Arcade Fire's Parodic Bible

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Résumé

L'album d'Arcade Fire, 2006, *Neon Bible* est actuellement un des chéris du monde de divertissement (gagnant un Juno en 2008 dans la catégorie l'Album Alternatif de l'An). L'album inclut une critique étonnamment dure de la vie d'église américaine, du nord et contemporaine, bien que cette critique n'étend pas christianisme lui-même. Qu'est intéressant de l'approche d'Arcade Fire au sujet religieux est la façon qu'ils construisent leur commentaire sur l'église et la société. *Neon Bible* est une parodie astucieuse de christianisme, l'un qui rappelle les descriptions de Bakhtin de Mikhail de carnavals médiévaux (*Rabelais and His World*), dans que les carnavals introduisent « un deuxième monde et une deuxième vie hors de la bureaucratie » (6). La bande fait cette chose même, ridiculisant l'autorité d'ecclesial officielle en usurpant son lieu légitime, exécuté, par un bouillon de culture non officiel et populaire. Ils ont enregistré pas seulement leur album dans l'espace sacré d'une église (littéralement), ils appellent même le produit fini une « bible ». Ces commentaires sur l'usage de parodie par Arcade Fire dans *Neon Bible* prennent aussi sur les définitions du terme de Linda Hutcheon.

Abstract

Arcade Fire's 2006 album *Neon Bible* is currently one of the darlings of the entertainment world (winning a Juno in 2008 in the category Alternative Album of the Year). The album includes a surprisingly harsh critique of contemporary North American church life, though this critique does not extend to Christianity itself. What is interesting about Arcade Fire's approach to religious subject matter is the way they construct their commentary on church and society. *Neon Bible* is a clever parody of Christianity, one that recalls Mikhail Bakhtin's descriptions of medieval carnivals (*Rabelais and His World*), in that carnivals introduce "a second world and a second life outside officialdom" (6). The band does this very thing, ridiculing the official ecclesial authority by usurping its rightful place, in effect, through an unofficial, popular culture medium. They not only recorded their album in the sacred space of a church (literally), they even call the finished product a "bible." These comments on Arcade Fire's use of parody in *Neon Bible* also draw on Linda Hutcheon's definitions of the term.

[1] According to Kelton Cobb, the jeremiad is widely used as a narrative framework in popular culture.[1] It offers a variation on the lost paradise script that calls for a return to Edenic innocence. The jeremiad has a biblical origin, of course. In the Hebrew

Scriptures, the prophets like Jeremiah warn the people of covenant violations and call them to repentance.[2] Cobb observes writers and artists in popular culture constantly returning to the flexible form of the jeremiad to express their conviction "that we have corrupted our obligations toward a providential order that surrounds us." There are numerous variations of this theme because artists differ in their views regarding "what it is that constitutes corruption, and what it is within us that persists in causing it." What these writers share in common is the use of paradise myths to explore "the shortcomings of human life" as they address the question "What went wrong?"[3]

[2] In their 2006 album *Neon Bible*, Arcade Fire presents two kinds of religiosity in dialogue, one we might call a genuine, biblically informed spirituality, and the other an expression of religion tainted by commercialism and self-interest. The band assumes the role of prophet in the jeremiad tradition, calling the audience to be wary of the latter. Why do they do this? Because "a golden calf" still gives its light ("Neon Bible") and the "lions and the lambs ain't sleeping yet" ("The Well And The Lighthouse"). Cobb continues:

> The covenant/jeremiad script is a good one for juxtaposing an ideal order to our boundless imaginations for deviancy. Through it, a stubborn moral faith that persists in the culture continues to have a voice, promoting repentance and invoking a more exalted and inclusive idea of justice than the one that prevails. It offers a proven device for inventorying both a society's sins and the contents of its conscience.[4]

Indeed, Arcade Fire's *Neon Bible* juxtaposes an ideal order with forms of deviancy and occasionally, we hear hints of a stubborn moral faith. Some characters cannot escape a persistent, nagging conscience. Value systems clash in the *Neon Bible* world as greed meets scruple.

[3] In addition to being a jeremiad, *Neon Bible* is also a parody. As such, it has some qualities of the carnivalesque, Mikhail M. Bakhtin's term for the transgressive energies of medieval carnivals during which unofficial culture would mock official culture, temporarily[5] resisting political oppression and totalitarian order—political, ecclesial,[6] or social—through laughter, parody, and grotesque realism. Bakhtin's image highlights liberation from fixed values and imposed modes of behaviour. Those normally subjected and silenced have occasion to speak, and freedom to treat the sacred as profane, to mock and ridicule authority figures, and cast off social expectations.

[4] The term carnivalesque is interesting in connection to this album though it does not suit this particular text in every respect; there is no attention to bodily functions and grotesque imagery in Arcade Fire's lyrics, for instance. For this reason, I also have in mind Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody as I approach this album. For Hutcheon, parody in literary history is neither "that ridiculing imitation mentioned in the standard dictionaries" nor "a mode of discontinuity which rejects earlier kinds of textual reference to other works." Rather, she sees parody as "operating as a method of inscribing continuity while permitting critical distance. It can, indeed, function as a conservative force in both retaining and mocking other aesthetic forms; but it is also capable of transformative power in creating new syntheses."[7] The "collective weight of parodic *practice*," she argues elsewhere, "suggests a redefinition of parody as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity."[8] Irony and parody are "double-voicings, for they play one meaning off against another."[9]

[5] Arcade Fire's second album offers a parody of Christian symbols. They not only identify this album as a kind of bible[10] but they connect their music to sacred

imagery in other ways as well. For instance, the liner notes number the songs and the verses within them, using larger and smaller fonts in a format recalling chapter and verse divisions in modern Bibles. The liner notes further evoke a mood suitable for something called a bible by including pictures of organ pipes, stained glass windows and churches, and people in water with crosses on their wetsuits, perhaps suggesting baptism. According to the notes, the band recorded and mixed the album "at 'the church' in Québec," and "St. James Anglican Church in Bedford, Québec, [and] the Église St. Jean Baptiste in Montréal." When they say they recorded and mixed the album "during 2006 at 'the church' in Québec," the band means this literally. They lived and worked in a nineteenth-century church near Montréal for the year it took to complete the album.[11] Not only does this decision to bypass a more traditional, modern, technologically sophisticated recording studio contribute to the fresh, original sound of the album, the preference for a "sacred space" over a "secular" one has metaphoric value. This expression of unofficial culture assumes the place of official, authoritative religious activity as it constructs its own bible.[12]

[6] There are still other ways the band introduces sacred elements to the album. They acknowledge the contributions of "Gospel Singers" and direct thanks to "the Ven. Dr. Brian A. Evans, Archdeacon of Bedford" and the Église St. Jean Baptiste in Montréal "for allowing us to use their organ." The album's cover has a picture of an open, glowing (neon) book (presumably a bible). These various visual clues indicate to the band's audience—before they hear a note—that Arcade Fire is presenting, to repeat my earlier phrase, a kind of bible. This bible draws on various symbols—the sacred sounds of church organs, a chapter-and-verse style of lyric presentation, explicit references to the

Bible and ecclesial practices—and in doing so parodies and comments on contemporary Christianity. The words neon bible[13] simultaneously suggests a modern, urban landscape complete with commercialism (neon), and such things as religious authority and moral directives (bible). The song lyrics do the same.

[7] Arcade Fire's *Neon Bible* is replete with the unexpected twists and inversions implied by the term carnivalesque. Furthermore, the album is rich in biblical imagery and this is no surprise given the principle songwriter's background. Win Butler grew up in the suburbs of Houston, along with his brother and fellow band member Will Butler, before moving to Québec, and he describes his father's side of the family as "really nonreligious" and his mother's side as "really religious." He refers to his maternal grandparents as "martini-drinking Mormons" and says he attended Mormon Sunday school as a child. He also listened to his maternal grandfather "who would cheerfully undermine the church's dogma."[14] Elsewhere, Butler mentions that he studied "scriptural interpretation." With reference to the band's first album *Funeral* (2004), a Montreal-based magazine reports, "The album's inception can be traced back to 1999, when Houston, Texas-born singer Win Butler moved to Montreal to study scriptural interpretation at McGill [University]."[15]

[8] Butler recalls another way religion loomed large during his days in suburban Texas and his remarks are instructive when considering the *Neon Bible* songs. He mentions the many megachurches in the area and claims he had contact with them: "I've been exposed to that quite a bit—the commercial church." These institutions embody for him a kind of religion "fused with the culture, [which] becomes more commercial." This stands contrary to what religion should be in his opinion: "I'm always suspicious when

religion isn't countercultural."[16] Implied in these remarks is Butler's view that religion has two faces. On the one hand, there is a kind of genuine spirituality (countercultural), and though he does not elaborate the point in this context, he does refer to the Bible as "still relevant." On the other hand, he criticizes religion when it aligns itself too closely with culture and commercialism (megachurches). This second form of religion betrays the influence of contemporary society, presumably its uglier qualities.[17]

[9] This dual perspective contributes to the ambivalence toward religion evident in the *Neon Bible* songs. There is such a thing as authentic, genuine spirituality but it has a materialistic, commercially driven doppelganger that mimics distasteful features of the modern world, and herein lays the band's social critique. They use biblical and ecclesial imagery as part of a critique of certain religious institutions, those "fused with the culture" and manifesting the greed and selfishness of the contemporary world. Within the lyrics of Butler's songs and his comments about them, we find references to both kinds of religion. There is a bible that is poison ("Neon Bible"), and *the* Bible that is "relevant" (the interview cited above). We discover from this album that the church is a place that can kill you and destroy your family ("Intervention"), but "the church" (liner notes) is also the site of creativity, the sacred space in which the band creates its prophetic music, its jeremiad. An overview of selected lyrics in *Neon Bible* illustrates the band's vision of these contrasting manifestations of religion.

"(Antichrist Television Blues)"

[10] The song "(Antichrist Television Blues)" involves three distinct speeches. The first speech (vv. 1-2, 9) is a soliloquy presenting the narrator's rationale for not wanting to work downtown, ostensibly because planes are crashing into buildings two by

two. This obvious allusion to 9/11 articulates a perfectly understandable fear, and a credible reason for wanting to avoid the rigours of a regular job in an urban landscape. Presumably, most listeners would be sympathetic to his despair at first. However, if we jump ahead to the third speech (vv. 7, 10-14), addressed to his "sensitive child," we become a little suspicious of his motives. He tells his thirteen-year-old daughter that he worked for minimum wage when he was her age, and he will not allow her to do the same when a better opportunity exists. He is coaxing his "little mocking bird" to get on the stage and sing. She may be tired and afraid but he insists she perform and convince the men watching[18] that she is "old for [her] age." Initially there is gentleness in his terms of endearment but his words—and the musical accompaniment—become increasingly frantic as the song proceeds, as if the girl is reluctant to perform as he wishes. This culminates when his tone changes toward the end of the song and he tells her, "I'm through being cute, / I'm through being nice." He will force her to sing.[19] His words almost suggest violent coercion.

[11] It is in the second speech, directed to God (vv. 3-6, 8), that we can piece together the narrative in more detail. This "good Christian" narrator, as he refers to himself, attempts to justify his actions, explaining to God that people must work hard and receive compensation for their labours. He also tells God that his daughter is quite mature for her age—as if he does not already know—perhaps anticipating the same objection that the men watching the girl, and the girl herself, appear to recognize.

[12] This father is clearly looking for permission to allow his "bird in a cage" to perform for pay. In an effort to provide a persuasive case, he appeals to a biblical precedent. He asks God whether he intends to seat his daughters (plural in verse 4 of the

song) at his right hand, clearly alluding to the Gospel story where a parent puts the same request to Jesus:

> Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee [James and John] came to [Jesus] with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom" (Matt 20:20-21).[20]

The parent in the song obviously knows this story but appears to overlook the fact that Jesus does not grant the mother's request (20:22-23), making his appeal to this particular biblical passage rather odd, even foolish. Butler is certainly aware of this, and by having his narrator make such a request, it is clear that the father's actions do not enjoy divine commendation (or the songwriter's approval).

[13] This father has other biblically based arguments in support of his case. He claims to have God's best interest in mind, wanting a child on the TV screen so "the world can see what / your true word means" and he refers to his daughters (plural) as "the lanterns" and God as "the light." These lines allude to Jesus' metaphors of a city on a hill and a hidden lamp: "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:14-16).

[14] According to some reports,[21] the band occasionally refers to "(Antichrist Television Blues)" by the title "Joe Simpson," after the father of pop star Jessica Simpson who would therefore be the bird in the cage mentioned in the song. Regardless of the referent intended, the song clearly describes a parent willing to exploit his children for personal gain. This father may tell his girl to perform and "show the men it's not about

the money," but his words ring hollow. He is the one with an aversion to the idea of his daughter working for minimum wage, as he once did, and he is the one who becomes wealthy thanks to her talent. This is evident in the fact that he holds the purse strings tightly; if the girl does not sing, he threatens, "daddy won't buy her no diamond ring." He has an opportunity to escape the workaday world by living off the profits earned by his celebrity child.

[15] There is a polyphonic quality to this song's lyrics. On the one hand, the father is a person of faith ("Dear God, I'm a good Christian man") and biblically literate, evident in his choice of terms and phrases: "seatmydaughterstherebyyourrighthand" [sic] (cf. Matt 20:21); "My lips are near, but my heart is far away" (cf. Prov 26:23-24; Isa 29:13; Matt 15:8); "God loves the sensitive ones" (cf. Matt 5:5). At the same time, this father recognizes that his actions are morally suspect. If this were not the case, he would not need to explain himself to God in the first place (vv. 3-6, 8). This recognition of moral shortcoming is most evident in the closing words of the song, which follow immediately on his announcement to the girl that he will no longer be cute and nice. Returning to prayer, he cries as the song closes, "O tell me, Lord, am I the Antichrist?!" This conflicted father is aware of two kinds of sacred discourse. One is the commercially driven religious agenda that attempts to justify the exploitation of a child using biblical tropes (sitting at Jesus' right hand; a city on a hill). The other is the father's religiously informed conscience, traces of what Kelton Cobb calls "a stubborn moral faith" (see above). Despite his own rhetoric, he is aware that what he is doing is wrong. His desperate last question—"am I the Antichrist?!"—is the largely stifled voice of conscience, perhaps something implied by the use of parentheses in the song's title (i.e.,

it is a muted confession, partly hidden away). The father in this song holds in tension two separate discourses. He is dialogical, debating with himself, driven by both genuine religious ideals, and more selfishly motivated religiosity that hopes to profit from immoral actions. In his final question, he again draws on biblical discourse (antichrist: 1 John 2:18) but this time with a different tone, one of fear (the music is frenzied as he speaks the words) and perhaps confession.[22]

"Keep the Car Running"

[16] The narrator of "Keep The Car Running" is anxious about a vague sense of impending doom not unlike hints of the same in "Windowsill."[23] This song describes the contents of a recurring dream situated in a city that involves unidentified men coming to take the sleeper away. They know his name because he told it to them. This implies a personal connection but just the same, he does not want them to find him. The recurring call to keep the car running signals his intention of fleeing before (or when) they arrive. The narrator does not tell us explicitly who these men are, or why they frighten him so much. He feels a "weight that's pressing down" and further describes a deep-seated fear that he has known his whole life, knowing its name "since before I could speak." This weight and this fear are distinct from the men themselves, and he adds the detail that they "don't know / where / And they don't know / When It's coming."

[17] The capitalization of "It's" (as it appears in the liner notes five times) is intriguing and suggests he is referring to a specific crisis, perhaps the biblical judgment. The reference to the biblical passage about the lion lying with the lamb elsewhere on the album—an image frequently linked to the millennium/kingdom of God in some Christian circles—lends support to this reading (see "The Well And the Lighthouse" and Isa 11:6;

65:25). This still does not explain the identity of the men he is running from who are at least aware of the "weight" causing the singer's "fear," even if they do not know where and when the expected crisis will occur. It seems plausible they could be religious teachers who preach fear to their congregations, even if their messages lack clarity and detail (i.e., the when and where of divine judgment). Though it is risky to link a songwriter's biography to poetic lyrics, it is striking that Win Butler is so open about his connections to organized religion during his childhood. The fact that the singer wants to run from them ("I can't stay") suggests his desire to leave behind the fear mongering that traumatizes him.[24] He cannot escape the fear itself, it would appear, because he continues to have these disturbing dreams, but he can avoid those who promulgate that fear.

[18] If this reading is correct, it supports the suggestion put forward earlier that *Neon Bible* distinguishes actual, genuine religious content from institutions and other manifestations of that religion that are suspect in the songwriter's view. The narrator of "Keep The Car Running" wants to distance himself from those who represent the kind of piety that thinks it appropriate to frighten children in the name of God.[25] This song resembles "(Antichrist Television Blues)" in that it comments on what is arguably a form of child abuse—broadly defined—by religious authority figures.

"Intervention"

[19] We find a further narrative about the frightening power of institutional religion in the song "Intervention." It tells the story of a "soldier" whose efforts on behalf of the Church produce destructive consequences. Quotation marks signal his direct speech:

> "Been working for the / Church while my family dies. / Your little baby sister's gonna lose her mind. / Every spark of friendship and love / will die without a

home." Hear the soldier groan, "We'll go at it alone."

This story appears to involve the plight of those inside the Church who are simultaneously its victims. Indeed, some of these people are "Singin' hallelujah with the fear in [their] heart."

[20] The song opens with a king taking back his throne and the sowing of "useless seed." Here we have an allusion to the parable of the sower (Matt 13:1-9, 18-23; Mark 4:1-9, 13-20; Luke 8:4-8, 11-15) in which a dutiful farmer scatters seed. According to Jesus' parable, some of the seeds do not produce crops because of the nature of the soil, competing plants (thorns), or birds. The seeds themselves are fine. The king in the song "Intervention," by contrast, sows "useless seed." There is a carnivalesque quality to this image. The seed in Arcade Fire's version of the parable is itself ineffective (as opposed to the soil or growing conditions in Jesus' parable), and the king of the song, who parallels the diligent, well-meaning farmer of Jesus' parable, is abusive. We see a further inversion of values in the soldier's story; the Church does not care for the hard-working individual but is instead responsible for his demise.

[21] The soldier in the song is a vulnerable member of a religious community. The image of a soldier is a common one in Christian discourse[26] but even though he is "fighting . . . on [the Church's] side," the narrator can taste his fear, and sees that man's life fall apart. A church that once provided genuine care for its members and carried out the honest, biblically mandated work of spreading the gospel and its love (i.e., spreading good seed, as in Jesus' parable) now exploits and abuses its members.

“Neon Bible”

[22] Finally, I turn to the album’s title track. According to the song “Neon Bible,” distinguishing pain and hope is no easy thing because “they both [look] the same.” Like other songs on the album, this one also describes moral ambiguity in a world where “the light of a golden calf” and the “poison of your age” offers the only light, skewing better judgment in the process. The narrator uses the first person in his dialogue with an unnamed individual who holds a position of moral authority, saying to him, “What I know is what *you* know is right” (italics added). By the song’s end, however, the narrator recognizes that the lessons learned from this source are suspect, and the value system offered to him is corrupt: “It was wrong but *you* said it was right” (italics added). Again, a carnivalesque reversal is at play, now with reference to ethics—right is wrong, wrong is right. This mixed up logic is the poison of the age, and the light provided by the golden calf is more blinding than illuminating. The biblical image of the golden calf raises again the notion of religious authority figures—Aaron the priest, after all, plays a part in that story (Exod 32:1-6). The implication from the song is that the “*you*” providing bad advice is also a religious authority figure. After recognizing the dangers of distorted values, the narrator retreats from this confusing light, announcing “In the future I will read at night,” as if to say darkness provides a better source of illumination than the alternatives available to him.

[23] Here again, *Neon Bible* appears to address commercialism (it is a *golden* calf after all) and a self-interest that acts to the detriment of others: hope and pain pours “out into the world, / On every boy and every girl.” Despite reference to “the world,” there is a specifically urban setting evoked because the poison of the age, and the golden calf, light

up “the city.” This is consistent with the use of the word neon in the song’s title, typically associated with downtown signage and commercial spaces, and Butler’s reference to suburban megachurches in the interview cited above.

Conclusion

[24] *Neon Bible* is an illustration of unofficial culture resisting official—in this case ecclesial—culture, questioning its coercion and abuses by presenting a parody of the church and its biblical basis of authority. Returning to Linda Hutcheon’s definition of parody for a moment, I note her emphasis on the potential of parody as a constructive force.

> Parody is endowed with the power to renew. It need not do so, but it can. We must never forget the hybrid nature of parody’s connection with the “world,” the mixture of conservative and revolutionary impulses in both aesthetic and social terms. What has traditionally been called parody privileges the normative impulse, but today’s art abounds as well in examples of parody’s power to revitalize.[27]

Arcade Fire’s carnivalesque lyrics subvert and ridicule authoritarian, commercially driven Christianity. The band, in this carnivalesque reversal of roles, takes the place of (literally in) the Church through their symbolic act of choosing to record in that venue. Arcade Fire’s album functions as an alternative bible, replacing *the* Bible in effect, and through parody the band censures the questionable ethics and practices of churches in consumer culture. This repetition of religious images involves, according to Hutcheon’s definition of parody, a critical distance that permits “ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity.”

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Notes

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[1] Kelton Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), esp. 213-20.

[2] Literary critics apply the term jeremiad "to any work which, with a magniloquence like that of the Old Testament prophet (although it may be in secular rather than religious terms), accounts for the misfortunes of an era as a just penalty for its social and moral wrongdoings, but usually holds open the possibility for reforms that will bring a happier future" (M. H. Abrams, with Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 8th ed. [Toronto: Thomas Nelson, 2005], 145).

[3] Cobb, *Theology and Popular Culture*, 220, 227.

[4] Cobb, *Theology and Popular Culture*, 227-28.

[5] "The official feasts of the Middle Ages, whether ecclesiastic, feudal, or sponsored by the state, did not lead the people out of the existing world order and created no second life. On the contrary, they sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it" (Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984], 9).

[6] According to Bakhtin, sacred parody was common in medieval times (*Rabelais and His World*, 14).

[7] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 5, 20.

[8] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 26.

[9] Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 210-11.

[10] I will use lower case when using the word "bible" as a category. I will use upper case when referring to the Christian Scriptures or the album and song titles that include the term.

[11] Sean Michaels reports that, "while touring the world on the heels of their debut full-length, *Funeral*—Arcade Fire bought and renovated [a] church in the middle of nowhere [the Petite Église church in Farnham, a town about 80 kilometres outside of Montreal]. And they began working on some new songs" ("Arcade Fire: Inside the Church of Arcade Fire," *Paste Magazine* 30 [published online, April 11, 2007]: http://www.pastemagazine.com/action/article/4047/feature/music/arcade_fire).

[12] This was not the band's first experience performing their music in churches. They launched their earlier album *Funeral* (2004) in one. When asked about this, Win Butler offered the following: "We wanted to play in a different space, and my friend Anita, who used to play harp with us, told me that when she was younger she saw Petra play at a church—they're this shitty Christian rock band. So that got me thinking about finding a local church we could play" (from an interview conducted by Lorraine Carpenter, "Hot Property: Montreal's Next Big Thing, The Arcade Fire, Channel Familial Grief and Internal Upheaval into an Ecstatic Debut Album," *Montreal Mirror* 20.13 [September 16-22, 2004]: http://www.montrealmirror.com/2004/091604/cover_music.html).

[13] The band acknowledges that the name *Neon Bible* is the title of a John Kennedy Toole novel and they use it with the publisher's permission. However, the band's principle lyricist Win Butler denies any

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connection, claiming the album's concept is independent of the book: "I had that image in my mind before" (taken from Ryan Adams, "Arcade Fire," *Interview* 37.7 [2007]: 101).

[14] Gavin Edwards, "The Magnificent Seven," *Rolling Stone* 1027 (2007): 63-64, 66-67.

[15] Carpenter, "Hot Property: Montreal's Next Big Thing." Colin Larkin (ed.) reports the same thing: "Butler relocated to Montreal, Canada to study religion and Russian literature at McGill University, where he began working with Régine Chassagne . . . a student of medieval music" (*The Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 5th concise ed. [London: Omnibus, 2007], 66).

[16] Taken from Adams, "Arcade Fire," 101. Butler does not define what he means by counterculture in this context, and the band does not offer any clear alternative to the religious expressions they criticize in *Neon Bible*.

[17] The criticisms of organized Christianity in Arcade Fire's *Neon Bible* seem to have American institutions primarily in mind, which makes sense given Butler's upbringing. One interesting question raised by an anonymous peer reviewer is what, if anything, the album says about Christianity in the largely French-speaking, Roman Catholic environment of Quebec. In addition to theological and socio-cultural distinctions between Protestant, suburban Texas and Roman Catholic Montreal, there are also architectural distinctions. The megachurches Butler recalls from childhood were presumably modern, with an emphasis on function and comfort, whereas those in his adopted home tend to be older buildings, ornately decorated, with theologically significant features like stain glass, elevated pulpits, altars, candles, and iconography. These are excellent questions—and I thank this reviewer for them—though a full response is beyond the purview of the present paper.

[18] Are these the "salesmen" mentioned in "Windowstill"?

[19] It is interesting to note that when she was a child, a nun forced Régine Chassagne of Arcade Fire—Win Butler's wife—to play organ. She says of the experience, "the sister was really intense, like she was going to have a heart attack any minute. I wanted to sing so bad—I love singing!—but she made me replace the organ player, and I was only 10 or 12" (Carpenter, "Hot Property: Montreal's Next Big Thing"). Her experience resembles the plight of characters in the *Neon Bible* songs that encounter religious authority figures that force them into situations they would rather avoid, most obviously the thirteen-year-old "mocking bird" mentioned in "(Antichrist Television Blues)."

[20] In Mark's version of the story (10:35-40), the mother does not appear.

[21] See e.g., Allison Stewart, "Arcade Fire's 'Bible': A Searing Success," Special to *The Washington Post*, Sunday, March 11, 2007; p. N08; posted at washingtonpost.com: "The sprawling, masterly "(Antichrist Television Blues)" somehow conflates 9/11, God, television and Joe Simpson—the father of Ashlee and Jessica—into a tale of a struggling father who sees his talented daughter as a ticket out of downtown Manhattan, where planes might crash at any minute" (http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/09/AR2007030900480.html).

[22] In the song immediately following "(Antichrist Television Blues)," the narrator asks "MTV, what have you done to me?" ("Windowsill"). This song appears to continue the story told in "(Antichrist Television Blues)" with its ongoing interest in "the TV screen." If so, the narrator of "Windowsill" could be the voice of a now repentant father no longer wanting to "hearthenoisesonTV [sic]." The TV screen/MTV presents him with a world of temptations that includes easy money and he seems to blame this commercial/entertainment culture for destroying his values: "MTV, what have you done to me? / Save my soul, set me free! / Set me free! What have you done to me? / I can't breathe! I can't see!"

An impending judgment frightens the narrator of "Windowsill" ("house on fire, or a rising sea?" cf. 2 Peter 3:5-7; "World War III") and he may even be suicidal ("Why did I take the pill?"). He longs to escape the noise, the "salesmen," and the debt in his father's house and does not want to live "in America

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no more," which seems to be a criticism of the American entertainment industry and consumer culture more than a political statement. With reference to Bakhtin, it is noteworthy that Butler does not allow this voice of conscience to disappear. The song presents a dialogue between these two (commercial and genuine) forms of religion.

[23] Cf. n. 23. The idea of a future calamity appears also in "Black Mirror" where the singer tells us "I know a time is coming / [When] All words will lose their meaning."

[24] Remarks by Win Butler fit well in this connexion: "There are two kinds of fear: The Bible talks a lot about fear of God—fear in the face of something awesome. That kind of fear is the type of fear that makes someone want to change. But a fear of other people makes you want to stay the same, to protect what you have. It's a stagnant fear; and it's paralyzing" (Win Butler, interview with Michaels, "Arcade Fire").

[25] This song reminds me of anecdotes I have heard about the traumatic experiences of those who watched Donald W. Thompson's rapture movie *A Thief in the Night* (1972) as children. Undoubtedly, a new generation of children are experiencing similar anxieties because of the books and movies in the *Left Behind* franchise. In both of these examples, religious teachers emphasise aspects of a future judgment.

[26] As in the hymn, "Onward Christian Soldier" (words by Sabine Baring-Gould, music by Arthur Sullivan, 1871).

[27] Hutcheon, *Parody*, 115.