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**King of American Kitsch?  
A Reading of Elvis as X-Rated Artist and American Prometheus / Icarus**

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In a 1957 essay entitled « The Fiction Writer and his Country », Flannery O'Connor speaks about what she calls “the grotesque imagination” in connection to the South. She develops the following argument:

I have written several stories which did not seem to me to have any grotesque characters in them at all, but which have immediately been labeled grotesque by non-Southern readers. The problem might eventually be to find something that is not grotesque. At least, of late, Southern writers have had the opportunity of pointing out that none of us invented Elvis Presley and that that **youth** is himself probably less an occasion for concern than his **popularity**, which is not restricted to the southern part of the country. (32-33)

Of course what is exposed here is O'Connor's sense of humor, not her lack of judgment: it was as impossible for her (or for anyone) to assess the artistic and cultural importance of Elvis Presley as it would have been to foresee the many parallels between her trajectory and artistic gesture and the singer's. As artists, O'Connor and Elvis do indeed share a taste for provocation and the voluntary

transgression of their audience's sense of decorum, a deep understanding of the culture of poor whites, a vision of the grotesque as repressed sublime, and an overall sense of anxiety combined with a desperate search for grace. As individuals, sadly they shared an ailment – lupux – and both died young after learning in their flesh the all-too-painful humiliations and sufferings of the grotesque body.

Still what is implicit in Flannery O'Connor's remark remains: Elvis fans seem to be lacking good taste; they are unable to discern the beautiful and valuable with certainty; they lack distinction. Maybe they mistake beauty for its opposite (ugliness) or maybe they mistake beauty for its parody, its simulation, its travesty (kitsch).

The rejection of Elvis by intellectuals and elite culture did not end with Flannery O'Connor: it would be long-lasting and actually goes on to this day. Even the president of the International Association of the Study of Pop Music (IASPM) Simon Frith deplores that Elvis's contribution is largely minimized and uncommented in the field of popular music studies (Frith 257-258). Parallel to the fans' unconditional adulation and construction of an all-purpose Elvis that becomes synonymous with the American experience, there has been an equally strong rejection of the artist in all phases of his career, on account of his alleged bad taste. As Linda Roy Prat summarizes in an article entitled "Elvis or the Ironies of a Southern Identity", the alleged king of rock and roll "was never able to raise above his original cultural disreputableness"(44). It is all too plain to see: never to this day has the Elvis the Pelvis gained cultural respectability and recognition by the elites: too black and barbaric for recognition by the middle-class, too redneck to acquire the radical chic value of, say, James Brown.

There seems indeed to be something in the artist's aesthetics, something in his modes of performance and in the conduct of his career – with its many failures – that defies all standards of good taste, all sense of what emotions are permissible in 'good art', all sense of what art indeed is. It is important to remember that popular art and performance should be studied for what they are: as artistic statements that are as legitimate as elite culture, as art that has depth and intensity and focus and relevance, but also as art that operates in different fields and generates different

types of engagement with the audience. Elvis's performance art is irreconcilable with the Kantian aesthetics of detached appreciation and good taste. It is an art of self-fashioning, the semiotic art of creating Elvis. What primarily matters about Elvis is largely anti-textual: it is pure physicality and feeling; it is art that requires a phenomenological approach and a poetics of the body.

We will deal with the artist's career in three grossly divided phases that can be designated as "pre-army subversive rock-and-roll Elvis"; "sixties Hollywood actor and novelty singer Elvis"; and "Las Vegas seventies jumpsuited Elvis" (with original glory and later downfall). With each phase, we'll see that Elvis's artistic gesture interacts with a specific mode that is usually connected to bad taste and sometimes reclaimed by the artist: the *vulgar* and the *obscene* in the fifties; the *kitsch* (with its logics of simulations and sentimentality) in the sixties; and the *garish* and the *monstrous* (interacting – as always – with beauty) in the seventies.

Within these modes, we would like to problematise Elvis's artistic gesture as X-rated, that is as defined by three "X"-s, namely *exhibition*, *excess* and *expressionism*. In the process, we will reclaim Elvis's art as something more radical than it is usually perceived, trying to show that Elvis is an artist with a gesture of his own and a vision of his art. Of course Elvis is also a cultural signifier and a site of discourse and we will have to explore what contemporary cultural analysts would call Elvis's 'star text'<sup>1</sup> and what we perceive are its three major components: the body as site of urgency, desire and chaos, which links Elvis to revolutionary radical aesthetics; the theme of sovereignty, which links Elvis to a somewhat kitschy kingly mythology of affluence and sacrifice; and the theme of failure and death, which connects Elvis with the southern imagination and turns him into this tragic figure he has become in the collective memory. At the outset of our analysis, what will emerge is the Elvis myth, a reconfiguration and re-arrangement of earlier myths under the guise of American kitsch.

At the heart of the highbrow rejection of Elvis lies a great deal of cultural snobbery. Elvis is another name for the well-known and well-oiled mechanics of

distinction: North versus South, Puritan versus Pentecostal, educated versus unschooled, upper-middle class versus white trash, liberal versus conservative. To achieve cultural respectability, Elvis was born on the wrong side of class, race and gender. As southern writer William Campbell demonstrates in an essay entitled "Elvis as redneck", through Elvis, what was and sometimes still is rejected is the culture that he emerged from: poor southern white culture, forever identified with bigotry, ignorance and racism (Campbell 79). Hence a drive to diminish his contribution: a working class hero - yes, certainly. An artist of white trash origin with an agenda and a vision? You must be kidding! The myth of Elvis as non-author of his music or artistic gesture, as a figure devoid of moral force or artistic agency - just the right man in the right place at the right time - is still largely disseminated. Duncan Smith's view that "[Elvis] is not the author of Elvis. He's ex-centric to his own Elvishood" (cited in Marcus, 1991: 44) is almost dominant in some circles, no matter how much that view stands at odds with the figure of absolute empowerment that Elvis stands for for most of his fans, with the assurance, vitality and urgency of most of his production (didn't he redefine the face of popular music at the age of twenty?) or with his insolent talent for self fashioning.

It is true though that Elvis was decidedly southern. To the last day of his life, he never grew out of his cultural heritage: the courteousness, the guns, the extended family and collective living, the greasy soul food, the 'yes,mam' and 'no sir' that define the southern *habitus*. He even ended his life in Graceland, a plantation house (now a museum of kitsch and temple of profane piety) that is a replica of William Faulkner's Rowan Oak Mansion. Like Sutpen, Elvis was the poor boy in the master's house: a southern version of the northern rags to riches story.

But, as often is the case in symbolical scapegoating, the identification is partly faulty - Elvis hardly stands as the token redneck. Though not an intellectual by any stretch, he was relatively educated for the time (he had completed high school with good grades); he was partly urban (he had been brought up in inner city Memphis from the age of twelve). Mostly, he was a cultural hybrid, to a great extent the 'white

negro' Norman Mailer would dream of, having been raised in close and loving contact with African-American culture: its music, its idioms, its spirituality and discursive practices. Interestingly in the moral panic of 1956, as the cultural integration Elvis was achieving was at its most blatant, as mainstream America considered the singer as threat for social order and the morality of youth (he was supposedly a vehicle of juvenile delinquency, open sex and race mixing), an urban legend of Elvis as racist began to circulate and was largely adopted in northern educated class (and also, sadly, in the African-American community), identifying the artist with the worst of southern culture and with what was most alien to what he was, but making him effectively politically abject in a time of struggle for civil rights.

As has been widely documented in Greil Marcus's book *Dead Elvis*, this desire to desecrate and soil the idol, to identify him with utter political evil lasted long after his death, as the punk generation and postmodern artists obsessively associated Elvis with Hitler (see in particular Marcus 114-116)<sup>2</sup>.

Now, when it comes right down to it, Elvis's artistic gesture (and in fact the rockabilly genre in general) stands in the heart of white southern culture as a foreign and contradictory body, almost a *pharmakon*: It mirrors the culture, reproduces some of its patterns (the expropriation and exclusion of black artists); it recontextualises part of its cultural heritage (the spirituality of the shakers, pentecostal exhibitions, radical demagogical democracy, the world of money-honey, pink Cadillacs, blue suede shoes and casual sex...), but at the same time it threatens that culture absolutely, blurring, distorting and subverting as it does all the distinctions of a South that was still segregated and of mainstream white America at large.

Obviously, if we list the distinctions that Elvis's music and stage act disrupted, we must start with the black/white distinction: Elvis borrows from African-American culture in music, singing style, but also in self presentation (his clothing and overall demeanor came straight from Beale Street, Memphis's black avenue of pleasure). The male/female distinction must come next in the list: in many photo shoots of his early career, Elvis displays the tropes of sexual availability and

aesthetical perfection that are typical of fifties pin-up models. Alongside the dimension of masculine assertiveness central to his attitude, there is much in his persona however that can be culturally perceived as culturally feminine: he wears abundant jewelry, mascara and pink; his hairdo is elaborate, takes a lot of attention (and if biographers must be believed a lot of his waking time) and he affects an overall languid demeanor with limp wrists (some pictures of early Elvis actually became iconic in gay circles). The lyrics of the songs also involve speakers that put themselves on the receiving side of love. We'll name but a few evocative song titles: "Love me Tender"; "Love Me"; "I Need Your Love Tonight"... In her cultural study of cross-dressing Marjorie Garber goes as far as to reads Elvis as "hypereal female," a "undercover female impersonator" whose appearance "violated and disrupted race, class and gender" (Garber 367).

But most disturbingly the line that early Elvis transgressed was the well-established line between propriety and obscenity. The dissolution of that line was well-captured by a southern newspaper article that labeled Elvis's stage act as "strip-tease with clothes on" (cited in Guralnick 284), a strip-tease made all the more dangerous as the stripper in question is male. On stage and during a few controversial TV appearances, not only did Elvis's alleged "revolutionary stage persona" (Spencer 119) mimic the sexual act and even orgasm, he also made his audience experience their bodies sexually, which was deemed all the more unacceptable and vulgar, as Elvis inverted the traditional gender politics of strip-tease, "recycling," as musicologist Robert Fink perceptively remarks "the musical signifiers of sex (borrowed from female strippers) to a teenage female audience" (Fink 171).

Another line that is early Elvis breaks in performance is the line that divides popular entertainment and social insurgency Concerts were transformed into rituals of collective hysteria, with broken chairs and vandalized concert halls. There is this element of "sullen and inarticulate violence" (Fink 171) The *angry-young-man*esque early Elvis did indeed sing partly from an impulse of social resentment. His choice of

material and his spontaneous rewriting of some lyrics makes it plain that what he sings against is the middle-class codes of proprieties, norms and values that were used to humiliate his class. Hence the famous interpellation in his 1956 hit "Hound Dog":

They said you were high class, but that was just a lie,  
They said you were high class, but that was just a lie.  
You ain't ever caught a rabbit and you ain't no friend of mine.

Of course in his scandal-rousing televised performances of that song in the spring and summer of 1956 (the now iconic Milton Berle Show, during which a fully-energized and malicious Elvis drove the female audience wild with his pelvic gyrations; the Ed Sullivan Show, during which he was shot only above the waist; and the Steve Allan Show during which a tuxedoed Elvis was compelled to sing the lyrics as a love song to an actual hound dog, complete with bow-tie and top-hat), Elvis sang against the hound dogs of cultural authority that were trying to control, normalize and censure his performance. Watching the performances today, it is plain to see that he did indeed symbolically become that oversexualised promiscuous trickster rabbit of African-American lore too fast and smart for the hound dogs to catch.

The raw musicality of the early Elvis's stage act only highlights the anger that nourishes the performances. For, and this is sometimes overlooked, Elvis and his early musicians did not only merge black and white musical idioms (rhythm and blues played as country music and country songs played as blues) but, fuelled by a chaotic nervous energy that really originated in Elvis's body, they distorted African-American Rhythm-and-Blues, did away with its groove, with its 'swing' element, replacing it with something much cruder, much more syncopated and violent, something that is really best described as proto-punk.

Sexual provocativeness, crude musicality and social anger made for an explosive proto punk mix indeed. Also announcing the punk movement was the reclamation of working class bad taste. Early Elvis looks greasy and he provocatively

exaggerates all elements in his demeanor that are thought vulgar: he swaggers, sneers, chews gum, spits out the gum, slurs, whines and sniffs, mumbles. He 'plays dirty' to use a jazz idiom that designates and sings dirty: his singing is very much an art of everything that can happen in the vocal tract, with hiccups, glottal stops, growls, rasping, panting fully integrated into the singing style. Greil Marcus sums it up perfectly with one word in his celebrated Illiad-inspired article "Presliad": "venom" (Marcus, 2000, 179).

All this calls for a redefinition of young Elvis's art as a form of performance art that is not simply the transmission of songs, but something that has an avant-garde at least a radical strand to it. We could approach these early live and televised performances as a form of participatory *body art* that works alongside two main lines: singing as a performative act whereby a state of insurgency (inner and social) is created (a form of 'action singing' we could say to connect Elvis to Jackson Pollock and avant-garde artistic practices of the fifties) accompanied by what John Shepherd calls "choreographies of enactment", coded gestures that mimic the disruption of social taboos (Shepherd 141), in the case of Elvis, expressionistic exhibition of the body as site of urgency, desire and chaos.

This artistic proposition is of course totally at odds with Kantian good taste and aesthetics of disinterested engagement. Steeped as it is in feeling and bodily engagement, it was collectively perceived in the mid to late fifties as and an emancipation of the body and as no less than a promethean cultural liberation. Bruce Springsteen recurrently asserted that "Elvis had freed our body" (cited in Edin, VII) and Texas Songwriter Butch Hancock hyperbolically declared that "Elvis wiped out 4000 years of Judeo-Christian uptightness in 15 minutes of television"(cited in Rodman 153).

The second phase of Elvis's career is a phase of integration. Under the conduct of his manager the infamous Cl. Tom Parker, Elvis was completely assimilated into the culture industry and transformed into a commodity in a series of 29 family-friendly Hollywood movies. In the process, he was turned into a variety artist whose



versatile vocal talent could appropriate any style of music from gospel to harmless pop or operetta pastiche, such as rewriting of “O Sole Mio” (“It’s Now or Never”), “La Paloma” (“No More”) or “Plaisir d’Amour” (“Can’t Help Falling in Love with You”). This second phase can be seen as fully “kitsch” as the term was conceptualized by the cultural critics of Frankfurt school (Herman Broch, Adorno and Herbert Marcuse) and by radical modernists American art critics such as Clement Greenberg: mass-produced formulaic products with little substance, that function on a logic of mild sentimentality and simulation. Pastiche of art for a parody of aesthetic experience.

Some of Elvis’s films do seem indeed to be *simulacrum*s of films rather than actual movies, formulaic escapist fantasies, romances and travelogues packed with novelty songs, children and studio-recreated beaches. Elvis plays a demobilized soldier, a boxer, a doctor, a cow-boy, a skin-diver, a formula-one pilot, a beach-watcher, a cabaret singer, a disguised millionaire; he plays two Elvises (twin cousins a city Elvis and a country Elvis in the aptly titled *Kissin’ Cousins*); he’s in Hawaii, Acapulco, Florida, Arabia, New Orleans, Chicago, the Far-West, the Middle-West and the titles of some of the material expose all too blatantly the shameless ways in which the script-writers used songs to advance their lame plots regardless of artistic ambition: “There’s no Place to Rumba in a Sports Car”, “Ito eats Coconuts,” “Kiss me Quick” ...

For some, this amounts to artistic death by lack of distinction. Not so much bad taste as an absence of taste altogether, an indistinct embrace of everything, (one album significantly titled *something for everybody*, another *pot-luck*), the first stage of what Greil Marcus calls Elvis’s “empty yes” (Marcus, 2000, 182). But, because of their kitsch value, and because kitsch is a parody of an aesthetic experience (Elvis’s films being imitations, simulations of films) the movies and many songs are reclaimable for camp appreciation.

This is the position of Douglas Brode of Syracuse University in a book called *Elvis, Cinema and Popular Culture*. The author provides a reading of the movies as using the codes of lighthearted commercial comedy, while having profound

resonance with the social and cultural changes of the sixties and Elvis's autobiographical trajectory. Brode sees the Elvis persona in the movies as a "cowboyish Candide of contemporary lowbrow cinema" (Brode 243) that navigates in a world that has no stable values. It must be granted indeed that, with hindsight, some of the lighter movies have acquired a quaint charm: there is an innocence to them, a very bearable lightness that invites a camp appreciation.

Other critics go further and see subversive subtexts brought along by Elvis's acting performances beneath the family-friendly framework the movies operate in. Peter Nazareth, professor of African-American studies at Iowa University sees the movies as "dangerous movies masquerading as safe ones" (Nazareth 69) and sees Elvis the Hollywood actor through the lens of the African-American practice of "signifying". Nazareth sees Elvis's position in the power structure of Hollywood industry as mirroring that of the black man in slave states: powerless and dispossessed of dignity. "Signifying", the art of symbolically and invisibly subverting and ridiculing an oppressive order with behavioral and linguistic irony was all that was left to Elvis the actor. Ironic delivery of trite dialogue, constant self-deprecation and distancing techniques is what Nazareth sees in Elvis's acting performances, as well as little explosions of violence or eroticism in the way he seems to reclaim the fist-fight scenes and the kissing scenes. Whether or not one subscribes to the critic's views, something is striking in those movies and gives a bizarre quasi-*unheimlich* quality to some: it's Elvis himself. There is often a blatant disproportion between the vacuity of the hackneyed situations and the physical intensity and ambiguity of the actor's Brando-like mannerisms and moody sensual presence. He is oozing with sexual promise, a sexual bomb waiting to go off at the heart of family movies. This is not enough, of course, to redeem the film artistically, but it is enough to disrupt their harmless functioning, to make them very fit objects for camp recuperation.

Plus of course, there is the singing, fuelled by Elvis's larger vocal range and greater technical control than in his early career. Now a most affecting ballad singer, the artist creates strange unexpected moments of grace in the movies that stand

equally at odds with the film's inner kitsch triviality. It's still performative 'action singing' that we are confronted with, but what is produced, what is accomplished is no longer a state of insurgency, but a state of grace, a couple of minutes that momentarily pierce through the kitsch surface and transcends the innateness of the material.

The third phase of Elvis's career consisting mainly of the nineteen seventies live shows is certainly harder to recuperate for camp enjoyment. As Susan Sontag famously explains in *Notes on Camp* Camp enjoyment reconfigures kitsch by neutralizing its sentimentality or inappropriate seriousness with humor: camp "dethrones the serious" and "proposes a comic vision of the world" (Sontag, 106) in the later phase of Elvis's career, the charge in pathos is a great part of how the performance functions and such a neutralization is largely impossible (although on stage, the artist himself often tried to deflate the pomposity of his artistic gesture with self-deprecating humor that sometimes backfired).

Of course from a certain point of view, it's tempting to dismiss Elvis's seventies art as kitsch and pure overbearing bad taste. Arguments to support this abound: the increased sentimentality of patriotic anthems, soaring gospel numbers and self-pity filled country ballads; the high degree of ornamentation in Elvis's infamous jumpsuit costumes; the strive for maximum effect in Elvis's performance and the emotional redundancy in his hyperbolic interpretation of sadness. There is an overall sense of a beauty that overplays itself. What this reveals is that, once again, the concerts function under the "X-rated" regime of Elvis's art of performance: exhibition, expressionism, and the extreme. The spectator knows from the start of the shows – with the use of Richard Strauss's "Also Sprach Zarathoustra" as a prelude to Elvis' stage entrance – that his standards of good taste and sense of decorum (the extent of permissible emotions) are going to be transgressed.

But kitsch is only part of the story here and the seventies concerts cannot be dismissed as such. For kitsch to be pure kitsch, what is required is an inherent emptiness, a lack of substance or artistic drive. Kitsch is overstylisation that masks or

unmasks a lack of inner artistic strength (Sontag 98). And if we pay attention to how Elvis Las Vegas shows function as collective rituals we can locate an origin, a source, an artistic impulse that Elvis is very much in command of. That original impulse is the expression of pain: Elvis as *schmerzenmensch*, as a figure of sorrow that will be staged within the framework of a theatricality of sacrifice. An avatar of what 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropologist Robert Fraser calls the “Divine King” (Fraser, 228), this new persona will be exhibited according different modalities that depend Elvis’s physical condition: the glorious, radiant, shining body of the king when Elvis is fit and thin (a *corpus eroticus*) or a monstrous body when Elvis is fat and tired (a *corpus dolorosus*) as increasingly is in the years that lead to the artist’s death.

In the shows, Elvis does indeed fashions himself as an otherworldly, larger-than-life kingly figure: the jet-died hair and impressive sideburns can only be described as an artificial mane or symbolic crown; the costumes that art historian Karol Ann Marling from the university of Minnesota describes as “strange, quasi liturgical garments”:

Jeweled, studded, fringed and laced (or unlaced), the Jumpsuit Elvis is a different creature, the Vegas Elvis, a legend armored in a carapace of sheer radiant glory. (Marling 82)

The artist exhibits the characters of regalia: Napoleonic collars, superhero capes, rhinestones and jewelry; totemic animal like tigers, eagles or peacocks sewed in silk or outlined in gems on the chest stand as emblems of power and glory as do the huge belts inspired by boxer trophies. The predominance of gold and radiance also contribute to the construction of a solar figure (one of the most famous costumes reproduces an Aztec calendar with a radiant the Sun God in the centre) that encapsulate the properties that Robert Fraser ascribes to the divine king: he has power over nature and stands as the dynamic center of the universe (Fraser XXIII). Greil Marcus calls him “the transcendental sun King Emerson only dreamed about” (Marcus, 2000, 133). Biographer Peter Guralnick more facetiously remarks that Elvis stands “somewhere between semi-God and a giant bat” (Guralnick, 1999, 444).

As always with Elvis, those concerts are exhibitions, but they function under a new regime: the regime of *ostention*, the medieval religious ceremonies where the relics of saints were exhibited for veneration. What is offered for veneration here is the body of the King, which as medieval political theology teaches us is always double: there is a material earthly, a body of flesh that can be touched by fans, given offerings, just the fans receive offerings in return (the famous scarves imbued with Elvis's sweat<sup>3</sup>). But through that earthly body communion is possible with the body politic, the community, the kingdom, America itself, which Elvis reclaims in patriotic anthems such as "American Trilogy", his operatic merging of a minstrel song ("Dixie"), a negro spiritual ("All my Trials") and the Yankee Civil War Hymn ("The Battle Hymn of the Republic"): Elvis performs in song the unity of America, a unity that the audience can symbolically take part in.

What was exhibited however is not just body and America, but also excessive feeling in ballads of hyperbolic pain (gospel numbers like "Amazing Grace" and "How Great Thou Art", laments like "This Time You Gave Me a Mountain" and ballads like "My Way"), that were vehicles for Elvis to present his persona of Divine King engaged in a theatricality of trial and redemption. The lyrics of the songs in question present figures of sorrow and pathos, men confronted to loss, abandonment and death. With up to seventy-five musicians and backing singers on stage with Elvis in the seventies, the songs were powerfully orchestrated (under the musical direction of Joe Gercio) in highly dramatic fashion, alternating crescendos of blaring brass and strings, climaxes and releases. Enveloped in this music that was iconic of the turmoil of emotional life, Elvis sang and bodily interacted with the music, at times seeming to command it with large theatrical gestures of empowerment, at times seeming to struggle against it with postures and dances inspired by karate and the art of bullfighters. What was acted out on stage were three to four minute dramatic vignettes of a man confronted to obstacles and trials, with threats of defeat and promise of victory. Seeing Elvis wining those symbolical fights against destiny and a full-blown orchestra were a highly cathartic moments of quasi-taumachic or gladiatorial dimension for his audience.

As the radiant glory of Elvis's *corpus eroticus* was gradually replaced by a pathetic *corpus dolorosus*, as the signs of personal tragedy and impending death become more obvious, the sacrificial dimension of the performances became increasingly painful to watch. What was exhibited for worship in the later years is a monstrous body struggling to achieve grace in songs, succeeding sometimes and failing often when the artist was too weak, too drugged or too bored. The concerts were held in aesthetic suspense: would Elvis transcend the layers of American kitsch and the inherent bad taste of the dominant culture once more or would the sacrifice be finally accomplished? For, as Robert Fraser reminds:

The king is slain in his character of god or demi-god, his death and resurrection as the only means of perpetrating the divine life unimpaired being deemed necessary for the salvation of the people and the world. (253)

This is of course was presented through a heterogeneous, loud American aesthetics of excess, with a high degree of redundancy and overbearingly emphasized effect, but when the ritual functioned, what came across to the sympathetic viewer was not so much bad taste as a feeling of awe that the monstrosity of the body and the garishness of the aesthetics only re-enforced. As can be seen from the many existing concert footages, what came across was the feeling that something actually awful was taking place, an age-old ceremony not unlike the ritual slaying a bull, with a sense of real-life danger and real life tragedy that simply dispels the accusations of sentimentality. As Oscar Wilde brilliantly explains explains in *De Profundis* "a sentimentalist is simply someone who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it" (Wilde 140) and here we feel that a very hard price is being paid, that a game with death and suffering is being played with suffering and death, as in the performance art of body artists Chris Burden and Jack Niztsch.

When the ritual fails and Elvis is not committed or too weak, we are indeed faced with the impression that Greil Marcus had after a performance in 1974: that "Elvis had dissolved into a presentation of his myth" (Marcus, 2000, 133). The

resulting feeling was one of tremendous sadness, a sadness that is almost without redemption, the irretrievable sadness inherent in kitsch when there is no camp connoisseur in sight, the sadness of beauty that fails, of a promise that is not delivered. Kitsch then becomes a potent aesthetic mode that mirrors our condition of frailty and failure. Milan Kundera calls this lightness of undelivered promise of kitsch unbearable and indeed it is.

After Elvis's death comes what Gilbert Rodman calls "Elvis after Elvis" (Rodman, 1), a million-dollar merchandising empire, but also what can only be called a myth, a tale, a legend. Inspired by the work of Richard Dyer, we feel bold enough to claim that stars – dead stars in particular – as the equivalent of a mythological pantheon or a gallery of saints for the mass-media that is collectively used by the community to make sense of the culture and bring meaning into people's lives. And the story of Elvis's life and career has indeed been condensed and reduced into a minimal narrative, a tragic legend written collectively by America and as richly layered and evocative as the stories to be found in Ovid.

This mythological figure in question is linked to royalty and to fire, victory and defeat. It starts with a heroic figure that steals the fire of African-American music to liberate mainstream America: Elvis as Prometheus. But, burned by this fire or flying too close to the sun of American vitality, Elvis burns his wings and falls: a figure of pathos, a golden-clad Icarus. With its motif of redemption-less defeat the story has a political ring to it: it tells us the rags to riches self-made man mythology of the North is not available to southerners. With its motif of a King that is trapped by his own glory and power, it has shades of King Midas, a figure that prefigures the predicament of kitsch: to be left with glory only and no nourishment. There are other motifs that cling to the story: Orpheus who could sing the country into grace and had to walk through hell to retrieve his loved one (dead twin or mother), there is the motif of the Faustian pact with his manager that becomes more prominent each time the Elvis story is told. Most of all, it corresponds to the myth of all myths, the story that Robert Fraser places at the origin of all religions and fertility cults: a solar deity,

who underwent a marriage with an earth goddess, and has to die to revive and rejuvenate the land. Of course, in the case of Elvis that earth mother is the modern America of consumer society whose inherent kitsch the best of Elvis's art has always tried to scare away, dispel or transcend.

The story could be told as a simpler children's tale: a young culturally hybrid American who was caught with a huge fit of American hunger. He wanted to eat all he could of the vitality, dynamism and affluence he was told stands as the heart of the American experience. That America - the America he loved and the America that loved him - certainly had good taste because he never stopped eating and famously became an ogre that died of surfeit of America. This is why, Elvis may seem so much greater than Walt: he exposes Whitman's hunger for America and identification with the land for what it was: simply a literary posture, an incantation that was repeated until you believed it. Elvis died because he not only singed the body electric, he was the body electric.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The concept was introduced by Richard Dyer in his pioneering work on the semiotics of film stars and their relationship to what he calls "needs, dreams and the collective unconscious" (Dyer 1998, 18). He defines 'star text' as "the star's image as read across all different media manifestations" (Dyer 1986, 2-3) including extra artistic documents and narratives, i.e. "aspects of the star's private life that have been made available for public consumption". We will be using the expression 'star text' to designate the narrative and network of representations through which a given star has penetrated the collective imagination.

<sup>2</sup> Don de Lillo makes the same connection in his novel *White Noise*, as professors Gladney, head of the Hitler Studies department becomes a model for professor Murray J. Siskind, who wants to create Elvis Studies and finds countless similarities in the trajectory and biographies of the two figures (61-63).

<sup>3</sup> One of the functions of the Anglo-Saxon king, as *Beowulf* reminds us, is to be a 'ring-giver'. The king is a figure of benevolence that gives away. Elvis can indeed be seen as sacrificial figure to that extent, absolute benevolence (akin to the sun burning away its own substance to light the universe: he gives away, throws away; squandering as he does his material possessions and, more sadly, his talent).

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