

The Contemporary Text: Media and Preaching

"Losing My Religion" on MTV

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In the week that the presidential circus came to Atlanta, when the main news stories seemed to be about the candidates' choice of church at which to speak on Sunday morning (President Bush finally chose Baptist rather than Presbyterian), the Georgia-based rock band *R.E.M.* won a Grammy award for the video of their song "Losing my Religion." It was an interesting coincidence, one that raised an important question in my mind: which media image more closely reflected the truth about America - that of pious politicians humbly seeking the approval of socially dominant churches, or that of bohemian musicians, icons of pop culture, being feted by the showbiz establishment because of their loss of faith?

A recent article in *Rolling Stone* magazine (5 March 1992) suggests that pop videos may be better indicators of the true condition of contemporary culture than the evening television news shows. The author, John Katz, distinguishes between "Old" and "New" approaches to journalism today. The "Old News" - characterized by the major networks, by Walter Cronkite and Ted Koppel, by the White House Press Corps, and irrelevant foreign news stories - is "pooped, confused and broke." Its viewers are "aged and dying, and the young no longer take their place." The "New News," on the other hand, - "a heady concoction, part Hollywood film and tv movie, part pop music and pop art, mixed with popular culture and celebrity magazines, tabloid telecasts, cable and home video" - is the real agenda setter, fostering a revolution among the young, the marginalized and the disaffected.

The leading "New News" columnists, Katz maintains, are the rock singers whose videos appear constantly on MTV. They identify and express trends in society in a way in which "Old News" journalists are seldom able to do. Consequently, it is they who are now having the greater role in shaping the public mind.

Rolling Stone is a rock magazine, so perhaps we ought to expect some overstatement and hyperbole from this quarter. Katz seems to revel in the breakdown of "the traditional boundaries between straight journalism and entertainment," seeing very little cause for concern in this major cultural development. But one does not have to agree with everything he says in order to acknowledge that Katz is on to something here.

Historically, politicians, social commentators, theologians and church leaders have paid very little attention to "popular" culture, assuming dismissively that it lacks seriousness and doesn't count. Many ministers appear to be blissfully ignorant of MTV's existence, and references to it in sermons - if they are present at all - are likely to be contemptuous. That cultural stance was always elitist and mistaken. But today, with the unprecedented proliferation of electronic communications, and the creation of what can only be called a media environment, it is also foolish and irresponsible.

For it is not only rock journalists and millions of young viewers who attach great significance to MTV and its sister station VH1. Increasingly, many social critics are coming to see music video as at the forefront of a movement in the arts that is helping to bring about profound changes in the way that we perceive the world and our place within it. Pop video "exemplifies in capsule many of the cultural traits which have

given currency to the idea of post-modernism.”¹ Post-modernism is essentially a reaction against what Jürgen Habermas has described as “the project of Enlightenment.” With its origins in the work of the Enlightenment philosophers of the eighteenth century this modernist project attempted to “develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic,” and to use this knowledge in the rational organization of everyday life, the pursuit of human emancipation.²

The twentieth century, littered with its rationally planned inhumanities and technically produced environmental catastrophes, has shattered the optimism of the Enlightenment, and the whole project is now seen by many as oppressive and terroristic. According to the literary critic Terry Eagleton, “we are now in the process of waking from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and fetish of the totality, into the laid-back pluralism of the post-modern....”³

Post-modernist thought, with its rejection of “meta-narrative” and all forms of “totalizing discourse,” embraces notions of ephemerality, discontinuity, and above all, perhaps, fragmentation. It “swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is.”⁴ Post-modern art subverts the “high” notions of culture that sprang from the Enlightenment tradition by breaking down the boundaries between art and commerce, image and reality, past and present. “Its stance towards cultural tradition is one of irreverent pastiche, and its contrived depthlessness undermines all metaphysical solemnities, sometimes by a brutal aesthetics of squalor and shock.”⁵ It is not hard to see why rock videos are seen as being at the cutting edge of the post-modernist movement.

Many people of the pre-baby-boom generation find it very hard to sit and watch MTV. This is not simply because they don’t like the music. Rather, it has to do with the visual form of the video, which they find physically, and perhaps intellectually, disturbing. They are not familiar with, and do not accept, the “grammar” of music video. Among the characteristics of that “grammar” are:

Fragmentation. Striking images appear and disappear at a phenomenal rate, allowing almost no time for conscious digestion of the visual information. R.E.M.’s video, “Losing my Religion” lasts just over four and a half minutes. A rough count yielded a total of 145 shots, that’s a change of image every two seconds. In many videos the images may bear no relation to each other, or to the words of the song.

Discontinuity. Logic and a structured approach to storytelling are absent. We are in the world of the dream - or maybe the drug trip. Performers might be seen in one shot, for example, singing half a line of the song in a nightclub. In the very next shot, cut hard against the first, they are lazing on a tropical beach somewhere, without any apparent interest in the lyrics, even though we hear them being sung.

Eclecticism. Any image is fair game. Music videos regularly plunder news archives, old movies, tv commercials and the art world for images to appropriate and play with. The group Van Halen in “Top of the World” are seen floating among the moon probes; the Scorpions mix shots from one of their concerts with those of celebratory crowds at the breaching of the Berlin wall; Paula Abdul recreates scenes from the cult movie *Rebel without a Cause* in “Rush, Rush.”

Commercialism. Music videos are by their very nature commercials. They exist in order to promote the performer/band and their latest song. Stylistically, they have had a major impact on the advertising world. Many commercials have copied the dreamlike form of the music video; they are often accompanied by a rock soundtrack; pop musicians may well star in them, as in the Pepsi advertisements. The boundary

between art and commerce has broken down to such an extent that on MTV it is sometimes difficult to tell the program from the commercial. For example, the program may contain a Bryan Adams video promoting the movie *Prince of Thieves*. This may be followed by a commercial for another movie, *Terminator II*, which features a hit song by Guns 'N Roses. The images in "Gonna Make You Sweat" by the band, C&C Music Factory, are consciously modelled on advertisements from the fashion magazines.

"Losing my Religion" exhibits some, though not all, of these characteristics of music video very clearly. At the same time it demonstrates what is possible with the medium when it is in the hands of artistically creative people. R.E.M. thoroughly deserved the Grammy, and all the other awards that they have picked up for this piece of work. It stands head and shoulders above most other pop videos as a work of real imagination and beauty. Every shot is well composed and superbly lit, and there is a richness of imagery throughout the song. But what, if anything, is it trying to say?

The lyrics of the song are fairly obscure. I'm told that in Southern usage, "losing my religion" can simply mean, "having a bad day" or "life is getting the better of me"; and, who knows? maybe that's how the song originated. Many a pop classic has been built around an everyday catch-phrase. There is a sense of loss and ambiguity, of dealing with a painful subject in the repetition of the line - "Oh no, I've said too much, I haven't said enough"; and the song does speak of "the slip that brought me to my knees." But what does that mean? Are we supposed to interpret it theologically?

It's the imagery of the video that invites an explicitly theological reading of "Losing my Religion", as angels, crucifixion shapes, sublime holy people and martyred saints are flashed before our eyes. But which religion is the band in danger of losing? Here we encounter even greater problems of interpretation, for the images woven so skillfully together allude to Greek mythology, Christianity, Renaissance humanism, revolutionary socialism, Eastern mysticism, and paganism.

The central image in "Losing my Religion" is that of a set of wings. They appear mysteriously from time to time in the room where Michael Stipe, the lead singer, is performing the song. We see them next on an aged god or angel who is seated with a younger celestial being looking down on the affairs of the temporal world. The octogenarian falls from his perch to the darkness below, and there are desperate attempts to restore him to his position. They fail, and he falls into the hands of human beings who find him in the first place curious, then ridiculous, and finally obnoxious. There are fleeting glimpses of Rembrandt-like biblical scenes, a nativity, a mocking, a stoning. But who is this fallen angel? Could this really be Jesus, or is it Icarus, perhaps, the symbol of human beings who, in flying too close to the sun have overreached themselves?

Intercut with all of this are images of an altogether different set of wings. These wings are made of iron and steel. We see them being fired in the furnace and hammered out on the anvil of history. They are the product of human reason and technical skill. They embody self-confidence. Leonardo da Vinci provides the design, socialism provides the labor. But wait. The final product bears more than a passing resemblance to the winged symbol of the Third Reich. These wings are no replacement for those that have fallen from the heavens. "Losing my Religion" is both visually and aurally a lament.

For me, the most convincing and moving lines in "Losing my Religion" describe the reality of life in the post-modern world: "Every whisper/ Every waking hour I'm choosing my confessions/ Trying to keep up with you/ And I don't know if I can do

it.” Confronted with an entire world of religions, of images, of life-styles, of moral stances, of art, of goods and services, we are literally spoiled for choice. Pulled in a thousand directions all at once, we are constantly in danger of fragmenting into as many different pieces. “Every waking hour I’m choosing my confessions.” Freedom confronts us as condemnation.

“Losing my Religion” is not an expression of youthful rebellion against some established faith. It’s a statement of despair. We have gained the whole world and lost our soul. This is being said on MTV. But will the divine promise also be heard by the MTV generation, a promise that includes all of us who live under the many signs of post-modernity?: “Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”

NOTES

¹ Peter Wollen, “Ways of Thinking About Music Video (and Post-Modernism),” *Critical Quarterly* 28, Nos.1&2:167.

² Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity - An Incomplete Project,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Post-Modern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, 1983, 8.

³ Terry Eagleton, “Awakening from Modernity,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 Feb. 1987.

⁴ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 1990, 44.

⁵ Eagleton, “Awakening from Modernity.”