS laboratory itself has been described in the reviews as 'a golden cathedral' (Travers 2020), 'a sort of brutalist temple', 'an ancient Mayan pyramid' (Berman 2020), but also 'a large-scale reproduction of a real quantum computer' (Zuckerman 2020). As the DEVS system begins to function, the events chosen for observation by the team, and those to which viewers bear witness, include the crucifixion of Christ, the Crusades and Joan of Arc's execution. When they refine the system with the many-worlds hypothesis, they use it to listen to Jesus speaking in Aramaic.

In multiple interviews, Garland emphasized his deliberate incorporation of numerous religious references, primarily Christian, as his intention was to ground the show 'on three lines of inquiry: science, philosophy, theology' (Renfro 2020). *Devs* seamlessly blends themes of religion with technology because, in Garland's view, they represent 'versions of the same thing: They're devotional, they're faith-based […] they make us feel small, they make us feel comforted' (Turchiano 2020). The stylistic choices in the series are intricately woven into the central theme of the relationship between determinism and free will, and the utilization of technology to address a dilemma that is simultaneously scientific, religious and ethically moral: How can free will coexist with an all-knowing force that already knows what will happen, whether it is God or DEVS? None. But in *Devs*, it is not exactly that straightforward. Contrastingly, as becomes increasingly evident, the very word DEVS is a clever play on words, echoing the Latin word for God.

Ultimately, in the finale of *Devs*, determinism and free will coexist, establishing blurred boundaries. This coexistence is made possible by the very condition that allows DEVS to function: the many-worlds hypothesis. The concept of DEVS truly embodies the Deus Ex Machina, but not in a secular-allegorical transhumanist sense of technological salvation, nor in the sense of sanctifying the machine itself. Instead, it represents the reconnection of science and spirituality in humanity's ultimate quest for meaning. In *Devs*, we do not witness declarations of faith or religiosity, but all characters are aware of the religious dimension of the theme (Sergei is asked during an interview if he is religious). Furthermore, the characters' attitude towards science (rather than the machine itself) and life is animated by the kind of spirituality discussed by posthumanists: a transcendence that is not 'premised on absence from this world in order to achieve consummation with the next' but 'as reaching beyond the now and the given towards future, unrealized possibilities (Graham 2016: 68).

6 'SAN JUNIPERO' AND *UPLOAD*: TWO DIFFERENT, TRANSHUMANIST TAKES ON HYPERSECULARIZATION

In both *Upload* and 'San Junipero', death has become a business and the digital afterlife is a service provided by private companies to everybody who wishes

to access it. They revolve more straightforwardly around the concept of transferring human consciousness into a digital afterlife. This concept aligns with the goals of transhumanism, which seeks to attain eternal life by transferring human consciousness into a digital system. The digital afterlife portrayed in *Upload* and 'San Junipero' significantly differs in scope and representation from that depicted in *Devs*. These differences involve the main subject of this article, specifically, the perspective on societal and cultural development concerning religion, morality and spirituality in the near future. However, while both depict a hypersecularized society, the two differ in how extensively they address the subject.

In San Junipero, another dramatic take on the subject within the dystopian anthology series *Black Mirror*, the themes of death and the afterlife are not problematized whatsoever in a non-religious or spiritual sense. Set in a simulated reality where older people can live forever, it challenges traditional notions of the afterlife and spirituality: religious themes are notably absent, reflecting a hyper-secularized society. The husband of one of the protagonists, for example, abstains from going to San Junipero, as the digital afterlife is called, not due to religious or ethical reasons, but because of his personal connection to their daughter, deceased in a pre-San Junipero era and thus not 'uploaded'. The show portrays not choosing to go to San Junipero as an irrational choice, with death depicted as a simple disappearance. One of the protagonists herself suffers because those who have gone are lost forever, and she does not consider that they might still exist somewhere. Instead, the focus is on human desires, relationships and the pursuit of happiness within a digital realm.

Upload, created by Greg Daniel known for his work on the US adaptation of comedy series *The Office* (NBC 2005–13) and for the sitcom *Parks and Recreation* (NBC 2009–15), leans towards the dramedy genre. It directly explores life in a society where the digital afterlife is a common reality, as well as life within that digital afterlife itself. However, unlike 'San Junipero', where the technology initially served therapeutic purposes, *Upload* presents this practice as a mere commercial service, offering varying levels of quality based on one's economic means. In *Upload*, the digital afterlife entails duplicating and uploading the deceased individual's consciousness into virtual realities called Heavens, complete with customer care services referred to as 'Angels'. Following the upload, life continues much as it did before, with individuals maintaining connections to the external world through video calls and virtual reality headsets.

Nathan, the protagonist, enters a particularly luxurious afterlife called Lakeview, for which Nathan's girlfriend has paid. In the first episode, Nathan met with his 'Angel', Nora. In their exchange, the religious themes serve as a sort of aesthetical framework rendered through visual and auditorial effects. But the content of this first encounter with the afterlife is definitely more mundane. When Nora describes Lakeview as 'the only digital afterlife modelled on the grand Victorian hotels of the United States and Canada' with 'uplifting views, healthy pursuits, timeless Americana' Nathan asks 'Are there slaves?'. To this, Nora clarifies, 'Lakeview is open to all races, religions, genders, absolutely anybody' ('Welcome to Upload' 2020). As the series progresses, we learn that Nathan had developed a free-for-all version of Lakeview and was murdered before he could release his product. The show, in fact, addresses the socio-economic inequalities, with certain individuals relegated to a lower-quality afterlife due to their inability to afford better options. The 2Gigs represent a

marginalized group frozen in time because their relatives could not purchase more data for their digital avatars.

Unlike *Black Mirror*, *Upload* directly addresses ethical questions surrounding the digital afterlife, consciousness and the relevance of 'old religions'. The show introduces a character, Nora's father, who regards uploaded consciousness as a scam. He contends that real consciousness after death leads to conventional afterlife destinations such as heaven or other spiritual realms. However, within the society depicted in *Upload*, this perspective is portrayed as a minority viewpoint, considered outdated and irrational. The prevailing consensus underscores the significance of the 'Self', which can be flawlessly replicated and remains unaltered even after death. Life in the digital afterlife, despite its occasional glitches and updates, mirrors life on Earth in its imperfections. This imperfection is what imbues it with value; it lacks the perfection of a paradise, making it more desirable than such a paradise.

Religion in *Upload* is portrayed as a relic of the past, regarded with a sort of reverence mixed with compassion. In this regard, the show satirically critiques the commodification of religious elements within a hyperconsumeristic society. Religious practice inside the digital afterlife is rare and its concept is remarkably broad: presenting Lakeview to Nathan, Nora makes a passing reference to the presence of a place of worship that can be turned into a church, a temple, a mosque or even a bowling alley. This serves to emphasize the all-encompassing and diverse approach to faith that prevails in this futuristic world. In a similar way, in episode three of the first season, Nathan attends his own funeral in the real world via a virtual reality headset. The juxtaposition of mourning loved ones and the surreal atmosphere of the digital funeral underscores the disconnect between the living and the uploaded, as well as the commodification of grief in a hypersecular society.

The creator Greg Daniels has declared that what was more useful to him in using science-fiction setting and tropes was the fact that this kind of speculative narrative allows audiences to get 'a little preview of what life might be like and what certain issues might happen if life develops in this direction' thus imagining that if such a thing like the digital afterlife would actually been achieved probably 'it wouldn't be all that fair and it would be capitalistic' given the fact that mankind created it (Turchiano 2020). The tension between technological advancement and human connection are addressed too. While the digital afterlife offers a semblance of immortality, it also isolates individuals from the physical world and the intimacy of genuine human relationships. Nathan's budding romance with Nora becomes a central storyline that explores the limitations of virtual intimacy and the longing for authentic connection in a simulated environment.

In summary, *Upload* and 'San Junipero' offer distinct explorations of the digital afterlife, with *Upload* delving into the ethical and socio-economic implications while 'San Junipero' presents a more straightforward, secularized view of digital existence. In doing so, however, both shows depict a highly secularized society with storytellings that, even if belonging to different genres, embrace a secularized take on the subject.

7 CONCLUSIONS

In contemporary speculative television narratives, the digital afterlife emerges as a tool for exploring various world-views, forms of morality and perspectives

on everyday life and the meaning of human existence in near-future settings. What can be labelled as a posthuman imaginary acts as a vehicle through which exploring the directions society may take when talking about the future of religion and spirituality, morality and ethical dilemmas.

Shows like *Devs* and *Upload* explore, behind the individual and personal experiences and inclinations of their characters, issues related to collective morality in the transitional phase occurring within US and western societies at the outset of the twenty-first century. This transitional period is marked by the coexistence of conventional narratives of secularization alongside more intricate conceptions of the relationship within and between the secular and religious domains. In this context, the incorporation of a conventional theme, such as the afterlife within the realm of advanced technology, enables these shows to blend traditional reflections on morality and ethical concerns with broader perspectives on the future of humanity.

Through their portrayal of futuristic societies, these shows explore two contrasting perspectives: one that embraces pluralism, recognizing the coexistence of diverse world-views and fostering dialogue between religious and secular perspectives, and another where religious beliefs become obsolete, viewed through a rationalist lens that highlights their decline amidst scientific and technological advancements. In doing so, they delve into this transitional phase with depth and complexity.

These shows thus contribute to a complex and evolving landscape of speculative televisual fiction that challenges our understanding of religion, morality and spirituality in a technologically advanced future. TV seriality is increasingly proving to be a venue where complex issues can be explored through various registers and languages. Leveraging the wide accessibility of the medium, it delivers complex reflections on contemporary matters while also presenting thought-provoking visions of the future of society and humanity to its audience.

REFERENCES

Asad, Talal (2003), *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Berger, Peter L. (1999), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center.

Berman, Judy (2020), 'FX on Hulu's first streaming series, Devs, is a tech thriller with cosmic ambitions', *Time*, 3 March, https://time.com/5793864/devs-fx-hulu-alex-garland-review/. Accessed 16 May 2024.

Biano, Ilaria (2023), '"To me, religion is like Paul Rudd": Popularising secularities and nonreligion in contemporary US seriality', *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*, 12:1, pp. 76–96, https://doi.org/10.1163/21659214-bja10087.

Braidotti, Rosi (2008), 'In spite of the times: The postsecular turn in feminism', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25:6, pp. 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276408095542.

Braidotti, Rosi (2013), *The Posthuman*, Oxford: Polity Press.

Braidotti, Rosi (2020), 'Preface: The posthuman as exuberant excess', in F. Ferrando (ed.), *Philosophical Posthumanism*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. xi–xvi.

Bruce, Steve (2020), *British Gods: Religion in Modern Britain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Campbell, Heidi (2013), *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, New York: Routledge.

Casanova, Jose (1994), *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Clark, Gordon Lynch (2007), 'Why study popular culture?', in G. Lynch (ed.), *Between Sacred and Profane Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 5–20.

Clarke, Scott H. (2005), 'Created in whose image? Religious characters on network television', *Journal of Media and Religion*, 4:3, pp. 137–53.

Devs (2020, USA: DNA TV and FXP).

Dunleavy, Trisha (2017), *Complex Serial Drama and Multiplatform Television*, New York: Routledge.

Erickson, Gregory (2022), *Speculative Television and the Doing and Undoing of Religion*, New York: Routledge.

Garrett, Greg (2015), *Entertaining Judgment: The Afterlife in Popular Imagination*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Graham, Elaine (2016), 'Manifestations of the posthuman in the postsecular imagination', in J. Benjamin and H. Tirosh-Samuelson (eds), *Perfecting Human Futures Transhuman Visions and Technological Imaginations*, Wiesbaden: Springer, pp. 51–72, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-11044-4_3.

Herbrechter, Stefan (2022), 'Posthumanism and deep time', in S. Herbrechter, I. Callus, M. Rossini, M. Grech, M. de Bruin-Molé and C. J. Müller (eds), *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism*, Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 1–26.

Hobden, Stephen (2014), 'Posthumanism', in C. Death (ed.), *Critical Environmental Politics*, London: Routledge, pp. 175–83.

Hodkinson, James (2020), 'Returning again: Resurrection narratives and after-life aesthetics in contemporary television drama', *Poetics Today*, 41:3, pp. 395–416, https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-8519642.

Hoover, Stewart M. (1998), *Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse*, London: SAGE Publications.

Howell, Charlotte E. (2020), *Divine Programming: Negotiating Christianity in American Dramatic Television Production 1996–2016*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Iyer, Pico (2023), *The Half Known Life: Finding Paradise in a Divided World*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Kasselstrand, Isabella, Zuckerman, Phil and Cragun, Ryan T. (2023), *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society*, New York: New York University Press.

McClure, John A. (2007), *Partial faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.

Mittell, Jason (2015), *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, New York: New York University Press.

Renfro, Kim (2020), '"Devs" creator Alex Garland explains 5 references and details you might have missed in his new series', Business Insider, 8 May, https://www.businessinsider.com/devs-creator-alex-garland-explains-details-references-2020-4. Accessed 16 May 2024.

Roof, Wade Clarke (1997), 'Blurred boundaries: Religion and prime time television', in M. Suman (ed.), *Religion and Prime Time Television*, Westport, CT: Praeger, pp. 61–67.

'San Junipero' (2016), O. Harris (dir.), Black Mirror, Season 3 Episode 4 (21 October, USA: Netflix).

Skill, Thomas, Robinson, James D., Lyons, John S. and Larson, David (1994), 'The portrayal of religion and spirituality on fictional network television', *Review of Religious Research*, 35:3, pp. 251–267, https://doi.org/10.2307/3511892.
Stout, Daniel A. (2012), *Media and Religion: Foundations of an Emerging Field*, New York: Routledge.
Thompson, Robert J. (1997), *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
Travers, Ben (2020), 'Devs' review: Alex Garland's FX on Hulu series is a contemplative knockout', IndieWire, 18 May, https://www.indiewire.com/criticism/shows/devs-review-fx-hulu-alex-garland-1202211794/. Accessed 16 May 2024.
Turchiano, Danielle (2020), 'From "Upload" to "Westworld": The cautionary tales of technology-driven series', *Variety*, 4 May, https://variety.com/2020/tv/features/upload-devs-westworld-next-technology-cautionary-tale-digital-afterlife-ai-1234586699/. Accessed 16 May 2024.
Upload (2020–present, USA: Amazon Prime Video).
'Welcome to Upload' (2020), G. Daniels (dir.), *Upload*, Season 1 Episode 1 (1 May, USA: Amazon Prime Video).
Wheatley, Helen (2022), 'The persistence of the soul: The afterlife in postsecular television', *Flow Magazine*, https://www.flowjournal.org/2022/05/persistence-of-the-soul/.p. Accessed 16 May 2024.
Winston, Diane H. (2009), *Small Screen, Big Picture: Television and Lived Religion*, Waco, TX: Baaylor University Press.
Zuckerman, Esther (2020), 'Alex Garland is asking big questions with "Devs"', Thrillist, 19 March https://www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/alex-garland-interview-devs. Accessed 16 May 2024.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Biano, Ilaria W. (2024), 'The digital afterlife between hypersecularization and postsecularity in contemporary speculative TV seriality: *Devs*, *Upload* and *Black Mirror*'s "San Junipero"', *The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, Special Issue: 'The Afterlife in Popular Culture', 13:1, pp. 27–40, https://doi.org/10.1386/ajpc_00085_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Ilaria W. Biano is a religious and cultural studies scholar and historian. She holds a Ph.D. in political studies, as well as an MA in religious studies from the Università degli Studi in Torino (Italy). She has been a fellow at Italian research institutes such as Fondazione Einaudi (Torino) and the Italian Institute for Historical Studies (Napoli). Since 2020, she has been a member of the Group for the Study of the Fantastic at the 'History of Religions' Museum 'Raffaele Pettazzoni' (Velletri) and serves as the editor of the Fantastic Religions Series (Quasar, Roma). Her research interests include non/religious representations in pop-cultural texts, mainly TV seriality; posthumanities and philosophical posthumanism in cultural and pop-cultural fields; trauma and memory in literature and culture. Her research has been published in journals such as the *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*; *Feminist Media Studies*; *South Central Review* and *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image*, as well as in several edited collections by international academic publishers.

Contact: University of Turin, Lungo Dora Siena 100, 10153, Turin, Italy.
E-mail: ilariabiano@gmail.com

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0581-6271

The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture
Volume 13 Number 1
 https://doi.org/10.1386/ajpc_00086_1
Received 13 October 2023; Accepted 18 December 2023; Published Online xx xxxx

AMY WILLIAMS WILSON
Fairmont State University

Bonnie Bennett and the beyond: An exploration of one representation of the afterlife in *The Vampire Diaries*

ABSTRACT

The contemporary vampire story is an apt place to explore immortality, the afterlife and other dimensions in general. Additionally, there are numerous parallels between the vampire story and the Christian story. The vampire's 'maker', for example, can be compared to God, also known as 'maker', and a vampire's immortality offers a relevant parallel to the Christian idea of immortality in the afterlife. The CW network series The Vampire Diaries *(2009–17) houses various narratives offering such comparisons, especially with regards to alternative dimensions ('worlds') that can potentially be construed as commentary on the afterlife. Interestingly, though, I believe that the most compelling narrative in this regard involves the witch Bonnie Bennett and not an actual vampire. Also interestingly, Bonnie often seems to hold more power than the vampires, even though she is not necessarily immortal (she is, however, considered a supernatural being). She perpetually saves her friends throughout the series, regularly willing to sacrifice her life for theirs and actually dies in Season 4 in effort to bring Jeremy Gilbert back to life. She embodies the New Testament verse in the book of John that states,*

KEYWORDS

the other side
heaven
sacrificial love
religious allegory
immortality
CW network
alternate dimensions
anchor

'[g]reater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends'. Despite that she is dead, she lives in a concurrent dimension, and only Jeremy is aware of her and can hear her. She is with him in the present. I posit that the storyline pertaining to Bonnie's character and her death in Seasons 4 and 5 in particular offers a possible and even compelling read on the biblical description of heaven and the afterlife – and God on the whole – per Judeo-Christian scripture and scriptural interpretation.

The vampire story is an apt and curious place to explore immortality, the afterlife and God. One such story for consideration is *The Vampire Diaries* (hereafter *TVD*), a CW network series based on the books of L. J. Smith (*Vampire Diaries* series) that aired from –2009 to 2017, whose premise is based on the character Elena Gilbert (Nina Dobrev), a doppelgänger and the object of love for two brother vampires who 'try to redeem themselves in order to be good vampires' (Blom 2013: 12). The series follows Elena's teenage friend group consisting of humans and various supernatural beings (vampires, werewolves, witches and travellers, e.g.). Notwithstanding the many traumas thrown their way, they are loyal to and reliant on each other.

Throughout its eight seasons, *TVD* incorporates various dimensions as part of its plotline, making it a prime narrative for afterlife analysis. In my concluding ruminations in my book *The Bite, the Breast and the Blood: Why Modern Vampire Stories Suck Us In*, I deem that, despite analyses that suggest otherwise, I do not consider the vampire a representation of the Judeo-Christian God (Wilson 2018: 206). Interestingly, however, I read a prominent character in *TVD*, who is not a vampire but a witch, in this light. Odd as it may sound in that witches are stereotypically affiliated with the Devil (Russell and Lewis 2023: n.pag.), I interpret this particular witch character as a potential portrayal of the Judeo-Christian God per description in Hebrew and Christian biblical text.

Along with the multiple dimensions of the afterlife in the *TVD* narrative is a general belief in the dimensions of heaven – a place where souls find peace – and hell. The idea of finding peace in the afterlife is first introduced by vampire Lexi Branson (Arielle Kebbel), the best friend of vampire Stefan Salvatore (Paul Wesley). In a discussion with vampire hunter Alaric Saltzman (Matthew Davis) regarding the dimension of the Other Side, she asserts, '[y]ou know there's something else out there, right? There has to be. Silas's whole agenda was to find peace with his one true love, and whatever "peace" is, it's out there'; Lexi goes on to deliberate, '[a]nd I figure once we've served our time for all of the bad things we've done, then it's just about letting go, moving on' ('Graduation' 2013).

Christian doctrine maintains that one can enter heaven only through a rebirthing experience through Jesus Christ (John 3: 3, 2011), and Christ is affiliated with peace. He tells his disciples in John 14: 27, '[p]eace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid' (2011). The Apostle Paul, an avid follower and teacher of Christ's message in New Testament scripture, writes to the church in Colossae, '[f]or God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by *making peace* through his blood, shed on the cross' (Colossians 1: 19–20, 2011, emphasis added). Thus, not only does Christ

give humans a different peace that can be attained in the earthly realm, but also his peace is instrumental in connection to heaven via crucifixion. Apostle Paul goes on to say to the Colossians in 3: 15, '[l]et the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace' (2011), arguably implying if we are called to peace, we are called to 'finding peace', as coined in *TVD*. Robyn J. Whitaker, New Testament educator, defines heaven as 'a place of peace, love, community, and worship' (Whitaker 2019: n.pag.).

Lexi and Alaric are temporarily on leave from the dimension of the Other Side, which is joined to the earthly dimension by means of a veil. Vampire Damon Salvatore (Ian Somerhalder) explains to Sheriff Forbes (Marguerite MacIntyre) that this veil is 'an invisible wall that separates our plane from the plane of all dead supernatural creatures' ('The Walking Dead' 2013). This dimension is where supernatural beings, such as vampires, vampire hunters, witches and werewolves, go when they die.

Despite the allusion to a heavenly dimension in the series, the dimension of the Other Side as the afterlife resembles the general description of heaven according to Judeo-Christian scripture: a concurrent world beyond us on the other side. Whitaker's text aligns with this, describing heaven as '*a parallel realm* where everything operates according to God's will' (Whitaker 2019: n.pag., emphasis added).

To clarify for purposes here, I use *heaven*, *kingdom of God*, *afterlife* and *eternal life* interchangeably, broadly following the description of 'present' heaven, per Christian religion experts Randy Alcorn (2004) and N. T. Wright (2008), which differentiates from 'eternal heaven' wherein the kingdom of God comes to earth to create a New Earth at some future time (Alcorn 2004: 42).

I posit, then, that the depiction of the Other Side in many ways fits the description of the kingdom of God, or heaven, or 'present' heaven (Alcorn 2004: 41–42, 48–49), as presented in Hebrew and Christian biblical text. In addition, witch Bonnie Bennett (Kat Graham) exhibits certain traits that exemplify both the Judeo-Christian God in the heavenly realm and Jesus Christ (as part of the Triune God as depicted in Christian text) in the earthly realm, in that they demonstrate sacrificial love. Bonnie is specifically analogous to God in that both are omnipotent and are accessible to and have a relationship with humans; furthermore, Bonnie is specifically analogous to Jesus Christ in that they both function as portals from the earthly realm to the heavenly realm.

SACRIFICIAL LOVE

The Judeo-Christian God, Jesus Christ as incarnate of that God, and Bonnie Bennett are alike in the very distinct way that they display sacrificial love for their loved ones. 1 John 4: 10 declares, '[t]his is real love – not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins' (2015). In his analysis of John Calvin, Randall C. Zachman explains that Calvin deemed Christ's sacrifice as 'the chief representation of God's love that transcends all others' (2015: 295). Bonnie has been described as a martyr (Khalil 2023: n.pag.; Ryan 2021: n.pag.), who is 'always willing to sacrifice herself' for her friends (Khalil 2023: n.pag.), in other words, demonstrating 'real love' or a love that 'transcends all others'.

During Jesus's last supper with his disciples before his crucifixion, he imparts instructions and analogies regarding love. After giving them the commandment to love each other as he has loved them, Jesus claims, '[g]reater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends' (John 15: 13, 2011).

It is a clear foreshadowing of his own death for humankind; he would die so that the people of the world could have everlasting life, so that they could be saved, as revealed in John 3: 16, '[f]or God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life' (2011). Bonnie does the same: she gives her life for Jeremy Gibert's life (Steven R. McQueen), the ultimate demonstration of love for a friend.

In addition to Jeremy, Bonnie's friends Elena, Caroline Forbes (Candice King) and Matt Donovan (Zach Roerig) 'wouldn't be alive without Bonnie's help' (Khalil 2023: n.pag.). In Season 4, Silas (Paul Wesley and Scott Parks), the first immortal human, threatens Bonnie that if she does not help him by performing a spell that drops the veil temporarily to the Other Side he will hurt her loved ones. She is the only one who can perform the spell. She promises to help but emphasizes, '[j]ust *don't hurt* my friends' ('She's Come Undone' 2013, original emphasis), demonstrating that her friends are consistently first and foremost as her concerns.

When the veil drops after Bonnie's spell in Season 4, the supernatural beings on the Other Side temporarily have access to the earthly realm ('The Walking Dead' 2013). She tells Jeremy that she will give him and his sister Elena as much time as she can to be together before closing the veil because Elena's grief over Jeremy's death is so severe. She explains to Grams (Jasmine Guy), a deceased witch on the Other Side, that the reason for her delay in closing the veil is to create this opportunity for Jeremy and Elena. True to Bonnie's nature, her compassion for her friends is paramount, even though Grams clearly disapproves. Bonnie subsequently begins chanting a spell in an unknown language and dies.

At the end of Season 4, it is confirmed that Jeremy is alive because Bonnie died so that he could live ('Graduation' 2013). When preparing for Bonnie's memorial, Elena is distraught, trying to find something to wear and says tearfully to Damon, '[s]he gave up her life so that I could have my brother back and I didn't even know about it' ('Handle with Care' 2013).

As a ghost that Jeremy can see and hear, Bonnie confesses in Season 5, 'Jer, just so we're clear: I would die a hundred times over just to have you standing here alive in front of me' ('Handle with Care' 2013). And upon learning that the plan to try to bring her back to life is off, she says to him, 'do you not know me at all? Is there a part of you that thinks for one minute that I would see one of my friends die so that I could come back to life?' ('Handle with Care' 2013). She says this knowing that she was close to being freed, *despite* that she was close to being freed. This is selfless, Christ-like sacrificial love.

Through a spell, Bonnie comes back to life in Season 5 with the ability to live in both dimensions of the earthly realm and the Other Side, but in Season 8, the final season of the series, she almost dies again in an effort to save vampire Lorenzo St. John, known as Enzo (Michael Malarkey). They are in love, but Enzo's humanity is turned off, and she is willing to go to extreme lengths to get him back. When vampires turn off their humanity, it means that they are flipping off the switch to their conscience. They cannot feel guilt, fear or any human emotion: 'In *The Vampire Diaries*, the vampires had an inner mechanism called a "humanity switch." This allowed them to turn off any emotions that made them human so they could completely and carelessly follow their desires' (Habib 2021: n.pag.).

In Enzo's early appearances in the show, he is a violent antagonist and altogether unlikable. Prior to being turned into a vampire, he was an orphan and child labourer in England, revealing,

> I was sent to a workhouse at the age of four with a concept of family so limited that I actually convinced myself that an Italian line cook was my father. By 14, I was out on the streets. By 27, I was dead.

He had been turned into a vampire on a ship in 1903 while dying of consumption, and his life as a vampire was no better in that he spent most of it in misery as a subject of torturous vampire experiments. He confesses to Bonnie, '[l]ove, relationship, families – these are things I know nothing about' ('Moonlight on the Bayou' 2016). Putting it mildly, Enzo's life has been rife with trauma.

Because he was abandoned by his sire (the vampire who turned him), his character follows suit with findings regarding the anxiously attached human boy who, according to attachment authority Robert Karen, 'may also feel, at some level, misshapen by his unwanted feelings. He is mistrustful, he is bitter, he is retaliatory, he is violent' (Karen 1998: 239). When his sire resurfaces, Enzo desires a relationship with her but is hurt that she favours his siblings and seems to take advantage of him ('Day One of Twenty-Two Thousand, Give or Take' 2015). Due to his desire and hurt, especially after being abandoned for so long, 'a twisted attachment forms, in which the child may become magnetized by the rejecting quality and to give that up feels like giving up love itself' (Karen 1998: 396).

Bonnie speaks to this in Season 8 when she attempts to convince Enzo to turn his humanity back on by confining them both to a cabin. While she does not have her magic back, she is nevertheless able to use a magical object, the Flame of Imprisonment, which 'traps supernatural beings in the space where it burns' ('Coming Home Was a Mistake' 2016). Only Bonnie, the lighter of the Flame, can come and go from the cabin. Because Enzo's biggest fear is abandonment, her plan is to set the cabin on fire and not leave him.

When she sets the cabin on fire, Enzo is trapped, and she is committed to dying with him. She says, '[y]ou're afraid of people leaving, period. You're afraid of being abandoned – the one thing that happens to you again and again. Everyone leaves. No one stays. But it ends now cause I'm not going *anywhere*' (original emphasis). Bonnie goes on to say, 'I'd rather burn alive than abandon you'. Enzo smirks, drinks the last of his champagne and asks, '[a]ny other last words?' Scarcely able to talk because of the smoke, she slowly repeats, 'I'm. Not. Leaving. You'. Enzo responds, '[y]ou're as good as dead'. She then passes out from smoke inhalation, and his humanity is restored as he recognizes that she is willing to die to save him from inhumanity. He throws her from the cabin but remains trapped. When she regains consciousness, she sees that he is going to die in the fire and struggles to get to her feet to save him. Observing her effort, he says through a stifled cough, 'Bonnie. It's my time. You love me more than anyone. It's enough'.

Bonnie runs into the burning cabin, puts the candle out with the palm of her hand and upon seeing her burnt palm, he begins apologizing profusely. 'It's okay. We're okay', she says lovingly.

'I almost killed you', he reminds her.

'I'm still here', she smiles.

'You're okay now. You're stuck with me forever because I'm never leaving'.

This scene is reminiscent of what God speaks through the prophet Isaiah: '[W]hen you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you' (Isaiah 43: 2, 2016), as well as Moses's assurance to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 31: 6 (and repeated in Hebrews 13: 5) that God 'will never leave you nor forsake you' (2011).

Bonnie here epitomizes the kind of love the Apostle Paul refers to in his letter to the Romans: 'But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5: 8, 2016). John Calvin calls Christ's love 'incomparable' and references St. Augustine, who describes it as '[i]ncomprehensible and immutable' (in Calvin 1599: 438). She is willing to die for Enzo, even if he chooses not to turn his humanity back on. This is exactly the kind of love Jesus defines in John 15: 13, which further illustrates Bonnie's stark parallel to the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross and God's willingness to sacrifice his son – both for their loved ones to be saved.

OMNIPOTENT

Bonnie has been referred to as 'the Most Powerful Supernatural Creature' in the series (Khalil 2023: n.pag.) and, in fact, exhibits omnipotence, a notable feature of the Judeo-Christian God. Her former boyfriend Jeremy dies in Season 4 ('Down the Rabbit Hole' 2013). He is one of the Brotherhood of the Five, a vampire hunter who, upon a killing, receives a tattoo that reveals part of a code to the cure for vampirism. This means he is supernatural and will spend his afterlife on the Other Side. When Bonnie temporarily brings down the veil to the Other Side, she stalls to allow Jeremy extra time with Elena and discloses to Grams that the delay is because Jeremy was not supposed to die in the first place.

'It was the will of nature', Grams responds regarding Jeremy's death, adding, '[t]here is no magic in this world strong enough to challenge it'. Bonnie replies emphatically, 'I have every magic; I have the spirits!' and claims that she has the ability to perform Expression magic. Grams explains to Bonnie that this type of magic is 'a manifestation of your will' ('The Walking Dead' 2013). It is dark and so powerful that it could destroy the world. This means, then, that she theoretically has omnipotence.

The Judeo-Christian God, per Hebrew scripture, also has omnipotence. Job says to God, 'I know that You can *do* all things,/ and that no plan is impossible for you' (Job 42: 1–2, 2020, original emphasis). Additionally, the prophet Jeremiah announces, in reference to God, '[*i*]*t is* He who made the earth by His power,/ Who established the world by His wisdom;/ And by His understanding He has stretched out the heavens' (Jeremiah 10: 12, 2020, original emphasis). God later asks Jeremiah, '[b]ehold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh; is anything too difficult for Me?' (Jeremiah 32: 27, 2020). Furthermore, 1 Chronicles 29: 11 declares,

> Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth; Yours is the dominion, O LORD, and You exalt Yourself as head over all.
>
> (2020)

Bonnie's power to perform Expression magic parallels God's omnipotence in creating the world and being able to do all things with unrivalled ability.

Christian scripture further confirms God's all-powerful nature. When the angel Gabriel reveals to Mary that she has found favour with God and prophesies her pregnancy, Mary questions him because she is a virgin. His response is that the Holy Spirit (a part of the Triune God) 'will come upon you,/ the power of the Highest hover over you;/ Therefore the child you bring

to birth/ will be called Holy, Son of God' (Luke 1: 35, 2003), the son being Jesus. He then pronounces, '[n]othing, you see, is impossible with God' (Luke 1: 37, 2003). Other biblical versions translate as '[f]or with God nothing will be impossible' (1982) and 'God can do anything!' (2005). That she conceives as a virgin is certainly indicative of God's power to do anything – that nothing, then, is in fact impossible.

Jesus is aware of God's unlimited ability to do anything. When he debates about life after the resurrection in the Temple with religious scholars, he tells them, 'you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God' (Matthew 22: 29, 2016). Scripture reports that Jesus is resurrected, thus proving him the Messiah and Son of God as part of the Holy Trinity (Matthew 28, 2011; Mark 16, 2011; Luke 24, 2011; John 20, 2011). 'I know you're looking for Jesus the Nazarene, the One they nailed on the cross. He's been raised up', a man says to some of Jesus's loved ones when they approach the tomb to embalm him (Mark 16: 6, 2003). In the account in the book of Luke, two men appear to Jesus's loved ones and ask,

> Why are you looking for the Living One in a cemetery? He is not here, but raised up. Remember how he told you when you were still back in Galilee that he had to be handed over to sinners, be killed on a cross, and in three days rise up?
>
> (Luke 24: 4–8, 2003)

It goes without saying that power to raise the dead is immense, and God informed the Israelites about this power over 700 years prior to the resurrection of Christ in the book of Hosea, wherein, after reprimanding them, he shows compassion for them, saying through Hosea, 'I will deliver this people from the power of the grave;/ I will redeem them from death./ Where, O death, are your plagues?/ Where, O grave, is your destruction?' (Hosea 13: 14, 2011).

When Apostle Paul references Hosea in a letter to the Corinthians, he phrases the prophecy as such: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory' (1 Corinthians 15: 26–27, 2011). In his letter to the church in Ephesus, he expresses gratitude for the Christians there, summarizing his prayers to God, that they would know:

> [H]is incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.
>
> (Ephesians 1: 19–21, 2011)

Another version reads, 'the immeasurable greatness of his power' (2016). God's power to resurrect is therefore grand and vast and due to the present tense verbiage, ageless as well.

Bonnie brings Jeremy back to life from the Other Side, thus proving a similar kind of resurrection power as demonstrated by God. Jesus comes back to life after three days of being dead, three days on the other side (Luke 24: 6–7, 2011, to name one New Testament reference). Bonnie performs the spell to do so while chanting in another language ('The Walking Dead 2013), sounding like tongues, as referenced in New Testament scripture, a manifestation of

the Holy Spirit as part of the Triune God. Apostle Paul informs the church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 12 about 'the gifts of the Spirit' that

> [T]here are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.
>
> (1 Corinthians 12: 4–6, 2011)

In considering the Holy Spirit in the Gospels of Luke and John, Wayne G. Rollins, psychology and biblical studies scholar and educator, describes it as a 'transforming power' (Rollins 2013: 24).

One of the gifts of the Spirit is 'speaking in different tongues', whereby a believer prays in a language unknown to him or her (1 Corinthians 12: 10, 2011). Apostle Paul explains in this letter, '[f]or anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit' (1 Corinthians 14: 2, 2011). There is power in speaking in tongues. One translation clarifies, '[a]nyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves' (1 Corinthians 14: 4, 2011), whereas another describes that the speaker is 'strengthened personally' (2015), and yet another translates to 'builds up himself' (2016). The person praying in tongues is bolstered by the experience in much the same way that Bonnie is empowered by her magic chant in another language before the veil is closed at the end of Season 4. This spell is powerful enough to resurrect Jeremy from death. The veil to the Other Side is closed, but he survives in the earthly realm ('Graduation' 2013). In this very distinct way Bonnie exemplifies the resurrection power of God, which proves sheer omnipotence.

OMNIPRESENT

An appealing attribute of God is that he is omnipresent. Joshua, Moses's successor and appointed to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land of Canaan after 40 years of wandering in the desert as narrated in Hebrew scripture, receives a direct word from God regarding taking over the land: 'Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go' (Joshua 1: 9, 2011).

Speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, God announces, 'I am a God who is everywhere and not in one place only. No one can hide where I cannot see them. Do you not know that I am everywhere in heaven and on earth?' (Jeremiah 23: 23–24, 1992).

Several hundred years after this, Apostle Paul describes the nature of God to the inquisitive Athenians at the Areopagus, claiming that:

> [H]e is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though *he is not far from any one of us*.
>
> (Acts 17: 25–27, 2011, emphasis added)

The Other Side is presented as a spiritual realm that exists concurrent to the human realm. When Elena and Caroline arrive at college, carrying their belongings into the dorm, Elena stops and points out, '[w]e're in college, Caroline' ('I Know What You Did Last Summer' 2013).

Caroline responds, grinning, '[w]e actually made it. We're here'.

Bonnie joins them, unseen by them, and says, '[w]e're all here together', smiling at them.

Elena and Caroline do not realize that Bonnie is with them, present, in a concurrent dimension, like heaven. In Alcorn's scholarship on heaven, he suggests that 'the present Heaven coexists with and watches over an Earth under sin, the Curse, and suffering' (Alcorn 2004: 67). Additionally, regarding the description of heaven in the book of Revelation, Wright maintains, '[i]t is a picture of *present* reality, the heavenly dimension of our present life' and, moreover, that '[h]eaven, in the Bible, is not a future destiny but the other, hidden dimension of our ordinary life – God's dimension, if you like' (Wright 2008: 19, original emphasis). Rollins's assessment of 'eternal life' in the Epistle to the Romans finds that it pertains to 'a transformation of being and perceiving in present time' (Rollins 2013: 190). *TVD* paints this same picture of the Other Side in real, present time.

Not only does Bonnie coexist in a parallel realm, but she also speaks to Jeremy, as God speaks to humanity, from that realm. God says, through Jeremiah, '[c]all to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know' (Jeremiah 33: 3, 2011), indicating that God talks directly to humans. Furthermore, according to the book of Hebrews, '[i]n the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son' (Hebrews 1: 1–2, 2011). Because humans have an advocate with God through his son Jesus – 'we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One' (1 John 2: 1–2, 2011) – this means that access to and conversation with him are possible and ever-present. While it is not unheard of for humans to claim that God has spoken to them, Christians in the Pentecostal movement '*expect* to hear from him and to experience his power in their daily lives' (Nel 2017: 2, emphasis added).

Bonnie is an embodiment of this aspect of God, speaking directly to Jeremy from the Other Side: For example, when he is in a car accident and at risk of dying, she appears on the scene, imploring him to hold on ('I Know What You Did Last Summer' 2013). He holds on, and Damon arrives to give him blood so that he can live.

When Bonnie's friends convene to hold a memorial for her, Jeremey rings a bell and announces that he does not know what to say. Bonnie directs him, '[s]ay that I'm not going anywhere. Say that even though they couldn't see me I've been there the whole time' ('For Whom the Bell Tolls' 2013). Jeremy then says to the group, '[s]he says that she's not going anywhere. That she has been here all along. Bonnie has watched you have the summer of your life'. Bonnie encircles them and says to Elena (through Jeremy),

> And I saw you happy. And I know you think now that you can't have a normal life, that you have to be here for everyone, but you don't. Everyone will find their way. So you are going to repack your things, you're going to go back to college, and you're going to live it up.
>
> ('For Whom the Bell Tolls' 2013)

To Matt, she says, '[y]ou know I would have sent you 300 emails back if I could', and to Caroline, 'I watched you decorate that dorm room like your life depended on it. I don't know that college is everything you expected and that you feel like something's missing, but'. She is cut off when their friend Tyler Lockwood (Michael Trevino) arrives. She then says, '[t]his is good. This is all I wanted' and, observing her friends together, tells Jeremy, 'I'll be okay. We'll all be okay'. As God speaks to and through certain people, so can Bonnie; as God speaks words of encouragement directly to his loved ones from a synchronous dimension, so does Bonnie.

In another representation of the ubiquitousness of God, Elena is back at college and writing in her diary about how she misses Bonnie. She wipes a tear from her face. Unbeknownst to her, Bonnie is standing next to her. 'I'm right here, Elena, and I miss you, too', she says, laying her hand on Elena's shoulder. Elena continues writing: '[B]ut in the meantime I choose to believe that she's watching over me. Because that's who Bonnie is' ('Monster's Ball' 2013). This is also a characteristic of God. Psalm 23: 4 reads, '[e]ven if I go through the deepest darkness,/ I will not be afraid, LORD,/ for you are with me' (1992) and Psalm 56: 8, '[y]ou know how troubled I am;/ you have kept a record of my tears' (1992). Additionally, it is recorded in John 16: 32 that Jesus informs his disciples that they will 'scatter' from him but persists, '[y]et I am not alone, for the Father is with me' (2016).

In this same episode, Bonnie observes a conversation between Jeremy and Damon about how Bonnie died to bring Jeremy back to life. 'And may she rest in peace', Damon says. Jeremy points out, '[s]he's actually right over there', and Bonnie waves to him. She is present, even though Damon cannot see her.

Despite the effort on her friends' part to get Bonnie back, Jeremy must admit to Elena that they cannot do it. Bonnie, standing in the room with them, instructs Jeremy, '[t]ell her it's for the best, Jer' ('Handle with Care' 2013). He responds that he will not relay the message because in his opinion it is not for the best.

'Bonnie's here', he announces to Elena and Damon. 'She wants us not to worry'.

The directive not to worry is abundant in scripture by various writers,[1] but Jesus specifically addresses it in what is known as his Sermon on the Mount: 'Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life' (Matthew 6: 25, 1982) because '[w]hich of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?' (Matthew 6: 27, 1982). A compassionate God and a compassionate Bonnie do not want their loved ones to suffer from worry and anxiety and are consistently there to remind this to their loved ones. Jeremy affirms to Bonnie, 'I know that one way or another, you will always be here' ('Death and the Maiden' 2013).

ANCHORS

In Season 5, Bonnie becomes the Anchor, meaning that she now exists in both dimensions. All supernatural beings who die must go through her in order to get to the Other Side. She is told that as the Anchor she will feel every death as it passes through her ('Death and the Maiden' 2013). Christ as the Messiah performs the same function as he explains in John 14: 6, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father *except through me*' (2011, emphasis added.).

The book of Hebrews addresses God's word, his promise, as humanity's hope:

1. For example, Apostle Paul commands to '[b]e anxious for nothing' (Philippians 4: 6–7, 1982), and King Solomon explains that '[w]orry is a heavy burden' (Proverbs 12: 25, 1995).

> This *hope* we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the *Presence* behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, *even* Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.
>
> (Hebrews 6: 19–20, 1982, original emphasis)

The metaphor, then, is Jesus as an anchor between humanity and what is behind the veil (heaven). In *TVD*, the Other Side is behind the veil, and while it can be perceived at times as a sort of purgatory, my reading shows that not only is it concurrent as heaven is biblically described but also a place of positivity, as I read heaven to be, an 'endlessly wonderful place' as Alcorn (2004: 17) narrates: 'Think of friends or family members who loved Jesus and are with him now. Picture them with you, walking together in this place' (Alcorn 2004: 18). This interpretation comes from a scene in Season 5 that suggests a similarly positive description, where Bonnie experiences the death of an elderly witch (Rebecca Koon) who must pass through her ('Dead Man on Campus' 2013). Bonnie is at a party thrown in celebration of her return to life and is interrupted by the woman's passing. After seeing Bonnie's pain during this process, the woman comments that being the Anchor does not seem like it would be much fun. Bonnie responds, '[i]t's better than being dead' and then immediately apologizes.

The woman responds, '[i]t's okay, honey. Dying wasn't fun but then you felt my pain so I guess you know that. Sorry. But you know what? The pain's gone now. And seeing friendly faces over here certainly doesn't hurt'. She clasps hands with Bonnie. Her gesture implies her recognition of Bonnie taking the woman's pain so she could enter the Other Side.

IN SUM

Matthew 3: 2 claims that 'the Kingdom of Heaven is near' (2015), like the Other Side, and while the Other Side is not heaven, it is a realm that coexists with our earthly realm, a place of waiting for those wanting to find peace and a place of 'friendly faces'. Bonnie can watch her loved ones and the people of Mystic Falls from the Other Side. She can talk to them and attend them in the way that the Judeo-Christian God talks to and tends to humanity. When she is brought back to life, she becomes the Anchor, a portal through which souls must pass through to get to the Other Side in much the same way that Jesus functions as a portal to God and the kingdom of heaven. Christianity maintains that believers must pass through him to get to the Other Side, to what is beyond us. In the few select episodes explored herein, these are some of the many ways in which Bonnie proves a parallel to God and Jesus in heaven, as described in biblical text.

She has been deemed 'arguably the most compassionate and selfless character in the entire series and the undeniable hero of Mystic Falls' (Flavell 2020: n.pag.). In short, from here and beyond, Bonnie consistently goes above and beyond.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Angela Schwer and Darlene Mudrick from Fairmont State University for their invaluable guidance with regards to my research and to my peer reviewers and Rebecca Wilson for their extremely vital feedback on my drafts. I am also grateful to them for the insightful conversations that were sparked because of this project.

REFERENCES

1 Chronicles 29: 11 (2020), New American Standard Bible, La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

1 Corinthians 12: 4–6 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

1 Corinthians 12: 10 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

1 Corinthians 14: 2 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

1 Corinthians 14: 4 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

1 Corinthians 14: 4 (2015), New Living Translation, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

1 Corinthians 14: 4 (2016), English Standard Version, Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

1 Corinthians 15: 26–27 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

1 John 2: 1–2 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

1 John 4: 10 (2015), New Living Translation, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Acts 17: 25–27 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

Alcorn, Randy (2004), *Heaven*, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum.

Blom, Minja (2013), 'Television vampire fandom and religion', *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis*, 25, pp. 9–25, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326886585_Television_vampire_fandom_and_religion.

Calvin, John (1599), *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. H. Beveridge), London: Bonham Norton, https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.iii.vi.html. Accessed 13 January 2024.

Colossians 1: 19–20 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

Colossians 3: 15 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

'Coming Home Was a Mistake' (2016), J. Thompson (dir.), *The Vampire Diaries*, Season 8 Episode 5 (18 November, USA: The CW).

'Day One of Twenty-Two Thousand, Give or Take' (2015), P. Verschooris (dir.), *The Vampire Diaries*, Season 7 Episode 1 (8 October, USA: The CW).

'Dead Man on Campus' (2013), R. Hardy (dir.), *The Vampire Diaries*, Season 5 Episode 8 (21 November, USA: The CW).

'Death and the Maiden' (2013), L. Libman (dir.), *The Vampire Diaries*, Season 5 Episode 7 (14 November, USA: The CW).

'Detoured on Some Random Backroads Path to Hell' (2016), P. Wesley (dir.), *The Vampire Diaries*, Season 8 Episode 6 (2 December, USA: The CW).

Deuteronomy 31: 6 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO, Biblica, In.

'Down the Rabbit Hole' (2013), C. Grismer (dir.), *The Vampire Diaries*, Season 4 Episode 14 (14 February, USA: The CW).

Ephesians 1: 19–21 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

Ephesians 1: 19–21 (2016), English Standard Version, Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

Flavell, Leah (2020), 'The Vampire Diaries: 10 times Bonnie Bennett was the real hero of mystic falls', ScreenRant, 5 January, https://screenrant.com/vampire-diaries-bonnie-hero-mystic-falls/#defending-the-town-from-vampires. Accessed 3 September 2023.

'For Whom the Bell Tolls' (2013), M. Allowitz (dir.), *The Vampire Diaries*, Season 5 Episode 4 (24 October, USA: The CW).

'Graduation' (2013), C. Grismer (dir.), *The Vampire Diaries*, Season 4 Episode 23 (16 May, USA: The CW).

Habib, Serena (2021), 'Humanity switch? I wish', *The Silhouette*, 18 February, Arts and Culture, https://thesil.ca/humanity-switch-i-wish/. Accessed 4 September 2023.

'Handle with Care' (2013), J. Hunt (dir.), *The Vampire Diaries*, Season 5 Episode 6 (7 November, USA: The CW).

Hebrews 1: 1–2 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

Hebrews 6: 19–20 (1982), New King James Version, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

Hebrews 13: 5 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

Hosea 13: 14 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

'I Know What You Did Last Summer' (2013), L. Anderson (dir.), *The Vampire Diaries*, Season 5 Episode 1 (3 October, USA: The CW).

Isaiah 43: 2 (2016), English Standard Version, Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

Jeremiah 10: 12 (2020), New American Standard Bible, La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

Jeremiah 23: 23–24 (1992), Good News Translation, 2nd ed., Philadelphia, PA: American Bible Society.

Jeremiah 32: 27 (2020), New American Standard Bible, La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

Jeremiah 33: 3 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

Job 42: 1–2 (2020), New American Standard Bible, La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

John 3: 3 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

John 3: 16 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

John 14: 6 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

John 14: 27 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

John 15: 13 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

John 16: 32 (2016), English Standard Version, Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

John 20 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

Joshua 1: 9 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.

Karen, Robert (1998), *Becoming Attached: First Relationships and How They Shape Our Capacity to Love*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Khalili, Isabel (2023), 'Why Bonnie deserved a better ending in The Vampire Diaries', CBR, 13 November, https://www.cbr.com/tvd-bonnie-deserved-better-ending/. Accessed 8 January 2024.
Luke 1: 35 (2003), *The Message//Remix* (trans. E. Peterson), Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.
Luke 1: 37 (1982), New King James Version, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
Luke 1: 37 (2003), *The Message//Remix* (trans. E. Peterson), Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.
Luke 1: 37 (2005), New Century Version, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc.
Luke 24 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.
Luke 24: 4–8 (2003), *The Message//Remix* (trans. E. Peterson), Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.
Luke 24: 6–7 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.
Mark 16 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.
Mark 16: 6 (2003), *The Message//Remix* (trans. E. Peterson), Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.
Matthew 6:27 (1982), New King James Version, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
Matthew 3: 2 (2015), New Living Translation, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Matthew 6: 25 (1982), New King James Version, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
Matthew 22: 29 (2016), English Standard Version, Wheaton, IL: Crossway.
Matthew 28 (2011), New International Version, Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc.
'Monster's Ball' (2013), K. Cyrus (dir.), *The Vampire Diaries*, Season 5 Episode 5 (31 October, USA: The CW).
'Moonlight on the Bayou' (2016), J. Hunt (dir.), *The Vampire Diaries*, Season 7 Episode 14 (26 February, USA: The CW).
Nel, Marius (2017), 'Pentecostal talk about God: Attempting to speak from experience', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 73:3, pp. 1–8, ttps://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/view/4479/9387.
Philippians 4: 6–7 (1982), New King James Version, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
Proverbs 12: 25 (1995), Contemporary English Version, Philadelphia, PA: American Bible Society.
Psalm 23: 4 (1992), Good News Translation, 2nd ed., Philadelphia, PA: American Bible Society.
Psalm 56: 8 (1992), Good News Translation, 2nd ed., Philadelphia, PA: American Bible Society.
Rollins, Wayne G. (2013), 'Eternal life in John's Gospel: It's playing now', in J. Harold Ellens (ed.), *Heaven, Hell, and the Afterlife: Eternity in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, pp. 302–22, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/fairmontstate-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1524104. Accessed 13 January 2024.
Romans 5: 8 (2016), English Standard Version, Wheaton, IL: Crossway.
'Rose' (2010), L. Friedlander (dir.), *The Vampire Diaries*, Season 2 Episode 8 (4 November, USA: The CW).
Russell, Jeffrey Burton and Lewis, Ioan M. (2023), 'Witchcraft', Encyclopedia Britannica, 21 October, https://www.britannica.com/topic/witchcraft. Accessed 5 July 2023.
Ryan, Ted (2021), 'Bonnie Bennett: The unsung hero', Geeks, https://vocal.media/geeks/bonnie-bennett-the-unsung-hero. Accessed 8 January 2024.

'She's Come Undone' (2013), D. Martin (dir.), *The Vampire Diaries*, Season 4 Episode 21 (2 May, USA: The CW).
'The Walking Dead' (2013), R. Hardy (dir.), *The Vampire Diaries*, Season 4 Episode 22 (9 May, USA: The CW).
Whitaker, Robyn J. (2019), 'What and where is heaven? The answers are at the heart of the Easter story', *The Conversation*, 18 April, https://theconversation.com/what-and-where-is-heaven-the-answers-are-at-the-heart-of-the-easter-story-115451. Accessed 12 September 2023.
Wilson, Amy Williams (2018), *The Bite, the Breast and the Blood: Why Modern Vampire Stories Suck Us In*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.
Wright, Nicholas Thomas (2008), *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, New York: HarperOne.
Zachman, Randall C. (2015), 'The Christology of John Calvin', in F. A. Murphy and T. A. Stefano (eds), *The Oxford of Christology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 284–96, https://books.google.com. Accessed 9 February 2024.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Wilson, Amy Williams (2024), 'Bonnie Bennett and the beyond: An exploration of one representation of the afterlife in *The Vampire Diaries*', *The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, Special Issue: 'The Afterlife in Popular Culture', 13:1, pp. 41–55, https://doi.org/10.1386/ajpc_00086_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Amy Williams Wilson is an educator, a sexual assault advocate and a mom to one amazing son and four well-intentioned rescue animals. Her analyses on vampires and meaningful attachment have been presented at academic and pop culture conferences throughout the United States and coalesced in her book *The Bite, the Breast and the Blood: Why Modern Vampire Stories Suck Us In* (McFarland, 2018). Facilitator of a weekly writing group at her local domestic violence shelter, she and other survivors of domestic and sexual violence write for clarity and connection. She lives in West Virginia.

Contact: Department of Humanities, Fairmont State University, 311 Jaynes Hall, 1201 Locust Avenue, Fairmont, West Virginia 26554, USA.
E-mail: amy.wilson@fairmontstate.edu

https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4153-8829

The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture
Volume 13 Number 1
 https://doi.org/10.1386/ajpc_00087_1
Received 13 October 2023; Accepted 18 December 2023; Published Online xx xxxx

DENNIS YEO
Nanyang Technological University

‘Where are we?’: The ghost as interrogative haunting in *The Others*

ABSTRACT

The ghost raises fundamental questions of reality, identity and epistemology. The ghost is the shadow image of otherness that threatens our notions of life, humanity and permanence by intimating that if death is permanent and the afterlife eternal, then perhaps it is our present tangible reality that is the simulacrum. The ghost interrogates the quotidian, not vice versa. The fetishization, aesthesizing and ritualizing of death in the Gothic aims consistently to defer the final definitive ending of death and the state of non-existence. As a memento mori, ghosts remind us that our ruminations of death are not morbid, but life-affirming. This article will explore the depiction of the afterlife in The Others *(Amenábar 2001) in which the living are simulations of the dead and vice versa. Unlike the typical horror movie, the predominant discourse of* The Others *is a postmodern interrogation of belief, truth and doctrine. The haunted house is an in-between land of purgatory, a death space of self-loss and separation that plays out in the conflict between religion and the supernatural. The questions with which the films ends – ‘What does all this mean? Where are we?’ – is not just a geographical question, but an ontological one. The interrogation of Biblical narratives causes the audience to evaluate the reliability of the discourse of established religion and its doctrine of the afterlife. By defying audience expectations of the generic conventions of the ghost story, the movie relies on the viewer’s faith that what we see on-screen is real, when this cinematic reality is as deceptive as seeing dead people artificially propped up to appear alive. Suspended between being and nothingness, both absent and present,*

KEYWORDS

Amenábar
Gothic
afterlife
death
film
postmodern
horror

the ghost is a metaphor for the simulacrum of film. The cinematic thus serves as the Other by which the real can be defined.

INTRODUCTION

The ultimate reality is the inevitability of death, and the final frontier is the unknown aftermath of the afterlife. Milan Kundera regarded the horror of death as based on the prospect of 'non-being' and 'the terrifying materiality of the corpse' (Badley 1995: 41). While vampires and zombies remain fictional creations that defy death, the ghost inhabits the afterlife of permanent stasis as a spectral simulacrum. The ghost is steeply ingrained in our cultures, beliefs and psyches as it raises fundamental questions of reality, identity and epistemology. Just as it steps out of the land of the dead into the world of the living, the ghost transgresses the boundaries of the supernatural and the real, belief and rationality. To Gillian Beer, the ghost is 'the insurrection, not the resurrection of the dead' (Badley 1995: 42). The ghost is the shadow image of otherness that threatens our notions of life, humanity and permanence by intimating that if death is permanent and the afterlife eternal, then perhaps it is our present tangible reality that is the simulacrum. 'The ghost calls the quotidian into question and not vice versa' (Salomon 2002: 8). As a *memento mori*, ghosts act as 'reproductions or simulacra of human beings' (Briggs 1999: 124) that remind us that our Gothic ruminations of death are not morbid, but life-affirming. The fetishization, aesthesizing and ritualizing of death aims consistently to defer the final definitive ending of death and the subsequent state of non-existence. Suspended between being and nothingness, the ghost is a representation of antimatter, a death space of self-loss and separation.

This article will explore the depiction of the afterlife in *The Others* (Amenábar 2001). The movie tells of Grace, who lives in a manor with her two children waiting for the return of her husband from the war. Anne and Nicholas suffer from a rare photosensitivity that requires them to follow a strict regime of closing doors and drawing curtains to keep out the light. Grace wakes up one day to find that her servants have mysteriously left and three new domestic workers – the matronly Mrs Mills, the mute girl Lydia and the gardener Mr Tuttle – have unexpectedly showed up in response to a newspaper advertisement that has not been mailed yet. The family begins to experience unexplained phenomenon – a child and an old lady only Anne sees, strange weeping, the sound of running footsteps – and the cryptic comments of the newcomers suggests that they know why. *The Others* draws from Henry James's 1898 novella *The Turn of the Screw* and its adaptation *The Innocents* (Clayton 1961). Anthony McGlynn hails *The Others* 'the definitive ghost movie of the twenty-first century' and notes its influence on movies like *Goodnight Mummy* (Franz and Fiala 2014) and *A Ghost Story* (Lowery 2017). Upon its release, *The Others* was touted as a copycat of M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999), but *The Others* daringly locates the entire film in the afterlife. While other movies may tell their narrative from the perspective of the ghost, the viewer knows that they were ghosts. In *The Others*, the living are simulations of the dead and vice versa. This reversal of perception makes us question who the others are and what it means to be other, and this is significant in today's Post-Truth world. The deferment of meaning and the subversion of ideology in the movie bring to mind the theories of postmodern deconstruction. This questioning of knowability reveals that reality is a construct and

encourages an attitude of scepticism and paranoia that evokes an ontological crisis of relativity, pluralism and irresolution.

The conventional ghost story revolves around four questions that the audience requires answered: who or what the ghost is, where it is, why it has returned, and how it can be exorcized. The movie persists in deferring the audience's identification of the paranormal force in the film by constantly shifting the locus of horror from the servants to the children to their father and to Victor and the old lady. Marked as other by their dressing and accents, the servants' behaviour is suspicious but when Grace hears footsteps overhead and thinks that it is Lydia, she is seen in the yard with Mrs Mills. Despite the prolonged build up, the children appear harmless. Anne's propensity for telling horror stories, mimicking voices and pranking her brother constantly makes the audience unsure whether to believe her insistence that the child-ghost Victor exists or that her picture of the family and the old lady with pupil-less eyes is not imagined. This slow elimination of suspects accompanies the breakdown of rationality and the escalation of hysteria. Grace's direct encounter with the ghost when the piano plays itself after she had locked it provides irrefutable proof that the house is haunted. Our interpretation is thus that a dead and unsettled family continues to reside in the house and needs to be exorcized. The search for the ghost thus shifts to uncovering the reason why they have stayed. The underlying assumption is that there is 'unfinished business' and this temporary incursion impinges on the world of the living for a specific purpose or a limited period. Unable to relinquish a hold on the past, the ghost signifies a repressed trauma – 'a loop of one emotion, playing over and over again' (Grafius 2016: 52) – that needs to be revealed and put right. The paranoid control of Grace identifies her as the heroine who will restore order after she triumphs over these disruptive otherworldly forces she is presumably going to encounter. Still, her excessive obsession and harsh repression, coupled by the insinuations that 'Mummy went mad', allude to a history forgotten and a memory fractured. 'It is not so much the ghost, as the haunting, or being haunted, that is important […] haunting makes manifest something that we are in danger of forgetting, or not even noticing' (Bruce 2005: 23). The denial of the memory of what she has done expresses itself in a neurotic insistence that everything is normal that verges on the psychotic. This destabilization of definiteness stirs 'the reader's desire to create meaning, only to frustrate it and leave us with obscure but significant fragments' (Lloyd-Smith 1996: 12). When the audience discovers the twist, we are compelled to revisit the film again this time knowing its outcome, unwittingly resurrecting the dead again.

WHERE ARE WE?

Whether it is heaven, hell or purgatory, the afterlife is situated in a space, usually the location where the deceased expired. This space is often depicted as a liminal place of transit or a threshold. *The Others* is not merely about a haunted house but explores the origins of its haunting and its inexplicable hold on its inhabitants. When we learn that the servants once served there 'a few years ago', Mrs Mills muses, 'They were the best years of my life. That's why we come by, because this house means a lot to us'. She emphasizes that 'this is a very old house' and reiterates the sense of rootedness and shelter the Gothic abode provides to the wandering otherworldly shenanigan, reminisc-ing that 'although sometimes when you leave a place […] it's like it's there

with you, all the time. I always felt like I never left this house'. The children are made to memorize a lesson that begins 'The house and the family. We all live in a house with our family'. What becomes clear is 'possession is at the crux of Amenábar's film' (Burkholder-Mosco and Carse 2005: 215). The film is not keen on just exploring how the house possesses its inhabitants but also how they in turn possess the house.

The opening credits forewarn the audience of the blurred boundary of realism and artifice they are to expect from the movie. The graphic match dissolve from the lithograph sketch of the house to its photographic realization in the opening credits hints at the liminal boundary between what is real and what is imagined or believed. The caption 'Jersey, the Channel Islands, 1945' gives the movie a more specific, and thus seemingly real, location and time which lends a sense of authenticity and veracity to the story. With its stagnant tarn, the old English mansion combines 'a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration' (Grunenberg 1997: 195). The idea that the house must remain dim and its portals to the outside world closed adds to the Chinese-box effect of claustrophobic yet connected labyrinthine spaces and shuts out any notion of time, or whether it is day or night. Displaced by space and time, the mansion is an enclosed universe from which there is no escape or exit. The house appears to be suspended in a primal past and remote from the rest of the world. This impression of regression is reinforced by the fact that 'you will not find a telephone, a radio […] We don't have electricity either'. The dream-like fog further entraps its inhabitants in an entropic existence much like the purgatory they are in. This alienation is reinforced by the isolation of the family and the house. Grace feels 'totally cut off from the world' and likens the house to 'this damned island', one of the Channel Islands located in the middle ground between Britain and the territory Germany possessed, which significantly was the only British territory which surrendered and was occupied by the Nazis. That 'stupid war that had nothing to do with [them]' becomes a metaphor for the struggle between her religious beliefs and the reality of an alternate afterlife for the allegiance of her soul.

The afterlife is as much a psychological space as it is a physical one. It is typical of the external physical landscape of the Gothic castle to be an objective correlative of the internal psychological mindscape of its owner. 'Living in this darkness, this prison', Grace's determination to stake her territory is a bid to lay claim on the sovereignty of her mental space. This epistemological struggle for self-possession and containment is played out in the battlefield of the house. Hitherto, she has succeeded in keeping intruders out of the stable framework of her world-view. Grace's declaration that 'for five years [she] managed to avoid a single Nazi entering this house' is echoed as she fights off 'the intruders' that threaten to encroach into the sovereignty of her domestic space. 'The invasion of the private and secure sphere of the home by some unknown evil force exemplifies the conflict between interior and exterior world, between individual and society' (Grunenberg 1997: 176). Grace confronts the servants, 'You want to frighten us, to get us out, me and my children. You've wanted to take over this house ever since you arrived'. Her struggle to maintain control over the inviolability of her household is symbolic of her attempt to reassure herself of her sanity. The opening and closing of spaces also signify the compartmentalization of Grace's denial that has shut out any remembrance of what

she did. Ultimately, the dispute is about usurpation and the right to haunt the house, the home and the self.

The movie presents a heterotopia of realities: 'that of the living, of the dead, and of the newly dead who don't know they're dead' (Burkholder-Mosco and Carse 2005: 212). The living and the dead coexist in parallel dimensions on earth, occasionally detecting one another. The movie subverts the archetypal imagery of light and darkness that demarcates this dichotomy of good and evil, and life and death. The ambiguous role of Grace as both protector and demoness humanizes her. Amenábar observes that in *The Others* 'there are neither heroes nor villains. Only human beings, trying to find some meaning to their condition or their situation' (Director's Production Notes, DVD). If the film is an allegorical journey towards light and revelation, the darkness of Grace's emotional and spiritual imprisonment can be seen to be symbolic of our existential entropy. The sight of Anne shielding the sunlight away vampire-like throws doubt on Grace's insistence that the children are photosensitive and that 'the light is trying to get into the house'. From this perspective, just like the 'ghosts' and the Nazis, Grace is also preventing the light of revelation and truth from entering the household to keep her children literally and figuratively in the dark. This illusionary space is a state of oblivion and ignorance that leads her to create a delusional isolated reality. Grace acknowledges that 'I'm beginning to feel totally cut off from the world. And this fog doesn't exactly help. It's never lasted this long before'. Mrs Mills waits for the knowledge of 'what she has done and what she is now' to dawn on Grace who is either unable or unwilling to see what is there. When Grace questions the existence of ghosts, she pulls back from the verge of a breakthrough of accepting the reality of her guilt and returns to her wilful delusion. This suggests that 'dying is not only a corporeal failure, but also a cognitive act' (Briefel 2009: 97) and that the dead can only transition into an understanding of their demise by piecing together the fragmented experience of dying to provide a proof of death.

The questions the film ends with – 'what does all this mean? where are we?' – is an ontological one.

ANNE: If we're dead, where's Limbo?
GRACE: I don't know if there even is a Limbo. I'm no wiser than you are.

This state of unknowingness and, more importantly, the acceptance of this liminal state leaves one in a place of vertigo. The only method of relocation is repossession. The possession of our fears through narrative helps us regain control of our reality. By chanting 'this house is ours' together, Grace encourages her children to use the power of the word to will something to happen. This performative act restores their sense of being and belonging and thus their humanity. 'No one can make us leave this house'.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHO THE 'GOODIES' AND THE 'BADDIES' ARE?

The movie begins with a blood-curdling scream and a canted frame that momentarily disorientates the audience as Grace wakes up from her dream life to her 'reality' – one in which she is dead but unaware of it. This awakening to consciousness is a spiritual re-birth that conflates both creation and destruction as Grace transits from the world of the living into the realm of the

dead. Unlike the typical horror movie, the predominant discourse of *The Others* is a postmodern interrogation of belief, truth and doctrine, which form the basis for our perception of reality, identity, life and death. Amenábar suggests that the movie is about 'how religion gives meaning to death and the concept of destiny, and how it responds to not really knowing' (Fuchs 2001). He also acknowledges the philosophical dimension of the genre when he suggests:

> that many mystery stories, above all, those that belong to the genre of 'gothic horror', tend to be religiously biased, its moral interpretation almost always in relation to sinfulness; the individual who tampers with nature and who dares to overstep the bounds of the divine […] in general, stereotypes of Good versus Evil.
>
> (Director's Production Notes, DVD)

This movie however compounds this binary by evoking a sense of relativity and vertigo.

> What is the world? Who is living and who is dead? Who are the 'Others' and what can we know of them? […] How do you know what you believe you know? How does Grace reconcile her distrust of books with her insistence that everything in the Bible is true? Why is it necessary to believe in God but unacceptable to believe in ghosts?
>
> (Davis 2010: 69)

What is notable is 'the dominant attitude in postmodernism is disbelief' (Gregson 2004: 1) and the stability of belief is not just the basis of faith, but the foundation of knowledge.

What we think comes after life is prefigured by what we think came before life. The story told during the opening credits is not one of horror but one of creation. Its conclusion 'Only God existed […] and so only He could have created them. And He did' comes across as an explanation for the Creation. The innocent child-like prayer we overhear the children reciting expresses the simplification of Grace's doctrine of faith. Her name already cues the audience to the way her beliefs help her draw the boundaries in her world. Mrs Mills explains to Anne that 'there are things your mother doesn't want to hear. She only believes in what she was taught'. Grace's insistence on spiritual obedience provides her with a framework of order within which she functions. The physical walls that demarcate and compartmentalize the house are symbolic of her denial and is at odds with her proclaimed adherence to reason. Her domineering demeanour, regimental routine and oppressive religiosity is clearly a façade that belies her insecurities and anxieties. The intrusion of the paranormal is disruptive to this ideological stability. 'The dialogue in *The Others* often consists in the juxtaposition of contradictory beliefs or truth claims, where nothing allows us to choose between competing assertions' (Davis 2010: 69). When Anne and Nicholas interrogate the rationale of a particular doctrinal concept, it is made to look ludicrous even to a simple child. For instance, Nicholas and Anne find the decapitation of Justus and Pastor amusing and that 'those children were really stupid'. Their pragmatic logic, 'Inside I would have believed in Him but I wouldn't have told the Romans', undermines the heroism and faith of the martyrs. After painstakingly describing children's Limbo, 'where children go who tell lies', Grace's tone takes on one of dread horror and fearful threat.

GRACE: At the centre of the Earth where it's very, very hot […] but not for a few days […] oh no […] no, they're damned forever […] think about it […] try to imagine the end of Eternity […] close your eyes, close your eyes and try to imagine it. Forever. […] Pain. Forever.

ANNE: I'm getting dizzy.

Anne acts as a fact-checker and her mockery undercuts the serious religious intent of her mother's warning, indicating to us a cavalier attitude towards the purgatory which they are ironically already in. The subtext provides an alternative perspective of faith and the consequent result of that faith, one's afterlife. The concept of a limbo counters 'fundamentalist discourses which offer too easy and too convenient a conception of sin, death, punishment and redemption' (Bruce 2005: 33). Grace tells the children the penalty for lying: 'In the next life, the one that's waiting for us after we die. Where would you have gone?' God is perceived to be 'an exacting being who condemns disobedient believers to suffering' (Kwiatkowski 2019: 5). The postmodern crisis of faith produces a schizophrenic God who created us yet deserted us, who saves us yet condemns us, and who warns of the penalty of sin yet provides the means of transgression. The metaphysical implication is that there is 'a perverted God at the center of things' (Salomon 2002: 64), or worse, that he has gone missing. 'Either there are plots or, perhaps worse, there are none, an unendurable void of meaning' (Lloyd-Smith 1996: 16) and thus, there is no one in-charge or in control.

At the core of the Gothic is essentially the question of belief.

MRS MILLS: Well, you shouldn't believe everything that you read in books.

ANNE: That's what our mother says. She says that all this stuff about ghosts is rubbish. And then she expects us to believe everything written in the Bible.

MRS MILLS: And don't you believe it?

ANNE: I believe some things. But, for example, I don't believe that God made the world in seven days. And I don't believe that Noah got all those animals into one boat. Or the Holy Spirit is a dove.

NICHOLAS: No, I don't believe that either.

ANNE: Doves are anything but holy.

NICHOLAS: They poo on our windows.

By equating the biblical and the superstitious as equally supernatural and unbelievable, the pragmatic down-to-earth reality subverts the believability and certainty of doctrine and faith. The interrogation of narratives causes the audience to evaluate the reliability of the discourse of established religion and its doctrine of the afterlife.

The conflict of discourse is a confrontation of imagined realities. Grace's obsession with the concept of truth is expressed in an antipathy to imagination and fantasy and an abhorrence for lying, which she equates with storytelling. Grace does not 'like fantasies, strange ideas' and warns the children that children who tell lies are 'damned forever'. The focus of the conflict between mother and daughter has to do with the veracity of narrative. As such, Grace punishes Anne for what she presumes is a lie and questions Nicholas 'Has

your sister been telling you one of her stories?' Anne's voice threatens the security of Grace's structures.

GRACE: Anne, do you remember the story about Justus and Pastor? Children who don't tell the truth end up in limbo.

ANNE: That's what you say. But I read the other day that limbo is only for children who haven't been baptized. And I have.

This aversion of fictionalization is ironic as the first lines of the movie which is Grace's maternal voice-over even before the opening credits – 'Now children are you sitting comfortably, then I'll begin' – overtly foregrounds her first role as a storyteller herself and alerts the audience to the fictionalization of the narrative. Besides framing the film as a children's bedtime story, this suggests that the entire film is told from Grace's perspective. As a character trapped in her own narrative, her unreliability is revealed to be an ignorance of her own incognizance. In the scene where she mistakes Anne in her baptism dress for the old lady, we are not sure if Grace's distorted point-of-view is real or a temporary lapse of her mental state. Her unreliability as narrator causes the audience to question our ability to discern truth and undermine our trust in our senses. We hear Anne's voice but see the face of an old woman, so the viewer is unable to trust sight or sound. We know what we are looking at while knowing simultaneously that 'what we think we see is not really what we see at all' (Bruce 2005: 21). This disorientation is reinforced by Grace's inability to negotiate reality and her inadequate religiosity, which appears increasingly irrational and absurd against the intensifying chain of events.

Instead of finding salvation through God, the fact that they are saved by fellow spirits provides an alternative religious discourse. Grace tells Nicholas that whenever he feels afraid to squeeze his rosary, pray 'and then your fear will go away [because] when you do that, the Lord is with you. There's no reason to be afraid'. This advice is put to the test when she herself relies on her rosary, but this act is now seen to be in vain as they are past redemption. There is an irony in having a wandering spirit, which itself is a concept contrary to Christian doctrine, pray. Prayer is a fundamental assertion of one's being as it presumes that one exists and is being heard by one's Creator. It is thus most incongruous that the most religious character is also the most to blame.

The dramatic irony is not lost that Grace is speaking of herself as being inhuman, the abominable 'aberration' of the Lord. Grace herself is that 'something diabolic' that inhabits her house. Mrs Mills tells her later about 'the new situation' that 'We must all learn to live together. The living and the dead'. 'The point is neither for the living to exorcize the dead nor for the dead to frighten away the living, but to find a means of coexistence' (Davis 2010: 67). While most horror movies allow for a provisional temporary interpenetration of the dead into normality, they insist on reinstating the demarcation between death and life once the dead are done with their business, accept their fates and transcend to a better place where they rightfully belong. The realization that she is dead does not free Grace but empowers her to finally protect her children. *The Others* suggests that this coexistence is permanent and ongoing as Grace 'does not pass on to another world once she discovers that she has died, but asserts her resilience in that of the

Table 1:

GRACE:	And yet I felt as if there was someone else there. And it wasn't human. There is something in this house. Something diabolic.
MRS MILLS:	Ma'am […]
GRACE:	Something which is not… not at rest. I know you don't believe it. You don't believe it, do you? No, I don't blame you. I used to not believe these things.
MRS MILLS:	I do believe it, ma'am. I've always believed in those things. They're not easy to explain but they do happen. We've all heard stories of the beyond now and then. And I think that, sometimes the world of the dead gets mixed up with the world of the living.
GRACE:	But it's impossible! The Lord would never allow such an aberration! The living and the dead will only meet at the end of Eternity. It says so in the Bible.
MRS MILLS:	Ma'am […] there isn't always an answer for everything.

living' (Briefel 2009: 105). When our presumptions of who the ghost and victim are finally debunked, the ambiguous relativity of the title *The Others* takes on new meaning. It is the living who haunts the dead.

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN?

This absent presence of the ghost makes it a metaphor for the simulacrum of film. The moving picture we 'see' is itself a paraxial ghost, neither real object nor unreal image, a penumbra of light and shadow. In the late eighteenth century, 'ghost shows' were exhibitions of *camera obscura* by means of a magic lantern that projected images of spirits, demons, skeletons and devils onto a wall in a darkened room. By positing 'the veracity of the image, prone as it is to illusion' (Davies 2016: 114), the cinematic serves as *The Other* by which the real can be defined. The viewer of old photographs looks upon ghosts powerfully brought back to life as 'the photograph is a grave for the living dead' (Cadava 1997: 10). Sontag believes '[a]ll photographs are memento mori […] the photograph tells us we will die, one day we will no longer be here, or rather, we will only be here the way we have always been here, as images' (1979: 70). While photography brings the dead back to life by reminding the living of the dead when they were alive, it also reminds the living of our own inevitable mortality. Because death haunts all photographs, the relationship between the ghostly and the photographic is complex. This effect is even more pronounced in motion pictures which combines with sound to reanimate the dead. Movies 'confront us with questions of what is real or imaginary, and of how far we can trust our senses' (Davis 2010: 67).

The twist in the plot of *The Others* rests on a basic assumption that the audience makes: that what we see on-screen is real. 'The materiality of the characters' bodies gives them an illusion of reality and existence in the world of the living and tricks them, as well as the viewers into perceiving themselves as beings that exist in the world of the living' (Antunes 2020: 277). If the character is a ghost, there are conventional Hollywood devices that signal to the audience that this is a ghost. We thus expect ghosts in movies to be shadowy, wispy, translucent and grotesque, visual cues that signify them as Other. We are assured that Charles, Grace's husband, is corporeal as their physical intimacy is tactile and he is seen and heard by all. This solidifies

his tangibility for the audience as we are unaware they are all in the same spiritual realm. While the same device was used in *The Sixth Sense*, the interaction between Grace, the children and the servants dismisses the notion that the director is using the same trick. The red herring of the old woman also distracts our attention away from the servants, albeit not completely, but certainly from Grace and her children, who are unlike the kinds of ghosts we have been trained and conditioned by Hollywood to expect. This generic expectation persists despite Anne's exposition on what ghosts are supposed to be like.

NICHOLAS: Did you really see a boy?
ANNE: Yes, he's called Victor.
NICHOLAS: Is he a ghost?
ANNE: Don't be stupid. Ghosts aren't like that.
NICHOLAS: What are they like?
ANNE: I've told you, they go about in white sheets and carry chains.
NICHOLAS: How do you know?
ANNE: I've seen them. They come out at night.

Anne literally instructs the audience not to expect the stereotypical representation of ghosts, but we still do. 'Our failure to recognize the ghosts as ghosts is the depth of our expectation that ghosts should be "other" to us' (Bruce 2005: 23). This matter-of-fact view of ghosts is reinforced when Anne pretends to be a ghost while dressed in her baptism dress which resembles as much a death shroud as it does a bridal veil. The invisible playful Victor and the blind old woman fit more snugly into the expectations that we have of ghosts. Like Nicholas, we are sceptical but willing to believe Anne as we can come up with no other explanation for the noises in the house. When asked what he should do if he sees a ghost, Grace's dismissive advice is to 'say hello and you continue on studying', something she is obviously unable to do later. While manipulating the audience by defying the conventional concept of a ghost, the movie persists in interrogating it to the point of parody even in its climactic scene.

The audience who already knows that the servants are dead feel a heightened sense of jeopardy and suspense as the children are hesitant to believe that they are ghosts because of their everyday appearance. The movie plays primarily with the audience's need to define who the 'others' are and is successful by implying that otherness is present where we least expect it.

The grotesque discovery of the post-mortem pictures of the servants artificially propped up to simulate the living is at once horrifying and fascinating. Grace initially presumes they are asleep but when understanding dawns on her, finds it macabre and incredulously superstitious. The corpses are 'suspended between the place of the dead and the place of the living, no longer alive, but not yet buried […] it acts, somehow, to arrest the passage between one state and the next' (Bruce 2005: 32). This morbid practice captures the person who is, while concomitantly insisting exists no longer. Likewise, it is only much later that we realize that we too have been similarly deceived and seen nothing but ghosts. The first shot prefigures that Grace is already one of the dead when it gives the audience the impression that Grace is vertical when she is actually horizontal in her bed. Grace remarks that the light 'changes everything' and 'must be contained'. Because photography is impossible without

Table 2:

NICHOLAS:	What's that over there?
ANNE:	I think they're graves.
NICHOLAS:	Don't go near.
ANNE:	Why not?
NICHOLAS:	What if a ghost jumps out?
ANNE:	Graves don't have ghosts. Only skeletons. There's something written here.
NICHOLAS:	Let's go.
ANNE:	Wait.
NICHOLAS:	Anne, what does it say?
MRS MILLS:	You must be strong now, children.
ANNE:	Nicholas, come here!
NICHOLAS:	Mrs Mills, please don't tell Mummy we've run away.
ANNE:	Don't speak to them!
NICHOLAS:	Why?
ANNE:	They're dead.
NICHOLAS:	What?
ANNE:	They're ghosts! Please come here!
MRS MILLS:	Children[…]
ANNE:	Nicholas!
NICHOLAS:	If they're ghosts, why aren't they wearing sheets and clanking chains

light, Grace's photophobia is not only fear of the light but also fear of the photograph (Bruce 2005: 28). The discovery of the picture of the dead servants finally puts to rest our doubts concerning Grace's sanity. The nagging suspicion the audience has had concerning the servants is finally confirmed. Content that they have correctly located the ghost of the movie, the audience is quick to dismiss the discrepancy that it does not explain the ghost of Victor and the old woman or the incident involving Grace. The immediate focus is to exorcize the spirits of the dead servants. The audience's identification with Grace is now complete. Isolated and cornered, surrounded by malevolent spirits, we identify with her fear and terror. The otherness of the ghosts is mitigated by their claim that they are only here to protect Grace from 'the intruders'. The audience is placed in a dilemma to decide which threat is greater: the present reality of the ghosts or the alleged existence of the Others. They find it difficult to reconcile the ghastly nature of the ghosts and the possibility that they have the welfare of Grace at heart. The audience assumes that 'the living and the dead' are Grace and her children and the servants respectively. This culminates in the séance scene when our presumptions are finally debunked. When we see a shot of the table shaking without the appearance of Grace and the children, it dawns upon us that it is Grace and the children who are dead.

The victims of *The Others* are not on-screen but in the cinema. We willingly subject ourselves to the horror and paranoia that we vicariously experience through the fears of the characters portrayed. In doing so, Amenábar manipulates our own fears and imagination to scare us. The stark, single notes of his

score and his use of probing close-ups echo the isolation of space as the children are confined in separate rooms. Amenábar's method is to use silence and darkness to toy with our primal fears and to leave objects out of frame. It is the idea of the paranormal, not the paranormal itself, that is the source of that fear. We hear, feel and sense more than we actually see anything happen. The dread lies not in what we do see but in what we do not see and it is 'not just that we *do* not see, but precisely that we *cannot* see, which has metaphorical and affective import' (Kavka 2002: 227, original emphasis). The camera follows Grace as she walks from room to room, anticipating her next move but always limiting our vision as it does hers. Kavka writes that

> the medium of film is in a peculiarly advantageous position when it comes to the representation of liminality, for it can exploit both the cut-off points of visibility imposed by its frame as well as the manipulations that are possible in its composition of space.
>
> (2002: 226)

In this respect, Amenábar steers away from the excessive shock and special effects of the contemporary horror film or the gore and eroticism of the teenage slasher movie. Instead, his employment of traditional devices like whispering voices and footsteps, slamming creaking doors, swelling music juxtaposed by pregnant silences, establishes an eerie disquieting atmosphere. The scene when Grace enters the junk room of furniture covered with white sheets effectively illustrates this mastery. The sequence ends with the gaze of eyes peering out from the shadows. The shiver that the audience feels is dismissed as foolish when it is revealed to be merely a portrait, another mock overture to what the audience expects. This relief is short-lived as Grace then discovers the antique lost images of the past inhabitants of the house. The familiar Gothic motif of the portrait, a pictorial representation of life, is replicated in the morbid photographs of the dead posing in a parody of life. In these photographs, the audience sees themselves sitting in the stillness of the cinema watching what they presume is a representation of life on-screen when unknown to them, the characters are playing dead in an imitation of life.

EPILOGUE

The terror of postmodern relativity is that life is a simulacrum. The fear is not just that of death but of living an empty life, an existence of routine and insignificance, and thus losing our sense of what makes us human. 'The chief secret of Gothic literature […] is that it is theology at once remove' (Ingebretsen 1996: 193). The ontological import of the Gothic compels 'a total reorientation of epistemological priorities' (Cavaliero 1995: 231). This is why *The Others* is a narrative of creation, death and rebirth. 'The genre of Gothic fiction is a literature of destabilization in that it inspires its readers to ask questions about themselves, their society and the cosmos surrounding them' (Oakes 1999: 284). The denouement of *The Others* turns on our failure to recognize the ghostly, by bestowing presence to an absence, 'the paradoxical evidence of the ghost's existence' (Bruce 2005: 22). Being present, the ghosts are revealed only when, like Grace, the audience comes to terms with the confusion and disorientation of longing, isolation and loneliness that is experienced by the departed. *The Others* exploits what are now perceived to be traditional Gothic features – 'death, deviance, the erotic macabre, psychologically charged sites,

disembodied voices and fragmented bodies' (Williams 2007: 12). Instead of exile and exorcism, the ghost is transformed into a site of identification, sympathy and self-recognition. Instead of scaring us, we now grieve for the ghost. The afterlife is a space of confrontation of guilt, catharsis of forgiveness and reconciliation of peace. By allowing us to experience death by proxy, 'what we take with us from these films is a deeper perceptual awareness of life and of our involvement in its complexities' (Telotte 2004: 31). In subscribing to the notion that 'the conventional values of life and enlightenment are actually less instructive than darkness and death' (Williams 2007: 19), we affirm the validity of our own existence.

REFERENCES

Amenábar, Alejandro (2001), *The Others*, DVD, USA: Dimension Home Video.

Antunes, Luis (2020), 'Making sense of mind-game films: Narrative complexity, embodiment, and the senses, by Simin Nina Littschwager, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 241 pp', review, *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, 19, pp. 276–80.

Badley, Linda (1995), *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Briefel, Aviva (2009), 'What some ghosts don't know: Spectral incognizance and the horror film', *Narrative*, 17:1, pp. 95–108.

Briggs, Julia (1999), 'The ghost story', in D. Punter (ed.), *A Companion to the Gothic*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, pp. 122–31.

Bruce, Susan (2005), 'Sympathy for the dead: (G)hosts, hostilities and mediums in Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* and postmortem photography', *Discourse*, 27:2, pp. 21–40.

Burkholder-Mosco, Nicole and Carse, Wendy (2005), 'Wondrous material to play on: Children as sites of Gothic liminality in the turn of the *Screw, The Innocents and The Others*', *Studies in the Humanities (Indiana)*, 32:2, pp. 201–20.

Cadava, Eduardo (1997), *Words of Light: Thesis on the Photography of History*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Cavaliero, Glen (1995), *The Supernatural and English Fiction*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Davies, Ann (2016), 'The Gothic camera: Javier Aguirresarobe at home and in Hollywood', *Contemporary Spanish Gothic*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 111–37.

Davis, Colin (2010), 'The skeptical ghost: Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* and the return of the dead', in E. Peeren and B. Pilar (eds), *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture*, New York: Maria del, Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, pp. 64–75.

Fuchs, Cynthia (2001), 'It works as mathematics: Interview with Alejandro Amenabar', Nitrate Online, 12 October, https://nitrateonline.com/2001/fothers.html. Accessed 12 October 2023.

Grafius, Brandon (2016), 'Mama and Kristeva: Matricide in the horror film', *Post Script*, 36:1, n.pag.

Gregson, Ian (2004), *Postmodern Literature*, London: Arnold.

Grunenberg, Christoph (ed.) (1997), *Gothic: Transmutations of Horror in Late Twentieth Century Art*, Boston, MA: The Institute of Contemporary Art.

Ingebretsen, Edward (1996), *Maps of Heaven, Maps of Hell: Religious Terror as Memory from the Puritans to Stephen King*, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.

Kavka, Misha (2002), 'The Gothic on screen', in J. E. Hogle (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 209–28.
Kwiatkowski, Fryderyk (2019), '*The Others* (2001) by Alejandro Amenábar in the light of Valentinian thought', *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 21:6, Article 3.
Lloyd-Smith, Allan (1996), 'Postmodernism/Gothicism', in V. Sage and A. Lloyd-Smith (eds), *Modern Gothic: A Reader*, New York: Manchester University Press, pp. 6–19.
McGlynn, Anthony (2021), 'The Others is the definitive ghost movie of the 21st century', The Digital Fix, 10 August, https://www.thedigitalfix.com/the-others/ghost-movie-nicole-kidman. Accessed 14 December 2023.
Oakes, David A. (1999), 'Ghosts in the machines: The haunted castle in the works of Stephen King and Clive Barker', *Studies in Weird Fiction*, 24, pp. 25–33.
Salomon, Roger (2002), *Mazes of the Serpent: An Anatomy of Horror Narrative*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Sontag, Susan (1979), *On Photography*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Telotte, J. P. (2004), 'Faith and idolatry in the horror film', in B. K. Grant (ed.), *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, pp. 20–35.
Williams, Gilda (ed.) (2007), *The Gothic*, Documents of Contemporary Art Series, London: Whitechapel Ventures.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Yeo, Dennis (2024), '"Where are we?": The ghost as interrogative haunting in *The Others*', *The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, Special Issue: 'The Afterlife in Popular Culture', 13:1, pp. 57–70, https://doi.org/10.1386/ajpc_00087_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

In a teaching career spanning over three decades, Dr Dennis Yeo has taught at elementary, secondary school, junior college and tertiary levels. He lectures at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research interests include Gothic literature, film studies, popular culture and literature pedagogy. His papers have been published in *Studies in Gothic Fiction*, *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, *Aeternum: The Journal of Contemporary Gothic Studies* and *Journal of Dracula Studies*.

Contact: National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 1, Nanyang Walk, Singapore 637616.
E-mail: dennis.yeo@nie.edu.sg

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4310-5980

The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture
Volume 13 Number 1
 https://doi.org/10.1386/ajpc_00088_1
Received 13 October 2023; Accepted 18 December 2023; Published Online xx xxxx

DANIEL FASTNEDGE
Auckland University of Technology

MELISSA L. GOULD
Auckland University of Technology

Ads from HELL: Complaining about the use of religion in advertising

ABSTRACT

HELL Pizza's advertising is characterized by its provocative art, audacious copy and bold tactics that relishes in its hellish reputation. Rather than merely relying on attention-grabbing stunts, the brand employs strategies that tap into the deep-seated cultural norms of its audience. Often deemed controversial, HELL's advertising elicits strong public reactions, serving as a mirror reflecting the evolving cultural and moral sensitivities and the place of Christianity in Aotearoa New Zealand. This article critically examines the official complaints about the use of religious references in HELL's advertising to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) in Aotearoa New Zealand. Using thematic analysis, we analyse how 'offense' and references to Christianity are navigated by the public complainant, the ASA and the brand, in 79 rulings between 2005 and 2021. We conclude that while the brand consistently negotiates a fine line between edgy humour and potential offense, the ASA rulings suggest a societal trend leaning towards freedom of artistic expression, even when intertwined with religious undertones, particularly when a brand has a well-established identity.

KEYWORDS

complaints
offensive
controversial
shockvertising
Christianity
Aotearoa New Zealand
brand
marketing

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the interplay between societal perceptions of Christianity and its appropriation by the advertising industry. Specifically, it analyses the HELL Pizza brand (HELL) which provides an iconic representation of religion in advertisements. HELL is the devilish brainchild of Callum Davis and was spawned in 1996. It now employs over 1200 people and has 77 outlet stores across the country, and international stores in United Kingdom, Australia and India amongst others. HELL 'uses the sustained metaphor that controversially links sin and damnation with fast food' (Gould 2008: 22) and embodies a hellish brand in its advertisements, branding, product naming, specials and promotions. For instance, their original pizzas are named after the seven deadly sins; the stores are called 'Hell Holes'; and their phone number is 0800 666 111 (a combination of the devil's number '666' and Aotearoa New Zealand's emergency number '111').

Interrogating the use of Christianity as a promotional tool to sell pizza provides a valuable lens into understanding the religious and cultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand. This is seen in Johnstone's research as he writes,

> The fact that a pizza franchise can build a successful business branded on the imagery of hell suggests that there has been a change in people's belief in hell. [HELL] no doubt plays a part in shifting the public imagination of hell from a real place of eternal condemnation and fire to a place where you pick up pizza on a Friday night. [HELL] outlets visually represent the underworld and thus fictionalize hell. One could argue that such a belief makes it more tolerable for people to enter a … place and order pizza compared to those for whom hell is still very much a reality and not a place to buy pizza from. Some, however, continue to boycott [HELL] on religious grounds. The imagery is not inviting.
>
> (2016: 119)

This resonates with the motivation of our article, to delineate how HELL's advertising not only reflects the changing societal norms and values in Aotearoa New Zealand but also challenges and reshapes them, especially in terms of what is considered acceptable or taboo in mainstream advertising. Through this exploration, we aim to contribute to the broader discourse on the interrelationship between religion, advertising and societal change.

RELIGION, POPULAR CULTURE AND ADVERTISING

The study of religion and popular culture brings together religious studies and cultural studies in what Clark describes as an 'seemingly inexhaustible and ever-evolving subject matter' (2012: 2). Hoover argues that the examination and understanding of when religion and media 'occupy the same conceptual and practical spaces' (2003: 10) offers learnings about both religion and media because, as Clark notes, religion and media 'find meaning in relation to the other' (2012: 8).

It is in the intersection of media and religion that this research is focused. While some believe that sacred topics should be kept separate from, popular culture, especially when it is their own faith and when it is used by people outside of their faith (Forbes and Mahan 2017), others, acknowledge the

similarities between religion and media. Mahan, for example, points out that religion and media are both 'complex phenomenon [that] [unite] diverse practices and beliefs' (2012: 15). Religions are often treated as a brand, marketed and sold to a loyal audience, competing against other religions, and creating spectacles as moments of self-promotion (Twitchell 2007; Einstein 2007). As Gould suggests, 'religious belief, once a deeply personal and private matter, seems … to have been repackaged for the world of celebrity, image and performance' (2008: 14). This supports Forbes and Mahan's acknowledgement that religion plays an important role in popular culture and in the symbolic system through which 'people think about the world, explore models of identity, present and challenge ethical systems, and articulate deeply held values' (2017: 28). Therefore, to have a thorough understanding of religion in a society, we must look to its presence in popular culture.

ADVERTISING AND AUDIENCES

Advertisements are cultural texts (Gould 2016) that negotiate the freedom and limitations of creativity and rhetoric by drawing on, and appropriating, themes and concepts in society. This is complimented by religion which provides 'a system of symbols' (Geertz 2002: 63) to 'comprehend the world' (Geertz 2002: 71). The secular appropriation of religious symbols in popular culture operates and nurtures their cultural freight as icons loaded with meaning. In 1998, Maguire and Weatherby suggested that the seldom use of religion in American television commercials was due to: (1) a perception that religion is 'irrelevant to everyday life' (Maguire and Weatherby 1998: 175); (2) advertisers observing a 'separation between church and state' (Maguire and Weatherby 1998: 176); (3) a perception that religion cannot 'capture or hold audience attention' (Maguire and Weatherby 1998: 176); (4) a need for a product and its messaging to be linked which religion does not often afford and (5) a perception that religion is off bounds.

The use of religion, an inherently sacred and therefore taboo subject in advertising is largely contingent on the perceived reaction of its audience and the goals and motivations of a brand. The study of advertising perception suggests that there is a complex interplay of factors. The examination by Kadic-Maglajlic et al. (2017) of ethical judgements on interpreting controversial advertisements is complimented by Wang (2018), amongst others, who acknowledge that an individual's religious identity plays a significant role in shaping responses to advertising. This is complicated by other identity factors, both individual and cultural (Vernerová 2012). For example, generational variances in attitudes towards controversial advertising indicate differing sensitivities across age groups (Ting 2012).

Whether an advertisement is perceived to be entertaining or amusing, offensive or controversial or anything in between, is also determined by the relationship between the audience and the brand and the nature of the content in a specific advertisement. Beard (2008) comments that there is a delicate balance between humour and offense in advertisements, noting how humour can sometimes lead to negative reactions. Keller (1993) and Aaker (1996) suggest that consumer familiarity with a brand can lead to higher acceptance to bold advertising. McStay's (2010) assessment of how creativity impacts audience perceptions emphasizes the importance of relevance and subtlety of messaging.

The use of religion in advertisements has increased (Maguire et al. 1999; Weatherby and Pugh 2008) and the nature of religion within commercials has changed from 'relatively unnoticed', 'infrequent' and 'beguilingly innocent' in the 1950s and 1960s (Mallia 2009: 172), to 'more frequent, more daring and more controversial' (Mallia 2009: 173) by the early 2000s. Mallia suggests that this is because religion and shock value can 'serve as cues that transport a world of meaning, [be a] shortcut to persuasion, [and pack] a powerhouse of emotion' (2009: 176). This is increasingly important in commercially saturated societies. Additionally, Nardella (2012) notes that the representations of religious themes are now more creative, which Carrette and King (2005) suggests includes a repackaging of religion as spirituality. Such a position is supported by Moore's (2005) suggestion that eastern religions and spirituality appear to be more appealing to advertisers as it is more commonly used than Christianity to sell to contemporary audiences.

DEPICTING THE AFTERLIFE IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

Aotearoa New Zealand presents a unique case study for the examination of religion and media. Located in the South Pacific Ocean, Aotearoa New Zealand is made up of two main islands and is estimated to have a population of just over 5.2 million people (Stats NZ: Tatauranga Aotearoa 2023). It is a multi-cultural and multi-religious population that, according to 2018 census data (NZ Census 2018), is predominately made up of Europeans (70%), Asians (15.1%), Pasifika (8.1%), Middle Eastern/Latin American/African (1.5%) and Māori (16.5%).

Aotearoa New Zealand can be described as having a 'de facto' relationship with Christianity (Gould 2016). While never officially being a religious state with an established church, Christianity has played a significant role in the historical development of the country and the identity of its people dating back to the British missionaries working to bring Māori to Christianity during the late nineteenth century. There has, however, been a gradual decline in the number of those self-identifying as 'Christian' (from 60.6% in 2001 to 37.37% in 2018) and a gradual increase in people self-identifying as 'non-religious' (from 29.6% in 2001 to 48.59% in 2018) (Stats NZ 2019).

With roots in Christianity, the nation's religious landscape is becoming more diverse and pluralist while also accompanied by a growing non-religious population, and local news media describing Aotearoa New Zealand as 'one of the world's most secular societies' (Levine 2012: 3; Singh and Tan 2015) with a 'godless capital' (Tan and Singh 2015: n.pag.). This provides an assumed basic level of understanding of stereotypical representations of Christianity by New Zealanders that advertisers can exploit. Such a perception is supported by Nardella's claim that when advertisers objectify religion, they acknowledge that religious ideas are no longer restricted to sacred spaces 'as part of "secret" knowledge that requires expert interpretation' (2012: 238), and by Johnstone who states that HELL's marketing 'assume[s] some religious knowledge or imagination, be that positive or negative' (2016: 118–19).

The incorporation of religion, let alone the afterlife, in advertisements in Aotearoa New Zealand is a lightly researched field. A content analysis of the incorporation of Christian references by non-religious companies in television commercials over a one-week period in 2008 captured 53 texts. Two of these texts reference the Christian afterlife concepts of heaven and hell as a 'destination', four texts depict angels and two texts portray the devil (Gould 2008).

Of note, Australian beer brand Pure Blonde uses the slogan 'Heaven Sent' to amplify the 'sacredness' and purity of the product. While Green & Black's Organic Chocolate references both heaven and hell to 'imply that their product's "completely natural ingredients"' come from a heavenly source, and its '"indulgent taste experience" is sinful', thus being 'a fusion between the best of both worlds' (Gould 2008: 39).

Gould (2016) expanded the study to over 630 hours of programming from 28 days in 2012 and captured 307 texts that referenced Christianity (including texts for Christian companies). The study captured eighteen texts that referenced the afterlife as a destination: heaven (n = 4) or hell (n = 13). Eight promos for television programmes and movies include the word 'Hell' within the language of the programme as a casual expletive, fairly removed from its religious connotations when used. Three promotions (*Hell's Kitchen*, *HellBoy*, *Little Nicky)* depict Hell as a place and is central to the genesis media text, and therefore its reference is inevitable. Devils or demonic characters were portrayed in ten texts. Interestingly, the only television commercials that referenced Hell as a place or through the devil was HELL which had three texts from the campaign including 'Roulette', which appears at Figure 2 in this study.

Despite Christian iconography been present in both studies (Gould 2008, 2016), the afterlife is seldom used, and when the afterlife is incorporated it is often part of a genesis text and favours heaven over hell. It is against this backdrop that HELL's unapologetic embodiment of the afterlife (and particularly hell over heaven) is particularly risky as there is not a precedent for the nature or extent to which the afterlife can or should be incorporated in advertisements in Aotearoa New Zealand.

METHOD

This study follows Braun and Clarke's (2012) six phase thematic analysis process through an inductive approach, as described by Strauss and Corbin (1998), to derive emergent patterns, themes and categories from official complaints made to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA). Thematic analysis navigates 'the complexities of meaning' (Guest et al. 2012: 10) to 'make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences' (Braun and Clarke 2012: 57).

We analysed 79 rulings[1] made by the ASA, a self-regulatory body 'dedicated to ensuring that advertising is truthful and not misleading or deceptive, and that it is socially responsible' (Magill 2023: n.pag.), following complaints about HELL's advertisements between 2005 and 2021. The data encapsulates the audiences' identification of what they perceive as offensive and a consolidated view of the deliberations and rationales from media, advertising agencies and other representatives. This enables a multidimensional analysis rooted in diversified viewpoints.

The data does have limitations. The data is confined to complaints lodged to the ASA and is restricted to advertising content. This means that offense that is not officially documented as an ASA complaint, and complaints against other forms of media content, such as merchandise or user-generated content, fall outside the scope of this research. The ASA complaints do, however, serve as a crucial foundation for exploring and understanding the complex interplay of religion, advertising and society in Aotearoa New Zealand because it serves as the official record of public complaints.

1. New Zealand Advertising Standards Authority Database, http://www.nzlii.org/nz/cases/NZASA/. Accessed 3 April 2023.

HELL PIZZA: OFFICIAL COMPLAINTS AND WIDESPREAD OFFENSE

This study analyses the ASA's 79 rulings in response to complaint/s about HELL Pizza advertisements from 2005 to 2021. While each advertisement might have received any number of complaints, only one ruling is made for each individual advertisement. While 58 per cent of the rulings were deemed to *not* violate the existing standards or guidelines and were therefore ruled as having no grounds to proceed, 10.12 per cent of the rulings were upheld (n = 6) or upheld in part (n = 2). This shows that the advertising content mostly follows established guidelines, with only a few cases seen as 'crossing a line'.

The upheld complaints (see Table 1 below) are all classified under ASA's codes that address social responsibility, decency and offensiveness (ASA 2023). Principle 1 states that '[a]dvertisements must be prepared and placed with a due sense of social responsibility to consumers and to society', Rule 1(c) states '[a]dvertisements must not contain anything that is indecent, or exploitative, or degrading, or likely to cause harm, or serious or widespread offence, or give rise to hostility, contempt, abuse or ridicule'. This aligns with the broader pattern observed in the dataset, where 47 out of 79 of the complaints concerning HELL cited offensiveness.

Several rules from the ASA guidelines emerged as recurrently cited: The Code of Ethics Principle 4, which stresses the importance of social responsibility in advertising, was referenced in 57 deliberations. Within this principle, Rule 5 about Offensiveness dominated (n = 47), followed by Rule 4 on Decency (n = 13), Rule 2 on Truthful Presentation (n = 7) and Rule 6 on Fear (n = 4). The use of humour and satire, as emphasized by Principle 6 from the Code for People in Advertising, was a notable point in fifteen deliberations. These references illustrate that while the ASA has a spectrum of guidelines, the public's concerns consistently revolve around offensiveness, decency, truthfulness and the limits of humour and satire. For brands which rely on dark humour and provocative content, the threshold between acceptability and offensiveness is delicate but crucial. While humour, satire and creative liberties are acknowledged, they are also bounded by societal expectations of decency, truthfulness and broader social responsibility.

The data points to three predominant areas of offense within the advertisements: (1) *art*, which encompasses the visual components present in advertisements – ranging from objects incorporated or the aesthetic techniques employed, to the scenes portrayed; (2) *copy*, which pertains to the

Table 1: Upheld complaints against HELL Pizza by the ASA (2005–21).

Year	*Advertisement*	*Medium*	*Complaint summary*
2006	'Kids are evil'	Mailer	Negative attitude of children.
2006	'Lust condoms'	Mailer	Delivery of unsolicited condoms.
2007	'George Bush'	Billboard	Use of 'bastard' in public
2009	'Our brownie won't eat your dog'	Billboard	Racial slur 'brownies'.
2009	'Mafia - Blood'	TVC	A bloody death scene
2015	'Certificate of Mutha f*cking awesomeness'	Flyer	Implies 'mother fucking'.
2015	'Candyman'	TVC	A man's head exploding.
2017	'Sweet F'all'	Radio	Implies 'sweet fuck all'.

linguistic content – whether written or spoken; (3) *tactics* which refers to the medium-specific factors – such as the delivery method, placement and scheduling of an advertisement.

THE REACTION TO CHRISTIAN ART IN HELL'S ADVERTISEMENTS

Thirteen advertisements for HELL were flagged for the inclusion of artwork that references Christianity, specifically, religious people (n = 8), symbols (n = 4) and non-Christian (n = 2), as summarized in Table 2 below.

According to the ASA data, portrayals of religious 'people' were a common cause for offence. Depictions of the devil, demons and Satan were the most sighted. A cartoon of a 'child-like' devil character elicited a complainant who 'objected to the caricature' (Complaint 06/355). Images of demons were described as 'frightening' (Complaint 10/038) – the 'hideous devil's face with the truly evil grin and eyes' (Complaint 09/726). The style of visual portrayal was observed to influence the level of reaction. While cartoonish caricatures of the devil were simply 'objected to' (Complaint 06/355), darker, graphic depictions were seen as 'frightening' (Complaint 10/038) or 'horrific' (Complaint 10/202). Interestingly, although the advertisement in Figure 1 (below) in which the devil is played by a middle-aged European male in a smart dark suit

Table 2: 'Not-Upheld' complaints against 'Christian' art in HELL's advertisements (2005–21).

Theme	*Art*	*Advertisement*	*Year*
People	Devil child with horns	'Kids are evil' mailer	2006
	Devil horn and fangs drawn over Queen Elizabeth II	'Defaced Queen' mailer	2006
	Devil and fire	HELL website	2006
	Leader of the Anglican Church (The Queen) defaced with devil features	'Defaced Queen' mailer	2006
	Devil's face	HELL sign	2009
	Depiction of a half angel half demon	'Reusable Bags' TVC	2010
	Jesus (painting of *The Sacred Heart*)	'Meet your new neighbours from HELL'	2009
	Jesus	'Meet the family from HELL' Mailer	2010
	Angel	'Welcome to HELL Bethlehem' Flyer	2010
Symbols	Christian cross	Job vacancy ad	2005
	Pentagram	'Hell crossed bun' billboard	2011
	Star of David	'Hell crossed bun' billboard	2011
	Inverted cross	'Pizza Roulette' TVC	2012
Other religious symbols (non-Christian)	A simulated séance scene	Séance TVC	2010
	Grim reaper	'Welcome to Hell Bethlehem' Flyer	2010

Figure 1: Screenshots from the 'Pizza Roulette' television advertisement by HELL, aired in 2012. Left: Inverted cross depiction. Right: Devil character portrayal. Courtesy of HELL.

did receive a complaint, the objection pertained to the 'incidental and fleeting' inverted cross – there was no objections to the 'devil' (Complaint 12/183). This supports McStay's (2010) finding that creativity and subtle messaging plays an important role in influencing audience reactions, and Moraru's (2013) study on Romanian Christmas advertisements which highlights how cultural synthesis and evolving audience perceptions of symbolic figures can impact interpretations and reactions in advertising.

Conversely, audiences frequently identified the use of Jesus' image as offensive. One complainant said, 'the usage of a well-known picture of Jesus Christ in this form, is totally wrong and an affront to myself and other Christians, for whom Jesus is both Saviour and Lord' (Complaint 10/260). An image of Queen Elizabeth II with devil horns and fangs drawn on it was found offensive because 'it defaces the leader of the Anglican Church with a devil caricature' (Complaint 06/057).

Like the complaints about the depiction of Jesus and Queen Elizabeth II, there were some complaints about Christian symbols, describing the inclusion of Christian 'symbols' as 'disrespectful', 'insulting' and 'blasphemous' (Complaint 11/222). Complainants noted that their concern was because they identified as Christian or was on behalf of religious audiences. One individual explains, 'to a Christian the cross is an essential part of our Christianity and I take *strong* objection to it being used in context with Hell and the nature of the advertisement' (Complaint 05/425, original emphasis). Another said, '[t]he picture of "The Sacred Heart" was offensive to many Catholics and Christians and was not necessary in the advertisement' (Complaint 09/747). These comments question the use of a religious symbols, suggesting their inclusion lacks a clear link to pizza and may be seen as a personal attack on Christians. This reinforces Weinberger and Gulas (1992) finding that the perceived relevance of controversial elements in advertisements to the product or service being advertised significantly influences the perception of the advertisements.

The incorporation of 'other religious symbols' was considered 'blasphemous' (Complaint 11/222), 'frightening' (Complaint 10/038) and 'offensive' (Complaint 12/379). In response to the billboard in Figure 2 below, one individual said a pentagram was 'extremely offensive', another said the 'use of the Satanic symbols as well as the wording is blasphemous' (Complaint 11/222). In response to the television commercial in Figure 1 above, an inverted cross for a 'Pizza Roulette' promotion was believed to have 'crossed a line in terms of becoming religiously offensive' (Complaint 12/183). One complaint claimed that a simulated séance scene 'could case children to have nightmares' (Complaint 10/655). These instances highlight the complex space advertisers

Figure 2: 'Hell Cross Bun' billboard advertisement by HELL, displayed in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2011. Courtesy of HELL.

must navigate. Subtle religious symbols and potentially frightening themes of the afterlife can evoke strong reactions from viewers, and the breadth of sensitivity and range of interpretations within the audience must be carefully managed. This compliments Kadić-Maglajlić et al. (2017) who suggest that as an individual's religious commitment heightens their perception of controversy in advertisements intensifies.

Despite many complaints raised regarding religious art, none were upheld on this basis, with the ASA frequently citing HELL's reputation as a factor. When responding to a complaint referring to the use of an inverted cross (see Figure 1), the ASA said that 'the laid-back humour in the advertisements was part of the "Hell Pizza" branding' (Complaint 05/425). This indicates that HELL's established identity often provides a cushion against rulings of wrongdoing. In other words, because HELL has a well-known reputation it sets an expectation with its audience to produce controversial advertisements using dark humour. This aligns with concepts developed by Keller (1993) and Aaker (1996) that a brand's established reputation not only sets audience expectations but also fosters societal acceptance of its provocative advertising approach. Social acceptance is perhaps summed up in this complaint (10/260): 'While I am not happy with the devilish characters shown on the form, they are probably relative to the unpleasant business name "[HELL]"'. Overall, while some individuals might find the use of religious art in advertising objectionable, it is not inevitable that it will breach the collective threshold of what is deemed 'widespread offence' in Aotearoa New Zealand.

THE REACTION TO CHRISTIAN REFERENCES IN THE COPY OF HELL'S ADVERTISEMENTS

HELL's Christian-themed copy in its advertising has been a source of public contention, as detailed in Table 3. When analysing the themes within the

Table 3: 'Not-Upheld' complaints against 'Christian' copy in HELL's advertisements (2005–21).

Theme	*Copy*	*Advertisements*	*Year*
Destination	'Go to Hell'.	Go to HELL radio	2012
	'Hell. Too good for some evil bastards'.	George Bush billboard	2013
People	'Feed your little devils'.	Feed your little devils mailer	2006
	'For a limited time. A bit like Jesus'.	'Hell crossed buns' billboard	2011
Symbols	'666' used in HELL's phone number (0800 666 111).	Defaced Queen mailer	2006
Other	'Deliverance'.	HELL's website	2006
	'Putting the vice in service'.	HELL's website	2006
	'Can you be saved?'.	HELL's website	2006
	'How do you know he's even listening? At least we deliver' questions beliefs.	The guy from HELL billboard	2006

complaints, a pattern of offense becomes apparent, particularly within the representations of 'Destination', 'People', 'Symbols' and 'Other'.

Under the 'Destination' theme, the slogan 'Go to Hell' was met with public disapproval, as it was seen to conflict with Christian values, indicative of a broader societal unease with the interplay of religious terminology and commercial branding (Complaint 12/179).

The portrayal of religious 'People' in advertising copy has also drawn criticism. This includes the controversial use of the phrase 'For a limited time. A bit like Jesus', in Figure 2 above, which elicited objections for its perceived irreverence towards the sanctity of Jesus' resurrection, a cornerstone of Christian faith (Complaint 11/222). Similarly, the phrasing 'Feed your little devils' was challenged for its potential to offend, reflecting a societal sensitivity to the depiction of children in the context of religious rhetoric (Complaint 06/396).

In the realm of 'Symbols', the inclusion of '666' in the company's contact number sparked disapproval for its association with negative biblical connotations, highlighting the complex interplay between numerology and religious sentiment (Complaint 06/057).

The category of 'Other' encompasses a range of complaints, such as reactions to the statements 'Deliverance', 'Can you be saved?' and 'Putting the vice in service' on HELL's website, which were considered to trivialize religious teachings and were opposed for undermining family values (Complaint 06/396). Moreover, the billboard statement 'How do you know He is listening? At least I deliver – The Guy from Hell' was noted for its provocative insinuation regarding the efficacy of prayer, a subject deeply woven into the fabric of religious practice (Complaint 06/050).

This analysis reinforces the significance of context when interpreting the appropriateness of religious references in advertising copy. The absence of religious references in upheld complaints suggests that the ASA affords

a measure of leniency towards religious references, focusing instead on the intent and broader context of the advertising copy.

HELL's established identity, which incorporates religious references, is acknowledged by the ASA and appears to inform societal expectations regarding the brand's thematic direction. This recognition, articulated by the ASA, implies an expectation that HELL's advertisements would naturally weave religious puns and references into their narrative (Complaint 06/050). This societal concession to HELL's branding strategy is emblematic of a broader cultural tolerance for satirical religious statements within Aotearoa New Zealand, as evidenced by the adjudication of complaints against the 'For a limited time. A bit like Jesus' billboard, which was ultimately deemed to align within the boundaries of acceptable humour and satire in a tolerant society (Complaint 11/222).

The use of religious motifs and language by HELL, while provocative and at times contentious, has not been judged by the ASA to exceed the bounds of 'widespread offence'. This reflects a level of societal tolerance in Aotearoa New Zealand towards religious-themed humorous or satirical content, particularly when presented as part of a well-established brand narrative.

IRRESPONSIBLE MEDIA TACTICS AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

The use of media tactics in HELL's advertising, which has included concerns about scheduling, placement and delivery methods, has been deliberated in 29 instances. These tactics have been scrutinized for their potential inappropriateness, with a particular focus on the exposure to children. Within these deliberations, religious beliefs have prompted concerns on nine occasions, as detailed in Table 4 below.

'Scheduling' complaints have centred on the timing of advertisements in relation to religious events and audiences. The placement of a billboard

Table 4: 'Not-Upheld' complaints against media tactics involving Christianity in HELL's advertisement (2005–21).

Theme	Tactic	Advertisement	Year
Scheduling	A simulated séance scene outside an AO timeslot.	'Séance' TVC	2010
	'Hell crossed buns' billboard offensive to Christian audiences leading up to Easter.	'For a limited time. A bit like Jesus' cinema advertisement.	2011
	Children exposed to inverted cross.	Thin base pizza TVC	2012
	Incentivising phrase 'go to hell' while children listening.	'Go to HELL' radio	2012
	Offensive to Christians leading up to Easter.	'Rabbit' billboard	2014
Placement	Children exposed to disturbing devil image.	HELL signage	2009
	A cartoon woman with devil horns and tail next to a primary school.	Unholy Doughnuts roadside sign	2020
Delivery method	'Feed your little devils' phrase used could be psychologically hurtful to children exposed.	'Feed your little devils' mailer	2006
	Possible exposure of children to free contraception.	LUST Condom mailer	2006

advertising a rabbit pizza covered in rabbit pelts during Easter (see Figure 3 below) was condemned for being visible to young people around a significant religious holiday, described as 'highly disrespectful to vegan and religious groups' (Complaint 14/207). Additionally, the timing of the 'Hell Crossed buns' billboard (see Figure 2) leading up to Easter was labelled 'deliberately inflammatory and akin to blasphemy' (Complaint 11/222). In these instances, the ASA referred to the advertiser's history of socially provocative and confrontational advertisements, indicating a societal tolerance for a certain level of deliberate provocation in advertising scheduling.

'Placement' issues have arisen from the location of advertisements and their visibility to specific groups. For example, the 'Rabbit' billboard by HELL was criticized for its placement 'in plain sight of young people', sparking concerns from vegan and religious groups (Complaint 14/207). Another contentious placement involved the Unholy Doughnuts roadside sign depicting a cartoon woman with horns and a devil's tail, located 'right next to a primary school' and considered inappropriate due to its proximity to young children (Complaint 20/186).

'Delivery Method' complaints have related to how certain advertising mediums and their delivery might inadvertently expose audiences, especially children, to offensive content. For instance, a mailer incentivizing the phrase 'go to Hell' was seen as sending an improper message to youth culture (Complaint 06/057). This aligns with the argument that offensive content in more intrusive media forms, such as direct mail, is more likely to offend (Beard 2008).

HELL's promotional tactic of mailing condoms to promote their 'Meat lovers' pizza was met with public outcry, primarily from those concerned

Figure 3: 'Rabbit' billboard by HELL, adorned with rabbit pelts, displayed in 2014 leading into Easter in Aotearoa New Zealand. Courtesy of HELL.

with religious and family values. This delivery method was criticized for its potential to clash with Christian teachings on sexuality, which caution against sexual indulgence (Francoeur 2001). Complainants labelled the campaign as 'An Inappropriate Use of the Mail System', fearing it could lead to children engaging with the adult-themed products (Complaint 06/417). HELL's advertising agency argued that the objections were driven by a 'motivated and vocal minority', challenging what they perceived as a tolerant secular society's views (Complaint 06/417). However, the ASA recognized the campaign could elicit 'serious and widespread offence' among communities with such religious convictions (Complaint 06/417), acknowledging the complex interplay between advertising freedom and religious sensitivities in the community.

CONCLUSION

HELL Pizza can be used as a barometer of Aotearoa New Zealand's cultural and moral sensitivities, specifically, the acceptance of provocative advertising which includes themes of the afterlife and Christianity. The 'art' utilized in HELL advertisements often teeters on the edges of good taste. But, while, for example, the depiction of religious people in a potentially derogatory manner elicited complaints, the ASA's rulings suggest a more liberal stance than the general populace, suggesting a society that, at its core, leans towards freedom of artistic expression even when it intersects with religious imagery. This study also reveals a discernible pattern of boundary-pushing in the use of religious copy in HELL's advertisements. Employing dark humour and sometimes treading on the delicate grounds of religious sensibilities, the 'copy' consistently straddled the line between audacious and offensive, a balancing act that manifested through blasphemous undertones and controversial phrases. Lastly, the 'tactics' employed by HELL reveal a trend of inappropriate content delivery, particularly concerning the young audience. The ASA's upheld rulings consistently emphasized the protection of vulnerable groups, including children, from exposure to materials deemed inappropriate. Thus, while society might be more forgiving in terms of the themes explored in 'copy' and 'art', there exists a firm stance against tactics that put inappropriate content within easy reach of young viewers.

When we compare all the complaints to those upheld rulings by the ASA, the data supports Gould's (2008, 2016) observation that the lines between the sacred and the secular in mainstream promotional material is blurring. Specifically, the data highlights a leniency towards controversial 'art' and 'copy' from a religious angle, hinting at a society more tolerant of religious satire than might be assumed based on the number of complaints received. It is imperative to note the crucial role HELL's established brand plays here. A brand synonymous with dark, edgy humour, seems to afford it a greater room to manoeuvre within the realms of provocative art. This supports Keller's (1993) and Aaker's (1996) assertions that audiences may be more accepting of bold advertising if they are familiar with the brand.

For advertisers, the insights garnered from HELL's advertising journey are invaluable. It showcases a society that, while open to dark humour and controversial art and copy, demands responsibility in the delivery tactics, emphasizing the protection of young people. The takeaways are clear: while 'copy' and 'art' may exist in the grey area of moral and ethical boundaries, 'tactics' must adhere to a stricter code, respecting the vulnerability of specific demographics. Religious imagery, given its deeply personal and emotional nature, needs to

be navigated with care. And while HELL benefits from its established reputation allowing for more provocative advertising, newer or lesser-known brands may struggle to secure audience acceptance and potentially lead to stricter scrutiny by the ASA board. It is also crucial for advertisers to remember that while the general public's moral and cultural compass can change over time, regulatory bodies like the ASA are often mindful that they reflect and consider the 'widespread level of offense'. So, while the ASA fosters creative freedom for advertisers, they must also advocate for responsible advertising for the broader community.

HELL's advertising serves as a compelling case study on the intersection of branding, societal sentiment and regulatory oversight. It is a delicate negotiation between pushing boundaries and understanding where those boundaries lie, all the while remembering that at the core of every advertisement is an individual viewer with their own set of beliefs and values.

REFERENCES

Aaker, David A. (1996), 'Measuring brand equity across products and markets', *California Management Review*, 38:3, pp. 102–20.

Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) (2023), 'Advertising standards codes', Advertising Standards Authority, https://www.asa.co.nz/codes/codes/advertising-standards-code/. Accessed 3 February 2023.

Beard, Fred K. (2008), 'Advertising and audience offense: The role of intentional humor', *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 14:1, pp. 1–17.

Carrette, Jeremy and King, Richard (2005), *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, London: Routledge.

Clark, Terry R. (2012), 'Introduction: What is religion? What is popular culture: How are they related?', in T. R. Clark and Jr D. W. Clanton (eds), *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture: Theories, Themes, Products and Practices*, London and New York: Routledge and Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 1–12.

Einstein, Mara (2007), *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age*, London and New York: Routledge.

Forbes, Bruce David and Mahan, Jeffrey H. (eds) (2017), *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, CA: University of California Press.

Francoeur, Robert T. (2001), 'Challenging collective religious/social beliefs about sex, marriage, and family', *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy*, 26:4, pp. 281–90.

Geertz, Clifford (2002), 'Religion as a cultural system', in M. Lambek (ed.), *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, Malden MA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, pp. 61–82.

Gould, Melissa L. (2008), 'Religion sells: A discourse analysis of the use of religious references in campaigns that sell non-religious products', honours dissertation, Aotearoa New Zealand: Auckland University of Technology.

Gould, Melissa (2016), 'Christianity sells and the advertiser's toolbox', Ph.D. thesis, Aotearoa New Zealand: Auckland University of Technology.

Guest, Greg, MacQueen, Kathleen M. and Namey, Emily E. (2012), 'Introduction to applied thematic analysis', *Applied Thematic Analysis*, 3:20, pp. 1–21.

Hays, Mila (2018), 'Does controversial advertising still work?: Four New Zealand case studies?', MA thesis, Aotearoa New Zealand: Auckland University of Technology.

HELL Pizza (2011), '"Hell Cross Bun" billboard advertisement', Ads of the World, https://www.adsoftheworld.com/campaigns/hell-cross-bun. Access 17 August 2023.

HELL Pizza (2012), 'Pizza Roulette television advertisement', YouTube, 29 March, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ahNpFf1_0Q. Accessed 17 August 2023.

HELL Pizza (2014), 'Rabbit billboard advertisement', Ads of the World, https://www.adsoftheworld.com/campaigns/rabbit-0a19f2c2-20c7-425b-ac66-b06bd7657ba2. Accessed 17 August 2023.

Hoover, Stewart, M. (2003), 'Religion, media and identity: Theory and method in audience research on religion and media', in J. Mitchell and S. Marriage (eds), *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*, London and New York T&T Clark, pp. 9–20.

Johnstone, Carlton (2016), 'Marketing God and Hell: Strategies, tactics and textual poaching', in C. Deacy and E. Arweck (eds), *Exploring Religion and the Sacred in a Media Age*, New York: LaTour & Henthorne, pp. 105–21.

Kadić-Maglajlić, Selma, Arslanagić-Kalajdžić, Maja, Micevski, Milena, Michaelidou, Nina and Nemkova, Ekaterina (2017), 'Controversial advert perceptions in SNS advertising: The role of ethical judgement and religious commitment', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 141:2, pp. 249–65.

Keller, Kevin Lane (1993), 'Conceptualizing, measuring, and managing customer-based brand equity', *Journal of Marketing*, 57:1, pp. 1–22.

Levine, Stephen (2012), 'Political values: Enduring political values', Te Ara: The Encyclopaedia of New Zealand, 20 June, https://teara.govt.nz/en/political-values/page-3. Accessed 23 May 2023.

Magill, Kerrie-Lee (2023), 'From the Chair (ASA Governance Board)', Advertising Standards Authority, https://www.asa.co.nz/about-us/from-the-chair/. Accessed 23 May 2023.

Maguire, Brendan and Weatherby, Georgie A. (1998), 'The secularisation of religion and television commercials', *Sociology of Religion*, 59:2, pp. 171–79.

Maguire, Brendan, Sandage, Diane and Weatherby, Georgie A. (1999), 'Television commercial content: Religion versus science and professional expertise', *Sociological Focus*, 32:4, pp. 413–25.

Mallia, Karen (2009), 'From the sacred to the profane: A critical analysis of the changing nature of religious imagery in advertising', *Journal of Media and Religion*, 8:3, pp. 172–90.

McStay, Andrew (2010), 'A qualitative approach to understanding audience's perceptions of creativity in online advertising', *Qualitative Report*, 15:1, pp. 37–58.

Moore, Rick (2005), 'Spirituality that sells: Religious imagery in magazine advertising', *Advertising & Society Review*, 6:1, https://doi.org/10.1353/asr.2005.0006.

Moraru, Mădălina B. (2013), 'Sacred and profane view of Christmas in advertising', *Revista Romana de Jurnalism si Comunicare-RRJC* (*Romanian Journal of Journalism & Communication*), 8:4, pp. 26–38.

Nardella, Carlo (2012), 'Religious symbols in Italian advertising: Symbolic appropriation and the management of consent', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 27:2, pp. 217–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2012.675689.

New Zealand Legal Information Institute (2023), 'New Zealand advertising standards authority decisions database', New Zealand Legal Information

Institute, 10 August, http://www.nzlii.org/nz/cases/NZASA. Accessed 17 August 2023.

NZ Census (2018), *Population Data; Generated by Statistics New Zealand*, Stats NZ Tatauranga Aotearoa, https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/2018-census-population-and-dwelling-counts/. Accessed 12 April 2023.

Singh, Harkanwal and Tan, Lincoln (2015), 'God and money: Interactive map shows rich suburbs have most atheists', NZ Herald, 13 May, http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=114472700. Accessed 12 April 2023.

Stats NZ (2019), 'Losing our religion', Statistics New Zealand, 3 October, https://www.stats.govt.nz/news/losing-our-religion#:~:text=The%202018%20Census%20results%20showed,in%20the%20last%20few%20censuses. Accessed 12 April 2023.

Stats NZ: Tatauranga Aotearoa (2023), 'National population estimates: At 30 September 2023', Stats NZ https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/national-population-estimates-at-30-september-2023/#:~:text=At%2030%20September%202023%3A,resident%20population%20was%20provisionally%205%2C269%2C200. Accessed 1 October 2023.

Strauss, Anselm and Corbin, Juliet (1998), *Basics of Qualitative Research Techniques*, 2nd ed., Thousand Oaks, CA, London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, Inc.

Tan, Lincoln and Singh, Harkanwal (2015), 'State of faith: Wellington can't believe it', NZ Herald, 13 May, https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/state-of-faith-wellington-cant-believe-it/LKHSHNO6ZBKDAOQTEQLROYJLKQ/?c_id=1&objectid=11447823. Accessed 12 April 2023.

Ting, Hiram and Ernest Cyril de Run (2012), 'Generations X and Y attitude towards controversial advertising', *Asian Journal of Business Research*, 2:2, pp. 18–32.

Twitchell, James B. (2007), *Shopping for God: How Christianity Went from in the Heart to in Your Face*, New York: Simon and Schuster.

Vernerová, Simona (2012), 'Characteristics of the language of advertising: Profanity in contemporary advertising: Profanity in contemporary advertising', bachelor thesis, Tomas Bata University in Zlín, Faculty of Humanities, https://digilib.k.utb.cz/bitstream/10563/21406/1/vernerov%c3%a1_2013_bp.pdf.

Wang, Zehua, Deshpande, Sameer, Waller, David S. and Erdogan, B. Zafer (2018), 'Religion and perceptions of the regulation of controversial advertising', *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, 30:1, pp. 29–44.

Weatherby, Georgie A. and Pugh, Jean (2008), 'The secularisation of religion and television commercials in the U.S.: An update', *Journal of Sociology, Social Work and Social Welfare*, 2:1.

Weinberger, Marc G. and Gulas, Charles S. (1992), 'The impact of humor in advertising: A review', *Journal of Advertising*, 21:4, pp. 35–59.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Fastnedge, Daniel and Gould, Melissa L. (2024), 'Ads from HELL: Complaining about the use of religion in advertising', *The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, Special Issue: 'The Afterlife in Popular Culture', 13:1, pp. 71–87, https://doi.org/10.1386/ajpc_00088_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Daniel Fastnedge is a lecturer in the School of Communications at the Auckland University of Technology (AUT), where he delves into research on AI image production in advertising, navigating the complexities of offensive advertising and dissecting audience perceptions.

Contact: Auckland University of Technology, 55 Wellesley Street East, Auckland City, 1010 New Zealand.
E-mail: daniel.fastnedge@aut.ac.nz

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8199-178X

Melissa L. Gould is a senior lecturer in critical media studies at the School of Communications at AUT. Her research focuses on media literacy, promotional culture and childhood studies.

Contact: Auckland University of Technology, 55 Wellesley Street East, Auckland City, 1010 New Zealand.
E-mail: melissa.gould@aut.ac.nz

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4066-2845

The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture
Volume 13 Number 1
 https://doi.org/10.1386/ajpc_00089_1
Received 4 October 2023; Accepted 18 December 2023; Published Online xx xxxx

MATT GUINIBERT
Auckland University of Technology (AUT)

JO PAGE
Auckland University of Technology (AUT)

That time I was reincarnated as a problematic trope: Viewer preferences and cultural trends in reincarnation isekai anime

ABSTRACT

The genre of reincarnation isekai anime, wherein a protagonist dies in their original world only to be reborn in a fantastical one, has grown significantly in global appeal. Yet, this genre's expansion also normalizes controversial themes such as mental health issues, sexual and violent content, and the sexualisation of virtual minors. This article employs a data-driven approach, analysing user-generated coding of themes and properties from English-speaking fan sites, to critically examine three emergent and interconnected dimensions: the success of series deemed 'trashy', the complexities surrounding sexual themes, and the rising appeal of the 'zero-to-hero' motif in a post-pandemic world. The findings reveal a paradoxical allure of 'trashy' but popular content, complex ethical dilemmas surrounding sexual themes, and an increased resonance of empowerment motifs resulting from the pandemic. These discoveries provoke renewed discussions on

KEYWORDS

isekai tensei
maladaptive media consumption
escapism
virtual minors
trash sells
data-driven

anime's role in shaping and reflecting societal values and raise questions about regulatory challenges in a globalized media setting. The study confirms the need for more nuanced understandings of the genre's growing global influence, particularly outside of Japan, and calls for continued research to delve deeper into its complexities.

INTRODUCTION

The genre of reincarnation *isekai* ('other world') anime ('Japanese animation'), wherein a protagonist dies in their original world only to be reborn in a fantastical one, has gained considerable popularity in recent years. As the genre expands its audience imparting the exploration of benign themes such as action, fantasy and romantic harem, it potentially also serves to normalize controversial areas such as mental health, sexual and violent themes, and the sexualisation of minors. Additionally, this genre has seen a rise in the 'zero-to-hero' theme, a narrative motif that resonates strongly in a world disrupted by the pandemic, embodying viewers' desires for escapism.

Examination of such problematic themes in manga and anime is nothing new, with harsh critiques following the 1989 'Otaku Killer' (an infamous murderer who was obsessed with anime) who kidnapped and killed girls (Azuma 2009). Further examination of the isekai genre has been conducted, e.g., Lu (2020) or Muhamed (2020). This study seeks to add to this burgeoning body of knowledge by focusing specifically on the reincarnation isekai subgenre using data collected from English-speaking audience fan sites to explore these problematic themes. Three interrelated aspects will be examined in detail: the dichotomy between well-rated series and those considered 'trashy', yet successful; the influence and challenges of sexual themes, including the sexualisation of virtual minors; and the growing prominence of the 'zero-to-hero' motif, particularly in the wake of the global pandemic. By examining the themes that define and characterize this genre using a data-driven approach sourced from English-speaking audiences' user-generated coding of themes and properties of these anime, this study aims to provide an understanding of this burgeoning genre as perceived by audiences outside the Japanese domestic market, and in turn, offer insights into the potential societal and cultural factors that influence its appeal.

THE EXPLOSIVE GROWTH OF ISEKAI

Anime is growing in popularity outside of its domestic Japanese market. In a report from the Association of Japanese Animations (2022), the overseas revenue spends have surpassed that of the domestic market and the total global revenue reached 2.74 trillion Yen (USD 18.5 billion) in 2021. Western market researchers give similar figures for this period and estimated the global market size had risen to USD 28.6 billion in 2022; they further predict an annual growth rate of 9.8 per cent through to 2030 (Grand View Research 2021). To contextualize this figure, Netflix's revenue was $31.6 billion in 2022 (Statista 2023). Crunchyroll, a western streaming platform specifically for anime, reported it had 120 million registered users and 5 million paying members in 2021 (Crunchyroll 2021). Current Crunchyroll statistics are not available for total registered users, however, Crunchyroll was acquired by Sony and merged with Funimation which saw the paying members double

to 10 million in a year (Sony 2022). These statistics all build a picture of a rising global demand for anime. This surge in interest can be viewed and dated using Google Trends (2023a, 2023b), which reports a sharp increase in interest in the search term 'anime' starting around the beginning of 2020 (Figure 1).

Correlating with the increasing global consumption of anime, is the rising consumption of a genre of anime called *isekai* ('different world' or 'other world'). Isekai anime is currently one of the most popular genres of anime. One in five anime released in 2021 on Crunchyroll were isekai (Crunchyroll 2022), and a total of 312 complete or proposed anime currently occupy this genre (MyAnimeList 2023) (note: seasons and format changes are counted as separate titles in anime). The isekai genre typically involves a character either being transported or reincarnated into another world. This chapter focuses on the latter and extremely popular reincarnation sub-genre.

The observed increase in interest for anime beginning in 2020 aligns temporally with the global outbreak of COVID-19 and the ensuing world-wide lockdowns (visualized by the grey area in Figure 1). The nature of the pandemic led to an unprecedented shift towards home-bound activities and a stronger reliance on the internet for socializing and entertainment, which may have served as a catalyst for the increased interest in anime. The internet, a longstanding hub for anime fans (Azuma 2009), likely enabled broader exposure to anime communities as socialization shifted online. Further, the increase in digitally mediated conversations may have increased exposure to anime-related content such as memes and gifs. Streaming platforms saw massive growth during 2020–21 driven by the COVID-19 pandemic (Spangler 2022; AJA 2022), and thus further increased accessibility of anime for Western audience engagement. While Google Trends highlights a concurrent rise in anime interest with the pandemic, it does not imply causation. The pandemic context likely influenced this trend, suggesting an association between

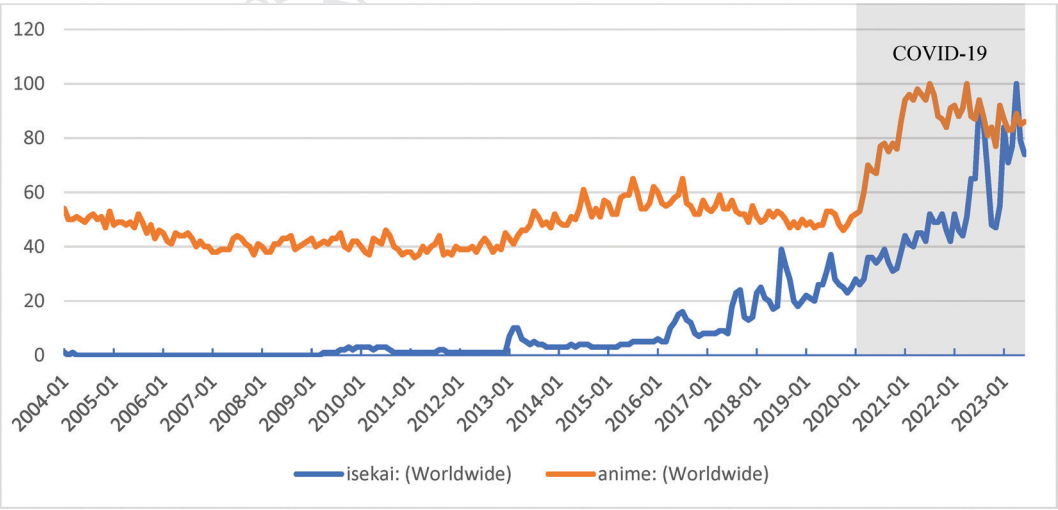

Figure 1: Google Trends (2023a, 2023b) recorded levels of interest for the search terms 'isekai' and 'anime'. The grey area indicates the COVID-19 pandemic.

lockdown-induced digital entertainment demand and anime's increased popularity.

WHAT IS AN ISEKAI?

Isekai animes are stories in which the protagonist is transported from their ordinary world to a parallel or 'other' world. The typical worlds found in isekai are pseudo-medieval European or Victorian sword-and-sorcery fantasy settings, while other settings typically draw on wider clichés found in fantasy, sci-fi and role-playing games (Muhamed 2020). Overwhelmingly, isekai draw on gamic elements found in computer-based role-playing games with characters either entering a game world they recognize, or a world in which common gamic conventions are present, e.g., having, 'HP' or 'hit-points', 'MP' or 'magic-points', special items or equipment one might find in a computer game (Price 2021).

The protagonist is typically an everyman who must learn to navigate this new world, often bestowed with special powers or abilities which they must use to overcome the challenges of their altered environment (Lu 2020; Muhamed 2020; Price 2021). Alternatively, knowledge from the protagonist's previous life is used to succeed in their new life. The plots of such shows usually follow a hero's journey and are propelled forward by the main protagonist learning and growing while obtaining multiple love interests, wealth and power.

The appeal of isekai is commonly attributed to its escapist nature, which allows viewers to temporarily disengage from their realities and immerse themselves in the characters' adventures, providing a respite from daily life (Lu 2020). This escapism is facilitated by leveraging isekai tropes of an everyman protagonist (Muhamed 2020), and traditional fantasy tropes such as otherworldly settings, novel experiences and empowerment. The use of an everyman as the protagonist easily allows viewers to self-insert and immerse themselves in the story and vicariously experience a sense of adventure, empowerment and wish fulfilment. Isekai settings further reinforce self-insertion through world building, allowing the audience to explore and come to understand the parallel world's culture, physical properties, political situation or magical systems alongside the main protagonist. This includes navigating unfamiliar social structures, cultures and environments, providing viewers with a sense of adventure and exploration. The trope of protagonists growing in power, skill and social prowess may resonate with viewers who desire similar growth or wish to escape feelings of powerlessness in their own lives (Muhamed 2020). These facets of isekai are likely a key contributing factor as to why its popularity is growing exponentially.

WHAT IS AN *ISEKAI TENSEI*?

Common tropes used to insert characters into the parallel world include being pulled into a game, summoning, interacting with tools or books, portals and *tensei* ('reincarnation'). In *isekai tensei* ('reincarnation into another world'), the protagonist dies in the real world and is then reincarnated in a fantasy world with their memories intact. For some animes, the protagonist's reincarnation is a transportation, where they find themselves revived and as they were, but with some new abilities in a new world (Price 2021). Other animes take a more traditional interpretation of reincarnation, starting the protagonist from birth in a completely different body (sometimes this can be a new gender, mythical

race, or object) but still with their memories intact. Typically, the protagonists of reincarnation isekai are male and older in the real world than in the other sub genres (Price 2021).

Most reincarnation isekai feature protagonists with negative elements in their lives prior to reincarnation. These can include but are not limited to; computer-game addiction, pornography addiction, being bullied, suffering from some form of abuse, being overworked, being an invalid, being *hikimori* (a 'shut-in'), not in employment education or training (NEET), lonely, or any combination of these (Lu 2020). Several reasons can be postulated for why this has become a common trope. First, it creates contrast; by portraying the main protagonist negatively in their original life, the show can create a strong contrast between their old life and their new life. Second, it justifies the reincarnation; by making the main protagonist's original life unpleasant or unfulfilling, the anime can provide a justification for reincarnation into a new world while also creating sympathy for the protagonist. Third, it allows for character growth; by starting the main protagonist off in a negative light, the narrative can provide an opportunity for character growth and development. A common plot device is to offer the protagonist opportunities to overcome their flaws or past mistakes in the new world and become a better person as a result. Somewhat oxymoronically, despite the protagonists' negative aspects, they are still portrayed as the everyman – a benign, humble and relatable character to help facilitate the viewer's self-insertion.

METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes a data-driven approach, integrating techniques of web scraping, data cleaning, descriptive statistical analysis and developing themes. The study aims to investigate the prevalence and popularity of diverse themes or tropes in reincarnation isekai anime.

The source for sample titles was extracted from two prominent western online anime databases, 'My Anime List' (https://myanimelist.net) and 'AniDB' (https://anidb.net/). These platforms' detailed categorization of anime enabled efficient searching and filtering for reincarnation isekai anime. An initial exploration was performed exclusively on My Anime List, resulting in a compilation of 68 anime titles, encompassing formats such as original video animations (OVAs), TV series and movies. Original net animations (ONAs) were excluded due to the inconsistency of their records in databases and the scarcity or irregularity of user-generated data. The tentative list of titles underwent refinement, with titles either currently airing (incomplete) or yet to be aired being eliminated, yielding 45 titles as of 16 June 2023. In the context of anime, distinct seasons and formats are treated as separate titles. For instance, 'Konosuba', a renowned reincarnation isekai anime, constitutes five distinct titles, including two seasons of the TV series, a prequel TV series, a movie and an OVA. Consequently, out of the 45 titles, only 28 unique overarching universes or narratives were present. These titles were cross verified with AniDB to ensure alignment with the study's selection criteria. There was a discrepancy between the two databases occurring on one title, so this was manually verified.

User-generated data was subsequently retrieved from AniDB using 'ParseHub', a web-scraping tool. This data comprised information on each anime title, the average user rating and number of rating votes cast for each title, and two sets of user-generated tags applicable to the title or the characters

appearing within the show. The amassed data contained 2393 instances of anime tags (451 unique) and 4155 instances of character tags (759 unique). Each tag was categorized into larger themes by AniDB and many were accompanied by textual descriptors for each code. Thus, AniDB facilitated a crowd-sourced coding of the anime titles, encoding both the titles as a whole and the characters within each title.

Following collection, the data underwent a cleaning process via Microsoft Excel, involving the removal of irrelevant information, blank cells, and errors, and categorization of the data into meaningful units for analysis. The cleaned data was subject to descriptive statistical analysis, primarily comprising frequency counts of each tag to discern the proportion of shows exhibiting specific characteristics. Cross-referencing the titles ratings against each titles associated tags offered insights into the popularity of specific themes or tropes. This process also enabled the researchers to become well-versed with the data. The tags were then manually coded then grouped into themes. Once the themes and the constituent tags were assembled, the frequency and weighted average ratings were calculated to gain a comprehensive understanding of the isekai elements and audience preferences. The highest rated titles and tags were also explored as means to give credence to the themes. Likewise, information related to content indicators was analysed. Lastly, Chat GPT's code interpreter was used to provide software-assisted analysis to verify and refine the statistical analysis and themes.

The research sourced its data from AniDB, a publicly accessible website operating under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license. In accordance with this licence, appropriate attribution is given, and the dataset used in this study is accessible for public viewing and usage at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/HCQMPX. Given the public availability and anonymity of the data, the research presents minimal risk of harm to individuals. The validity of the study was ensured by the careful selection of the data source, the accurate collection of data from this source, and by using software-assisted analysis to corroborate results. The transparency of the data source, data-collection method and analysis methods allows the potential for replication by other researchers.

LIMITATIONS

Despite the rigorous methodology, the study is not without limitations. Even though all known complete reincarnation isekai anime titles were included in the dataset at the time of data collection, the dataset should not be construed as an exhaustive representation due to the user-generated nature of the data, which is susceptible to biases, mistakes and manipulation. Additionally, while the titles were cross-verified to ensure validity of selection, the tags could not be corroborated, thus limiting the study's ecological validity as the data was solely drawn from AniDB. While AniDB has large amounts of site traffic, including 1.4 million total site visits for June of 2023 (Similar Web 2023a), the content nature and the effort required to participate in voting and tagging may skew the contributing demographics. Finally, the absence of contextual descriptions attached to all tags (as opposed to most) could result in inconsistent application of the tags to titles. Also, the presence of these contextual tag descriptions does not guarantee consistent application by users either. Future research could address these

limitations by conducting a thorough analysis on the content of the titles by the researcher and engaging in viewer interviews to glean more comprehensive insights into audience perspectives.

RESULTS

Reincarnation isekai ratings

An examination of 45 titles, each having user-generated ratings, was conducted, and subsequently ranked. The mean score was 5.88 (out of 10), with a median of 5.62. The lower and upper quartile scores were 4.66 and 7.44 respectively. The single title with the largest number of rating votes cast was 6657, whereas the lowest was 186, yielding an average of 1508 and median of 1126 votes cast per title. The potential of a relationship between total votes cast and ratings was explored, but none was found. *Mushoku Tensei: Isekai Ittara Honki Dasu* ('Mushoku Tensei: Jobless reincarnation') emerged as the top-ranking title, attaining a score of 8.61/10 with 2831 votes, whereas *Isekai wa Smartphone to Tomo ni 2* (*In Another World with My Smartphone 2*) had the lowest score, at 2.92 with 2258 votes.

Content indicators

AniDB employs content indicator tags as a proxy for region-specific age restriction systems, such as the R-rating system, applying them to each anime title. The following table (Table 1) presents the frequency and average rating of the main content indicators:

Content indicators reveal that a significant proportion of reincarnation isekai anime contains violence (62.22%) and nudity (37.78%). Notably, anime titles with these content indicators typically receive higher ratings than those lacking them. The highest rated title tags echo the subject matter of the content indicators, and unsurprisingly come from two of the *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation* titles. The tags are 'coughs up blood', 'sex', 'pornography', 'torture' and 'voyeurism'.

THEMES

Theme 1: Action and Violence

As highlighted in the content indicators section, themes of action, violence and combat are prevalent in the dataset. In total, 21 unique title tags related to this theme were identified, including 'violence' (28 occurrences), 'collateral damage' (seventeen occurrences), 'fighting' (eight occurrences), 'war' (eight occurrences) and 'action' (31 occurrences). This supports the notion that action

Table 1: A table of the content indicators present in the dataset, the average rating of titles featuring the content indicators, and the percentage of titles featuring the content indicators.

Content indicator tags (applied to anime)	Average rating out of 10	Occurrences as %
nudity	6.67	37.78
mutilation	6.15	13.33
violence	6.04	62.22
gore	6.01	26.67

and violence are typical components of isekai anime, which is consistent with the findings from the content indicators.

Theme 2: Fantasy Setting

Reincarnation isekai predominantly feature a fantasy world, often equipped with unique rules, creatures and societal structures. This is evidenced by 41 out of 45 titles tagged as 'fantasy' and 'speculative fiction', 28 as a 'fictional location' and 21 as 'European stylized'. The average ratings for these tags ranged from 5.7 to 6, mirroring the average of all the titles. This suggests that the setting is an inherent aspect of reincarnation isekai rather than a unique feature of specific titles.

Theme 3: Mythical Creatures

The fantasy element extends to the presence of mythical or magical creatures in isekai anime. Eight unique title tags reflected this theme: 'dragon', 'demon', 'elf', 'deity', 'fairy', 'juujin' (human–animal hybrids), 'succubus' and 'vampire'. The inclusion of such mythical creatures adds credence to the genre's intrinsic fantasy storytelling elements and further emphasizes its otherworldly settings.

Theme 4: Swordplay and Magic

'Swordplay' and 'magic' were significant presences in the title tags, with the tag 'magic' appearing in 39 out of 45 titles (average rating of 5.94), and 'swordplay' appearing in 21 titles (average rating of 5.86). Furthermore, several subgenre tags related to magic, including 'magic circles', 'visible aura' and 'magic weapons', were also frequently noted. These findings reiterate the isekai genre's alignment with common tropes found in broader fantasy media.

Theme 5: Humour

There were twelve unique humour-related title tags, with the tag 'comedy' being most prevalent at 32 occurrences and an average rating of 6.15. Clearly comedy is favoured in reincarnation isekai. Humour and light-hearted moments are often incorporated, serving to balance the serious or dramatic elements often present in these shows.

Theme 6: Ecchi

The prevalence of *ecchi* ('lewd' or 'dirty') content is evidenced by the abundance of related tags within the title tag dataset. Thirty-one unique title tags linked to lewd content were identified, with a weighted average rating of 6.32/10. This result echoes the findings related to the content indicators and confirms reincarnation isekai audiences' preference for ecchi content. AQ1

Contrasting this preference for ecchi, however, are the lower ratings associated with traditional scene-based ecchi tropes, often used to place characters in suggestive situations. A common example would be that of a bathing scene to provide an opportunity for some form of voyeurism. The trope is so prevalent in anime that there are databases such as http://animebathscenewiki.com that catalogue the 1600 plus animes that have featured bathing scenes. Table 3

Table 2: Left: *Ten most frequent ecchi title tags.* Right: *Ten highest rated ecchi title tags.*

10 most frequent ecchi title tags	Average rating out of 10	Frequency count	10 highest rated ecchi title tags	Average rating out of 10	Frequency count
ecchi	6.47	21	sex	8.43	2
nudity	6.67	17	pornography	8.43	2
skimpy clothing	6.50	15	voyeurism	8.43	2
Gainax bounce (exaggerated bouncing breasts)	6.39	15	borderline porn	8.25	1
breasts	6.71	14	sexual fantasies	7.96	3
large breasts	6.71	14	pantsu (panties)	7.77	3
furo scene (bathing scene)	5.85	13	sudden naked girl appearance	7.63	1
harem	5.72	13	uniform fetish	7.58	1
lap pillow	6.49	11	loli	7.58	1
boobs in your face	5.45	8	penis jokes	7.56	1

Table 3: Occurrences of scene-based ecchi tropes and the average rating of titles associated with these tropes.

Scene-based ecchi tropes	Average score out of 10	Frequency count
shower scene	7.16	3
lingerie shopping	6.44	1
furo scene (bathing scene)	5.85	13
hot springs visit	5.83	7
bath house visit	5.13	4
beach visit	4.95	7
beach volleyball episode	4.20	4
changing room scene	3.43	1

shows the occurrences of scene-based ecchi tropes and the average rating of titles associated with these tropes.

Theme 7: Loli

Evidence of the sexualisation of young characters can be seen in the dataset through the usage of tags such as 'lolicon' (featuring girls), 'loli' (an abbreviation of 'lolicon') and 'shotacon' (featuring boys) that denote young characters in sexual situations. The tag 'loli' featured in ten titles with an average viewer rating of 5.75. Further, two titles used the 'lolicon' tag, while the 'shota' (short for shotacon) tag was used once.

Theme 8: Zero to hero

Some reincarnation isekai anime explore themes related to a negative mindset, isolation, hikikomori ('withdrawn from society'), or being a NEET, potentially reflecting the mindsets or experiences of some viewers. This is justified by the tags 'NEET' (five occurrences) and 'lonely' (one occurrence). The weighted average rating for shows with these tags is 6.86/10, a full point above the total ratings average and clearly demonstrating such shows resonated with audiences. Additional tags further contributed to the idea of someone in a negative place, such as 'yare yare kei' ('an unmotivated character', five occurrences), 'trauma' (six occurrences), 'pessimist' (five occurrences) and 'bad luck' (five occurrences).

Following a protagonist's reincarnation, they often become extremely powerful in their new world, offering a stark contrast to their previous life. Ten titles were tagged with 'drastic change in life', three with 'zero to hero', and two with 'aim for the top'. In total 21 titles were tagged with 'nearly almighty protagonist', in which the titles featured a protagonist who becomes extremely powerful or overly powered and never experiences scenarios in which they might lose. The inclusion of gaining magical powers and fighting skills (Theme 4) further reinforces the idea of a protagonist who gains great power. Power also manifested as sexual power in the data set. For example, thirteen titles were tagged with 'harem', in which a male protagonist is surrounded by multiple female love interests. Two titles were tagged 'reverse harem', in which a female protagonist is surrounded by multiple male love interests.

DISCUSSION

The presence and prominence of the themes of action and violence, fantasy setting, mythical creatures, swordplay and magic, ecchi and zero to hero in the reincarnation isekai dataset reaffirm the prevailing understanding of the genre. These themes, each integral to the isekai genre's identity, are consistent with the broader literary context and expectations, reflecting established narrative tropes within the fantasy genre. This finding underscores the validity of the dataset and its alignment with existing literature on isekai. The discussion will therefore turn to how the themes reflect broader societal concerns, desires and anxieties.

Escapism

Many of the themes speak to ideas of escapism, notably themes, two ('Fantasy Setting'), three ('Mythical Creatures'), four ('Swordplay and Magic'), six ('Ecchi') and eight ('Zero to Hero'). The 'Zero to Hero' theme reveals a known pattern of isekai whereby a protagonist with some negative elements in their life dies and then is reincarnated to become a powerful hero. The similarity between the audience and the protagonist's pre-death scenario may have appeal to those seeking to engage in escapism. As demonstrated in Figure 1, there is a connection between COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdowns and the increased interest in isekai. The lockdowns had a profound impact on people's living situation and mental health. Those under lockdown conditions reported greater levels of loneliness, depression and suicidal ideation (Killgore et al. 2020). Furthermore, the lockdowns are noted to have had a greater impact on the mental health of young adults than other demographics (Banks and Xu 2020; Pieh et al. 2020), who are the greatest consumers of anime (Similar Web 2023b).

The lockdown living conditions and mental state of anime consumers demographic reflect those of the prototypical lonely shut-in reincarnation isekai protagonist. Viewers may have felt a sense of camaraderie with these characters and found respite in vicariously living through protagonists who escape such living situations to become powerful and desirable.

The desire to engage in escapism is a commonly cited cause for engaging in media use (Hastall 2017). Further, known causes for engaging in escapism, such as depression and anxiety (Hastall 2017), match the aforementioned effects COVID-19 lockdowns had on anime's target audience. Escapism, framed in this context, poses an interesting line of enquiry in this study's context; was this escapism adaptive (e.g. a positive means to repair one's mood), maladaptive (e.g. a means to further withdraw and engage in excessive media use), or both? Scholars have hotly debated this issue in the wider sphere of anime and manga since 1989 when Tsutomu Miyazaki, dubbed the 'Otaku Murderer', was arrested for the murder and rape of four girls (Azuma 2009). The timing and growth of reincarnation isekai popularity among western viewers may suggest a new manifestation of this decades-old debate; that western viewers initially consumed isekai anime during lockdowns, and adopting maladaptive escapism, have continued to withdraw and consume more isekai forming a maladaptive self-reinforcing cycle. This may explain the explosive growth in popularity among western audiences. However, such a claim must be tempered as speculation drawn and therefore warrants further investigation.

Trash sells

Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation top ratings position (8.61/10) aligns with expectations, given its derivation from a widely acclaimed light novel series. Contrastingly, *In Another World with My Smartphone* poses an intriguing scenario. Both the first and second seasons recorded significantly low rating scores of 3.43/10 and 2.92/10, respectively. This series is widely criticized as a clichéd and lacklustre isekai within the fandom, with the only unique aspect being the protagonist's ownership of a functioning smartphone in a fantasy world. However, the series was renewed for a second season, which is an unusual occurrence in the anime industry as most anime titles only get one season (Amaam 2016). Similarly, the same phenomenon of renewal of poorly rated titles can be seen in the title *By the Grace of Gods* and its sequel, which also recorded low rating scores of 4.44/10 and 3.33/10, respectively.

The renewal of low-rating titles suggests an intriguing trend in viewer preferences; even series perceived as inferior can captivate audiences and are consumed, or to put it more simply, trash sells. McCoy and Scarborough (2014) report on a similar normative contradiction in low-brow western media, where audiences condone television shows as 'trashy' yet still find themselves consuming these shows either as a guilty pleasure, or ironically. This phenomenon can be seen in fandom discussions pejorative use of 'trash' to describe anime, exemplified in *Trash Taste*, a popular YouTube channel hosted by western anime reviewers who frequently lampoon the isekai genre while consuming, reviewing and promoting it (Trash Taste 2023). This pattern indicates some understanding between creators and viewers that the allure of isekai can lie in its trashy appeal.

The effect of trashy appeal can also be seen when examining the results of scene-based ecchi tropes. Titles containing scene-based ecchi tropes weighted

average rating of 5.5/10 falls below the rating averages. These ratings results suggest that these conventional scenarios, despite being prevalent, are looked down upon within reincarnation isekai. However, the inclusion of these scenes' diminishing ratings should not be confused with a lack of success. As noted earlier, trashy content with poor ratings has been demonstrated to be successful by means of being further adapted. Twenty-one titles contained scene-based ecchi tropes rated lower than 5.88/10 (the dataset's average rating) and of these only four did not currently have or plan to have sequels or other anime adaptions, which is an impressive statistic. The success of low-brow content (discussed next) indicates that it is an important ingredient in reincarnation isekai, and further reinforces that ratings do not equal success and the notion that trashy reincarnation isekai sells.

Sexual themes

Japan's doujinshi market, inclusive of self-published and fan works, provides a platform for budding artists to introduce their manga or light novels. While many doujinshi infringe on original intellectual properties, their existence is tolerated due to the mutual benefits they bring to the manga industry, acting as a talent and idea incubator (McInerney 2018). Notably, Comiket, Japan's top doujinshi event, sees about a million attendees biannually, showcasing around 9 million doujinshi (McInerney 2018). Doujin sites like Shōsetsuka ni Narō ('Let's Become a Novelist') have birthed many iconic isekai tales adapted into anime, including *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation*, which significantly shaped the isekai genre (Morrissy 2021).

In the West, doujinshi is often linked with erotic fan-made content, a perception fed by the sizable volume of such works. Although not exclusively erotic, many manga artists began with erotic content creation. These erotic works often provide these manga artists an initial income source and fan base. Notable examples include *Masamune Shirow*, the creator of *Ghost in the Shell*, who began and continues as a *hentai* ('erotic') artist, and Clamp, the all-female manga studio behind *Cardcaptor Sakura*, who initially produced *yaoi* ('homoerotic') doujinshi. Artists like *Toshihiro Ono* and *Nanashi*, associated with *Pokémon* and *Don't Toy with Me, Miss Nagatoro* manga respectively, have also contributed to the hentai genre under the aliases *Kamirenjaku Sanpei* and *774*, respectively. This widespread use of pseudonyms makes it challenging to quantify the extent of manga artists launching careers with erotic content, but the trend is palpable and appears to be influencing the nature of the content being produced in reincarnation isekai, which frequently launches new narratives in this same space. This can be seen clearly in the data collected, with just under half the titles including ecchi content, and the large volume of tags dedicated to categorizing ecchi content and character fetishes.

Sexualisation of virtual minors

The sale, distribution and production of child pornography is illegal in Japan under the 1999 Act on Punishment of Activities Relating to Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, and the Protection of Children (Japanese Law Translation n.d.). This act was amended in 2014 that made the act of possession illegal, too (LOC 2014). However, in both the original and the amended versions of the act, virtual child pornography such as illustrations of fictional characters is legal to both own and produce. The exclusion of virtual characters in Japan's child pornography laws allows for children to appear in romantic

or sexual contexts in Anime and Manga. This deliberate exclusion has been a topic of international debate, with organizations such as UNICEF weighing in and asking Japan to impose stricter restrictions (Reynolds 2014) and VICE News publishing a story called 'Inside the Pedophilic Manga Industry in Japan' which casts a negative light on the manga industry (VICE News 2022). The crux of the debate is (1) Does sexualizing virtual minors cause harm as it does not involve real children?, (2) What does this mean for freedom of expression laws in Japan? and (3) What are Japan's international obligations? (Takeuchi 2015). This debate persists as proponents claim it is very difficult to establish a direct link between virtual child pornography and child victimization, despite evidence of second-order effects.

While the lolicon and shotacon genres make only a minority of Japan's erotic content produced, they can be seen to have influenced anime in the data set. These genres in conjunction with other Japanese cultural phenomenon such as junior idols, the age of consent having been 13 and only just raised to 16 as of June 2023 (Ye and Inuma 2023), and the *bishōjo* ('beautiful girl') aesthetic (Galbraith 2019) to name a few, have bled into the mainstream of anime over time. This can be exemplified by a character trope in isekai anime in which a female love interest that forms the protagonist's harem is a prepubescent girl. Other common tropes involve female romantic interests who are from different humanoid races (e.g. elves or vampires) that look prepubescent or in their early teens, but are in fact middle-aged to hundreds of years old (e.g. *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation*) or transform through some magical means between prepubescent body and that of a fully grown adult (e.g. *Isekai Nonbiri Nouka* [*Farming Life in Another World*]).

This dataset reveals a disconcerting lack of viewer discomfort towards content featuring the sexualisation of minors, as indicated by the absence of negative rating variance when compared to the dataset's overall average rating. As sexualization of virtual minors is more heavily regulated and condoned by countries and markets outside of Japan, one would expect more social pressure on western audiences to denounce or eschew such content, yet the ratings data collected by this study suggests otherwise. Given the growing popularity of isekai among western audiences this is concerning for several reasons. Firstly, the content could breach other countries' law. For example, Australia has a zero-tolerance policy for child pornography, including virtual child pornography (Krone 2004). However, in a recent ruling, the second season of the isekai *Isekai Maou to Shoukan Shoujo no Dorei Majutsu Omega* (*How Not to Summon a Demon Lord Omega*), which contains loli content, has been effectively banned from home-video release in Australia by receiving a refused classification (RC) rating (McDonald 2023). An RC rating means that the show 'cannot be sold, hired, advertised or legally imported in Australia' as it 'falls outside generally-accepted [*sic*] community standards' (Australian Classification n.d.: n.pag.). However, the anime is still available on the streaming service Crunchyroll which presents both ethical and legal concerns on how streaming media can circumvent bans and local law. Secondly, while direct links are difficult to make between virtual child pornography and child victimization, 'experts have suggested that children are harmed by a culture that appears to accept child sexual abuse' (Takeuchi 2015: 230). With the explosive growth and subsequent revenue being generated by this genre, the potential for maladaptive consumption, and streaming preventing traditional means of restricting access to this potentially harmful media, there are reasons for concern regarding the inability of nations to effectively regulate such content.

CONCLUSIONS

This exploration has unveiled the ways in which reincarnation isekai engages with both benign and controversial themes, reflecting broader societal concerns, desires and anxieties. Through the analysis of three interrelated aspects, the success of titles labelled as 'trashy', the nuanced influence and challenges of sexual themes, and the growing prominence of the 'zero to hero' motif, especially in the context of the global pandemic, provides insights into the dynamics of viewer preferences, creator influences and cultural trends.

The 'trash sells' phenomenon illustrates the paradoxical allure of content that may be seen as inferior yet captures audiences, reflecting perhaps a universal human penchant for guilty pleasures or ironic enjoyment. Meanwhile, the investigation of sexual themes, including the sexualization of virtual minors, underscores the complex relationship between creative freedom, societal norms, legal considerations, ethical boundaries and how streaming media can violate these. The pandemic-induced surge in consumption of the 'zero to hero' motif prompts the need for further inquiry into its psychological impact and broader societal implications.

These findings prompt further discussions on the role of anime in reflecting and shaping societal values, as well as regulatory challenges in a globalized media landscape. While this study contributes to our understanding of the reincarnation isekai genre, it also highlights the need for continued research. Given the genre's global impact and its evolving nature, there is an imperative for deeper investigations that can help us better understand its complexity and its cultural significance outside of Japan.

REFERENCES

Amaam, Baam (2016), 'Anime producer explains why second seasons don't happen', GoBoiano, 5 November, https://web.archive.org/web/20161119040607/http:/goboiano.com/list/5373-anime-producer-explains-why-second-seasons-don't-happen. Accessed 8 August 2023.

Australian Classification (n.d.), 'What do the ratings mean?', Australian Government, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communication and the Arts, https://www.classification.gov.au/classification-ratings/what-do-ratings-mean. Accessed 25 August 2023.

Azuma, Hiroki (2009), *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Banks, James and Xu, Xiaowei (2020), 'The mental health effects of the first two months of lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK*', *Fiscal Studies*, 41:3, pp. 685–708.

Crunchyroll (2021),'Crunchyroll reaches 5 Million subscribers, announces new project', 3 August, https://www.crunchyroll.com/anime-news/2021/08/03/crunchyroll-reaches-5-million-subscribers-announces-new-project. Accessed 3 August 2023.

Crunchyroll (2022),'INFOGRAPHIC: A census of every 2021 Crunchyroll simulcast', 11 January, https://www.crunchyroll.com/anime-feature/2022/01/10/infographic-a-census-of-every-2021-crunchyroll-simulcast. Accessed 3 August 2023.

Galbraith, Patrick (2019), *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Google (2023a), 'anime – Explore – Google Trends', 27 June, https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2004-01-01%202023-06-27&q=anime&hl=en. Accessed 27 June 2023.

Google (2023b), 'isekai – Explore – Google Trends', 27 June, https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2004-01-01%202023-06-27&q=isekai&hl=en. Accessed 27 June 2023.

Grand View Research (GVR) (2021), 'Anime market size, share & trends analysis report by type (T.V., movie, video, internet distribution, merchandising, music), by region (North America, Europe), and segment forecasts, 2023 – 2030', https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/anime-market. Accessed 14 April 2023.

Hastall, Mathias (2017), 'Escapism', in P. Rössler, C. A. Hoffner and L. Zoonen (eds), *The International Encyclopedia of Media Effects*, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, pp. 1–8.

Japanese Law Translation (n.d.), 'Act on punishment of activities relating to child prostitution and child pornography, and the protection of children', https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/100/en. Accessed 16 August 2023.

Killgore, William, Cloonan, Sara, Taylor, Emily, Lucas, Daniel and Dailey, Natalie (2020), 'Loneliness during the first half-year of COVID-19 lockdowns', *Psychiatry Research*, 294, pp. 1–2.

Krone, Tony (2004), 'A typology of online child pornography offending', *Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, 279, pp. 1–6.

Library of Congress (LOC) (2014), 'Japan: Possession of child pornography finally punishable', 4 August, https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2014-08-04/japan-possession-of-child-pornography-finally-punishable/. Accessed 16 August 2023.

Lu, Curtis (2020), 'The darker sides of the isekai genre: An examination of the power of Anime and Manga', master's thesis, San Francisco, CA: University of San Francisco.

McCoy, Charles and Scarborough, Roscoe (2014), 'Watching "bad" television: Ironic consumption, camp, and guilty pleasures', *Poetics*, 47, pp. 41–59.

McDonald, Sean (2023), 'Australia bans how NOT to summon a demon lord omega anime', CBR, 14 January, https://www.cbr.com/australia-bans-how-not-to-summon-a-demon-lord-omega-anime/. Accessed 25 August 2023.

McInerney, Tara (2018), 'Doujinshi and comiket: A day of "hare"', *Studies in Comics*, 9:2, pp. 209–30.

Morrissy, Kim (2021), 'Mushoku Tensei is not the pioneer of isekai web novels, but...', Anime News Network, 20 March, https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/feature/2021-03-19/mushoku-tensei-is-not-the-pioneer-of-isekai-web-novels-but/.170429. Accessed 8 August 2023.

Muhamed, Fatuma (2020), 'Rewriting your own narrative: Isekai as a contemporary coming of age tale', master's thesis, Seattle: University of Washington.

MyAnimeList (MAL) (2023), 'Isekai – Anime – MyAnimeList.net', https://myanimelist.net/anime/genre/62/Isekai. Accessed 3 August 2023.

Pieh, Christopher, Budimir, Sanja and Probst, Thomas (2020), 'The effect of age, gender, income, work, and physical activity on mental health during coronavirus disease (COVID-19) lockdown in Austria', *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 136, p. 110186.

Price, Paul (2021), 'A survey of the story elements of isekai manga', *Journal of Anime and Manga Studies*, 2, pp. 57–91.

Reynolds, Isabel (2014), 'UNICEF says Japan failing to control child porn', Reuters, 11 March, https://www.reuters.com/article/oukin-uk-japan-pornography-idUKT20430220080311. Accessed 16 August 2023.

Similar Web (2023a), 'anidb.net market share, revenue and traffic analytics | Similarweb', Similar Web, https://www.similarweb.com/website/anidb.net/#overview. Accessed 4 August 2023.

Similar Web (2023b), 'chrunchyroll.com market share, revenue and traffic analytics | Similarweb', Similar Web, https://www.similarweb.com/website/crunchyroll.com/#overview. Accessed 15 August 2023.

Sony (2022), 'Q2 FY2022 consolidated financial results', 1 November, https://www.sony.com/en/SonyInfo/IR/library/presen/er/pdf/22q2_sonyspeech.pdf. Accessed 3 August 2023.

Spangler, Todd (2022), 'U.S. subscription VOD revenue growth slowing to 13% in 2022, hitting $25 billion: PwC report', *Variety*, 20 June, https://variety.com/2022/digital/news/us-subscription-vod-revenue-pwc-forecast-1235298797. Accessed 4 August 2023.

Statista (2023), 'Revenue generated by Netflix from 1st quarter 2013 to 2nd quarter 2023', 1 July, https://www.statista.com/statistics/273883/netflixs-quarterly-revenue. Accessed 3 August 2023.

Takeuchi, Cory (2015), 'Regulating lolicon: Toward Japanese compliance with its international legal obligations to ban virtual child pornography', *Georgia Journal of International and Comparative Law*, 44:1, pp. 195–236.

The Association of Japanese Animations (AJA) (2022), *Anime Industry Report 2022*, Tokyo: The Association of Japanese Animations (AJA), https://aja.gr.jp/english/japan-anime-data. Accessed 3 August 2023.

Trash Taste (2023), 'Trash Taste', YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/@TrashTaste. Accessed 4 August 2023.

Vice News (2022), 'Inside the pedophilic Manga industry in Japan', YouTube, 22 November, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ky3HqvT3M8E. Accessed 16 August 2023.

Ye, Michelle Hee Lee and Inuma, Julia, 'Japan (finally) changes a century-old law: The age of consent is now 16', *The Washington Post*, 16 June, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/06/16/japan-age-of-sexual-consent-16. Accessed 25 August 2023.

Zhang, YuJia (2014), 'Entering post-otaku: Approaching the Internet era in the light of otaku', master's thesis, Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Guinibert, Matt and Page, Jo (2024), 'That time I was reincarnated as a problematic trope: Viewer preferences and cultural trends in reincarnation isekai anime', *The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, Special Issue: 'The Afterlife in Popular Culture', 13:1, pp. 89–105, https://doi.org/10.1386/ajpc_00089_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dr Matt Guinibert is head of digital communication, advertising and public relations at Auckland University of Technology. His background in digital media encompasses a diverse range of fields, including visual communication, user experience and interface design, technology-enhanced learning, and the strategies that underpin the use of digital media. His current research projects explore interdisciplinary topics within the field of digital

media. Matt is currently training as a data scientist to expand the methods used in his studies.

Contact: Auckland University of Technology, 55 Wellesley Street East, Auckland City, Auckland 1010, New Zealand.
E-mail: matt.guinibert@aut.ac.nz

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4000-1724

Jo Page is a copywriter with a background in radio and journalism. Not surprisingly words are her thing. With more than twenty years of experience in the field of media communications, she now teaches on the Advertising and Brand Creativity major helping students to find creative solutions to business problems. Jo is embarking on research exploring how social media and word-of-mouth advertising supports the growth of modern-day childhood traditions such as Dinovember.

Contact: Auckland University of Technology, 55 Wellesley Street East, Auckland City, Auckland 1010, New Zealand.
E-mail: jo.page@aut.ac.anz

https://orcid.org/0009-0001-6430-7779

The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture
Volume 13 Number 1
 https://doi.org/10.1386/ajpc_00090_5
Published Online xx xxxx

BOOK REVIEWS

***MARVELING RELIGION: CRITICAL DISCOURSES, RELIGION, AND THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE*, JENNIFER BALDWIN AND DANIEL WHITE HODGE (EDS) (2022)**

London: Lexington, 285 pp.,
ISBN 978-1-79362-139-9, h/bk, AUD 168.85
ISBN 978-1-79362-139-9, e-book, AUD 70.59

Reviewed by Angelique Nairn, Auckland University of Technology (AUT)

Released in 2022, *Marveling Religion: Critical Discourses, Religion, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe*, is an edited collection that traverses the intersections of religion and culture through the lens of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). As editors, Daniel Hodge and Jennifer Baldwin attest that the collection is designed to explore the MCU because of its capacity to 'contribute to cultural discourse and mirror social affect' (x) and the chapters that follow give weight to their position that the MCU has become 'our shared sacred text' (xiii). Broken into four parts, the collection covers a range of topics including technological determinism, modernity, Afrofuturism, colonialism and feminism (to name a few), all unpacked by authors grappling with religious ideologies and symbolism that are embedded and alluded to in the twelve years of films that comprise the first three phases of the MCU.

Part 1, 'Technology, Violence, and Sacrifice', is made up of three chapters which explore the place of saviours and their sacrifices within society. Inevitably, then, discussions of what constitutes a moral character emerge as the behaviours of Iron Man, Black Panther and Luke Cage are critically evaluated. For example, Dunn and Eberl contend in the opening chapter that, much like Tony Stark, society has become enamoured with the idea that technology can offer solutions to societal problems, and yet when the world needs saving, it is the sacrifice, and by extension Stark's humanity, that ultimately saves the day. It is in Part 1 that the reader is introduced to how sacrifice and acting as

a saviour can be revelatory and a catalyst for change, ultimately challenging perceptions of social order, while also presenting the argument that through their heroism, superheroes exhibit Christ-like tendencies. As an opening to the edited collection, Part 1 explores several religious symbols and ideologies that are interwoven into the remaining chapters of the book.

Part 2, 'Power, Worth, and Society', is comprised of five chapters, and given the title of the section, not unexpectedly, it has three chapters dedicated to considering the worthiness and godliness of Thor. Yet, the key to Part 2 is its explorations of personal identity. Whether it is Thor's personal response to failure, Black Panther's questioning of what sort of king he wants to be, or Spiderman learning his new role in the void left by Tony Stark, the emphasis of Part 2 is how these characters develop in their respective storylines and respond to personal identity crises. It is alongside this questioning of identity that a secondary question is also posed, how does religion contribute to understandings of the self? Such an exploration of personal identity is intensely relatable, for all humans engage in identity work, and as such, Part 2, although deeply philosophical, intentionally or unintentionally draws parallels with the human experience.

Part 3, 'Deconstructing Norms, Imagining the New', enters the debate that exists between science and religion. In so doing, the chapters also respond to the colonizing influence of religion and science, with the chapter by Bauman and Khan suggesting that much like storylines in the MCU that advocate a multiverse of possibilities, society could benefit from recalibrating away 'from our human centredness' (171) and need to dominate over the world. In what can initially be perceived as a major shift in direction from the previous chapters in Part 3, Baldwin considers the role of psychedelics in generating an altered state of consciousness, especially in response to threat and trauma. However, as the reader progresses through the chapter, Baldwin makes insightful arguments using the experiences of Dr Strange to demonstrate how exposure to altered states of consciousness can benefit humans by producing new frames of reference with which to view the world, and their place in it.

Part 4, 'Forming Identity', is not unlike Part 2 with its exploration of identity, but here, the emphasis is on evaluating the hegemonic values and political ideologies that contribute to identity construction. For example, McDowell considers how Captain Marvel as a post 9/11 cinema offering advocates moral action and responsibility when responding to perceptions of us vs. them. Admittedly, part four is where the collection does diverge somewhat from an overt consideration of the relationship between religion and the MCU, except for Micheva's chapter on the 'Supermuslim'. That is not to say that the chapters are not riveting in their exploration of important issues within society, but religious beliefs and symbolism are, in some cases, auxiliary rather than core to the arguments that are being made.

Despite many of the chapters hinging on Abrahamic religious teachings, some effort is made to delve into Eastern traditions, which is worthwhile but could have been developed further given popular cultural texts are polysemic in nature. In summary, the edited collection is well written, deeply philosophical, yet easily understood, and makes for a valuable contribution to the 'religion and science as a critical discourse series'. Although there is much written about superheroes in the academic milieux, the focus of this book on religion and the MCU is commendable, especially as it capitalizes on the capacity of this franchise to shape and reflect societal attitudes and behaviours towards religion. As it only covered the first three phases of the MCU, there is scope

for a second related book to be published that builds on the useful and interesting perspectives raised in this first collection.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dr Angelique Nairn is an associate professor in the School of Communication Studies (SCS). Angelique has been involved in a myriad of research projects that have hinged on organizational communication, identity construction, rhetoric and/or the creative industries. She is also interested in popular culture and particularly the representation of women, creative people and morality as they appear on-screen. Her recent work has explored issues of racism, sexism and technological determinism. She teaches courses in the public relations department, specializing in digital public relations and persuasion.

Contact: Auckland University of Technology (AUT), 55 Wellesley Street East, Auckland City 1010, New Zealand.
E-mail: angelique.nairn@aut.ac.nz

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5609-2627

The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture
Volume 13 Number 1
 https://doi.org/10.1386/ajpc_00091_5
Published Online xx xxxx

THE SUPERHERO MULTIVERSE: READAPTING COMIC BOOK ICONS IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY FILM AND POPULAR MEDIA, LORNA PIATTI-FARNELL (ED.) (2022)

London: Lexington, 313 pp.,
ISBN 978-1-79362-459-8, h/bk, AUD 195
ISBN 978-1-79362-461-1, p/bk, AUD 79.90

Reviewed by Enrique Ajuria Ibarra, Universidad de las Américas Puebla

Professor Lorna Piatti-Farnell demonstrates her continued interest in re-adaptations and re-imaginings with *The Superhero Multiverse: Readapting Comic Book Icons in Twenty-First-Century Film and Popular Media*. In this book, she compiles and edits a selection of critical essays that focus on re-adaptations of superhero narratives in different media forms, suggesting different ways in which these characters embody different meanings with each new characterization. Piatti-Farnell and the contributors of *The Superhero Multiverse* make us realize that superheroes have been constantly re-invented and re-adapted in their original medium, the comic book, but different incarnations and interpretations are defined by a culture that is more engaged with audio-visual media. In her introduction, Piatti-Farnell points out that the focus of the book is precisely on the different representations of superheroes that are affected by the particular qualities of each narrative medium: 'once superheroes are transported from comic books into another medium, they become autonomous figures, whose representations, actions, and meaning are constructed within the newly established platform that gave them renewed life' (5). As such, *The Superhero Multiverse* focuses on providing insights into the relationship between character, narrative form and medium. The critical analyses contained in this book confirm that superheroes are still active elements in our current media popular culture.

The essays in this collection carefully draw from contemporary case studies to explore nuanced adaptations, interpretations and reconfigurations of what superheroes mean. The issue here is the variety of their media representations, and the collection as a whole highlights how these varied media representations also affect our perception and interpretation of superheroes. This is also paired with new narrative possibilities, offering transformations that enrich already expanding multiverses, each delivering a side of a superhero that adds to previous representations, characterizations and intentions.

The collection is aptly divided into three thematic parts, each complimenting one another and suggesting a critical conversation between form, content, theme and cultural and political discourses. Part I, titled 'Across Platforms and Formats', mainly focuses on how different superheroes are interpreted and reinvented in different media platforms. The authors pay

attention to the specificity of the medium in order to understand the transformation of specific characters as they navigate from one platform to another. In his chapter, Cory Baker demonstrates that adapting a comic superhero such as Wolverine to a podcast implies a sense of multiplication of intertextual and paratextual references that help adhering it to a franchise, while at the same time expanding narrative possibilities in a digital audio format. Meanwhile, Whitney Harding and Julia Kiernan delve into the TV-series adaptation of *Legion*, helping us to rethink the multiverse paradigm. The authors argue that the idea of the multiverse, which points at expanding possibilities of interconnectivity between different narrative instances and diegetic worlds, can also help deliver a certain degree of autonomy for an adaptation from one narrative medium to another. Carl Wilson explores the representation of Superman and Batman in licensed videogames and suggests that character development depends on cooperative processes that help deliver believable videogame characters that work for the narratives of this specific format, yet still maintain a link to other media representations. In her chapter on Wonder Woman, Joan Ormrod notices the legacy of actor Lynda Carter, who interpreted the famous superhero in the classic TV series from the mid- to late 1970s, in fan narratives, creating adaptations as palimpsests that use intertextuality for a nostalgic appeal to past texts. The last chapter in this section focuses on superheroes adapted for animation. James C. Taylor convincingly argues that the 'elasticity' of the animated medium permits further negotiations that live-action films cannot do (87), while also enhancing the possibility for parody as is explored in *The LEGO Batman Movie* and *Spider-Man: Into the Spiderverse*. This section, then, determines the relevance of the medium form as it shapes superhero characterizations in new narratives.

The second section of the collection, titled 'Transformative Meanings', is focused more on content and interpretation. This is not to say that the relationship between form and content is altogether ignored, but these chapters focus more closely on how we understand superheroes in different media adaptations. The key topics here are gender representation, haunted histories, trauma and otherness. Forrest Johnson argues in his chapter on Scarlet Witch that the representation of Wanda Maximoff in comics and film exposes that the figure of the witch is a stereotype of female marginalization, but that each reinvention and rebooting of the character is aware of this reading and offers the possibility for Wanda to gain more agency and be able to rewrite her own self. Lorna Piatti-Farnell's chapter on Captain America explores the titular superhero through a Gothic lens, and pays particular attention to how the film adaptations focus on the character's condition of being out-of-his-time, suggesting a fragmented return of the past as trauma that speaks to contemporary American cultural anxieties. In his chapter, Matthew Thompson delves into the TV-series adaptation of Jessica Jones and how it confronts more directly the social acceptance of toxic masculinity in villain Kilgrave. Angelique Nairn convincingly argues that adaptations of Black Widow into other media formats continuously sexualize the character, thus pointing out the objectification of female superheroes for a male audience. In their chapter on *The Umbrella Academy*, Carmel Cedro and Blair Speakman look at how the Netflix adaptation of the graphic novel provides a more complex depiction of trauma as the Hargreeves siblings grapple with their shortcomings as superheroes. Simon Bacon argues in his chapter on Blade and Black Panther that both superheroes process the

historical legacy of the black community in different ways, with Blade owing much of his characterization and representation to blaxpoitation films, while Black Panther offers an alternative history where black communities have not been in contact with white people.

Identities and otherness help pave the way for the final section of the book, titled 'Transnational Dialogues and Evolving Political Contexts'. The first two chapters of this section focus on the transformative possibilities of superheroes as they cross over and interact with different cultures, particularly in Japan and the United States. In her chapter, Anne Lee analyses her case study, 'Attack on Avengers', an eight-page short comic that sees a confrontation between the Marvel superheroes and the titans from the manga *Attack on Titan*. Lee concludes that we cannot see comics and manga as autonomous media forms (219), but rather as sites for rich cultural exchange, collaborations and even marketing purposes adapted for particular cultural contexts. Sophia Staite challenges marketing strategies that adapt superhero TV-series from Japan in the United States. She demonstrates that, while *Super Sentai* was successfully adapted into *Power Rangers*, the adaptation of *Kamen Rider* failed to achieve the same popularity. According to Staite, this is due to processes of transcultural interference, where the Power Rangers was able to successfully match the American adaptation with its Japanese counterpart with a masking strategy that subtly recycled footage. This was not achieved successfully with *Masked Rider*. Thus, the latter show exposed a production process that failed to morph with its original Japanese production.

The final three chapters of this section turn to the relationship between superheroes and politics, where reboots and reinventions highlight how superhero characterizations are affected by the changing discourses that shape cultural perceptions of safety and justice. Demi Schänzel argues that Spider-Man has been reinvented from the classic counterculture young man of the comics to a superhero that embraces the notion of mass surveillance, as a response to post-9/11 American cultural anxieties. In his chapter, Justin Matthews highlights that, while Judge Dredd possesses an underlying social criticism in the comic books, adaptations into videogames and films tend to simplify its characterization because of the narrative restrictions of the media formats, delivering a less-nuanced, more graspable good guy/bad guy dynamic that is easier to consume by audiences. Finally, the last chapter brings superhero discourses into American politics. Michael Arthur Soares traces the presence of American presidents in several comics, to then show that some presidents incorporate a 'superhero rhetoric for their own political purposes' (281), as they attempt to equate their own political figures with super heroic powers and sense of justice. Thus, the final universe in this collection is our own world, where superheroes are still relevant in American popular and political culture.

The Superhero Multiverse pushes the study of superheroes beyond strict media format limitations, and seeks to encourage a more multi- and trans-media approach to the fascinating transformations of popular characters that we know well. Although some chapters may feel descriptive in their historical exploration of superhero adaptations into different formats, the strength of this collection is the critical approaches that notice the interconnection between media formats and character significations that respond to the concerns of our times. In different narrative possibilities, superheroes still appeal to us, yet also reveal that changes to their character depend on the multiple media forms and the cultural discourses of our times.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Enrique Ajuria Ibarra is senior assistant professor at Universidad de las Américas Puebla (UDLAP), Mexico. He has published several articles and chapters on Mexican Gothic horror cinema. He is the editor-in-chief of the online, peer-reviewed journal *Studies in Gothic Fiction*. He is currently exploring the Gothic in the Archie Comics Universe and continues looking at Gothic and horror in Mexican film and literature.

Contact: Universidad de las Américas Puebla (UDLAP) (Universidad de las Américas Puebla, Ex Hacienda Sta. Catarina Mártir S/N, San Andrés Cholula, Puebla 72810, Mexico.
E-mail: enrique.ajuria@udlap.mx

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6292-2308

NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

AIMS AND SCOPE OF *THE AUSTRALASIAN JOURNAL OF POPULAR CULTURE*

The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture is a peer-reviewed journal with an international focus. The journal is devoted to the scholarly understanding of the artefacts and social practices that are produced and are circulated in everyday life. It offers a broad range of scholarly material about many popular culture topics: academic articles; books, exhibitions, video games, new media, website reviews; 'notes' and 'essays' (original research that is shorter than the scholarly articles). The journal's aim is to publish innovative scholarly research about popular culture for an international readership. We invite contributions from academics, professionals, cultural practitioners, and those with a scholarly interest in popular culture. All relevant material is carefully considered. *The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture* works with a distinguished team of international experts to ensure the highest standards of selection and review. Articles should be between 5000 and 7000 words and referenced using the Harvard style system (Intellect Style Guide: https://www.intellectbooks.com/journal-editors-andcontributors).

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Intellect is committed to creating a diverse and inclusive space for the benefit of its authors, editors, staff and the wider academic community. For more information and resources, including our Inclusive Language Guide, Author Fund, Language Ambassadors and name-change policy, please consult our website: https://www.intellectbooks.com/diversity.

ILLUSTRATIONS

We welcome images illustrating an article. All images need a resolution of at least 300 dpi. All images should be supplied independently of the article, not embedded into the text itself. The files should be clearly labelled and an indication given as to where they should be placed in the text. Print reproduction will usually be in black and white, whereas images can be in full colour in the online version. The image should always be accompanied by a suitable caption (the omission of a caption is only acceptable if you feel that the impact of the image would be reduced by the provision of written context). The following is the agreed style for captions:

Figure 1: Artist, *Title of Artwork*, Year. Medium. Dimensions. Location. Copyright holder information [use of Courtesy of or © should be consistent].

Please note the colon after the number and the terminating full point, even if the caption is not a full sentence. Copyright clearance should be indicated by the contributor and is always the responsibility of the contributor.

LANGUAGE

The journal follows standard British English. Please use 'ize' endings instead of 'ise'.

LENGTH OF ARTICLES

Articles should be 5000–7000 words long and must not exceed 7000 words including notes, references, contributor biography, keywords and abstract.

METADATA

The following data are required for all submissions. Contributors must check that each item has been supplied correctly:

- Article title.
- Contributor name.
- Contributor addresses – the submitted material should include details of the full institutional postal address and a single e-mail address for the contributor for publication.
- Contributor biography – contributors should include a short biography of around 50–100 words, specifying the institution with which they are affiliated.
- Contributor ORCID identifier. This must be supplied in the following format: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1825-0097. If you do not yet have an ORCID identifier, please register here: https://orcid.org/register.
- Contributor publishing agreement giving us your permission to publish your article should it be accepted by our peer review panel. An electronic template is available from the Intellect website.
- Abstract of 100–200 words; this will go on to the Intellect website.
- Keywords – six to eight words, or two-word phrases. There is a serious reduction in an article's ability to be searched for if the keywords are missing.
- References – Intellect requires the use of Harvard references embedded in the main text in the following format (Harper 1999: 27).
- Bibliography – titled 'References'.
- Funder name and grant number (if applicable).

NOTES

In general, we discourage the use of extensive notes – if something is worth saying, it is worth saying in the text itself. A note will divert the reader's attention away from your argument. If a note is necessary, please use Word's note-making facility, and ensure that these are endnotes, not footnotes. Place note calls outside the punctuation, *after* the comma, full stop, colon etc. The note call must be in superscripted Arabic ([1,2,3]).

OPINION

The views expressed in this journal are those of the contributors and do not necessarily coincide with those of the Editors or the Editorial or Advisory Boards.

PERMISSIONS/COPYRIGHT/LIABILITY

Copyright clearance for non-original material included in the manuscript (e.g., images) should be indicated by the contributor and is always the responsibility of the contributor. The contributor publishing agreement, which also details which version of a contributor's own article remains their copyright, should be completed and sent to the editors to accompany every submission.

PRESENTATION/HOUSE STYLE

All articles should be written in Word. The font should be Times New Roman, 12 point. The title of your article should be in bold at the beginning of the file, but not enclosed in quotation marks. Bold is also used for headings and subheadings (which should also be in Times New Roman, 12 point) in the article. Italics may be used (sparingly) to indicate key concepts.

Any matters concerning the format and presentation of articles not covered by the above notes should be addressed to the Editor.

QUOTATIONS

Intellect's style for quotations embedded into a paragraph is single quote marks, with double quote marks used for a second quotation contained within the first. All long quotations (over 40 words) should be 'displayed'– i.e. set into a separate indented paragraph with an additional one-line space above and below, and without quote marks at the beginning or end. Please note that for quotations within the text, the punctuation should follow the bracketed reference. For a displayed quotation the bracketed reference appears after the full stop. All omissions in a quotation are indicated thus: [...] Note that there are no spaces between the suspension points. When italics are used for emphasis within quotations, please ensure that you indicate whether the emphasis is from the original text or whether it is your own.

REFEREES

The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture is a peer-reviewed journal. Strict anonymity is accorded to both contributors and referees.

REFERENCES

All references in the text should be according to the Harvard system, e.g. (Bordwell 1989: 9). Please do **not** group films together under a separate Filmography heading. Instead, incorporate all films into the main body of references and list them alphabetically by director. The same rule applies to television programmes/music/new media: identify the director/composer and list alphabetically with books, journals and papers.

Please note in particular:

- 'Anon.' for items for which you do not have an author (because all items must be referenced with an author within the text)
- A blank line is entered between references
- Year date of publication in brackets
- Commas, not full stops, between parts of each reference
- Absence of 'in' after the title of a chapter if the reference relates to an article in a journal or newspaper.
- Name of translator of a book within brackets after title and preceded by 'trans.', not 'transl.' or 'translated by'.
- Absence of 'no.' for the journal number, a colon between journal volume and number.
- 'pp.' before page extents.

The following samples indicate conventions for the most common types of reference:

Anon. (1957), *Narrative in Early Renaissance Art*, Oxford: Books Press.

Bashforth, Kirsty (2016), 'The rules for socialising with work colleagues', *Harper's Bazaar*, July, http://www.harpersbazaar.co.uk/people-parties/bazaar-at-work/news/a37383/how-to-socialise-effectively-at-work/. Accessed 15 July 2016.

'Blood of My Blood' (2016), J. Bender (dir.), *Game of Thrones*, Season 6 Episode 6 (29 May, USA: HBO).

Bowie, David (2016), 'Blackstar', *Blackstar*, sleeve notes, USA: Columbia Records.

Brown, Jane (2005), 'Evaluating surveys of transparent governance', *6th Global Forum on Reinventing Government: Towards Participatory and Transparent Governance*, Seoul, Republic of Korea, 24–27 May.

Denis, Claire (1988), *Chocolat*, France: Les Films du Paradoxe.

Derrida, Jacques (2002), 'The university without condition', in P. Kamuf (ed.), *Without Alibi*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 202–37.

Gibson, Rachel, Nixon, Paul and Ward, Stephen (eds) (2003), *Political Parties and the Internet: Net Gain?*, London: Routledge.

Gliesmann, Niklas (2015), *Denkwerkstatt Museum* ('Think workshop museum'), Norderstedt: Books on Demand.

Overdiek, Anja (2016), 'Fashion designers and their business partners: Juggling creativity and commerce', *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, 4:1, pp. 27–46.

Richmond, John (2005), 'Customer expectations in the world of electronic banking: A case study of the Bank of Britain', Ph.D. thesis, Chelmsford: Anglia Ruskin University.

Roussel, Raymond ([1914] 1996), *Locus Solu*s, Paris: Gallimard.

Ströter-Bender, Jutta (1995), *L'Art contemporain dans les pays du 'Tiers Monde'* (trans. O. Barlet), Paris: L'Harmattan.

UNDESA (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs) (2005), *Report on Reinventing Government*, New York: United Nations.

Woolley, Eileen and Muncey, Tessa (forthcoming), 'Demons or diamonds: A study to ascertain the range of attitudes present in health professionals to children with conduct disorder', *Journal of Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*.

Zhang, Yimou (2004), *Shi mian mai fu* (*House of Flying Daggers*), China: Beijing New Picture Film Co.

PERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS

Unless an informal conversation, interviews can be cited in text and included in the references. In the references, the name of interviewer/interviewee, type of communication, location, day and month should be included [if available].

Björgvinsson, Evan (2009), telephone interview with A. Høg Hansen, 23 January.

Branson, Richard (2014), in-person interview with J. Doe, Birmingham City University, 4 July.

WEBSITE REFERENCES

Website references are similar to other references.

There is no need to decipher any place of publication or a specific publisher, but the reference must have an author, and the author must be referenced Harvard-style within the text. Unlike paper references, however, web pages can change, so there needs to be a date of access as well as the full web reference. Website or blog titles should be in roman font. In the list of references at the end of your article, the item should read something like this:

Kermode, Mark (2017), 'Audience appreciation', Kermode Uncut, 17 November, http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/markkermode/entries/61bec71c-916d-4a13-a782-79c3afb3c2b9. Accessed 20 November 2017.

SUBMISSION PROCEDURES

Articles submitted to this journal should be original and not under consideration by any other publication. Contributions should be submitted electronically through the journal webpage. Please contact the journal's editor for further details.

TRANSLATIONS

If readers are unlikely to understand the title of a non-English-language work in your text (and references), the title in the original language may be accompanied by an English translation by the contributor, especially if its sense is not implied by the surrounding text. This applies to all types of work (journal article, book, film etc.).

Unofficial translations (e.g. those by the contributor) should be placed in quotation marks with parentheses, in roman type with an initial capital on the first word of title and subtitle (see Gliesmann in References). After the first mention in text, the original title should be used alone.

The official titles of published translations are set in italics inside parentheses (see Zhang in References). After the first mention in text, the English title should be used alone.

The guidance on this page is by no means comprehensive: it must be read in conjunction with the Intellect Style Guide. The Intellect Style Guide is obtainable from https://www.intellectbooks.com/journal-editors-and-contributors, or on request from the editor of this journal.