



# BELIEVING IN *Fiction*



## THE RISE OF HYPER-REAL RELIGION

“What is real? How do you define real?”

– Morpheus, in *The Matrix*

“Television is reality, and reality is less than television.”

- Dr. Brian O’Blivion, in *Videodrome*

by *Ian ‘Cat’ Vincent*

Ever since the advent of modern mass communication and the resulting wide dissemination of popular culture, the nature and practice of religious belief has undergone a considerable shift. Especially over the last fifty years, there has been an increasing tendency for pop culture to directly figure into the manifestation of belief: the older religious faiths have either had to partly embrace, or strenuously oppose, the deepening influence of books, comics, cinema, television and pop music. And, beyond this, new religious beliefs have arisen that happily partake of these media

– even to the point of entire belief systems arising that make no claim to any historical origin.

There are new gods in the world – and they are being born from pure fiction.

This is something that – as a lifelong fanboy of the science fiction, fantasy and horror genres and an exponent of a often pop-culture-derived occultism for nearly as long – is no shock to me. What did surprise me, however, was discovering that there is a growing area of sociological study of these beliefs... an academic realm which not only seeks to understand these developments, but also provides a useful perspective on modern belief for both the Fortean and the occult practitioner.

I first learned about this area of study from a 2007 interview on the excellent religion and pop culture focussed website *Theofantastique* with the Australian sociologist Dr. Adam Possamai,<sup>1</sup> in which he talks about his research into what he has termed ‘hyper-real religion’.<sup>2</sup> Fascinated, I acquired his introductory text to the concept, *Religion And Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament*<sup>3</sup> and, later, the mammoth 2012 collection of research and essays on the subject which he edited, *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions*.<sup>4</sup>

The term ‘hyper-real’ itself draws on the work of the French postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard. Possamai’s current definition of hyper-real religion is;

...a simulacrum of a religion created out of, or in symbiosis with, commodified popular culture which provides inspiration at a metaphorical level and/or is a source of beliefs for everyday life.<sup>5</sup>

Let’s unpick that...

A key aspect of postmodern theory (especially poststructuralism, in which Baudrillard was a key writer) is that, in modern society, symbols have attained such importance that they have actually overtaken the things which they are symbols *for*. Baudrillard

emphasises this particularly in his essay *Simulacra and Simulation*.<sup>6</sup> Here, he draws a distinction between *Simulation* – copies of an imitation or symbol of something which actually exists – and *Simulacra* – copies of something that either no longer has a physical-world equivalent, or never existed in the first place. His view was that modern society is increasingly emphasising, or even completely replacing, the simulation with the simulacra, the actual being displaced by the never-real... and that:

... The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth – it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true.

The term ‘hyper-real’ derives from this perspective: he defines it as “the generation by models of a *real* without origin or reality” (emphasis mine). The novelist and philosopher Umberto Eco later put this more succinctly, saying the hyper-real is “the authentic fake”.<sup>7</sup> Although Baudrillard did not specifically discuss religion in this context, Possamai’s use of the term fits broadly into Baudrillard’s view that modern society is especially, if you forgive my pun, symbol-minded.

The other key word in the definition given by Possamai above is “commodified”. It is a key aspect of postmodern and poststructuralist thought (which, though it stems almost entirely from the Marxist leanings of its founders, still has a remarkably apt bearing on our current situation) that the main cultural aspect of modern society is its origin in a time period which has almost completely succumbed to the viewpoint of neo-liberal concepts around value and trade – an era usually referred to as ‘Late Capitalism’, dating from roughly the end of WWII.<sup>8</sup> The late capitalist era is defined by the power of multi-national corporations, globalised markets and labour, increased concentration of financial speculation and (most significantly here) mass consumption. In the late capitalist world, pretty much everything can be defined or co-opted as a commodity, as Product.<sup>9</sup>

That's the thing about pop culture (and, of course, all cultures – a factor Possamai does not neglect): it's bought and sold. And it's this easily available aspect of it, in combination with the Western World's emphasis on individuality and choice (thoroughly reinforced by neo-liberal capitalist practices), which allows hyper-real religion to bloom.

The one aspect of postmodern thought that has thoroughly leaked into the overall modern mindset is the undermining of the Grand Narrative concept, the long-standing belief that there is One True Truth which underlies all aspects of a given society. While this has possibly led to the 'clash of civilisations' strife that dominates much of the geopolitical landscape,<sup>10</sup> it has also given the scope for individuals to seek their own defining narratives and faiths. As Possamai puts it:

...in this consuming world, the individual becomes his or her own authority; the postmodern person in the West no longer tolerates being told what to believe and what to do... he or she is faced with a proliferation of 'spiritual/religious/philosophical knowledges', which he or she researches and experiences.<sup>11</sup>

This personal seeking for truth has manifested in a variety of ways. For some, it allows them to find new and vivid metaphors for their existing beliefs. For others, it can give them the chance to move beyond the beliefs of their kin and tribe to find other beliefs (or, of course, to reject belief as a concept entirely). And, most interestingly for me, it can bring some people to find or even create a whole new range of faiths, based on the stories they find within pop culture.

If there is one thing we can say with certainty about the human mind, it is that it has a core-deep hunger for narrative. It is in stories that we have always found and transmitted our truths, probably from as far back as we have actually had language. It is clear that, on some levels, our minds react nearly identically to a story as to that which

the story is *about*. Whether or not the story happens to be, for want of a better word, 'true', doesn't matter for the most part.<sup>12</sup>

And these days, there are so very many stories to choose from.

Bearing all this in mind, let's look at some examples of hyper-real religion... and, especially, the particularly influential role played by the science fiction and fantasy genres.

## HISTORY

"If you believe it's sacred, it's sacred."

- Irving Rosenfeld, in *American Hustle*

Finding a starting point for the rise of the hyper-real religions might seem a problematic thing. After all, the telling and retelling of tales where the true origin is lost to antiquity and thus subject to untold levels of embellishment and fantasising has been a problem in the consideration of the history of all beliefs. There is a fine line between the growth of a mythology and its outright invention – not least because all of the hyper-real beliefs have necessarily drawn on older mythologies for their mystical and philosophical approaches (for example, the Buddhist and Taoist roots of the Jedi in *Star Wars*, who I will return to in some depth later on).

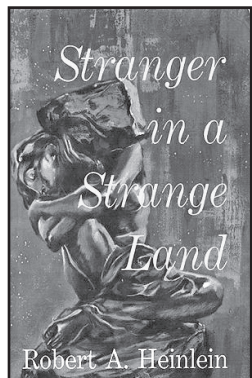
There is also the particular case of the belief systems spawned by L. Ron Hubbard – Dianetics and especially Scientology were certainly a product of his prolific work in pulp fiction writing, as well as his liberal borrowing from the work of Aleister Crowley, which he encountered as a result of his friendship with (and/or infiltration of the branch of the Ordo Templi Orientis led by) Jack Parsons in 1940s California.<sup>13</sup> However, they cannot be shown to have derived from any particular fictional work.

We can, however, establish a firm date for the first religion to be based primarily on a fictional source – one which Possamai himself



cites in *A Hyper-Real Testament*. The date was 7 April 1962, and the religion is The Church Of All Worlds.

Founded by the American Neo-Pagan priest Oberon Zell-Ravenheart and his friends, the name and initial ritual structure of The Church Of All Worlds (CAW hereafter) derives from the practices described in Robert A. Heinlein's novel *Stranger In A Strange Land* as having been brought to Earth by the adopted Martian hero, Valentine Michael Smith – specifically the ninefold structure of the Church and a bonding ritual for members based on the sharing of water.<sup>14</sup> The CAW also drew heavily on Zell's Earth-based pagan spirituality and, later, other science fiction concepts such as the Vulcan philosophy of IDIC – 'Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combination' – from the original *Star Trek* series.<sup>15</sup> The CAW was formally chartered as a religion in the United States on 4 March 1968 – the first Earth-based religion, and the first hyper-real religion, to be so formally and legally recognised. Although the CAW was officially dissolved in 2004, Zell and the CAW have continued to play an influential role in neo-paganism to this day.



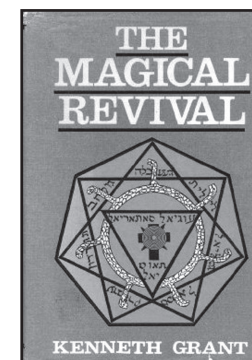
It should also be noted that the entirety of the neo-pagan set of beliefs has continued to be heavily influenced by fiction. There has always been a certain amount of mythic back-and-forth between fiction written by pagans and the practices of their faith – from the heavily neo-pagan influenced Marion Zimmer Bradley novel *The Mists of Avalon* (which many cite as their gateway text to the possibility of actually practicing paganism)<sup>16</sup> to Brian Bates' fictional interpretation of Celtic and Norse myth, *The Way Of Wyrld*,<sup>17</sup> to the rise of other openly pagan authors as major writers in the modern fantasy genre.<sup>18</sup>

Another immensely influential stream of the hyper-real was opened in the 1970s by the prolific writer and occultist, Kenneth

Grant (1924-2011). Grant, who was a friend of Crowley in his twilight years and was also the sole reason the work of proto-chaos magician Austin Osman Spare (1886-1956) was not lost after Spare's death in near-forgotten poverty, was a huge influence on modern occultism – not least because of his major role in the revival, and mystical interpretation, of the cosmic horror fiction of H.P. Lovecraft (1890-1937).

In a series of books now known as the Typhonian Trilogies, beginning with *The Magical Revival*,<sup>19</sup> Grant set out his theory that Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos stories were actually based on a genuine occult tradition, which Lovecraft had accessed subconsciously. This is of course highly debatable... nonetheless, a resurgence of interest in Lovecraft's work arose at the time, and the fictional lines were blurred even further with the publication of several books purporting to be the unexpurgated texts of the Cthulhu Mythos's key (and, according to Lovecraft, entirely fictional) occult tome, *The Necronomicon* – including one version which was partly ghost-written by the great British philosopher of the occult, Colin Wilson (1931-2013).<sup>20</sup> Lovecraft's work and the Cthulhu Mythos are now so deeply intertwined into pop culture that they have indirectly influenced or directly led to games, films, associated novels<sup>21</sup> and comic books<sup>22</sup> ... and a range of surprisingly adorable plushy toys.

Grant's attitude to the adaptability of fiction as (at minimum) an inspiration for mysticism was a major influence on the school of occult practice known as chaos magic, which first appeared in the mid-1970s and has become a key influence on both the practice of applied mysticism and a great deal of modern fantasy literature (especially in the urban fantasy sub-genre) that has followed. Although Possamai does not interrogate chaos magic directly in his work, it is clearly (and usually explicitly)



a postmodern magical system, and thus a thriving aspect of the hyper-real religious current.

The 1970s were a remarkably fecund time for the hyper-real religions – not least for the considerable growth in what has become known as the New Age Movement. Possamai regards this aspect of popular mysticism as an offshoot of the Human Potential Movement, whose roots Possamai traces to the ‘sensitivity training’ of the 1940s,<sup>23</sup> and which found wider acceptance in the 1960s. Although the Human Potential Movement was at its core a secular and humanistic one, aspects of its philosophy of deliberately-directed self-improvement of humanity filtered into the stream of imported Eastern spiritual ideas in the 1960s, becoming part of a popularised ‘transcendence’ narrative.

The various forms of New Age spirituality – ranging from the less explicitly mystical forms (such as EST and biofeedback training and the positive thinking/self-help practices ranging from Neuro-Linguistic Programming to *The Secret*<sup>24</sup>) to the more outright occult-tinged flavours (‘White Light’ paganism, pastel-coloured-angel worship etc) – have a common denominator... they are mass-produced, heavily marketed and designed with as much of an eye to commerce as to any personal enlightenment they may lead to. They are Product. And in that regard, they are perhaps the exemplary hyper-real religious practice.<sup>25</sup>

Possamai notes of the New Age adherent:

They consume products for gaining and enhancing sensations. They can visit a ‘New Age’ healing centre for a few days, participate in a ‘vision quest’ and be initiated into shamanism, buy crystals and indigenous paraphernalia, learn astronomy... These objects for sale - books, tarot cards, crystals, CDs, aromatherapy products - have long lost any taint of the demonic and have become common products.<sup>26</sup>

After noting the dichotomy between the New Age ‘hyper-consumer’ beliefs (where individual choice is celebrated) and the ‘hypo-consumerist’ Fundamentalist beliefs (in which, although they are still believed by a community of consumers, the adherents have their consumption choices dictated by a hierarchical authority - more on these later), Possamai says of the New Age Movement:

...they are the consumer religion *par excellence*...

and,

In traditional religions, the demand for religious objects is focussed on their authenticity. New objects will not be bought unless there is proof they are authentic for a specific religion, and that they contain the power of a specific source. In New Age, the individual is the main source of meaning attribution, and the authority of the object rests in the individual’s decision and/or feeling about the worth of its religiousness.<sup>27</sup>

Possamai sub-divides the New Age beliefs - always a very wide blanket term, to be sure - into three flavours:

- *Aquarian Perrenism* – as in *The Age Of...*, “a modern movement valorising the future and progress” (expressions of this current range from the self-help movements noted above to the techno-futurist Transhumanism movement),
- *Neo-Paganism* – “an anti-modern movement valorising traditions, mainly pagan” (though I would note factors such as the bleed-over from sources such as the CAW mentioned above), and, of the greater significance to this piece,
- *Presentist Perrenism* – “a movement which has its genesis in post-modernity”.

Possamai defines Presentist Perrenism further by saying that;

...even though it borrows eclectively from earlier esotericism, (it) is to be understood as an expression, in the field of spirituality, of emergent post-industrial or post-modern culture.<sup>28</sup>

By 'Perrenism' Possamai means a syncretic (drawing from many combined sources) spirituality which...

...interprets the world as *Monistic* (the cosmos is perceived as having its elements deeply interrelated. It recognises a single ultimate principle, being, or force, underlying all reality, and rejects the notion of dualism, e.g. mind/body);

...whose actors are attempting to develop their *Human Potential Ethic* (actors work on themselves for personal growth);

...and whose actors are seeking *Spiritual Knowledge* (the way to develop oneself is through a pursuit of knowledge, be it knowledge of the universe or of the self, the two being sometimes interrelated).<sup>29</sup>

It is this Presentist Perrenism that describes the fictional-sourced-or-influenced belief systems which are my primary interest here.

## THE NEW GODS

"A Jedi must have the deepest commitment, the most serious mind...  
Excitement. Adventure. A Jedi craves not these things"  
– Yoda, in *The Empire Strikes Back*

One especially fruitful area of Possamai's study – and one whose significance has grown considerably since he first explored it – is the

religious current deriving from *Star Wars*. Ever since the release of the first film in 1977, the *Star Wars* mythos has spoken to many people as a powerful expression of the ineffable – on a metaphorical level at least, the tales of the Jedi Knights and their use of the cosmic energy of The Force has connected with literally millions.

In the original creation of the *Star Wars* internal mythology (an ironic side-effect of George Lucas being unable to secure the rights to a *Flash Gordon* reboot), Lucas drew on many aspects of Eastern religion – Buddhism, Taoism and Shinto in particular – to build the mystical system practiced by the Jedi Knights. In a sense, this was an act of pure unadulterated cultural appropriation by a middle-class white boy from Orange County, California... but he was approaching these sources through the already assimilated New Age versions, and the resulting mix took on a life of its own. There's a directly appealing pull to the simplified version of Taoist dualism in his image of the Light and Dark sides of The Force...

The Force is what gives a Jedi his power. It's an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together.

Here, of course, Lucas is describing Ki/ch'i/mana/prana etc. by another name.

The other key aspect of how Lucas handled his burgeoning mythos was the work of Joseph Campbell, especially his development of the Monomyth concept.<sup>30</sup> Lucas hit every beat of Campbell's guide to tales of a mythological hero's journey with a ruthless efficiency – and it worked supremely well.

Of his creation, Lucas later said:

I see *Star Wars* as taking all the issues that religion represents and trying to distil them into a more modern and easily accessible construct... I put The Force into the movie in order to try and





*Star Wars*-related 'cosplay' at DragonCon 2006

(Image by Michael Neel, reprinted under Creative Commons Share-Alike licence)

awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people – more of a belief in God than a belief in any particular religious system. I wanted to make it so that young people would begin to ask questions about the mystery... I didn't want to invent a religion.<sup>31</sup>

Clearly, Lucas succeeded - perhaps more than he ever intended. Right from the start, there were an awful lot of people who simply and truly wanted to learn the ways of the Force and become a Jedi. The rise of the internet allowed the earliest signs of this fervent wish to begin coalescing into an actual faith... but it was not until 2001 that this loose belief in The Force undertook a significant shift, both for itself and for hyper-real religion in general.

In that year the U.K., Australia, New Zealand and Canada undertook a national census, the first in which those surveyed were asked to state their religion. In the U.K. and Australia in particular, there was an enthusiastic internet-based campaign to encourage people to claim Jedi as their religion of choice. This was a remarkable success – *390,000 U.K. citizens* and over 70,000 Australians were now, officially, members of the Jedi faith. These figures made the Jedi faith *the fourth largest in the United Kingdom* – far ahead of Judaism and all of the non-Mosaic Eastern faiths, and considerably higher than the number of either Pagan or Scientology adherents. Of course, many of those claiming Jedi as their faith probably did so for a laugh, or to make a statement on the ridiculousness of having a religious census question in the first place... but some of them meant it. And, after receiving a substantial amount of publicity as a result, the wider public awareness of what was now becoming known as Jediism grew.<sup>32</sup>

Many online groups attempted to formalise the belief set (and, obviously, make allowances for the fact that adherents did not develop any notable Force-based superpowers). Their statements clearly show the syncretic and perrenist aspects of the belief. An example:

Jediism is not fiction. Our ways are based on ancient wisdom as well as modern philosophies. Our ways are modern adaptations of Taoism and Buddhism. We encourage activities that cultivate physical and mental health, such as martial arts and meditation.

Jediism is a philosophy above all. Then, we use the Order to get together, to stay in touch, to share our united view of life and the Force. It is not required to be a warrior to be a member of the Order of the Jedi, nor to be religiously implicated.

We are non-exclusive. This means that you may keep participating in the religion of your choice, and study the principles of the Force, with no obligations. Our members are free thinkers, with free minds.<sup>33</sup>

The drive for Jediism to be recognised as the equal to any other non-hyper-real belief system won some major successes, especially in the UK. In 2005, newly elected Member of Parliament Jaimie Reed was seated as the first stated member of the Jedi in the House of Commons (although he later confessed to having done so as a joke and as a comment on a religious freedoms bill being then debated).<sup>34</sup> In 2006, two Jedi delivered a protest letter to the United Nations in recognition of the International Day of Tolerance.<sup>35</sup> In 2009, it became known that eight serving police officers in Scotland's Strathclyde force identified as Jedi.<sup>36</sup>

In 2010, an interesting comparison appeared between the treatment of hyper-real religions versus the more established faiths. It began when a self-identified Jedi walked into a British Job Centre. When asked to lower his hood, he politely refused, saying that keeping his hood raised was an article of his faith. He was asked to leave for 'security reasons'. After submitting a formal complaint to the Department of Work and Pensions, he received a written apology from the branch manager. Around the same time, a Christian nurse lost

her law suit against her employers at the National Health Service for being forced to conceal her crucifix at work.<sup>37</sup> Although U.K. law has specifically ruled against Jedi having the same religious entitlements as other faiths (along with Satanists, those who preach female genital mutilation and Scientologists – a delightful comparison),<sup>38</sup> in practice it is not only holding its own with orthodox religion, but can clearly on occasion be given even greater respect.

It should also be noted that the late capitalistic aspects of Jediism-as-product are considerable. Not only the quantity of material, but the quality (replica lightsabers have come a *long* way in 37 years!) and sheer ease of availability of physical manifestations of the mythos are both a continual manifestation of that belief and a multi-billion dollar industry (and, as any religionist will tell you, nothing makes a belief more concrete for the faithful than having physical objects which represent it). The upcoming resurgence of *Star Wars* product as a result of the sale of the franchise to the Disney Corporation – themselves an exemplar of the hyper-real in Baudrillard's eyes<sup>39</sup> – will likely lead to still further growth of Jediism.

Jediism may be the best known of the purely fictional-based beliefs, but there are many others: Matrixism (deriving from the mythos of the *Matrix* films) and the Na'vi mysticism of James Cameron's film *Avatar*, for example. There are also the satirical or spoof religions – Discordianism,<sup>40</sup> The Church of the SubGenius, The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster etc. – whose adherents of appropriately varying sincerity have claimed their own space in culture and even law, further blurring the lines of what can be considered a 'true faith'.

Some people have taken such hyper-real beliefs even further and hold that *their very souls* are a manifestation of the fictional into our realm. These folk, who call themselves Otherkin, have existed for quite some time (I became personally acquainted with several people who believed their true souls were essentially Tolkienesque elves as early as the mid-1980s), but the term is of fairly recent



origin – and, of course, the internet has allowed them to more easily ‘find the others’. Despite the considerable scorn of many, they have found a strength and consistency in their non-human soul models – although there are controversies within their ranks, mostly around a schism between the majority who hold to a non-specific species of soul origin (elf, wolf, dragon etc) and those who believe they are specific reincarnations of fictional entities (such as Neo of *The Matrix* or one of many anime characters).<sup>41</sup> It would seem that no religion is immune to fractioning.

### BACKLASH

“Life doesn’t work like stories.”

- Blue, in *Six-Gun Gorilla*<sup>42</sup>

As I noted earlier, Possamai’s studies have not been limited to the ‘presentist perrenist’, fiction-embracing faiths. The Yang to the Yin of these post-modern beliefs is what Possamai calls the ‘hypo-consumerist’ element of modern religion: how the already existing faiths have striven to co-opt, dilute or utterly oppose the influence of popular culture on their adherents.

These reactions vary widely. The more extremist forces (usually of the Mosaic religions) include such aggressive displays as a variety of Islamic *fatwas* against various popular materials (usually condemned for their ‘Western’ origin as much as for their heterodox content) and the book and record burnings so beloved of the American Christian right. Other branches of traditional faiths attempt to draw on popular currents to further their aims. These range from the use of comic books and popular literature used to directly preach (such as the long-standing Jack Chick comics<sup>43</sup>) to the resurgence in Christian-oriented works (such as the phenomenally successful *Left Behind* franchise), movies like *The*

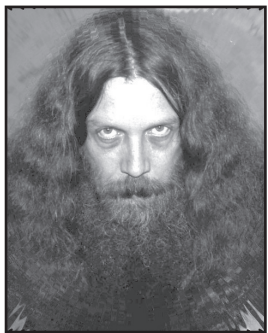
*Passion of the Christ* (2004), the recent wave of exorcism-related films, and the substantial production line of Christian-oriented music in various genres.

Many modern preachers (especially those in the ‘megachurch’ ministries, which, Possamai has noted, increasingly resemble shopping malls) are quite comfortable to purloin aspects of pop culture in their sermons, while of course never quite straying over the line into considering those sources as actually having any spiritual worth of their own. Others (such as Rabbi Cary Friedman, author of the delightful *Wisdom from the Batcave*<sup>44</sup>) can find confirmation and inspiration for their own faith within works of pop culture. Between condemnation and co-option, the orthodox faiths strive to keep the encroaching wave of modernism (and, far worse, postmodernism) at bay, with varying levels of success even within their own ranks.

Aside from the resistance from the older, orthodox faiths, there are of course specific issues in regard to the hyper-real religions and their place within the realm of contemporary belief systems. Bluntly put: if you are able to accept a fictional origin for your spirituality, what happens when you apply that to the real world? And, in such cases... how much is too much?

Here is an example of what happens when somebody takes their hyper-real beliefs rather too stringently to heart. Around British science fiction fandom in the 1980s, there was a woman who was an enthusiastic participant of the occult/pagan fringe which so often overlaps SF&F fandom. Her preferred personal mythos was Pern – the planet of telepathically-bonded dragon-riding heroes in the books of Anne McCaffrey. As you can imagine, when this person finally got to meet Ms. McCaffrey herself, it was quite an important moment... one which she spent explaining in excruciating detail to McCaffrey what the author and the books had got wrong about Pern, on the basis that *she had been there via the Astral Plane and knew better*.

(Of course, the possibility that she was right about Pern has to be mentioned... anyone who's familiar with Alan Moore's theory of Idea-Space<sup>45</sup> could raise the possibility that there is an Ur-Pern



Alan Moore

out there in the imaginal realm, and that some folk could conceivably make contact with it. Or even that Pern, faults and all, truly does physically exist somewhere in deep space and she actually did pick up some telepathic vibe coming from it, or even translated her soul there in some manner. Nonetheless; going up to the person who is pretty sure they actually invented that world with overriding declarations of your version of their invented reality as utter truth is, at bare minimum, impolite and just plain tacky.)

This story illustrates what I think is the most important factor in not just the hyper-real beliefs, but adherence to any religious text or mythos in general – the importance of treating metaphor *as metaphor*. The disparity between the stories our culture tells and the actually existing subjects (simulations rather than simulacra, in Baudrillard's terminology) of those stories can often be distinguished when the subject is deeply at odds with the story.

Consider the dissonance when watching a fictional version of a subject or profession you have some expertise in and the version on your screen. Or note how the ubiquity of fantasy versions of forensic science in TV shows such as the *CSI* franchise has led to a massively skewed public perception of the capabilities of that science – to the point that lawyers complain about the influence of 'CSI Syndrome' on juries' perception of evidence in cases.<sup>46</sup> The smarter hyper-real religionist should always be aware that, no matter how hard postmodernist and poststructuralist theory may insist, confusing story with fact has consequences – possibly severe ones. (As I often say, after Austin Spare – treat your spiritual perceptions

and inclinations *as if* they are real, not *as* real.) But, within one's own mythos or set of metaphors, many truths may be found – for a given value of 'truth'.

All of this came to a head recently, in a case which horrified the world and brought the hyper-real very directly into the Real.

The attempted murder of a 12 year old girl in Wakuesha, Wisconsin by two of her classmates, as a sacrifice to summon the favour of the internet-birthered monster Slenderman,<sup>47</sup> made it very clear that a creature of a known fictional origin could be the (alleged) inspiration for crimes just as vicious as any perpetrated by fanatics of a conventional religion. News media seized on the story – some offering it as an example of the pernicious influence of the internet on children, others considering the overall role of story and myth on modern humanity. With two other Slenderman influenced cases (one involving the murder of two policemen in Las Vegas<sup>48</sup>) mere days before the fifth anniversary of Slenderman's creation, it seemed that a point of no return had been reached. One might almost consider 31 May 2014 as the 9/11 of the hyper-real – after that date, nothing will quite be the same again.<sup>49</sup>

## CONCLUSION

"We read books to find out who we are. What other people, real or imaginary, do and think and feel... is an essential guide to our understanding of what we ourselves are and may become."

- Ursula K. Le Guin

Possamai's terminology – hyper-real religion, presentist perrenism – provides a useful perspective on a rising aspect of modern belief, one which manages to bring some clarity as to why people can derive spiritual guidance from one or more of the many fictional tales which permeate modern culture. It may even point the way to a position



'The Slenderman'. Image courtesy Cachét Whitman (pirate-cashoo.deviantart.com)

which rides the constantly shifting tides of that culture without either descending into Future Shock or surrendering to the particularly whiny form of nihilism that the non-spiritual postmodern adherents are often inclined to.

The hyper-real religionist (unless they simply take on a single belief system such as Jediism) draws on a smorgasbord of metaphorical possibilities, integrating these perspectives into how they self-define their personality... and as long as those metaphors have a personal resonance, their origin matters not at all. The Presentist Perrenist is, by nature, comfortable with a much higher degree of epistemological uncertainty than a monoculturalist practitioner – often, they have been disappointed by the lack of connection the more orthodox faiths have with the modern condition and look wider afield for something that can provide a connection to their own life experiences. The myths of our times can provide a wide and varied pantheon of heroic figures to draw on for comfort and inspiration – as Christopher Knowles put it so well in the title of his book on the modern mythology of comics, 'Our Gods Wear Spandex'.<sup>50</sup>

A criticism many would make of these perspectives is that the hyper-real religions are nothing more than a manifestation of the saturation of culture by mass-produced product. I would say that, although this is a factor, there is more often than not a spirit of self-adaptation, of *bricolage*, a guerilla-like use of the products of late capitalism against themselves, to the practice – a rich inventiveness which combines the love of stories manifest in the best of culture (fannish and otherwise) with the hopes, experiences and aspirations of genuine spiritual seekers. The act of absorbing and respecting aspects of so many variant stories may indeed allow them to find a more egalitarian, multi-modal perspective on faith and belief – a positive manifestation of what orthodox religionists so often sneer at as "pick-and-mix spirituality".

There may even be a greater honesty in admitting one's religious metaphors come from an invented source rather than making



unprovable claims to any kind of historical ‘authenticity’... as long as those metaphors never harden into dogma. Although, as the Wisconsin incident clearly showed, one must be as careful in regards to the pernicious effects of fanaticism and absolute belief with the hyper-real beliefs as with the traditional ones.

In terms of religious belief, these manifestations have a short history, barely half a century. But they are becoming a growing part of the conversation about how we view the Divine, and will open new possibilities for those disappointed by the Old Gods and the old certainties.

“The entire universe appears to be a huge theatre of mirrors in which every object hides a secret, in which everything is a sign that hides mystery.”

– *Adam Possamai*

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His favourite deities are Babalon, Eris, Ganesha and Valen from Babylon 5.