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# 'I'd sell you suicide': pop music and moral panic in the age of Marilyn Manson[1]

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Music makes mutations audible. (Attali 1977)

In his opening remarks as host of the 1998 Grammy Award Show, sitcom actor, substance abuser and convicted drunk driver Kelsey Grammer promised that Marilyn Manson's 'skinny white ass' would not be appearing on the show. It was a truly extraordinary moment. Referring explicitly to his own teenage daughter, Spencer, Grammer couched this slur in the form of an inside joke for the baby boomer parents of children with seemingly inexplicable musical tastes. In so doing, he affirmed not only the intractable conservatism of the Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences but also the arrogant hegemony of his own generation within mainstream musical culture. The show proceeded to reward Bob Dylan with Album of the Year, James Taylor with Best Pop Album and Elton John with Best Male Pop Vocal Performance, while lavishing unbridled approbation upon the newest crop of corporate hit-makers, including Babyface, LeAnn Rimes, Hanson and the ubiquitous Spice Girls. Mitch Miller could not have orchestrated a more thoroughgoing tribute to the pop music status quo in America.[2]

It has been twenty years since the French economist Jacques Attali wrote *Noise*, his seminal study of the political economy of music, but it remains one of my favourite texts. Attali was interested in the relationship of music to power. His radical approach was centred on two critical observations – firstly, that 'listening to music is listening to all noise, realizing that its appropriation and control is a reflection of power, that it is essentially political'; and secondly, that 'music is prophecy . . . It makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible.' From these premises he articulated his influential – and prescient – thesis on the uniquely subversive potential of the musician:

> Everywhere we look, the monopolization of the broadcast of messages, the control of noise, and the institutionalization of the silence of others assure the durability of power . . . The monologue of standardized, stereotypical music accompanies and hems in a daily life in which in reality no one has the right to speak any more. Except those among the exploited who can still use their music to shout their suffering. . . . For this reason musicians are dangerous, disturbing and subversive . . . (Attali 1977, pp. 6–11)

That Attali has fallen out of critical favour in recent years does not diminish, for me, the elegant simplicity of his analysis of *the power to silence*. These days we may

quibble with his valorisation of music in a 'postmodern' world dominated by an advertising discourse whose very essence consists in selling us our own rebellion, but his observations about the will to silence – to demonise, marginalise and ultimately censor musicians while distracting, diverting and ultimately deafening the rest of us – is more timely than ever.

What is striking about the recent 'moral panic'[3] Marilyn Manson has inspired is that, to borrow from Attali, it seems to extend well beyond the predictable interests of the political right and the socioeconomic status quo it claims to represent. Whereas a decade ago the censorship of pop music was spearheaded by clearly defined special interest groups and subsequently contested in public discourse – not only in the media but in the US Senate, in the courts, in the classroom and elsewhere – today the project of silencing appears to have acquired a normative quality. Revulsion for Marilyn Manson emerges in this new context not as an element in a broad public debate about art, politics or even freedom of expression but as the kind of 'received wisdom' or even 'common sense' that obviates the need for such debate and tacitly scorns the suggestion that it is even necessary. It is curious perhaps, but hardly surprising, that the Parents' Music Resource Centre (PMRC) and its neoconservative allies fell into a virtually moribund state in the late 1990s. In a world where the silencing of music is elevated to received wisdom, in which radio programmers, labels, retailers, tour promoters and many musicians themselves accept the reasonableness (or at least the utility) of self-censorship, they are not necessary. In a world of Kelsey Grammers, who needs Tipper Gore?

This article takes the form of a meditation on the current relationship of North American popular culture and public morality, with special emphasis on the extremely serious allegation that rock music can cause teen suicide. I want to argue that the impulse to silence music today is linked to a generalised and seemingly intractable youth crisis, *the cultural symptoms of which have become inextricably confused within popular discourse with their root social, economic and psychological causes*. Borrowing from Lawrence Grossberg's definitive study of American culture under neoconservatism, *We Gotta Get Out Of This Place*, I want to suggest, further, that this confusion – artfully cultivated in the 1980s as an aspect of the neoconservative *political* agenda – has since made its way by *cultural* means into the mainstream of North American life, where it now manifests itself both as a moral panic and as a profoundly conformist cultural imperative.[4] Lastly, and most importantly, I want to show how Marilyn Manson, uniquely among the current crop of commercially successful rock stars, has played what Jacques Attali would call a 'prophetic' role in this crisis by painstakingly deconstructing its discursive elements and subverting them with an almost sadistic delight.

## Don't Fear the Reaper

I was born in late 1960 and thus spent the much-maligned 1970s as a 'youth', aged 10–20. Say what you will about streaking and pet rocks but this was, in retrospect, a decade relatively free of youth-oriented moral panics in North America, even after the advent of punks and skinheads. Curiously perhaps, the socioeconomic malaise of the early 1970s – Vietnam, Watergate, the energy crisis, 'stagflation' – produced a popular culture of heightened individualism, nonconformity and escapism, rather than the reverse. This process was catalysed in large measure by the movement of the baby boom generation into 'adulthood' and by the gentle mutation of the

countercultural ethos of personal freedom into the 'me decade' ethos of existential self-absorption, conspicuous consumption and sexual liberation. Social problems abounded but there was nothing in everyday life on the scale of an AIDS epidemic or a renewed Cold War to legitimise a wholesale assault on the prevailing ethos of heightened individualism; drug abuse, pollution, poverty, inner city crime and 'youth' problems in general prompted a good deal of hand-wringing, but they did not precipitate the kind of broadly based conservative counter-assault they would in the 1980s and 1990s. As a 'youth' in the 1970s, I was not told to 'say no to drugs', I was not warned that my obsessive attachment to rock music was pathological, and I was not subjected to annual gymnasium lectures on teen suicide.

In those days, suicide was by no means the *verboten* subject for popular music that it has since become. In 'Alone Again (Naturally)' – which spent six weeks at the top of the *Billboard* charts in 1972 and garnered three Grammy nominations – Gilbert O'Sullivan pondered throwing himself off a 'nearby tower' because he had been betrayed by everyone from his fiancé to God.[5] Leonard Cohen threatened to slit his wrists in 'Dress Rehearsal Rag' (1971) for similar reasons, while Elton John considered walking 'headlong into the deep end of the river' in 'Someone Saved my Life Tonight' (1975).[6] Blue Öyster Cult scored a Top Twenty hit in 1975 with the *Romeo and Juliet*-inspired 'Don't Fear the Reaper'. 'Suicide is Painless', the *M*A*S*H* theme, became as well known and as commonplace in the 1970s as any commercial jingle. Suicide emerged, in fact, as one of many rather unlikely but indisputably 'serious' subjects that 1970s pop music inherited from the 1960s counterculture, including war, race relations, feminism and ecology. Yet as Gilbert O'Sullivan's appeal to the highly conservative Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences attests, musical threats of suicide did not provoke anything even remotely resembling a moral panic in those years. Rather, the theme of suicide was integrated into mainstream pop culture in a thoroughly romantic and ultimately bourgeois fashion, just as it had been in earlier mass mediated incarnations from romance novels to tragic opera.

The theme of suicide was naturalised within mainstream pop music in the 1970s in at least two rather obvious ways. The first of these was the appearance of suicide-related songs in a radio-based musical culture characterised not only by many 'serious' commercial pop songs but by an equal or greater number of inane ones. (A modest short list of the latter might include Chuck Berry's 'My Ding-a-Ling' (1972), Jim Stafford's 'Spiders and Snakes' (1973) and Carl Douglas's 'Kung Foo Fighting' (1974).) Gilbert O'Sullivan may have been truly desperate but sandwiched between Hall & Oates and the Righteous Brothers on Top Forty radio, how much harm could he really cause himself or anyone else? Secondly, the music itself – that is, the sonic codes by which the *meanings* of the songs were partly constituted – worked to undermine the violence of the lyrical content, most obviously in the soft acoustic tones of the singer-songwriters, but even in the ostensibly proto-metal strains of Blue Öyster Cult.[7] In general, and to an extent that seems extraordinary in retrospect, the theme of suicide was conventionalised in 1970s pop music as one of many bittersweet expressions of existential self-pity, romantic disappointment, misunderstood genius or nostalgic regret. Eric Carmen's 'All By Myself' (1975), Terry Jacks' 'Seasons in the Sun' (1974) and Janis Ian's 'At Seventeen' (1975) were not about suicide but they could have been.

The late 1970s witnessed the irrevocable fragmentation of North American rock radio and its audience into distinct 'formats', but prior to this period commer-

cial radio programming was characterised by a remarkable degree of variety and even inclusivity. Whereas commercial rock is today partitioned into 'oldies', 'classic rock', 'adult contemporary', 'CHR' (hits), 'AAA' (adult alternative) and various other heavily circumscribed genre categories (to say nothing of dance, 'urban' and other black musical formats), in the 1970s it was possible to hear the Rolling Stones, Donny Osmond, Sly and the Family Stone, Glen Campbell and Alice Cooper in rotation on the same commercial radio playlist. Even the 1960s valorising of the ostensibly independent FM band vis-a-vis its more 'corporate' AM counterpart waned in the 1970s (only to be rearticulated in the 1980s in a similar valorisation of 'campus and community' radio). As a recent survey of the music of the early 1970s suggests, this remarkable inclusivity in 1970s commercial rock radio helps to account not only for the era's goofiness but for its innocence as well (Breithaupt and Breithaupt 1996). By the end of the decade, however, the evolution of disco, new wave, metal and mainstream rock into stylistically and ideologically incompatible genres had provided a musical rationale for the fragmentation and specialisation of rock radio, while the 'maturing' of the baby boom – always commercial radio's golden goose – added a powerful demographic impetus. In the 1980s and 1990s this trend continued unabated, as commercial rock radio shamelessly abandoned any pretense that it mattered musically and programme directors of virtually all formats clamoured over each other to court (mostly white female) baby boomers. Today, even 'new country' radio pretends it is rock in an attempt to win the allegiance of this enormously profitable cohort.

Radio has always been the most powerful means by which rock music is mediated commercially (though record retailing, live concerts, jingles, movie/ television tie-ins, the Internet and especially 'music television' have become increasingly significant).[8] That much mainstream rock radio now boasts that it plays 'no rap, no metal' is a measure not only of its arrogance but of its unabashed claim to musical hegemony in a world characterised, paradoxically, by increasing musical diversity. (How else to explain its clichéd insistence that, although its playlists are determined by increasingly rigid formats, it offers 'more variety'?) Commercial rock radio now defines itself in exclusive terms – a tendency that seems to reflect a more generalised cultural insularity within the baby boom generation, one that is increasingly nostalgic, myopic and, above all, conservative.[9] As Graeme Turner notes somewhat sardonically of baby boomers' ossifying musical tastes:

> [U]nlike the audience for teen radio . . . FM's audience does not seem to change its tastes or look for the thrill of the new. FM's audience listened to the Eagles in the 1970s on its record players, it tuned into FM in the 1980s so it could listen to the Eagles on its car radios, and now it is the 1990s and it *still* wants to listen to the Eagles – perhaps so it can remember the 1970s. (Turner 1993, p. 145)

Music – and commercial radio in particular – has thus emerged since the 1970s as one of the most clearly defined and intensely disputed sites of cultural struggle, most notably between the baby boom generation, for whom rock radio has become a predictable, sanitised refuge from the anxieties of modern life, and their children, for whom hip-hop, alternative, metal, techno, industrial, goth and all of their seemingly endless hybrids stand for nothing less than the articulation of their status as musical outsiders.

The evidence suggests that, throughout the industrialised West, the struggle for rock radio is one that youth has all but lost.[10] It is possible, as Stephen Barnard

has argued, that the abandonment of youth by commercial radio is in fact symptomatic of a much broader 'dismantling of the teenager as a market entity' in favour of strategies that target their more affluent parents (Barnard 1993, p. 146). Certainly the eradication of a youth presence on radio has produced a 'highly regulated' broadcasting environment in which youth has not only been silenced but cut off from one of its primary signifying (or self-defining) traditions. As Turner observes, the 'privileged discourses and thematics' of contemporary rock radio 'are not at all consonant with those of youth cultures generally, and certainly not easily contained within the conventional discourses of the teenager.' This is at least in part because

> The raucous, pervasive, invasive and eroticized pleasures of rock music and of teenagers in general were found on the same cultural terrain and thus meant many of the same things. As rock music has become music for adults, it has cut itself off from such associations: it has acquired aesthetic traditions and pretensions, it has increasingly separated melody from rhythm as its central formal element (so it is now possible to like a wide range of rock music from Talking Heads to Billy Joel but to hate the very sound of rap). . . . (Turner 1993, pp. 151, 153–154)

The anecdotal evidence of this musical generation gap is voluminous. In a recent article celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the release of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, the influential Canadian broadcaster and author Alan Cross was quoted as saying: 'Those universal themes of death, money, insanity and time have that transgenerational appeal. [*Dark Side of the Moon*] is not just the kind of record that could be handed from older brother to younger brother, but now from father to son.' Added one-time Toronto rock radio programmer and station manager Gary Aubé, 'I guess it's a matter of wanting your children to appreciate the music that was part of your generation. *Dark Side* is such an iconic album, it's a good one to choose. Kids need to be exposed to the darker elements as well as to happy little pop songs.' (O'Reilly 1998, p. C6) One can only assume that Aubé has not heard Marilyn Manson.

Most observers now agree that 'music television' – and MTV in particular – has usurped radio's responsibility for 'breaking' new acts and for musical 'newness' in general (Shuker 1994, ch. 7). This is an extremely important claim, and one that deserves a good deal more rigour than I can give it here. For now, I would like to suggest that this ostensible division of labour – in which radio broadcasts the old, the familiar and the reassuring, while music television assumes responsibility for the new, the unfamiliar and the shocking – is, in fact, a symptom of the generational divide in contemporary popular music discourse, rather than any kind of resolution of it. It is no coincidence, for example, that Marilyn Manson rose to the top of the charts and into the limelight via music television, nor that objections to his music are inevitably tangled up with criticisms of his personal appearance and especially the visual content of his videos. Nor is it coincidental that, practically since its inception, music television has been 'studied' obsessively by self-styled educational 'authorities' like the (US) National Coalition on Television Violence and the Ontario (Canada) Teachers' Federation, heightening fears that 'rock videos ''legitimize violence'' and reinforce racial and sexual stereotypes' (Shuker 1994, p. 198).

Since the early 1980s the musical works most commonly blamed for inciting teen suicide (and other sorts of antisocial behaviour) have been those which fit least well into the rock radio mainstream, the sociocultural status quo it represents, and the discourses that sustain it. Indeed, attacks on specific, ostensibly suicide-inducing songs have frequently been subsumed in more generalised attacks against artists,

albums, even entire genres – a trend that has been abetted by rock critics themselves, many of whom no longer judge musical worth on grounds of compositional specificity but instead trade openly in casual and careless stereotypes. Heavy metal has until recently been the most conspicuous casualty of such generalised critiques, attracting broadly based accusations that, *as a genre*, it fosters social pathologies among its listeners ranging from occultism and satanism, through sexism and racism, to murderous and suicidal tendencies.[11] (Rap and even goth music have attracted similar kinds of 'generic' attacks, though the social pathologies ascribed to them have varied (Shuker 1994, pp. 260–2).) Tipper Gore set the tone for this shotgun approach in her 1987 book, *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*, devoting a full chapter to 'Heavy Metal: Throbbing Chords and Violent Lyrics' and admonishing the genre as a whole for 'focusing on the darker, violent side of life' (Gore 1987, p. 31). 1980s rock critics, most of whom were drawn from the ranks of white male baby boomers still wedded to countercultural notions of 'authenticity', were equally ruthless in their derision of heavy metal. Critic Charles M. Young spoke for many when he observed in *Musician* magazine in 1984 that 'heavy metal is transitional music, infusing dirtbags and worthless puds with the courage to grow up and be a dickhead' (Young 1984).

As Robert Walser has taken pains to show, the critical marginalisation of heavy metal music was a demonstrably historical process. Metal evolved in the 1970s out of mainstream 'album-oriented rock', typified by bands like Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple which, in turn, had their roots in the blues-based hard rock of 1960s acts like Cream and Jimi Hendrix. But because they were hardening musically at precisely the moment when radio and its coveted baby boomer demographic were softening into 'adult-oriented' formats, metal bands were driven underground, promoting their records by means of relentless touring and by word of mouth. In the 1980s, acts as varied as Van Halen, Poison, Def Leppard and Metallica broke through, especially via music television, to make metal not only one of the decade's most commercially successful musical styles, but one that was, according to Walser, 'increasingly gender-balanced and middle-class' (Walser 1992, p. 3). Metal bands have occasionally even made their way onto mainstream radio with so-called 'power ballads', typified recently by Extreme's 'More Than Words' and Guns N'Roses 'November Rain', but these have turned out to be the exceptions that prove the rule. Until quite recently metal has failed to convince the rock establishment that it is anything other than 'monolithic' (Burns 1990, pp. 100–4).

The abandonment of heavy metal by the rock establishment in the 1980s quite literally delivered it into the hands of its most vociferous opponents, the neoconservative right in the United States, from which it faced a public relations assault unprecedented since Elvis and legal challenges that only a few years earlier would have seemed laughable. Neoconservatives in the US – including a powerful fundamentalist Protestant coalition promoting so-called 'family values' – objected to what it regarded as sexism, profanity, satanic influences and drug glorification in heavy metal music. But it was the claim that heavy metal lyrics caused teen suicide that provided the right with the most powerful weapon in its rhetorical arsenal, and it was by means of this sensational allegation that the opponents of metal pushed their claims into the courts and ultimately into the public imagination. In 1985 British heavy metal artist Ozzy Osbourne and his label, CBS Records, made their first of many appearances in court on charges that the song 'Suicide Solution', from Osbourne's 1981 *Blizzard of Oz* album, had caused nineteen-year-old John McCul-

lom to attempt suicide (despite Osbourne's repeated claims that 'Suicide Solution' was written about the death of AC/DC's Bon Scott and that, therefore, it carried a socially positive 'anti-suicide' message). The case was dismissed on the grounds that song lyrics are protected speech under the First Amendment. A similar action was brought against Judas Priest and CBS Records in 1990, in which the song 'Better By You, Better Than Me' from the 1978 album *Stained Class* was alleged to have caused the suicide of Raymond Belnap and the attempted suicide of his friend James Vance. This case hinged, however, not on anything the band had actually written or sung explicitly, but on the contention that it had deliberately buried 'subliminal' messages in the music. (An attorney for the plaintiffs claimed that 'satanic incantations are revealed when the music is played backward'.) Judge Jerry Carr Whitehead ruled explicitly at the outset that the court was not interested in the overt lyrical content of rock songs because it was protected by the First Amendment; only the so-called 'subliminals' were in question, he ruled, because they did not constitute an open exchange of information. Thus, the trial took the form of a Kafka-esque spectacle in which William Nickloff, a marine biologist with no formal training in audiology, acting as the 'leading sound expert' for the prosecution, attempted to persuade the court that he had unearthed the back-masked words 'Do it' in the song and, further, that this was a clear provocation for its listeners to commit suicide. Although Judas Priest and CBS Records were, predictably enough, exonerated by the court, this case (and others like it) went a long way towards legitimising the once-preposterous claim of Protestant fundamentalists like Wilson Bryan Kee that subliminals are common in heavy metal music and that they 'exert an almost hypnotic power' (Billard 1990; Henry 1990, p. 65).[12] As lead singer Rob Halford noted in the aftermath of the trial, 'What we went through . . . we considered that simply an attack on our artistic expression. It was nothing to do with real subliminals.' (Burns 1990, pp. 100–14)

The neoconservative campaign against heavy metal was, to be sure, fuelled by *bona fide* evidence that North American youth had become mired in a downward spiral of unprecedented social and psychological crisis. As Lawrence Grossberg notes bluntly:

> In 1940, the major problems [in American schools] were listed as, in order: talking, chewing gum, making noise, running in the halls, getting out of turn in line, wearing improper clothing, not putting paper in waste baskets. And in 1982: rape, robbery, assault, burglary, arson, bombings, murder, suicide, absenteeism, vandalism, extortion, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, gang warfare, pregnancy, abortion, and venereal disease. (Grossberg 1992, pp. 185–8)[13]

Teen suicide in particular had by the 1980s reached truly 'epidemic' proportions, and it has continued to escalate. The adolescent suicide rate in the US has *quadrupled* since 1950, according to research published in 1996 by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), and now represents twelve percent of total youth mortality. 'Individuals born in the latter part of the twentieth century', the study concludes, 'are at far greater risk [than their predecessors] for developing [suicide-related] mood disorders and these disorders are manifesting themselves at a younger age' (Birmaher *et al.* 1996, pp. 1,428–30). Not surprisingly, research and counselling organisations like the AACAP and the American Association of Suicidology have declared the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of suicidality among teens to be one of their top priorities. Various teachers' and parents' organisations have made similar commitments.

Blaming this horrific increase in teen suicide on 'explicit' and 'destructive' themes in rock music may accord well with the ideological premises of neoconservatism, but *there is nothing in the clinical evidence to support any such link*. Indeed, what is striking about the current psychiatric literature, apart from its predictable focus on diagnostics and treatment, is its overwhelming concern with the social, cultural and economic context of youth depression and suicide, and its indifference not only to rock music but to mass media in general. Surveying the last decade of research on teen suicide, for example, the *Journal of the AACAP* concludes:

> Beyond [clinically diagnosed] depression, predisposing factors for suicidality include anxiety, disruptive, bipolar, substance abuse, and personality disorders. In addition, family history of suicidal behavior, exposure to family violence, impulsivity, and availability of methods (e.g., firearms) have been associated with an increased risk for suicide.

Further, 'specific events, including loss, divorce, bereavement, exposure to suicide alone, or together with other risk factors (e.g., lack of support) have been associated with the onset of depression' (Birmaher *et al.* 1996, pp. 1,431–2). A 1997 AACAP study entitled 'Precipitating factors and life events in serious suicide attempts among youths aged 13 through 24 years' concluded, more particularly, that

> The most common precipitants of serious suicide attempts were relationship breakdowns, other interpersonal problems, and financial difficulties. However, one third of those attempting suicide were unable to describe any precipitating factor. Individuals who made serious suicide attempts had elevated rates of life events which were associated principally with interpersonal difficulties, work issues, financial difficulties, and legal problems. (Beautrais *et al.* 1997, pp. 1,543–51)[14]

Three out of four youth suicide victims today are drug or alcohol abusers; they are also 'more likely to have been sexually abused or to be learning disabled, homosexual or close to someone who committed suicide' (Wartik 1995, pp. 23–7). Sociocultural factors commonly identified with an increased risk of suicidality among teens include:

(1) greater mobility among families, accentuating teens' 'experience of loss',
(2) pressure to get involved in sexual relationships that they may not be able to handle,
(3) pressure to be straight rather than gay, and
(4) inability to measure up to the 'American Fairy Tale' of happy, beautiful, successful teens (Frankel and Kranz 1994, p. 19).

As for the 'Danger Signs' that can accompany youth suicide, the American Association of Suicidology lists the following six behaviours:

- suicide threats,
- statements revealing a desire to die,
- previous suicide attempts
- sudden changes in behaviour (withdrawal, apathy, moodiness),
- depression (crying, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, hopelessness), and
- final arrangements (such as giving away personal possessions). (<www.cyberpsych.org/aas/aasyouth/html>)

As Dr Barry Goldfinkel of the University of Minnesota Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Division, insists: 'Ninety out of 100 kids who kill themselves meet a psychiatric diagnosis. Kids don't commit suicide just because they've been treated harshly or life's dealt them a bad hand. It's the internal process going on, not merely the fact of one's horrible existence.' (Wartik 1995, p. 23)[15]

Not only is the subject of rock music absent from the psychiatric literature – suggesting at the very least that it is clinically inconsequential – but researchers are now also at pains to dispel some of the more persistent popular myths about teen suicide, including the 'copycat' (or 'Werther') syndrome and the 'cluster effect'.[16] Significantly, the 'copycat' syndrome, in which teens are thought to imitate the suicides of others (whether celebrities, friends or anonymous victims), is one of the ostensibly 'scientific' means by which alarmists like Tipper Gore originally claimed a connection between rock music and teen suicide. Gore argued in *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*, 'If simple news coverage pushes some kids over the edge, what should an intelligent person think about lyrics that glorify and even promote a dead end?' (Gore 1987, p. 83). Further, in what has turned out to be a profoundly influential but equally flawed *non-sequitur*: '[S]ome musicians and record companies continue to produce songs that glorify suicide, despite scientific evidence that some teenagers are prone to imitate suicides they hear about in the media.' (Gore 1987, p. 129) (Even if troubled teens were inclined to copy *actual suicides*, how would *songs about suicide* be implicated?) From these premises Gore articulated what has since become one of the central tenets in the campaign to silence rock music: 'Many of those who do listen to a great deal of negative music are troubled, and their interest in the music should be a warning sign to adults.' (Gore 1987, p. 83) Thus the very act of *listening* becomes symptomatic of antisocial behaviour and even suicidal tendencies, a principle that continues to animate the censorship efforts of the Parents' Music Resource Centre and its allies.[17] Speaking in November 1997 to a US Senate Subcommittee hearing on the topic 'Music Violence: How Does It Affect Our Youth?', Dr Frank Palumbo of the American Academy of Pediatrics actually said: 'To date, no studies have documented a cause-and-effect relationship between sexually explicit or violent lyrics and adverse behavioural effects. But we can all acknowledge the overall effect music has on people.' (Crowley 1997; Senate Subcommittee 1997)[18]

If the clinical research on teen suicide says nothing about rock music, the voluminous 'self-help' literature on the subject says plenty. Popular books like Eleanor Ayer's *Teen Suicide: Is It Too Painful to Grow Up?* (1993) commonly include lengthy narratives recounting the Ozzy Osbourne and Judas Priest trials, in which the claims of the victims' parents and lawyers are repeated uncritically (Ayer 1993, p. 17). Some, including *Teenage Suicide* (1996) by Nikki Goldman, even segue from these narratives into prescriptive advice for their teenage readers:

> Many popular singers and rock groups such as Ozzy Osbourne, Blue Oyster Cult, Nine Inch Nails, Suicidal Tendencies, and Metallica sing songs with negative lyrics. If you find yourself thinking of suicide while listening to these songs, stop and think for a minute. Although you may identify with the words, the band is not singing directly to you. Rather than listen to songs that deepen your depressed mood, do something else. Put on some different music, call a friend, watch TV – do something to override the moment. (Goldman 1996, p. 33)

Even the best of these popular texts, notably Kate Hill's critically acclaimed *The Long Sleep* (1995), tend to blur cause and effect, leaving what can only be called an ambiguous impression of the relationship of music to suicide:

> Young people are clearly affected by a milieux in which suicidal behaviour plays a familiar, sometimes romanticized role. Books, films, news stories, and songs can provide both an emotional reference point and a source of information for those who are already vulnerable. . . (Hill 1995, p. 95)

By means of this self-help literature – which is, to say the least, *far* more accessible to the layperson than the highly specialised and jargon-laden clinical research – opponents of rock music have quietly won one of their sweetest victories: they have turned the ideologically self-serving pseudoscience of the 1980s into the normative pop-psychology of the 1990s.

Perhaps the only point upon which the likes of the PMRC and its anti-censorship rivals would today agree is that much contemporary rock music really *is* 'darker' now than in the recent past. In a detailed musicological analysis of Ozzy Osbourne's 'Suicide Solution', for example, Walser shows how certain musical conventions and especially studio production techniques were deployed to achieve 'an affect of despair and futility' in the recorded performance – a creative strategy that applies to much of the metal pantheon and, more recently, to the 'industrial' sounds of acts like Nine Inch Nails and Marilyn Manson (Walser 1992, pp. 148–50). Thus, although the lyrics to 'Suicide Solution' are no more 'explicit' or 'destructive' than, say, Blue Öyster Cult's 'Don't Fear the Reaper' or even Gilbert O'Sullivan's 'Alone Again (Naturally)', the sonic codes that animate them are far more thematically coherent, making the overall performance far more powerful. Presumably, efforts to censor rock music have centred on its lyrical content rather than its musical elements because, superficially at least, lyrics are far less ambiguous than 'sonic codes'.[19] But, as even a cursory foray into the realm of musical semiotics suggests, deconstructing the sonic signifiers in rock music leads in some perhaps unexpected directions – towards the 'dark' elements in the classical repertoire, film scores, experimental music, everyday noise, and even the mainstream pop tradition itself. This is a slippery slope the PMRC and its allies have been careful to avoid, for if all of the 'dark' elements in Western music came under their scrutiny, they would inevitably have to censor everyone from Wagner (for being Hitler's favourite composer) and the *Jaws* theme (for causing hydrophobia), to the Beatles (for inspiring the Manson murders) and Barry Manilow (for causing the social isolation, self-pity and delusional tendencies his fans have been known to evince).

## Antichrist Superstar

Recently, Marilyn Manson has provided the pretext for yet another moral panic about rock music; indeed, to judge from the public furore he has inspired, it would seem that he has successfully rendered himself the scapegoat for a far more generalised millennial crisis in American life. (In an era commonly characterised as one in which 'nothing shocks any more', this is no mean achievement.) Conflating his name from pop icons Marilyn Monroe and Charles Manson, the artist has created a striking visual persona which *Time* magazine calls 'part Boy George and part Oliver Stone' – a *bricolage* of jack boots, leather, lingerie, black lipstick, eerie contact lenses and cadaverous face paint (Hebdige 1979, pp. 102–4; Thigpen 1997, p. 68). He has been arrested for exposing himself on stage and criticised for his occasional indulgence in self-mutilation (though neither behaviour seems to have exceeded the antics of Jim Morrison and Iggy Pop, respectively). He is an honorary 'reverend' in the late Anton LaVey's Church of Satan, but he has stated repeatedly that this is only 'one philosophy among many that I base my belief system on' (CNN interview <www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Alley/4812/ameredge.html>). In November 1997 Manson told *Religion Today* that 'I've never been [and] never will be a Satan worshipper or someone who worships the Devil', adding that he still considers

himself a member of St Paul's Episcopal Church in his hometown of Canton, Ohio (*Religion Today* 1997). He has denied the widely reported rumours that he practises animal sacrifice and that he is planning his own on-stage suicide. Although he is clearly interested in mystifying his own image and rhetoric, it is clear from his autobiography (and other sources) that Manson takes himself and his music very seriously, that his critique of organised religion is both personal and ideological, and that his music is not intended to induce self-destructive behaviour but, on the contrary, to inspire strength and independence. As he told Avi Lewis during a panel discussion on MuchMusic (Canada's music video network):

> I see what I do as a positive thing. I try to bring people closer to themselves. That may be further away from God but that's closer to themselves. I think that's a good thing. I think that makes people stronger. . . I'm trying to tell people to believe in themselves because that's all that they have to believe in. I think that's a positive thing. (MuchMusic 1996)

Significantly, both of his parents have said recently that they respect their son's musical integrity and stand behind his determination to 'encourage kids to think for themselves' (Thigpen 1997, p. 68). Manson's mother has said: 'At first the lyrics shocked me, but when you sit down and think of the meaning behind it, he wants parents to raise their children right.' (Strauss 1997A, pp. 48–55)

Since December 1996, when his third album *Antichrist Superstar* entered the *Billboard* Top 200 Album Chart at Number 3, Manson has become the favoured whipping boy of North American moral guardians of virtually every stripe. Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman has called him 'perhaps the sickest artist ever promoted by a mainstream record company' (Jeffrey 1996, p. 3), while C. Dolores Tucker, chairwoman of the National Political Congress of Black Women, has called his music 'the dirtiest, nastiest porno directed at youth that has ever hit the market' (Brunet 1997, p. 42). A coalition led by William Bennett, co-director of the conservative lobby group Empower America (whose membership includes Lieberman and Tucker) is pressuring Seagram CEO Edgar Bronfman, Jr, 'to draw some basic lines of decency' and force Interscope – Manson's label and a subsidiary of Seagram – to stop distributing Manson's records (Jeffrey 1996, p. 3). (This follows their successful campaign to persuade Time Warner to relinquish its $100 million interest in Interscope in 1995 (Dean 1995).) Reverend Donald Wildmon's evangelical American Family Association and the Religious Right, best known for their tenacious campaign against 'pornographic' art funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), singled out Manson's 1997 tour for demonstrations in several American cities (and ended up in a legal wrangle with Manson's lawyers after posting false 'affidavits' on the Internet claiming that the band had distributed drugs, sexually abused audience members and incited its fans to kill animals).[20] Other evangelical campaigns against Manson include that of the Christian Family Network to provide 'the truth about Marilyn Manson from a Christian perspective' and evangelist Billy Mayo's Kids-N-Crisis campaign to 'grab the attention of today's teen' on 'difficult issues' including rock music and homosexuality (<www.cfnweb.com/manson>; <www.cfnweb.com/manson/lies.html>; <www.sonrisewordministries.org/kids.htm>). The 'new' PMRC, now under the leadership of grandmother and former music teacher Barbara Wyatt, cites Manson's music as a leading example of the kind of 'verbal pornography' that should be off limits to 'minors' (Dean 1995).

Conservatives are not alone in their hand-wringing about Marilyn Manson, not least because the claim that rock music can cause young people to commit

suicide has been resuscitated to dramatic effect in the campaign against him. Commenting on the extraordinary 'right-and-left-wing tag team' of Tucker and Bennett – a pairing conceived and facilitated by Wyatt and the PMRC – Washington journalist Eddie Dean notes that 'opportunists from both ends of the political spectrum now mimic the PMRC's battle cry: that violent, sexually explicit music is inflicting permanent damage on the youth of America. And it should be stopped – not labeled, debated, or criticized but rubbed out.' (Dean 1995)[21] Mainstream media obsession with Manson has been at fever pitch since the December 1996 suicide of Richard Kuntz, a fifteen-year-old North Dakota Manson fan whose death made headlines internationally and ultimately prompted the Senate Subcommittee hearing on 'Music Violence'. ('The music wasn't symptomatic of other problems', Raymond Kuntz, the father of the victim, told the Senate Subcommittee in a widely quoted soundbite. 'I would say that the music caused him to kill himself.')[22] North American talk shows pondered questions like, 'Are music lyrics dangerous?' and 'Should I let my children listen to Marilyn Manson?' throughout 1997 and into 1998, many of which featured bereaved parents claiming explicit linkages between Manson's music and their children's self-inflicted deaths (Webb 1998). At virtually every stop on his 1997 North American tour, Manson was harassed by religious groups, insulted by municipal and state politicians, lectured by law enforcement authorities, scrutinised by local media and in some cases prevented from performing.[23] At least one 'youth counsellor' – Lynda Fletcher, executive director of the Lower Mainland Purpose Society, an organisation that counsels 'troubled teens' – has called him a 'cult leader' who leaves his 'victims . . . so brainwashed . . . that they literally cannot separate fantasy from reality' (Brunet 1997, p. 42).

Manson is not without his defenders. Various North American civil liberties organisations have taken up his cause – including the ACLU, Rock Out Censorship (ROC), Parents for Rock and Rap, and especially Nina Crowley's ever vigilant Massachusetts Music Industry Coalition (Mass MIC) – and his records have become the latest *cause célebre* in the defence of First Amendment rights (<www.aclu.org/library/pbr3.html>; <www.ultranet.com/~crowleyn.what.html>). With the significant exception of *Rolling Stone* magazine, however – which named him 'Best New Artist' of 1996 and gave him its prestigious cover shot in January 1997 – the mainstream rock press has for the most part taken a 'we've seen this all before' approach to Manson, dismissing him as a latter day 'shock rock' opportunist of the Alice Cooper/ Kiss variety. 'How many times can you go to the metaphorical well of leeches, devil's horns and the F-word', asked Parke Puterbough in *Stereo Review*, 'without coming off as shopworn as Jack Nicholson's leer?' (Puterbough 1997, p. 135). Greg Quill, veteran rock critic for the *Toronto Star* (and 'a parent') spoke for many when he stated sanctimoniously that Manson's work is 'not music' and should not be dignified as such (MuchMusic 1996). Like Ozzy Osbourne and Judas Priest before him, Manson has been relegated critically to the realm of *persona non grata*.

In his introduction to the MuchMusic *Too Much for Much* panel discussion with Marilyn Manson, televised live on 21 October 1996, host Avi Lewis succinctly encapsulated the soul-searching the artist has occasioned within popular culture, even among anti-censorship liberals:

> Shock rock – it's all been done before, right? These days you've got to go further and further to scare your parents. Enter Marilyn Manson and his new album *Antichrist Superstar*. Marilyn's got a whole keyboard full of bad boy buttons to push: he's part cyborg, part self-

> mutilator, a minister of the Church of Satan . . . Is this the same old shock rock, but voltage enhanced for the millennium? Is Marilyn no more than a master marketeer, adding fuel to the corporate machine? Or is he really the Antichrist superstar, forcing us to confront our own self-destruction, an intentionally ugly reflection of ourselves, come to shock us out of passivity? (MuchMusic 1996)

'Intentionally ugly' is an apt turn of phrase. Manson has gone further down the road of pop cultural infamy than any of his 'shock rock', punk or heavy metal forebears by painstakingly deconstructing contemporary North American culture and 'mutating' (his word) into a *prophetic* persona whose very essence is to be reviled, condemned and ultimately sacrificed by that culture. Unlike Alice Cooper, for example, for whom the 'Alice' stage act was known by fans and critics alike to be wholly artificial, Manson refuses to distinguish between himself and his persona, and takes great delight in playing upon this ambiguity. In an interview, he said, 'When people sometimes misconceive us as being like Kiss or like Alice Cooper, or being a persona, I don't think they understand how deeply Marilyn Manson goes into my existence.' (Strauss 1997A, pp. 48–55) Further, and far more ingeniously, he has constructed for himself an elaborate autobiographical mythology in which his personal transformation from obscurity into a superstar is simultaneously prophesied and fulfilled. The full-blown realisation of this prophetic myth takes the form of the metamorphosis narrative (the 'deformography') in *Antichrist Superstar*, in which Manson documents his personal evolution from 'worm' to 'boy' to 'little horn' to 'dirty rock star' to, finally, 'the man that you fear'. Manson's messianic complex is animated by his remarkable fluency with the concepts and especially the jargon of conservative evangelicalism, which helps to explain why the religious right finds him 'dangerous' and 'evil'. Indeed, Manson's 'Antichrist' persona is chilling – and brilliant – because he has so thoroughly appropriated the language of the New Testament, not only in scripted performances but in casual conversation. He told Neil Strauss of his December 1996 interview for *Rolling Stone*:

> This is going to be an important piece of press. It's going to be a piece of history that I want people to look at when I'm gone, and maybe it'll help them understand what I was thinking at the time, when I did this record . . . I want people to know that I tried to explain it to them when they had a chance to listen. (Strauss 1997A, pp. 48–55)

In the lead-off single from *Antichrist Superstar*, 'Tourniquet', Manson uses messianic language to place himself in the public controversy over his work: 'Take your hatred out on me/ Make your victim my head/ You never even believed in me/ I am your tourniquet'. Similarly, on 'Worm Boy', he reflects: 'Oh no, I am all the things they said I was'.

To judge from Manson's written autobiography, *The Long Hard Road Out Of Hell*, his upbringing seems to have been more or less what one might expect of an introverted and socially awkward lower-middle class teen in the Reagan era. Manson, a.k.a. Brian Warner, spent much of his youth rebelling against his parents and teachers, goading them with minor pranks and the forbidden pleasures of heavy metal and Dungeons & Dragons. He attended an evangelical Protestant public school, where his born-again Christian teachers terrified him with graphic descriptions of the apocalypse, bred in him a deep revulsion for fundamentalist religion and armed him with the powerful millennial rhetoric he would later put to such effective use in his music. After graduating from high school, Manson spent a year studying journalism and theatre at a Florida community college. Frustrated by his lack of success as an aspiring poet, short-story writer and rock critic, Manson

formed the band that bears his name in 1989. Of the impulse to become a musician, Manson has recalled:

> At the time I was reading books about philosophy, hypnosis, criminal psychology and mass psychology (along with a few occult and true crime paperbacks). On top of that, I was completely bored, sitting around watching *Wonder Years* reruns and talk shows and realizing how stupid Americans were. All of this inspired me to create my own science project to see if a white band that wasn't rap could get away with acts far more offensive and illicit than 2 Live Crew's dirty rhymes. As a performer, I wanted to be the loudest, most persistent alarm clock I could be, because there didn't seem like any other way to snap society out of its Christianity- and media-induced coma. (Manson and Strauss 1998, p. 80)

Throughout the 1990s Manson engrossed himself in the pursuit of this subversive vision, transforming himself into precisely the most abominable pop cultural villain imaginable to the Moral Majority- and PMRC- afflicted America out of which he sprang.

*Antichrist Superstar* (1996) represents the crowning achievement of this vision. Eight months in production, the album is nothing less than a *magnum opus* – a superbly realised fusion of Manson's relentlessly pathological vision and producer Trent Reznor's cutting edge studio mastery. It is a highly complex work, both lyrically and compositionally but, as Manson's opponents have noted, it is not easy listening. The arrangements – which graft the aggressive, guitar-based hard rock of Manson's live band seamlessly onto Reznor's heavily sampled 'industrial' soundscapes – are sonically dense, claustrophobic, even oppressive; yet they are also brilliantly conceived and, in their own way, beautifully realised. The album's lyrical ambiguity – its willingness to explore the semiotic terrain of modern culture, including its dominant political and advertising discourses – is announced in the mocking title of the opening track, 'Irresponsible Hate Anthem', and in the song's opening lines: 'I am so all-American/ I'd sell you suicide'. This song also declares the ontological position of the Marilyn Manson persona – 'I am the animal who will not be himself' and 'I am the ism/ my hate's a prism' – as well as the album's explicitly oppositional politics – 'Everybody's someone else's nigger/ I know you are, so am I'. Many of the songs on *Antichrist Superstar* can, in fact, be read as rather ordinary rock-era social commentary, most notably the MTV-friendly single/video 'The Beautiful People', which Manson has called his statement against the 'fascism of beauty in America' (MuchMusic 1996). Elsewhere, Manson pushes the lyrical envelope with levels of rage and profanity that even Reznor's seminal *Downward Spiral* cannot match. 'Let's just kill everyone', he rails, 'and let your God sort them out'.

*Antichrist Superstar*'s fusion of sonic intensity and rhetorical dexterity helps to explain its immense appeal to a generation of youth saturated by, and highly sensitive to, mass mediated hypocrisy. So, too, does the album's ostensibly anarchistic politics. As his critics have noted, Manson seems intent upon gutting some of North America's most sacred cows, defacing Bibles in his live shows, adopting fascist iconography, and revelling in the estrangement of parents and children. But while many of his adversaries have taken him literally – which, of course, he hoped they would – his critical stance is thoroughly (and even transparently) ironic, making him, not a cynical postmodernist, but a classic *modernist*. As he told Avi Lewis, again couching his ideas in millennial language:

> I would love to see North America be conservative again. I feel it's almost my duty to take things to such an extreme level – so that it can be born again – to appreciate the beauty and the magic of the taboo of sex, drugs and rock & roll because it's so commonplace . . . I would

love to be in the fifties and the sixties again, when people blushed when you said 'dick' or something. I wouldn't have to shock people. I wouldn't be necessary. (MuchMusic 1996)

Here Manson confesses himself – rather remarkably – to be as nostalgic and ultimately as puritanical as his most hard-bitten conservative enemies. As dark, angry, profane and relentless as it is, *Antichrist Superstar*'s preoccupation with death, disease, violence, betrayal and disillusionment does not translate into an unambiguous nihilism but, rather, into a prophetic urge to *redemption*. In short, like all modernists, Manson wants not merely to destroy but to liberate.

Nowhere is this impulse more in evidence than in the album's aggressive treatment of the theme of suicide. Having grown up in the heyday of Tipper Gore and the heavy metal trials, and having seen the insidious ideological uses to which the teen suicide crisis has been put, Manson mocks the increasingly normative claim that rock music causes teen suicide by, again, *becoming* its most depraved exemplar. In places, the ironic distance established in the album's opening boast – 'I'd *sell* you suicide' – is maintained, as in 'Mr. Superstar': 'Hey Mr. Superstar/ I'd kill myself for you'. Elsewhere, as in 'The Minute of Decay', Manson explores with remarkable sensitivity and pathos the existential condition of suicidal confusion and despair: 'There is no cure for what is killing me/ I'm on my way down/ I've looked ahead and saw a world that's dead/ I guess that I am too'. And yet, the self-pity of 'Minute of Decay', which ends in a simple, repeating piano phrase, leads directly into the anger, accusation and vindictiveness of 'The Reflecting God', with its hard-driving beat and snarled vocals: 'Let's jump upon the sharp swords/ And cut away our smiles/ Without the threat of death/ There is no reason to live at all'. Thus does *Antichrist Superstar* explore, with stark candour, the emotional intensity and complexity of the suicidal impulse – an impulse the artist has himself experienced (Strauss 1997A, pp. 48–55). It is a powerful, heart-rending, sometimes terrifying performance; and it speaks, in language equal to the task, to the *bona fide* crisis of self-destruction afflicting Western youth.

In his treatment of suicide, as in practically all things, Manson is interested in exposing the raw nerve of generational difference in American life. Indeed, one does not have to be Roland Barthes to see that Manson is at play in the semiotic fields of the baby boomers, and that he is at pains to work his young fans against what he sees as the staid conservatism of their parents' cultural hegemony. His pseudonym plays on 1960s-era pop cultural iconography, while *Antichrist Superstar* spoofs *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the 1970 'rock opera' that launched the career of Andrew Lloyd Weber (and inaugurated the Andrew-Lloyd-Weberisation of popular musical culture that has proceeded apace over almost three decades). His make-up is borrowed from some rather obvious 1970s-era sources, including Alice Cooper and slasher movies, while his biggest musical influences, by his own admission, are Kiss, David Bowie and Annie Lennox. He made his first splash on MTV with a 'demonic' cover of the Eurythmics' adult contemporary radio staple, 'Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)' – a strategy he has likened to 'a piece of cheese in a trap'. 'A lot of innocuous mall shoppers bought ['Sweet Dreams'] and were then introduced to this whole new world of Marilyn Manson that they didn't expect', he boasts. 'Now that I've got the attention of a mainstream audience, things can really be accomplished.' (Brunet 1997, p. 42) When Manson performs 'Sweet Dreams' live, as he did at a show at Toronto's Warehouse on 22 October 1996, he quips sardonically: 'That one was for the Top 40 crowd.' Not only does Manson know his own place in the rock pantheon; he has an uncanny sense of the relationship of main-

stream rock culture to the margins – and he exploits its tensions at every opportunity. In contrast with rap music – which, as many popular musicologists have argued, is threatening to mainstream musical culture because it was the first rock-era musical form not pioneered by baby-boomers – Marilyn Manson is a semiotic threat from deep *within* the dominant culture. He knows full well that he is playing, not only with inter-generational dynamite, but with the legacy of the PMRC, the neoconservative right, the censorship lobby, the hegemony of banal rock radio and, above all, the thoroughly fraudulent claim that rock music causes teen suicide. A tee-shirt for sale at his concerts summarises his agenda succinctly:

> Warning, the music of Marilyn Manson contains messages that will
> Kill God
> In your impressionable teenage mind, as a result you could be convinced to
> Kill your mom and dad
> And eventually in an act of hopeless Rock and Roll behavior you will
> Kill yourself.
> Please burn your records while there is still hope. (Christian Family Network)

## Noise

To return to Jacques Attali and *Noise*, in a world in which the 'monopolization of the broadcast of messages [and] the control of noise' assure 'the durability of power', music and the musician become 'either objects of consumption like everything else, recuperators of subversion, or meaningless noise' (Attali 1977, p. 8). In the late 1980s, under pressure from Tipper Gore and the PMRC, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) acceded to the demand that albums with 'explicit' lyrics be stickered with 'parental advisory' warning labels. At that time, 'voluntary' stickering was thought to be the least objectionable alternative to a legislated 'ratings system', presumably one that would have resembled the classification of motion pictures (with specific ratings for violence, coarse language, adult situations, etc.). Even now, the RIAA prides itself on its commitment to the defence of free speech, suggesting that Gore's original argument – that stickering was not a form of censorship – has held sway in industry circles.[24] And yet, the apparently innocuous practice of stickering has been at the centre of a quiet, almost covert campaign to censor rock music, in which not only record producers and distributors *but artists themselves* have been enlisted. The 2,300-store Wal-Mart chain, for example, which accounts for nearly ten per cent of all record sales in the United States, refuses to stock stickered albums in its stores, as does the K-Mart chain. And just as Frank Zappa and others predicted they would, artists as varied as U2, Nirvana, Public Enemy, John Mellencamp, Beck and White Zombie – no doubt under pressure from their labels – have acquiesced in these policies by releasing 'clean' unstickered versions of their albums for sale in the chains (Morse 1996, p. C13; Chiose 1998A, p. D1). Similarly, many rock promoters in the US and Canada – many of them browbeaten and demoralised by the protests that followed the 1997 Marilyn Manson tour – are considering a ratings system for rock shows 'in an attempt to save their businesses from complaining parents, restrictive legislation and increased police scrutiny' (Strauss 1997B, p. D1). Such practices constitute *self-censorship*, and together they represent one of the greatest victories of the Reagan-era censorship lobby over contemporary North American popular culture – a victory over the principle of artistic freedom, and a rendering of musical works into the mere

'objects of consumption' and the 'meaningless noise' predicted by Attali. In an era characterised overwhelmingly by the *sanitisation* of rock music – on radio, at Wal-Mart, at the Grammies, virtually everywhere – Marilyn Manson speaks, prophetically, for those who refuse to be sanitised.

As for the insidious claim that rock music causes teen suicide, here, too, it would seem that the 1980s-era censorship lobby has prevailed, subtly recasting its own baseless hysteria into the popular psychology of the turbulent 1990s. That some troubled youths have taken comfort in the 'darker' forms of rock music is indisputable – just as music lovers of all ages find consolation in the music that seems to articulate their losses, their pain and their grief. But the clinical evidence on teen suicide confirms what common sense has suggested from the outset: that young people's sometimes obsessive identification with violent themes in rock music is, if anything, symptomatic of deeper and far more profound social and psychic dislocation in their lives. That the advocates of censorship continue to confuse a passion for 'dark' music with a disposition to suicide is a measure not only of their ideological tenacity but – even more pitifully – of a more generalised refusal to admit that the lives of young people are highly stressful, and that their problems truly have become *critical*. It may be comforting to retreat into a 1950s-era fantasy of well-adjusted children, untroubled families and happy schools, or to take refuge in the wistful nostalgia that now passes for mainstream musical culture in North America but, in the meantime, the evidence that young people are in serious trouble mounts inexorably. For anyone who might be listening, Marilyn Manson really means it when he sings, 'You've poisoned all your children/ To camouflage your scars'.

## Epilogue – Spring 1999

On 20 April 1999, Marilyn Manson inadvertently achieved a level of infamy in the United States that even he had not anticipated. News of the high school massacre in Littleton, Colorado had barely broken when Manson was thrust to the forefront of an almost unprecedented media feeding frenzy, becoming, as he later put it himself, 'the poster boy for everything that is bad in the world' (Manson 1999). Scant hours after the massacre's bloody finale, in which gunmen Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold took their own lives, the Associated Press released what would become the defining portrait of the killers: 'They are called the ''Trench Coat Mafia'', a group of about 10 students who wear long black coats, keep to themselves and follow shock rocker Marilyn Manson.' (Associated Press 1999) As it became widely known that the rampage was meticulously planned and executed not by run-of-the-mill delinquents but by 'typical product[s] of the American middle class' (Rhodes 1999), Americans led by President Bill Clinton plunged into a desperate 'national dialogue' on 'youth violence', in which conservatives scapegoated the usual suspects - rock music, movies, video games, the Internet – and liberals ratcheted up their attacks on the National Rifle Association. Like 'Kent State' in the era of the counterculture, 'Columbine' has already entered the American lexicon as a byword for a society that has become inexplicable to itself.

For his part, Manson steadfastly refused, as he put it, 'to jump into the media frenzy' and defend himself – even after it was discovered that Klebold and Harris had 'disliked' his music. In late May 1999, when the public pressure to go on the record had grown insuperable, Manson published an open letter on the Columbine

killings in *Rolling Stone* in which he reiterated the critique of American society that has been so forcefully articulated in his music:

When it comes down to who's to blame for the high school murders in Littleton, Colorado, throw a rock and you'll hit someone who's guilty. We're the people who sit back and tolerate children owning guns, and we're the ones who tune in and watch the up-to-the-minute details of what they do with them. I think it's terrible when anyone dies, especially if it's someone you know and love . . . This kind of controversy does not help me sell records or tickets, and I wouldn't want it to. I'm a controversial artist, one who dares to have an opinion and bothers to create music and videos that challenge people's ideas in a world that is watered-down and hollow. In my work I examine the America we live in, and I've always tried to show people that the devil we blame out atrocities on is really just each one of us. So don't expect the end of the world to come one day out of the blue – it's been happening every day for a long time. (Manson 1999)

## Endnotes

1. This paper was presented at the international *Bang Bang, Shoot Shoot! Film, Television, Guns* conference, Ryerson Polytechnic University, Toronto, May 1998. I am indebted to Avi Lewis, Barbara Lawlor, Nina Crowley, Lynda Allison, Eddie Dean and Betsy Struthers for their assistance in the preparation of this paper. 'I'd sell you suicide' is from Marilyn Manson, 'Irresponsible Hate Anthem', *Antichrist Superstar*, Nothing/Interscope/MCA 90086 (1996).
2. In the 1950s, Mitch Miller, head of music direction at Columbia Records and ASCAP's leading spokesperson, called rock & roll a passing fad and vowed that he would never make a rock & roll record. In 1959, Miller played a pivotal role in the escalation of the 'payola' scandal that eventually brought down legendary DJ Alan Freed (Eliot 1993, pp. 67–9).
3. 'Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folk lore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself.' (Cohen 1972, p. 9)
4. 'Large segments of the [American] population are depoliticized, demoralized, pessimistic and indifferent. In fact, the conservatism of the nation is being built upon that pessimism and depoliticization. Somehow, regardless of their beliefs (which are as likely to be ''liberal'' as conservative), the same people find themselves pulled into a new conservatism . . . I want to argue that the new conservatism is being put into place through cultural rather than political strategies.' (Grossberg 1992, pp. 14–15)
5. Don Breithaupt and Jeff Breithaupt have called 'Alone Again (Naturally)' 'the world's catchiest suicide note', noting that the 'dark opening lines are sung against a bouncy piano-based rhythm that will have you gently rocking your head from side to side, never once registering the lyric's morbid undercurrent' (Breithaupt and Breithaupt 1996, p. 155).
6. 'Someone Saved My Life Tonight' was the lead-off single from the two-time Grammy nominated album *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy* (MCA AD-1613, 1975).
7. Walser locates Blue Öyster Cult in 'the second generation of heavy metal, the first to claim the name unambiguously . . .' (Walser 1992, p. 10). To my ear, however, 'Don't Fear the Reaper' owed far more to the Hollies than to Black Sabbath. The song's infectious melody line, its 'lah-lah-lah-lah-lah' hook, its supported – rather than raspy – lead vocals, its joyous groove and especially its elaborate vocal layering communicate, not desperate social isolation or psychic despair, but rather a kind of collective euphoria. 'Together in eternity', the song's hauntingly beautiful refrain, emerges not as an inducement to take one's own life but as a call to celebrate the possibility of

transcendence with others – an effect that is most palpable on live recordings of the song.

8. Other cultural sites evincing this generational divide include music mail-order 'clubs', which now divide their rock music catalogues into 'classic' and 'alternative' sections solely on the basis of artists' ages, and music retailing, which has recently redoubled its efforts to make in-store ambience inviting to baby boomers. As journalist Simona Chiose observes of the latter, '[B]uyers in [a 45-year-old] demographic may find themselves far more comfortable than they would have been a few years ago. Instead of hearing the industrial-strength rock of acts such as Nine Inch Nails and Marilyn Manson blaring out of a store's speakers, they are much more likely to hear reissued catalogue material from David Bowie . . .' (Chiose 1998B, p. D1)
9. 'Today, [music] is unavoidable, as if, in a world now devoid of meaning, a background noise were increasingly necessary to give people a sense of security.' (Attali 1977, p. 3)
10. Observes Turner: 'None of these changes [to commercial radio] has occurred without being noticed or resisted. *Rolling Stone* devoted an editorial to the issue back in 1988, newspaper features have attacked the trend to ''radio bland'', columnists have accused radio of shooting itself in the foot by disenfranchising a key section of their constituency . . .' (Turner 1993, pp. 147–8)
11. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that Walser's *Running With the Devil* constitutes a monograph-length apologetic for heavy metal vis-à-vis this dismissive critical discourse.
12. In 1991 Ozzy Osbourne ended up back in court defending 'Suicide Solution' from the charge that it, too, contained 'back-masked' messages; and in 1993 Guns 'N Roses were taken to court in Australia on similar charges (Atkins 1990, p. 88; *CQ Researcher* 1991; *Melody Maker* 1993, p. 2).
13. The general cultural backdrop for this crisis, Grossberg concludes, consists in a deeply rooted existential anxiety: 'To put it quite simply, kids today know too much and they are, at some deep level, too cynical to mark any difference from older generations . . . Not only do many young people not believe in the inevitability of progress, they do not place any particular faith in traditional institutions, images or authorities.' (Grossberg 1992, pp. 185–8)
14. In a 1996 study, the same research team concluded: 'Risks of serious suicide attempt among young people increased with extent of exposure to childhood adversity, social disadvantage, and psychiatric morbidity, with each of these factors making independent contributions to risk of serious suicide attempt.' (Beautrais *et al.* 1996, pp. 1,174–82; Caplan *et al.* 1997, pp. 799–808)
15. Scholars of youth culture have been arguing for decades that music functions in part as a vehicle for the burning self-discovery that accompanies adolescence, particularly when that process is fraught with uncertainty or trauma. Echoing the AACAP literature on teen suicide, sociologist Michael Brake asserts: 'Young people need a space in which to explore an identity which is separate from the roles and expectations imposed by family, work and school. Youth culture offers a collective identity, a reference group from which youth can develop an individual identity. It provides cognitive material from which to develop an alternative script, kept secret from, and in rebellion with, adult authority . . . [Y]outh cultures attract those who feel little commitment or investment in the present state of affairs. It attracts those who feel misunderstood, or that they do not fit, or rejected. Where the life of the young person reinforces this alienation or isolation, where s/he feels a misfit, the scripts being composed in subcultures become highly attractive.' (Brake 1985, p. 191)
16. 'As we try to understand why and how people reach the decision to end their own lives . . . we must look beyond the simple ''copycat'' effect or ''cluster'' syndrome to the deeper truths about suicide.' (Frankel and Kranz 1994, p. 17)
17. Warns current PMRC president Barbara Wyatt, 'There are many children that can listen to this music and it may not affect them, but there are many young people out there today kind of sitting on the edge . . .' (Dean 1995) In the hope, it would seem, of manufacturing the illusion that the clinical literature is consistent with its own ideological agenda, the PMRC now lists 'Pamela Cantor, former president of the American Association of Suicidology' as a board member, even though, according to its executive director, the AAS has 'no official position' on rock music and 'no relation' to the PMRC (Berman 1998).
18. After asserting that death metal music causes murderous behaviour in its teen listeners, and also that Kurt Cobain's suicide has caused 'scores' of 'copycat suicides' in the US, Waliszewski advises parents: 'Base your family [musical] standard on God's Word. A standard based on musical style, personal preference or a blacklist of out-of-bounds bands is destined to fail. A standard based on biblical principles, however, will guard your children for a life-

time. Philippians 4:8, Psalm 1 and Psalm 101:3 are great places to start.' (Waliszewski 1998, pp. 10–11)

19. Clearly, though, as Walser implies and as virtually any rock music fan will attest, the PMRC's preoccupation with lyrical content missed the point altogether, focusing on perhaps the least 'affective' component in rock music (and one in which, research shows, listeners are least interested). Since the 1950s, surveys of rock fans' listening habits have revealed that they often do not 'hear' the lyrical content of their favourite songs, even when they carry explicit social or political messages. As Simon Frith notes, 'Pop songs celebrate not the articulate, but the inarticulate, and the evaluation of pop songs depends not on words but on sounds – on the noises around the words.' (Frith 1983, p. 35; Middleton 1990, pp. 227–32)
20. Before the American Family Association could destroy the 'affidavits', they were copied and posted in their entirety at <www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Alley/4812afaaffid.html> (Geocities; see also *American Family Association Journal* 1997). Daniel Tripp, a Republican state representative in South Carolina is one of several state legislators in the US preparing bills to prevent 'explicit' rock concerts like Manson's at venues owned or financed by their states. Says Tripp: 'Our kids are being affected by this trash. I want to have some standards set up. I'm looking at these concerts in the same way I do pornography.' (Strauss 1997B, p. D1)
21. Says Wyatt about *Antichrist Superstar*: 'There is great concern over lyrics that tell kids they don't want to go to heaven because their parents will be there and they should go to hell because that's where they can party.' (Kato 1998, p. L1)
22. In an unofficial transcription of the hearing, Kuntz was quoted as saying: 'I failed my son by not realizing that what he was holding [the *Antichrist Superstar* CD] was a hand grenade, and it was going to go off in his mind', to which Lieberman replied, 'You couldn't know. It didn't look like a hand grenade.' (Associated Press 1996; Crowley 1997; O'Keefe 1997; Strauss 1997C)
23. Anti-censorship activist Nina Crowley has catalogued this anti-Manson hysteria – city by city – at <www.ultranet.com/~crowleyn/manson.html>.
24. Hillary Rosen, the president and COO of the RIAA, has been criticised by some civil libertarians for her defence of the voluntary stickering programme and public statements to the effect that the RIAA supports 'efforts to have retailers restrict sales of albums to consumers under the age of 17' (Crowley 1997).

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