

Pop Spirituality: The Application of Popular Culture in Contemporary Esoteric Practices



Pop spiritualnost: uporaba popularne kulture
v sodobnih ezoteričnih praksah

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1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek
DOI 10.4312/svetovi.2.2.30-45

ABSTRACT

Magical practices have undergone significant changes in the past decades, shifting towards accessibility and individuality. With the rise in popularity of individual, custom-designed magical rituals, popular culture has proven to be one of the important aspects associated with the new practice. Influential, reaching a wide audience, with a strong focus on immersive visual aspects, it is of no surprise that practitioners have started to include pop-cultural elements into their rituals. New schools of magic, such as the influential Chaos Magick, have proven to be a fertile ground for these innovative practices. This paper will focus on the mutual interaction between occult knowledge represented through visual means in popular culture and the magical practice of modern mages.

KEYWORDS: esotericism, magic, pop culture, subculture, aesthetics, occult

IZVLEČEK

V zadnjih desetletjih je v magičnih praksah prišlo do pomembnih sprememb, saj so se usmerile k dostopnosti in individualnosti. Z naraščanjem priljubljenosti individualnih, po meri oblikovanih magičnih ritualov se je popularna kultura izkazala za enega od pomembnih vidikov, povezanih z novo prakso. Zaradi njenega vpliva, širokega občinstva in močne osredotočenosti na vizualno, ki občinstvu omogočajo potopitev v fiktivni svet, ni presenetljivo, da so praktiki v svoje obrede začeli vključevati elemente iz popularne kulture. Nove šole magije, na primer vplivna skupina Chaos Magick, so se izkazale za plodna tla za te inovativne prakse. Članek se bo osredotočil na interakcijo med okultnim znanjem, predstavljenim z vizualnimi sredstvi v popularni kulturi, in magično prakso sodobnih magov.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: ezoteričnost, magija, popularna kultura, subkultura, estetika, okultno

INTRODUCTION

Popular culture has taken a lot of inspiration from magical practice, from the environments, skills and professions, to practices and beliefs. Topics often associated with magical practice, such as wizards, witches, spellcasters, thaumaturges, spells, curses, or rituals are abundantly represented in popular culture, and for most people outside of the active esoteric milieu, are predominantly connected with these works of fiction. However, these artistic representations are often based on historical esoteric writings, authentic rituals, or established beliefs.

Popular culture itself has for a long time been disregarded as a subject “unworthy” of academic, but also artistic interest. Often pejoratively described as “low art” to emphasize its separation from the more established forms of art and entertainment, such as painting, sculpture, theatre, or opera, associated with the opposite term of “high art” (or fine art), for a long time popular culture was overlooked, or even shunned and ridiculed (Danesi 2018: 6). However, not that long ago, this status quo started to change. With the emergence of pop art in the 1950s (Livingstone 2000: 4), the line between high and low art was becoming blurrier. Mirroring the change of opinion in the art scene, the academic community was also slowly adapting its previously negative outlook on popular culture. With several authors already acknowledging the important role popular culture has played in art theory (Crothers 2010: 31; Kececi 2015: 419), health (Kendal and Diug 2017: 9; Zimmerman and Mason 2017: 55), education (Kos-Lajtman and Slunjski 2017: 74; Seko and Kikuchi 2021: 358), or cultural transmission (Cohn, Taylor-Weiner and Grossman 2012: 1; Darling-Wolf 2015: 101; Leung et al. 2014: 143) we compared panels from American and Japanese comics to explore cross-cultural cognition beyond behavioral experimentation by looking at the expressive mediums produced by individuals from these cultures. This study compared the panels of two genres of American comics (Independent and Mainstream comics), the study of popular culture and religions is slowly gaining momentum as well. Nevertheless, within the studies of esotericism, or spirituality, the connection between magical practice and popular culture largely still remains omitted and ignored. Here I would argue that, especially within the contemporary spiritual milieu, popular culture plays a much more important and influential role than is usually attributed to it. Especially with the emergence of new (sometimes also called “post-modern”) forms of magical practice, such as the popular Chaos Magick and all its numerous subcurrents and variations, the aesthetical as well as narrative influence is on the rise. At the same time, due to the progress in audiovisual technology, the ability to depict mythological worlds, otherworldly beings, or supernatural powers is as advanced as never before (Abbott 2006: 93; Fellner and Fischer 1996: 345). It is thus of no surprise that these possibilities, combined with the seemingly endless imagination of the artists, create immersive storylines, which in turn subsequently influence the behaviour of the practitioners themselves.

This article aims to analyse this interconnectivity of both sides, focusing on the magical practice represented in popular culture, as well as the popular culture implemented into the magical practice. Through literature review, media studies analysis and chosen anthropological methods (participant observation and semi-structured interviews), chosen case

studies will be processed and analysed. At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge the topic's complexity, relative novelty, and the potential for further research. The main limitation of this study is the heterogeneity and often anonymity of the respondents. Often, they prefer communication through digital means, represented under nicknames, and are unwilling to divulge additional personal information outside of their practice and association with popular culture. As such I chose to not focus on the age and gender structure of the respondents, but rather on their persona as a magician, and the Chaos Magick community they are part of. In terms of structure, this article first addresses popular culture within the historical esoteric milieu and then continues to the contemporary one. Here, the focus is aimed initially at case studies representing the modern aesthetic representations of magic within popular culture, and subsequently at the influence said pop-cultural representations have on the practitioners themselves.

THE MAGIC OF POPULAR CULTURE – THE ORIGINS

To investigate the mutual interconnectedness of pop culture and modern magical practice, it's necessary to look at where, when, and how this relationship originated. Despite its emergence being associated with the counter-cultural movements of the 1970s, which will be discussed in a later part of this paper, I would argue that the precursor of these practices was the late 19th century English artist and occultist Austin Osman Spare (Nechvatal 2009: 41). Being actively interested in Western esotericism and theosophy, while at the same time developing a unique and often misunderstood art style (Anonymous 1909: 171), Spare's exhibitions attracted the interest of one of the most prominent occultists of the time, Aleister Crowley (Baker 2011: 48), who invited him to join his new magical order Argenteum Astrum (or A.∴A.∴) in 1907 (Baker 2011: 65).¹ Nonetheless, already in 1912, after a series of disagreements between Spare and Crowley (Baker 2011: 105), Spare left the order and proceeded to work on his own occult philosophy.²

Out of his ideas, the concept of the unconscious mind and his sigil magic practice are the ones that played a major role for later generations of artists/magic practitioners. Spare

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Even though art critics considered Spare to be a talented artist from an early age (at seventeen, he was the youngest artist at the 1904 Royal Academy summer exhibition), his style was seen as controversial. An anonymous reviewer on his *Book of Satyrs* wrote: "Like most young men he seems to take himself somewhat too seriously, and we think for the moment of the manner in which a Goya (who, by the way, is among Mr. Spare's examples) would have treated a similar range of themes. We find a lack of ease and spontaneity underlying all these elaborate fancies. Yet to have conceived such a series of designs is something to an artist's credit, even though the value of line in his work does not seem to us always to have been perfectly understood, so that his drawing is often more shapeless and confused than we trust it will be when he has assimilated better the excellent influences upon which he has formed his style" (Anonymous 1909: 171).

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Spare strongly disliked Crowley's emphasis on hierarchical organisation and gradually became critical of the practice of ceremonial magic. Crowley, in return, accused Spare of only being interested in "black magic", which according to Crowley was the reason he prohibited Spare from becoming a full member of the order (Baker 2011: 105). Following his experience with Crowley, Spare developed a lifelong hostility towards ceremonial magic, as well as towards the occultists who practiced it. In his *Book of Pleasure: The Psychology of Ecstasy*, he famously described them as "the unemployed dandies of the Brothels" (Spare 1913: 3).

emphasized the importance of the unconscious part of the mind for artistic endeavours. According to him, the psyche creates repressions of certain desires, which would have the ability to create a new reality, but through conscious repressions, the entry to this reality is prohibited. On the subconscious level, under certain conditions, these repressions can be “forgotten”, thus evoking an even stronger impulse of creation, which brings the previously inaccessible reality into existence (Spare 1913: 12).

One of the methods Spare himself applied to this theory was the process of sigilisation. In his *Book of Pleasure*, he describes sigils as “monograms of thought”, glyphs, or graphical means to symbolise the desire by giving it form (Spare 1913: 26). This will create a bridge between the conscious and unconscious, as the creation process of the sigil involves the process of forgetting the desire the sigil is representing. The graphical symbol represents the limitations of the desire. In order to release the energy meant to cause the alteration of reality, the symbol needs to be destroyed. The choice of destruction itself is bound only by the imagination of the practitioner, and includes but is not limited to burning, tearing, breaking, drowning, smearing and many others (Grant and Grant 1961: 4; Spare 1913; U.:D.: 2012: 9). This practice, due to its relative simplicity, playfulness and creativity is still one of the most popular forms of contemporary practical magic even today.

Even though Austin Osman Spare was undoubtedly one of the most important figures of Western esotericism who combined art, visual culture, and magical practice, he was not the only one. In 1949 Spare met another key figure of the magical milieu, the English ceremonial magician Kenneth Grant (Baker 2011: 209). Despite Spare’s antipathy towards ceremonial magic, both of them soon became friends. Grant himself was a lifelong collaborator of Aleister Crowley, and for some time after Crowley’s death acted as his successor as the Head of the Ordo Templi Orientis, or O.T.O. (an occult secret society of which Crowley assumed control). More importantly, in the 1970s he established his own Thelemic organisation, the Typhonian O.T.O (later the Typhonian Order).³ Here, he aimed to research a dark realm which he named “Universe B”, or the “Tunnels of Set”, which was according to Grant a realm opposite to the Qabalistic Tree of Life (Evans 2007: 307). Within this realm Grant drew inspiration heavily from the deities described by the American cosmic-horror author H. P. Lovecraft, and later from ufology (Evans 2007: 308). It is noteworthy that Lovecraft himself rejected any claims of occultism and considered his work as pure fiction (or weird fiction). Even though Grant was the first occult leader that began implementing Lovecraft’s cosmology into his magical practice, he was not the last. Among others, Michael Aquino from the Church of Satan incorporated elements from Lovecraft’s work into his ritual magic (Engle 2014: 91), and Paul Remi Provost founded the occult organisation the Esoteric Order of Dagon, which is a direct reference to Lovecraft’s story *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* (Engle 2014: 92; Lovecraft 1936). Like Grant, Aquino and Provost argued in similar terms that Lovecraft’s stories contain hidden, cryptic meanings that were unknown even to the author himself (Engle 2014: 92).

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Thelema is a Western esoteric philosophy and a new religious movement, founded in the early 1900s by Aleister Crowley (Crowley 1966: 61).

CHAOS MAGICK AND POP CULTURE WITHIN MAGICAL PRACTICE TODAY

If with Austin Osman Spare and Kenneth Grant we were talking about the precursors of combining popular culture and art and magical practice, with the emergence of Chaos Magick, this trend manifested fully. Chaos Magick (often spelled with a “k” at the end) is a term describing a modern approach to magic, founded in 1970s England by Peter J. Carroll and Ray Sherwin (Hine 1995: 9). Drawing heavily from the beliefs of Spare, criticising other occult traditions as too rigid and religious, chaos mages (or chaotes) aimed to strip away the non-pragmatical aspects of occult traditions, to leave behind a set of techniques used for practical means (Otto 2020: 767). The foundational teaching of Chaos Magick is that beliefs influence perceptions, and that the world as we perceive it can be changed through the change of said beliefs (Woodman 2003: 16). As such, every practitioner can create their own syncretic magical system, intentionally combining any magical tradition, religious teaching, philosophy, or culture (even popular) they see fit (Clarke 2004: 105).

Due to this individuality of the practice, a stark difference in opinions, even certain forms of rivalry between the practitioners, often emerge. The aforementioned “do what works for you” approach is notoriously heterogenous, and members of the community are often arguing between themselves about what should and shouldn’t be used as a magical practice, relying on their own experiences and interpretations. This is especially the case with attempts to implement non-traditional, or perceivably “eccentric” elements into the rituals, such as characters from movies, comic books, video games, or any other pop cultural channels. As these ritual designs are strongly emotionally driven (working with elements the practitioner has intensive emotional binding to), the peer-critique often revolves around the dichotomy of sympathy-antipathy towards the chosen element.

On the other hand, popular culture and art have always played a pivotal role in this magical practice, as both can be the sources of various symbols and symbol systems. These symbols, following Spare’s philosophy, when sufficient belief is invested in them, can rival in importance any traditional or established magical or religious symbolism (Carroll 1987: 30). The main symbol of Chaos Magick – the Chaos star (also known as Chaos orb or sigil of Chaos) – originates from the works of the fantasy author Michael Moorcock (1970), even though a similar symbol had already been used by A. Crowley for his Eight of Wands tarot card design.

Despite Chaos Magick being a practice not confined to any institution, and not following any fixed hierarchical structure, several organisations came into existence. Two of the most prominent ones are The Illuminates of Thanateros (IOT), founded in 1978, describing itself as the Order for “serious” Chaos Mages in the same way as the OTO is for “serious Thelemites” (Hine 1995: 192), and Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth (TOPY), a chaos/sex magic/experimental art collective, founded by the English singer, performance and visual artist Genesis Breyer P-Orridge in 1972 (P-Orridge 2010: 18).

With the popularity of Chaos Magick on the rise, it was no surprise that it attracted many artists and other celebrities of the time. Genesis P-Orridge studied for nearly a decade under the American writer and visual artists William S. Burroughs, who was at that time heavily involved with the Chaos Magick movement (P-Orridge 2010: 17). The Scottish comic book writer Grant Morrison wrote one of his most famous works, *The Invisibles*, as a “hypersigil”, his own small magician’s universe, which should have the power to influence real life (Morrison 2003: 21). The South African hip-hop duo Die Antwoord, Danny Carey from the band Tool, the electronic musician Richard D. James, better known under his pseudonym Aphex Twin, or the Chilean-French avant-garde filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky are further examples of artists who implement Chaos Magick practices, philosophy, and visuals into their work (Burke 2018: 1). Due to the visual and narrative talents of the artists, their work has often become the source of inspiration for further practitioners. In my research among Chaos Magick practitioners, a substantial number of respondents admitted that their initial interest in magic came from pop culture. Based on the narrative aspect, the comic book series *The Invisibles* (1994–2000, DC Comics) by Grant Morrison was the most commonly mentioned first step into magic, followed by tabletop games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, and video games (ongoing research, 2023).

Of particular importance to the respondents was also the visual aspect of popular culture. In contrast to real-world stories, the supernatural ones form a whole separate genre of the entertainment industry. Fictional worlds tap into the human preferences for exploration, which have been co-opted by cultural evolution for entertainment (Dubourg and Baumard 2022: 31). Spectators can find character traits in fictional characters that reflect their own traits – real or desired ones – and offer possibilities of self-projection to situations and abilities that are impossible in the real world (Park and Henley 2007: 44). The exposure to visual stimuli, also in the form of audio-visual entertainment, in moderate amounts, can have multiple beneficial effects on the individual. Stress relief (Sedghikhanshir et al. 2022: 1780), improvement of motor skills (Nuernberger et al. 2023: 13–14), or character building (Dubourg and Baumard 2022: 33) are just several aspects of visual culture that have already caught the attention of researchers.

In this chapter, I’ve focused mainly on the aesthetic depictions of the practitioner and the practice. The data pool consisted of movies and TV shows that explicitly dealt with topics of magic and the occult, where one of the main or supporting characters was a practising magician in any form. The geographical space of the depicted narrative was limited to European or US origins. Fictional worlds with lore grounded in European or US folklore, such as *Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter* were also considered adequate. The temporal setting of the narrative was not a major decisive factor, but I focused predominantly on contemporary times. Out of the data pool, several case studies were chosen for detailed qualitative content analysis (Bengtsson 2016: 9). Due to the spatial limitations of this paper, I’ll only be discussing several examples that represent the variations of depictions in the most

suitable way (from the aesthetic as well as esoteric standpoint), leaving other topics that are not discussed here for potential future research.

THE PRACTITIONER

When thinking about the persona of the mage, or the witch, the aesthetics and visual narrative were dominated for decades by two major archetypes: the old man, usually bearded, dressed in robes, often wearing hats of various forms, and the crone, similarly old, rugged in apparel, often with noticeable physical abnormalities or deformations (a hunchback, a long nose, warts, etc.). Even though not exclusively, both of these archetypes often had malicious intent towards the hero, who needed to overcome their trials to achieve his goal.⁴ Both often serve as the main antagonist of the story, even though in the case of male mages, the function of a wise man, an advisor to the protagonist, is also frequent. The witch archetype can be found, for example, in the character of the Grand High Witch in the movie *Witches* (the original from 1990, dir. Nicolas Roeg, as well as the remake from 2020, dir. Robert Zemeckis), or Helena Markos, a.k.a. Mother Markos from the movie *Suspiria* (original 1977, dir. Dario Argento, remake 2018, dir. Luca Guadagnino). In these examples the appearance of the witches is two-fold: the “masked form” in which they appear to the unknowing environment, and in which they appear no different from normal humans, and the “true form”, a disfigured, grotesque, almost monstrous one.

The image of the horrid crone is something that has been revised in recent decades. During the 1970s, in connection to several women’s and feminist movements, the witch was slowly rebranded from the antagonistic creature to a symbol of female empowerment and liberation (Kwaschik 2023: 189). This transition was also marked with the new, intensified beauty standards and aestheticization (Cait 2023: 6). Modern witches aimed to manifest their independence and often anti-establishment demeanour openly, and as such a re-evaluation of the aesthetics of the witch trope was necessary. After all, in the culture of beauty, nobody wants to be associated with symbols of ugliness and repulsion. The old crone needed to make room for the attractive, strong, independent female, so that the aesthetical self-stylisation, in accordance with the fictional models of popular culture, could be used for self-identification and character building. In response, many old forms of the witch archetype are still being reinterpreted today, with the previous antagonist redeemed and re-imagined as the protagonist (Dagalp 2022: 20, 69). Such is the case of Elsa from the *Frozen* franchise (2013–2019, dir. Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee), inspired by H. Ch. Andersen’s evil Snow Queen (Andersen 1884), or *Maleficent* (2014, dir. Robert Stromberg) as the altered version of the main antagonist from the story of Sleeping Beauty.

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Ivan Bilibin, the late 19th century Russian illustrator, skillfully depicted both of these archetypes in Slavic folklore in the form of Koshchei the Deathless (an archetypical evil, immortal wizard) and Baba Yaga (an old witch living in the forest).

The 1996 movie *The Craft* (dir. Andrew Fleming) is one of the earliest representations of witches that marked the transition from crone to attractive young witch, followed by the TV series *Charmed* (1998–2006, created by Constance M. Burge).⁵ This kind of new witch was attractive, designed according to the contemporary beauty standards, independent, and thus one of the main driving forces of the narrative. Aimed predominantly at teenagers and young adults, it is not difficult to imagine why they became the models of behaviour for almost a whole generation (Rudy 2022: 146). Partridge observed a similar trend with the character of Willow Rosenberg from the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003, created by Joss Whedon), who is another example of a young, attractive, independent witch, and served as a role model for many young wiccan practitioners (Partridge 2005: 133).

This trend is still present in cinema today, with examples such as Wanda Maximoff, a.k.a. the Scarlet Witch in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (2014–2022, dir. various), the witches in the TV series *The Magicians* (2015–2020, created by Sera Gamble and John McNamara), the 2015 movie *The Witch* (dir. Robert Eggers), or in the third season of the *American Horror Story: Coven* series (2013, created by Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk).⁶ These aesthetic standards are subsequently also reflected in the stylisation and fashion choices of many modern real-life witches, which has led to the emergence of the witchcore style – an aesthetic centred around the themes of modern witchcraft. The popularity of this style can also be tracked on social media, where the hashtag #witchcore at the time of writing this paper has over 200,000 posts on Instagram, and over 177 million views on Tiktok (ongoing research 2023).

The situation with male magic practitioners slightly differs from their female counterparts. The archetypal depictions of mages can be found in a plethora of the so-called high fantasy and low fantasy stories, such as Gandalf and Saruman in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003, dir. Peter Jackson), or Dumbledore and Voldemort from the *Harry Potter* film series (2001–2011, dir. various).⁷ Similarly to modern witches, mages (or wizards, sorcerers, warlocks, etc.) have also undergone a modern re-imagination. Characters such as Harry Potter and the rest of the young adult cast of the Harry Potter franchise, the male cast of the aforementioned TV show *The Magicians*, Dr Stephen Vincent Strange from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, or the street-warlock and occult detective John Constantine from the eponymous movie and TV series (the comic book counterpart on which they are based is titled *Hellblazer*) are also depicted as young and attractive in comparison to the old archetype. However, in

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One could argue that there was also a different trope of the witch in popular culture – the comedic character of the witch placed in an everyday setting, such as the 1960s sitcom *Bewitched* and, aimed at a teenage audience, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996–2003). Due to the comedic setting and silliness of the events depicted, nobody among my respondents mentioned these as a noticeable influence, in contrast to the more dramatic movies and TV series.

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The example in *The Witch* (2015) actually references both depictions. The titular witch is depicted at times as the old, repulsive, child-eating witch of the old archetype, at different times as a young seductive female of the new trope. The main protagonist, Thomasin, represents the new approach fully.

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High fantasy, or epic fantasy, is a subgenre of fantasy fiction set in an alternative, fictional world, with its own rules, which differ from the real world (Stableford 2005: 198). Low fantasy, or intrusion fantasy, is a subgenre of fantasy fiction, in which magical events intrude into the real world (Stableford 2005: 256).

contrast to the witch trope, the archetype of the mage as an old bearded man is still very much alive in modern popular culture. While the witch in the old archetype was mostly associated with negative traits and unappealing appearance, the mage was depicted in a more dualistic sense – the antagonistic evil wizard and the supporting magical advisor, mostly wise and respectable also in appearance. As a positive role model, the second form needed no revision and could exist simultaneously with the new re-imagined modern form. This is also reflected in the aesthetic fashion styles inspired by depictions of mages from popular culture. Similar to witchcore, the style for modern mages (representing the new mage trope – young, attractive, fashionable) emerged as the wizardcore style, while the more traditional one (representing the old mage trope – wise, bearded) emerged as the magewave style.⁸

In addition to the two aforementioned mage types, there is also a third one. Represented in movies like *A Dark Song* (2016, dir. Liam Gavin) or *Anything for Jackson* (2020, dir. Justin G. Dyck), this type isn't aesthetically distinguishable from an everyday person. These mages dress in standard clothing, with little to no intention of standing out; some are even depicted as socially awkward, shy, or reclusive, sometimes showing signs of antisocial behaviour. What differentiates them from other people is their extensive knowledge of magical symbolism and practical magic. Their position within the story tends to gravitate towards the secondary antagonist, unwilling advisor, or antihero. Even though their intellectual or opinion appeal might resonate with the audience (mostly due to their sarcastic, anti-social, or even nihilistic views), their aesthetic appeal is usually low.

THE PRACTICE

Building a sufficiently believable image of a magician is a difficult task on its own, but it pales in comparison to the depiction of the magical practice itself. While real-life practitioners are individual people with their individual tastes and there is no fixed rule of what is and what is not allowed, especially within the diversity of Chaos Magick, the practice itself can be subjected to stricter rules. As we have already mentioned, while Chaos Magick is liberal in its practice, other schools of magic are not. Rituals have rules concerning setting, symbolism, texts, and gesticulation, which need to be followed. As such, in depictions of magical practice, we can identify the following three categories:

- The depicted practice is fictional, with occasional loose inspiration from folklore.
- The depicted practice is trying to claim some level of legitimacy, mostly through symbols or texts, but it is used in a different or incorrect way.
- The depicted practice is trying to represent the original source as closely as possible, with occasional alterations due to the needs of the narrative.

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As is usual in fashion, the mentioned styles rarely work individually. In an attempt to create a unique look, they are often combined with other subcultural styles, such as gothcore, metalcore, devilcore, lustcore, acidwave, punk, and many others.

In the first category we can find most of the big movie blockbusters and popular TV series aimed at the broadest audience. *Lord of the Rings* was loosely inspired by Norse mythology (Barton 2022: 1), *Harry Potter* draws from Greek and Roman mythology (Indulkar 2013: 27; Saeed 2015: 103), and many of the mentioned popular TV series are a playful variation of old European myths and fairy tales.

It is the subsequent two categories that we'll analyse more deeply. Each will be represented by a chosen case study movie – the second category by the American horror movie *Anything for Jackson* (2020, dir. Justin G. Dyck) and the third by the Irish horror movie *A Dark Song* (2016, dir. Liam Gavin). The main motive in both movies is the death of a child and the attempt to deal with the situation through magical means.

Case study 1 – Anything for Jackson

Plot summary: An elderly couple who lost their only grandson in a car accident attempt a “reversed exorcism” – to bring back the soul of the deceased child and place it into the unborn baby of a pregnant woman they have kidnapped. They join a local Satanist group, and with the help of another member, Ian (an expert in magic), they try to conduct the ritual.

Several elements of the story are of particular interest here – the magical book, the demonic entity, and the symbolism contained in the book.

The book, according to the story, “appears to be written over many years, in different languages, dialects, and religions, and it might be the oldest book in the world” (01:04:13). During a detailed shot of the book's pages, we can see several noteworthy symbols – multiple inverted crosses, a leviathan cross and a deer with two arrows stuck in its forehead (01:04:43). The invoked demon is called Surgat, who, according to the movie narrative, “is the demon who unlocks the gate between us and tormented souls” (01:05:51). Due to lack of space, we'll be focusing only on these three interconnected elements.

First, the symbolism: it is true that the inverted cross, even though originally known as the Cross of Saint Peter (Rest 1954: 29), has been associated with occultism and later satanism in numerous modern pop-cultural cases. Nonetheless, its first usage as an occult symbol is connected with the 19th century occult leader Eugene Vintras, who according to the prominent French occultist Éliphas Lévi, wore it as a sign of his new faith (where the traditional cross represented the “Reign of Suffering”, the inverted one should symbolise the “Reign of Love”) (Jules-Bois 1900: 237). In 1846 Pope Gregory XVI accused Vintras of homosexuality, conducting Black Masses in the nude, and masturbating on the altar, of which he was never found guilty (Waite 1906: 109). Despite this, it was the first instance where the inverted cross was associated with anti-Christian sentiments. It was only following the 1960s movie and TV productions that the inverted cross became the most noticeable satanic symbol.⁹

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Other than the immensely popular *Rosemary's Baby* (1968, dir. Roman Polanski), other movies that contained the inverted cross as a satanic symbol were, for example, *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964, dir. Roger Corman), *Black Sunday* (1960, dir. Mario Bava), *The Devil Rides Out* (1968, dir. Terence Fisher), or *The Satanist* (1968, dir. Zoltan G. Spencer).

One of the most influential examples is the 1968 movie *Rosemary's Baby* (dir. Roman Polanski), where in the final scenes the titular infant is gifted an inverted cross as a sign of Satan.

The leviathan cross, another symbol commonly associated with satanism, originally the alchemical symbol for sulfur, was adapted in the 1960s by Anton LaVey, the founder of the Church of Satan (Koch 1955: 73; LaVey 1969: 218). The deer with the arrows in his head was taken from the chapter "Aemula naturae" in the book *Devises Heroïques* by Claude Paradin (Paradin 1557: 111). This publication is a collection of 182 emblems and mottos, commonly used as markers by the aristocracy, as well as decorative elements by artists (Sharratt 2005). Other than its seemingly sinister design, this picture bears no occult, esoteric, or satanic meaning whatsoever.

Surgat himself is considered a minor demonic entity known as the "one who opens all locks". His name is briefly mentioned in the 17th–18th century *Grimoire of Pope Honorius* (Kelly 2019a: 51–52) and the 18th century *Grimorium Verum* (Kelly 2019b: 18). With the earliest component in the book being an illustration from a 17th century emblem catalogue, it is hardly imaginable that the magical book in question is the "oldest book in the world". As such, the visual content of *Anything for Jackson* works with symbols that are seemingly occult, or occult but used in an incorrect setting, relying on the aesthetical message rather than the content. The aim here was to create a narrative and atmosphere based on identifiable symbols (inverted crosses) or symbolic meanings (disturbing imagery) and not to focus on the authenticity of the content.

Case study 2 – A Dark Song

Plot summary: A grieving mother who lost her son tries to conduct a difficult ritual to contact her child with the help of a ceremonial magician. The pair is locked in a magically sealed house and the majority of the movie focuses on the hardships of the ritual practice, while several personal traumas and hidden agendas are revealed.

Many of my respondents consider *A Dark Song* to be a movie that depicts the ritual practice as realistically as possible and as such it has become a benchmark for the quality in occult themed narrative cinema. The ritual in the movie, aimed to invoke the Holy Guardian Angel, is known as the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage, from the *Book of Abramelin*, an early 17th century (maybe older) grimoire. It is the same ritual as was conducted by Aleister Crowley in the Boleskine House in 1899 (Readdy 2020: 15). Even though the director took some artistic liberties with several elements for the dramatization of the story (such as the inclusion of Chinese and Tibetan characters during the magical process, which are not part of the original ritual), most of the parts follow the requirements for the ritual in detail.

The ritual in the movie takes about six to eight months to accomplish, which is in accordance with the English translation of the grimoire by S. L. MacGregor Mathers (1975) (later, more complete translations mention eighteen months), the same length as Crowley was planning (Readdy 2020: 13). The earliest versions of the manuscript are written in German, a later copy was in French. The protagonists of the movie discuss the proficiency

of reading, speaking and understanding German and French (19:10). The ritual requires cleanliness, a strict diet and abstinence from alcohol, drugs and sex. One of the characters, struggling with alcoholism and addiction, has to deal with it before the beginning of the ritual (11:13). The setting has to be ritually sealed by a circle of salt, which can also be seen in the movie (22:15). Throughout the movie we can see the protagonist undergo a series of torturous procedures, often inflicting harm on oneself, in order to reach altered states of consciousness, another aspect that is true to the original source. Similarly, the process of summoning and subsequently banishing the Lords/Kings of Hell, and summoning the Holy Guardian Angel, or the creation of magical squares (sigils containing the mystical words) are also depicted in accordance with the original ritual.

Within the study of esotericism in modern pop culture, *A Dark Song* is a unique phenomenon. While still following a comprehensible and relatable narrative, it includes a number of minor details that are aimed at practitioners and researchers, and are easily missable or not understandable for the casual viewer. It is of no surprise that it had an alluring effect on enthusiasts interested in studying magic, who through the movie researched and studied the original sources.

While these two examples are taken from movies dealing with explicitly occult themes, modern practitioners of magic do not limit themselves to only such “serious” depictions. Due to the aforementioned syncretic nature of Chaos Magick, anything can become a source of magical symbolism. Seemingly mundane activities, such as growing plants in the animated movie *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988, dir. Hayao Miyazaki), can become a baseline for agricultural rituals, or a signature clothing type, such as the superheroine’s jacket in *Jessica Jones* (2015, created by Melissa Rosenberg) can become a vessel for a protective spell. Similar to art, in Chaos Magick the design (of the ritual) is also only limited by the imagination of the practitioner.

CONCLUSION

Modern times bring modern revisions, and even magical practice is no exception to this rule. Thanks to modern technology as well as the post-modern approach to magical practice, previously clandestine and hierarchical practices have been brought to light and to the public. Modern schools of magic have thrown away the dogmatic and religious approach of ceremonial practice and approached magic from a new perspective: as a tool for achieving one’s desires. Free from rigorous norms, new rituals have been designed, combining elements that would previously be unheard of. At the same time, magical practice was absorbed into the media as a narrative and visual source of entertainment. Thanks to the influence of popular culture, magic worlds, magical practices and magical practitioners have become part of every household, influencing millions of viewers in the process.

The original archetypes related to practitioners of magic – the mage and the witch – have also changed over time, undergoing a process of aestheticization. While the original ones, represented by old, secluded, mostly antagonistic characters, were part of folktales for

hundreds of years, the situation has changed dramatically in the last few decades. Mirroring societal changes related to counter-cultural, artistic, anarchistic, and feminist movements, the image of the witch has changed. It evolved from the evil old crone, an image that resonated throughout the Middle Ages, to a strong, independent, often visually attractive woman. The times of witches being destined only for a painful demise at the hands of the heroic protagonist are over, the new witch is free of the repressions and is firmly defending her position in society. The transition from the antagonist to the protagonist has been completed. Following this new trend, it is understandable that many of the witches in popular culture have become role models for young women around the world. It was this combination of self-sufficiency, strength, appearance and magical powers that has given rise to new fashion trends, but also increased interest in magic and spirituality. A similar trend could also be seen with their male counterparts, the mages, who experienced modernisation as well. The age of the new, modern magician is now.

But what is the practitioner without the practice? In this case, visual artists use their interest in and knowledge of magic to create depictions of magical practice, ranging from purely fictional, to inspired, to precise. Without claiming one is better than the others, as each serves a different purpose, the chosen examples aimed to represent the appropriate categories in the most descriptive way. Magic and art have thus become two sides of a coin – drawing inspiration from each other, and at the same time, mutually influencing each other in a never-ending cycle of inspiration, alteration and adaptation. As this paper focused mostly on the various levels of accuracy in magic depictions within popular culture from the esoteric perspective, there is also a vast potential for additional research. Considering the cultural impact this new wave of magical fascination is having on the audience, as well as on content creators, it is safe to claim that popular culture and magical practice are now as interconnected as never before.

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POVZETEK

V zadnjih desetletjih zanimanje za ezoteriko in magično prakso postopoma pridobiva zagon. Kar je bilo dolgo časa stvar skrivnih organizacij z ekskluzivnim članstvom, skrito pred očmi javnosti, počasi prodira med širšo javnost in spodbuja zanimanje različnih subkultur. Na podlagi te modernizacije so se razvile različne »postmoderne« šole magije, predvsem popularna *Chaos Magick*, ki je razbila okove tradicionalnih obredov in jih ponovno zgradila na nov, sinkretičen, »naredi sam« način. Pomembno vlogo pri tem prestrukturiranju je imela popularna kultura. Ta kulturni fenomen, ki je prodril v milijone gospodinjstev po vsem sve-

tu, se je izkazal tudi kot močan medij za posredovanje ezoteričnih idej, simbolov in likov. Navdihnjena s tradicionalnimi magičnimi arhetipi tako praktikov kot prakse, je popularna kultura naredila to, kar zna najbolje – si stvar na novo zamislila in jo preoblikovala. Tradicionalne upodobitve čarovniških praktikov niso bile več primerne, saj so morale odražati sodobne ideje o tem, kaj je vabljivo in privlačno. Prenovljene čaravnice in magi, v skladu z novimi, sodobnimi standardi vizualne privlačnosti, so za mnoge mlade praktike postali novi arhetipi. Na podoben način je bila prenovljena tudi sama magična praksa. Vsaka različica magične prakse je na svoj način predstavljena znotraj popularne kulture, od fiktivnih ali »izmišljenih« upodobitev do obredov, ki točno sledijo ritualom, opisanim v čarovniških knjigah. Ker sta oba moderna fenomena še vedno v vzponu, povezava med sodobno magično prakso in popularno kulturo kot njenim medijem najverjetneje še ne bo kmalu izginila.