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Grimshaw - Preacher, or the Death of God in Pictures - JCRT 3.2

***Preacher*, or the Death of God in Pictures**

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We philosophise on the end of lots of things, but it is here that they actually come to an end.”¹ Jean Baudrillard in his episodic ‘postcard’ treatise on hyperreal America, (the theorist as traveller), posits a vision of the USA as simultaneously both a paradoxical ‘realised utopia’² and “the *only remaining primitive society*”³, a dystopian utopia, a society best understood from the sacrificial expanse of the desert horizon. Baudrillard’s aphorism on America as the land of ‘last things’ finds pop-culture realisation in the pages of Garth Ennis’ *Preacher*, a 66-issue, graphic novel. For if Nietzsche proclaimed the Death of God in the 1880s and the ‘Death of God’ theologians debated the merits of this claim; if *Time* asked the question in 1966, then readers of *Preacher* comic actually see it happen. God dies. God is shot. God is killed. And you understand why.

This nihilistic punk aesthetic is an important undercurrent to *Preacher* not only in Jesse’s a/theology but also in its critique of Kurt Cobain and the nihilistic music of grunge as sub narrative. For Ennis is saying that to believe in the salvific, redemptive example of suicidal rock stars (whether Sid Vicious or Kurt Cobain) is as self-defeating as those believing in a God who profess love but display indifference. Here Aresface stands in for all damaged humanity, briefly succeeding himself as punk rock celebrity because of his hideous appearance but then just as quickly discarded. Ennis states that the lack of paternal affection is what drives adolescents into the worship of these nihilistic, narcissistic stars. Here the inauthentic punk star is an analogy for the inauthentic God, who likewise feeds off his fans, who often damage themselves in attempting various forms of salvific imitation.

To read a comic is therefore to engage in looking beyond what is being presented to the fuller picture behind the panels. This acknowledgement of the artificiality of presentation paradoxically allows the presentation of the fantastical as ‘real’. The other important link is that *Preacher* is making use of a mythology and history that appears from the viewpoint of late modern post-enlightenment society rather fantastical and ‘artificial’. This has been noted in an interview with Garth Ennis:

The comic can therefore present what is, in a modernist, secular world, often viewed as un-presentable. Yet in its mixing of genres and mythologies *Preacher* is perhaps the ultimate form of a postmodern, eclectic, religious sensibility of pastiche. It aims not only to implement such a cosmology upon the world of its readers but also must at some level reflect their eclectic cosmology for it to garner such acclaim both critically and in the realm of consumer appreciation. At this level *Preacher* acts as an icon for the postmodern GenX religious sensibility - a melange of tradition, pop culture, Gnostic occultism, and the mediaization of our religious sensibility⁴. And while a movie

¹Jean Baudrillard, *America* trans. C. Turner (London/New York; Verso 1988/1993)p.98.

²ibid., p.77.

³ibid., p.5.

⁴There have been many recent texts that build upon this current state of Western society (particularly that of America - and by implication the ‘global America’ of the commodified, mediaized world). See Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith. The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998); Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: the emergence of the post-christian nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992); Douglas Coupland, *Life After God* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994); Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: myth, magic + mysticism in the age of information* (New York: Three River Press, 1998); Bruce David Forbes & Jeffrey H. Mahan (eds.), *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Berkeley: University of

can approximate this experience, only a comic book series can enable a drawn out engagement over a period of five years to create of a sub-world for the reader to engage with and within.

3. In January 1995 DC comics under its adult, Vertigo⁵ imprint, published the first of what would become a long running series of graphic novels⁶ that finally concluded in October 2000. Over 66 issues the reader is taken on a graphic roller coaster ride through contemporary America with side trips to the Vietnam War, The Dublin 1916 uprising, the Western frontier in the 1880s, the south of France, and up into Heaven and down into Hell. Ostensibly, the story of Jesse Custer, a fallen preacher hunting for God, involves a labyrinthine plot with tales of vampirism, frontier revisionism, graphic sex and violence, Kurt Cobain's suicide, small town American gothic, serial killers, secret societies, Grail legends, fallen angels, an indestructible Saint of Killers, the ghost of John Wayne, a God who abandons his creation, and the course of true love.
4. Created by Garth Ennis⁷ an expatriate northern Irishman, and largely drawn by Steve Dillon, *Preacher* is an important example of the gnostic lure of both blasphemous and esoteric religion in what could be termed the underground of contemporary religiosity and popular culture. For while *Preacher* may be unknown to scholars inside the academy it is big news outside. Not only is there the 66-volume five-year saga of redemptive transgression and religious angst but also a myriad of spin-off web-sites and discussion pages and the continued rumours of a movie version in various stages of pre and early production.
5. *Preacher* is a Byzantine-interlocking of stories that slowly unfold over the 66 issues. These manage to slowly coalesce into the final showdown where God is killed. The lead character is Jesse Custer, a typical hero lead: tall, dark, rugged and good-looking. Raised in a Southern gothic house of horrors, he briefly escapes and embarks on a life of grand theft auto before being dragged back and forced to become a hellfire Texas preacher "for some obscure little Presbyterian-Baptist sect no-one's ever heard of." ⁸ This phase ends, when personal and communal tragedy strikes and the wandering preacher is reborn into worldly temptation. Possessed by Genesis, the unworldly result from the mating of angel and demon, the preacher is literally the possessor of the voice of God, able to command his will on all who hear his voice.
6. Jesse is hunting for God, pursuing him⁹ through the underworld of contemporary America, seeking an answer to why God has abandoned heaven. Accompanying Jesse in his quest are

California Press, 2000); Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy (eds.), *God in the Details. American Religion in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Mark C. Taylor, *About religion: economies of faith in virtual culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁵DC Comics launched Vertigo as 'mature comics' in 1993.

⁶A graphic novel is a designation of a form of comic book that addresses more 'adult themes' and in a manner analogous to the format of a novel. *Preacher*, over its 66 issues, varied from a single 30 page comic to 200 page 'graphic novels' all of which combined to make up the mammoth *Preacher* series.

⁷Ennis, from Belfast worked previously on the seminal British comic *2000 AD* and then, for Vertigo on the very anti-establishment (both religious and political) *Hellblazer* and was also behind the titles *Hitman*, *Unknown Soldier* and *The Darkness*. In 1991 the publisher Robert Maxwell (under pressure from the UK's Evangelical Alliance) withdrew from publication an early graphic novel by Ennis called "True Faith". The Evangelical Alliance was offended by, amongst other things, a description of God as "a blockage in the world's toilet." See James Tweed, "True Faith" *New Statesman* February 15 1991.

⁸*Preacher* 43, November 1998, p.19.

⁹God is masculine, closer in form to a Greek God - all flowing hair and beard and rugged musculature.

Tulip O'Hare and Cassidy. Tulip, on one level, is the typical adolescent cartoon female fantasy figure. Overtly sexualised, often flimsily dressed or naked, yet also the 'tough talkin', pistol packin' mama'- the 'best friend with breasts' of so many pop culture dreams.¹⁰ Tulip is both lover and sidekick; Bonnie to his Clyde. Also accompanying them is Cassidy, an alcoholic Irish vampire¹¹. Fleeing the Dublin 1916 uprising, he was bitten by a vampire. Relocating to America he eventually meets up with his fellow outcasts. Befriending Jesse he is also in love with Tulip, adding tension to their relationship.

7. Jesse is hunted by The Saint of Killers, an eternal bounty hunter. Following personal disaster and a resultant delight in gratuitous violence on the Western frontier in the 1880s, he was sent to hell. However his cold heart snuffed out Hell's flames and his hatred for God has made him immortal. He replaces the Angel of Death, murders the Devil and sets out in pursuit of both Jesse and God, knowing that they will have to eventually meet up.
8. Starr, the increasingly mutilated senior agent of the Grail, protector of the sacred bloodline of Jesus is also hunting Jesse. The Grail, from its headquarters in the south of France has kept the messianic bloodline pure for two thousand years by only allowing familial inbreeding. Unfortunately such genetic limitation has resulted in an imbecilic faeces-throwing moronic messiah. Seeking to take over the Grail, Starr kills its leader, the Allfather and pursues Jesse wishing to make him the new messiah.
9. There is also a myriad of supporting players notably Arseface (whose deformed features are the result of a bungled Kurt Cobain copycat suicide attempt), and Jesse the Redneck 'deliverance'¹² good-ol' boy and muscular virile factotum of Jesse's evil grandmother. There are Louisiana vampire wannabes, San Francisco sexual deviants, New York serial killers, Mid-western repressed psychotics, and Grail functionaries. We learn the love story of Jesse's parents, the tragedy of Tulip's father, Cassidy's participation in the Irish uprising and his life in depression-era New York. We encounter various angels and demons in Heaven and Hell and a revisionist reading of the American frontier.
10. The graphic novel series is ideally suited to such a weight of characters and story lines for two main reasons. Firstly, within the realm of the comic anything is possible, alternate universes are almost prerequisites and secondly, the serial form enables the unfolding and inter-linking of a variety of stories that can be told at a leisurely pace. As such *Preacher* is a series of interlocking narratives that circle around the central quest for God. We gain background on all the characters, are granted access to connections that initially seem unrelated and become part of a sprawling saga of pop-culture religiosity and the search for meaning and purpose in a hypothetical contemporary America. This is an America that appears in terminal decay. Whether small town or large city, deviance, disaster, crime and brutality are never far below the surface of a society that may call on religion as a justification but is, in fact, abandoned by God.

¹⁰Tulip draws on a pulp culture tradition of sexualized action-women, from Wonder Woman to Charlie's Angels and Tankgirl on to the virtual heroine of Lara Croft of *Tomb Raider*.

¹¹Laurence Rickels in *The Vampire Lectures* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minneapolis Press 1999), p.2 notes that it is often the alcoholic who is a prime candidate for becoming a vampire. He also notes (p.23) that the suicide is another prime candidate. Here Cassidy escapes from the mass suicide, becomes a vampire and copes with it by becoming an alcoholic. Ennis is prone to twist established lore.

¹²Ennis' take on Southern society is strongly influenced by movies such *Deliverance* and *Southern Comfort* where crazed, inbred hillbillies mix twisted fundamentalist Christianity, sexual deviance and extreme violence.

11. *Preacher's* undercurrent of the violent frontier of the Saint of Killers acts as a sub-narrative and explanatory device. The blood spilled and the murderous acts committed have stained the land and its inhabitants. A land founded on violence can never be pure or peaceful. The link is made with the ideology of the blood sacrifice in the 1916 Dublin rising. Ennis critiques such neo-romantic ideology of a sacrificial outpouring of blood that would, it hoped, change history. Cassidy, at this time, just a normal Irish youth, flees from the slaughter and in the process, on a country lane, is attacked by a vampire. Here he becomes a blood sacrifice. Yet his blood sacrifice is one that symbolically stands for Ireland itself, continuously feasting on the blood of her people. Cassidy, driven abroad by both types of blood sacrifice (national and personal) arrives in America where a new form of national blood sacrifice will occur in the 1960s and early 1970s with the Vietnam War. Here the State acts as vampire, sucking the life out of its own combatants.
12. The religious core is the theme of humanity abandoned by God. Whether it is incipient Irish nationalism, a bloodthirsty frontier, the Vietnam War or contemporary America's societal decline, God is either absent or neglectful and needs to be called to account. God is even absent from the messianic line so faithfully kept by the Grail; for here what should be purity becomes imbecility and corruption - in a sense God even abandons his self-representation for humanity. Here Ennis' Northern Irish Protestantism (even if latent) comes to the fore. Ennis is an outraged puritan, stating it is better to destroy than to allow contamination (whether societal or religious) to continue.
13. Throughout, Jesse is the confused existential hero who can only rely on the ghost of John Wayne, the embodiment of a mythological frontier, i.e. virility and virtue. In the end the Grail collapses, God is killed and Jesse and Tulip ride off into the sunset in a world without God. Yet this world seems perhaps more at peace. For the underlying theme is that religion and God are ultimately harmful and destructive, ultimately seeking to control, to separate and to enslave.
14. For Garth Ennis, a product of mass-media culture, the frontier had two sources: the old westerns he watched on television as a child in Ireland and later the 'spaghetti westerns' of Sergio Leone and the European ultra-violent school of cowboy existential apocalypse¹³. He also notes the major influence of Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* on the character Saint of Killers, the cold-blooded cowboy who takes on the mantle of the Angel of Death.¹⁴ Yet Saint's indestructibility also links into recent pop-culture vigilantes *Robocop* and *Terminator*. The difference here is that he is the spiritual 'alien cyborg' (the mix of human and non/inhuman) from the past now acting in the present, not the rampant 'man-made technology'¹⁵ from some machine-controlled future. This is an interesting point for often these indestructible vigilantes speak of our fear of technology - a lineage back to the romantic gothic horror of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1816). In *Preacher* the point is more theological. If the future mechanical cyborg killer is the result of humanity's interference with the created order, then the Saint of Killers is a reminder of the destructiveness that lurks within humanity, unleashed

¹³The best source available in English is Christopher Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns. Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone* (London/New York: I.B. Taurus.1981,1998). Frayling notes the mix of types that underwrote the spaghetti hero as "a mixture of James Bond, Che Guevara, Hercules and Judas" (p. xii). Possible influences for *Preacher* include the anti-clerical *Django* films, the bandit-priest of *A Bullet for the General* (1961), the sex-maniac priest of *Find a Place to Die* (1968) and the bounty-hunting preachers of *No Room to Die* (1969) and *Reverend Colt* (1971). Frayling,p.79.

¹⁴G. Ennis, "foreword" in *Ancient History*, DC Comics 1998, p.2.

¹⁵The use of the term 'man' here is deliberate for in science fiction the post-human cyborg is nearly always, seemingly created by a man.

by God's interference and then abandonment. The killing machine we have to fear is not some imagined future event created by Promethean humanity but rather a potential within all divinely created humanity. For we all possess the vengeance, destructiveness, and cold-heated detachment of a wrathful God. As such this raises an interesting ontological issue. For if the wrathful God of our violent, destructive *imago dei* is no more, does this offer the potential for a new dawning for humanity? The fact that Jesse and Tulip ride off into the clich'd new life of the western sunset could suggest so, but only if God is truly dead.

15. *Preacher* is part of an imagined mythology, the Death of God as an event rendered in, and rendered possible by, America. *Preacher* makes great use of Western mythology and motifs, on one level fulfilling Jim Kitses' definition of the postmodern Western as "blending mythology and demythology, revisionism and nostalgia..."¹⁶ Ennis undertakes a form of frontier revisionism heavily influenced by Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* and the paradoxical moralistic amorality of two Western archetypes: the Revenger Western and the Gunfighter. The Revenger seeks personal redemption - acting alone to overcome a world that has created his state of despair. He is the site of a moral panic within the self, seeking to overcome that which threatens to destroy him. Often this can only be achieved in an act of redemptive violence. By imposing physical death on the other he frees himself from the death of his own soul. The Revenger has links to the Gunfighter who acts as the defining symbol of a society in chaos. Both act as moral agents- the Revenger on a personal level, the Gunfighter on a public one. Yet these moral agents are unable to separate morality from violence, exhibiting a puritanical delight in and desire for chastisement, suffering and cleansing pain. As Richard Slotkin notes "in the world of the gunfighter...moral suasion without violent force to back it is incompetent to achieve its civilizing ends; it is foolish at best, at worst a species of complicity with evil."¹⁷ Therefore *Preacher* also references another Eastwood film, *Pale Rider* where the Angel of Death exacts God's vengeance on a frontier community. Yet in *Preacher* vengeance is wrought not by, but rather against God. God is the cause of evil, not its answer. It is God who stands against civilization, God who acts as the forces of disruptive chaos, God who has to be tamed, broken and exterminated because of his outlaw actions.
16. To be read both underneath (as supporting text) and against this (as text of challenge) is the act of ultimate blood sacrifice: the Christian typology of redemption through violence initiated by the sacrificial death of Jesus. Bataille sees this as reflecting a central principle of theology that "the world is complete" which "is maintained at every time and in all places, including the night of Golgotha."¹⁸ This leads him to posit a form of Hegelian dialectic of completion and incompleteness. God has to be killed, claims Bataille, so "to see the world in the weakness of incompleteness"¹⁹, yet the sacrifice of the crucifixion, the act of salvific solidarity can have meaning only if the incompleteness is overcome. For Christianity's message is that the act of completion is actually incomplete, yet will be made complete by God joining in our incomplete state and holding out the promise of completion for all those who believe in the act of divine dialectic. *Preacher* responds to this in two ways. On the one hand it claims that if the bloodline did survive it is now incomplete having been corrupted by those seeking

¹⁶Jim Kitses, "Introduction: Postmodernism and the Western" in J. Kitses and G. Richman ed. *The Western Reader*, p.16.

¹⁷Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation. The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992) p.402. Slotkin states that the frontier myth "...represented the redemption of the American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or "natural" state, and regeneration through violence." p.12.

¹⁸Georges Bataille, *Guilty* trans. B. Boone (Venice/San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1988), p.27.

¹⁹ibid., p.27.

to protect it. For the incarnation is a one off - the surviving human blood needs the divine intervention to be completed and the theme of this story is the abandonment of humanity by God. On the other hand it moves past Bataille's dialectic claiming that the act of completion for humanity is to ensure the permanent state of the world in the weakness of incompleteness. God has to die to save the world- yet it is only in the abandonment of God in death that the world will be set free. For to live in a world that is theologically complete, is to fail to hold God to account.

17. The underlying claim of *Preacher* is that God is an irresponsible father²⁰, the one who abandoned his son and now abandons his responsibilities. In this sense Jesse, orphaned by his human parents, is also orphaned by his divine father. Starr, in his desire to remake Jesse as the new messiah, is actually closer to the mark than he realises. In this reading Jesse is actually a type of Christ figure. For the divine possesses Jesse, in this case the new knowledge of Genesis - the new beginning. Jesse, as recipient of this power and knowledge (being like God and so a reference to Genesis 3: 5) is the newest Adam, the partial kenotically-inflected being²¹ who is to overturn the old law of God and call the irresponsible father to account. In this pursuit Tulip becomes a new Eve, partial temptress but also embodying the independence of the midrashic Lilith. Cassidy is the serpent, the voice of temptation and inhumanity; yet in this new creation even the non-human still exhibits more humanity than the creator does.
18. The second theme is that of the Grail Mystery and here there is an obvious debt exhibited to the pop culture phenomenon of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*²². As the authors note in their introduction to the revised edition in 1996 "material from *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* found its way into a multitude of...fictional narratives, from tacky thrillers and pot-boilers to very serious literature indeed."²³
19. In outline, the book concerns the mystery of Rennes-le-Chateau in the South of France and the sudden wealth experienced by the local priest Berenger Sauniere at the end of the nineteenth century. A new age detective thriller that predates *The Celestine Prophecy*, it offers up a mixture of esoterica, divine bloodlines, hidden conspiracies, the Templars, the Cathars and a still operating secret society. The basis is the existence of a society dedicated to promoting the claims and interests of the Merogovian bloodline as rightful heirs of the throne of France and as possessors of the Holy Bloodline. The Cathars and the Templars are involved in the protection of both the bloodline and the various esoteric secrets.
20. The book promotes what it claims are 'key facts', all of which are to be found in either implicit or explicit form in *Preacher*. It claims the existence of a secret order acting behind Western history and seeking the legitimate and justifiable restoration of the Merogovian dynasty and bloodline to the thrones of France and other European nations.²⁴ However, *Preacher* differs

²⁰The Saint of Killers returns to his vigilante ways when his family is brutally murdered in his absence.

²¹That is, Jesse contains a God-force within him- that which has been 'poured out' of the divine (or in this case escaped from heaven). While not the typical kenotic being, Jesse has links to such forms of Christology where Jesus is 'a God-filled man' and in many ways has a twisted lineage back to the Arian heresy.

²²M. Baigent, R. Leigh, and H. Lincoln, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (London: Arrow Books, revised edition, 1996).

²³Ibid., p.18. One of my students, Joseph Veale also alerted me to the existence of a narrative drawing on a search for esoteric knowledge that exists as an unmarked site upon the website for the American alt-metal band tool: <http://www.toolband.com/>. If you scan down the tumourous side bar and click on the large right hind nodule you enter a narrative telling of a Indiana Jones type search conducted in the south of France by the bass player. The audience for comic books and metal music heavily overlap.

²⁴Baigent, Leigh & Lincoln, *Holy Blood and Holy Grail*, pp.106-107.

from the book While the book claims the bloodline is diffused throughout European nobility, in *Preacher* the bloodline is pure, if inbred and moronic.

21. The third theme is pop culture in general. This ranges from the influence of Kurt Cobain of the grunge band Nirvana and the effects of his suicide upon his fans (*pace* "arseface"), to Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire* - New Orleans gothic lore with the undercurrent of the more general ethos and sensibility of the American road movie. For in many ways *Preacher* is a road movie in graphic form.
22. The road movie is a cinematic expression of the existential search of both society and the individual. *Preacher* moves its characters through an America that has become radically secularised by the abandonment of God. Only now it is not just the city that is secular but also heartland America, whether Deep South, the Midwest or the Western desert. *Preacher* also exhibits an underlying mythology of the frontier. In its violence the frontier is a permanent state of experience in a world abandoned by God. Yet the road movie thesis is one that works well within the cultural logic of *Preacher* because as Bennett Schaber remarks, its underlying rhetoric has always been strongly Biblical- whether that of Exodus for those of the pre-war period or apocalypse for those post-war.²⁵ For the road movie is typically the dual journey of both a physical and spiritual search where neither one replaces the other but instead operate as interdependent.²⁶ On one hand *Preacher* follows in the template of *Easy Rider* and its utopian search for peace of self through a dystopian America, yet in its fetishization of violence and beauty it also references *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Natural Born Killers*. The road in *Preacher* is the road to God and *Preacher* here also references the ultimate American existential quest of *The Wizard of Oz*. In Oz the wizard is revealed to be a small man hiding behind an artificial persona. In *Preacher*, God is revealed as not who we believed he was, unmasked by a collection of outcasts (as in Oz) who are symbolically reborn and remade on the journey.
23. *Preacher* makes use of the motif of horror in two distinct ways. First it reflects the excesses of cinematic horror and splatter movies. Death and violence occur in close-up slow frame detail. Linked into the Western motif, this cartoon representation of death and violence reflects the ballet of death and violence experienced in Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* where "the mix of slow and regular motion allows the audience to experience the subjective distortion of time experienced by those engaged in violent action."²⁷ *Preacher* posits a dystopic America where violence and degradation exist just under the symbolic realized utopia of existence.²⁸ Horror, blood, leakage and penetration seek to destroy both the personal body and the body politic. While Bataille may claim that the crucifixion "is a wound by which believers communicate with God"²⁹, in the motif of horror, the wounds experienced in *Preacher* are a worldly crucifixion of wounds which signal the abandonment of this world by God. The world is a site of Kristevan abjection. For Kristeva "the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life."³⁰ So the reanimated, immortal corpse of Saint of

²⁵B. Schaber, " 'Hitler Can't Keep 'Em That Long': the road, the people" in S. Cohan and I. R. Hark ed. *The Road Movie Book* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), p.20.

²⁶S. Roberts "Western Meets Eastwood. Genre and Gender on the Road" in Cohan & Hark ed. *The Road Movie Book*, pp.53-54.

²⁷Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p.593.

²⁸Tracing lineage from Tocqueville, Baudrillard states "America is powerful and original; America is violent and abominable. We should not seek to deny either of these aspects, nor reconcile them." *America*, p.88.

²⁹Georges Bataille, *Guilty*, p.31.

³⁰Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection* trans. L. S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.4.

Killers stalking heaven and earth in pursuit of his divine prey is a leakage of death into life. Yet this corpse cannot be excluded from God's territory precisely because it is "accursed of God" (Deut 21:23)³¹, because it is God's abandonment of his territory that has resulted in a corpse-stained land. Yet while it is the absence of God that has allowed horror to flourish, it is also the continued existence of the absent God that perpetuates the horror of life. For horror is a body language, a language born of the crisis of identity in a world suffering ontological disrapture³², a language that seeks to re-experience and remake the limits of the body and existence, the articulation of liminal imaginings and of the fear of the failure to contain (the self, the fear, the threat, the inside of the body).

24. In *Preacher* Ennis is making the point that horror, leakage, disruption and suffering occur in a world because God has abandoned his responsibilities. The horror occurs not because of God's existence (or otherwise) but rather because of the wilful inaction of God. Yet while acts of horror do occur because of divine inaction *Preacher* also claims that God seeks to inspire terror (and so force humanity to seek refuge in him). Therefore God must be called to account for his abandonment of the world - abandonment is one of the traditional motifs of horror and terror - yet with an awareness that acts of terror and horror will continue. However with God dead humanity will finally take responsibility for this world and its existence ' and that includes its potential and possibility for horror and terror. The death of God will not end terror or horror, but it will return such events to within the orbit of humanity's control and effect. In a radically secularized existence, horror and terror continue to exist, continue to be random and disruptive, but the answers are now within humanity's sphere of action.
25. It would be easy to dismiss *Preacher* because of its form of presentation. For the comic book is often seen to reside on the low end of the cultural spectrum, a form of entertainment as opposed to literature, a repository of adolescent views and attitudes, and a type of text for an audience unable to cope with narratives without pictures. Here they fall under Adolf Loos' designation as *ornamentation*, the signifier of either a criminal tendency or degenerate mind in an unornamented modern world.³³
26. Yet the history of the cartoon as societal comment has its roots in the anonymous woodcuts illustrating the broadsheets of seventeenth century society that commented on religious and foreign affairs in Britain, while one of the earliest series telling a story in sequential pictures was Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress* (1755). While the comic became a mainstay of a mass public during the 1930s with the rise of the American superhero, there was also the parallel rise of the countercultural comic whether as anti-rational horror comic, or Rabelaisian excess as in the work of Robert Crum. Heavily influential upon the ethos of *Preacher* was a British comic, *2000 AD*, that appeared in the middle of the punk explosion in 1977. Ennis later wrote for it before shifting to Vertigo and he seems never to have forgotten its *raison d'être* as propounded by Roger Sabin:

At its core it stood for a distrust of any kind of authority; a romanticised belief in working-class culture (street credibility); the worth of rebellion for its own sake;

³¹see *ibid.*, p.109.

³²Linda Badley, *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic* (Westport,Conn./London, 1995), p.7.

³³A. Loos "Ornament and Crime" in L. Munz & G.Kunstler *Adolf Loos: pioneer of modern architecture* (London; Thames & Hudson) 1966, pp. 226-231(original essay 1908). Loos' essay became a theoretical underpinning of the modernist movement, influencing Mies van der Rohe and his famous dictum: 'Less is more'- perhaps the pre-eminent 'touchstone' of modernity.

and the fetishisation of violence (real or imaginary).³⁴

27. *Preacher* is therefore a moralistic narrative represented in perhaps the supreme narrative form of pop culture, the comic book. For the comic book (or graphic novel) occupies a unique place in narrative presentation because it operates in a manner similar to the Christian icon. An icon is 'a widow to the divine', where the image presented is not there as a concrete one-dimensional presence or presentation, but rather exists as an opening to an encounter. That is, the observer looks through the presented image to the reality behind it. That which is represented is only an approximation of the non-visual truth that is posited as exiting behind and beyond the image. Comics (especially graphic novels) exist in a similar fashion. As one critic has noted of the comic genre

The illustrations are not really illustrations of what's going on. The narration isn't really describing what's going on. There is a gap there, and somewhere in that gap is reality.³⁵

Of course, being in the comic world allows you to throw in casually, "We have this reanimating serum that can bring fish back to life." Which would be out of place in a more realistic book. Like in *Preacher*, there's a lot of supernatural things going on, but if you accept Christian mythology, that's the only jump you have to make. In DC you have Christian mythology and radioactive superheroes and space aliens...³⁶

28. It would be easy to dismiss *Preacher* as low culture, juvenile, adolescent, sophomoric, ill informed and the like. But that would be to miss the point of both the series and of the comic book itself. For *Preacher* is an important insight into the religious sensibility of postmodern culture, a sensibility that is incredibly eclectic, largely anti-establishment, and highly suspicious of religious orthodoxy and highly receptive to the fantastical, the occult and the Gnostic. Ryan Gilbey has labelled it "The Doom Generation", noting a turn to images of gothic distress and horror in music, fashion and entertainment. A generation seeking answers to questions that may not have acceptable answers, a generation feeling disenfranchised from "the old ideologies or beliefs or 'traditional politics' whose relevance has withered as the decade has worn on."³⁷ It represents a culture that is predominantly visual and tribal in its affiliations and interests, a culture where violence and sex are merely part of any narrative structure, where the body is celebrated, transfigured, mutated, transgressed and not denied and where the individual can overcome any opposition whether human or divine. As such *Preacher* is GenX in search of itself, a generation reading of a loss (the Death of God) heard of from their parent's generation, but now experienced in graphic, *graphic* detail. *Preacher* reflects the sensibility of a generation willing to suspend disbelief in anything - as long it is *not* traditional, orthodox Christianity - a generation existing in Baudrillard's dystopian critique of New York: " ...completely rotten with wealth, power, senility, indifference, puritanism and mental hygiene, poverty and waste, technological futility and aimless violence..."³⁸ *Preacher* is the universe of those who identify more with Bret Easton Ellis' outraged morality tales of fragmented, postmodern society than with Douglas Coupland's rival inactive, ironic GenX' of

³⁴Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels. A History of Graphic Art* (London: Phaidon, 1996) p.133.

³⁵Frank Miller in "Amazing Heroes" July 1986 pp37-8, quoted in R. Sabin, *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels*, p.9.

³⁶Mania in Garth Ennis Interview, April 18, 1997, <http://www.fandomshop.com/comics/interview/garthennis041897.html>

³⁷Ryan Gilbey, "Doom Generation: new tales from the dark side" in *The Face* no.4 May 1997, p.122.

³⁸Jean Baudrillard, *America*, p.23.

hypermodernity.³⁹ Coupland might ask of 'life after God', but Ennis (and Ellis) are attempting to come to terms with the full implications of a life *with* God. For in a radically secularized world there would have been no point or meaning in *Preacher*.

29. In *Preacher* GenX confronts its greatest demon- that their parents did *not* kill off God in the 1960s...

Notes

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³⁹Bret Easton Ellis has written a series of novels (*Less than Zero*, *The Rules of Attraction*, *American Psycho*, *The Informers*, *Glamorama*) expressing a puritan outrage at postmodern society and its commodification of existence. Douglas Coupland (*generation x*, *shampoo planet*, *microserfs*, *life after God* etc) takes a more mannered approach of switching between ironic inertia and utopian celebration.