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Karr's Kill Cult: Virtual Cults and Pseudo-Killing in the Digital Age

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Abstract: This article explores the strange trajectory of John Mark Karr's life and writings indicates a dialectical relation of world and representation, reality and virtuality. In his multi-faceted online persona, not only is Karr a virtual cult leader, he is a virtual prophet, heralding a new form of subjectivity characterized by the interpenetration of reality and representation.

Keywords: Cults, Virtual Cults, Digital Age, Theory, John Mark Karr, JonBenét Ramsey

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Original Violence

Most readers will recall the 1996 tragedy in which six-year-old beauty-pageant princess JonBenét Ramsey was found bound, gagged, and strangled in the basement of her parents' home, inciting an orgy of media coverage. What readers may not know is that John Mark Karr—the imminently creepy individual who falsely confessed to the killing, and whose sordid past includes an arrest for possession of child pornography—has continued to make news as an alleged cyberstalker and would-be cult leader.

In May of 2010, Karr was accused of seeking to create a “sex cult” of JonBenét lookalikes: blond girls, some as young as four years of age, willing to do his bidding. To evade apprehension by police and ostensibly to be more approachable to would-be cult members, Karr reportedly underwent a sex-change operation and took the name of Alexis Reich. This bizarre case has all the makings of a disturbing quasi-religious narrative, with Karr constructing himself as a cult leader as well as a serial pseudo-killer.



In the tradition of biblical hermeneutics, someone who writes in the name of a well-known author in order to invoke that author's authority is given the name of that author prefixed by pseudo-, for example, Pseudo-Dionysius or Pseudo-Philo. In the same way, Karr is a serial pseudo-killer, falsely identifying himself with the killer of JonBenét Ramsey and compulsively performing the crime he did not commit by periodically bringing forth new pseudo-evidence of his guilt and constantly trying to keep the cold case alive. Whereas a real serial killer is compelled to murder again and again with different victims, Karr is compelled to repeat the singular murder of JonBenét Ramsey the only way he can—in a virtual reality constituted by writing.

The Internet provides an ideal platform for the creation of Karr's shifting authorial persona, especially through the production of religious writings on his pseudonymous blog, Lei Sussurra. Sadly, in the context of Karr's cultic aspirations, the murder of JonBenét has become a foundational sacrifice for the myth and cult around which Karr's sinister prestige continues to accrue.

The term “cult,” used to classify everything from the Church of Latter Day Saints to the Branch Davidians, has a distinctly pejorative connotation, resting as it does on the assumption of a normative definition of religion. Consequently, it has long been out of favor with scholars of religion, though it still has currency in the media and mainstream churches. The “cult” as a cultural construct looms large in Karr's self-made world; in fact, it is the very idea of a cult as secretive, marginal, and dangerously infused with sexuality, violence, and demagoguery that Karr wants to conjure with his use of the term. It is cult as representation—a media-created construct that generates genuine fear—that concerns us when we look at the case of John Mark Karr, whose blog titillates readers by suggesting that he envisions himself as a cult leader. The strange trajectory of Karr's life and writings indicates a dialectical relation of world and representation, reality and virtuality. In his multi-faceted online persona, not only is Karr a virtual cult leader, he is a virtual prophet, heralding a new form of subjectivity characterized by the interpenetration of reality and representation.

Of Blood and Blogging

Lei Sussurra, the blog that Karr maintains (without claiming or disavowing authorship) is a contrivance of simultaneous self-display and self-effacement. The blog represents itself cryptically as “a journalistic effort based outside the United States currently conducting an ongoing news investigation of JonBenét Ramsey murder suspect John Mark Karr.” Even the title of the blog is misleading. Media outlets like FOX News (apparently taking Karr's word for it) have reported that Lei Sussurra is “Latin for ‘I Murrmur’” (Barnes). It is not Latin, but rather Italian for “you murrmur.” In the spring of 2011, Karr added a subtitle that translates the blog's heading as “She Whispers,” an apparent reference to JonBenét's voice, now seemingly subsumed into his own. The victim is now part of his virtual universe.

In a blog post from September 20, 2009, Karr, writing in the third person, situates himself within a religious lineage: “Karr is from a long line of religious leaders. His father was a missionary evangelist once launching a church in Caribbean Jamaica. Karr's mother, a teen missionary herself, was the daughter of an evangelical preacher...” The post, bearing the headline “Karr Contemplates Creation of Cult” and accompanied by a collage containing images of Jim Jones and Charles Manson surrounding Karr's piercing, disembodied blue eyes, ends with lines that suggest Karr's self-fantasization as the center of some outlaw cult: “Could it be that Karr is in some tropical utopia carrying out an old family tradition? Without a doubt, U.S. federal authorities and international law enforcement will certainly make it a point to find out.”

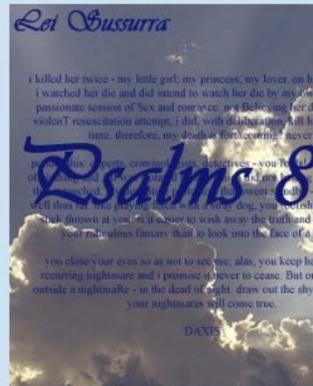
Psalms 8:2 - Karr's Christmas Incantation

INTERNATIONAL. (Lei Sussurra) December 25, 2009 -- John Mark Karr's 2009 Christmas message, more cryptic than ever, might reveal new information in the JonBenet Ramsey murder investigation. Karr sent the message to Lei Sussurra which follows unedited.

Psalms 8:2

i killed her twice - my little girl; my princess; my lover. on her first death, i watched her die and did intend to watch her die by my own hand in a passionate session of Sex and romance. not Believing her dead, after a violent resuscitation attempt, i did, with deliberation, kill her a seCond time. therefore, my death is forthcoming? never!

ponder this: experts, criminologists, detectives - you fools! the Deceptor of Nothing and All was isolated to that which did not belong to her and all that it touched. my deceptive protector; that sweet standby - serving me well thus far. like playing fetch with a stray dog, you foolishly chase any stick thrown at you. is it easier to wish away the truth and hold on to your ridiculous fantasy than to look into the face of a killer?



On December 25, 2009, Karr posted a Christmas message titled “Psalms 8:2” (“Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.”) The chilling text reads:

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you close your eyes so as not to see me; alas, you keep having that recurring nightmare and i promise it never to cease. But one saw me outside a nightmaRe - in the dead of night. draw out the shy one and all your nightmares will come true.

The format of the poem recalls taunting messages sent to police by serial killers like Jack the Ripper and the Zodiac Killer. The mysterious capitalized letters “S-B-T-C,” “D-N-A,” and “B-R” are followed by a quotation from Karr: “The world deserves nothing from me; especially not law enforcement who can all burn in hell before I reveal what they refer to as my hidden physical evidence that would seal my doom. JonBenet deserves my death and it is forthcoming but I will be damned to hell if I allow myself to be killed at the hands of my enemies.” But on April 9, following a post announcing that he is now living as a woman under the name Alexis Reich, Karr offers up an exegesis of the Christmas message, including the mysterious capital letters, which even he can only partially decode: “It was thought in 2006 that ‘SBTC’ stood for ‘Shall Be The Conqueror’ based on an entry written in a yearbook from 1983 by a younger Karr. The meaning of ‘DNA’ is obvious, while ‘BR’ remains vague.”

The religious dimensions of Karr's writings are consistent with his self-construction as a cult leader. More unsettling is the manner in which Karr's message imitates those of previous serial killers. Karr's penchant for "copycatting" serial killers points to the dialectical relationship with the wider culture that so often characterizes serial murderers. Serial murderers not only take on the style of their predecessors but also imitate depictions of serial murderers in the popular media, depictions which are themselves based on actual serial murderers. Cultural critic Mark Seltzer, author of the book *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*, calls this tendency a "mimetic compulsion." According to Seltzer, the killer "makes self-identity indistinguishable from identification with others, and inseparable from media-facilitated processes of imitation, simulation, and identity-contagion" (43). In the case of Karr, as with many others, the media's portrayal of serial killers is imitated, reflected, and copied by "new" killers. Whether Karr turns out to be such a killer remains to be seen. What is clear is that the copycatting Karr seeks to mimic also mimics the real killers who have preceded him in the media spotlight.

Secrecy and Celebrity

A quintessentially unreliable narrator of his own life, Karr swaps authorial voices and switches sexes with rapidity in the pages of his blog. Karr's blog-based cult-building project—in which he plays prophet, amanuensis, and interpreter—takes form as a collage of discursive elements. Not only does he impersonate a sexually potent, megalomaniacal serial killer and prophetic cult leader; Karr also portrays himself as a persecuted man/woman, explaining his sex change by again quoting scripture: "Paul said in Corinthians, 'I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some,'" which he immediately follows with his skeptical journalistic voice: "The average sex change operation costs \$25,000 U.S. It might be questioned as to how the former Karr got this kind of money if he or she has been on the run since 2008 with no work or only work as a very low paid teacher."



John Mark Karr as Alexis Reich

These conversions are part of a pattern that also includes the dialectic of secrecy and celebrity so common to serial killers, who taunt the police and delight in media attention even as they remain absconded. Like these killers, Karr is a spectacle, even and especially in obscuring himself through his strategic evasions in writing and self-construction. He seeks both to be witnessed (e.g., falsely confessing to JonBenét's murder) and to "vanish completely," as he writes on Lei Sussura, where his secrecy is most conspicuous. "Secrecy lies at the very core of power," claims Elias Canetti (290). If so, then we should suspect that part of Karr's peculiar power to cultivate secrecy and court celebrity derives from the way he applies to his personal narrative the same mechanics of alluring encryption that one observes in his religious writings.

Part of what makes Karr remarkable in this context is his ability to use the Internet as a marketing tool through which he can announce but also deny his presence, construct and deconstruct his own persona. The dissolution of his person (his disappearances, his evasion, his withdrawal from public life) coincides with the construction of his protean personality (his unreliable authorial voice, his fictionalized self, his journalistic disguise, and his anonymity/pseudonymity). But the virtual carries over into the visceral, as Karr also transforms his corporeal self. For Karr, the body, too, is a construction.

The Immaculates: Cybercult and Cybercrime

Karr, like the serial killers he imitates, is thus a "simulated person, a 'type of nonperson,'" as Seltzer puts it, quoting a phrase from Joel Norris's *Serial Killers: The Growing Menace* (162). But of course, simulations, as Baudrillard has taught us, can lie at the root of real violence (Baudrillard). News of Karr's cultic and potentially deadly ambitions were exposed in May 2010, when then-nineteen-year-old Samantha Spiegel, a former girlfriend of Karr's, alleged that she had been the victim of a barrage of threats from him.

Spiegel told the media that she had met Karr when she was nine years old, a fourth-grader at a school where Karr was a teacher's aide. A few years ago, Spiegel "reconnected" with Karr after seeing him in a televised court hearing. They began a relationship via the Internet, with Karr convincing Spiegel that she was to be part of his plot to create a cult. Karr even proposed marriage to a willing Spiegel, but her parents stepped in, sending her to rehabilitation to help her overcome drug addiction and apparent brainwashing by Karr (Barnes).

For two years after her emergence from the program, she was assailed by messages from Karr insisting that she help recruit blonde girls under the age of six with small feet to be part of the "Immaculates," a sex cult comprised of JonBenét lookalikes.

The Immaculates

A 19 year old California girl has revealed that she escaped a sex cult led by Ramsey murder suspect John Mark Karr. The young girl says she wandered the streets of San Francisco seeking out little girls to deliver to Karr. According to her, Karr's followers are numerous in number and are willing to kill for him.

INTERNATIONAL (Lei Sussurra) May 29, 2010 – In 2007, the FBI launched an investigation after being alerted that John Mark Karr was organizing a sex cult. Three years later, nineteen year old Samantha Spiegel says she fears for her life as she makes a break from what she describes as a dangerous cult capable of murder. Spiegel says the name of the cult is "The Immaculates" so named after Karr's past references to perfect little girls he has known.

Karr was thrust back into the news when ex-girlfriend Brooke Simmons Dovgan exposed what was thought to be Karr's new identity that has since become questionable. Over the months following the revelation, Spiegel, who says she was once a student of Karr's, has revealed that she was threatened through a



When Spiegel resisted Karr's attempts to bring her under his control, he began to threaten her by email and instant message. According to her testimony at a hearing in April 2010, Karr told her that if she "got in the way of him and his little girls, he would have [her] hunted down and killed" (Barnes). As law enforcement built a cyberstalking case against Karr, she revealed hundreds of messages in which he wrote things like, "if you cost me my little girls I will hunt you down and kill you."

In a December 2010 blog post accompanied by a picture of a spider impaled on a pin, Karr accused Spiegel of being a "serial killer groupie" who sent letters to Charles Manson, the "Night Stalker" Richard Ramirez, and convicted child-murderer Richard Allen Davis. Writing of himself in the third person, Karr attempted to distance himself from any wrong-doing, denying being a cult leader, while still basking in the glow of association with such an infamous rogue's gallery: "Karr now knows that he was just another 'strange oddity stuck through with a straight pin' in Samantha Spiegel's macabre collection of little girl killers and mass murderers. Karr says he's relieved that he's fallen out of Spiegel's murderous menagerie."

"I only kill the girls I love the most": Religion and Addictive Violence in the Digital Age

"If Karr rivals Manson," a 2010 Lei Sussurra entry reads, "and now leads a sex and death cult in some international location with murderous sleeper cells located throughout the U.S. and the world, it can be guaranteed that after Spiegel's public revelation, the FBI and every other international law enforcement agency has already commenced an investigation to confirm or discount the existence of 'The Immaculates.'" Notwithstanding the self-aggrandizing comparison to Charles Manson, Karr's cultic campaign is so far being staged primarily in cyberspace, giving rise to questions about the connections among religion, cultic activity, and serial killing in the digital age.

Spiegel's attorney, Robin Sax, speaks to Karr's technological acumen, calling him "a talented genius on the computer" (Barnes). And indeed Karr seems adept at translating the charisma he

exercises in person (at least over children) through the medium of the Internet, claiming to have gathered dozens of followers to assist him in procuring food and shelter and in cult recruitment. “John Mark Karr is a charismatic man in a sick creep sort of way,” remarks criminal profiler Pat Brown, “and he can get groupies much like Scott Peterson, Ted Bundy and Charles Manson” (Lohr).

So far, his alleged “sex cult” appears to be more virtual than actual, and Karr is not, to anyone’s knowledge, a real murderer. But he increasingly resembles a serial pseudo-killer in his attempts to reduplicate his original “victim,” JonBenét Ramsey. “I only kill the girls I love the most,” Karr wrote in an email to Spiegel (Celizic). As Seltzer argues, this compulsion to repeat, to reduplicate an original violence, to reproduce the victim, is not only the mark of a serial killer but a product of our increasingly technologized culture, where there prevails “a failure of distance, with respect to representation” (162) and thus “an interlacing of violence and representation” (114).

Perhaps what is most troubling—and also most instructive—about the Karr story is the way in which the virtual and the real continue to interpenetrate ever more deeply, bringing the fascinated, media-addicted audience more into complicity with the pseudo-killer. As JoAnn Conrad has put it: “Social addiction to seriality enjoins the serial killer and the serial viewer in the cycle of reproduction, substitution, collection, categorizing, representation and repetition. The redundancy itself [...] co-join[s] us through mechanical and technological reproduction in the spectacle of wounded bodies and wounded psyches” (Conrad).

And this is the fearful epilogue to the Karr story in its current cycle. The violence-addicted audience, and the media that keep it addicted, are as much a part of the Karr cult as the Immaculates. And perhaps in some sense even this article feeds the phenomenon, bringing further attention to the publicity-hungry Karr. But the aim of this article has been critical description, not complicity—to bring to visibility the underlying logics and techniques of an emergent brand of cult-formation and serial pseudo-killing.

All of this remains highly speculative; we cannot be certain about what “truth” lies behind the simulation that goes under the name “John Mark Karr” or “Alexis Reich.” But its traits are the traits that define many serial killers, and Karr’s cryptic religious writings and self-elevation betray a strong resemblance to those of the murderous cult leaders after whom he models himself, even as he distances himself from them. In his virtual world, Karr portrays himself as both the omnipotent arbiter of violence and the innocent victim of the media—the guilty scapegoat.

Above all, it is the very breakdown of boundaries between fantasy and reality, the virtual and the visceral, the silly and the savage, that is at stake in this issue. Although Karr may ultimately turn out to be a creepy eccentric more bent on a perverse fantasization of himself as a killer than on actual cultic bloodletting, he is, in any case, genuinely prophetic in at least one sense: The gothic melodrama of which he is the center demonstrates the increasing conjunction of bodies and technology, and with it, the increasing erosion of boundaries separating fantasy from reality. The virtual façade of Karr’s world is a shadow or double of our own. As a prophet of this

frightening new world, Karr shows us how to believe our own digitally constructed lies, or at least how to make others believe that we believe them.

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from John Mark Karr and the four images are excerpted from his blog Lei Sussurra: <http://leisussurra.cf/>

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