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# ZADÁNÍ DIPLOMOVÉ PRÁCE

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## Zásady pro vypracování

Závěrečná diplomová práce se bude zabývat tématem hnutí Nového věku a jeho zobrazením v americké populární kultuře. Důraz bude kladen zejména na takové směry uvnitř hnutí, které jsou většinou společností obecně vnímány jako obskurní a problematické (moderní satanismus, wicca atp.), přičemž zkoumanou oblastí populární kultury bude především kinematografie. Teoretická část práce nastíní sociohistorický kontext vzniku hnutí Nového věku v rámci americké kultury, a to jak obecně, tak i s ohledem na konkrétní směry alternativní spirituality, jejichž vymezení je vzhledem k obsahu práce relevantní. Pozornost bude rovněž věnována teoretickému zařazení kinematografie do korpusu populární kultury, přičemž z podstaty tématu bude důkladněji prozkoumán žánr hororu. Praktická část práce následně poskytne zevrubnou analýzu tematicky relevantních filmů americké produkce vydaných v letech 1970-2010. Hlavním záměrem bude pozorovat, jak se prvky vybraných směrů hnutí Nového věku promítají do americké populární kultury (kinematografie), jaké stereotypy se pojí s jejich zobrazením a jak stereotypizace může vést k utváření předsudků a otevřenému nepřátelství většinové společnosti vůči některým typům alternativní spirituality. Zároveň bude provedena komparace filmů z různých období, jejímž cílem bude určit, zdali a případně do jaké míry se zmíněná zobrazení s časem mění a vyvíjí.

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## **Annotation**

The thesis examines the motifs of New Age spirituality in several prominent horror films of American production (from 1970 to 2010). The theoretical part concentrates on characterizing the New Age Movement, its historical influences, and sociocultural determinants while scrutinizing the New Religious Movements of modern Satanism and Wicca by establishing the linkage to the New Age ethos. Furthermore, it includes a general overview of notable religious motifs in the horror genre. The analytical part then explores such motifs in the selected horror films while observing their continual alteration or lack thereof by each decade.

## **Keywords**

alternative spirituality, New Age, modern Satanism, Wicca, horror films

## **Název**

New Age v populární kultuře

## **Anotace**

Práce analyzuje motivy New Age spirituality v rámci několika významných hororových filmů americké produkce (z let 1970 až 2010). Její teoretická část se zaměřuje na zevrubný popis hnutí New Age, jeho historických vlivů a sociokulturních determinantů, přičemž věnuje pozornost dvěma novým náboženským hnutím – modernímu satanismu a Wicce – která dává do souvislosti s étosem hnutí New Age. Kromě toho tato část zahrnuje obecný přehled častých náboženských motivů objevujících se v žánru hororu. Analytická část poté zkoumá tyto motivy v kontextu vybraných hororových filmů a pozoruje jejich postupný vývoj (popřípadě jeho absenci) napříč desetiletími.

## **Klíčová slova**

alternativní spiritualita, New Age, moderní satanismus, Wicca, hororové filmy

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## Introduction

The thesis attempts to scrutinize a selection of sample horror fiction films, concentrating primarily on the depictions of the religious and spiritual dimensions while drawing general conclusions on the influence of the New Age Movement on the religious horror subgenre and (less prominently) vice versa.

The first chapter introduces the New Age Movement, investigating the origins of the term and discussing its applicability in academic discourse. Moreover, it addresses widespread criticism of the term and contrasts it with labels frequently used as its substitutes, including alternative spirituality (or alternative religion), New Religious Movements, and Western Esotericism. Due to its immense influence on the New Age Movement, Western Esotericism is discussed more meticulously, which encompasses a historical excursion into its evolution – from classical antiquity through the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and the Enlightenment to the 20th century, which saw the gradual emergence of the New Age Movement, listing a plethora of prominent elements and influential figures associated with esoteric beliefs and practices. The last section of the first chapter then examines modern Satanism (predominantly LaVeyan Satanism) and Wicca, attempting to summarize their tenets, history, external influences, and possible social criticism while providing a brief scrutiny of *The Satanic Bible* (1969) by Anton Szandor LaVey and *Witchcraft Today* (1954) by Gerald Brosseau Gardner, two crucial works denoting the principles of LaVeyan Satanism and Wicca.

The second chapter delves into the topic of horror fiction, predominantly focusing on its religious and spiritual manifestations. Furthermore, it contains a brief examination of the development of horror fiction, concentrating on its features in the ancient oral tradition, on its occurrence throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and on the Gothic novel and ensuing Southern Gothic as predecessors to latter-day horror fiction. Subsequently, the chapter details its contemporary realizations, particularly in cinematography and on the Internet. Furthermore, it examines the inherent qualities of horror fiction, aiming to identify the emotional reactions it evokes and explain its enduring popularity in modern times. Most importantly, however, it provides a general overview of typical themes, tropes, and figures found in the religious horror subgenre.

The third chapter, building on the concepts defined in the preceding theoretical chapters, analyzes selected films that can be (at least partially) categorized within the corpus of religious horror. Summarily, it centers on the period from 1970 to 2010 (the approximate time of the

inception and rise of the New Age Movement), selecting two horror films for each decade, one revolving around witchcraft and one focusing on Satanism or interrelated themes.<sup>1</sup> Coordinately, the analysis, while encompassing various issues, principally concerns the overview of religious motifs as exhibited in the selected films and strives to determine traces of influence (or lack thereof) of the New Age ethos. Additionally, the film corpus was assembled to connote a degree of diversity, including films that delve not only into religiosity and supernatural but also involve distinct cultural, feminist, or political undertones. However, since the selection is highly subjective, the ensuing analyses and conclusions can, by no means, be generalized.

The literature used in the theoretical part of the thesis is primarily academic, comprising publications and articles written by experts on alternative spirituality and horror fiction. In addition, the first chapter includes several primary texts by founders and/or practitioners of modern Satanism and Wicca, notably *The Satanic Bible* and *Witchcraft Today*. While *The Satanic Bible*, which formulates the principal tenets of modern Satanism, is adequately probed, *Witchcraft Today* is merely briefly denoted due to its inclination toward mainly historical and pseudohistorical postulations. Instead, other texts by contemporary Wiccans are used to illustrate the current form of the tradition. The analytical part of the thesis at times utilizes, in addition to academic texts, supplementary sources (mainly online articles) due to the scarcity of scholarly works on the subject. However, such texts are subjected to critical analysis and conventionally do not relate to information crucial for the eventual conclusions.

The thesis endeavors to approach the problematics methodically, first introducing the necessary terminology and theoretical concepts related to the topic, second deploying conceptual knowledge in the subsequent analysis of the selected films, and third extracting general conclusions regarding the contribution to a specific segment of popular culture.

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<sup>1</sup> The complete film corpus is to be found either in the introduction to the third chapter or by the end of the paper.

# 1. New Age Spirituality in a Sociocultural Context

The term New Age, when contextualized within the religious milieu, creates a concrete, if predominantly diverse, image of beliefs and practices that are inherently intertwined with the ethos of postmodernity. However, when attempting to render its plausible description or even definition, several major complications ensue. Therefore, it is vital to provide an initial assessment of the issue at hand while contrasting it with other labels related to the topic of newly emerged types of spirituality and religious conduct.

Deciphering the superficial denotation of the term New Age should not prove strenuous. As insinuated by George D. Chrissydes, the latter-day roots of the New Age Movement (NAM) can be traced back to the 19th century and are firmly associated with Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, a founder-leader of the Theosophical Society, who presumably coined the term herself. Nevertheless, its contemporary usage can be attributed to David Spangler, a renowned spiritual philosopher who played a pivotal role in instigating the early stages of the Movement.<sup>2</sup> Unambiguously, the term New Age was meant to indicate the upcoming turn of the millennium, an event of considerable spiritual symbolism and transformation, which was believed to reshape the current world order and bring forth a new epoch of Mankind. Pat Collins, among many others, notes that the idea of such a metaphysical transition from one age to another originated in divinatory practices, namely in astrology. Humanity would abandon the Judeo-Christian Age of Pisces marked by wars, bigotry, and conservatism, and commence an Age of Aquarius that would introduce peace, harmony, and prosperity.<sup>3</sup> Marilyn Ferguson, one of the most influential figures associated with the early stages of the NAM, who is frequently regarded as a pioneer of the “Age of Aquarius” conception, published a monography on the subject named *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1987). Ferguson argues that “after a dark, violent age, the Piscean, we are entering a millennium of love and light – in the words of the popular song, ‘The Age of Aquarius,’ the time of ‘the mind’s true liberation.’”<sup>4</sup> One of the chief characteristics of the unprecedented spiritual alteration was said to be an extensive decline of institutionalized forms of religion, more specifically Christianity; however, the reactive relation between the NAM and other religious traditions will be illustrated in the latter sections of the chapter.

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<sup>2</sup> George D. Chrissydes, “Defining the New Age” in *Handbook of New Age*, ed. James Lewis and Daren Kemp (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 6–9.

<sup>3</sup> Pat Collins, “New Age Spirituality,” *The Furrow* 49, no. 2 (February 1998): 91.

<sup>4</sup> Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy: Personal and Social Transformation in Our Time* (New York: Putnam, 1982), 19.

Even so, numerous critics have repeatedly pointed out that the term New Age (and its variations) is not only vague and arbitrary, but it also incorporates beliefs and practices so distant and divergent that seeking a common denominator might become unfeasible. Indeed, as Jack Finnegan claims, the NAM oftentimes tends to encapsulate contemporary thought in philosophy, religion, and science while merging it with topical day-to-day issues, such as ecology, health, and lifestyle.<sup>5</sup> Such a vast array of seemingly unrelated topics may help explain the enormous diversity within the Movement as well as its evident reluctance to be logically categorized and defined. Accordingly, Steven J. Sutcliffe argues that initially, the term New Age used to be an apocalyptic emblem, and as of late, it serves as a mere spiritual idiom, rendering it a theoretical construct – a reckless attempt made by outsiders to artificially bind together an immense number of disparate ideas, beliefs, and practices that lack any predictable content and fixed referents.<sup>6</sup> Such an evaluation acts as a prelude to a problem more serious. Sutcliffe states that the term does appertain neither to etic (objective or outsider accounts) nor emic (subjective or insider accounts) category – etically, the term is a social construct; emically, its usage appears “optional, episodic, and declining.”<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Chryssides, methodically addressing the widespread criticism of the term, declares that many academics consider the NAM a phenomenon of the past. Allegedly, the 1960s “hippie” movement, the Californian counterculture, the resistance against the establishment and authoritarianism, and utopian expectations have continually disappeared while popular culture, in a plethora of cases, replaced the label New Age with “Mind-Body-Spirit.”<sup>8</sup> Subsequently, Chryssides attempts to dispute the overall criticism, stating that the term New Age, albeit a theoretical construct, does not lack functionality and employability – etically, it is a label widely utilized by external commentators, mostly academics or evangelical critics; emically, numerous devotees have adopted the designation New Age for themselves and their groupings. Furthermore, the innovative nature of the Movement promotes its inclination to evolve and transform, but that does not imply its imminent disappearance altogether.<sup>9</sup>

Essentially, all the valid arguments mentioned above, both critical and apologetic, reinforce the impression of respective variety and entropy within the New Age Movement that, in turn, begs the question of whether the designation “movement,” which fosters a notion of a

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<sup>5</sup> Jack Finnegan, “The New Age Movement: A New Religion,” *The Furrow* 43, no. 6 (June 1992): 351.

<sup>6</sup> Steven J. Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices* (London: Routledge, 2003), 29.

<sup>7</sup> Sutcliffe, *Children*, 197.

<sup>8</sup> Chryssides, “Defining,” 12.

<sup>9</sup> Chryssides, “Defining,” 13–16.

unified and homogenous entity, may be applied at all. As demonstrated, the label is, in its entirety, a theoretical concept prone to an abundance of defects. At the same time, however, it presents a convenient umbrella term capable of absorbing a broad range of complex ideas, which is the main reason for its subsequent usage in this paper. Still, other forms of modern-day spirituality and religiosity are frequently misidentified with the New Age. Therefore, these should be briefly addressed as well.

Arguably, the most notorious substitute for the NAM is the popularized category of “alternative spirituality” or, less notably, “alternative religion.” Unfortunately, spirituality (from Latin *spiritus* – the breath of life) as a reliable descriptor cannot stand on its own because it might be dubbed even more vague and indefinite than the New Age itself. As Mick Brown expressed in his well-known publication *The Spiritual Tourist* (1999), spirituality became “a kind of buzz-word of the age.”<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, in compliance with the work of Walter Principe, observe that the precise meaning of the term spirituality shifted drastically throughout history. Firstly, the biblical usage denotes a sense of morality and discipline. Secondly, Christian Hellenism integrates the metaphysical dualism of spirit and matter. Thirdly, the ecclesiastical jurisdiction distinguished between temporal and spiritual concerns with regard to persons and property. Lastly, the Protestant Reformation conceived the tendency to equate the spiritual with one’s inner religious life. The contemporary usage of the term, on the other hand, is attributed to Romanticism, which emphasized internal feelings rather than external ecclesiastical authorities. The authors denounce the designation not only due to its arbitrariness but also due to its alleged modern association with capitalism and consumerism, which embrace a more materialistic worldview.<sup>11</sup> Chryssides, evaluating the hypothesis in question, strongly disagrees, pointing out that the fluidity of the term is grossly exaggerated and that, even though there exists no plausible academic definition, several common denominators of spirituality can be detected – namely the existence of dimensions or entities beyond the empirical realm, the ability to interact with them, or the search of deeper meaning in life. Furthermore, he adds that “alternative spirituality” is not synonymous with the New Age as this alternativeness includes the deflection of mainstream Christianity and admission of other major world faiths, which is by no means a credible pointer to the New Age ethos whose specificity lies in the rejection of firm spiritual doctrines offered by the traditional religions and the

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<sup>10</sup> Mick Brown, *The Spiritual Tourist: A Personal Odyssey Through the Outer Beaches of Belief* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Jeremy Carrette, Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005), 34–43.

adoption of the “seeker” attitude that enables the devotees to gain spiritual nourishment from the search itself, not from the findings they make.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, the prevalent designation of the New Religious Movement (NRM) that is commonly utilized by the academic discourse in order to avoid more pejorative labels such as sect or cult is regularly used to draw parallels with the NAM, even though the term itself is analogously considered problematic for a variety of reasons. From the emic viewpoint, the groups outlined as the NRM do not necessarily regard themselves as “new” since their members often hold a firm belief that they became the modern-day successors of ancient traditions; moreover, the “religious” element may be debatable as well, for the designation also involves unions that view themselves as lacking the religious dimension altogether; finally, the term “movement,” correspondingly with the NAM, denotes a degree of uniformity that some of the NRM certainly do not possess. Paul Heelas resolutely asserts that perceiving the NAM as an independent religious tradition, an example of the NRM, or even a substantial collection of NRMs is simply inaccurate. Such a perplexing inclination stems from a relatively brief history of academic study in new religiosity and somewhat ill-defined terminology.<sup>13</sup>

More remarkably, the final term, whose universal definition or lack thereof will be outlined here, carries significant meaning, both in general and for the imminent purposes of the thesis, and thus has to be probed meticulously – through a historical excursion to the development of beliefs and practices it envelops, for these directly coincide with the NAM. Esotericism, at times introduced by the adjective “Western,” represents yet another favorable umbrella term for various types of spirituality. Wouter J. Hanegraaff asserts that, in popular discourse, the terms “Western Esotericism” and “New Age” are used almost interchangeably, which is chronologically inaccurate and unhistorical. While it is verifiable that the NAM constitutes a contemporary phenomenon emanating from exceedingly older esoteric traditions, its current form was influenced and transformed by a vast number of societal developments, particularly in the wake of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment. Moreover, the continuity is equally disturbed by the cultural contexts in which such ideas are perceived, so one has to follow not only these inherent conceptions but also their metamorphoses under the impact of cultural subtleties.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Chryssides, “Defining,” 14–15.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 9.

<sup>14</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The New Age Movement and Western Esotericism” in *Handbook of New Age*, ed. James Lewis and Daren Kemp (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 25–26.

Jointly, Hanegraaff mentions that even though Western Esotericism is a sought-after subject of academic study as of late, there exists no clear-cut consensus on what appertains under its heading. Apparently, three essential models were established as a result – (1) Early modern enchantment, (2) The (post)modern occult, and (3) Inner traditions. The “Early modern enchantment” model, based on the postulations of Antoine Faivre and Frances Yates, regards the Esotericism of early modern culture, roughly from Paracelsus to the Romantic era, as its prototypical example that can be defined by enchanted worldviews defiant toward modernist and rationalist post-Enlightenment society. Alternatively, “The (post)modern occult” model instigates the hypothesis that only after the 18th century did Esotericism transpire as a social phenomenon, which enabled the emergence of official organizations capable of rivaling the uncontested authority of the Christian churches and widely amplified its relevance. Noteworthy, according to the “Inner traditions” model, which stems from the academically problematic conviction that the esoteric dimension of reality does exist, the innate esoteric spirituality is deemed universal, unified, and unrestrained by social, historical, or cultural circumstances, rendering Western Esotericism a mere segment of a larger spiritual domain. In essence, each model operates out of a specific selection of prototypical examples contextualized within a fixed time frame that the scholars who devised it consider the most faithful depiction of Esotericism in practice.<sup>15</sup>

Categorically, the beliefs and practices befitting the description of Western Esotericism and, subsequently, the New Age Movement spring from a long-lasting tradition that historically precedes even some forms of institutionalized spirituality, which dominate the religious milieu. According to Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, the author of a resourceful historical compendium named *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (2008), Western Esotericism has its primordial roots in traditional patterns of thought typical for classical antiquity (approximately from the 8th century B.C. to 5th century A.D.). These include but are not limited to a system of direct correspondences between the supreme divine reality, the universe, the earthy plane of existence, and human beings; the idea of an ensouled and animated universe; the notion of hierarchical structure in dimensions; or the vision of the transformation of the human soul and its ensuing return to the higher spheres.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 4–14.

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 15.

Such articulate conceptions, Goodrick-Clarke continues, constitute the archaic teachings of Alexandrian Hermetism, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, Pythagoreanism, Orphism, or theurgy, to name a few. Ancient Egypt, particularly after its absorption into the Roman Empire (31 B.C.), became the birthplace as well as the impending center of these esoteric doctrines, establishing a unique form of spiritual syncretism through the combination of Graeco-Roman rationalism, oriental mythology, and newly-founded mystery cults well-versed in magic, oracles, and healing. Fundamentally, the primary sources of Hellenistic spirituality and Western Esotericism as a whole are termed *Hermetica* – an extensive collection of texts on theosophy, astrology, and magic that are attributed to and named after Hermes Trismegistus – a mythical fusion of Ancient Greek deity Hermes and Ancient Egyptian god Thoth – who was believed to possess and reveal arcane knowledge. While *Hermetica* appear in anthologies and fragments by various authors, *Corpus Hermeticum* (2-3 century A.D.), a substantive assemblage of seventeen treatises, is regarded as the most influential. It introduces some of the paramount principles in Western Esotericism, such as the unified harmony between microcosm and macrocosm (the reflection of the universe in the human mind), the absence of dualism, or the ability to ascend into higher spheres through the exceptionality of human intelligence.<sup>17</sup>

As exemplified, Alexandrian Hellenism signified the seedbed of esoteric beliefs and practices; conversely, the following major epoch of human history – the Middle Ages – witnessed a sudden yet intelligible shift in focus. Christianity gradually emerged as a predominant force in the spiritual milieu of the West, whereas the esoteric traditions were deemed heresy by the ecclesiastical authorities. Goodrick-Clarke states that after the Western Roman Empire crumbled under the onslaught of barbarians and entered the Dark Ages, its Eastern part became the exclusive heir and sole bearer of Graeco-Roman values. However, Esotericism flourished elsewhere – by the 6th century, Arabs unfolded as an ascendant power in the Middle East, settling Egypt and Chaldea and promptly assimilating the Western spiritual legacy of magic, astrology, and alchemy. Only in the 15th century did the philosophical paradigm of the West, influenced by intellectuals and churchmen fleeing westward in order to escape the impending destruction of the Byzantine Empire, institute a process of transformation and renewed interest in nature and man, commencing the period of Renaissance and Humanism, which, indeed, proved exceptionally favorable in furthering the development of Western Esotericism.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western*, 15–20.

<sup>18</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western*, 33–34.

Universally, the gradual revival of esoteric traditions had its roots in 15th-century Italy and was associated with the newly popularized Humanistic worldview and rejuvenated engrossment in the original Graeco-Roman philosophy reintroduced by scholars from the East instead of commentaries made by medieval Scholastic authors. Naturally, as Goodrick-Clarke declares, the pivotal Italian pioneers of Esotericism, mainly centered in the flourishing Renaissance city of Florence, were students of Greek philosophy who would progressively uncover the metaphysical and arcane knowledge preserved by the Byzantine Empire. The most significant among such figures was Marsilio Ficino, a founder of the restored Platonic Academy and promoter of Neoplatonism and Hermeticism, who famously translated *Corpus Hermeticum* into Latin, and Pico della Mirandola, who was capable of incorporating the medieval Jewish mystical and speculative tradition of Kabbalah into the Western thought.<sup>19</sup> In a similar fashion, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, a German occultist and real-life inspiration for the Faustian legend, strived to dispel the ill repute of magic, writing an influential treatise *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* (1533) that, under the influence of Neoplatonic, Hermetic, and Kabbalistic ideas, concentrated on the problematics of natural, celestial, and intellectual magic, eliminating all its dangerous elements while attempting to outline the possible usage in angelology, astrology, or numerology. Analogically, the English court hosted another man who would shape the modern history of Western Esotericism – John Dee, an extraordinary scholar-magician and advisor to Elizabeth I. Dee’s lifelong quest to seek profound spiritual knowledge prompted the absorption into the enigmatic practices of angel magic and mediumship and resulted in his partnership with Edward Kelley, an alchemist of unsavory reputation accused of charlatanry and proneness to dark arts, particularly necromancy. Dee and Kelley devised an occult experiment involving an obsidian Aztec mirror, through which they allegedly channeled to angelic harbingers and recorded an occult-constructed language of Enochian.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the branch of alchemy was heavily transformed by Paracelsus, one of the first modern medical theorists, who advocated the reliance on experimentation and observation and introduced the concepts of iatrochemistry and homeopathy.<sup>21</sup> As illustrated, the Age of Renaissance proved enormously productive in terms of the restoration and development of esoteric traditions, and the prominent particulars mentioned above are mere examples of a vast number of individuals whose meticulous listing is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this paper.

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<sup>19</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western*, 33–46.

<sup>20</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western*, 55–68.

<sup>21</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western*, 74–75.

Eventually, as the Renaissance meant the unprecedented rise of Western Esotericism, the subsequent historically significant epoch of the 17th and 18th centuries – the Enlightenment – sealed its inevitable decline. Rationalism, Empiricism, and scientific Positivism dominated the academic discourse; at the same time, traditional religious and esoteric beliefs and practices were deemed unjustifiable by factual means and, therefore, irrelevant for the approaching Age of Reason. As noted by Max Weber, the processes of rationalization and secularization created the image of a disenchanted world, which suppressed the notion of magic in favor of intellectualism.<sup>22</sup> However, Goodrick-Clarke attests that the new “mechanical” worldview indirectly generated the “irrational” opposition against the practical reforming rationalism in the form of Romanticism – an intellectual and artistic movement of the 18th century, which reevaluated the importance of emotional, intuitive, and spiritual experience. Romanticism expressed itself through a wide variety of themes, ranging from the rediscovery of medieval forms, renewed fascination with ancient folklore and orientalism, and Gothic literary motifs cultivating the sublime and supernatural to the apparent continuities of Hermetic tradition, theosophy, or alchemy. More importantly, an extensive counterculture of secret societies and sects emerged, becoming the possessors of esoteric ideals, albeit in an institutionalized form. Arguably, the most prestigious of such organizations, aside from Rosicrucianism, was the high-grade Freemasonry – a fraternal society adhering both to Christianity and Humanistic attitudes that revolutionized the esoteric milieu by establishing the initiation process and the devotional hierarchy inside the organization.<sup>23</sup> As for the individual theorists, the most prolific figure of 18th-century Esotericism was Emmanuel Swedenborg, a Swedish mystic influenced not only by esoteric traditions but also Rationalism and Protestant Pietism, who reportedly experienced a series of visions that fostered his spiritual awakening and enabled him to visit the transcendent planes of Heaven and Hell.<sup>24</sup>

After a turbulent period defined by the schism between natural sciences and esoteric traditions followed by their intellectual devaluation came the 19th-century occult revival. Goodrick-Clarke explains that Romanticism greatly stimulated cultural receptivity to the mysterious and unknown, reinforcing a resumed interest in ritual magic, Spiritualism (the idea that the soul of a deceased can directly communicate with the living), and Mesmerism (the theory postulated by Franz Mesmer that advocates the existence of ethereal force, which

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<sup>22</sup> Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 25.

<sup>23</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western*, 137–138.

<sup>24</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western*, 155–165.

envelops all living organisms and which manifests potent healing properties).<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the Theosophical Society, founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott in New York (1873), reflected the widening gulf between religious orthodoxy and scientific Positivism crystallized by the publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859) by Charles Darwin, attempting to overcome the distress with science and disillusionment with traditional religions. Blavatsky's theosophy addressed such concerns progressively, combining scientific methods with spiritual ideas and further syncretizing ancient beliefs with modern concepts. Additionally, in line with the Romantic interest in Orientalism, Blavatsky is credited for incorporating the Eastern doctrines of Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta into Western Esotericism, promoting its international growth in the 20th century.<sup>26</sup>

Undoubtedly, the continuation of Western Esoteric traditions in the 20th century is directly tied to the New Age Movement, for it is oftentimes considered its postmodern successor. Expectedly, this period itself begot a plethora of noteworthy figures who affected the trajectory of Esotericism – from Aleister Crowley to Karl Gustav Jung. However, Hanegraaff insists that the immediate predecessor of the NAM – the so-called proto-New Age Movement – are, in fact, the UFO cults of the 1950s whose belief system envisioned the destruction of the current civilization, either by cataclysms, great wars, or socioeconomic collapse, that would evade those who possess the qualities desired by the newly emerging society. The gradually appearing alternative, countercultural communities of the 1960s, with Findhorn as the primary example, assumed similar beliefs – their members, however, lived as if the New Age had already come in order to foster the spiritual transformation themselves instead of merely awaiting the apocalypse. Such an idealistic spiritual movement, which thrived mainly in the United Kingdom, is referred to as New Age *sensu stricto* (i. e., New Age in a restricted sense) and remains a clearly recognizable constituent of New Age *sensu lato* (i. e., New Age in a wider sense) that flourished in the United States, being influenced by Californian counterculture and linking together various “alternative” ideas and aforementioned elements of Western Esotericism.<sup>27</sup>

Consequently, the preceding attempt to illustrate the existence of a vast array of traditions, beliefs, and practices contained within Western Esotericism was designed to recognize the subsequent inability of the NAM as its successor to be amply categorized. More

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<sup>25</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western*, 191–192.

<sup>26</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western*, 211–212.

<sup>27</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (New York: SUNY Press, 1997), 94–98.

importantly, however, the revealing excursion into the extensive history of the esoteric conventions strived to exemplify the inherent nucleus of the NAM in a condensed form suitable for the purposes of the thesis and lay the necessary foundations for the last section of this chapter.

After reviewing the paramount concepts required for a better understanding of the NAM, it appears vital to conscientiously scrutinize the two spiritual traditions whose profound characterization is indispensable for the analytical part of the thesis – modern Satanism (predominantly LaVeyan Satanism) and Wicca (or The Craft). Contemporary scholarly discourse tends to classify these as examples of alternative spirituality or New Religious Movements, deriving from Western Esotericism and harboring its many traits. Jointly, modern Satanism and Wicca are not traditionally deemed prototypical representatives of the New Age Movement, even though there are multiple influential academics, Wouter J. Hanegraaff among them, who perceive them as its integral component since they observe a plethora of shared characteristics. Hence, this paper attempts to advocate their conceivable inclusion under the heading, if only for convenient simplification.

The issue of Satanism in the Western culture is, without a doubt, a complex one. Historically, religious groupings that would adhere to the worship of Satan, Lucifer, or any of the demonic beings they command according to Christian demonology were far from plentiful. Commonly, throughout the Middle Ages, each accusation of venerating the Devil and other practices considered blasphemous, which include but are not limited to witchcraft, demon summoning, or blood rituals, was to be taken very seriously by the Roman Catholic Church, who promptly investigated and, if proven guilty, eradicated every individual or group suspected of heresy. Even so, as asserted by Chris Mathews, Satan's genealogy appears as the richest of any mythological or religious figure - it is a result of an elaborate amalgamation of various traditions and folklores that spanned millennia and gradually incorporated numerous individual entities (e.g., Mephistopheles, Beelzebub, Azazel, Ahriman, Set) that would appertain to the same domain of thought and fulfill the role of evil incarnate.<sup>28</sup> Naturally, Satan is most notably characterized by his inevitably dire position in Christianity, functioning as the binary opposition to God and the supernatural embodiment of Mankind's fears, carnal desires, and negative qualities in general. However, due to a number of post-Enlightenment literary expressions, the individual perception of Satan gently transformed. As Mathews attests, after the emergence of

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<sup>28</sup> Chris Mathews, *Modern Satanism: Anatomy of a Radical Subculture* (Westport: Praeger, 2009), 2.

Romanticism, authors such as William Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelley or Lord Byron became deeply impressed by John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), which renders a more sympathetic image of Satan as a revolutionary antihero who opposes the tyranny of Heaven and appears morally superior to God. Correspondingly, such admiration prompted the Romantics to create their own rebellious, defiant characters that are frequently dubbed Satanic in nature.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, as a result of the prevalent theological interpretations, Satan was and partially still is regarded as the chief representative of evil, darkness, and chaos. The fact that his religious dimension in the Christian context remained virtually unmodified made any potential attempts at establishing institutionalized organizations directly centered around the figure unappealing and, in fact, nearly impossible even in the wake of modernity. Still, a meager quantity of groupings that utilized Satanic symbolism and iconography verifiably existed throughout the 19th century. The striking turning point in the latter-day history of Satanism, however, occurred during the 1960s in San Francisco, facilitated by the continual liberalization, the decline of Christianity, and the emerging Californian counterculture, and can be attributed to Anton Szandor LaVey, a charismatic instigator of modern Satanism, sometimes called specifically LaVeyan, the founder-leader of the Church of Satan (CoS) and the author of *The Satanic Bible* (1969). James R. Lewis explains that the Church of Satan, established in 1966, was the first official modern-time organization devoted to Satan and still is (by 2009) the largest body of Satanists in terms of formal membership. Despite its unattested position as the holder of the original modern Satanist doctrines, the CoS did not appear unified, which resulted in generating numerous splinter factions as early as 1973.<sup>30</sup> The most prolific one was named the Temple of Set (ToS), founded in 1975 by a political scientist and a former high-ranking member of the CoS, Michael A. Aquino. However, as Massimo Introvigne references, the unprecedented rise of Satanism was soon after superseded by a great Satanism scare in the 1980s, which accelerated mainly in the USA and Canada and has been compared with the most virulent episodes of witch hunts. Although it gradually terminated at the turn of the millennium when the governments officially declared most of the alleged ritualistic crimes associated with Satanism to be mere fabrications, its overall ill repute can still be felt today.<sup>31</sup> Still, it must be stressed that there indeed exist several radical Satanist subgroups, namely those attached to the

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<sup>29</sup> Mathews, *Modern*, 25–27.

<sup>30</sup> James R. Lewis, "Infernal Legitimacy" in *Contemporary Religious Satanism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Jesper Aagaard Petersen (London: Routledge, 2009), 45–48.

<sup>31</sup> Massimo Introvigne, *Satanism: A Social History* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 372.

chaos-gnostic tradition or the Order of Nine Angles (ONA) that is classified as a terrorist network.

Hereafter, the concluding part of this section will concentrate primarily on the beliefs and practices linked to the CoS as the original precursor to the modern Satanist tradition, while a few notes regarding its comparison with the ToS will be provided as well. In essence, LaVeyan Satanism, in parallel with numerous other traditions under the heading of the NAM, may be satisfactorily categorized as self-religion - a human potential movement whose sole aim is the eventual improvement of the self. Jesper Aagaard Petersen indicates that the vast majority of contemporary Satanist groups interpret Satan merely as a symbol, archetype, force of nature, or an expression of the self. Noteworthy, however, LaVeyan Satanism can be additionally regarded as the cult of opposition - an anti-Christian movement whose existence is paradoxically based on the Christian culture and its innate understanding of the Devil. In such terms, Satan as a symbol represents the vices traditionally shunned by Christianity, yet attractive for modern people, concretely individualism, non-conformity, egoism, hedonism, and sexual gratification. Even so, LaVeyan Satanism cannot be comprehended solely on the basis of an anti-Christian attitude, as the figure of Satan has been gradually reinterpreted and freed of its previous theological links.<sup>32</sup> Thus, it can act as a form of secular religion, recognizing a previously religious symbol stripped of its original meaning as a materialistic substitution for and rendition of inherent human qualities. Conversely, the secular Satanism of the CoS does not coincide with the ToS, whose interpretation of Satan appears far more spiritual in nature. Satan, being identified with Set, an ancient Egyptian deity, is considered an existing supernatural entity and god-like figure, even though he is not worshipped per se. Moreover, membership in the ToS includes a process of initiation and engagement in magical rituals, which only deepens its esoteric character and differentiates it from the CoS, whose contemplation on magic somewhat collides with the overall secular ethos of the movement.

Generally speaking, the document that can most diligently exemplify LaVey's vision of modern Satanism is *The Satanic Bible* - four books comprised of a collection of essays that detail the tenets of LaVeyan Satanism. Notably, the members of the CoS do not venerate its contents as a sacred scripture; rather, it serves as an authoritative text that dictates some of the dogmatic elements of the movement. The Prologue postulates the nine Satanic statements - arguably the most iconic invention from *The Satanic Bible* - that modify the existing Christian

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<sup>32</sup> Jesper Aagaard Petersen, "Introduction: Embracing Satan" in *Contemporary Religious Satanism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Jesper Aagaard Petersen (London: Routledge, 2009), 2-3.

Decalogue. The nine Satanic statements promote indulgence, vital existence, undefined wisdom, kindness to those who deserve it, vengeance, responsibility to the responsible, interpretation of a man as an animal with deadly potential thanks to their intelligence, the plausibility of the Seven Deadly Sins, and the inherent relation between Satanism and Christianity, all of which are represented by the figure of Satan.<sup>33</sup> As apparent, the primary notion of LaVeyan Satanism is that of unfiltered egoism, individual gratification, and negation of the ethics of reciprocity. It attempts to reject Christian dogmatism, assert that human beings are not to be fettered by outdated morals, and advocate for an eye-for-an-eye philosophy. The first book, *The Book of Satan*, further explores the implications of the nine Satanic statements while fostering the importance of individual happiness and success that are to be achieved by dismissing restricting social, legal, and religious conventions and accepting the hedonistic lifestyle.<sup>34</sup> The second book, *The Book of Lucifer*, contains a philosophical treatise on the nature of Satan as a symbol, which was already outlined, advances a proactive approach when solving problems instead of prayers, emphasizes the sanctity of life, and touches upon the popular myths regarding Satanism and human sacrifices, suicides, or sexuality.<sup>35</sup> The third book, *The Book of Belial*, ventures into the territory of magic and rituals, delineating methods of manipulating others and categorizing rituals based on their aim (rituals for sex, compassion, and destruction).<sup>36</sup> Finally, the fourth book, *The Book of Leviathan*, is composed of multiple Invocations and Enochian keys adapted from John Dee's work.<sup>37</sup>

As demonstrated, LaVeyan Satanism is rooted in individualism, hedonism, and the liberation of the self, which aligns with the essence of human potential movement. However, its clear inclination toward egocentrism and narcissism may appear problematic. Individuals are encouraged to become gods in their own right instead of following rigid religious doctrines, which can cause misconceptions in those not elaborately familiar with the philosophy of the CoS and potentially even lead to more radical interpretations.

Jointly, Satanism and witchcraft were, at least from the standpoint of Christian theology, inexorably intertwined and equally condemned. Throughout the Middle Ages and even afterward, judicial processes, oftentimes instigated by the Catholic Inquisition, whose aim was to eliminate heresy, were frequently held under the pretense of witchcraft. One well-known

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<sup>33</sup> Anton Szandor LaVey, *The Satanic Bible* (New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 1969), 25.

<sup>34</sup> LaVey, *Satanic*, 27–35.

<sup>35</sup> LaVey, *Satanic*, 37–105.

<sup>36</sup> LaVey, *Satanic*, 107–140.

<sup>37</sup> LaVey, *Satanic*, 141–272.

example from the modern era is the Salem witch trials, a series of prosecutions occurring in Massachusetts between 1692 and 1693, which resulted in nineteen executions of the citizens from the colony. Bryan F. Le Beau suggests that the apparent reasons seem far more terrestrial than spectral, specifically naming warring factions, misguided leadership, and geographical limitations, which led to socioeconomic and religious tension.<sup>38</sup> Equivalently, Le Beau continues, similar strains initiated The Great European Witch-hunt, taking place between 1580 and 1630 and consisting of hundreds of separate witch trials.<sup>39</sup> However, as mentioned beforehand, in connection with the Renaissance period, numerous scholars, albeit in secret, practiced natural magic, astrology, theurgy, and other interrelated disciplines of Western Esotericism.

Evidently, the modern-day Wicca was heavily influenced by these Western esoteric beliefs and practices while centering itself around old nature-based pagan religions from before the Christianization of Europe. Thea Sabin, a practitioner of Wicca, explains that Wiccans generally celebrate the constituents of nature, which encompasses not only the four natural elements and the seasons of the year that dictate the traditional Wiccan sabbaths but also the cycle of life and death in its uniformity. Albeit principally polytheistic, Wicca notably venerates two strictly dualistic deities - the Horned God of the Forest and the Triple Goddess - who each symbolize two polarized principles. Furthermore, Wicca is an experiential spirituality learned through living it, which renders it highly individualistic and personal. Therefore, the employment of magic appears profoundly subjective, utilized equally in communal rituals and everyday life. Even though conventionally designated as a subtradition of Paganism, Wicca can be plausibly characterized as a form of European Shamanism defined by a specific type of witchcraft and acts as a syncretic spirituality that embraces integral components of major world religions and other small-scale traditions alike.<sup>40</sup>

Whilst the historical roots of beliefs and practices upon which Wicca operates extend to pre-Christian times, its latter-day beginnings as an officially recognized movement are ascribed to Gerald Brousseau Gardner, a British author with occult background, who directly determined its current structure and founded one of the first Wiccan covens. However, as the worldwide popularity of Wicca continuously increased, the diversification of denominations within the movement accelerated as well, with Gardnerian, Alexandrian, and Dianic arguably becoming

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<sup>38</sup> Bryan F. Le Beau, *The Story of the Salem Witch Trials*, 2nd ed. (London: Pearson Higher Education, 2009), 48.

<sup>39</sup> Le Beau, *The Story*, 14–15.

<sup>40</sup> Thea Sabin, *Wicca for Beginners: Fundamentals of Philosophy & Practice* (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 2009), 12–19.

the most renowned. Eileen Hollard posits that Gardnerian Wicca, firmly following Gardner's original teachings, is considered the earliest form of the modern witchcraft whose initiatory descent can be traced back to Gardner. Intrinsically, Gardnerian Wicca is deemed formal, hierarchical, and dualistic, concentrating on sky-clad ritualistic practice, with covens that have a relatively limited number of members and are led by a high priest and high priestess. Analogically, Alexandrian Wicca, founded by Alex and Maxine Sanders, also complies with Gardner's doctrines and is frequently dubbed a neo-Gardnerian tradition. On the other hand, Dianic Wicca, being directly tied to feminism and focusing on egalitarian matriarchy, typically reveres solely the monotheistic Great Goddess and revolves around womanhood and the female principle.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, there exists a plethora of other, perceptibly smaller, personalized denominations worldwide, which further substantiate the innate adaptability of Wicca.

Markedly, due to the imminent emphasis on individualism and self-empowerment, Wicca does not customarily acknowledge any sacred or dogmatic texts. However, a few publications written by Gardner, especially *Witchcraft Today* (1954), remain highly respected as they outline the history and meaning behind the essential Wiccan beliefs and practices introduced above. Unlike *The Satanic Bible*, *Witchcraft Today* mainly attempts to summarize the known history of the witch-cult while drawing upon the works of other authors. Accordingly, in the foreword, Gardner clarifies that the book originated on behalf of the witches in the United Kingdom, who implored him to exhibit their ill-reputed tradition more positively, falsifying its allegedly perverse and evil nature.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, its elaborate scrutiny is beyond the scope of this thesis since the book mainly merges historical facts with pseudohistorical and even mythological elements, the questionable interrelation between the witch-cult and Knight Templars being one of them. While it functions as a foundational text of Wicca and demarcates its many features, the current form of the tradition was already specified via information provided by contemporary Wiccan practitioners as it inevitably transformed since its beginnings.

Although akin in a considerable number of aspects, modern Satanism and Wicca traditionally amply differ in their specific approaches toward magic and the occult. Ostensibly, Satanism became associated with the so-called left-hand path, rejecting traditional societal and religious conventions and incorporating religiously tabooed issues, such as sexuality, into their conduct of practice. Conversely, Wicca represents the right-hand path, concentrating on white

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<sup>41</sup> Eileen Hollard, *The Wicca Handbook* (Newburyport: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2000), 10–11.

<sup>42</sup> Gerald Brousseau Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* (San Diego: Book Tree, 2022), 3.

magic and adhering to strict morals in their belief system. However, as a result of their controversial past, both traditions are oftentimes marked as corrupt by the general public.

## 2. The Religious Dimension in the Horror Genre

The genre of horror fiction and the concomitant contexts within which it generally operates are pervasive and ancient nearly in a universal manner; virtually any cultural milieu, from tribal societies to technologically advanced superpowers, would accommodate its visible traces transmitted through various media that inexorably reflect the changing conditions and circumstances of concrete communities and that may, in fact, indicate some notable aspects of the popular sentiment shared by its citizens. Even though it is not within the scope of this thesis to deliver a coherent and detailed history of the genre, recurrent characters, and settings, or typical literary devices, a few key points should be discussed in order to chart its origins, developments, and influences while concentrating on the spiritual and ecclesiastical manifestations and implications of horror fiction.

As outlined above, some of the traditional elements of horror fiction date millennia back, which renders any attempt to trace its exact beginnings practically unfeasible, even more so due to the lack of cultural exclusivity. Gina Wisker acclaims that horror appears as ancient as any form of oral folk tradition, acting as a powerful counterbalance to the comforts and certainties of developing civilizations of the prehistoric period. Its recognizable tracks are visible in some of the earliest written myths and legends, including the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh (approximately 2100-1200 BC) or specific passages in works of Graeco-Roman authors, most notably Homer, Petronius, or Phlegon. Moreover, even though humankind does not bear many records of the oral folk traditions from the bygone eras, it can be safely assumed that the first signs of horror fiction are significantly older than any of the aforementioned texts or authors. Conversely, the label of horror fiction as a separate literary genre seems relatively recent, firstly ascribed to the works of Edgar Allan Poe, which further complicates the categorization of earlier horror fiction texts. Additionally, the genre was oftentimes deemed insufficiently intricate and unfit for canonical writers, prompting other literary designations, such as the Gothic, fantasy, or weird.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, such an inconsistency in classification diligently illustrates that horror fiction can sustainably coexist in symbiosis with nearly any literary genre and manifest itself non-intrusively while playing a pivotal role in the body of literature as a convenient instrument of complementation.

Analogically, features of horror fiction are evident even in the *Bible* and other sacred and strictly religious texts or types of conduct. Howard Phillips Lovecraft, one of the most

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<sup>43</sup> Gina Wisker, *Horror Fiction: An Introduction* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 39–40.

renowned horror fiction authors, wrote an influential treatise named *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, in which he attests that, from the prehistoric era to its culmination point in Egypt and the Semitic societies, horror served as a prominent component of the convoluted ceremonial magic and obscure rituals devised for the evocation of demons and powerful spirits. Additionally, several biblical books, namely the apocalyptic Book of Enoch, which contains unique details regarding the origins of demons and fallen angels, and the Book of Revelation, displaying eschatological visions of the eternal struggle between good and evil, venture into the territory of horror fiction.<sup>44</sup> Broadly speaking, the imminent issue of good and evil as two opposing forces may be spotted in a plethora of seemingly unrelated religious and spiritual traditions. Wisker asserts that evil incarnate, specifically Satan and his minions within the context of Abrahamic religions, act as the ultimate manifestation of horror fiction in the religious milieu.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, malevolent figures akin to Satan, found in virtually every major religion around the world, constitute ideal horror characters due to their inherent and culturally conditioned influence over the mind of the reader and represent a pinnacle of religious horror, a subgenre of horror fiction that will be thoroughly scrutinized in the latter sections of this chapter.

When European culture gradually entered the Middle Ages, a historical period whose fixed duration is the subject of heated debates among historians (usually from the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 to Christopher Columbus's discovery of America in 1492), the subsequent role of horror fiction shifted as well. As Matt Cardin emphasizes, the term Dark Ages is sometimes used as a substitute signification of the period when juxtaposed with the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Since its frequent, yet not entirely justified depiction as an era of superstitions and barbarism, the Middle Ages composed a rich breeding ground for distinct types of horror fiction archetypes. A primary example may be the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*, with its somber atmosphere and nightmarish monsters rendering a source of fascination for modern-day scholars.<sup>46</sup> Concurrently, horror fiction flourished in popular folklore and, as stated by Ármann Jakobsson, occupied a substantive position within several mythologies, remarkably in the Old Norse and Germanic ones - the *Prose Edda* contributed to Snorri Sturluson and Icelandic sagas introduce multiple accounts of paranormal encounters and

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<sup>44</sup> Howard Phillips Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1973), 7–8.

<sup>45</sup> Wisker, *Horror*, 39.

<sup>46</sup> Matt Cardin, "Horror through History," in *Horror Literature through History: An Encyclopedia of the Stories that Speak to Our Deepest Fears*, ed. Matt Cardin (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2017), 8–12.

describe horrifying creatures that inspired a vast number of modern horror fiction tropes.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, as insinuated by Lovecraft, the Renaissance inclination toward esoteric and occult practices bore academically formulated texts, which exercised immense impact on the genre.<sup>48</sup> The intense allure of the enigmatic disciplines of occultism and demonology provided an extensive collection of grimoires for summoning spirits, protecting against evil specters, and bargaining with demons, such as *Clavicula Salomonis* (14th or 15th century) and later also *Pseudomonarchia Daemonum* (1577) or *Ars Goetia* in *Lemegeton* (17th century). Rather significantly, such carefully assembled compendia influenced horror fiction and, more importantly, the religious horror subgenre by adding some of its key elements. Dismally, as illustrated in the first chapter, the upcoming Age of Reason partially interrupted the previous rise of Esotericism, yet the subtle intrigue of the occult persisted to the modern era and manifested itself substantially in the genre of horror fiction.

In essence, if the Enlightenment represents rationalism and scientific positivism, Romanticism, as a direct reaction to its mechanized worldviews, stresses the power of human imagination and creativity. Expectedly, as declared by Kevin Corstorphine, it was precisely this aesthetic tradition that generated arguably one of the most significant predecessors of modern-time horror fiction – the Gothic novel.<sup>49</sup> Initially, Meyer Howard Abrams clarifies, the term Gothic referred to an early Germanic tribe of Goths, but in the wake of Romanticism in the second half of the 18th century, its innate implications comprised medieval architecture and atmosphere. The Gothic novel itself was inaugurated by Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1764), which laid the foundations for the genre and inspired countless authors to follow in Walpole’s footsteps. These would include Ann Radcliffe, the author of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Matthew Gregory Lewis, who, through the elaborate novel *The Monk* (1796), exploited the imbalance between the chaste exterior and the wickedness inside, or Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). As suggested, Gothic novels were customarily set in a Catholic country during the medieval era, specifically in seemingly abandoned, gloomy castles filled with concealed subterranean passages, old-fashioned furniture, and sliding panels. The intricate plot frequently consisted of a pure heroine being kidnapped by an unscrupulous, lustful villain, creating a binary opposition between innocence and corruption. Curiously, the genre

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<sup>47</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, “Horror in the Medieval North: The Troll,” in *The Palgrave Handbook to Horror Literature*, ed. Kevin Costorphine and Laura R. Kremmel (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 33–34.

<sup>48</sup> Lovecraft, *Supernatural*, 8.

<sup>49</sup> Kevin Corstorphine, “Introduction,” in *The Palgrave Handbook to Horror Literature*, ed. Kevin Costorphine and Laura R. Kremmel (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 2.

utilized mysterious and supernatural phenomena, such as ghosts, that could, in multiple cases, be rationally exemplified. The principal aim of such stories was to invoke chilling fear by uncovering the obscene and immoral impulses that lay beneath the orderly surface of the human psyche. Gradually, as the genre found its way overseas, Gothic fiction began to flourish in the American South. However, when juxtaposed with its European counterpart, the Southern Gothic accommodates some unique characteristics. Fundamentally, the common themes include prototypical Southern issues, such as the exploration of the historically motivated strains, loss of ideals, and continued racial hostilities as a legacy of American slavery but, in addition, also alienation, madness, or decay. Correspondingly, the recurring characters tend to be ordinary individuals, albeit complex, oftentimes grotesque, eccentric, or mentally disturbed, who search for meaning and strive to find their place in society. Moreover, Southern Gothic frequently blurs the lines between two opposing concepts, particularly between waking and dreams, humans and machines, or the living and the dead. Becoming well-established in the United States, Southern Gothic begot numerous comprehensive literary works, notably by Edgar Allan Poe and William Faulkner, influenced younger generations of great horror writers, most importantly H. P. Lovecraft and Stephen King, and significantly impacted American cinematography.<sup>50</sup> In a general sense, Gothic fiction had such a profound impact on the genre of horror fiction as a whole that its distinctive features are well preserved in contemporary writing as well.

In the 20th century, television usurped the role of popular entertainment for the masses. Expectedly, it did not take long for the innovative medium to integrate the genre of horror fiction and allow for one of its most successful modern-day realizations. John Belton asserts that the primary purpose of horror films is to evoke intense emotions in the audience via the figure of the humanity-threatening monster, which renders them inherently dominated by the supernatural, inexplicable, and irrational.<sup>51</sup> Factually, Belton continues, the cinematographic origins of horror, when not taking into account its direct literary and dramatic antecedents from the 19th century, namely Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), can be traced back to the artificially arranged scenes of Georges Méliès at the turn of the century as well as to German Expressionist cinema in the 1910s and 1920s. Incidentally, its subsequent development in the United States is conventionally divided into two main periods – the classic, roughly from 1930 to 1960, and the modern, from 1960 to the present. The classic period was

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<sup>50</sup> Meyer Howard Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th ed. (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999), 110–111.

<sup>51</sup> John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2017), 256–257.

principally influenced by Gothic fiction, Expressionist themes (psychological and spiritual crises), and stylistics, producing such films as *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), and *The Mummy* (1932), which feature supernatural motifs, dreadful monsters, and exotic settings. However, during the war years, the classical paradigm shifted, instead giving way to films set in modern times and less unfamiliar locales that frequently utilized psychological terror through monsters attaining a degree of anonymity and remaining off-screen. Among such films were Val Lewton's *Cat People* (1942), *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), and *The Leopard Man* (1943). Thereafter, the modern period was symbolically initiated by Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), which resumed the tradition of horror films being set in America while depicting the monster as a product of the latter-day American family. In essence, modern horror films cover an abundant variety of overlapping subgenres, from splatter movies that portray graphic violence and gore, such as George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978); through slasher movies in which a psychopathic killer stalks and murders a series of victims, namely *Halloween* (1978); demon child movies, featuring a child revealed to be the anti-Christ or possessed by Satan, which include *Rosemary's Baby* (1968); the living dead movies whose monsters traditionally appear as reanimated bodies, arguably the most prolific one being *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) that inspired several parodies, notably British zombie comedy film *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), and the *Resident Evil* video games; survival horror movies in which the protagonist strives to remain alive in the face of the incoming attack while having limited resources at their disposal, for instance *You're Next* (2011); or body horror movies that present a process of mutation, transformation, or invasion of the human body by a parasite, particularly *Shivers* (1975); to self-reflective horror movies, which exhibit the conventions of the genre, notably the *Scary Movie* films (2000, 2001, 2003, 2006, 2011, 2013).<sup>52</sup> As apparent, the genre of horror fiction, when employed in cinematography, offers seemingly limitless potential and can span over a vast array of distinctive subgenres and themes.

As Western civilization progressively transitioned into the age of information and the so-called digital revolution (roughly in the second half of the 20th century) came forth, the genre of horror was bound to transform significantly. Apparently, the subsequent emergence of the Internet generated new forms and prospects for horror fiction as it enabled its users to produce and distribute non-professional fictional stories via dedicated Internet platforms and receive immediate feedback from readers. Such online paranormal legends, initially appearing

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<sup>52</sup> Belton, *American*, 266–270.

on 4chan.com launched in 2003, became generally known as *creepypastas*.<sup>53</sup> *Creepypastas* oftentimes utilize not only the wide range of preexisting horror subgenres and stock characters but also encompass multimedia production, which, apart from the text itself, includes videos, audio recordings, images, hyperlinks, or GIFs. Accordingly, since its beginnings in the 2000s, the online phenomenon of *creepypastas* accelerated in public recognition, with its popularity, especially among young people, gradually increasing. Consequently, a considerable number of websites designed for horror fiction enthusiasts were created, for example *Creepypasta Wiki* or *Reddit's r/nosleep*. Moreover, a plethora of originally non-professional authors gained prestige through the writing of *creepypastas*, hence their horror stories not only provided a great source of inspiration for movies, series, or video games but were later published in paperback editions, including Dathan Auerbach's *Penpal* (2012) or *Borrasca* (2015-2016) by C. K. Walker. In addition, several fictional concepts and even whole mythoi established by *creepypastas* were incorporated into popular culture, most notably the *SCP Foundation* and the *Backrooms*. Generally speaking, despite public concerns regarding its quality, the modern form of horror fiction facilitated by technological advancements, albeit highly inclusive, seems no less imaginative and innovative than its predecessors, yet it serves as definite evidence of the genre's continual development and the ability to evolve even further.

Accordingly, as the previous historical excursion attempted to illustrate, the horror genre can not only function as its own separate entity but might also rather effectively supplement other genres. Even so, with its vast array of subgenres, tropes, and archetypes, it appears significantly challenging to devise an accurate and versatile definition of horror as a genre. According to Matt Cardin, the designation "horror" is, in layman's terms, frequently identified with the word "fear." However, a closer inspection would reveal that horror as a genre has to account for fear fused with something else: with some quality of wrongness and repulsiveness – physical, metaphysical, moral, or otherwise – that profusely affects the reader or viewer. Therefore, one aspect that may, in fact, distinguish the greatest authors of horror fiction is their inherent sensitivity to such intense feelings of dread and abhorrence, which allows for the incorporation of these emotions into the texts with the subtlety, yet increased intensity.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, Jess Nevins validates the previous statement, stating that, unlike other genres, the

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<sup>53</sup> The term *creepypasta* was coined around 2007 on the online imageboard 4chan.com. It appears to be derived from *coppypasta* (copy and paste) – a block of text that achieved immense publicity throughout the Internet, being repeatedly copied and posted on different websites.

<sup>54</sup> Matt Cardin, "Introduction: Spookhouses, Catharsis, and Dark Consolations," in *Horror Literature through History: An Encyclopedia of the Stories that Speak to Our Deepest Fears*, ed. Matt Cardin (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2017), xxix–xxxi.

core feature of horror fiction scarcely lies in its content but rather in its effect on the reader. As indicated above, modern horror fiction, due to its mutability and high supplementary value of other genres, for the most part, lacks a set-in-stone setting, characters, or plot. Thus, the key trait of its definition heavily depends on the ability to induce specific emotions and sensations, most prominently dread, terror, repulsion, disgust, and a sense of observable and fundamental impropriety.<sup>55</sup> Still, numerous scholars perceive the definition as simplistic and dispute its claim, yet it remains arguably the most resourceful tool for the systematic classification and categorization of horror fiction.

As demonstrated, horror fiction seems capable of admitting countless miscellaneous themes and subgenres, each boasting a cluster of unique features. Arguably, the most fundamental distinction of varied horror subgenres is grounded in their correlation with the supernatural, rendering two paramount categories of horror fiction – paranormal and non-supernatural horror. Ordinarily, paranormal horror revolves around unearthly entities and events whose existence or occurrence appears devoid of logic and reason. Contrarily, non-supernatural horror presents a hypothetically feasible plot or even derives fear and terror from realistic, day-to-day situations. The religious horror subgenre, whose more detailed exposition is vital for the purposes of this thesis, would undoubtedly concur with the definition of the former. Brandon R. Grafius and John W. Morehead assume that the inherent interconnectedness of horror and religion is not only evident but, as insinuated before, age-long. Influenced by Leo Braudy’s postulations, they conclude that the popular attraction to the supernatural was induced by the ethos of the Enlightenment, which endeavored to detach the supernatural element from religion. Yet such an endeavor served only to drive the supernatural out from Catholicism and Protestantism to the realm of folklore, rendering it the repressed component of religion that continually manifested in popular culture. Incidentally, horror fiction attempts to contend with similar issues as animate religious thought – the nature of the divine, the place of humanity in the universe, or the distribution of justice – even though both approach such issues differently.<sup>56</sup> In fact, the inexorable closeness of religion and horror is equally apparent in the frequent use of strictly religious tropes, locales, and figures in horror fiction, a topic that is adequately probed in the analytical part of the thesis. Even so, the crucial link that needs to be discussed beforehand

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<sup>55</sup> Jess Nevins, *Horror Fiction in the 20th Century: Exploring Literature’s Most Chilling Genre* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2020), xiv–xv.

<sup>56</sup> Brandon R. Grafius, John W. Morehead, “Introduction” in *Theology and Horror: Explorations of the Dark Religious Imagination*, ed. Brandon R. Grafius and John W. Morehead (Minneapolis: Fortress Academic, 2021), vii–ix.

is the preoccupation with evil. Evil plays a pivotal role in religion, specifically in the Christian context, which undeniably functions as the primary influence on Anglo-American religious horror. There, its incarnation continues to be the Devil with his demonic cohorts, coincidentally some of the most commonly used figures in terms of religious horror. Likewise, when the battle with evil ensues, the likely combatants are oftentimes priests, experts on the occult, or ordinary individuals wielding potent religious artifacts or, even more probably, traditional religious symbols such as the Christian cross. Such a representation of religiosity serves to implicitly affirm the ability of religion to defeat evil, even though its realization in horror fiction may appear sensational and exaggerated. Even so, an extensive number of Christians and followers of other traditions have criticized religious horror and horror fiction as a whole for its incorrect, stereotypical, and, for some, even insulting depictions of faith.

One of the main subjects horror fiction traditionally concerns is the representation of the monstrous. Indeed, such a dimension can manifest in multiple ways, ranging from cold-blooded murderers through evil spirits and alien cosmic entities to formidable forces of nature or events of mass extinction. Nevertheless, religious horror as a specified subgenre offers a significantly narrower extent of depictions, popularly focusing on the darker side of religion, which principally includes demonic possessions, apocalyptic visions, or witchcraft. Generally, Timothy K. Beal suggests that monsters in horror paradoxically constitute a sense of “otherness within sameness,” acting as a rogue element in a well-established order of things. Such an interpretative perspective correlates with the Freudian concept of *unheimlich*, meaning uncanny or unhomely, referring to that which threatens one’s sense of “at-homeness” not from outside but from within the house. For Freud, home, in this case, alludes primarily to individual human consciousness, yet Beal amplifies its scope to incorporate virtually anything – the self, society, or cosmos – and asserts that *unheimlich* is that which invades one’s sense of personal, social, or cosmic order and security. Innately, monsters are a personification of *unheimlich*, representing chaos and disorientation within order and orientation, endangering the sense of security, stability, and integrity. In addition, monsters as such tend to be demonized on the basis of threatening not only individual arrangements but also the sacred order of the gods or God, which is contrasted against diabolically monstrous chaos (the sea monster Leviathan in *Psalm 74*). Alternatively, the opposite can occur – monsters may be deified as a revelation of hallowed otherness, entering the world through hierophany and representing what is dubbed sacred chaos (Ctulhu and other cosmic gods in the stories of H. P. Lovecraft). However, the distinction between the two reactions is solemnly clear-cut. Oftentimes, the monster in question becomes

both demonized and deified, nourishing the strong sense of ambivalence between the monstrous and the divine.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the subgenre of religious horror thematically relates to the issue of death. As it will become apparent throughout the analytical part, the archetypal monsters of religious horror, such as Satan and other demons, tend to be practically immortal and eternal, which further intensifies the dread of their presence. Similarly, witches are customarily portrayed as having an unnaturally long lifespan, thus possessing the ability to cheat death. In essence, the capability of evading one of the most fundamental natural principles signalizes immense power that renders such monsters even more threatening.

Even though the historical overview transparently illustrated that religious horror has a long literary heritage, its 20th and 21st-century manifestations have become an intrinsic segment of popular culture as well, producing cult classic films, such as *Children of the Corn* (1984), *Hellraiser* (1987), or *The Calling* (2000), modern-day movies, namely *The Rite* (2011), *The Possession* (2012), or *The Conjuring* franchise (2013, 2016, 2021), and even video games, including *The Binding of Isaac* (2011), *Outlast* (2013), or *Faith: The Unholy Trinity* (2022).

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<sup>57</sup> Timothy K. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters* (London: Routledge, 2001), 4–10.

### 3. New Age in Cinematography

The two preceding theoretical chapters were meant to exemplify the fundamental tenets of New Age spirituality and the subgenre of religious horror fiction. This analytical part will substantially draw from the sources and information provided therein in order to adequately probe and scrutinize a selection of horror films produced throughout the decades that coincided with or followed the emergence of the New Age Movement and its subsequent rise in popularity. The examination mainly concentrates on the time frame between 1970 and 2010 while selecting two prominent horror film representations from each decade – one focusing its plot on the topic of Satanism and/or demonic possession and one delving into the obscurities of witches and/or witchcraft. The movie corpus thus contains eight horror films due for analysis. Its primary purpose is to document the possible influence or lack thereof of New Age spirituality, more distinctively modern satanism and Wicca, whose sociocultural preunderstanding oftentimes correlates with the themes mentioned above that are regular in the religious horror subgenre, on the selected horror films and determine whether any observable and logical comparison between the individual time periods can be devised.

The section covering the 1970s would feature *Mark of the Witch* (1970), a virtually unrecognized small-budget supernatural horror film set in Dallas, and *The Exorcist* (1973), a cult classic supernatural horror film of immense prestige that laid the foundations of modern-day horror fiction cinematography. The pair of horror films representing the 1980s would include *The Devonville Terror* (1983), a small-budget supernatural feminist horror film set in the fictional town of Devonville, New England, and inspired by the Salem witch trials, and *Trick or Treat* (1986), a music horror comedy film centering around the interconnectedness of modern Satanism and metal music. The segment on the 1990s would incorporate *Omen IV: The Awakening* (1991), a supernatural horror film and the fourth and final installment in the original series that revolves around the figure of the anti-Christ and examines its political implications and *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), a psychological horror film and pseudo-documentary that revolutionized horror fiction and meaningfully impacted popular culture. Finally, the last fragment of the analysis focusing on the 2000s would explore *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), a supernatural horror film and legal drama combined about a failed exorcism attempt based on a real-life story of Anneliese Michel, documenting the continuing tension between rationalism and faith, and *An American Haunting* (2005), a supernatural horror film that, via extraterrestrial phenomena, deals with the topic of repressed family trauma. Each film will be

analyzed based not only on the relevant religious themes; expectedly, other aspects potentially significant for the thesis will be scrutinized as well.

Before the actual scrutiny of the aforementioned horror films, which endeavors to illustrate the considerable influence of religiosity and spirituality on horror fiction and the subgenre of religious horror in particular, it is paramount to note that, in specific cases, it can apply inversely. There are several instances demonstrating the impact of horror fiction on the religious milieu, predominantly in terms of the NAM. One such case is *Rosemary's Baby*, a 1968 influential psychological horror film directed by Roman Polanski, which probes the topic of a child as the anti-Christ that subsequently gained increased prominence within the genre. Lewis clarifies that the positive public reception of the film popularized the notion of Satanism and enabled LaVey to publish *The Satanic Bible*, therefore accelerating the subsequent emergence of modern Satanism groupings.<sup>58</sup> Unfortunately, *Rosemary's Baby*, albeit thematically appropriate, is beyond the time frame of the analysis. However, its imprint on popular culture appears so crucial that at least a brief mention is necessary. Accordingly, the subsequent analysis features films that, albeit indirectly, may have impacted the religious or spiritual milieu as well.

Chronologically proceeding, *Mark of the Witch* (1970) is a small-budget independent supernatural horror film directed by Tom Moore and written by Mary Davis and Martha Peters that debuted when the NAM was still at its beginnings. While it meaningfully relates to the issue of witchcraft and its growing prominence, there are virtually no academic reviews or analyses that would attempt to interpret the film and its diligent presentation of sorcery. In fact, the film appears practically unrecognized, and even the handful of existing reviews written by the fanbase, whose tone is predominantly gently negative, do not touch upon the religious dimension, which, however, makes it an excellent sample to contrast with some of the other films in the movie corpus that concentrate on similar topics but became cornerstones of horror fiction popular culture.

The film opens with a pseudohistorical scene from the 17th century showing the execution of The Witch (Marie Santell), serving as a concise prelude that explains her subsequent motives. The Witch is portrayed stereotypically – instead of claiming innocence and pleading for mercy, she openly admits her involvement with the demonic forces and casts a curse on the captor, MacIntyre Stuart, who allegedly attempted to join her coven but ultimately

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<sup>58</sup> Lewis, "Infernal," 48.

betrayed her and the other initiates. However, the curse does not merely prophesize Stuart's nearing demise; its effects are far more devastating due to their timelessness. When The Witch utters: "Be it known to you, MacIntyre Stuart, and to those of your blood throughout eternity – the mark of my lord Satan will be with you always,"<sup>59</sup> she is extending her course of vengeance to a multigenerational scale. Indeed, such are the recurrent tendencies of witchcraft-focused religious horror works – many of them are set in the modern period, which can potentially complicate the emergence of witches, who are traditionally associated with the Middle Ages or early modernity. Therefore, as insinuated in the second chapter, witches are oftentimes able to return from the afterlife and execute vengeance on the descendants of those who played a role in their passing. Moreover, the aforementioned "mark of Satan" is not only meant to indicate a metaphorical burden upon the succeeding generations. As Raven Grimassi explains, a witch's mark was, historically speaking, alleged evidence of one's affiliation to the Devil, appearing in the form of birthmarks, moles, warts, and generally any abnormal skin conditions.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, the film draws inspiration from this superstition, linking the mark with the actual involvement in sorcery as attested by The Witch since all of Stuart's descendants indeed have a distinctive birthmark to commemorate the alleged deception of their ancestor.

The main timeline of the film, set in modern-day Dallas, introduces Jill (Anitra Welsh) and her boyfriend Alan (Darryl Welsh), two young college students, as well as Professor Mac Stuart (Robert Elston), who teaches a course on the Psychology of Superstition and is, of course, a latter-day descendant of MacIntyre Stuart. The film makes it astoundingly clear that the increase in prominence of modern witchcraft, initiated by Gardner in the 1950s, had an immense impact on its overall premise. When searching for the book on witchcraft necessary in the seminar, Alan explains: "Well, we're starting the Psychology of Superstition this term. You know, way back to the pagans, and how they worshipped fire and water and how it grew into various kinds of beliefs in magic. You know, you'd be amazed how many people believe in it now," alluding to a renewed interest of American society in paganism and magic interrelated with the NAM, with a plethora of volumes on the subject and even dedicated courses on universities. Furthermore, when The Witch is resurrected via ritual found in Stuart's old book and takes over the body of Jill, she refers to her as "a high priestess of the old religion or The

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<sup>59</sup> Tom Moore, dir., *Mark of the Witch* (Lone Star, 1970; Code Red, 2016), Blu-ray, 0:02:15–0:03:04.

<sup>60</sup> Raven Grimassi, *Encyclopedia of Wicca & Witchcraft* (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 2000), 451.

Craft,”<sup>61</sup> which is an alternative term for Wicca. Thus, the fascination with and influence of the NAM, as well as the subtle affirmation of its ancient roots, is evident.

Yet another example of the film’s direction in this regard is its portrayal of ritualistic practice. Even though it features several blood rituals that present a stereotypical image of witchcraft as a dark art based on black magic, human sacrifices (two fellow students, Harry (Jack Gardner) and Sharon (Barbara Brownell)), and communing with demons (calling of Lucifer, Asmodeus, or Belphegor), there are also numerous instances of Wicca-based practices. Specifically, a section in the invocation to summon a witch, which Jill finds and jokingly attempts to employ during the seminar, includes the passage “East and west and south and north, harken to our earthly cry”<sup>62</sup> that is exceedingly similar to some of the chants utilized during rituals in the Gardnerian Wicca. Moreover, some of the subsequent rituals performed by The Witch-possessed Jill, in nature and sky-clad, may further confirm the apparent connection. Even so, it is vital to emphasize that the film by no means depicts witchcraft as an individualistic practice established upon the principles of white magic and the celebration of nature. However, being a product of horror fiction, it is bound to pose a more sinister representation of witchcraft.

Jointly, one of the foremost symbols in the film is *The Red Book of Appin*, Stuart’s family heirloom, which is shown to cover a vast range of obscure practices related to sorcery, being the source of the ritualistic formula that functions as a significant plot device for reintroducing The Witch into the story. Strikingly, *The Red Book of Appin* was likely an existing document whose current whereabouts, however, remains uncertain. Hugh Cheape clarifies that *The Red Book* was supposed to be a unique and valued manuscript from Scotland, which heavily influenced the notion of folkloric medicine as magic.<sup>63</sup> Albeit its potential real-life ties to the left-hand path form of witchcraft may be dubious, *The Red Book* fulfills the role of the Lovecraftian “ancient lore” archetype that possesses the innate ability to endanger individuals solely by its contents.

Ultimately, the film addresses the theme of demonic possession, or, more specifically, possession by the soul of a dead witch. While the issue of possession and exorcism will be adequately probed in the later sections of this chapter, it appears vital to reflect on some of its subtleties as presented in the film. Naturally, when Jill becomes possessed, her demeanor

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<sup>61</sup> Moore, *Mark*, 0:25:18–0:25:21.

<sup>62</sup> Moore, *Mark*, 0:16:20–0:16:33.

<sup>63</sup> Hugh Cheape, “The Red Book of Appin: Medicine as Magic and Magic as Medicine,” *Folklore* 104, no. 1/2 (1993): 111.

instantly transforms to reflect the persona of The Witch. Interestingly, however, the shift is visible even in terms of language, switching from a colloquial speech suitable for a young adult student in college to an almost archaic form of English. Even though it certainly does not authentically mirror the speech conventions of the 17th century, it expressively illustrates the idea that language constitutes one's personality. The ensuing exorcism of Jill is performed in a rather simplistic manner – when The Witch attempts to paralyze Alan and Mac Stuart during a ritual, the silhouette of the Christian cross is projected onto the wall as the two of them set a timer beforehand. This action immediately frees Jill from The Witch's grasp, stressing the already-explained potency of religious symbols in horror fiction. Hence, the eventual implication contrasts the inherently evil witchcraft with Christianity, which otherwise holds seemingly no relevance in the film.

*The Exorcist* (1973) is a supernatural horror film directed by William Friedkin and based on the identically named novel (1971) by William Peter Blatty, who also produced the film and wrote the screenplay. It serves as one of the foremost pioneers in the horror fiction genre, heavily influencing numerous other movies reflecting on similar issues. Popularly, during the principal photography phase of the production, several accidents resulting in injuries and even deaths of the cast occurred, making some believe that the film, partially due to its themes, may be cursed.

As the title suggests, the plot revolves around demonic possession and exorcism while touching upon a number of far-reaching subjects, such as religiously constructed faith or lack thereof. The introductory segment of the film presents a Catholic clergyman, Father Lankester Merin (Max von Sydow), who, when conducting archeological research in Northern Iraq, unearthed a stone talisman of Pazuzu, an ancient Mesopotamian demonic deity. Once again, the object serves as a source of evil, fulfilling the role of the Lovecraftian “forgotten knowledge” archetype that possesses the potential to invoke primordial forces. The ensuing parts, set in Washington, DC., then serve chiefly to establish the diverse backgrounds and life circumstances of the main characters.

The subsequent demonic possession of twelve-year-old Regan MacNeil (Linda Blair), which takes prominence later in the film, progresses gradually. However, its seeds are sown when Regan plays with a spiritualistic Ouija board, claiming that “Captain Howdy” moves her hand. This subtle hint at extraterrestrial presence, initially dismissed by her mother, Chris (Ellen Burstyn), as an imaginary friend, along with dramatic music and occasional jump scares, is

employed to induce an urgent sense of impending danger in the audience. Fundamentally, the later symptoms of possession can be categorized into several groups. The first includes the manipulation of the material world, mainly telekinetically relocating furniture, which arguably manifests the spirit's malevolent intentions and is meant to scare the characters. The second involves the secretion of bodily fluids, specifically blood, urine, and vomit. These, especially in the religious environment, were frequently deemed unclean and unholy, thus juxtaposing the demon's conduct with traditional beliefs of impurity. The third incorporates the change in language idiosyncracies – Regan, at first polite, commences using frequent expletives, for example, telling her doctor to “keep [his] fingers away from her goddamn cunt.”<sup>64</sup> Such obscene language, coincidentally filled with the strongest vulgarisms in English vocabulary, demonstrates profanity and ridicule of God as well as intense anger, meaning to assert that the demon, even in the boundaries of language, embodies evil. In addition, the possessed Regan is capable of speaking Latin, a liturgic language of the Catholic Church, which further devaluates its doctrines and acts as a prototypical sign of demonic possession in horror fiction films. The fourth, partially blending with the body horror subgenre, encompasses the mutilation of the human body, its arguably most graphic depiction being the head spinning, also conventionally associated with demonic possession in horror. Indeed, the spirit seeks to cause intense pain and suffering but not death, as that would deprive it of its host. The fifth and final is related to violence and overall aggression. Initially, Regan is portrayed as a typically disciplined and loving child; however, after being possessed, she oftentimes physically harms others, including Chris, and it is generally assumed that she instigated the sudden demise of Burke Dennings (Jack MacGowran), a close family friend, thus concluding the notion of the spirit as an inherently evil being whose sole purpose is to bring chaos and destruction upon humanity.

Nevertheless, the film does not explicitly mention why the demon targeted Regan specifically. Even so, the tendency to present possessed children instead of adults seems prevalent in horror fiction. LMK Sheppard even formulates that one of the traditionally recognized subgenres of religious horror, to which *The Exorcist* appertains, is the Evil Children narrative, which tends to demonize children as a way of addressing concomitant societal concerns.<sup>65</sup> While she does not provide further insight into the phenomenon, the reasoning appears plausible. However, the “evil children” designation may sound ambiguous as, particularly in the case of Regan, the child is not inherently evil – she starts acting evil only

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<sup>64</sup> William Friedkin, dir, *The Exorcist* (Hoya Productions, 1973; Warner Bros., 2011), Blu-ray, 0:36:06–0:36:11.

<sup>65</sup> LMK Sheppard, *Faith Horror: Cinematic Visions of Satanism, Paganism and Witchcraft, 1966-1978* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2022), 8.

after her body is taken over by an external force, which directs her behavioral patterns. In any case, the sensible explanation of such inclinations, rooted in folkloristic beliefs, is the innate vulnerability of children, who, therefore, become more susceptible to demonic possession. Albeit undisputedly true, yet another reason exists – a child functioning as a symbol of innocence. Generally, Romanticism regarded children as pure beings uncorrupted by the outside world, which had an immense influence on Gothic fiction that oftentimes utilized immature characters whose fundamental innocence was contrasted with the sinister motives of the antagonists. In fact, the apparent cluster of binary oppositions between Regan and the demon can be recognized in the film as well, constituting good and evil, helplessness and power, and, of course, innocence and corruption.

The final section of the film features the traditional Roman Catholic practice of exorcism, whose purpose is to banish the demon from the body of the possessed individual. In essence, Charles Buck deduces that exorcism constitutes a key component of the Roman Catholic belief system and cannot be performed without explicit permission from the bishop. It is customarily held in a sacred locale – a church or a chapel – while utilizing several prominent hallowed symbols, including the Christian cross and holy water, and reciting the exorcist formulae. Alternatively, the ritual may be carried out in a house believed to be haunted, with the procedure being virtually unaltered.<sup>66</sup> Despite its historical prominence, predominantly in the Middle Ages and the era of the Inquisition, the ritual is employed rarely in modern times. However, it has become, partially due to *The Exorcist's* considerable influence, a matter of utmost attraction primarily for those horror film producers whose movies concentrate on the issue of possession, demonic or otherwise. Technically, the exorcism can act as a culmination point during which one of the characters (conventionally a clergyman) faces the demon and attempts to drive it out via faith. In the context of *The Exorcist*, Father Damien Karras (Jason Miller), a clergyman specializing in psychiatry, proceeds to perform the ritual on Regan alongside more experienced Father Merin. Accordingly, several notable religious symbols are prepared, including a crucifix, holy water, and a copy of *The Roman Ritual* that contains prayers traditionally applied during exorcisms. Thus, it once more reaffirms the legitimacy of the Christian Church as the proprietor of good, as its symbols are capable of dispersing evil. Noteworthy, while reciting invocations from the publication, Father Merin repeatedly exclaims: “It’s the power of Christ that compels you,”<sup>67</sup> asserting the dominion over the demon.

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<sup>66</sup> Charles Buck, “Exorcism and the Bible” in *Exorcism Through the Ages*, ed. St. Elmo Nauman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1974), 22–23.

<sup>67</sup> Friedkin, *Exorcist*, 1:50:31–1:50:35.

Assuredly, the frequent mentions of Jesus Christ during an exorcism are not unexpected; nevertheless, they include a concealed motive. Christian demonology habitually presents Christ as a “master of demons,” upon whose command they need to exit the mortal realm. Eventually, both clergymen perish during the ritual, yet due to an intervention from Father Karras, it is nonetheless successful. Karras, a deeply conflicted man experiencing a crisis of faith, which only deepens after his mother’s unforeseen death, decides to save Regan through ultimate sacrifice, inviting the demon into his body and subsequently committing suicide via self-defenestration. Such an act of immense courage and unselfishness has redemptive effects and ultimately mends Karras’ crumbled faith as he consigns himself to God, virtually rendering him a martyr in his own right.

*The Exorcist* does not only excel in diligently depicting the religious dimension, albeit with numerous fictional and supernatural elements; it also has sociocultural implications. As John Kenneth Muir states, the film equally succeeds in accurately portraying the changing spirit of the 1970s in the United States – it acknowledges the uncertainty of the era, ushering the nation to return to its roots by highlighting the occasional powerlessness of science and technology and contrasting it with redeeming properties of religion.<sup>68</sup> Verifiably, the theoretically constructed conflict of science and religion as a result of post-Enlightenment sentiment is more than evident throughout the film. When the initial symptoms of the possession manifest, Regan is immediately taken to a hospital and forced to endure a number of medical examinations with no apparent outcome whatsoever. In a way, she is then being “possessed” by science. After the indicators of unearthly presence accelerate, the futile effort of medical experts is replaced by that of psychiatrists, who, however, postulate no plausible explanation of Regan’s condition either. Interestingly, Chris first learns about the possibility of an exorcism on their behalf as one of the psychiatrists mentions it as a potential solution while stating that “[i]t’s been pretty much discarded these days, except by the Catholics, who keep it in the closet as a sort of embarrassment. But it, uh, has worked, in fact, although not for the reasons they think, of course. It’s purely a force of suggestion,”<sup>69</sup> thus deeming the practice’s impact a mere placebo effect. In the end, nevertheless, it does work, which subtly asserts the significance of religiosity even in terms of secular societies. Such deliberate indications of the failings of modern-day science, therefore, heavily suggest its sporadic insufficiency and the effectiveness of religiosity in affairs beyond the reach of technology.

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<sup>68</sup> John Kenneth Muir, *Horror Films of the 1970s* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2007), 268.

<sup>69</sup> Friedkin, *Exorcist*, 1:09:52–1:10:09.

*The Devonsville Terror* is a 1983 small-budget independent supernatural horror film directed by Ulli Lommel and written by George T. Lindsey and Suzanna Love. Similarly to *Mark of the Witch*, it primarily draws inspiration from the Salem witch trials, being frequently regarded as one of the early examples of feminist horror, despite incorporating other themes of cultural significance that may be deemed relevant for the thesis.

The film opens with a scene from 1683 in the fictional New English town of Devonsville, showing three young women – Jessica Morley (Morrigan Hurt), Mary Pratt (Barbara Cihlar), and Rebecca Carson (Leslie Smith) – accused of witchcraft during the interrogation by the Inquisitor. Expectedly, they are sentenced to death and summarily executed – Jessica is disemboweled by hogs, Mary dies on a breaking wheel, and Rebecca gets burned at the stake. However, unlike the titular character from *Mark of the Witch*, the three women are presumably innocent, becoming mere scapegoats for the town’s male residents, perhaps except for Rebecca, whose apparition can be seen in the sky immediately after her death, along with a violent thunderstorm. Even though her exact background is not revealed, the film makes it apparent that Rebecca, albeit potentially a witch, is equally a victim of the superstitious community. Such an exposition already presents a subtle hint at the film’s feminist undertones, rendering the three women victims of the patriarchal town while stressing the conservatism and close-mindedness of its citizens.

While the main plot of the film takes place three centuries after the introductory scene, the overall atmosphere of the town remains practically unchanged. *The Devonsville Terror* presents an image of a quaint and closely knit farming community located far from urban areas. Most of its residents are portrayed as traditionalists, having strong ties to the land and family history that stretches back to the colonial era. The community, with its deep Puritan roots, is also ostensibly religious, regularly gathering for a mass in the local church. Unfortunately, the seemingly marginal scenes of the sermons are one of the very few indicators of the religious dimension in the film, serving mainly as an affirmation of the town’s affinity toward conservatism and potentially as a reason for the continuing belief in witchcraft. More significantly, however, the residents are adamant about retaining the *status quo*, refusing the adherence to liberal views, and being wary of outsiders, which plays a pivotal role throughout the plot.

Fundamentally, the breaking point occurs when three young female outsiders move into Devonsville, attempting to transform the rural community – Chris (Mary Walden), an

environmental researcher, Monica (Deanna Haas), a radio disc jockey, and, most prominently, Jennifer Scanlon (Suzanna Love), an external schoolteacher and the protagonist of the film. Interestingly, over the course of the film, the trio does not directly interact, yet their overall motives remain similar – the implicit promotion of liberalism, feminism, and change in a conservative, chauvinist, and traditionalist town. Monica, who hosts a live radio show that enables women to voice their personal issues and obtain advice from her, and Chris, who researches a lake that is being polluted by the residents, do not feature prominently in the film, but their contributions are nonetheless evident. On the other hand, Jennifer’s interactions with the residents are depicted in vivid detail, juxtaposing their imminent disdain for outsiders with attraction to a young, mysterious woman. Jennifer’s most severe and arguably only transgression appears to be the explanation to the students that “originally, God was considered to be a woman. In Babylonia, the supreme deity or God was the Queen of Heaven. It’s only in fairly recent history, since Judaism, that God the Father has taken over.”<sup>70</sup> Such a bold declaration, albeit historically accurate, angers the locals, prompting them to believe that Jennifer is a witch, which diligently illustrates the limited and clouded worldviews of the community. Moreover, according to Heather Greene, the male characters, being portrayed as murderous, lecherous, and gang-like, purposely want to eliminate progressive women who would endanger their position of power. Thus, unlike prototypical horror films that feature witches as antagonists, it is the male characters who have evil intents, whereas the alleged witches merely struggle to survive.<sup>71</sup> Greene’s observation is undoubtedly grounded in reality, yet while Chris and Monica’s affronts antagonize the community as well, Jennifer indirectly questions the legitimacy of the Christian God, which is a far more serious crime in a town that is so heavily vested in traditional Puritan morality. Her comment that is implicitly feminist in nature functions on a transcendental level, reflecting the conscious internalization of liberal ethos within more conventional structures. Therefore, the residents do not only feel threatened by progressive women per se; their entire integrity rests upon assumptions that become invalid once confronted with the reality of the outside world that is constantly changing and transforming.

While the religious dimension itself is not substantially expanded upon, the film incorporates a considerable number of supernatural elements. Firstly, the town is plagued by a

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<sup>70</sup> Ulli Lommel, dir, *The Devonville Terror* (New West Films, 1983; Vinegar Syndrome, 1983), Blu-ray, 0:33:26–0:33:40.

<sup>71</sup> Heather Greene, *Lights, Camera, Witchcraft: A Critical History of Witches in American Film and Television* (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 2021), 109.

curse that has been dormant for many years, but that awakens when Walter Gibbs (Paul Willson), a local shopowner and main antagonist of the film, suffocates his wife to get free of her influence. The curse is allegedly associated with the Devonsville witch hunt, which implies that Rebecca, moments before her demise, may have cast it as a punishment for the executions of the wrongfully accused. Nevertheless, there is one specific citizen who appears to have been affected by the curse even before its awakening – Dr. Warley (Donald Pleasence), whose ancestor was the executioner of the Inquisition. In essence, Warley suffers from a strange disease that causes worms to crawl out of his skin, prophesizing slow and agonizing death. His condition can be compared to the previously discussed witch’s mark, yet Warley and his ancestors were marked more severely. Even so, after an aggressive mob attempts to execute the trio in the typical inquisitorial fashion and is ultimately destroyed by Jennifer using her extraterrestrial powers, the curse is lifted and Warley’s disease cured. This moment serves as a rehabilitation of the previous wrongdoings done by the residents, cleansing the town of corruption and the burden of guilt. Finally, the character of Jennifer, akin to Rebecca, is shrouded in mystery. It is heavily implied that she may be a reincarnation of Rebecca, yet when Warley hypnotizes her and inquires about her motives, she asserts that she is, in fact, “a messenger from the unknown.”<sup>72</sup> Apparently, such an explanation carries a double meaning – Jennifer is rather literally the outsider hailing “from the unknown,” but she is also a bringer of progress who arrived to lead Devonsville out of the age of conservatism and superstition into the era of liberalism and modernity. Therefore, even though her exact nature remains debatable, she embodies the progressive female character archetype that is crucial for the premise of the film.

Generally speaking, while the film does not delve into religious and spiritual matters, it utilizes a vast array of motifs that occur in *Mark of the Witch* and other witch horror films of the 1970s that examine the religious dimension more extensively. Even though the influence of the NAM is uncorroborated, the intense feminist subtext may suggest a degree of inspiration drawn from Wicca and its subtraditions, whose inclination toward feminism is undisputed. Still, any direct links are intricate to determine as the film is virtually unrecognized by the larger audience and is not the object of inquiry in any authentic research papers.

*Trick or Treat* is a 1986 supernatural slasher film with comedy elements directed by Charles Martin Smith. While the initial reviews varied, the film gradually developed a fandom

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<sup>72</sup> Lommel, *Devonsville*, 1:02:24–1:02:27.

and is now considered a cult classic. Although it does not portray demonic possession in the traditional sense, its premise, paired with the interconnectedness of Satanism and metal music, renders it an adequate sample for analysis.

The film follows the story of Eddie "Ragman" Weinbauer, a high school student and social outcast that becomes a victim of bullying by Tim Hainey (Doug Savant) and other "jock" students. As a form of escapism, Eddie frequently listens to rock and metal music since the inherent proneness toward rebellion against the system and intense manifestations of negative emotions appear attractive and relatable to him. Accordingly, the promise of impending vengeance against his peers, mediated through the lyrics, motivates him. Even though Eddie's repertoire is extensive, he is, above all else, an avid fan of infamous rocker Sammi Curr (Tony Fields), who attended the same high school as him and managed to become a successful musician despite his eccentricity and antisocial tendencies. Therefore, Eddie idolizes Sammi, viewing him as a role model and aspiring to live by the lyrics of his songs.

However, Sammi Curr, who is depicted as a stereotypical rock musician of the 1980s – with black leather clothes, silver accessories, spiked bracelets, white face paint, and long black hair – is not only eccentric; the film implies that he is an incarnation of evil or, more specifically, the proxy of Lucifer. This presumption is explicitly alluded to several times throughout the plot. Firstly, the film begins with an ominous prayer uttered by Sammi: "Go, bear these tidings to great Lucifer. Say Faustus doth surrender up his soul. So he will spare him four and twenty years. To give me whatsoever I shall ask. To tell me whatsoever I demand. To slay my enemies and aid my friends. And always be obedient to my will."<sup>73</sup> As plainly visible, the prayer addresses Lucifer directly and, in traditional Faustian fashion, outlines a pact – a dominion over Sammi's soul for power, wealth, and knowledge. Thus, contrarily to *The Exorcist*, the bargain renders Sammi not a victim of demonic possession but a willing perpetrator in league with the dark forces. Secondly, later in the film, Eddie, when listening to Sammi's unreleased album on an acetate disc given to him by his friend Nuke (Gene Simmons) backward, experiences a vision of Sammi kneeling in the center of a flaming circle, surrounded by people ablaze. Such a scene reflects the stereotypical performance of Satanic blood rituals in popular imagination. Interestingly, the motif of fire symbolizing Hell is not exclusive to this scene – a television reporter mentions that Sammi met his alleged demise in a hotel that was consumed by flames. Therefore, thirdly, Sammi undergoes death as a rite of passage only to be reborn as a wraith-

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<sup>73</sup> Charles Martin Smith, dir, *Trick or Treat* (De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, 1983; Synapse Films, 1986), Blu-ray, 0:00:17–0:00:50.

like demonic entity that, indeed, appears immensely powerful and knowledgeable, affirming his pact with Lucifer and making him an inhumane evil entity inclined toward violence whose sole purpose is to destroy, which is a trait oftentimes associated with Satan or Lucifer.

Nevertheless, as previously indicated, the presence of demonic figures and Satanic motifs does not necessarily signify the influence of the NAM (or modern Satanism specifically); rather, it may draw inspiration from fundamentally Christian demonology. However, the already insinuated relation between Satanism and metal music, at least in popular thought, provides a subtle hint as to whether the latter applies to *Trick or Treat*. Correspondingly, John Kenneth Muir asserts that the 1980s begot an extreme subgenre of metal music called Death Metal, characterized by abrupt tempos, deep growling vocals, and thematic closeness to blood, gore, death, and Satanic symbolism. The subgenre found recognition by a vast number of American teenagers whose families deemed it dangerous and even claimed it contained subliminal Satanic messages if played backward.<sup>74</sup> Evidently, the realization of these unfounded accusations constitutes the main component of the film, in which a rock musician truly communicates through his music post-mortem. In addition, it is equally important to note that the adoption of Satanic imagery by metal bands for entertainment purposes is at times classified as a separate form of Satanism, which, similarly to the CoS, perceives Satan merely as a symbol of revolt against the traditional values and establishment. However, Introvigne adds that some Black Metal musicians of the 1990s, dissatisfied with LaVey's moderate approach to Satanism, embraced a more radical and theistic perspective, wishing to directly worship and venerate Satan, which reaches far beyond the dimension of entertainment.<sup>75</sup> Still, it appears explicit that modern Satanism had, to a perceptible extent, influence on the metal music scene and, therefore, via proxy, on *Trick or Treat* as well.

Furthermore, *Trick or Treat* presents several traditionally Christian motifs that are aptly incorporated into the premise concerning metal music. Initially, Eddie quotes Sammi's maxim, according to which "rock's chosen warriors will rule the apocalypse,"<sup>76</sup> which visibly integrates Christian eschatology into popular culture, specifically rock and roll. Such an instance demonstrates that rock and metal music frequently utilizes not only Satanic but generally religious terminology, concepts, and symbols, oftentimes detached from their original meanings. Next, the film features Reverend Aaron Gilstrom, famously and rather paradoxically

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<sup>74</sup> John Kenneth Muir, *Horror Films of the 1980s* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2012), 549.

<sup>75</sup> Introvigne, *Social*, 480–484.

<sup>76</sup> Smith, *Trick*, 0:02:22–0:02:27.

portrayed by heavy metal singer Ozzy Osbourne, who calls the discussed music genres “rock pornography”<sup>77</sup> and the musicians “demonic beasts.”<sup>78</sup> Gilstrom’s monologue alludes to and practically mocks the assumption of some Christians that rock and metal music is, by definition, dangerous and harmful as it negates traditional Christian values, promotes violence, drugs, and promiscuity, and can lead to Devil worship. In reality, the arguments were deemed altogether unjustified and hyperbolized, yet anticipated since metal music, throughout various aspects, constitutes a revolt against the establishment to which Christianity appertains.

Finally, after Eddie gradually recognizes Sammi’s malevolent intents and, with the help of his friend Roger Mockus (Glen Morgan) and love interest Leslie Graham (Lisa Orgolini), attempts to get rid of him, Sammi’s ultimate weakness is revealed – a susceptibility to water. Although it cannot be, without all doubt, classified as necessarily a religious motif, several clues suggest that it is not arbitrary either. As showcased, Sammi represents the fire element, which serves as an affirmation of his pact with Lucifer and is generally associated with Hell and the Devil in the Christian milieu. Thus, devising water as an instrument of defeat appears not only as a logical choice but also as a representation of sanctity since water (not automatically holy water) has the innate ability to cleanse and exhibit healing properties. Albeit a mere speculation, the water may then constitute yet another symbol of religious origin. Notably, Eddie also undergoes a rite of passage, being forced to stand against his greatest idol and eventually defeat him, which can be comprehended as a milestone symbolizing the coming of age.

Nevertheless, the film observably constructs its premise on the initial close association between specific subgenres of metal music, namely Death Metal and Black Metal, and modern Satanism, which suggests at least an indirect or mediated influence of the NAM ethos. However, the extent of inspiration remains debatable and prone to divergent interpretations.

*Omen IV: The Awakening* is a 1991 supernatural horror film directed by Jorge Montesi and Dominique Othenin-Girard and written by Brian Taggart. As the title insinuates, it is the fourth and final installment in the *Omen* franchise; however, a preconceived notion regarding the previous three films is not crucial for comprehending the plot, even though several links to them are, naturally, involved. Incidentally, the main reason for the inclusion of at least one of the *Omen* films into the corpus is its thematic relevance to the figure of anti-Christ. Therefore,

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<sup>77</sup> Smitk, *Trick*, 0:42:10–0:42:11.

<sup>78</sup> Smith, *Trick*, 0:51:47–0:51:48.

in order to comply with the overall intention of the thesis, the fourth one, due to its release in the 1990s, was selected.

The film follows a married couple – Gene York (Michael Woods), a Virginia congressman, and his attorney wife Karen (Faye Grant) who, unable to conceive a child of their own, decide to adopt an infant from a nun-owned orphanage. From the beginning, it is made abundantly clear that the child, a girl named Delia (Asia Vieira), is unique. Initially, she exhibits several behavioral patterns akin to Regan from *The Exorcist*, yet it is soon revealed that she is not a victim of demonic possession but represents the “evil child” archetype and is directly linked to the figure of anti-Christ. The concomitant manifestations of Delia’s alignment with the dark forces are plenty. At first, the Mother Superior of the orphanage, as well as the priest who unsuccessfully attempts to perform baptism on Delia, both die under mysterious circumstances, allegedly due to a heart attack. The fact that both deceased are religious, more specifically Christian, officials is revealing enough and introduces Delia’s animosity toward Christianity. Moreover, Delia is visibly prone to aggression, being capable of mocking her bully and even defying him by force, which further negates the Christian disdain for violence. In addition, Delia is shown to invoke fear and angst in animals that are oftentimes indicated to exhibit increased receptivity to ill intentions. However, there is one exception – when Delia nearly perishes in a car accident, she is saved by a rottweiler, who is then promptly acquired by the family and becomes her loyal companion. While the Omen franchise regularly utilizes dogs as the guardians of the antagonists, Carrol Lee Fry anticipates that such a choice is not arbitrary. The dogs serve to represent the hounds of Hell, a symbol originating in Greek mythology in the form of Cerberus, a three-headed dog with a reptilian tail that defends the gates of Hades.<sup>79</sup> Such a motif permits the assumption that the Omen franchise draws inspiration not only from Christianity but from other traditions as well. Furthermore, Fry continues, the film uses blackness, notably as the color in Delia’s eyes, as an archetypal symbol for darkness and evil.<sup>80</sup> Correspondingly, evil and its realizations are the primary theme of the film, once again contrasting the innate innocence of children with inherently evil nature that manifests as a direct consequence of malevolent forces. Nevertheless, in this case, the forces are internal rather than external, rendering Delia the incarnation of evil, which is achieved by the conscious elimination of any morally positive personality traits.

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<sup>79</sup> Carrol Lee Fry, *Cinema of the Occult: New Age, Satanism, Wicca, and Spiritualism in Film* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2008), 120.

<sup>80</sup> Fry, *Cinema*, 120.

Gradually, the plot reveals that the source of Delia's evil nature appears to be her biological father, Damien Thorn, the original anti-Christ of the *Omen* franchise. Remarkably, Delia experiences a rare condition called *fetus papyraceous*, carrying inside her an embryo of her twin, which is later implanted into Karen, who gives birth to a boy named Alexander, the actual anti-Christ. Seemingly, the intricate process of childbirth may act as a parody of the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary, as it is often the tendency in horror films that use parodied or reversed Christian symbolism to denote affiliation with the Devil or evil in general. The *Omen* does that several times, notably deploying the inverted cross, a frequently used symbol of the Devil, the number 666, and multiple allusions to the *Bible*, particularly to the passages from *Revelation to John* depicting "the beast." As Father Mattson (Duncan Fraser) explains: "We believe the beast to be the anti-Christ,"<sup>81</sup> which implicitly confirms the biblical interpretation of the anti-Christ as represented in the film, only with specific political connotations that will be presented later.

More relevantly, however, the film features a character named Jo Thueson (Ann Hearn), a self-proclaimed New Age practitioner who works as an au pair for the Yorks and ultimately meets her untimely demise as instigated by Delia. Her inclusion into the story opens new vistas for analysis since, through her character, the film incorporates a vast array of fundamentally New Age motifs. Initially, Jo is portrayed prototypically, holding firm beliefs in metaphysics, alternative healing techniques, and divinatory practices. When inaugurated into the household, she brings multiple healing crystals, yet after discovering they are all blackened and witnessing Delia's antagonism, she begins to suspect her of ill intentions. Symmetrically, this moment further reinforces the postulation that blackness acts as an indicator of evil. Later, Jo invites her like-minded comrade Noah (Jim Byrnes), who is exceedingly sensitive to one's aura (customarily a colored emanation believed to enclose living beings and objects), for a consultation. Noah asserts: "It's more like a muddy pool than an aura. It's like mud and molasses. Swirls of red paint. ... A very negative life force. Red means violence. ... Swirled together like that, it means rage and chaos."<sup>82</sup> immediately after encountering Delia. Analogically, yet another example of color symbolism is utilized, but this time, the aforementioned blackness is juxtaposed with red, representing aggression and violence, while together, they signify chaos – a quality regularly associated with the Devil as opposed to God's order. Following the interaction, Jo takes Delia to a "psychic fair," an esoteric festival centered

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<sup>81</sup> Jorge Montesi, Dominique Othenin-Girard, dirs, *Omen IV: The Awakening* (FMM Films, 1991; Shout Factory, 1991), Blu-ray, 0:46:47–0:46:50.

<sup>82</sup> Montesi et al., *Omen*, 0:28:03–0:28:26.

around metaphysics and New Thought, to either prove or disprove her previous assumption. While there, multiple traditional New Age practices are showcased, including fortune-telling, aura reading, holistic medicine, and meditation. Since the attendants of the fair are said to exhibit a certain degree of sensitivity to negative emotions, they all display overwhelming awe when encountering Delia, which prompts her to set the fair ablaze, fire again emblemizing affinity toward the Devil. Additionally, Jo carries a copy of *The Book of Light*, which is rendered to contain esoteric beliefs as well as biblical allusions. Interestingly, it may refer to the publication by Michael Sharp, bearing the subtitle “*The Nature of God, the Structure of Consciousness, and the Universe Within You*,” which focuses on self-improvement and self-empowerment and was apparently heavily influenced by the NAM ethos. Therefore, the film deliberately expresses the New Age motifs and attempts to illustrate the innate hostility of radical Satanism not only toward Christianity but alternative spirituality as well. Incidentally, Fry mentions that the conscious and explicit incorporation of the NAM into the *Omen* also suggests an intricate play at a level of paranoia that was intensely felt throughout the American society, especially in the conservative Christian communities that regarded the NAM not as a disjointed grouping of distinct spiritual traditions and movement but as a unified network of organizations all around the globe, whose eventual aim is to replace God with the anti-Christ and bring forth the New World Order, comparing it to the period of McCarthyism in the 1950s.<sup>83</sup>

Indeed, the political dimension plays a significant role in the film, primarily through the character of Congressman Gene York, whose governmental ambitions reach even further. Jointly, it is later revealed that Dr. Lou Hastings (Madison Mason), the individual who, unbeknownst to her, implanted into Karen the fetus of Delia’s twin brother, as well as Lisa Roselli (Andrea Mann), Delia’s new au pair, are both members of a Satanic cult that aspires to install the anti-Christ as the president of the United States. Correspondingly, this plot escalation refers to a conspiracy theory according to which, as explained by Adrian Schober, there exist “huge, intergenerational, secretive criminal organizations” adhering to radical Satanism whose members, attempting to accumulate a vast degree of power and wealth, regularly disguise themselves as ordinary, yet influential citizens, including entrepreneurs or politicians, and strive to establish the New World Order.<sup>84</sup> Concurrently, the film not only draws inspiration from the alleged conspiracy but its overall premise, due to the considerable impact of the franchise on popular culture, unintentionally popularizes it. Furthermore, the first two installments in the

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<sup>83</sup> Fry, *Cinema*, 121–122.

<sup>84</sup> Adrian Schober, *The Omen* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022), 14.

franchise, released during the 1970s, supposedly anticipated and perhaps even marginally contributed to the Satanic panic of the 1980s. Therefore, the *Omen*, akin to *Rosemary's Baby*, illustrates a degree of influence of popular culture on the spiritual milieu.

*The Blair Witch Project* (1999) is a psychological horror film and one of the most successful independent films ever produced. It was written, directed, and edited by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, two film students at the University of Central Florida. As Scott Dixon McDowell and Daniel Myrick explain during an interview, due to its relatively low budget (around \$40,000), *The Blair Witch Project* inspired numerous amateur filmmakers to produce other independent films while influencing such horror cult classics as *Paranormal Activity* (2007) or *Cloverfield* (2008). Its innovative take on the horror genre as a pseudo-documentary through the progressive presentation of the footage found in a discarded camera stirred a revolution in horror filmmaking. Similarly, the realistic plot, setting, and dialogue combined with a point-of-view technique (the audience views the story through the camera, therefore through the eyes of the protagonists) brought the film widespread fame and recognition among renowned producers and filmmaking companies (a large portion of the audience initially believed it to be a true story). In addition, the aggressive marketing campaign utilized to promote the film demonstrated the immense power of the Internet, which, at the time of the release, was a relatively new and unprobed medium.<sup>85</sup>

*The Blair Witch Project* and its direct sequels primarily draw inspiration from the Blair Witch urban legend that circulates in the town of Burkittsville, Maryland, and its immediate vicinity. Even though the film attempts to present and interpret authentic material in regard to the legend, its exclusively local character and general obscurity and haziness render it considerably difficult to distinguish between the original tale and the artificial lore constructed specifically for the film, as the two are fused together. Interestingly, according to Aya Tsintziras, the real-life Blair Witch figure might be based on the story of Moll Dyer, a local hermit and healer who was said to have lived near Leonardtown in the 17th century. Allegedly, she was attacked by a group of men who subsequently fell victim to a dark curse, which stirred the rumors about her being a witch.<sup>86</sup> However, during an interview made by Phil Hoad and published in *The Guardian*, Daniel Myrick, the co-director of *The Blair Witch Project*, emphasized that the first personal impulse for making the film was not the legend but rather a

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<sup>85</sup> Scott Dixon McDowell, Daniel Myrick, "Method Filmmaking: An Interview With Daniel Myrick, Co-director of *The Blair Witch Project*," *Journal of Film and Video* 53, no. 2/3 (Summer/Fall 2001): 140–141.

<sup>86</sup> Aya Tsintziras, "The Real-Life Inspiration Behind The Blair Witch Project, Explained," *Gamerant*, April 1, 2023, <https://gamerant.com/the-blair-witch-project-inspiration-explained/>

lifelong dread of randomly discovering stick figures (or twanas) in the woods that was incorporated into the film as the twanas are used by the witch for her ritualistic practices.<sup>87</sup> Peculiarly, similar objects - traditionally totems, talismans, or dream-catchers - made of wood, feathers, bones, and other nature-based materials are stereotypically used throughout the horror genre by the Native Americans, mainly for rituals, protection, or as a warning. Nevertheless, the film does not explicitly elaborate on its purpose, even though it can be assumed that they are meant to taunt and frighten the protagonists.

Essentially, as insinuated above, *The Blair Witch Project* follows a trio of film students, Heather (Heather Donahue), Mike (Michael C. Williams), and Josh (Joshua Leonard), who strive to shoot a documentary about the Blair Witch legend. After interviewing the local residents, the trio learns about Rustin Parr, a hermit who reportedly committed several infanticides in 1941. Throughout the plot, the dialogue between the characters is highly expressive and visibly improvised as it endeavors to induce a sense of realism in the viewer, including numerous strained emotional reactions and vulgar expressions when the group comprehends they are being hunted by the mysterious denizen of the forest. The somber and haunting atmosphere of the Black Hills woods only adds to the terror and dread. Gradually, as the plot progresses, the overall tone of the film intensifies. The story progressively escalates, firstly with the loss of the map, which Mike throws into a creek out of utter desperation and frustration, and secondly and more significantly with the sudden disappearance of Josh, whose muffled cries and screams are later heard during the night. The film ends on a rather ambiguous note - as the two remaining protagonists rush to the abandoned house of Rustin Parr, where they hear Josh's voice, they are ambushed by an unknown attacker, and their ultimate fate is left unknown, although due to the footage found in the deserted camera, it can be presumed that the whole trio was murdered by the pursuer.

Even though the film is titled *The Blair Witch Project*, which signifies supernatural elements connected to the witch character, there seems to be no definite proof that the antagonist is of paranormal origin. While the film does incorporate constituents that could be viewed as supernatural (Josh's voice in the night after his disappearance, children's cries and bloody handprints on the wall, Mike, seemingly in a trance, facing the wall as the Rustin Parr's victims did), the majority of the recorded material is left open for interpretation. Furthermore, not even the antagonist's appearance is revealed, which only increases the mysteriousness and obscurity

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<sup>87</sup> Phil Hoad, "How We Made The Blair Witch Project," *The Guardian*, May 21, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/may/21/how-we-made-the-blair-witch-project>

of the plot. The psychological dimension of the characters, via realistic improvisation, convincingly imitates a potential real-life scenario. Subsequently, the open ending with a plethora of undisclosed variables creates new vistas for the sequels that were produced afterward and that are beyond the scope of the thesis.

Summarily, *The Blair Witch Project* appears to lack the religious dimension altogether, instead drawing inspiration from a local urban legend and being profusely motivated by a desire to devise a realistic plot and promote modern techniques of film-making. Interestingly, however, the film bore several well-known one-liners that became iconic among the horror fans, such as “It’s fucked up but I kicked that fucking map into the creek yesterday,”<sup>88</sup> as uttered by Mike during one of the intense arguments. Thus, due to its revolutionary methodology, intricate plot devices, and famous quotes, the film had a considerable impact on popular culture and developed a cult following.

*The Exorcism of Emily Rose* is a 2005 supernatural horror film with elements of legal drama directed by Scott Derrickson and written by him and Paul Harris Boardman. Based on the authentic case of Anneliese Michel, albeit loosely, the film utilizes demonic possession as an instrument to denote the age-long conflict between reason and faith or, more specifically, between scientific postulations and religious or spiritual beliefs.

Essentially, the plot centers around Erin Christine Bruner (Laura Linney), an ambitious and confident lawyer whose successful defense in the James Van Hopper case renders her a likely candidate for a senior partnership in her law firm. Subsequently, in order to obtain it, Erin reluctantly agrees to serve as a defense counselor in the case of Father Richard Moore (Tom Wilkinson), a Catholic parish priest who is sentenced for negligent homicide, having participated in the untimely demise of Emily Rose (Jennifer Carpenter), a 19-year-old student allegedly possessed by demonic powers, on whom he performed the rite of exorcism. Immediately, the film presents two diametrically different models of thought – Erin, a self-proclaimed agnostic guided by reason and law, who accepts the case merely for her own benefit, and Father Moore, a man of faith who refuses a bargain he is offered only to be able to share Emily’s story. In addition, the prosecutor Ethan Thomas (Campbell Scott), a Methodist who, via several medical experts, presents Emily’s condition as an imminent result of untreated epilepsy and schizophrenia, then paradoxically represents an extreme degree of inclination

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<sup>88</sup> Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sanchez, dirs, *The Blair Witch Project* (Haxan Films, 1999; Lionsgate Films, 2010), Blu-ray, 0:39:54–0:40:00.

toward scientific observations and factual explanations, rendering his religious outlook strictly intellectual. Therefore, the central theme of the film constitutes the juxtaposition of rationalism and faith while implicitly asserting, contrary to the traditional post-Enlightenment fashion, that science encompasses limitations and that traditional religiosity still plays a pivotal role in modernity, even despite technological advancements.

Curiously, the film makes an effort to delineate a possible symbiosis between the two models of thought via the character of Sadira Adani (Shohreh Aghdashloo), an anthropologist who specializes in cross-cultural studies of spiritual experiences and physiological and psychological changes that result from them. When questioned about the scientific research on possession in the courtroom, she declares that “possession is one term for a basic human experience reported by a great number of people all around the world. In my fieldwork, I’ve seen many people who experienced a sense of being invaded by an entity from the supernatural realm.”<sup>89</sup> Such a pioneering approach, which is deployed to indicate an attempt at reconciliation of reason and faith, is immediately dismissed by Thomas as “pseudoscientific,” demonstrating his firm rationalistic worldview. Moreover, Dr. Adani asserts that the medical treatment of Emily, specifically the drug Gambutrol, prevented the successful performance of exorcism since it rendered her immune to “the psycho-spiritual shock”<sup>90</sup> exorcism is intended to provide. Correspondingly, such a bold accusation not only legitimizes exorcism as a viable method but simultaneously condemns medical or, more broadly, scientific treatment as the actual reason for Emily’s death. Consequently, as demonstrated, the film generally leans toward the rehabilitation of faith, proposing a theological rather than medical explanation for Emily’s condition. However, according to Kim Newman’s interpretation, such a tendency devaluates the real-life case of Anneliese Michel, whose injuries included ruptured kneecaps from repeated, forced genuflexion. Thereafter, Hans-Christian Schmid’s *Requiem* (2006), which deals with an identical topic, adopts a more moderate approach, advocating that even the ecclesiastical authorities adhered to medical and psychological explications and deemed exorcism the actual cause of death.<sup>91</sup> Thus, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* may be viewed as a distortion and sensationalization of reality. Conversely, Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. asserts that the trial as a framing device shrouds the plot in ambiguity and uncertainty. Via flashbacks, Emily is seen under a demonic attack in her dormitory room. However, afterward, a similar scene is showcased,

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<sup>89</sup> Scott Derrickson, dir, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (Lakeshore Entertainment, 2005; Sony Pictures, 2005), Blu-ray, 0:58:15–0:58:34.

<sup>90</sup> Derrickson, *Exorcism*, 1:00:37–1:00:39.

<sup>91</sup> Kim Newman, *Nightmare Movies: Horror on Screen Since the 1960s* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 431.

exhibiting Emily amid an epileptic seizure, during which she achieves the same body position and facial expressions. Hence, unlike *The Exorcist*, the possession in the film is, by no means, undisputable.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, while the possession is perhaps deliberately left ambiguous, the film presents supernatural phenomena, namely the demon stalking Erin and Father Moore during the prosecution, which is hardly possible to clarify via logic.

Conjointly, the film includes not only extraterrestrial occurrences but also noteworthy religious motifs. Significantly, the symptoms of Emily's presumed possession are visibly similar to *The Exorcist*, including proneness to violence, unnatural body positions, and speaking in languages virtually unknown to her. In addition, there are several other manifestations, notably visual and auditory hallucinations of the demonic entity reflected in individuals around Emily. Relevantly, during the exorcism, the demon is commanded by Father Moore to utter his name, which is linked to the traditional belief that knowledge of the demon's name grants the exorcist dominion over him. Interestingly, in accordance with the alleged real-life possession of Anneliese Michel, there is not only one demonic entity possessing Emily but six. Their complete enumeration would include entities from Christian demonology (Lucifer and Belial), biblical figures representing treachery and sin (Cain and Judas Iscariot), and historical individuals regularly associated with evil (Nero and Adolf Hitler). Evidently, the number and identities of the demons, albeit inspired by a real-life scenario, are utilized to amplify the gravity of the possession. Furthermore, it is traditionally assumed that demonic beings enter the mortal realm by three to ridicule the Holy Trinity. However, the number six carries significance as well – akin to 666, it is frequently connected to the Devil and sin. Moreover, yet another numerological reference encompasses the fact that the demon habitually attacks Emily at 3 a.m., during the so-called “witching hour,” which Father Moore defines as “an inversion of 3 p.m., the miracle hour, which is traditionally accepted as the hour of Christ's death.”<sup>93</sup> Accordingly, the witching hour is believed to be the time of increased demonic activity and, once again, the mockery of the Holy Trinity. Summarily, this example further reinforces the assumption that demonic entities, representing the inherent antithesis to God and Christianity, are oftentimes portrayed as using inverted symbolism.

Noteworthy, the film does not explore only the demonological dimension of Christianity. During the trial, Father Moore reads a letter written by Emily, in which she

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<sup>92</sup> Kevin J. Westmore, Jr., “Emily Rose Died for Your Sins” in *Divine Horror: Essays on the Cinematic Battle Between the Sacred and the Diabolical*, ed. Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2017), 29–31.

<sup>93</sup> Derrickson, *Exorcism*, 1:12:04–1:12:11.

describes her vision of the Virgin Mary, who offered her a choice – either depart with her or continue defying the demon. Traditionally, such Marian apparitions are attributed to individuals or locales with profound religious significance. This and the fact that Emily chose to stay and struggle against the forces of darkness, ultimately sacrificing herself, practically renders her a martyr or, as Westmore concludes, “a female echo of Christ.”<sup>94</sup> Indeed, the film refers to such a possibility as well, with Father More describing her wounds as “stigmata”<sup>95</sup> and proclaiming her a future Saint based on her self-sacrifice to prove to the largely secular society that demons are real. Therefore, it, as is often the case with religious horror films, depicts the battle between good and evil, signaling that, even though Emily ultimately perished, she achieved a moral victory and modern-time martyrdom.

Broadly, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, similar to *The Exorcist*, delves primarily into Christian theology and demonology and can be, hence, considered a refined example of Catholic horror. While it alludes to several myths that are not exclusively Christian, Christianity or, more specifically, Catholicism remains its chief focus as it comments on its legitimacy in the period of strong scientific inclinations. Therefore, it does not involve any observable traces of alternative spirituality or the NAM.

*An American Haunting* is a 2005 supernatural horror film directed and written by Courtney Solomon and based on the novel *The Bell Witch: An American Haunting* by Brent Monahan. Moreover, it draws substantial inspiration from the Southern United States folklore, which incorporates a similarly constructed legend of the Bell Witch. Additionally, the film utilizes the legend as a framing device to signify and develop the psychological dimension of the characters.

The introductory scene presents a subplot of the film concerning a terrified daughter (Isabelle Almgren-Doré) who suffers from intense nightmares and her recently divorced mother (Susan Almgren), who, when preparing her daughter for a weekend at her ex-husband’s, encounters a cryptic letter allegedly written by one of their ancestors that details the story of Betsy Bell (Rachel Hurd-Wood). While the modern-day subplot constitutes the beginning and the ending of the film, the main story, narrated by the letter’s author, takes place in 1817 and depicts the traditional, if slightly idealized, atmosphere of the antebellum South, including the typical southern accent of the characters. As already insinuated and attested to by Teresa Ann

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<sup>94</sup> Westmore, “Emily,” 31.

<sup>95</sup> Derrickson, *Exorcism*, 1:42:57–1:42:58.

Bell Lockhart, the local legend of Betsy Bell is not only grounded in reality; it appears to be one of the more well-known tales in Tennessee and an integral part of the collective southern folklore that, to this day, generates new versions of the tale, which continue to circulate.<sup>96</sup> Therefore, similarly to *The Blair Witch Project*, the film is heavily impacted by a specific version of a local myth, albeit this time, it is a widely recognized legend whose origins are likely vested in a real-life scenario.

Fundamentally, the main plot revolves around wealthy landowner John Bell (Donald Sutherland) being allegedly cursed by Kate Batts (Gaye Brown), who has an unsavory reputation around the village and is presented as a witch-like figure, for using a portion of her land and refusing to return the profit. Initially, however, it is his daughter, Betsy Bell, who is tormented by the curse via a mysterious entity whose exact nature remains virtually unknown, at least for a portion of the film. Notably, akin to *The Exorcist*, the victim is an innocent female character, free of any burden of guilt, while the torture by the entity gradually intensifies. Thus, the film involves a considerable number of supernatural occurrences as well as religious motifs. The manifestation of the entity that is designated by James Johnston (Matthew Marsh), an acquaintance of the Bell family, as an evil spirit most notably includes the projection of nightmarish visions or dreams onto Betsy, which involve a shrouded figure resembling a little girl. Furthermore, a wolf is frequently depicted as an instrument of the spirit's malevolent intentions. While the wolf typically represents a pristine hunter, in a biblical sense, it is recognized as a symbol of opposition to God, which may suggest the spirit's demonic origin. Moreover, one scene portrays the entity picking up a cross from the wall and shattering it, which further reinforces the assumption. Given the Protestant background of the characters and the strong inclination toward religious doctrines at the time, it appears expected that their explanation of the phenomenon in question is strictly theological, blaming Kate as a practitioner of witchcraft and seeking aid from God. James even attempts to exorcise the household while John visits the church to ask God for mercy, both ultimately failing. In addition, the film encompasses an intellectual character named Richard Powell (James D'Arcy), a teacher and future husband of Betsy, who strives to explain the phenomena rationally and logically, which proves equally unsuccessful and makes him question his own integrity. Therefore, the film strongly hints at supernatural occurrences, indeed, being the source of Betsy's torment.

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<sup>96</sup> Teresa Ann Bell Lockhart, "Twentieth-Century Aspects of the Bell Witch" in *A Tennessee Folklore Sampler: Selected Readings from the Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin*, ed. Ted Olson and Anthony Cavender (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2009), 234.

However, a crucial plot twist that is foreshadowed several times over the course of the film completely shifts the paradigm, changes the implication of the story, and suggests a more mundane explanation while not directly forfeiting the paranormal dimension. The spirit repeatedly whispers ominous insinuations to Betsy and her mother, Lucy (Sissy Spacek), such as: “You know the truth.”<sup>97</sup> As it gradually becomes apparent, the entity does not mean to harm Betsy but to make her acknowledge the repressed family trauma of her father sexually abusing her. Regarding the topic of trauma, Beata Piątek, alluding to the postulations by Irene Kacandes, states that trauma narratives are not characterized exclusively by the depiction of violence but include striking stylistic devices communicating gaps, silence or even whole stories whose recollection may be blurred.<sup>98</sup> Accordingly, the film utilizes such devices, albeit visually, exposing scenes of Betsy physically struggling against an invisible entity that is, in fact, her father, John, symbolizing the repression of painful memories as a defense mechanism. The plot twist completely transforms the nature of the entity, which can be regarded as an evil spirit only in the sense of manifestation of repressed trauma. Furthermore, the entity openly states: “I was born from the union of evil and innocence,”<sup>99</sup> effectively rendering it a product of John’s evil deed and Betsy’s lost innocence. Moreover, the fact that the entity is voiced by the actress who plays Betsy further supports the claim that it is no demonic being but rather an embodiment of her traumatic experience. Thereafter, John is poisoned by Betsy and Lucy, which can be described as a final act of vengeance that ultimately exorcises the entity. Thus, the film implies that there is no actual supernatural monster whose sole purpose is to torture the Bell family. The monstrous emerges directly from the family circle, which renders the nucleus of the film more realistic and, in turn, even more frightening. Additionally, the ending insinuates that the modern-day subplot practically reflects the fate of the Bell family, with the daughter being a victim of sexual abuse by her father as well, which only intensifies the somber conclusion of the film.

As such, *An American Haunting* bears features of domestic horror, which situates the source of dread inside the family. However, even though the supernatural entity acts, above all, as a symbol, the paranormal connotations of the film are not to be neglected. Still, due to its historical setting and emphasis on the psychological dimension of the characters, the plot does

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<sup>97</sup> Courtney Solomon, dir, *An American Haunting* (After Dark Films, 2005; Freestyle Releasing, 2005), Blu-ray, 1:10:31–1:10:35.

<sup>98</sup> Beata Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma in Contemporary British and Irish Fiction* (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2014), 42–43.

<sup>99</sup> Solomon, *American*, 1:19:36–1:19:41.

not principally revolve around religiosity, and any explicit influence of the NAM would appear anachronic.

## Conclusion

The thesis attempted to identify the influence of the New Age Movement (or its absence) in the selected horror films thematically related to Satanism, alternatively demonic possession, and witchcraft while commenting on the religious and spiritual motifs and observing the continual evolution of the genre. Summarily, the genre of horror fiction, due to its inherent supplementarity, encompasses a vast array of issues and themes. The analyses demonstrated that alternative spirituality and the NAM did impact it, even though the exact extent of the impact would require a far more extensive corpus of sample movies. However, based on the findings postulated in the thesis, the nature and extent of its influence can be loosely categorized into three separate groups.

The first group would include films whose inspiration in the New Age milieu is explicit, direct, and undisputed. The existing movie corpus covers one such film, namely *Omen IV: The Awakening*, which vividly displays various New Age beliefs and practices and features a self-proclaimed New Age practitioner as one of the main characters. While traces of the NAM may be observed in multiple selected films, *Omen IV* is the only one that alludes to the label and deliberately indicates its ethos.

The second group would incorporate films whose influence of the NAM is implicit, indirect, and regularly open for interpretation. These would involve *Mark of the Witch*, which implicitly alludes to Wicca and promotes its ritualistic practice, and *Trick or Treat*, which, due to its thematic closeness to rock and metal music, was affected by the simplified notion of modern Satanism and its popularization in the 1980s. Nevertheless, the identification of such features requires meticulous scrutiny of the plot, the cinematographic background, and relevant sociocultural determinants, which may render the categorization slightly subjective.

The third group would constitute films whose impact of the NAM appears absent completely. Such movies include *The Exorcist* and *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, both appertaining to the domain of Catholic horror and in terms of religiosity concentrating solely on Christianity, *The Devonville Terror*, which draws inspiration from the Salem witch trials, *The Blair Witch Project*, which focuses on an urban legend, and *An American Haunting* that, equally influenced by a regional myth, covers chiefly the traditional Protestant mentality in the 19th century. Thus, the potential attempt to detect indicators of the NAM in these films could seem ungrounded and artificial.

Despite their thematic similarities, the selected films are considerably diverse, each constructing its premise differently. However, several recurrent tendencies may be evident across the decades, especially in movies depicting witchcraft, namely the burden of guilt from the past, the exploration of local myths, or small towns as the place of setting. Jointly, Satanism-inspired films or movies concerning demonic possession, while frequently adding new components, approach the subject of possession and the subsequent exorcism in a similar fashion. Even so, the genre of horror constantly evolves and revolutionizes, incorporating contemporary cultural, social, and political issues, which renders it exceedingly versatile.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that, due to the limited scope of the thesis, the selected films constitute merely a meager part of the extensive body of horror fiction works. Therefore, the assembled corpus is highly subjective and the aforementioned postulations can, by no means, be deemed general or universal.

## Resumé

Tato diplomová práce se pokouší zmapovat vliv hnutí New Age na specifický segment populární kultury, který zahrnuje převážně nábožensky laděné hororové filmy, a to formou nastínění teoretických konceptů a východisek spjatých s hnutím New Age a žánrem hororu, následných zevrubných analýz náboženských a spirituálních motivů v daných filmech a konečnou formulací relevantních závěrů daných rozborů.

První kapitola se zaměřuje na hnutí New Age (někdy také Hnutí nového věku), zkoumá původ tohoto označení a jeho kritiku a limity v rámci akademického diskurzu. Zároveň vysvětluje několik termínů, které se často chybně užívají jako synonym pro hnutí New Age, konkrétně alternativní spiritualita (či alternativní náboženství), nové náboženské hnutí nebo západní esoterismus. Jelikož západní esoterismus jakožto souhrné označení různorodých tradic a seskupení lze považovat za přímého předchůdce hnutí New Age, první kapitola zahrnuje rovněž historický exkurz, jehož cílem je některé z těchto tradic představit a který se soustředí převážně na období klasické antiky, středověku, renesance a humanismu, osvícenství a 20. století, během něhož hnutí New Age postupně vznikalo. Uvedený historický přehled klade důraz především na představení vlivných postav a s nimi souvisejících tradic, jejichž věrouka a praxe hnutí New Age ovlivnily. Poslední sekce první kapitoly se poté věnuje modernímu (převážně LaVeyovu) satanismu a Wicce (modernímu čarodějnictví) jakožto dvěma specifickým tradicím spadajícím (alespoň okrajově) do hnutí New Age a charakterizuje jejich věrouku, historii, vnější vlivy a společenskou kritiku. Kromě toho krátce popisuje *Satanskou bibli* (1969) od Antona Szandora LaVeye, otce moderního satanismu, a *Moderní čarodějnictví* (1954) od Geralda Brosseau Gardnera, zakladatele Wiccy. Ačkoliv *Satanská bible* je charakterizována zevrubněji, a to kvůli jejímu značnému vlivu na populární kulturu, *Moderní čarodějnictví* je pouze krátce zmíněno, jelikož obsahuje převážně historické a pseudohistorické postulate, které nejsou pro práci tolik relevantní.

Druhá kapitola se zabývá žánrem hororu, především pak jeho náboženskou a spirituální dimenzí. Zahrnuje stručný přehled jeho vývoje, od prvků hororu v ústní lidové slovesnosti přes jeho výskyt během středověku a renesance až po gotický román, jenž značně ovlivnil současnou hororovou fikci, a jeho americkou manifestaci ve formě tzv. jižanské gotiky. Samotný přehled poté obsahuje četné odkazy na texty, které lze považovat za prototypické předchůdce náboženského hororu, a situuje je do dobového kontextu. Druhá kapitola se dále zaměřuje na soudobé realizace hororové fikce, zejména pak na kinematografii a internetové hororové

povídky (tzv. *creepypasty*), aby tak ilustrovala schopnost hororu se dále vyvíjet a modernizovat. Kromě toho také zmiňuje některé relevantní prvky hororové fikce, zkoumá, jaké emocionální reakce horor vyvolává, a pokouší se tak ozřejmit jeho rostoucí popularitu. Okrajově také uvádí některé hororové subžánry a stručně je definuje. Především se nicméně druhá kapitola koncentruje na náboženský horor jakožto specifický subžánr hororové fikce, představuje jeho typické znaky a postavy a předkládá teoretická východiska, na kterých poté analytická část staví.

Třetí kapitola se zaměřuje již přímo na analýzu vybraných hororových filmů, které lze částečně či zcela zařadit mezi příklady náboženského hororu. Konkrétně se zaměřuje na filmy vydané mezi lety 1970 a 2010 (přibližné období zrodu a vzestupu hnutí New Age), přičemž z každého desetiletí vybírá dva zástupce, z nichž jeden se tematicky dotýká satanismu (často ve formě démonické posedlosti, postavy Antikrista, exorcismu atp.) a druhý čarodějnictví. Kompletní filmový korpus tak obsahuje celkem osm hororových filmů, jmenovitě *Mark of the Witch* (1970), *Vymítače ďábla* (1973), *The Devonville Terror* (1983), *Koledu, nebo něco provedu* (1986), *Přichází Satan – Procitnutí* (1991), *Záhada Blair Witch* (1999), *V moci ďábla* (2005) a *Americkou kletbu* (2005).<sup>100</sup> Následná analýza se poté převážně zaměřuje na identifikaci a rozbor náboženských motivů v daných filmech a pátrá po indikacích možného vlivu hnutí New Age. Korpus byl navíc sestaven tak, aby zahrnoval různorodé snímky, a tudíž se analytická část nevěnuje jen samoučelné analýze religiozity a nadpřirozena, ale vyjadřuje se i k dalším potenciálně relevantním tématům, která mají kulturní, sociální nebo politický přesah. Jelikož se ovšem práce věnuje jen drobnému výseku z jinak nezměrného množství hororových filmů, jejichž výběr byl ryze subjektivní, její závěry nelze generalizovat.

Práce doplňuje vlastní interpretace o relevantní citace ze zvolených filmů, pasáže z primární literatury, převážně z textů napsaných samotnými tradenty, úseky sekundární literatury, která cílí na akademickou přesnost a objektivitu, a výjimečně úryvky internetových článků, které jsou nicméně podrobeny kritické analýze a které nejsou zásadní pro konečné vyznění práce ani jednotlivých rozborů.

Prostřednictvím analýz zvolených filmů práce dochází k závěru, že hnutí New Age žánr hororu skutečně ovlivnilo. Úplný rozsah tohoto vlivu však nelze určit pouze na základě osmi selektivně vybraných hororových filmů. I přesto je však lze rozdělit do tří základních skupin

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<sup>100</sup> Některé filmy zřejmě nebyly přeloženy do českého jazyka, pročež resumé uvádí jejich název v anglickém originále; u ostatních filmů uvádí oficiálně uznávaný překlad, aby tak u českých čtenářů docílilo lepší orientace.

podle typu a míry vlivu. První skupina obsahuje filmy, které přímo a explicitně zobrazují prvky hnutí New Age, což zahrnuje pouze snímek *Přichází Satan – Procitnutí*, jenž přímo zachycuje tradiční praxi tradentů hnutí. Do druhé skupiny patří filmy, jejichž inspirace hnutím je implicitní a značně závislá na divákově interpretaci, jmenovitě *Mark of the Witch*, kde se objevují četné odkazy na tradiční wiccánskou rituální praxi, a *Koledu, nebo něco provedu*, který se tematicky dotýká rockové a metalové hudby, což jej spojuje se zpopularizovaným pojetím satanismu z osmdesátých let. Třetí skupina poté zahrnuje filmy, které se k hnutí New Age navenek nikterak nevztahují, konkrétně *Vymítače ďábla* a *V moci ďábla*, což jsou příklady katolického hororu a ve vztahu k religiozitě komentují převážně křesťanství, *The Devonville Terror*, jenž čerpá inspiraci především z čarodějnických procesů v Salemu, *Záhadu Blair Witch*, která pracuje se specifickou městskou legendou, a *Americkou kletbu*, jež se zakládá na populární americké pověsti o Betsy Bell a zobrazuje primárně protestanskou mentalitu 19. století.

Napříč jednotlivými filmy lze navíc pozorovat řadu podobností, které svědčí o určitých zažitých tendencích v rámci hororového žánru a o vzájemné inspiraci. Co se týče filmů, které se tematicky vztahují k čarodějnictví, je to především břímě minulých skutků (často se jedná o skutky dávných předků), inspirace regionálními mýty a pověstmi nebo zasazení děje do malého, provinčního města. Filmy, které se věnují satanismu nebo démonické posedlosti, rovněž následují zpravidla zažité postupy, především pokud se jedná o zobrazení samotné posedlosti a následného exorcismu, nicméně řada z nich se snaží jisté stereotypy revitalizovat či vůbec nevyužívat. Tuto snahu lze nicméně vztáhnout na žánr hororu jako celek, poněvadž i ten se neustále vyvíjí, využívá nových metod a často duchaplně reaguje na dobové dění.

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## AI Tools

The author did not utilize any external tools of artificial intelligence, except for the free version of Grammarly, which was employed only for the correction of the text.