

## Icons of Transgression

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This article takes a look at some specific, iconic images that are meant to be particularly transgressive of normality, challenging stereotypical images of American unity and wholesomeness<sup>1</sup>. All iconic representations of actual persons (living or dead) are caught in a dichotomy between elements of normality / familiarity and elements of transgression, but what happens to the dissemination of iconic images when their transgressive qualities predominate? Manipulation of representations of celebrities or famous persons into hero- or other-images can either constitute adversarial or collaborative icon work, and furthermore this icon work can be either oppositional or hegemonic/incorporated in the capitalist sphere of production and dissemination of artifacts<sup>2</sup>. I propose to look at collaborative, yet provocative and anti-hegemonic representations of two 1960/70s icons of transgression: Charles Manson and Patty Hearst, and to analyze how these particular images simultaneously stylize and sacralize these counterculture (anti)heroes, turning the viewer of the icons from passive consumers into ardent worshippers, consumers or cultural agnostics, all according to our ideas regarding the subjects and symbols in question.

Icon-work, as shown in the analyses below, is an interactive process where anyone can become a textual agent or producer, manipu-

lating existing iconic texts/images, or creating new additions to the bank of already existing iconic representations of a given cultural icon, as in the case of more recent representations of Manson and Hearst. Images enter the open field of cultural iconicity where others may contribute freely to elaborating and reinterpreting their iconic status. Historically this has worked to extend the lives of these images and figures beyond the span one might otherwise have estimated for them in an age of cultural acceleration, which is particularly pertinent in the case of what might otherwise have become extremely time-bound and -specific icons of a dead counterculture.

I propose that all iconic representation combines two modes of representation: the images presented are both stylized and sacralized. This duality originates in the connotations of the word 'icon' from two spheres of use of the term: The commercial icon or pictogram which works through simplified representation (i.e. is stylized), and the religious icon which works through embellished representation and through symbolic detail (i.e. is sacralized<sup>3</sup>). A fully worked-up religious icon, or a pastiche thereof as we shall see an example of (depicting Manson) later, tends to borrow very directly from an old formal language developed in specific traditions of worship, but also always adds the specific signifiers that through stylization identify the uniqueness of the icon in question and transgress the old forms.

From the religious connotations of iconicity we as public inherit the position of worshipper. The need for icons is an expression of our longing for something beyond our own subject-hood, a desire to idolize. This need is no longer fulfilled in traditional religious ways, but has become transferred onto other manifestations of the extraordinary, such as heroes, stars, idols. As we shall see, oppositional or anti-hegemonic worship of cultural heroes sometimes fixates on figures that are recognisable as subtypes of the Outlaw (mass murderers, bank-robbers etc.) or as Messianic specimens of particular transgression.

A person who achieves icon status has to be recognisable to a large number of members of a specific group, whether that is an oppositional subculture (defined through age, race, class, belief etc.), a group of hegemonically inscribed consumers, a nation, or the global community: Iconicity presupposes immediate recognition and familiarity. In apparent contradiction of the safety connoted

by familiarity, the iconic person simultaneously has to be extraordinary, whether through his or her achievements, or through image. Some element of the person's appearance, life, story or activities has to transcend the familiarity of everyday life as lived by most of us: Iconicity presupposes transgression of normality. Ultimately, icon status is only achieved when the person imaged represents a combination of familiarity (which echoes in the word 'fame') and transgression of norms (often figured as 'cool').

The activities of the consumer of icons – in both senses of the word consumption – form what I term icon-work. It is convenient to subdivide this icon-work into two broad categories determined by the intention of the consumer, fan or icon-worker: adversarial and collaborative icon-work. By adversarial icon-work I understand the type of intervention which is aimed at destabilising or subverting the icon's function and meaning in the icon-worker's contemporary cultural reality. This type of icon work can be either oppositional or incorporated. To depict Manson as a Satanic icon is oppositional in the sense that only a minority will find this an acceptable practice and something that invites one to collaborate further (but the convinced Satanist will still read the icon work as collaborative), whereas Marilyn Manson's commercially successful collaboration with the two 'seed' icons he feeds on is fully incorporated in the normal capitalist circulation of goods and services, as his numerous fans and followers will attest to, and his entire image circus will be perceived as collaborative icon work feeding off Marilyn Monroe and Charles Manson's pre-existing cache of fame.

Icons, especially over-commercialized and over-familiarized ones, tempt people into actively resisting them, e.g. by defacing them, satirizing them or otherwise tampering with them: The formerly passive worshippers then become iconoclasts. Collaborative icon-work, on the other hand, may take the form of *homage*, imitation, worship and activities to preserve the memory of the icon, etc. This form of activity is often the work of the ardent fan or follower of the icon's original work. Most icon-work comprises a mixture of adversarial and collaborative efforts. All of these activities, whether adversarial or collaborative, ultimately serve only to perpetuate the iconic person or image's status and longevity.

Largely due to the increased commodification and availability of icons, the need for worship has not diminished throughout the last

50 years, despite the apparent secularisation of the post WW II-era. On the contrary, there are now more icons than ever before, and despite the general tendency towards cultural acceleration, many icons formed, or reshaped and reinvented in the 60s and 70s are still potent and present in the commercial and cultural sphere. Iconicity serves as a form of immortality (at least within a cultural or subcultural memory), yet, historically speaking, icons are always specifically situated and mean different things in different eras. Icons have a history, and not all icons are permanent, as witnessed by certain icons slipping out of a culture's memory after some decades. Let us turn now to an examination of how two specific icons of the 1960s and 70s have had their life-spans prolonged. In both cases, Manson and Hearst, popular culture has provided them with an extra lease on life, and specifically in the case of Manson a political dimension has helped overdetermine his icon status.

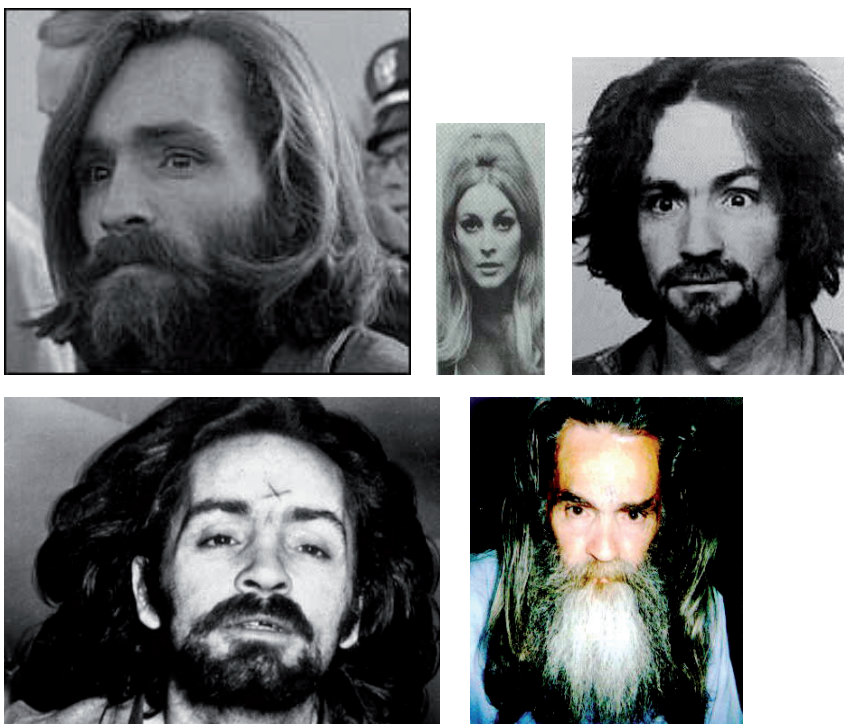
Charles Manson's claim to fame or more appropriately put: infamy, comes from his activities as a cult leader in the 1960s. Having spent much of his youth in prison for a variety of crimes, including burglaries, auto theft and sexual assault, Manson moved to San Francisco upon release in 1967. Here he became involved in the counterculture and a hippy life style, including drug use, sexual experimentation and various criminal activities involving theft and violence. Manson established himself as a minor guru on the San Francisco scene, espousing a philosophical system inspired by Scientology. As a charismatic leader he soon created an extended family of followers, mainly young women. After re-locating to the Los Angeles area the burgeoning Manson family settled in various neighbourhoods, including Topanga Canyon and Pacific Palisades, where a large Manson contingent crashed Beach Boys member Dennis Wilson's house for an extended period of time. Manson at this point believed he could break into the music business and attempted to have Wilson's connections record his songs and sign him to a contract. Manson's links to popular culture are thus inscribed right from the onset of his iconic life. This link was further strengthened after the release of the Beatles' *White Album* in 1968, which led Manson (a long time fan of the group) to read the lyrics of the *White Album*, esp. the song 'Helter Skelter' into his philosophical system.

Briefly put, Manson believed that an apocalyptic time was at hand where a race war between black and white Americans would

break out, eventually leading to the annihilation of the white race, with the exception of Manson and his followers who as an elite would 'ride' the black insurgents and emerge as the new leaders of society. This prognosis Manson believed was detailed in songs such as 'Helter Skelter' – in fact he was convinced the whole album was written specifically for him and the Family and contained specific directions for them to follow. When Manson's race war, which he termed Helter Skelter, failed to materialise he became convinced that he needed to trigger it by committing particularly vicious and bloody crimes, and leading the police to believe that groups such as the Black Panthers were behind them. A number of murders were committed by Manson followers, on his specific orders, to spark off Helter Skelter – including the killing of Sharon Tate and the rest of the members of her household. These and other murders were made to look ritualistic (slogans were written in blood, and horrific multiple stabbings employed as killing method) and were 'signed' as Black Panther—related crimes. The Manson Family were amateurs at killing and were soon arrested for the crimes, having failed to cover their forensic tracks and also having committed numerous minor crimes which meant that the police were constantly looking for members of the Family.

After Manson's arrest the devotion of the family to him and his teachings puzzled and shocked the general public, as did Manson's own bizarre behaviour. He appeared in court with an X scratched into his forehead, claiming that his identity had been X'ed out because he was not allowed to act as his own defence attorney during the trial. The Family followed suit by similarly X'ing their foreheads. Later, during the trial, Manson shaved his head and forked his beard, declaring this to be an enactment of the demonization he felt victim of by the state. He declared "I am the Devil, and the Devil always has a bald head". These two deliberate stigmatizations of Manson's own body have of course been recurrent features of the icon work done on Manson, as over the years he became adopted for the causes of Nazis (in a radicalisation of the X on his forehead into a Swastika) and Satanists. In the spring of 1971 Manson received the death penalty, but as California soon after (in February 1972) introduced a moratorium on executions Manson's sentence was permanently commuted to life imprisonment. Manson staying alive has no doubt extended the

many uses to which his iconic presence can be put, as will be apparent by his insertion into a number of political fantasy scenarios in recent years.



My first 4 images of Manson (with one of victim Sharon Tate inserted in the sequence) show Manson's development from fairly well-groomed hippy-type to wild-eyed fanatic and self-mutilated madman. He ages into a rugged prophet-like apparition in later images. It is the elderly Manson who fuels the imagination of icon workers that use him in a politicized discourse, as witnessed first by a right wing manipulation of Manson's image, photo-shopped into a photo of former Democrat candidate for President, John Kerry, who was the victim of a vicious slander campaign due to his past as an anti-Vietnam War activist. Here a grinning Manson in a suit modelled on Kerry's (as is Manson's hair style) shows the Senator a piece of paper or a photograph (perhaps a snapshot of the Manson victims), and they appear to share a moment of confidence, although Kerry's closed eyes might indicate that the image Manson



shows him is a bit too much to take in. Note the Swastika on Manson's forehead and the Kerry campaign button on his lapel.

In a parallel image, this time used to satirize Kerry's defector, George W. Bush, Manson's photograph (the raw image is the same, and here the hair and attire are not air-brushed or photo-shopped) is used for a different type of collaborative icon work, this time more oppositional in nature. It is accompanied by an amusing text<sup>4</sup> calling for the approval by the Senate of Manson as ambassador to the Klingon Empire (referencing the Star Trek universe). In this narrative Manson works for the Republicans as (crudely) indicated by the replacement of the Swastika on his forehead, which is substituted with a GOP Elephant, the symbol of the Republican Party. Bush and Condoleeza Rice are both 'quoted' as supporting Manson's speedy appointment, saying for instance that "questions about Manson's management style shouldn't be part of the confirmation process".

These two instances will be perceived as collaborative only from a politically partisan view. Both authors use Manson's monstrosity to satirize the party he or she does not belong to. They are both hegemonically inscribed in a party political system, although not officially sanctioned by either party. The main iconic image I have selected for analysis is however a true homage to Manson.

Here Manson is a saint and a martyr, signalled as in classical religious iconography via a representation of his stigmata. We note again the Swastika on Manson's forehead, echoed in even more stylized form in his halo along with pentagrams that associate Manson with Satanism. His other stigmata consist of the bloodstains on his face and neck and the strange umbilical chord of blood stretching from the back of his skull into the background of the icon. The photograph used as template for the icon is the one I showed previously depicting Manson in a particularly wild-eyed moment, taken shortly after his arrest, but prior to the X'ing incident. The choice of red, black and purple colours for Manson's halo and the background (the traditional rays

of light signalling the subject's holiness in religious icons are here turned negative and black) contrast sharply with his pale skin. Taken together with the Swastika this composition and colour scheme serve to underscore Manson's racial programme which the creator of the icon obviously condones.<sup>5</sup>

Manson's afterlife as an icon is thus prolonged by oppositional, collaborative icon work, falling within at least three spheres (which are not as separate as they perhaps should be): political, religious and pop-culture discourses all feed off his image. The strongest infusion of new blood into Manson's afterlife is of course that performed by the act of naming by Marilyn Manson whose popularity has alerted a whole new youth generation to the original Manson story. This example of collaborate icon work I have unfortunately no space to detail further here.<sup>6</sup>

Turning now to Patty Hearst, we encounter a story much intertwined in the same counterculture background as the Manson legend. Heiress Hearst was the victim of an extremely high profile kidnapping in 1974, at the tail end of the armed struggle that militant splinter groups originating in the counter-culture and its anti-capitalist agenda was waging in America. The kidnapers, the bizarrely named Symbionese Liberation Army, carried out urban guerrilla warfare inspired by South American left-wing groups. Their agenda further included an attempt to free African-American inmates from the US prison system which their rhetoric compared to concentration camps and apartheid regime oppression a la South Africa. The SLA saw itself as spearheading a Black revolution in America and took as its symbol a seven-headed cobra snake – each head representing a Kwanzaa principle, such as unity, creativity and faith. After kidnapping Hearst and demanding various types of ransom payment (in kind, to be distributed among the poor), Hearst apparently willingly switched sides and joined the SLA in a bank robbery, generating one of the more iconic images of Patty (now known as Tania) wielding a sub-machine gun.

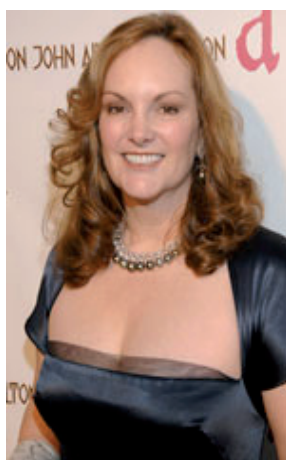
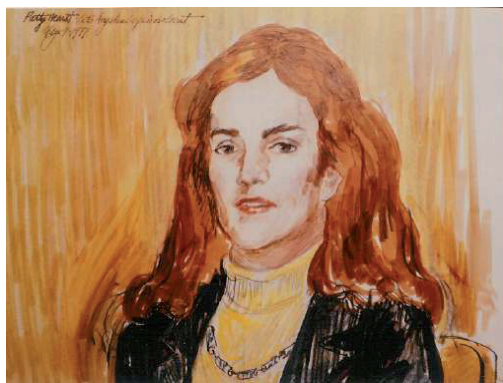
The SLA was eventually hunted down by the police, and in an extremely violent shoot-out which resulted in a fire, most of the SLA members were killed. Hearst and a few SLA members escaped the siege and shootout, but were arrested soon after. During the trial, Hearst again switched persona and claimed that her participation in the robbery was coerced and that she had been sexually



abused and brainwashed during her captivity by the SLA. She was sentenced to a fairly mild stretch in jail, her sentence was reduced by President Carter and eventually she was fully pardoned by President Clinton. A number of iconic cultural texts have been generated by this sequence of events.



My first images show Hearst's startling transformation from society ingénue via revolutionary urban guerrilla (note Tania's Che Guevara beret which positions this image as an homage to the most iconic Che image of all, taken by Alberto Korda on March 5, 1960) to prisoner in her profiled mug-shot. The second pair of images show a trial sketch of Hearst back in millionaire's daughter attire, complete with pearl necklace, which astonishingly recurs in the much later photo of her enjoying her second lease of life as socialite, attending a red carpet function in honour of Elton John. Note also hair style changes through these sequences: blow-dried, sprayed, styled – greasy, straight – back to long, flowing and expensively styled.



The best known icon of Hearst is the image of her in

front of the SLA cobra on a bright orange background. 'Tania' stares aggressively at 'the Man', ready to fire her Thompson gun – another weapon is ready in the background.



This is revolutionary iconography 101, down to the army fatigues, the beret, the weapon and the surprising amount of cleavage shown. The phallic cobra offers a potent reminder of Tania's taming, but also boosts her new-found revolutionary clout. As an ironic paean to this image Warren Zevon has put Patty Hearst into the lyrics of his tall-tale of mercenaries, post-colonial African liberation wars, upright, well-meaning Norwegian boys displaying bravery, sinister Danish power brokers, and CIA engineered betrayal followed by posthumous just deserts in the form of a headless ghost's revenge: "Roland, the Headless Thompson Gunner". The song ends on a didactic note:

The eternal Thompson gunner  
Still wand'ring through the night  
Now it's ten years later, but he still keeps up  
the fight  
In Ireland, in Lebanon, in Palestine and Berkeley  
Patty Hearst heard the burst  
Of Roland's Thompson gun and bought it...

What exactly the meaning of the closing phrase "and bought it" might be is an interesting point of debate. To buy something, of course means to acquire it for money, but also to buy into a story hook, line and sinker. The court case against Hearst revolved exactly around this point: did she buy the rhetoric of the SLA, or was she coerced or seduced, becoming a case of Stockholm Syndrome? My take on Zevon, who has many songs about masculine exploits gone horribly wrong ("Send lawyers, guns and money – the shit has hit the fan" is a line that springs to mind), is that he is warning us all against being taken in by revolutionary bravado and romanticism. To him Hearst is the naïve, protected, socialite teen who temporarily falls for the seduction of revolutionary ardour (a sentiment I would guess many of us can recognize).

For many contemporaries on the streets and squares of Berkeley Tania continued to be a revolutionary hero, turning on her capitalist, propagandist family (owners of a newspaper empire with right wing sympathies), and slogans of 'Free Tania' appeared as graffiti in many places. Tirelessly political prose poet, Robert Gibbons, writes about the day after the Compton siege and killing of the SLA members:

The only thing the woman I was with & I cared about was  
Patty Hearst. Hoping they wouldn't get her, at the same  
time wondering if they'd ever get Nixon, but not as often,  
& never as hard a wonder.

When Hearst recanted her newfound beliefs, the disappointment and confusion was palpable in many circles which were making the same connection between crooked politics, unjustified war and atrocities in Vietnam, poverty in the Black ghettos of LA – and in comparison wondering how bad Hearst and the SLA really were, and whether anyone was ever going to not sell out when the squeeze came.

Our last icon is perhaps a reflection of the numerous ambiguities in the Hearst kidnapping. Mort Künstler's painting *Patty Hearst, 1975* is produced many years after the events and its title date, and depicts an angry Patty in typical 70s house-wife garb, large sunglasses, and wearing her hair in a plain, hennaed, Tania-esque style. Her anger shows in her taciturn facial expression, which however could also be read as displaying complacency, boredom or downright disgust. And in her clenched fist, raised in imitation of the Black Power salute made famous world wide by the Black American sprinters at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. The Black Power salute is appropriate, given the politics of the SLA, but the power salute had in fact been disseminated more widely throughout the counter-culture by the time we reached 1975, for instance featuring in much feminist iconography. Künstler's icon of Hearst may therefore also be displaying a feminist anger at her violation during captivity, her dead facial expression now signaling an entirely different motivation.



We thus end with the least clear-cut example of icon work in terms of categorization as collaborative or adversarial, oppositional and hegemonic. Künstler may in fact live up to the signification of his name (which translates as 'Artist') in his having produced an ambiguous work of celebratory art – an homage to the Zeitgeist ('1975' being as important as the other title element, the Hearst name) as much as to Patty Hearst. By 1975 the revolutionary ardour has bled out of icons such as Hearst – all the revolutionaries have become housewives as Kathleen Soliah did (arrested in 2001 after more than 25 years underground). Even the bright orange of Tania's background has turned a murky brownish orange as if blood (perhaps that of the shot and burned SLA members) has permeated the wall and dried out. The resulting nuance is so typical of its period that it alone perfectly signals the Zeitgeist of the soured, post-revolutionary American 1970s.

In conclusion, these two transgressive icons have been shown to lend themselves best to collaborative, unincorporated icon-work, and only rarely to enter into more commercial realms – with the exception of often ironic, tongue-in-cheek use in popular music. Divisive icons such as Manson and Hearst, however, tend to live on even long after their initial shock value has worn off.

## Notes

- 1 For reasons of space limitations I exclusively focus on the dissemination of these transgressive icons in an American iconosphere (Mieczysław Porębski's term) in this article, although particularly the Manson case is global in scope as are the musical icon manipulations performed of his image by indie and metal artists.
- 2 This framework for analysing icons is explained in the following article: Bent Sørensen: "Countercultural Icon-work: Adversarial and Collaborative Uses of 'Uncle Sam'", in *Communities and Connections: Writings in North American Studies*, ed. Ari Helo, Renvall Institute, Helsinki, 2007
- 3 In "The French Path to Postmodernity: Bataille between Eroticism and General Economics", Jürgen Habermas neatly encapsulates Bataille's idea of the sacral which serves as my primary point of inspiration for the theses rendered in the preceding: Bataille stands in the tradition of the Durkheim school. He traces the heterogenous aspects of the social as well as of the psychic and mental life back to the sacral element that Durkheim had defined by contrasting it with the world of the profane.

Sacral objects are possessed of an auratic power which simultaneously entices and attracts even as it terrifies and repulses. If stimulated, they release shocking effects and represent a different, higher level of reality. They are incommensurable with profane things and evade any homogenizing mode of treatment" – in *Bataille – A Critical Reader*, ed. by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Blackwell, 1991)

4 <http://www.faux-news.com/stories/2005/04/25/>

5 On the website I originally located the image there was a click through link to a further shrine for Satanism and Alistair Crowley which opened when Manson's image is clicked. The link is now defunct.

6 Transgressive indie musician Trent Reznor's uses of the site of the Sharon Tate murders as domicile and studio where he later recorded Marilyn Manson, of course form a fascinating portion of this chain of icon-work and dissemination.

## References

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**Graebner, W.**, 2008. *Patty's Got A Gun – Patricia Hearst in 1970s America*, University of Chicago Press.