Welcome to My Nightmare (I Think You're Gonna Like It): Hermeneutics of Horror in Alice Cooper's Metamodern Menagerie of Age

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Abstract

Alice Cooper, the Shock Rock character, has died on stage thousands of times since the early 1970s— often via guillotine, electric chair, or hanging—but he has never had to get "old". Every night, the character is reborn even as the performer himself reaches his seventies. Aging, ageless, and undead simultaneously, Alice, his music, and his atypical "timelessness" reveal complexities of age identity through vocal performance, paranormal thematics, and vaudevillian theatrics. I analyse three elements of Alice Cooper's stage shows—vocal caricatures of age, monstrous puppets, and stylized use of mobility tools—that give insight into fluctuating expressions and understandings of age(ing) and time in his music. The discourse I highlight looks beyond nostalgia and biological longevity to have a post-postmodern (metamodern) conversation at the intersection of music x age in the twenty-first century. This work—building on Mikhail Bakhtin's "grotesque", Anne Basting's sociological research on age in theatre, and musicological disability studies—considers another way participants in the subgenre of Shock Rock or theatrical rock have been re-presenting rock's founding themes through decades of musicking.

Introduction

In this article, I analyse three elements of Alice Cooper's stage shows—his vocal caricatures of age, his menagerie of self-reflective monsters, and his stylized use of mobility tools such as canes or crutches—that give insight into some of the

uncommon and differentiating ways that he has navigated and expressed fluctuations in perspective on age(ing).

At the outset of my academic consideration of the topic of age(ing) in music, particularly within the subsection of popular music and the further subsection of Classic Rock, I read a lot of discourse about "nostalgia" (Boym 2001) and biological/medical acoustics (Mueller 1997). These were usually the first, the most topical, and the most plentiful sites of conversation I had ethnographically in all of my fieldwork visits to Classic Rock concerts and my interviews with fans, artists, crew, and critics. Whether I brought up topics coded for "age"-related conversation (such as "legacy", "longevity", "Classic") or not, discussion would typically lead back to a similar prefacing debate: fans' and critics' evaluation of whether or not the artist was better, worse, or the same as they had been before. There was almost invariably an emotional component (nostalgia) and a physical component (biological/medical) to the points made about the artist; I found that interlocutors wanted, at minimum, to share things about the longevity of their personal connection to the music and to assess the performers' ability. However, these two major areas of analysis for a colloquial conversation about age in music were rarely enough to encapsulate what Alice Cooper fans said they wanted to explain to me: in short, why Cooper and his music have lasted as long as they have at all, as well as how that is different to what others have been doing even in a similar genre.

As I advanced in the field, particularly during my fieldwork following Alice Cooper on every date of the Ol' Black Eyes is Back tour (2020), I found interlocutors and dialogue that helped me clarify some of those nuances: discourse about monsters and dis/ability (Clasen 2010; Wirtz 2016), camp style and acceptable perversion (Sontag 1964/2008; Waters 2005; Kattari 2020), and a flexible, post-postmodern (metamodern) understanding of time that has implications for age as a temporal identity (Abramson 2015; Gibbons et. Al 2017). These are clearly broad areas for discussion that couldn't be fully parsed in such a short space; however, I do believe that this article could serve as a proof of concept that this is a fruitful intersection to explore more fully for musico-sociologists who hope to understand some peculiarities about one slice of musical interpretation of age(ing) identity at the turn of the twenty-first century. After all, as Marshall McLuhan has oft been quoted: "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 1964). As a result, this work—building especially on Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about "the grotesque" (Bakhtin 1965), monster theory (Kattari 2020; Halberstam 1995), Anne Basting's research on the sociology of age in theatre (Basting 1998), and a combination of musicological influences in disability studies (Naiman 2017; Samuels 2017; Fiedler 1978)—serves as an opportunity to consider unarticulated ways Classic Rock music and its fans, particularly in the subgenre of Shock Rock or theatrical rock, have been contending with and re-presenting the genre's founding themes through decades of musicking.

I. Alice through the Ages

Alice Cooper, the Shock Rock persona of Vincent Furnier, has died on stage thousands of times during performances since the early 1970s—via guillotine, electric chair, hanging, or otherwise—but he has never had to get "old". Every night, the character is reborn, revived, or reanimated: eighteen years old, even as

the performer himself reaches twenty-one, thirty, and now seventy-six (at the time of publication). Aging, ageless, and undead, simultaneously and depending on the moment, Alice and his stage show have a unique positionality that allows them to reveal complex intersections of age, time, and popular culture through vocal performance, paranormal themes, and vaudevillian theatrics.

This jumbled web of temporal identities is what originally drew me to hold the layers of Alice up for analysis in the study of Aging x Music. In plainer words, I noticed that, even amongst peers in a genre like rock that is predicated on being music exclusively by and for "young" people, this performer references and manipulates our concept of "age" a lot, in so many forms, incredibly overtly, and has consistently over many decades. Some aspects of his performance that have made it from album to album, tour to tour, seem similar but have actually been transformed through the years. I will elucidate specific examples of his unique embodiment and championing of age(ing) identity in my discussion of his voices (vocal and nonvocal), but first I must explain the multiple age(s) and identities embodied.

Vincent Furnier (the performer, born 1948) is seventy-six years old (at the time of this publication). The original band, called "Alice Cooper", formed in the mid-1960s before Furnier then legally changed his name to "Alice Cooper" as well. "Alice Cooper" is also a persona he embodies (sometimes on stage and sometimes off). So already, we have a few moments of birth and an array of chronological ages, depending on which form of "Alice" one refers to. (see also Cooper 1976, 2007; Bruce 2001, Dunaway 2015, Demorest 1974, Greene 1975). As the band sings songs like "I'm Eighteen″ (1970), one might think that the performers themselves were eighteen at the time. Nope: they were already out of their teens and in their early twenties. Ok, well if not in the chronology of life outside the song, then perhaps the persona is or was imagined as eighteen years old. Wrong again. When I spoke to Alice (the performer) via Zoom in mid-July 2020, I asked him how old he considered Alice (the persona) to be. He told me that he actually imagines the character to be about twenty-eight years old; a huge shock to me, as this particular age is so close to thirty (the rock threshold for "oldness" and "adulthood")—even more so, perhaps, than the age of eighteen. This will be a recurring and relevant thing to note as I discuss meaning-making and identity in rock vis-à-vis age.

So already we have this palimpsestic multiplicity of age images built into the performer-persona at the locus of creation (in 1970/1971) and through to the present, complicating the comfortable simplicity of straightforward temporal linearity. Everybody is writing age onto the stage or slate of Alice Cooper, including the character persona himself (Rockwell 1975; Myers 2017). This has huge impact on the way Alice fits into the Baby Boomer culture that has dominated pop culture since its demographic became—and never ceased to be—the most populous generation in U.S. history (Nealon 2012). Just by virtue of this alignment to the largest folk group, there is alignment to a temporal identity majority. Within this majority, the original members of Alice Cooper also had intersectional alignment with other dominant identities in the cultural sphere: white, male, cisgendered, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle class, Judeochristian, western, Anglophone, and American.

Culture theorists like Jeffrey Nealon, Anne Basting, Andy Bennett (2000), Simon Frith (1978; 1996), and Tom Wolfe (1976), among others, have taken on the extensive explanation of how Baby Boomers became synonymous with a discussion of age (or really *youth*) in the postwar context of the twentieth century. To paint it with broad strokes, more standardized time and productivity became the new organizers and motivators of the nineteenth century after the industrial revolution. Children and the elderly were slowly relegated to the sidelines as "non-producers" of capital and culture. Youth, specifically teenagehood and young adulthood, became a representation of both able-bodied production of capitalist goods and also the consumers of those goods. With the baby boom and increase in disposable income that came of the post-war period, the group of people born between 1946 and 1964 became the ideal marketing demographic. This overlapped with the twentieth century's accelerating speed introducing new technologies of far-reaching and pervasive communication. Essentially, the twentieth century became the story of capitalist consumerism simultaneously globalizing and localizing towards the goal of perpetual economic growth. The mythical Teen and their disposable resources became the market for more and more industries, including the culture industry, although it became apparent to some that this was decidedly less self-determined given that the people prescribing said culture were older adults trying to benefit financially.

As Baby Boomers came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, the reaction to this perceived manipulation and the heavy-handedness of the Vietnam War draft reached a boiling point. The Man cannot be trusted and, to quote the Doors' Jim Morrison, "when you make your peace with authority, you become authority" (Smith 2018). At the same time, pop wisdom advised "DON'T TRUST ANYONE OVER THIRTY" (Kaines 2018). These energies conflated became the zeitgeist representative of Baby Boomer youth of that time. The imperative became creating and utilizing modes of expression by youth, for youth: embracing the new, and all that the top-down authority was unwilling or unable to try. However, when this imperative was cemented in the foundation of newly forming bands, they didn't take into account the tie to another midcentury Baby Boomer imperative, *authenticity* (Trilling 1972): now a ticking clock of their own design that would likely eventually signal a descent into hypocrisy and obsolescence. This looming spectre of modernist binaries likely didn't seem to be such a problem in the face of a future threatened by continued war and instability.

I find this gap between legally and subculturally defined adulthood—eighteen and thirty years old, respectively—to be prescient. A liminal space that is the perfect stage for the second generation of rock bands who looked to their rock *predecessors* as they became *elders*. Alice Cooper, like KISS and Ozzy Osbourne (two other notable Baby Boomer shock rock artists of the second generation), established themselves on the backs of first generation rock musicians like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, as well as the foundational rock of Chuck Berry, Screamin' Jay Hawkins, and Arthur Brown. They were the ostensible kid brothers rather than the children of a parent/child binary. The bands, like the musicians themselves, were born into a conversation of their youth already in progress, navigating the authenticity of age and commodity that was inextricable from the time period. When Baby Boomers were able to seize the method of their own production and its consumable products—that is, to not only participate in but benefit from their

own commodification—this turned the tables on the rest of the twentieth century and its turn into the twenty-first.

Understanding this commoditization of "youth", how it came to define early generations of rock musicians, and the turning point of widespread Boomer control, self-determination, and self-actualization (which can only happen with capital—social or fiscal) is crucial for explaining how Alice Cooper is a unique case, even in a discussion of the metaphorical "negative space" of "non-youth" and even in the company of other "weirdos". As I explained, the band, the man, and the two other Baby Boomer shock rock groups I mentioned (KISS and Ozzy Osbourne) all benefitted from the fact that they were aligned with so many dominant identities and now their age demographic also came into its own reign of authority. This offset—although it didn't eliminate—some of the dangers of their transgressive subculture(s). In the emerging arenas of glam rock, gothic rock, proto-metal, and early punk, these groups could flirt with the other side in a more passable way that didn't preclude them from maintaining mass appeal and being able to commoditize themselves if they so chose. As Auslander (2006, 2008), Waksman (2009), Frith (1978), and other rock critics have pointed out: they troubled gender presentation, invoked the devil, and entered the bodily realm of the working class. However, all three of them executed this subversion in slightly different ways and towards the slightly different ends of establishing not only personal identity, but brand identity.

Acts that also use camp or kitschy aesthetics to undercut the seriousness of their "perversion" have sometimes been able to code-switch and maintain access to both mainstream and alternative fan groups (Sontag 1964/2018; Waters 2005). Although this privilege yields criticism from both sides (fans who accuse artists of "selling out" by abandoning the subculture for mainstream popularity; fans who disapprove of mainstream-acceptable artists co-opting or capitalizing on subcultural style), it can actually be incredibly helpful for sociocultural normalization (Kattari 2020). One of the main dualities Cooper fans would regularly elaborate on was that the music (broadly considered: meaning the songs themselves but also the character persona, the stage theatrics, etc.) made them feel, proudly, both more and less "weird" (i.e. noticeably set apart from the mainstream). While other shock rockers elicited different versions of that sentiment, I argue that Alice Cooper was the one most concerned with centering the identity of age in his act and, in choosing to do so with his musical blend of campy shock and otherwise mainstream, commercially-appealing identities, he offered a space for fans to contend with potentially paradoxical understandings about how age intersects with things like culture, time, and socioeconomics.

II. A Baby's Brain and an Old Man's Voice

Although not the most noticeable, the most audible manifestation of Alice's commitment to sonically representing age is his manipulation of voice and vocal style. The timbre of the voice he speaks with off stage, as well as some of vocal styles he *can* sing with if he so chooses, confirms that he has and uses the ability to consciously shift identity via changes in vocal timbre. Alice employs one particular vocality, which I have termed the *Teen Sneer*, to represent a certain persona whenever the song is thematically rooted in topics of youth. This teen sneer uses a

nasally, higher pitched tone with a hint of vocal fry and longer decay to characterize and distinguish itself from the other characters within the story and within Alice. Almost a parody of other pop cultural icons like *Leave It to Beaver* 's Eddie Haskell (a favourite of the performer), this voice invokes a caricature of teens as entitled, irreverent braggadocios who *relish* in their smarminess. "I'm eighteen *and I like it*" (Cooper 1970). The teen voice projects, powerful in its control, even with the shakiness of the vocal fry's light vibrato. This is in contrast to aural signifiers of an aging voice: a change in pitch (lower in puberty and then higher in old age for men), softer volume that resonates less, more vocal trembling, a change in breath and pace (Prakup 2012; Gnevsheva 2018). But more important than the physical accuracy of the impressions are the connections drawn between two commonly linked aspects of age: the physical/biological and the psychosocial/emotional.

In this way, Alice has taken his representation of age further than the rest of his cohort – more frequently, from more angles, and for longer. Yet, the transgression here might still seem minimal. It does not in-and-of-itself particularly trouble the modernist binary of youth versus old age to highlight and mirror common tropes of aging, although it does show little ways that the binary isn't fully black and white (otherwise a teen sneer and an aging male voice wouldn't both have a smidge of shakiness and higher pitch, for example). If anything, Alice's teen sneer might have actually originally participated in the oversimplified "[stratification of] the aging process into seemingly stable, independent life stages and [disconnecting of] moments of the life course from each other—separating, for example, the frail old person from the teenager, the infant from the adult, the young adult from the older adult" (Basting 1998: 135). This is a problem because, as Basting continues, "in order to prove their worth in such a system" people – both young and old -- "must perform and display [only *certain* characteristics] of aging" or else risk "[depleting] their cultural value" (Basting 1998: 135). As mentioned in the previous section, if sociocultural value—under the rules of twentieth-century western commodification—is largely divided down lines of productivity/capital and that productivity/capital is largely defined in a way that excludes the oldest *and* youngest members of society, then there is a tangible reward or punishment to how one's age is perceived by others. Age is rarely acknowledged as the performed or performative identity that it can be. However, this is risky territory to fall into the same place that some misguided 1970s anti-ageism activism advocated: namely, trying to "replace the negative images of aging with 'positive' images—a move that ultimately fails to question the strict division between these two poles (successful and unsuccessful aging), and which fuels a denial of physical and psychological changes in the aging process" (Cole, quoted in Basting 1998: 14). The interest here is not whether Alice can still sing like he used to or whether one can aurally discern the singer's age, but rather how, when, and why would he choose to perform in ways that either reflect or trouble the norms set forth by the medical model of age.

So the productive part of this slice of analysis, for my purposes in situating aging (and its status as an embodiment of time) with popular music, is in listening to Alice as he continues to perform this "adolescent voice" while aging. Hearing the sneer attempt to codify itself over fifty years foregrounds "the instability inherent in the aging process, the body's production of time, and the inseparability of life stages in the process of aging. Repeating performances—social acts that define who one knows one's self to be—creates a sense that, over time, one gains a clearer

understanding of who one 'is.' But aging itself is a process of change that makes identical repetitions of social acts impossible" (Basting 1998: 136). As Alice moved from early 1970s album versions of The Teen Sneer (as heard on *Killer* and *School's Out* for example), to late 1970s versions of The Teen Sneer on his Madhouse Rock tour (as Alice the Performer was turning thirty years old himself), to twenty-first century versions of The Teen Sneer on his most recent tours, the voice seems to have changed more drastically in tone with sociocultural opinions about Alice's age than it changed by virtue of physical aging alone. For example, one fan told me his interpretation of Alice's Madhouse Rock performances was that of a second Teen Rebellion; at many points in these performances uniquely, Alice's teen sneer drags "sloppily" out of time while the rest of the band plays on in time together. The sneer oscillates from high to low in a way that mirrors somebody in an alcohol-induced blackout; and, while Alice the Performer was drinking heavily in his personal life both on and off stage, there were other moments in the show when he intentionally chose to sing in his more standard, controlled, by-the-book style. We observed that, in juxtaposition with the addition of prop mobility tools like bloody crutches or canes and the mounting media scrutiny about the performer nearing thirty years old, there was a darker, more debaucherous, more sarcastic overtone of boundary pushing involved in the portrayal of "youth" compared to what was once a more innocently "annoying", but relatively benign depiction of youth. These days, Alice sings his Teen Sneer with a sort of hybrid style: the intentionality, control, and earnestness of the early days, more energy than the middle years, and a better balance between the Teen Sneer and the "Old Sigh" (a more newly developed affect). In recent years, Alice started giving weight—particularly in a song like "I'm Eighteen" (Cooper 1970)—to an older character (the "old man's heart" being contrasted with the "baby's brain"). This Old Man Voice has a slower, lower, breathier quality. While, in past performances, the Teen Sneer has been the more developed persona of mischief and intrigue while the Old Man has been virtually unacknowledged, now neither duality seems to be "good" versus "bad" or "fun" versus "a drag". Both personas are more fleshed out, and yet also more obvious caricatures as their performer aged into a post-postmodern liminal space that is simultaneously between and beyond: old, young, both, or neither depending on your perspective(s).

I enjoy thinking through this conversation in different ways with different people. In my more recent fieldwork, I've been directing conversations with my interlocutors less and holding space for ruminations on unanswerable questions that don't necessarily feel academically practical. However, these ponderings do seem to yield thoughts that are practical in the way that I believe we as cultural historians must embrace all lived experience as a practical, real consideration (Nietzsche 1874). It was only by listening to the circuitous debates and debaucherous anecdotes that I heard fellow listener-participants talk about a really crucial observation: that there is a difference in what they hear and what they're listening for. Audiences acknowledge the physical realities of aging and the importance mainstream society puts upon that; but the fans that I spoke to were more excited to describe how the Cooper fandom frequently doesn't conform to or align with expectations, even in how they listen. They can hear "age" in the negotiation of this teen sneer between aging performer and unaging persona—and choose not to associate it with a value judgment, just as I argue Alice attempts to

do increasingly over the history of his career. Like Alice, we can relish in a roughness of style not appreciated (or at least not used) by most people as "virtuosic" singing. And yet we can also resist pathologizing or rescuing—putting one age or another on a pendulous pedestal—and therefore decide ourselves to be outside of the binary.

III. Welcome to the Nightmare Castle

Alice Cooper's use of grotesquerie and monsters in both content and form provides the most visible, but also the most figurative, representation of age(ing) as a performed identity and a site of revolution in his work. I think this is crucial because, as the previous section highlights, a lot of one's age as an identity is located not just in a concrete number, but in one's performance of multiple facets of "age" and in how those performances are interpreted by others. Age is a sociocultural negotiation of the meanings of time—and music, as the sonic organization of time, can play an important role in that negotiation. Rock music has always been positioned in an ever-evolving, contentious alignment with popular acceptability. Some musicians, like Alice Cooper, have the privilege of choosing how, when, and to what extent to align with different levels of mainstream, Rock, and Shock Rock subcultures. As a result, it's valuable to take note of when they specifically choose to break from easier, mainstream commercial appeal or even from Classic Rock's subcultural appeal.

One big difference between Alice Cooper and other rock musicians who were transgressive in ways like long hair or feminine stage attire is Cooper's use of monsters and camp-macabre Halloween imagery. I lean heavily on theorist and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of carnival, sacred time, and the grotesque to parse this huge conversation (Bakhtin 1965; Bakhtin 1981; Gritten 2012); after all, as Victor Hugo stated, "the aesthetics of the grotesque are to a certain extent the aesthetics of the monstrous" (Bakhtin 1965: 43). They are intertwined, along with caricature, in the way they hyperbolize specific identifying features for effect. As Bakhtin lifted up Rabelais's characters to represent the fulfilment of the grotesque realist imperative in his time and international framework, I offer Alice Cooper as an example for my own twentieth/twenty-first century American context. Grotesque realism—as opposed to "gross naturalism" (Bakhtin 1965: 31)—is specifically *not* just a presentation of grossness in nature; it is a system of hyperbole that reflects something more accurate than the real. This is what Alice can access and mobilize toward a discussion of age(ing) that others can't. Alice can choose to use his exaggerated, campy monsters to reach people that might be intimidated by more serious and believable imagery. He can use that exaggeration for the purposes of humour and normalization. And ultimately he can create space for ideas that might have otherwise not been considered.

In addition to the shared conversation of spectacle (Debord 1967) and wildness between other types of carnival and rock music concert, there's a fourfold crux of why the Bakhtinian framework is so specifically helpful for understanding the overlap between Alice Cooper's treatment of monster subthemes and his treatment of age:

(1) the unseverable link to the corporeal;
(2) the necessity of both comedy and ambivalence;
(3) using the grotesque not just to subvert and surpass norms, but to oscillate them *continually and intentionally* while suspended in the "carnival time" of the concert; and
(4) prioritizing the value of a *"folk populous"* during a *"marked shift in temporal hermeneutics"* (Bakhtin 1965: 11).

Alice's menagerie of monsters isn't just a man behind a mask. When the curtain parts on one of his recent tours, the eyes of Alice Cooper give way to a multi-level set that looks like an impressive, camp Castle Dracula. Multiple doors provide passage for the musicians to weave through—and for the monsters to emerge. As the show opens, a giant Frankenalice puppet—something that looks like Alice if you dug his corpse out of the ground and reanimated him—bursts free and causes havoc on stage to the song "Feed My Frankenstein". After Frankenalice, we also have Teenage Frankenstein, although that portrayal is a much simpler miming of the stilted walk and stiffened arms that have become synonymous with the character of Frankenstein's monster. Things regain grotesque, surrealist speed quickly though; and at one point—after the character either kills or attempts to kill a baby named Steven in a moment of psychosis—the mutant babies with adult bodies, mechanic jumpsuits, and bald, white, baby faces contorted in screeching expressions come to take Alice away for punishment. He's executed by guillotine while the crowd cheers and is egged on by a dancing, mutant nurse. Once he has been killed, a giant inflatable baby with tattoos and scars comes and plays with Alice's disembodied head as the rest of the band plays "I Love the Dead". Alice is reborn from a coffin that has been a benign onstage prop until this point. He's triumphant, vaudeville-esque again, and he sings the hits with his band as the spectacle of balloons and streamers and guest stars and ensembles all hit a finale.

The sheer variety of monsters is impressive. In this piece, I focus on the four that are specifically hyperbolizing age and link into particularly age-related song text: the age-unspecified Frankenalice, the teenage Frankenstein, and two types of mutant baby. What's most noteworthy is the way Alice takes them to the absolute brink of recognition. Frankenalice and the inflatable baby are easily fifteen to twenty feet tall. Frankenalice has stringy, thin hair and dingy flesh that make it look like he has been decaying in a wet environment. He scowls; stiff, but agile in his movements – possibly from the mechanics of the puppet, but in line with the generally accepted pop cultural interpretation of the character (Weinstock 2020). Meanwhile the baby presents as vibrant and smiling, but gruesomely scarred, tattooed, and demonized with Alice Cooper's signature facepainted eyes. The other mutant babies—the adult-baby hybrids—become simultaneously more and less recognizable. They are not inflatable or giant, their bodies look like blue collar human mechanics, and their heads look like scowling, crying babies; but put that all together and you have an even more uncanny and disturbing visage.

To understand this as a meaningful transmutation of sound to sight, we can use Bakhtin's framework to interrogate the following:

(1) When Alice's brings focus to the body (the corporeal). There are multiple points in the show when a disembodied voice communicates, but remains

detached and menacing rather than monstrous. We do not get to connect with the disembodied like we do with the embodied monsters as "the essential principle of grotesque realism is (...) a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (Bakhtin 1965: 20). Age is embodied time. We cannot escape time because of the inherent bodiedness of humanity. To be without a body is to be beyond even the inhuman. Because of this, it makes sense that "the aging body is the materialization of the various discursive constructions of age" (Basting 1998: 19). Alice seems to be exclusively interested in performing embodied monstrosity that can be influenced by aging—or the conspicuous lack thereof. Even other paranormal characters in Alice's oeuvre (not included in this show or on the albums I discuss here), such as the conjoined twin Alices on the cover of *Paranormal* (2017), are corporeal monsters. No ghosts, only putrid flesh, voluminous fat, gigantic size, leaking blood, boney contortions, and twisted proportions.

(2) When Alice uses comedy, particularly a comedy that can coexist with ambivalence (in other words, when the humour isn't trying to paint one way of being or another as "better"). This is so crucial for a contemporary analysis of age and ability that doesn't fall into the tropes Disability Studies scholars have been warning us about: namely, that we don't want to go so far in normalizing aging that we try to paint any age as "better" than another (von Hülsen-Esch 2022). After recognizing an embodied time, the next step is to be able to laugh at it. To tear it down joyfully. To not preserve its form—and to remain ambivalent about that so as to allow it to change and change again. "Carnival laughter builds its own world in opposition to the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state" (Bakhtin 1965: 88) and, almost paradoxically, it is that ability to dissolve that is what makes comedy so indissolubly related to the potential for freedom. In Alice's show, the perceived violation of natural proportions reveals what norms we harbour, particularly for age. These unexpected bodies heighten the comedy of unexpected actions, like when the reanimated corpse of Frankenalice seems to gleefully hop and flail his arms in joy—the wind flowing through his clumps of hair as he runs around with carefree abandon. Similarly, one of the biggest laughs of the show is when the giant inflatable baby, face adorned with an unsettlingly large grin, grabs Alice's disembodied head from the guillotine and dances around with it to the audience sing-along of "I Love the Dead" (Cooper 1973). Grotesque comedy, parody, and satire must be careful not to exit too early though, as that prematurely cuts off the transformative potential of the act. "Folk humor denies, but it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture" (Bakhtin 1965: 11). So just as we were reminded of the importance of not "overcorrecting" sociocultural wrongs by casting either older age or youth as more valuable than the other, we must also remember that part of the revolutionary process is to be aware of the lived experience of the common man.

(3) When Alice's monsters are "winning" or "losing" the battle in the suspended time of The Show. On the *'Ol Black Eyes is Back* tour, the cycle of mutants vs Alice is one of perpetual motion; he dethrones them, they rise again and dethrone him, he rises again and dethrones them. This is the revolutionary

potential: changing and aliveness, rather than the completed and immortal (Bakhtin 1965: 10). It's not a battle of young versus old; it's a battle of alive or dead. Alice the Performer has to deal with the lived difficulty of celebrating both change and life even with the spectre of death waiting in the wings. Alice the Persona has a different relationship to them; although he is not free from them. The persona is a sort of vampire figure, changing and benefitting from the liveness of his host. He cannot stay dead, be completed, or achieve immortality so long as Alice the Performer keeps him alive via energy transfer. In this way, there is also a Frankenstein/Frankenstein's monster parallel (Nugent et al 2018). The oscillation of death and rebirth, revivification, or reincarnation and back again is the most pervasive undercurrent in the menagerie. As observed in the previous paragraph, we don't want to be so far removed from the lived experience of the common man that we negate the implication that old age necessarily leads to death; however, perhaps we've also come to a space where we can hold multiple things to be true and to acknowledge that it's possible to remain alive in some ways even after death and vice versa (Carroll 1987). This is even more true – and the lines further blurred – as technology advances.

(4) When, in the lifespan of Alice's performances, we see the intersection of all of these things at a point of rebirth or upheaval that opens people up to new thinking. In the realm of Bakhtin's examples of the grotesque, this happened when there was a shift from thinking of time as cyclical (in line with the natural seasons and harvest) to prioritizing historical, linear time. I think the birth of the Internet and the Digital Renaissance offered a similar point of upheaval for the popular majority of Alice Cooper's era by again shifting lived relationships with time (Kirby 2009). In the Age of the Internet, perceived spacetime is compressed by the speed and distance that information can travel (Heidegger 1962; Benjamin 1968; Kirby 2006). Our ability to consume some commodities in real time as they are produced (for example, watching a performance on Instagram Live) or accessed (for example, archival video clips on YouTube) makes some sort of singularity feel ever closer. I argue that with this shift in time must also come a shift in understanding of time-based forms like age identity (time embodied) and music (time organized). By looking for sites of performative expression through Bakhtin's framework of carnival and the grotesque, I continue to find intersections of musicking and age identity in Alice Cooper's oeuvre that reveal new nuances of how Alice has been expressing and experimenting with different understandings of age(ing) within the context of technology that can, at the same time, make all of recorded time feel simultaneous while also showing that it isn't.

IV. Cripping The Living Deadness, the Undeadness, and/or the Living Undeadness of "I'm Eighteen" (1970)

"As Nina Auerbach suggests in her 1995 *Our Vampires Ourselves*, 'every age embraces the vampire it needs'" (Basting 1998: 148). I would argue that Alice Cooper is the vampire we need now to handle a tricky conversation: namely, how to balance a celebration of embodiment with awareness of the potential to reinscribe harms already present in society (both generally and within popular

music). How might we decentre normative ideas about bodies and the disproportionate focus they pull in the discussion of age(ing) without also unduly negating their importance in the process? To answer this question, I turn to disability scholarship and look particularly at a couple of subtler components of Alice's stage performance: his use of mobility tools and affectations of "old age". From this lens, I argue that the thematic trajectory of age in Alice Cooper's musicking bears the hallmarks of an effort to "crip" time: that is, as Samuels (2017) said, a movement to bend (or interpret) time to suit a disabled body rather than the inverse, in this case by decentring "able bodied youth" as the "norm" of Rock.

In a less nuanced performance or understanding of age, aging, and grotesquerie (which depends on hyperbolic satire or parody of the corporeal), the correlation of any type of body with "monstrousness" could damage the unmonstrous real people who might identify with them. As Leslie Fiedler explains: "monsters are not 'real' as Freaks are" (Fiedler 1978/1993). This is hugely important to distinguish; the main monster characters in this show (such as a Frankenalice) are so exaggerated that they are obviously unreal, but some smaller characters acted out in mime (such as a "little old lady") are not as obviously fictional. Comparatively, they might read as real—and the portrayal of those characters can end up having tangible sociocultural impact. This is especially important for somebody like Alice Cooper, who has been made a part of some of the subversive efforts of dis/abled people to reclaim loaded terminology for use *by* (instead of *on*) a vulnerable minority. For example, two of the most common self-bestowed labels used in the Alice Cooper fan community are "Freaks" (such as in the most recent 2023 tour "Freaks on Parade") and "Sick Things" (the longstanding moniker for Cooper's fans). We need a vampire—in this case, a Hollywood Vampire—that knows not just where to stop, but how to balance. In the history of his performances of "I'm Eighteen", he illustrates just that.

Now, this is not to say that every mime of a hunched back and cane to represent the little old lady in "No More Mr. Nice Guy" (Cooper 1973) is transcendent. But in "I'm Eighteen" (Cooper 1970), the juxtaposition of his crutch choreography and other performances of age or aging over the past five decades has been so layered with the lyrical and improvisational content of the song that it strikes a resonant frequency.

The lyrics of the song set a foundation of what we probably already recognize as tropes of age(ing) from fifty years of Baby Boomer pop culture:

Acknowledgment of physical changes: "Lines form on my face and hands".

Acknowledgment of emotional weight: "Lines form from the ups and downs".

Youth as a confusing time: "I'm eighteen and I don't know what I want"; "Don't always know what I'm talkin' about"; "Feels like I'm livin' in the middle of doubt."

But there's also some unrealized transformative potential in the lyrics as well:

Youth as a liminal space, betwixt *and* beyond: "I'm a boy *and* I'm a man." (my emphasis); "I'm in the middle without any plans."; "I've gotta get out of this place".

He doesn't see it yet, but relishing in this betweenness is, in my opinion, a crucial part of what would be the twenty-first century, post-postmodern project: to meet modernism and postmodernism in the middle while also moving beyond (Vermuelen et al 2019; Abramson 2015). There is nothing but betweenness for us while we are alive. To escape the middle is to be dead.

And ultimately, even in the song, even in the shadow of late 1960s/early 1970s context for young men of that age in the United States, Cooper embraces it:

"I'm eighteen and I like it."

There is a sharp contrast between the gritty teen sneer with which he sings all of the lines above—the majority of the song—and the way he suddenly puts on this slower, lower, tired, pained affect when talking about his "old man" heart. This dichotomy—having "a baby's brain and an old man's heart" (Cooper 1970)—is another liminality that directly ties in with the cognitive dissonance surrounding this monolith of prescribed youth culture that was put on Classic Rock artists (by themselves and others).

And then the way he engages with this crutch. As I mentioned before, there's this longstanding idea that, in rock, the cut off for old age is notoriously thirty years old. It's noteworthy that Alice started doing this crutch choreo on the *Madhouse Rock* tour in 1979—just as Classic Rock became a radio block—potentially as a sardonic prophylactic against an expected, impeding cultural obscurity. 1979 was also just after Alice the Performer turned thirty. He had not used the mobility tool gag in the earliest performances of "I'm Eighteen", even though the band members were slightly older than eighteen years old already by the time the song was written. Alice's *Madhouse* spectacle featured a much more aggressive crutch choreo than we see these days, but its adoption as a staple of that song's performance shows that, in some capacity, he has been aware of a ticking clock and the alligator swimming behind his Captain Hook.

Most prominently, the crutch seems to symbolically represent an assumed change in physicality that signals "old age", even though the use of mobility tools is something that is not age-dependent. Alice frequently switches up the way he uses the crutch; it is a conductor's baton, an air guitar, a pointer, and, almost *least* frequently, an assistive mobility device. At different points in the song, he will lean upon it for support, only to kick it away moments later. At the end of the song, he tosses it back over his head indignantly. In my take, this is a way the artist can be playful about age and aging—which is already an act of defiance—while also normalizing different bodies that evolve in linear and unlinear ways. The Alice persona is a trickster figure; he subverts and circumvents expectation. In the interview where I asked about this crutch choreography (the same interview in which I asked about how old he imagines the Persona to be), he brought up humour immediately. He said that the crutch choreo is that Alice persona playing a prank or a joke on him—Alice the Performer—and making fun of the huge disconnect between a then seventy-two year old playing a twenty-eight-year-old singing about what it's like to be eighteen. He draws attention to artifice and relativity—of time, of "age", of ability—in ways that, as I have argued previously, are both uncommon

and yet also seemingly more accessible to spurring conversation in mainstream audience demographics.

With that balance to maintain, it's noteworthy to observe what gets the minimalist "humour" treatment and what gets the more maximalist "horror" treatment in these shows. I think this spectrum is very revealing about what the artists and fans truly consider "scary" or "shocking" in life. For instance, as audience members, we're never worried about the fact that this character has died on stage over ten thousand times. Fans cheer as the execution happens. We know it's coming; there's a coffin on stage the whole time. And we also know the character—vampire or not—won't stay dead. What *is* scary—in life as in the Universal horror films to which this show nods—is the unknown and unseen: things shown off camera, things obscured in the shadows, the uncertainty of what might happen outside the confines of the show. We need the camp, vaudevillian humour, and sacred separation of concert spacetime to address the truly horrific: prescriptive narratives about bodies and fears of loss that so often come with discussions about age, aging, and dis/ability.

Bakhtin's work applies here too. As he notes, laughter represents a victory – over fear, over death, over power, over the assumptions about what age and aging look or sound like. Via the medium of laughter, anything horrifying can be set apart; transformed into an unreal space of the grotesque. A space where:

> "inhibitions and mores, even identities, could be let loose so that new and better norms and selves can take shape. For while the grotesque to many confers negative connotations of the horrific and the disgusting… [there is a] world view in which the grotesque constitutes a revolutionary opening to new and exciting possibilities. Rather than an eruption of uncontrollable and transgressive forms of behavior and bodies that are best eliminated, Bakhtin sees grotesque behavior and grotesque bodies as a vital sign of health, not just for the individual but for society as a whole". (Graulund 2019).

Now, this is really to put a decidedly optimistic, arguably privileged, spin on it. I don't mean to discount the very real ways where the terms or ideas of grotesquery or freakdom and age have been used as oppression, particularly for people who aren't as white, cishet, able-bodied, economically successful, and male as Alice Cooper. In fact, a couple of years ago scholar Tiffany Naiman gave an amazing paper at the 2017 meeting of the American Musicological Society about Madonna and the aging female body in popular music that really makes clear how different it is for other acts, particularly female, to do this. Screamin' Jay Hawkins talked about the dangers of getting into a coffin willingly as a black man. The fears or anxieties about aging and how we or others read age is different and highly intersectional—and that is important to acknowledge before I draw my final conclusions.

To bring this article to a close, I would like to address a common idea that what we're always ultimately afraid of is being dead—or of death itself. I think this show, like the classic Universal Horror films and other monster media, reveals another thread: a fear of a liminal space where you don't feel fully dead or fully alive. This is a fear manifested so clearly by Frankenstein's monster, vampires, and zombies—

and, for some people, also manifested in anxieties about aging or disability. Fears of the extreme exist; however, I believe that they often mask a pervasive fear of the middle that exists too. This is where I feel that the work we're doing comes in. We must of course continue to break the assumption that alive = young and traditionally able-bodied, and that aging is a subsequent draining of that vitality until you are a liminally placed shell. We must also break assumptions that the solution to those ageist biases is to minimize or refute the value that youth does have. In the twenty-first century, we are better positioned than ever to shift beyond the modernist debate of the former and the postmodern deconstruction of the latter into a third space: a metamodern framework that allows us to consider perspectives of age that exist simultaneously between and outside of the others.

V. Conclusion: Musical Notes on a Metamodernist, or at Least a Post-postmodern, Relationship with Age in the Twenty-first Century

The history of digital mediation, mass commoditization of youth, and their effects on socioculturally negotiated perceptions of time in the twentieth and twenty-first century are inextricable from the evolution of cultural interpretations of the intersection between Classic Rock and age; and vice versa. Different conventions within different subgenres peel back layers that reveal, via the medium of "music" (or rather, "time organized"), new contemporary flavours of that experience and new frameworks by which to understand it.

Baby Boomer musicians, who were the first demographic to have their age identity commodified and almost fossilized in youth, have also had to lead the way for other genres of popular music that followed in their wake during the "shift [in] the United States from a country identified and predominantly populated with youth toward a society of the aged" (Basting 1998: 17). For a conversation that so often *seems* to be pitted in the extremes—young or old, early/mid-twentieth-century modernism versus mid/late-twentieth-century postmodernism, vitality versus decay, alive or dead—I believe that the twenty-first century evolution of the discourse on age will, like Alice Cooper's music, actually be the beginning of wider appreciation for avant garde understandings of extremes as "middles" (and vice versa) in a way that isn't so obvious with a narrow model of linear time. The middle, construed very broadly (being "between", "beyond", and "simultaneous" all at once) in the post-postmodern/metamodern context, is a historically overlooked place, despite being rife with opportunity to address lived experiences that people have been expressing with regards to other identities or in other contexts. Alice Cooper serves as an early case study of one way that contemporary discourse on age, made more expansive and complex by the influence of the Internet on perception of time and non-linear experience of history, can be transduced and amplified to make and value space in the middle for those who might otherwise be on the fringe.

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