

Celebrations in Dark Guise:

A Definitional Study of Contemporary Satanic Ritual



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Abstract:

This thesis aims to answer the question “what is contemporary Satanic ritual?” It explores the historical development of Satanic ritual from being a fictional nineteenth-century literary concept, to a means of giving voice to 21st century activism and identity. From its roots in Christian history when the Satanic Black Mass was once a polemic instrument for subduing the other, and its transformation into a meaningful practice with which the oft subdued raise their own voice. Through interviews with members of the Global Order of Satan, a non-theistic religious organization that adheres to a positive reading of the Satanic figure as a rebel and adversary to despotic, arbitrary and patriarchic rule, I have concluded that contemporary Satanic ritual can be defined by division into four categories: activism, identity, community and play. The traditional definition “Black Mass” is refuted as a commonly usable term within contemporary Satanism due to irrelevance. This study serves the overall purpose of clarifying a concept often pre-convinced by the greater public based on medial and political propaganda or religious polemics. In a modern multi-religious society, it provides an analysis of an often-stigmatized group and widens the scope of understanding of what we normally may perceive as acceptable religious beliefs or even, what counts as religion.

Key words: contemporary Satanism, Black Mass, ritual, activism, religious community, identity

I would like to express my warmest gratitude to all interviewees who aided me by participating in this study.

Furthermore, I would like to extend gratitude to my supervisor Per Faxneld. For the inspiration - both within and beyond the purely academic.

Front matter: Salvator Rosa, *The Witches' Sabbath*, c. 1635-1654, oil on canvas. Source: Wikicommons

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Introduction

I decided to spend the unusually hot summer of 2018 at Stockholm university, in a windowless lecture hall, taking a course called “Western esotericism”. One particularly balmy afternoon, class was introduced to the fascinating and oft misconstrued subject of Satanism, and I realized that this is an academic field with plenty of room for growth. Not in the least because Satanism is a phenomenon prone to rapid (at least in comparison to some religions) change. In fact, the dominating atheistic branch of Satanism today had its inception as late as the 2010’s. Despite this, Satanism generally seems to be understood as something sinister and taboo, a remnant from the Satanic panic of the 80’s and 90’s. At the mention of it people conjure up such memories as church burning black-metal heads or abducted children with strange tales to tell. But mayhaps the foremost image in people’s minds regarding Satanism, is that which we have seen repeatedly within pop culture. Literature, film, and TV constantly reiterate the Satanic ritual, or if you will, the Black Mass. That gruesome, blood-curdling affair, usually made up of a robe-clad, chanting group of people in a circle or a pentagram. There might be an altar and a ceremony master offering up a naked woman or even an infant, to Satan himself. Usually, it involves burning black candles, maybe even a behorned, goat-masked figure and certainly a culmination of blood splatter in every direction. It is an image and a trope with a long history, usually told with an agenda to smear the “other” and seldom, if ever, described firsthand by the Satanists themselves.

This thesis is now two years in the coming and during that time I have naturally discussed the topic with people in my surroundings. The contrasting reactions I receive when I say I’m about to write a thesis on Satanism is interesting to say the least. Some immediately wish to hear more, they are the sort from whence I hail, that is, persons who find the forbidden and obscure

fascinating and alluring. But then there are those who quizzically raise their eyebrows in a small degree of offence and wonder “*why* would you write about *that*?”. About half of Sweden’s population are born into the Lutheran church but Swedes are certainly not strong in their Christian beliefs and practices.¹ Yet the aversion for the concept of Satanism still lives on. That Satanism is a religion split into several very different factions, and that only a miniscule number of Satanists worship an actual Satan, remains widely misunderstood. I believe, that if we can understand ritual, we can understand the religion itself. It is the hearthstone from which all the components of religion emanate; ritual can be used as a tool to convey moral guiding principal or canon, it can give us spiritual peace and understanding, bring us together in a supportive community and let us be creative, play and have fun. Some of these things have been shown through decades of research by scholars within the cross-disciplinary field of ritual studies. But what is Satanic ritual, exactly?

The problem addressed by this thesis is that there aren’t any scholarly descriptions of, or studies dedicated to, contemporary Satanic rituals - how they are constructed or what they mean to the Satanist. Satanic ritual has conventionally been described by non-Satanists, and for centuries a trope about Satanic ritual which seldom varies have been pushed upon the public - usually by Christian fundamentalists or for purposes of entertainment through media. I believe that this fact also proves the relevance of this study. Since we live in a pluralistic society, the arbitrary prejudice of one certain religion based on insubstantial “facts”, polemics, hearsay or what we’ve seen on TV should be questioned - ultimately for the betterment of a democratic and tolerant society, in the least to better understand one another. The purpose of this study then, is to analyze the emic perspective, that

¹ Thurfjell 2019.

is – the perspective of the practitioner, to answer the question “what is contemporary Satanic ritual?”. To find out, I will employ several sub-questions:

- What is the difference between the stereotypical fictional Satanic ritual and contemporary practiced Satanic ritual?
- Is the Contemporary Satanic ritual a Black Mass?
- What is the purpose of Contemporary Satanic ritual?
- Why is there a need for Contemporary Satanic ritual?
- What does a Contemporary Satanic ritual look like? What symbolism is used? What creative choices are made? Are there any rules? Who can participate?
- What does the Contemporary Satanic ritual mean to the practitioner?
- How has the Satanic ritual evolved historically?
- How can Contemporary Satanism be theorized?

Disposition

For the remainder of this introductory chapter, I will introduce key concepts and definitions and present an abbreviated background relating to Satanism in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries. I will continue in chapter two with a modus operandi where the four main theories used in this study will be presented along with the method of semi-structured interviewing. The following chapter is a somewhat extended history of attributed-to-self-claimed Satanic ritual, mapping the course of this phenomenon from the pre-Christian era until today - aiming to offer a deeper understanding of the stigma surrounding Satanic ritual. It will also help in providing answers to what Satanic ritual is - as we compare it to what it is not, nor has ever been. The main study pans out in chapter four where I have divided my findings into four acts, thematically arranged according to the four categories I deem contemporary Satanic ritual is comprised of –

concluded by a summational curtain call. What follows is a list of primary sources, printed and digital references and additionally, a transcript of the interview questions used.

Definitions and Demarcations

An appropriate approach to the study of Satanism before modern times would be focusing on mechanisms of *attribution*. That is, the polemic practice of attributing Satanism unto others.² This practice is discernible in the persecution of “heretics” throughout history, be it the burning of Cathars in the 1200’s or accused witches during the early-modern times. But even after self-declared Satanists show up in history this approach continues to be relevant, in the context of my study it represents the perspective of the thesis problem; that Satanic ritual is often described by non-Satanists and attributed as a practice unto others. This is one of two discourses on how Satanism is narrated in western culture, a discourse on the Satanic in media and the public sphere on one hand and the self-declared Satanic narratives on the other hand.³

Both these discourses, but primarily the latter, come together in the concept of *imagined community* discussed by Joseph Laycock. The concept highlights that the understanding of a tradition that for so long has existed exclusively in people’s imagination, will greatly vary from Satanist to Satanist. They each hold a personal conception of the Satanic with which they connect. Laycock exemplifies with Asbjørn Dyrendal’s studies of online debates regarding what counts as Satanic music. The recurring argument was that whatever music the Satanist deem to be Satanic, *is* - in allusion to that it “is Satanic to them”.⁴ I will return to the topic of fluidity in Satanism and why it renders definition a tough task.

² Van Luijk 2013, p. 41.

³ Petersen & Dyrendal 2012, p. 216.

⁴ Laycock 2020, p. 88.

However, even though the abovementioned definitions certainly are relevant my main approach of definition will be that of categorizing Satanism into two labels as defined by Per Faxneld, Satanism *sensu stricto* and Satanism *sensu lato*. This is a definition that works well in both past and present. Each form of Satanism has several sub-factions. These are central definitions as to understand the sort of Satanism we are dealing with primarily in this thesis. Satanism *sensu stricto*, or Satanism in a strict sense, is described as a variety where Satan is celebrated in a “prominent position”. This means that Satan, or the devil, is lauded as the only or foremost deity or symbol. Satanism *sensu lato* means that the symbol of Satan is used just so, as a symbol in the peripheral - or in a metaphorical manner. Or as Faxneld describes it “... as a discursive strategy in a fairly demarcated and restricted manner.”⁵ This could be exemplified with the Satan-symbol in the works of theosophist Madame Helena Blavatsky or anarchist Michail Bakunin. However, it is crucial to note that even though my interviewees could be categorized within Satanism *sensu stricto*, since Satan is a central figure to them - they do *not* believe in an *actual* Satan or devil. In fact, they do not believe in or worship any deity, they are atheists and “... use the orthodox establishment as a negative Other while extending the positive connotations of the figure of Satan.”⁶ A development of Faxneld’s definition through a division of Satanism *sensu stricto* into two sub-groups of theists and atheists would thus be relevant since *sensu stricto* involves Satanic groups from opposite sides of the theistic spectrum.

This way in which Satan is utilized by contemporary Satanists can be explained by the term *counter-myth* or *counter-reading*. Faxneld employs the term *myth* as described by religious scholar Trygve Mettinger. That is, myth is narrative in form, it deals with

⁵ Faxneld 2014, p. 48, Faxneld 2006, pp. xiii–xvi.

⁶ Petersen & Dyrendal 2012, p. 216.

one or several gods/supernatural beings and it has one or more of the following functions: a) to provide entertainment, b) to serve as a paradigm for the present, a validation for institutions and values and explanation for human burdens and c) to offer a counter-present that relativizes the deficiencies of the prevailing situation. Myth can be a very powerful legitimation of social values and moral.⁷ In the prevalent Satanic context we are specifically talking about the myth of Eve and the serpent from the book of Genesis, chapter 3 (and the romantic literary Satan described below) which is a central object of counter-reading. The original biblical myth is widely known and reads as follows:

Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?; And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; But of the fruit of the tree which *is* in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die; And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil; And when the woman saw that the tree *was* good for food, and that it *was* pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make *one* wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat; And the eyes of them both were opened...⁸

In a traditional reading of this myth, it can be seen as a legitimation for the subjugation of women. Particularly since God proceeds by punishing Eve with the promise of greatly multiplied labor and pains (“sorrows”) in childbirth and that she should be forever

⁷ Mettinger 2007, pp. 68-69.

⁸ The Bible: King James version, Genesis 3:1-7.

under the rule of her husband. Adam, in turn, is doomed with vegetarianism in perpetuity, as well as the pains of physical labor. However, in pro-Satanic counter-readings of this myth, the serpent (a.k.a Satan, the Devil, Lucifer, et cetera) becomes an instigator in the search for enlightenment, Satan liberates Eve (and Adam) from arbitrary divine authority by urging her to eat from the fruit of knowledge. Thus, a form of protest exegesis or counter-reading of the myth is created. Anchored in a well-known narrative, using well known figures to provide familiar context and comprehension, but twisted into something positive towards the supposed villain. Counter-readings present an alternative worldview and destabilizes hegemonical myths. In consideration of this, it is not necessarily the desire of contemporary Satanists to entirely remove Christianity, but to protest values or practices they believe to be wrong and claim their place within the religious milieu, but we get a head of ourselves.⁹

⁹ On counter-myths and readings, see Faxneld 2014, pp. 28–33, Mettinger 2007, pp. 68–69, Foucault 1977, p. 209, Terdiman 1985, pp 68–69.



Figure 1 - The serpent entwines itself around the body of Eve, it whispers in her ear, enticing her to eat the forbidden fruit. Aquatint photogravure by Lemercier and co. After Walter Crane, 1899. Source: Wikicommons

Satanism is a fickle term. I have chosen the denominator *contemporary* to describe the kind of Satanism I'm studying, adapted from the Oxford dictionary definition "living or occurring at the same time."¹⁰ I intentionally wanted to move away from *modern* Satanism since (as discussed below) modern Satanism was born in the 1960's with the establishment of the Church of Satan (CoS) by Anton LaVey, and although there are similarities between CoS and contemporary Satanists they differ tremendously on several points within their ideology, creed, and policies. The Global Order of Satan (GoS) operates today but their ideology is still based on the texts written by LaVey during the second half of the 1900's. By choosing *contemporary* I want to highlight the primarily activist, non-static, sensu lato Satanists of the present, as Satanism as a religion has been prone to rapid

¹⁰ Oxford dictionary of english 2010, p. 958.

change and the practice of Satanists vary greatly. Because of this, I find that studies of Satanism might be somewhat antiquated even though they aren't very old. For example, Massimo Introvigne defines Satanism as the worship of the character in the Bible named Satan by organized, hierarchic groups through liturgical and ritual practices in his *Satanism: A social history* published as late as 2016.¹¹

Many of the anthologies and monographs on Satanism and modern Satanism were published before the establishment of the Satanic Temple or the Satanic Temple/Global Order of Satan schism. Indeed, there aren't any published volumes on these organizations except for Joseph Laycock's *Speak of the devil*- and one or two essays on bachelor and master-level. The term Contemporary Satanism could be interchangeable with new Satanism, activist Satanism, post-Satanism, or global Satanism (as per suggestion from a member of GoS) but seeing as all these seem somehow fixed in one time/space or other, contemporary appears to be the better and more fluid choice. However, *contemporary* might not be a narrow enough denominator considering other, theistic Satanic groupings exist today which obviously does not belong to the same category as GoS and TST. Because of this, a variant titled *Activistic-Contemporary Satanism* could be used when describing the groups analyzed in this study. I will, for the sake of convenience, continue to use the singular term *contemporary* throughout this thesis.

Romantic Satanism

Using the biblical Satan as a positive metaphorical archetype isn't a capricious choice made by contemporary Satanic organizations, but a continuance of a long tradition particularly upheld by poets and literary romantics such as Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe

¹¹ Introvigne 2016, p. 3.

Shelley. As explained below, the tradition of romantic Satanism is quite integral to contemporary Satanists and their ideologies.

In 1667 John Milton writes his epic poem *Paradise Lost* where Satan appears in a, for the time, unusually ambiguous depiction. In the beginning of the poem, Satan is a strong, intelligent and above all - heroic - character (a quality close to Milton's own heart) opposed to the despotic power of God. But he (for Milton refers to Satan as *he*) is also trickish and vengeful and in the end he is nothing more than a worm slithering back to hell after the fall of man.¹² Even though Milton most likely did not intend a positive reading of the Satan figure, and Eve is depicted with noticeable misogyny - the allegory of the disenfranchised anti-hero tell-tale was picked up some hundred years later by the radical thinkers and literary romantics of the late 18th and early 19th century.¹³

A sympathy for the metaphorical devil was adapted early on by writers and artists positive towards the French revolution, who particularly adhered to the literary Satan's famous proclamation "Better to rein in Hell, than serve in Heav'n".¹⁴ Satan then became the embodiment of the republicans fight against social injustice, caused by incompetent and totalitarian monarchy rule. Journalist William Godwin (1756-1836) proclaimed Satan protested that incomprehensible "...inequality of rank and power which the creator assumed..." and made him represent Godwin's own anarchist values.¹⁵

He undeniably influenced his son-in-law Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822). As one of the most prominent romantic poets Shelley openly declared for the necessity of atheism (and got

¹² Milton 1916, pp. 181-448; Tillyard 1946, pp. 276-279.

¹³ Faxneld 2014, p. 114; Milton's misogynist depiction of Eve is most prominent in book IX, Milton 1916.

¹⁴ Van Luijk 2013, p. 42.

¹⁵ Godwin 1993, p. 146.

expelled from Oxford university for it) as well as promoted early (Satanic) feminism in his poem *The Revolt of Islam* (1817). Shelley considered organized religion to represent a conservative oppression of mankind and his poetry served to strive for freedom. Through poetry, Shelley believed he could awaken a general curiosity and make people question the arbitrary Christian hegemony. Thus, he created a countermyth - and infused the Satanic figure with a different meaning. In lieu of of “the great deceiver”, Satan became the liberator of humankind.¹⁶ The romantic poets (the Satanic theme would come to be reiterated by both William Blake, Lord Byron, Victor Hugo, and others) believed that true meaning could only derive from the *imagination* and that it was best manifested through poetry. According to this way of thinking, even religion originates from an imaginary source - making poets important spiritual guides. Some claim that this was indeed their objective and that in some sense, they succeeded.¹⁷

Furthermore, Faxneld claims that some sections of the romantic movement can be interpreted as a continuation of the revolutionary enlightenment, but against orthodox Christianity instead of authoritarian rule. In *The Revolt of Islam* woman is Satan’s foremost ally and Satan is attributed many nature-like qualities traditionally connected with femininity. The text has a strong feminist tone and includes norm breaking characters. This theme is recurring in Shelley’s poetry even though he seldom mentions Satan by name but rather refers to the figure as a serpent or the english translation of the Latin word Lucifer, meaning “morning star” - probably because blasphemy and allusion to Satanism would bring very real, legal repercussions during the time.¹⁸

¹⁶ Faxneld 2014, pp. 120–128; Van Luijk 2016, p. 95.

¹⁷ Van Luijk 2016, p. 88ff

¹⁸ Faxneld 2014, pp. 124, 136.

Early interpretations of Gen 3 and the fall of man were made by church fathers such as St. Paulus who advocated for women to “adorn themselves in modest apparel; with shamefacedness and sobriety [...] let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.”¹⁹ This oppressive and misogynist tradition of thinking was passed down to distinguished and massively influential reformers such as Martin Luther (1483–1546) and Jean Calvin (1509–1564) who continued the tradition of promoting this thoroughly ingrown principle of female subjugation.²⁰ Even the concept of Satan as the evil adversary of God, who lures man into sin, is a later construction which appears first in the New Testament where we are told that

“...there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels [...] and the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world; he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.”²¹

¹⁹ King James Bible, Tim 1, 2:9-15.

²⁰ Faxneld 2014, p.66–67.

²¹ King James Bible, Gen 12:7-9.



Figure 2 - Gustave Doré, *Satan finding the sleeping serpent, in whom he will hide himself*. Plate. From John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, 1866. Source: Wikicommons

Satan was given characteristics of lustfulness, jealousy, and pride and so the early theologians wrote him into Christian history and by the fourth century there existed a consensus on the nature of Satan. With Satan as a scapegoat, it was much easier to condemn heretics and blasphemers who strayed from the orthodox path, as they could be accused of Satanism.²² The point being, these principles derive not directly from the Old Testament itself but from *interpretations* of genesis 3 by misogynist men, hence leaving the field open for alternative interpretations. These alternative interpretations wouldn't be socially or legally accepted until much later. A massive change in society needed to occur before such radical thoughts would see the light of day. That is precisely what happened during the scientific enlightenment when empiric studies resulted in discoveries concerning the mechanisms of the universe which, in turn, gave rise to a questioning of the God-given

²² Van Luijk 2016, pp. 21ff

order of things. Rationalism, reason, critique of religion and authoritarian order grew strong and culminated during the French revolution.²³ The enlightened thinkers freed themselves from the hegemony of the church, and religious tolerance gradually increased throughout Europe during the 18th and 19th century.

After the so-called disenchantment of the world (a much-debated subject²⁴), when science offered answers to the many mysteries of the workings of the universe, there still existed a void which religion once filled. People needed answers to philosophical queries of meaning, truth, and value. The countermyths of the romantics weren't supposed to be taken as literal facts or truth. Their lost faith in orthodox Christianity and propagation of enlightened ideas were contributing factors as to why they could create a counter mythical Satan; their own interpretation - and thus facilitating their own ideology. However, their goal was not to create a new religion, the counter myth was meant to help mankind find the meaning of our existence.²⁵ It was a type of thinking where science and religion could co-exist, and it remains central to the Contemporary Satanism of today. By criticizing the doctrine of others through their own narrative (in this case Christianity), one creates a powerful tool with which ideas, creed and moral can be argued on another, hard-hitting to a greater extent, level than if one would polemize outside of the narrative. Of course, the purpose of Contemporary Satanism is not solely to act as inverted Christianity, of which they have been accused. However, their creed is grounded in what they feel are a great number of evils and injustices that historically have been and continue to be committed in the name of God.

²³ McKay 2015, pp. 557, 565–566, 569.

²⁴ Asprem 2014.

²⁵ Van Luijk 2016, p. 90–91.

By creating the above-described counter myth, the romantic poets challenged emotions of identification with the Christian mythology - and if their rhetoric was to succeed, they would create doubt. The counter mythical Satan also became a most personal figurehead. Even though Shelley and the other poets aim was to change the attitude to religion within society generally, the personal meaning of the counter myth could, and still can, look very different from person to person; Satan could represent freedom from either patriarchal, religious, racist, class, and gender oppression amongst many other injustices.

Theistic/Non-Theistic Satanism During the 20th and 21st Century

In the early 1960's San Francisco, Anton Szandor LaVey (1937-1997) introduced a select group of people to lectures on the occult and esoteric matters. Riding on the popularity-wave of those themes was what prompted him to form what would be known as The Church of Satan (CoS, officially formed in 1966) and release *The Satanic Bible* in 1969 (a text specific to the ideology of CoS which should not be understood as universal code for all Satanic groups). LaVey's writings features a hodgepodge Satanic philosophy made up of chiefly borrowed thoughts from figures such as Ayn Rand, Ragnar Redbeard, Éliphas Lévi and others. Promoting ideas of elitism, individualism, atheism, rationality, and epicureanism along with his carnivalesque persona, LaVey quickly garnered a following. Satan, in this case, represented the individual, the self and was also seen by LaVey as a symbol of opposition to the hypocrisy of Christian morality.²⁶ The attention directed at the CoS was partly due to the extravaganza and spectacle of their rituals. LaVey was marketing savvy and understood the value of inviting the press to these happenings. In 1970, CoS even released a documentary (*Satanis: The Devil's Mass*) where these rituals were portrayed accompanied

²⁶ Faxneld 2019, pp. 11–14, LaVey 1983.

alongside interviews with LaVey and his followers (discussed below). The Satanic mass recorded in 1968 at the headquarters of the Church of Satan and featured in the documentary doubtlessly also influenced the occult and heavy metal music bands of the time, as mentioned below.²⁷

Some members were not satisfied with the non-theistic nature, commercially monetary direction and single rule authority of CoS and broke off to form a separate group called Temple of Set (ToS) in 1975, led by Michael Aquino (1946-). Aquino, who believed Satan to be an essential, intelligent entity had already, some years earlier, written down his own Satanic myth of creation in the two volume *Diabolicon*. He claimed to receive messages directly from Satan and demons such as Beelzebub and Azmodeus, and it was in one of these messages Satan supposedly conveyed the wish to be called by his true name Set, “the ageless intelligence of the world” who was revered in old Egypt. ToS registered as a non-profit religious corporation and many followers from CoS joined the group who saw Set as a transcendent non-Judeo-Christian deity, able to assist the Setians in attaining a higher level of humanity, their objective of self-deification (a process they call *Xeper*) and life beyond death. The temples organization evolved into an intricate grade system and local chapters called *pylons*. Similar to CoS, ToS operated on principles on elitism but differed in their overwhelming intellectual tendencies.²⁸

David Wulstan Myatt, also known as Anton Long (1950/1952-), chief ideologue and founder behind the theist, extremist group Order of the Nine Angles (ONA/O9A), built upon the elitist, social-Darwinist and anti-egalitarian values propagated by CoS

²⁷ Partridge 2006, 254.

²⁸ Van Luijk 2016, pp. 344–354; Faxneld 2019, p. 14; Granholm (Faxneld & Petersen ed.) 2012.

and brought it to a whole other level. The group is far removed from other Satanic organizations in its blatant violence and apocalyptic doctrine. Myatt developed a creed based on the goal of creating a new human species of Satanic god-men through a system called the *Seven-Fold Sinister Way* and the practice of *magick*. In the worldview of ONA, history is divided into aeons lasting a couple of thousand years. The upcoming aeon, a galactic civilization, will only emerge by the evolution of a new, aryan, God-like species – the objective of ONA. For this evolution to happen, a chaotic destabilizing and breakdown of current society needs to occur through actions of terrorism, agitation, political unrest, and general mayhem through and through. Along with “human culling” (murder), rape and terrorist acts, ONA encourages its members to undertake “insight roles”; joining insurrect organizations with a direct aim of undermining the status quo. Myatt himself converted to radical Islam, spoke in extremist mosques, and defended suicide bombings in his quest to tear down society. Moreover, this utmost extreme context is one example of the recurring connection between Nazism and Satanism. Senholt estimates the number of ONA adherents to be very low due to its elitism and difficulty in passing through the varying tests of initiation and grade systems, that anyone other than Myatt has actually put them all into practice is hard to prove.²⁹

In the late 80’s and early 90’s, a neo-religious Satanic movement grounded in music formed in Scandinavia, its discourse spread largely through fanzines. Black Metal Satanism has always been an obscure and extreme form on the outer fringes of Satanism, much like ONA. Swedish/Norwegian black metal band Mayhem and its followers spear-headed a movement and genre pioneered by bands like Venom and Bathory, the forementioned were driven to take the genre to the next step by being extreme on all

²⁹ Senholt (Faxneld & Petersen ed.) 2012; Van Luijk 2016, pp. 371–373.

levels. This turn was quickly emulated by bands such as Darkthrone, Abruptum, Emperor, Watain and Burzum. The objective was to revere death and Satan as the power of all evil, not just through music but by deeds – emically declaring the religiosity of black metal - evil in this context is seen as something positive and desirable. Lyrics were a sort of Satanic creed and concerts performed as rituals. Religious circles were formed by the figures involved, including True Satanist Horde (TSH), Misanthropiska Lucifer Ordern (MLO, later known as Temple of the Black Light), and Sorte Sirkel who hung around famous record store Helvete in Oslo, run by Mayhem front figure Øystein Aarseth (Euronymous). Faxneld estimates the active core of theistic black metal Satanists to consist of roughly 300 individuals. A handful of these, namely the figures of Mayhem and Burzum, created headlines through a number of church burnings, grave desecrations, assaults, and murders. In '91, Pelle "Dead" Ohlin committed suicide with a shotgun and was found by Aarseth who famously proceeded by taking photos of the deceased and collecting bits of his fragmented skull to keep. Aarseth in turn was later murdered by Varg Vikernes of Burzum. Self-destructiveness and self-harm along with extreme forms of ascetism is part of black metal Satanism where the avoidance of feeling pleasure and being "good" is sought at all costs - quite the contrary to LaVeyan epicureanism which the black metal-Satanism adherents claimed had nothing whatsoever to do with Satanism or true evil.³⁰ Black metal Satanism is an example of the great variety of currents and differences fitting under the umbrella-term Satanism, it is a counter-discourse against non-theistic Satanism such as the kind propagated by CoS and later, The Satanic Temple (TST), with which the only common denominator is the use of a Satan symbol.

³⁰ Faxneld 2015; Dyrendal (Hammer & Raudvere ed.) 2000.

The Satanic Temple is a US based group formed in 2012 by Harvard alumni Malcolm Jarry and Lucien Greaves (Doug Mesner). Initially the two bonded over their aversion for the American public school system. In their minds a totalitarian system, not ideal in fostering critical thinking citizens of a democratic society. Greaves, who was chosen the official spokesperson for the group, had grown up during the Satanic panic (discussed below) and was well read in Satanism including the works of LaVey although he was never a member of CoS. He believed that the kind of actions for social change TST proceeded to engage in was the stuff CoS *should* be doing. This includes protests aimed at biased representation of Christianity in schools which prompted TST to create the so-called After-School Satan Club in 2016, and protests against pseudo-science in the psychiatric care of mental health patients (resulting in the Grey Faction campaign). The activities of TST are characterized by social and political activism, engaging in issues regarding women's reproductive rights, LGBTQI+ rights, promoting pluralism, and the separation of church and state in fighting what they believe to be an American theocracy - the group is officially politically unaffiliated but lean left in their opposition of the conservative right wing. The various chapters involve themselves in good-samaritan acts of raising money for the homeless and cleaning up interstates and beaches, although some members stand out in their aggressive approach towards making real change.³¹

For instance, activist and artist extraordinaire Jex Blackmore, (who has since left TST) conducted a ritual in 2018 in which she urged the public to fight complacency, demonized the patriarchy, and promoted execution of the president while naked and chained participants speared decapitated pigs' heads on stage.³² As the group grew more organized, a headquarters was erected in

³¹ Laycock 2021.

³² Jexblackmore.com.

Salem, MA., criteria for membership was initiated including a card fee which currently stands at \$35, and a creed of seven tenets was established based on a mission to “... encourage benevolence and empathy, reject tyrannical authority, advocate practical common sense, oppose injustice, and undertake noble pursuits”³³ TST is practically identical in their creed and purpose to the Global Order of Satan (GoS), with certain exceptions.

Who Are the Global Order of Satan?

The group of individuals I have interviewed for this study are affiliated with the contemporary Satanic organization *The Global Order of Satan*. The order is a self-proclaimed “... progressive atheistic Satanic group, following science, evidence, and reason...” and was officially formed in 2018 by London-based members of TST.³⁴ The group was originally wholly affiliated with TST, but decided to break free and form their own organization after disagreements. This was mostly due to TST’s American-centered activities, and policies such as asking for membership fees, and partly because of certain controversies regarding the leadership of TST.³⁵ However, TST and GoS’s foundational moral code is practically identical. What sets the two organizations apart is foremost their political actions and activist discretion. Members of GoS do not agree with TST’s actions following the ruling of the new abortion laws in Texas, for example, which will be discussed

³³ Thesatanictemple.com

³⁴ Globalorderofsatan.com.

³⁵ The latter refers to Jex Blackmore’s open letter regarding the leadership of TST. Although this is not an official reason for the break and subsequent formation of GoS it is widely known and expressed within Satanic circles to be part of it. The recent actions of TST regarding the anti-abortion law in Texas have also been mentioned by my interviewees as an example of the differences between the groups. For Blackmore’s open letter see: <https://medium.com/@JexBlackmore/the-struggle-for-justice-is-ongoing-6df38f8893db>. For more on the TST/GoS schism see this article published by the Luciferian dominion (a somewhat more radical and theistically/atheistically ambivalent Satanic group) which was posted on GoS’s official facebook page: https://luciferiandominion.org/nothing-works-the-way-the-Satanic-temple-thinks-it-does/?fbclid=IwAR2GXgDsdq4MdWCnfqxSUnTjqKWJVnJe_EpT4-Sum3GFh-Ds2N7PtFvyx2U.

below. GoS's ideology and moral code are defined by their six founding pillars which read as follows:

“1. Self-fulfilment and personal understanding allow us to support ourselves and therefore others.

2. Respect the inviolable body, autonomous will, and sovereign right of every individual to guide their own life and being; remembering that enjoyment of these rights is predicated on respect for the same in others.

3. Science, evidence, reason, and critical thinking should guide our beliefs about our universe. Truly critical thinking can only be achieved by challenging your own preconceptions and opinions, providing a more balanced outlook to help us make better informed decisions.

4. Act with empathy, compassion, and wisdom towards yourself and others.

5. Justice always takes precedence over laws, institutions, and religious texts, as long as the pursuit of it does not countermand the pillars.

6. All people make mistakes. Allow them to correct those mistakes, as we seek acceptance in others over our own.”³⁶

As mentioned above, the official stance of GoS is that they are atheist. They do not believe in the existence of a devil nor any other deities, and their use of Satan is purely as a metaphorical character for their allegorical teachings and narrative of principle. Nine out of the ten people I interviewed confirmed this, but one person differed slightly. They stated that they were indeed rationalist, and that while performing rituals they do not expect any kind of divine intervention. But according to their

³⁶ <https://www.globalorderofSatan.com/the-six-pillars-of-the-global-order-of-Satan/>

understanding of science, the inexistence of any devil, demon, or the like cannot be proven. Therefore, they did not call themselves atheist, this provides an example of the non-static nature of Contemporary Satanism simultaneously.

GoS could be seen as an evolved form of the first modern Satanic organization CoS, formed in 1966 by LaVey. The two organizations share the use of a metaphorical Satanic theme and a fundamental belief in rationalism as a common denominator. Some particulars on how the groups differ would be relevant to clarify since I have made a point of defining Contemporary Satanism as something different from modern Satanism. Even though CoS certainly is an atheistic organization based on beliefs of rationalism, they are in opposition to many of GoS's policies. For instance, CoS is a meritocracy, built on a hierarchical system based on elitism - an elitist and egotistic way of thinking permeates their entire religious creed. GoS on the other hand has no hierarchal system whatsoever. GoS is built on several international local orders, each with their own councils and chairpersons. But none of these are seen as higher up in a hierarchal chain than any other member, neither are there any degrees to pursue.³⁷ Activism is at the heart of GoS's ideology, and the order regularly organize protests in varied forms, usually regarding issues on social injustice, religious oppression, prejudice, or bodily autonomy. CoS does no such thing. The church is self-described as "apolitical", welcoming members of all and any politically held beliefs (including, according to their website, fascists, Stalinists, republicans and conservatives) and the first of their "11 Satanic rules of the earth" proclaims to not give opinions unless asked.³⁸

³⁷ <https://www.churchofSatan.com/hierarchy/>;
<https://www.globalorderofSatan.com/history-and-background-of-the-global-order-of-Satan/>.

³⁸ <https://www.churchofSatan.com/faq-Satanists-in-society/>;
<https://www.churchofSatan.com/eleven-rules-of-earth/>;
<https://www.churchofSatan.com/policy-on-politics/>.

Much of CoS's official website is devoted to quite aggressive polemics as they consider themselves to be the original and only form of Satanism, not recognizing any other type of Satanism. GoS on the other hand, is a strongly left-leaning group who recognizes other Satanic organizations and the individuality and great variety of Satanic practice. The nature of GoS will be expounded upon further in following chapters.

Theory and Method

Having introduced you to the subject matter of this thesis I will now continue by explaining the choice of theory and method. The main method used is semi-structured interviewing and when analyzing my interviews, I choose to disassemble the concept of contemporary Satanic ritual into four categories.

A Theory in Four Parts

The recurring themes which I have found throughout my interviews to constitute Satanic ritual are *activism*, *play*, *identity*, and *community*. The *activism* category represents the fundamental connection between Contemporary Satanism and social/political activism, which becomes especially prevalent in ritual as it can be a powerful tool with which to demonstrate the group's stance in a particular matter. To theorize this category, I have chosen to apply historian Bruce Lincoln's theory on religions of resistance. In this category I will also deal with the concept of the "Black Mass" and its meaning to contemporary Satanists. *Play* pertains to the creative and aesthetic aspects of ritual, including symbolic objects and creative choices within contemporary Satanic liturgy such as clothing, ritual choreography, and script. In this thesis, *play* will be theorized using historian Johan Huizinga's ludic theory. *Identity* is a broad category concerning personal spiritual reward or purpose, self-care, self-development practices, and thoughts on magic which will be theorized using the concepts

of the *subjective turn* and the *spiritual revolution* as described by scholars of religious studies Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead. *Community* relates to a sense of communal bonding and belonging which will be theorized using the social functionalism in sociologist Emile Durkheim's definition of religion as well as professor of religious studies Michael Houseman's theory of relationality. Each of these categories address a separate cornerstone in the make-up of ritual and, in extension, a definition of the religion itself.

In lieu of addressing and discussing these theories at the top of this thesis, each subchapter on the theories have been lifted into the main study itself to create a comprehensible disposition and to facilitate an unconstrained reading.

Interrituality

For parts of this thesis, mainly what concerns the "Black Mass" I will introduce the concept of *interrituality*. Interrituality refers to the practice of putting together elements or acts from other rituals when designing new ones. When carefully choosing elements, symbols or acts already given a value and defined as traditional and rearranging them with a new framework, the group in question can introduce a new ritual grounded in meaning and authority. It can be taken seriously in its playfulness rather than being rejected as a charade. Historian of religions Ann-Christine Hornborg, who conducts her study with the Mi'kmaq first nations in Canada, explains how the "playful seriousness" of creating new rituals must respect certain boundaries or risk the new ritual being reduced to mere "playful invention".³⁹ In the case of the Black Mass, I would claim the chain of events developing the other way around. The carnivalesque ritual of LaVey has turned into a contemporary Black Mass taken with the utmost serosity, not

³⁹ Hornborg 2017, pp. 17–27.

grounded in attacking or smearing the sacrament of other religions but with a positive purpose, protesting religious oppression and representing the alternative path. Interrituality is practiced across the board regarding contemporary Satanic ritual, not just the Black Mass. In fact, there seem to be a consensus among my interviewees that “Black Mass” is an outdated and context-dependent term only to be used where it makes sense to protest Christian oppression.

Ethnographic Fieldwork

In writing this thesis I have chosen an approach where the semi-structured interview functions as my main method. This choice is the result of working with research questions pertaining to the phenomenological perspective - I am trying to identify the lived experience of contemporary Satanic ritual to the individual participant. Or to paraphrase Amedeo Giorgi; I am studying the structure and the variations of the structure within the consciousness of which each thing, occurrence, or person appears.⁴⁰ With that said, I’m not asking the participants to describe the ritual as it appears to them all context set aside. I ask them to describe what they *do* and what *meaning* that brings them. What they choose to answer will unvaryingly be affected by multiple factors such as GoS’s founding pillars.⁴¹ Essentially, this will be an inquiry into the social process of meaning-making within a modern Satanic organization through the medium of ritual. It is my ambition that the individual voices will result in a coherent understanding of what contemporary Satanic ritual is.⁴² It is furthermore my hypothesis that the descriptions, interpretations

⁴⁰ Giorgi 1975, p. 83, in: Kvale & Brinkmann 2014, p 44.

⁴¹ Amedeo Giorgi on the Descriptive Phenomenological Method [2021-10-31].

⁴² On phenomenology in ethnographic methodology see: Alvesson & Skoldberg 2018, p.97–99; Coleman refers to Talal Asad who argues that Clifford Geertz’ definition of religion refers to meaning, while overlooking the actual processes through which meaning is constructed. The methodology of this thesis will avoid aforementioned problem by thoroughly examining contemporary Satanic ritual and its process of meaning making through the practitioner. Coleman 2018, p. 107.

and meaning of these rituals will differ depending on the participants varying life-worlds, gender, sexual orientation, and social background. The beliefs propagated by a denomination or organization do not necessarily reflect the beliefs of the individual within that denomination.⁴³ Therefore, it has been important to find a diverse pool of interviewees. However, that has proven to be a difficult task. I will consider my failure in finding a diverse group a research result in and by itself, as it denotes the inclusivity and/or approachability of contemporary Satanic ritual. All my interviewees are white and belong to a rather narrow age bracket. This will be discussed below.

In conducting my research through interviews, I partake in the construction of knowledge in accordance with the phenomenological critique of traditional social science where the scientist “knows better” or the scientists “abstract categories are superior to the actors’ own knowledge.”⁴⁴ Asking interviewees to *describe* their own experience of Satanic ritual will generate new knowledge in what participants are making Satanic ritual to be – as opposed to what the general public might *think* it is based on how Satanic ritual has been portrayed in popular culture such as TV and film, literature and religious polemics.

Certainly, valid critique exists against ethnographic method which one must bear in mind. As a researcher I could be accused of skewing the results by asking leading questions or holding a bias. My informants’ answers could be vague, context-dependent or influenced by a sense of duty to their organization. The method itself could lead to incomprehensible and disassociated results. Some of these issues and their solutions I will address in the paragraph on “ethics” below. Other approaches which are useful

⁴³ Coleman on Ruel, Coleman 2010, p. 108.

⁴⁴ Alvesson & Sköldberg 2018, p. 99.

in combating the pitfalls of poor interviewing is the elucidation of an inductive ethnography and reflexivity.⁴⁵

Reflexivity and Inductive Ethnography

My research will be inductive. Rather than pre-deciding a theory to which I need to bend and adjust my data I will allow my gathered data to form, and then affix a theoretical framework to the finished accumulation of data. Evidently, the introductory data-collecting segment of this study is carried out with a pre-decided idea of thesis objective and research questions, as well as a few assumptions, for example the assumption of an existing connection between contemporary Satanic ritual and social activism. Pre-conceptions like these are needed to keep interviews from derailing, and to pinpoint the intrinsic meaning of the data.⁴⁶

Utilizing a reflexive methodology means that as a researcher, I am aware of my own influence upon my interview subjects. I am in some sense connected to the same culture in which my informants operate.⁴⁷ Even though I do not identify as a Satanist myself, in the name of transparency I have spent years delving into the realm of occult history out of curiosity, through books, articles, popular culture, and social media where I have been “lurking” in several Satanically themed discussion groups, that is, I have been a purely observative presence.⁴⁸ I highly enjoy the romantic’s literary portrayals of the Satanic anti-hero and my bookshelf at home is overflowing with topics concerning the history of the devil, occultism, witchcraft, esotericism, and any other related matter in that obscure dominion of knowledge, both fictional and academic. Furthermore, I take great pleasure in using the dark,

⁴⁵ Alvesson & Skoldberg 2018, p 105, 109.

⁴⁶ Alvesson & Skoldberg 2018, p.109.

⁴⁷ Davies 2008, p. 3.

⁴⁸ On Lurking: DeWalt, Kathleen M. & DeWalt, Billie R., *Participant observation: a guide for fieldworkers*, (Altamira, Lanham, Maryland), 2011, p. 23, 138.

numinous, and often fantastical imagery in my photography and aesthetic expression on my social media. This, along with my verbal and written communication is liable to bear an influence on my interviewees in the initial step of making contact. Further on in the interviewing process other points of communication such as clothing choices and body language are likely to affect the interviewee. This sort of influence might not affect the data being extracted in a foundational sense, but it might affect what kind of data, and how much of it, the interviewee chooses to share. And so, in practicing reflexivity, I am practicing self-awareness. Throughout this study I strive to turn back on myself in a process of self-reference. During every stage of analysis, I will mentally take a step back and reflect upon which ways I as a researcher could have had an influence on the data I am extracting from my gathered material. In some cases of ethnographical and reflexive methodology the appropriate choice would be to engage in a more observative, inconspicuous or anonymous approach, as to minimize the researcher's influence. This would be unfeasible in the present case as the implementations of the interviews are wholly dependent on me being accepted by the group I am studying, a fact which has been made clear on several occasions, both during my interviews and interviews done by others.⁴⁹

The DeWalt's assert that reflexivity makes ethnography to be the interaction between the people being studied (which they call "the Other") and the researcher (defined as "the Self"). They continue by defining reflexivity as a beginning point to ethnography in that we need to be aware of who we are and to understand our own biases in order to understand the truths and realities which form

⁴⁹ See: Häyrynen, 2019, "Jenny wants to underline that the denominational purpose is to create a community for people who might otherwise have had a hard time to find it. She cares about the members safety, that is why they do not have any public events, and they almost never agree to being interviewed. They even turned down Filip and Fredrik on channel 5. 'We do not want to be portrayed as freaks.'" (my translation).

in the space between subject and object, or, in this case, interviewer and interviewee.⁵⁰ That is all well, but isn't the need for reflexivity so great precisely because "the Other" *isn't* "the Other"? In these cases when the distance (meaning intellectually, socially, morally and in some cases economically and gender wise) does not stretch very far, isn't it particularly important to practise self-awareness? In these cases ones' own bias could easily be lost in the common ground. Wherever possible I will work to prevent this from happening.

Interviews

Below I will describe my methodological process of planning and implementing my interviews as well as some of the post-interviewing stage. Conducting this study in a time of a global pandemic has complicated the work process somewhat. One could argue interviewing over zoom is a practical, time and cost-efficient *modus operandi*, especially since I am working with informants all over Europe though mainly people from the UK and Sweden. Unfortunately, it also limits the personal connection with the interviewee. For example, one of my informants used a virtual background during our zoom talk so that all I had to go on in analysing non-verbal communication was a floating head in cyberspace. Most of us are also aware that poor and spotty internet connection can create an awkward situation where conversation flow without interruption is hard to achieve. I have completed ten interviews, eight over zoom, one face to face and one via e-mail. I judge these ten to be an acceptable number based on the size of the group I am studying, that is: people who identify as Satanists and have participated in a contemporary Satanic ritual. That group is further limited to members or affiliates of the organization Global Order of Satan. I believe that, within this group, approximately ten people will be enough for me to gain a

⁵⁰ DeWalt & DeWalt 2011, p. 36–37.

sufficient understanding of what contemporary Satanic ritual can be.

Naturally I have tried to find as demographically broad and diverse a group as possible to access a rich and varying pool of different perspectives concerning contemporary Satanic ritual. As explained above that has been a challenge. The interviewees are all white, in the age range of 25–50, and predominately middle-class with left leaning political views. A few examples of what occupations the interviewees have are: military pilot, embalmer, professor, student. I did manage to find interviewees who could represent a diversity in gender, having talked to people who identify both as cis-male, cis-female and non-binary. With the explicit intention of avoiding this problem I initially reached out to possible interviewees through the Facebook groups of Global Order of Satan's (GoS) several chapters. These are often closed groups where a request to join is necessary, I have done so disclosing I am asking to join for research purposes. After gaining consent from the group moderators, I have posted onto the group discussion (visible to all members) a request for interviewees. I have described my study and clarified that my only two requirements for participating are that the interviewee identify as a Satanist and has participated in a Satanic ritual. As this strategy resulted in zero interviews, I had to turn directly to the group moderators or target people (that is, send a carefully phrased DM) I knew by lurking would fulfil the requirements. At times I have felt pushy and bothersome as communication have sometimes been slow and the lack of response has left me frustrated. However, with persistent communication and accomplished interviews I have been referred to other potential interviewees, resulting in a snowball effect⁵¹. In most cases I have experienced

⁵¹ On "Snowball Sampling"; a qualitative research method where the researcher usually starts out with a smaller number of people from hard-to-reach communities but eventually reach additional subjects because of recommendations, see: Parker, Scott, & Geddes 2019.

that the interviewee acts somewhat guarded at first contact, but after a completed interview this attitude would usually change into a friendlier, more accommodating tone. Some of the interviewees have communicated through their own private channels such as their private e-mails or their personal Facebook page. Others have preferred to communicate via GoS's official e-mail or Facebook group. This means that people not involved in the study have had access to the written communication between me and the interviewee. Indeed, in one case I even had other people answer me in an e-mail thread named "FAO -name of interviewee-". In accordance with the principle of "do no harm"⁵² I would have preferred to communicate solely through private channels as it otherwise inhibits the interviewee's anonymity. However, as I offered to communicate privately and was declined, I had to accept the interviewee's wishes.

As mentioned above, eight of the interviews were carried out via zoom. Using zoom allows for videorecording without worrying about a setup and possible run out of batteries during the interview. These interviews were carried out on a mutually decided time and date and followed a list of questions aimed to keep the talk on relevant topic, the interview would usually last for approximately one hour. Most of the questions are open-ended and designed to give the interviewee the room they need to expand on thoughts, allowing for eventual additions or afterthoughts. Often, with the phenomenological perspective in mind, the interviewees were asked to *describe* their experience. According to Merleau-Ponty a detailed description is the quintessential strategy in getting at a phenomenological experience.⁵³ As the interviews progressed the list of questions has changed, and questions have been added or modified based on

⁵² To avoid exposing people to additional risks through our actions. See American Anthropological Association 2012.

⁵³ Merleau-Ponty 1962.

discoveries during talk. Because of this fluidity, there is no strict template of questions, and varying sub-questions would often pop up. However, I will attach my original list of questions in the appendix. In analysing the interviews each interviewee has been given a codename independent of gender or nationality to protect their anonymity, the codenames are “Mickey”, “Rosy”, “Shelley”, “Lando”, “Aron”, “Mitzie”, “Dio”, “Dana”, “Merrit”, and “Burt”.

One informant requested to do the interview per e-mail with referral to their lack of conversational English skills. This I approved with the understanding that the restricted forum could bring restricted answers and that a number of follow-up questions might be necessary. One of my informants I met face to face in London. We arranged to meet at a park café in Vauxhall as per the informant’s request. The location was close enough to home for them to get to comfortably and it provided a level of noise which wouldn’t be so bad as to interfere with the sound recording. It is apt to note that the interviewee brought their partner to this meeting. This partner kindly offered to leave if necessary but after weighing the pros and cons of them staying I decided that letting them stay could encourage a relaxed atmosphere in which the interviewee would feel more at ease. As they were both part of GoS I determined it wasn’t likely the interviewee would censor their answers on account of their partners presence. Also bearing in mind DeWalt & DeWalts discussion on the possibility of un/knowingly creating an uncomfortable situation.⁵⁴ This could happen if the researcher asks for more than the interviewee is willing to share or commits a blunder by making a misplaced comment in an attempt to make conversation (a phenomena hard to circumvent in case of “the blathers”).

⁵⁴ DeWalt & DeWalt 2011, p. 153–155.

In connection to my discussion on reflexivity above and the issue of over familiarity with the interview subject I tried to, to the best of my ability and as far as the situation would allow, assume an air of estrangement during my interviews. Coffey argues how estrangement during fieldwork is even more crucial in studying the familiar as with the over-familiar eye you could easily miss or dismiss vital information.⁵⁵ In cultivating strangeness the researcher could gain insight and understanding otherwise hidden from them. With that said, it would be strange to say the least if I showed up to these interviews feigning complete ignorance of the subject and culture I am studying. Finding a suitable middle ground is, I believe, key to achieving a rewarding and productive interview. I settled this by simply not revealing exactly how deep my own understanding of Satanism runs, but instead focused on letting the interviewee speak. As I am trying to form a fruitful relationship with my interviewee it would not be conducive or ethically proper to lie. Besides, it would counteract my own methodological strategy as I arrive at the interview well prepared with questions designed to get the interviewee to talk about essential elements of Satanic ritual. Along the same lines of estrangement, reflexivity and to avoid a possible influence on the answers to my questions, I made an effort to avoid leading questions.⁵⁶ Several of my interviewees I have researched beforehand as far as this is possible, this entails reading articles, watching YouTube videos and lurking on social media. I do this to get an idea of how active this person is in the Satanic community, what type of rituals they have attended, and which social issues are important to them. I have found this strategy to

⁵⁵ Coffey 1999, p. 21.

⁵⁶ De Walt & DeWalt 2011, p. 153, Kvale & Brinkmann 2014, p. 213–215. Even though avoidance of leading questions is common practice Kvale & Brinkmann highlights the exaggerative practice and application of this strategy. Leading questions *could* aid in ascertaining the reliability in the interviewees answers and to verify the questions. This is an approach that I have yet not to, but could possibly, apply to my study further on in the interviewing process.

be valuable as it allows me to bring up topics the interviewee either forgot or didn't deem important enough to mention.

During these interviews I adopted several techniques described in DeWalt & DeWalt such as active listening. Active listening could be a challenge as you need to be attentive of several things at once. Listening to what is said but also to what is not said, non-verbal cues and repetitions, as well as trying to connect dots and think of follow-up questions could bring about a glazed look in the researchers' eyes. I always tried to alert the interviewee that this could happen. This isn't as much of a problem on zoom as there is no direct eye contact. Although you both look at each other through the screen, you never lock eyes and establish the same contact which is more sensitive to be broken, as you do in a face-to-face meeting. The DeWalts raises issues with eye contact as it could indicate different things depending on the setting. For instance, intense eye contact could be interpreted as an invitation to intimacy.⁵⁷ In my experience, attentive eye contact with well-timed short lookaways could lead to the interviewee feeling seen and opening themselves up more or expanding more on what they're saying. But there is also a risk that this strategy could lead to a feeling of insecurity in the interviewee, awkwardness, and a loss for words. It is up to the researcher to determine just how much eye contact is appropriate.

Other techniques I have found useful during my interviews is the sensitive silence and the uh-huh/tell me more prompt. Silence is a difficult but very effective tool in the interviewer's utility belt. Many feel awkward during silences, and it prompts us to continue speaking which is why it is effective in an interview setting. The silence as a prompt is in my experience best used combined with attentive eye contact to convey a message of interest, looking away

⁵⁷ On interviewing strategies: DeWalt & DeWalt 2011, pp. 142–148

while silent signals disinterest or that I am thinking of what to ask next. There is (also, in my own experience) the risk of nervous silence causing blathering, both by interviewee and interviewer. Therefore, it is helpful to combine the silent technique with verbal prompts like “uh-huh”, “yes”, “OK”, or the simple but effective “tell me more”.⁵⁸

Immediately after each interview I sit and reflect upon the conversation. I write down impressions or feelings I obtained during the talk and any other circumstance that might have had an impact on my perception of the interview or could have an impact on my memory of the interview during the analysis stage. After this it is time for transcription and coding. Transcription is time consuming and requires careful attention. I try to transcribe the interview exactly as is, writing down every spoken word, only omitting the “eh’s” unless the word adds a unique meaning. If there are any non-verbal communications worth noting I write that down too. If certain words are emphasized, they will be in italics, if certain words are exclaimed, they will be in uppercase letters. My goal is to preserve the conversation in a facsimile manner, exactly as it was spoken, not to miss any details during analysis. However, in this paper I have translated any citations or quotes from my Swedish interviews into english. When I code the transcription, I utilize parts of Amedeo Giorgis descriptive phenomenological method which was adapted to the field of psychology from the Husserlian philosophical approach of phenomenological reduction.⁵⁹ Since my aim is to find out the meaning of the rituals to the individual in order to describe Satanic ritual, I look at the accumulated data from the interviews (the transcription) and break it down into meaning units/categories which describe what type of meaning the ritual implicates. I have

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ On the Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Method: Giorgi 2012, pp. 3-12.

named these units *activism, identity, community, and play*. The next step in the process is to analyse and compare these meaning units. In Giorgi's words the result is "... a series of transformed meaning units. That become the basis for the structure of the experience, which is the essence."⁶⁰ The "essence", in this case, will be the essential answer to what contemporary Satanic ritual is.

Ethics

Depending on where in the world you live, or even depending on whose hands get a hold of this thesis, participating in a study in which you identify as a Satanist could prove difficult or even dangerous for the informant. As one of my interviewees informed me, in some areas where government is heavily influenced by conservative politics or the Catholic Church, it is conceivably a criminal offense. Due to the possible sensitive nature of this study, I decided early on to anonymize all my interviewees, including the ones who would gladly reveal their identity as a practicing Satanist. This in accordance with the principle of "do no harm" which states that a researcher who deals with human beings needs to assess the risk posed to them, be it immediate or long-term. Moreover, in accordance with the rudimentary ethical principles of social research and based on the Nuremberg Code, I have presented each of my interviewees with an informed consent document.⁶¹ The document apprises the participant of their rights in relation to the study. It clearly states the interviewees conditions of participation which are based on free will and the possibility to, at any given time and without notice, withdraw their participation.

In conjunction with these two actions and with the aim to maintain a high standard of ethics I delete all material from my phone or computer as soon as possible after a completed interview and

⁶⁰ Giorgi on the descriptive phenomenological psychological method: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcSyQzoBRlc>, 18:40.

⁶¹ On ethical guidelines and the Nuremberg code see: Stausberg & Engler 2011, p. 81–95.

store it exclusively on an external hard drive accessible only to myself. Each participant is given a codename in an effort to minimize any leakage of sensitive information. By doing this I have to the best of my abilities safeguarded the interviewees from any possible harm. This includes un/intentional exploitive harm and bodily harm. Amanda Coffey discusses how we as researchers need to be attentive of the possible harm to the body which a study could implicate, this is especially relevant during fieldwork observation. We are observing, analyzing, and writing up the physical body which we have seen engaged in interaction, work, or play. In other words, consent isn't just relevant to what we perceive as an intellectual concern, by also a bodily concern - a body which could be considered private or sacred.⁶² For the case in hand, this is something I need to be cognizant of while referring to or portraying the study participants. Particularly since the second of the six pillars on moral code written up by the GoS pronounce the body inviolable and to be respected - sovereign rights of the body is held solely by the individual.⁶³

This concludes the introductory chapters for this study where I have presented the fundamental ideas on theory and method adopted, who the interview subjects are and from which scholarly context this study derives. We will now continue with the historical, investigative, analytical and summational parts of this thesis.

Attributed Satanic Ritual: A Historical Digest

Rituals and ritual elements attributed unto “the other”⁶⁴ is a phenomenon which goes back millennia. This tradition, as we

⁶² Coffey 1999, p. 74–75.

⁶³ The six pillars of The Global Order of Satan: Global Order of Satan, “About, Our six pillars”, <https://www.globalorderofSatan.com/the-six-pillars-of-the-global-order-of-Satan/>, [2021-11-02].

⁶⁴ “The other” a term used in opposition of what is considered the default or “normal”. The modern usage of the term was coined by existentialist and feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* 1949.

shall see further on, still continues to this day. To begin this study, I want to show how Satanic ritual has been depicted in a historical context and from whence the tradition of these depictions derive. We will follow the tradition of attribution into the 21st century when figures within popular culture and self-proclaimed satanists to some degree embrace the way they previously have been portrayed. By doing this I wish to offer a deeper understanding of the stigma surrounding Satanic ritual. It will also help us to understand the answer to this thesis' main question: what is Satanic ritual? - as we compare it to what it is not, nor has ever been. I have chosen my starting point in Greece during the 5th century BCE. This is where we find some of the earliest, and most perspicuous examples of attributed ritual elements which reminds us of, and has obvious connections with, what we later in history will recognize as Satanic.

Cannibals, Heretics and Witches: An Account of Satanic Ritual in Older Times

Some of the earliest fantastic ritual narratives have to do with the Greek mystery religions. Although (evidently) very little is known about them, a general consensus is that they revolved around ritual activities of madness, excess, intoxication and sexually illicit behavior. During the 5th century BCE, Greek playwright Euripides' tragedy *The Bacchae* became a hit play. It depicts the god Dionysus who, after discovering his cult has not yet been recognized in Greece, arrives at Thebes where the king explicitly had forbidden the cult. Dionysus smote all women of the area with madness and engaged them in a great Bacchae, or *Bacchanalia* which might sound more familiar. The women danced wildly, dressed in the skins of beasts, crowned in ivy, girdled with snakes and suckling fawns or wolf-cubs at their breasts. They flung themselves at grazing animals and tore them apart, feasting on the raw flesh. The King, who had denied Dionysus and saw him as the *other*, "...a foreigner, a preacher, a

sorcerer...”, ended up a sacrifice - torn limb from limb and beheaded by his own mother. The cult of Dionysus and the Bacchae is described by Euripedes as nocturnal, miraculous, secret rites, carried out in secluded forested areas, where the bacchants achieve communion with their god by consuming the raw flesh of the sacrifice - the incarnation of Dionysus himself. The central element of frenzy, madness or *mania* was also a proof that the bacchant was filled with the god.

The King Pentheus demanded Dionysus to reveal what the cult’s mysteries were, only to receive the answer they are a secret forbidden to communicate to anyone not a bacchant.⁶⁵ These mysteries became a real concern. The Greeks had brought the Dionysian cult to Etruria and it quickly spread throughout Italy. Membership of the cult was estimated to several thousands and accounts of the Bacchae entailed orgies and sexual promiscuousness between men, women, adults, and children. They were also rumored to commit crimes of fraud and perjury as well as murder.⁶⁶ Still, there were no hard facts or numbers, but these assumptions were based on rumors, word of mouth, paranoia and slander. The mystery religions were just that, a mystery. Roman historian Livy (ca 59 BCE–ca 17 CE) recount a meeting of the senate in 186 BCE where the agenda was read to discuss the cults as the authorities feared their rapid supposed growth which threatened the Roman way of life. The senate ended up deciding upon the destruction of any Bacchic shrines and restriction of Bacchic worship.⁶⁷ Urban singles out this quote by Livy as a depiction of religious ritual which would come to deeply influence the tropes of attributed ritual narrative for the next 2000 years:

⁶⁵ Eliade 1978, pp. 363–368.

⁶⁶ Wagemakers 2010, pp. 337–354.

⁶⁷ Urban 2006, pp.25–27.

The pleasures of drinking and feasting were added to the religious rites, to attract a larger number of followers. When the wine had inflamed their feelings, and night and the mingling of the sexes and of different ages had extinguished all power of moral judgement, all sorts of corruption began to be practiced, since each person had ready to hand the chance of gratifying the particular desire to which he was naturally inclined. The corruption was not confined to one kind of evil, the promiscuous violation of free men, forged documents and wills, and perjured evidence, dealing also in poisons and in wholesale murders...[T]he violence was concealed because no cries for help could be heard against the shriekings, the banging of drums... in the scene of debauchery and bloodshed.⁶⁸



Figure 3 - Peter Paul Rubens "Bacchanalia". Oil on canvas, first half of 17th century.
Source: Wikicommons

Some 300 years later the young religion of Christianity began taking hold throughout Rome. The Christians were regarded with much suspicion by both authorities and the people, and the slanderous rumors attached to the rituals of mystery religions were

⁶⁸ *ibid*, p. 26.

applied to this strange new cult as well. Non-Christian Roman authors portrayed Christians harshly and Christian authors testified to this. 3rd century apologist Minucius Felix details the goings on at Christian meetings in his written dialogue *Octavius* as incestuous, and claims that the Christians baked little children into pies and consumed them. Theophilus of Antioch (? - 183-5CE) exclaimed that people seemed to believe that Christians shared their wives and committed incest with their sisters. In the year 177 CE there was a riot between Christians and Pagans in the towns of Lyon and Vienne and at the following trials Christians were accused of sexual immorality, cannibalism, the murder of children and the consumption of human flesh.

How could these fantastic accusations arise and whence did they come from? As described, a slanderous narrative of strange and mysterious religions was already established and accusations seems to have been thrown about without inhibition as the Christians also functioned as scapegoats for both natural disasters, epidemics, and earthquakes as well as personal disputes. The Christians themselves expressed a regret for the ignorance of pagan Romans who denounced and condemned them for horrendous crimes on the basis of slander, as seen in the *Epistle to Diognetus* (late 2nd century). In fact, some of the Christian customs rather bolstered the surge of rumors against them. Their community still had no church buildings and would gather in their homes at night as to not rouse suspicion, resulting in the exact opposite. The rumors of incest and illicit sexual conduct may originate from their practice of “brotherly love” and the “kiss of peace” they would perform during assemblies. It is also possible that accusations of cannibalism derive from the celebration of the Eucharist where Christians ritually consume the body and blood of Christ.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Wagemakers 2010, pp. 337–354.

Moving forward, it didn't take long for this type of smear campaign to become established within the Christian community itself. Author and bishop of Constantia, Epiphanius of Cyprus (ca 315 CE-403 CE) wrote a heresy-catalogue called the *Panarion*, also known as the *Medicine Chest* in which he depicted ghastly customs and unorthodox rituals of the, according to himself, Christian, heretic, subversive groups often designated by the catch all term "Gnostics". These were people whose customs Epiphanius did not agree with and the heresiological descriptions of them served as a powerful polemic rhetoric to submit his own theological pursuits or agenda. To shift focus away from his own position regarding religious canon, which was considered somewhat liberal, Epiphanius strongly opposed practices of extreme ascetics, denial of universal marriage, alcohol prohibition and overzealousness. Epiphanius's accounts of the heretic practices often tell of secret rituals performed outside of their regular church meetings. They would communicate with secret handshakes to identify one another, feast on meats they couldn't afford, douse themselves in scented oils, excessively drink and fornicate. During their love rites called *Agape* they would consume both male and female bodily fluids in representation of the body and blood of Christ. He wrote that the Gnostics' views of this world were that of suffering and decay and therefore procreation was not their goal.⁷⁰ Since babies inevitably were conceived as a result of their very liberal sexual life, they would, as Epiphanius describes it:

...extract the fetus at the stage which is appropriate for their enterprise, take this aborted infant, and cut it up in a trough with a pestle. And they mix honey, pepper, and certain other perfumes and spices with it to keep from getting sick,

⁷⁰ Linjamaa 2020, pp. 316–334; Linjamaa & Nilsson 2018, pp. 4–9; Urban 2006, p. 31.

and then all the revelers in this <herd> of swine and dogs assemble, and each eats a piece of the child with his fingers [...] and this, if you please, is their idea of the ‘perfect Passover’.⁷¹

The ritual consuming of an aborted infant is, as we shall see, a particularly long-lived theme connected to Satanic ritual. The accounts of Epiphanius were particularly explicit and some scholars believe the explicitness is born out of Epiphanius rage at getting rejected from these heretical groups which he, as they suggest, wanted to join. These theories are based on incel-like passages such as the following, which also contain an early example of the woman/devil trope:

For I happened on this sect myself [...] and was taught these things in person [...] Not only did women under this delusion offer me this line of talk, and divulge this sort of thing to me. With impudent boldness moreover, they even tried to seduce me themselves - like that murderous, villainous Egyptian wife of the chief cook [...] Now the women who taught this dirty myth were very lovely in their outward appearance but in their wicked minds they had all the devil’s ugliness.⁷²

Linjamaa argues that Epiphanius takes inspiration from other heresiologists and makes up most of his material for polemical reasons. In fact, there exists no first-hand accounts of these supposed rituals. These texts are examples of a continuity in the historical pattern of discrediting the “other”, something Linjamaa claims is closely associated with identity formation. Definition of oneself doesn’t happen in a void - but in opposition to something, or someone, else.⁷³

⁷¹ Epiphanius quoted in Linjamaa 2020, p.321.

⁷² *ibid*, p. 319.

⁷³ Linjamaa 2020, pp. 316–334.

Persecution and slander of heretical groups would continue throughout the early and late Middle Ages and attributed ritual customs as that of sexual licentiousness would become generally accepted. The connection to and accusation of Satanism would grow stronger, as we shall see, especially when the Catholic authorities would turn their attention to distortions of dualistic beliefs, making heretical worship of the devil that much more credible. A few early examples that involve Satanism is 2nd century church father Irenaeus written insults toward the Gnostic Marcus and the accusations of Satanism towards the Paulicians in 719 CE. In the latter case, the Paulicians, who where a Christian group active in Armenia outside the reach of the empire and the Armenian church, were condemned by St John IV of Ojun (“the Philosopher”) as “sons of Satan”.⁷⁴ In a written tract, “the Philosopher” accused the Paulicians of hidden incestuous meeting under the cover of darkness where babies were thrown around until dead. The infant blood was supposedly mixed into a eucharist and devoured resulting in cannibalism.⁷⁵ As the trend of Gnostic condemnation moved further west, the heresy of Orléans in 1022 CE tells of devil-worshipping heretic groups who were charged with Satanism. The devoutly pious and extraordinarily rational, men and women of the collegiate church of Orléans did not believe Christ to be born of a virgin, nor rose from the dead, neither the supernatural efficacy of the baptism – and they reportedly went to the stake laughing. Contemporary chroniclers riding on what the Orléans church called “heavenly food” set in motion rumors of infanticide, cannibalism (where the adherents would eat the ashes of babies) and Satanic sectarianism as the devil would appear to them in the guise of an animal and offer money in return for denying Christ.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Cohn 1973, p. 37.

⁷⁵ *ibid*

⁷⁶ Cohn 1973, pp. 39–40; Lerner 1972, p. 33.

In the early 1200's German inquisitor Conrad of Marburg attributed an invented heretic sect called Luciferians onto the real, gnostic Waldesians. Conrad influenced pope Gregorius IX to announce a papal bull in which an initiation rite is depicted where the devil appears in many varying shapes unto who the heretics seek their blessing.⁷⁷ During the tenth or eleventh century the ascetic and dualist *Bogomils* emerged in Europe and were severely persecuted. The Bogomils were accused of being hypocrites who engaged in sodomy and licentious sexual behavior. In a text from 1050 CE Constantinople, we find a description of a horrendous Bogomilian incestuous ritual. Children born of the ritual were blood-let and thrown into the fire and the blood and ashes were later mixed with food and drink to be consumed.⁷⁸ The detailed and explicit depiction of this ritual bears much similarity to the polemics of Epiphanius, and the theme of the aborted infants whose blood and ash were consumed had earlier been used during the heresies of Orléans.

Another famous example of attributed Satanic ritual was that against the Cathars, active throughout middle Europe during the 12th and 13th century. Like the Bogomils, the Cathars were accused of Satanism which they supposedly manifested through secret rituals where they would indulge in food and drink. Satan would appear in the guise of a black cat and the attendees would proceed by kissing its hind quarters (the black cat was also present in the account of the Luciferian rites). Gregorius IX was persuaded that the Cathars, who opposed the authority of the Catholic Church, believed that Satan had unjustly been cast out of heaven and would one day return and claim the power of God who would be undone.⁷⁹ The Cathars were dualist and believed Satan to be the

⁷⁷ Faxneld 2006, pp. 6–7.

⁷⁸ *ibid*, p. 13.

⁷⁹ Urban 2006, p. 34.

creator of the material world, as God was of the spiritual. But they did not worship him, they struggled to be free of the earthly body, which they believed he had created.⁸⁰ Once again attributed Satanic ritual was used by the orthodox Christians to discredit and quell the “other”. One of the earliest descriptions that show signs of likening these heretic rituals to an inverted catholic mass seems to be that of John of Viktring (ca 1270–1347) who wrote a chronicle about men and women gathering in underground hideaways to listen to a “priest of the devil” say mass.⁸¹



Figure 4 - Heretics burned at the stake, mid 14th–15th century. Source: Wikicommons

Accusations of maleficia, heresy and witchcraft blend together in a continuation of attributed and distorted accounts of Satanic ritual through history. These accusations and supposed evidence of practice of harmful or evil magic called *maleficia* has been around since the dawn of society. But during the twelfth and thirteenth century when many ancient Greek and Islamic texts concerning it were translated the practice increased, as did the interest of the church. Inquisitors like Nicolau Eimeric (ca 1316–

⁸⁰ Faxneld 2006, p. 15.

⁸¹ Lerner 1972, p. 30.

1399) condemned the practices which were often connected to the devil in the form of a pact. The notion was that magic power had to be traded against Satanic devotion and so magicians or *magis* came to be considered as heretics. This did not only apply to maleficia but to all kinds of ritual magic, even the innocent healing kind performed by wise women and men of the uneducated classes. As magicians and heretics became synonymous, naturally the now well-established slander towards heretics would transfer as well. However, during the 15th century the notion of a magician would slowly shift into that of the witch. The theory explaining this shift is that the well-educated, upper-class men who were thought of as necromancers wouldn't be equated with the lowly peasant (and female) magician's relationship to the devil and so learned magic and folk magic was separated, and the characterization of the pact changed. Necromancers were thought of as commanders of the devil while witches were his servants.⁸² It has been a common belief that the conceptual transition from malefici into witches and collective Satanic worship was most noticeably manifested through the Cathars. However, Levack explains how descriptions of trials and confessions regarding the Cathars were forgeries. It is more likely that the notion of collective Satanic worship by witches was spread through such cases as that of Dame Alice Kyteler who in 1325–25 stood on (most likely a politically motivated) trial, accused of practicing maleficia and murder for the sake of gaining wealth. This had supposedly been done in the company of a group of Satanic heretics who met at night to give sacrifice to demons and fornicate with them.⁸³

The learned elite's belief in a diabolic pact and collective worship of Satan often went hand in hand, and these Satanic meetings were used as a scapegoat reason to torture accused witches' into

⁸² Levack 2006, pp. 31–40.

⁸³ *ibid*, p. 43.

revealing their allies. The belief in collective meetings, Satanic masses or sabbaths are a pivotal reason as to why the witch hunt became such a large judicial operation spread all over Europe.⁸⁴ Many of the church's demonologists and inquisitors depicted it as a complete inversion of the Christian mass. Descriptions of these sabbaths vary and oftentimes they are coherent to specific geographical or cultural areas.

In Sweden, the devil was already well established within the local folklore and accounts of the sabbath became a natural addition to those tales. The first to describe the sabbaths were children who claimed to have been abducted by witches and taken to the mythical Blåkulla (Black hill⁸⁵). Testimonies of the sabbath would often be contradictory and bizarre. Usually, the children gave witness of activities similar to everyday life but with a dreamlike and backwards character. The abductors flew on everyday items like broomsticks, shovels or sometimes farm animals. Witches feasting at the devils table would sit with their backs towards their plates and eat through their necks, they would stand with their backsides upwards acting as candleholders or copulate back against back. The devil himself appeared in different form and clothing depending on the witness. Sometimes he would be a regular man with horns over his entire body, dressed in farmers clothing but in expensive colors like red and blue. Sometimes he was described as a hairy figure with a human head, sometimes as a black dog, a pig with three horns (one between his buttocks and two tall as chimneys on his head), sometimes as a priest, white robed but with a black head and legs and mean eyes. Sometimes

⁸⁴ Levack 2006, pp. 40–41.

⁸⁵ In old Swedish the word “blå”, which in our modern tongue means “blue”, could also mean “black”. Depending on which place the person had in mind when describing Blåkulla I think it more probable they imagined it as a dark or blackened place. However, one of the supposed locations of Blåkulla is the Swedish isle “Blå jungfrun” meaning “The blue virgin” or “The blue maid”, known for its blue waters and the blue haze surround the isle during summer. I believe translating Blåkulla into “blue” or “black” hill, is relative to historical context and opinion.

he was all black and crouching under the table. The devil would also preside over Satanic liturgy during these sabbaths, he would baptize, wed, preach and bestowed gifts upon those who wrote their name in his book.⁸⁶

In accordance with the pact, the feasting came with certain conditions. Witches had to write their names with blood in the devil's black book, swear off their Christian faith and perform Satanic prayers with elements such as "Father thou art in hell". Satan's demons would attend the sabbath, they acted as incubi and succubi. Spawn born out of the copulation of witches and demons came in the form of toads or snakes which would be thrown into the cauldron, boiled, and used as an ingredient of the witch's salve which was smeared over their legs so she would be able to fly to Black hill. The atmosphere during the sabbaths was often described as unpredictable and unbearable. Satan would shapeshift into a benevolent angel only to shift back to his horrific self again, the feast would erupt into a tumultuous and chaotic fight while Satan laughed, and the children would be burned, and tortured to death by the witches (except for the ones who made it back to tell the tale, obviously).⁸⁷ The four major factors describing who these supposed witches were clarifies that accusations were often based on fear or suspicion of "the other". In 75–90% of cases witches were *female*, a testament to the misogyny of the time and the belief that women were more susceptible to the lure of Satan's powers, based on genesis 3. Females of the lower classes often worked in positions where they, if they indeed were witches, could do great harm unto others - they were cooks, midwives, or healers/wise women. They would've effortlessly been able to steal babies for Satanic rituals, poison food, or practice maleficia through unguents, ointments,

⁸⁶ Ankarloo 1984, pp. 217–221.

⁸⁷ Ankarloo 1884, pp. 218–223.

and herbs.⁸⁸ The accused were often *old*, before going to trial they would've been suspected for a long time. Being old in the 15-1600's meant you were part of a minority since life expectancy was lower. The old witch was likely not living under the supervision of a man, she might've been working with the above-mentioned occupations or be a widow. This made her a threat to the patriarchal society. These circumstances made it likely the witch was *poor* and not uncalled for; a usual trait of the witch was that she was *quarrelsome* - simply not a pleasant neighbor. Irritability, cursing or symptoms that can arise with old age such as senility could all be seen as signs of maleficia.⁸⁹ Witches are a perfect example of Satanic ritual being attributed unto people who deviate from the norm of society.

Every old woman with a wrinkled face, a furred brow, a hairy lip, a gobber tooth, a squint eye, a squeaking voice, or a scolding tongue, having a rugged coat on her back, a skull-cap on her head, a spindle in her hand, and a dog or a cat by her side, is not only suspected but pronounced for a witch.⁹⁰

France played host to several examples of attributed Satanic ritual during the late Middle Ages and early modern times. In the 15th century, nobleman, companion-in-arms of Jeanne d'Arc and later marshal of France Gilles de Rais (1404-1440), stood on trial and confessed the murder of scores of children in diabolic ritual sacrifice which he performed to gain wealth and riches. Supposedly de Rais, who had squandered most of his fortune on charity and pleasure, tried to make a pact with the devil by summoning him through ritual with the help of magical manuscripts, but to no avail. Learned magician Francios Prelati convinced him that child sacrifices might just be the trick. After

⁸⁸ Levack 2006, pp. 141, 146-147.

⁸⁹ *ibid*, pp. 149-152, 160.

⁹⁰ Briggs 1996, p. 15.

rumors regarding missing children in the areas around his castles and conflicts with other noblemen, de Rais was arrested and put on trial. After several explicit witness testimonies of de Rais' depraved love for the murder and entrails of children he was condemned to death by hanging and burning in 1440.⁹¹ De Rais would later become the subject of J.K Huysmans *Là Bas* (Down There), more on which further on.

Rumors of Satanic masses extended to the royal courts. Queen Caterina de 'Medici (1519-1589) who, particularly after the massacre of St. Bartholomew's day and by associating with figures like Nostradamus, was ill-liked and shrouded in myth. Allegedly, she tried to cure her ailing son by performing a Black Mass involving human sacrifices.⁹² Further examples from the French court would be that of the "affair of the poisons" in the late 17th century. 104 people were tried and 36 sentenced to death in this massive scandal which involved several members of the sun king Louis XIV's court, including his official mistress Madame de Montespan who feared the king had lost interest in her and was looking to gain it back through Satanic ritual. It revolved around a certain soothsayer and abortionist Catherine Montvoisin or "La Voisin" who, as the spider in this large net of insidiousness, offered poison powders, abortions and diabolic rituals performed by her catholic priest underlings to the aristocracy. Witnesses describe how they were approached and offered to sell their soul to the devil in exchange for the power to hurt or bring death to anyone they disliked. Several of the accused confessed to have participated in Satanic rituals. One was a woman named Filastre who gave birth to a child within a circle of candles while chanting an un-baptism incantation. The child was taken and offered to the devil with whom she had made a pact. La Voisin's daughter testified as to how entrails of aborted children had been used in

⁹¹ Faxneld 2006, pp. 44–51.

⁹² Urban 2006, p. 194.

these rituals, their blood had been consecrated with the host and drunk from chalices while the mass was performed with the body of a naked woman as an altar. This has later been referred to as “Black Masses” although they were never called by that name in the interrogation records. Filastre’s confession came under torture and La Voisin’s daughter came forth with details of said rituals after her mother had been executed.⁹³ Even if there were occult or diabolic rituals of some kind being performed it is easy to imagine they were much distorted and inflated through the means of interrogation, much like what happened during the witch hunts. There also seemed to be personal vendettas involved as member of the “Chambre ardente” (the inquisitorial court installed especially for the case) minister Louvois was a political opponent of the accused Maréchal de Luxembourg.⁹⁴

Devil Enlighten Us: Satanic Ritual in Modern Times

As the 18th century enlightenment ensued, rumors of Satanic ritual and Black Masses seems to have receded. Philosophes such as Voltaire famously declared that Satan did not exist and belief in the devil was more often than not perceived as ridiculous in accordance with the preference for rationality and anti-superstitiousness of the time. However, there were some exceptions. During this century, gentlemen’s clubs began to rise in popularity and some of the most notorious of these were later referred to by the explicit epithet “hellfire clubs”. These clubs were rumored to host all sorts of equivocal behavior. The “Order of the Knights of St Francis” was founded by Sir Francis Dashwood in 1750 and the club was particularly prone to cause gossip. Dashwood, who held a disdain toward Catholicism, had bought an old monastery called Medmenham where he hosted his secret club-meetings. The club, which was constituted of members of parliament, poets, painters, professors, and

⁹³ Van Luijk 2016, pp. 45–48.

⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 50.

noblemen - was said to hire prostitutes dressed up as nuns and perform acts of demon worship while engaging in copious drinking. Despite the fame of Dashwoods hellfire club, any proof of actual Satanic ritual has never been found. It seems to have been yet another example of a non-conforming secret society slanderously pointed out as the other, not unlike the early Christians who met in the cover of peoples homes.⁹⁵ The Church of Satan's' Anton LaVey may have exacerbated the Satanic reputation of the hellfire club by pointing out the friendship between Dashwood and Benjamin Franklin who visited and stayed at Medmenham on several occasions, claiming that the pledge of allegiance "one nation under God" should rather be "one nation under Satan".⁹⁶

La Sorcière or *Witchcraft and Satanism* (1862), was Jules Michelet's (1798-1874) attempt to put the Satanic mass into scholarly history books, although the result was anything but scholarly due to its lack of sources and its extraordinary poetic and polemical tone. He "never really perceived the limitations of reason" as Georges Bataille puts it.⁹⁷ The anticlerical Michelet describe the sabbaths as pagan affairs before the 1300's after which they became "...open warfare against the God of those days [...] Then do the Sabbaths take the grand and horrible form of the *Black Mass*, of a ritual upside down, in which Jesus is defied and bidden to thunder on the people if He can."⁹⁸ In Michelet's renderings of the Satanic mass, the witch takes center stage. "She is priestess, altar, pledge of holy communion, by turns. Nay, at bottom, is she not herself a god?"⁹⁹ *La Sorcière* is written in propagation of feminism but with patriarchal overtones, the witch he described as an oppressed woman, driven to boldness by

⁹⁵ *ibid*, pp. 64-67.

⁹⁶ Faxneld 2006, p. 82.

⁹⁷ Bataille (1957) 2012, p. 53

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 283; Michelet (1862) 2018, p. 145-146.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 148.

danger, daring anything. From an apparent male gaze perspective (a running theme in the book), Michelet even describes what she would look like, with the form of Medea, beauty that comes of pain, deep eyes lit by a feverish fire and black untamable tresses. This priestess of Satan carries out her mass by riding her wooden Devil deity, consuming belladonna laced mead, dancing the violent “Sabbath-round”, “offering up herself” to an officiating demon and beheading toads, amongst other revelries.¹⁰⁰ In the 17th century, he continues, the Black Masses resembled a massive fair or masquerade and were mainly performed in the pursuit of money. Indeed, in the Basque country some twelve thousand people would attend and Satan himself would preside over the mass, gentlemanly seated in a guilted armchair.¹⁰¹ Bataille opines Michelet wants to rescue and justify the female Satanist from opprobrium,¹⁰² however, this is done through the perspective of a patronizing outsider. Michelet reads as a man with a personal agenda towards the church, who over-sexualizes and fetichizes the oppressed woman, attributing to her the rebellious hero role of the Satanic sabbath, with very dubious substantiation.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, pp. 148–156.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p. 218.

¹⁰² Bataille (1957) 2012, p. 60.



Figure 5 - Etching by Martin van Maële for Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière*, 1911. Source: Wikicommons

As described above, the 19th century saw a different usage of Satan as a freer of the oppressed through the romantic poets. During this century, Satanic ritual became a favored subject of popular culture, shapeshifting from its previous form as mere slander or rumor. This was not solely done by the ideological poets but by authors writing fiction for entertainment, drawing on historical material. A famous example, which has been defining in how to depict a Satanic mass from then on - is Joris Karl Huysmans *Là Bas*, first published in 1891. The novel wasn't unique in depicting a Satanic mass but what made its appeal so special was the claim that the novel was partly documentary. The story continues the tradition of expressing a disdain for the other, in this case - womankind.¹⁰³ The protagonist Durtal who is a writer embarked on a project about the previously mentioned Gilles de Rais, is examining Satanism in fin-de-siècle Paris and accepts an invitation from his mistress Mme Chantelouve to attend a Black Mass. The

¹⁰³ Faxneld 2014, pp. 407–408.

mass, which is made up of blasphemy, hysterics and an orgiastic culmination is mostly a female affair, revolving around a defamed, twisted, and naked crucified Christ - with a protruding member from a bush of horsehair. The few men attending are demasculinized, wearing makeup or appearing effeminate in one way or other as well as showing signs of feebleness or disfiguration.¹⁰⁴ As Faxneld accurately points out, Huysmans pathologizes Satanism as a particularly female ailment, riding on the traditional misogynistic mindset of woman as susceptible to Satan's lures and proneness to hysterics, much like how witches and the witches sabbath (as well as the 19th century feminist contemporaries) was described during early-modern times.¹⁰⁵

One of the very first self-proclaimed Satanists, Stanislaw Przybyszewski (1868–1927), did not engage in Satanic ritual himself. However, he claims that the Satanic witches sabbaths in fact took place albeit without a present prince of darkness. The ecstatic dancing and narcotics consumed during these gatherings, he writes in *Die Synagoge des Satan* (1897), was the cause of hysterics which could be said to constitute the essence of the Satanic witches sabbath. He connects this with Huysmans so-called documentary *Lá Bas* (which he apparently took for truth) in which the women fell into hysteric antics similar to those found in the mad house during the climax of the Black Mass.¹⁰⁶

A great hoax, but an attribution of Satanic ritual, nonetheless, was that of Leo Taxil's (1854–1907) Palladism and Satanic freemasons. Indeed, as we have seen, secret societies (such as freemasonry) provided the perfect breeding ground for rumors about Satanism. In 1895, there emerged, it seemed, an inner-masonic group openly devoted to Lucifer - declaring themselves

¹⁰⁴ Huysmans (1891) 1972, pp. 240–252.

¹⁰⁵ Faxneld 2014, pp. 414–415.

¹⁰⁶ Faxneld 2013, pp. 72–73.

through the periodical “The Free and Regenerated Palladium”. Its editor in charge Diana Vaughan and an investigative reporter, one Dr. Bataille, were both great sources of inside information from the Satanic goings-ons within the masonic off-shoot. However, both figures were a complete fabrication by Taxil. Nevertheless, tales of Satanic rituals emerged through the writings of these figures in addition to Taxil’s own. He revealed how Catholic psalms and prayers to the “grand architect” during Palladist-meetings was in fact only parodies, invoking Satan under the guise of Christian piety. The Palladists had its own sacraments, credos, and exorcism rituals to cleanse the Christian worship out of old monasteries procured by the group, *inter alia*. Women, who were admitted into this branch of freemasonry, evidently went through five stages of ritual before their initiation. One of these were the “Trial of Lazarus”, the idea was for the neophyte to have sex with a seemingly lifeless man with the purpose of transforming him to a living God - all underneath the watchful eyes of a huge depiction of Baphomet. She would continue the ritual by piercing a consecrated host with a dagger and crying “Vengeance, Adonai, Vengeance!”, vowing herself to Lucifer and denouncing Jesus.¹⁰⁷

What was the purpose of all this? Taxil was in truth both anti-clerical and anti-mason. He had undergone a feigned conversion to Roman Catholicism in order to gain credibility with the church - which he believed were far too excessive in their persecution and smearing of the freemasons. By convincing them of the Satanic activities within freemasonry Taxil fed the flames of the Church’s zealotry and effectively made public mockery of them through his eventual reveal. Overall, the Taxil hoax was another example of Satanic ritual being attributed by an outsider unto the other (the freemasons) for reasons of slander. As Van Luijk astutely observes

¹⁰⁷ Van Luijk 2016, pp. 207–216.

this attribution is extraordinary because of its “explicit purpose of exposing the very mechanics of attribution itself.”¹⁰⁸

Around the turn of the century, due to increased religious tolerance and a growing interest in esoteric religion, there occurs somewhat of a shift and de facto Satanic rituals become a more open and well documented phenomena. Satanic ritual became real, for a lack of better word, existing in a sort of symbiosis between ideology and early entertainment.



Figure 6 - Still from the ritualesque dance "Heretic" by Martha Graham who derived inspiration from her rebellion against the constraining mentality of Christian Puritanism, prevalent in the oppression of women during the Salem witch trials.
Source: Wikicommons

Individuals like occultist, dualist and sex-magician Maria de Naglowska (1883–1936) took advantage of the provocatively popular renderings of the Black Mass in late 19th century literature and rose to fame with her “Temple de Satan” Satanic sex-seminars “Confrerie de la Chevaliers de la fleche d’Or”. Initiation into her order “Les Chevaliers de la Flèche d’Or” was done through stages of ritual and these would often be constituted of

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 231.

extreme sexual acts like the “mystery of hanging” where a man was sexually aroused and hung until near asphyxiation, a female “Satanic priestess” would then let herself be penetrated by him until he reached climax and was released from the noose. De Naglowskas underlying motive was of social transformation, intended to usher in a new era characterized by female principles. This would partly be achieved by unleashing woman’s sexuality.¹⁰⁹ In a photograph from one of Naglowskas rituals she is pictured naked, laying on an altar. Initiates, robed in black are kneeling in front of her.¹¹⁰ The staging very clearly alludes to descriptions of Satanic rituals during earlier times, especially that of the “affair of the poisons” described above. Self-declared Satanists (although the extent of de Naglowskas Satanism can be discussed, it is clear however that Satan was an important figure in her belief system¹¹¹) thence adopted elements of Satanic ritual which until then had only been established by outsiders, aiming to vilify and demonize Satanists. As we shall see, this praxis of the perceived other adopting the perspective of the outsider is a tradition very much alive to this day.

This shift didn’t eradicate the existence of Satanic ritual as mere slander, to be sure. Subversive and provocative individuals who alluded too much to the Satanic to be acceptable by the norm would still be accused of ritual activities like that of the Black Mass.

The singular, Italian marchesa Luisa Casati (1881–1957) would be an example of this. A performer, eccentric and socialite with an interest in esotericism and ceremonial magic, Casati often accessorized her dramatic costumes with live snakes and ram horns - a clear nod to the devilish. Her mythical persona was

¹⁰⁹ Urban 2006, p. 260.

¹¹⁰ Linjamaa & Nilsson 2018, p. 9.

¹¹¹ Faxneld 2006, pp. 189–194.

shrouded in rumors of Satanic ritual and that she supposedly performed Black Masses in her house. There is no proof of this, but considering her large collection of esoteric books, her attendance at many seances and her expressed disappointment in the Black Masses that were offered in her circles it could be conceivable. Even if Casati performed her own or attended other Black Masses, there doesn't seem to have been a truly strict Satanic motivation behind it, more than a sympathy for the devil. But instead, rather a playful, entertaining motivation - one that matched her flamboyant lifestyle and interests.¹¹² Ritual and play is of course a powerful combination that creates meaning in its own right - which I shall discuss further on.

As the 20th century progressed, Satanic ritual became a well-worn niche within pop culture, especially cinema. The provocative theme would continue to be a popular entertainment with which to entice the audience, express a subversive spirit, and most certainly to play on the vilification of the other.

A classic of early cinema, *Häxan* from 1922 (dir. Benjamin Christensen), in its opening text plates designates itself a cultural historic lecture in moving pictures. It describes the witches sabbath from the point of view of an accused witch under torture. The beginning of the film which is dryly documentary in character describing the sabbath in both recognizable and original detail, an example of the later would be that the food served during the sabbath is prepared of corpses straight from the gallows. The witch herself is correctly characterized as often being old, poor, and miserable. The other half of the movie depicts the sabbath as the accused tells it. During the sabbath the witches dance frantically in a ring, sped on by drumming demons. The "devils' grandmother" is performing black arts by a ritual site made up of a circle, skull and bones, playing cards, an hourglass, lit

¹¹² Faxneld 2014, pp. 530–538.

candelabras and an open book (not very dissimilar to the *vanitas* of the 16th and 17th century, art pieces symbolic of the ephemerality and futility of life and pleasure, and the certainty of death). Witches who had not behaved evil enough are physically chastised by demons, other witches are trampling the cross and seen throwing dead infants into a large cauldron. The sabbath continues with a great orgy between the witches and demons and the witches line up to kiss the devil's behind. The devil is also seen running his clawed hands over a naked witch, bestowing her with his mark. Former medical student Benjamin Christensen who directed, produced, and starred in the movie combined a wish to inform and entertain. As Faxneld points out, the witch is depicted as a victim of superstition, a testament to the anticlericalism and scientific credentials of the film. However, Christensen simultaneously turn the sabbath into such an entertaining spectacle that it undermines the purpose.¹¹³



Figure 7 - Still from *Häxan* (dir. Benjamin Christensen, 1922). Source: Wikicommons

Commercial appropriation of Satanic ritual in the cinema saw a breakthrough during the mid 1900's. These films have generally

¹¹³ Faxneld 2014, p. 344.

been blamed as breeding ground for the subsequential Satanic panic of the 80's and 90's. Recurring themes are notably looming and threatening Satanic cults hiding amid normal society as well as female sacrifice. In early examples like *The Seventh Victim* (dir. Mark Robson, 1943), although the movie depicts no outright ritual, the Satanic cult (named Palladists in the film as a clear reference to the Taxil hoax) does cause the suicide of a woman through a somewhat ritualistic goading scene which would remind the observant of the witch inquisitions.

Depictions of the Satanic ritual in modern film really sees an increase in the 60's with production company Hammer film productions in the forefront. The camp horror movies released by the company would label a whole genre, "Hammer horror", with cult classic film (based on the novel by Dennis Wheatley) *The Devil Rides Out* (dir. Terence Fisher, 1968) portraying definitive ritual scenes. In the first of these, a Bacchae-like Satanic rite is performed in a glen decked with burning black candles, animal hides and occult symbols. The purple robed ritual master Mocata commits animal sacrifice and offers up the blood to the participants to drink. They in turn, continues to dance ecstatically until the devil appears in the shape of the Goat of Mendes. Later, Mocata presides over a sacrificial ritual in a cellar. Together with 13 robe-clad coven members they proceed to invoke "Set", used as another name for Satan, and attempting to sacrifice a female child on an altar, cutting her neck with a ritual knife (although they are stopped just in time by the protagonist).¹¹⁴ Non-hammer film *Devils of Darkness* (dir. Lance Comfort, 1965) features a ritual in an underground cave, lit with black candles where red-robed Satanists are sacrificing a woman dressed in a white wedding gown. She is to be married to the Satanic priest who in turn is markedly othered with a flamboyant foreign accent.

Production companies in direct competition with Hammer film productions such as Tigon British film productions would produce anti-hammer films like *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (dir. Piers Haggard, 1971). These were less vibrant and later described as “folkhorror” - a distinguishing genre of the 70's (*The Wicker Man* being a famous example). In the film a coven of witches gathers in the ruins of an old cathedral to summon the Devil. The witches, wearing flower headdresses (reminiscent of the Bacchae) commit ritualistic murder, rape, and chants - urging the devil to use their flesh and blood to materialize among them.

Rosemary's Baby (dir. Roman Polanski, 1968) was met with a wider commercial success than the hammer-horror films and portrayed a woman being ceremonially raped by the devil and having her baby stolen by a menacing Satanic cult while being accused of hysterics. Hammer films tried to win back the audience by topping *Rosemary's baby* with more explicit ritual scenes in their *To the Devil, A Daughter* (dir. Peter Sykes, 1976) which features orgiastic rituals and a teenage Satanic bride being impregnated and giving birth to the spawn of Satan. The movie poster (fig. 4) states how the film rides on the fascination for what they call “black magic”, however, the film ended up being the death of Hammer films and was their last release for many years.

The films mentioned above share many recognizable elements and a running theme: the Satanists are evil. They often manifest as cults lurking amid regular folk, luring the innocent into ruin. Often the films protagonist sets out to save someone from the cult. They are thus a reflection of the hegemonical Christian values of the west, and a continuation of using Satanism and Satanic ritual to demonize the other.

In this context it would be apt to mention the artistically influential

Kenneth Anger (1927-) whose short films, namely *Invocation of my Demon Brother* and *Lucifer rising* (1969) could be labeled as (11 and 28 mins long respectively) rituals in and of themselves. The first features a clip of Anton LaVey in his trademark devil horns.¹¹⁵ Even though Anger incorporate many elements eluding to Satanism he staunchly refers to himself as pagan.¹¹⁶

In *Satanis: The Devil's mass*, a documentary on the Church of Satan released in 1970, the viewer is exposed to one of the church's rituals, recorded in '68. To the accompaniment of a skeleton-masked individual playing the electric organ, a group of robe-clad people enter a room to perform what might be one of the most quintessential versions of what come to people's mind at the mention of a satanic mass. The predominantly male group proceed to ring the bell and led by LaVey engage in a call and response chant beginning with the words "In nomine satanas, Lucifer excelsis dei." A naked woman is leisurely monitoring the spectacle from on top of an altar. In the same documentary another ritual is shown, again, featuring a naked woman on top of an altar, and a man mockingly dressed as a bishop in a mitre, having his buttocks flogged. Said mock-bishop later joins yet another naked woman in a coffin for some consummating intercourse. A third ritual depicts several naked women (one tied to a pole) slithering around in slow swaying motion to a drumming rhythm, cradling a snake and a skull, while LaVey waves his hands around as some sort of cartoonish, behorned conjurer. The last ritual portrayed in the documentary features, you guessed it, more naked women. Presided over by a fully dressed LaVey and his male disciples.¹¹⁷ Aside from being a blatant display of objectification and sexualization of the female body, these rituals are performed in accordance with LaVey's ideas of epicureanism

¹¹⁵ Anger 1969.

¹¹⁶ Hattenstone 2010.

¹¹⁷ *Satanis: The Devil's Mass*

and carnal nature of man. They are examples of the so-called psychodramas which he called his rituals, not meant to actually conjure a Satan but to decondition the individual from negative socialization and reducing stigma acquired from past indoctrination with enough blasphemy to break the rules of said past indoctrination.

After the Satanic scare of the 80's and 90's, films depicting Black Masses and Satanic cults did not dwindle in popularity (nor have the way in which Satanists are being portrayed changed much) but have continued as a common horror feature with numerous films and TV-series on the topic including *Angel heart* (dir. Alan Parker, 1987), *The Ninth Gate* (dir. Roman Polanski, 1999), *Hot Fuzz* (dir. Edgar Wright, 2007), *The House of the Devil* (dir. Ti West, 2009), FX's *American Horror Story* (2011–), *The VVitch* (dir. Robert Eggers, 2015), *Lords of Chaos* (dir. Jonas Åkerlund 2018), *Satanic Panic* (dir. Chelsea Stardust, 2019) and more. Some films treat the subject of the sabbath/Black Mass/ without necessarily involving obvious Satanism or devil worship. Often, they will portray witches and ritual witchcraft in a somewhat positive light - making them the protagonists or anti-heroes of the story. This is done with an underlying theme of female empowering which can be traced back to the feminist reading of gen 3. Examples would be *The Witches of Eastwick* (dir. George Miller, 1987), *The Craft* (dir. Andrew Fleming, 1996), *Practical Magic* (dir. Griffin Dunne, 1998) and *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013).

As mentioned above, the upsurge of Satanic cinema has been blamed as one of the factors in the rise of the “Satanic panic”, which blossomed in America (and subsequently Europe) during the 1980's and 1990's. My summarizing of all the factors that make up Satanic panic and ritual, including pop culture such as music, roleplaying games, films, talk shows, magazines, and news

stories, will be immensely condensed, as the subject have been thoroughly covered in my secondary sources.

Heavy metal music has often been pointed out as a main initiation of young individuals to Satanism. The theoretical model adopted in police education explaining how the mechanisms of Satanism operate put teenagers “testing” Satanism on top of the list - meaning a Satanist would start out by listening to heavy metal and ultimately end up in a Satanic cult. This was the message picked up by the media as well as right wing Christian organizations and spread to the public.¹¹⁸ This proven baseless logic refers to the Satanic elements commonplace with bands like Coven who released a thirteen-minute-long *Black Mass* on their album *Witchcraft destroys minds & reaps souls* (1969) where they hail Lucifer, “the only true God”, beseeching him to open the gates of hell and come forth, denying Jesus and breaking a crucifix et cetera. The included album poster depicted the bandmembers performing a ritual over a nude woman, lead vocalist Jinx Dawson.¹¹⁹ Also, the band Black Widow who released songs with lyrics like “come to the sabbath, Satan’s there” (from the album *Sacrifice*, 1970), and ritually sacrificed women for show on stage should be mentioned.¹²⁰

More commercially successful bands like Black Sabbath certainly contributed to the wave of Satanic panic, although there wasn’t much Satanic symbolism at all to the band beyond their dark image and an inverted cross in their 1970 debut album art (which the band hadn’t approved according to drummer Bill Ward).¹²¹ Later, the band Venom would continue to draw heavily on Satanic themes with a pentagram encircled Baphomet on their album cover and tracks like “In league with Satan”, “Sons of Satan”, “In

¹¹⁸ Dyrendal 2000, p. 153; Partridge 2006, 246–247.

¹¹⁹ Coven 1969.

¹²⁰ Partridge 2006, p. 253.

¹²¹ Ward 2010.

Nomine Satanas”, on their first full-length album *Welcome to Hell* (1981). The band's third full-length release is a concept album telling the story of a war between heaven and hell. To what must have been the chagrin of contemporary righteous moralists, the album is covered in an inverted cross and hell subsequently conquers over heaven.¹²² Artists using offensive and/or Satanic imagery were compiled on a list called “The filthy 15” by members of the American PMRC (Parents Music Resource Center) - naming them artists representing the most explicit music of the time. Venom, Judas Priest, Mercyful Fate, and Black Sabbath were all on the list, but also bands who never used any Satanic imagery, violence, or ritual elements like Twisted Sister. Dee Snyder, lead singer of the band, went on to defend his music in front of the US senate against sensory regulations. He later stated in a *Rolling Stone* interview “You can’t just take a broad stroke and say, ‘It’s all like this.’ To generalize is damaging.”¹²³

The point of mentioning all these bands who show little to no signs of Satanic or ritual activities is because they were further victims of attributed Satanism and Satanic ritual. This becomes clear when investigating talk shows, televangelists, and infomercials from the time. In a clip from the crime prevention video series “Satanic Cults & Ritual crime” which was produced for the Louisiana state police, pictures of Iron Maiden album art and Slayer posters can be seen, the music of Black Sabbath can be heard, and the voiceover makes a generic statement, pointing to listening to heavy metal music as a warning sign of Satanism. The video continues by urging parents to look for ritualistic objects in the bedrooms of teenage heavy metal fans, especially ritual daggers, black candles, a “book of shadows”, Satanic symbols, robes, or other “Satanic” books.¹²⁴ As described by

¹²² *Welcome to Hell* 1981, *Black Metal* 1982, *At War With Satan* 1984, *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* 1986.

¹²³ Grow 2015.

¹²⁴ Louisiana police department 1990.

Robert D. Hicks, the occult-crime model was driven by fundamentalist Christians and Christian police officers who, mirroring the US state and government, didn't separate their religious views and professional duties.¹²⁵

Kathleen Lowney who spent six years of ethnographic fieldwork studying a Satanic coven in Georgia was met with skepticism and scorn when she presented her results which proved that the coven was no threat to itself or others. The reason was that her results did not parallel information the audiences had seen and heard on talk shows like *Oprah* or *Geraldo* and was therefore deemed wrong.¹²⁶ *Geraldo*, which had millions of viewers, aired no less than eleven Satanic themed programs between the years 1987–1991 including the two-hour prime-time special “Devil Worship: Exposing Satan’s Underground”.¹²⁷ These shows revealed the secret rituals of Satanists by audience members, “former victims”, “experts” such as police, authors and therapists. In 1987 *Geraldo* aired an episode which revealed how a child was taken from its child-care center and forced to participate in a ritual where she was married to the devil and had to kill a dog while the Satanists were involved with “...burning each other, torturing one another, marrying the devil.”¹²⁸ In another example the victim “Gloria” tells of how her family forced her into a Satanic cult, impregnated her and made her abort the baby so it could be used in Satanic rituals. However, Gloria’s credibility is iffy to say the least, as she keeps calling the aborted baby “feces”. *Geraldo* intervenes by asking “you’re saying feces. You meant fetus?”, whereupon Gloria answers “Yes...”.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Hicks 2008, p.160.

¹²⁶ Lowney 2008, pp. 409–411

¹²⁷ Ibid, p. 410; Random Stuff I Find On VHS.

¹²⁸ Ibid. P. 422.

¹²⁹ Ibid, p. 434.

The Oprah Winfrey Show (1986-2011) featured an interview with former Church of Satan member Michael Aquino (leader of the Satanic group Temple of Set) who was forced to defend himself against an audience member claiming to have witnessed a murder during a ceremony with the Church of Satan. The audience member attests to the ritual as a “witches’ sabbath” on Walpurgisnacht and that the participants ritually murdered a person by stabbing them with seven daggers. However, the person does not recall the names of anyone else participating or if they themselves actually partook in the murder, referring to a nervous breakdown and partial amnesia.¹³⁰ Of the thirteen talk show programs on the theme of Satanism compiled by Lowney, only three featured practicing Satanists, including Michael Aquino and LaVey’s daughter Zeena who more often than naught got insufficient airtime to explain their practice, had their statements skewed by audience members or were interrupted by commercial breaks.¹³¹

The Satanic panic was a phenomenon involving cases of child ritual abuse and police models of “how people become murderous Satanists” that contributed to a general fear of the Satanic and a false perception that Satanists operated with a sinister agenda amid normal society. The sudden surge of ritual abuse stories has been proven to emerge partly because of obsolete therapeutic methods of memory recovery consisting of leading questions and repeated interrogation where the “right” answers were rewarded. Memories of ritual abuse in traumatized patients had seldom existed until after undergoing rigorous therapy, bit by bit coaxing the increasingly gruesome memories out of the patient if satisfactory results of recovery had not been achieved.¹³² After a sufficient amount of pushing “the patient and

¹³⁰ Ibid, p. 431.

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 429.

¹³² The mechanics of these methods are thoroughly explained in Watters & Ofshe 1994.

therapist become fully adept at the alchemy that turns imagination into memory belief” and patients would conjure up traumatic and explicit images of Satanic rituals where they had to masturbate with crucifixes, be exposed to gangrape, drink blood, urine or other bodily substances, dismember or violate family pets, or being tied to an altar in order to be sacrificed - just to name a few examples.¹³³ This is strikingly similar to what the children accusing women of being witches went through some 300 years earlier.

The book *Michelle Remembers* (1980) has been credited as the case which started the entire Satanic panic and is the first documented case of a claimed ritual abuse child survival.¹³⁴ Michelle Smith here “revealed” severe abuse at the hands of a Satanic cult to whom she had been given over by her own mother. During her therapy sessions with future husband Dr. Lawrence Pazder, Smith would assume the voice and demeanor of her five-year-old self and retell her experiences, sometimes described by Pazder as “psychobabble”. The stories were of sexually abusive rituals where Smith was prodded and penetrated by the cult members and a personification of Satan by the name of Malachi. She also told of being kept in a cage and being cut with knives. Smith’s case gained the attention of the Catholic Church, and during their involvement Smith’s memories became inexplicably tinged with details from medieval inquisitorial literature like the *Malleus Malleficarum* - the devil himself had attended the ritual and he had left his mark on her body.¹³⁵ Cases like Smith’s inevitably drew media attention, and the subject of ritual child abuse became especially popular on TV talk shows as shown by Lowney, discussed above. Titles of talk show episodes during the 80’s and 90’s like “Satanic Cults and Children”, “Satanic

¹³³ Ibid, p. 177–179.

¹³⁴ La Fontaine 1998, p. 39.

¹³⁵ Kaplan 2008, pp. 246–250.

Breeders: Babies for Sacrifice” and “Devil Babies”, drew attention to the issue.¹³⁶

Sensational, misleading, and poorly substantiated news articles further fanned the flames of murderous Satanic ritual practices as discussed in Crouch & Damphousse’s article “Newspapers and the AntiSatanism Movement”.¹³⁷ In Scandinavia during the early 90’s these types of articles often homed in on the activities of black metal band Mayhem and its social circle. The people involved were a small clique of extremist adolescents. Musician, church arsonist, murderer, and writer Varg Vikernes told the newspapers that his life’s purpose was to hurt others. Bandmate and murder victim Øysten Aarseth said that it (Mayhem and co) was an organization for people who wanted to spread evil, hate, war, and destruction.¹³⁸ Statements like these would not have been hard to connect to the thriving Satanic panic in the US and UK. Chiefly because, particularly in Norway, “experts” had adopted the British and American police theories and models to investigate “Satanic crime”. Stories of Satanic ritual, sexual abuse and teenage Satanism were already thriving in 1992, and when Vikernes publicly claimed responsibility for several church burnings, the media exploded. Hundreds of articles were published on the connection between black metal and Satanism.¹³⁹ However, the case of Scandinavian black metal Satanism is singular and considered isolated within the sphere of Satanism. The involved were very few and, quoting Faxneld:

One could question whether these deeds were direct results of the ideologies propounded in the black metal scene. The perpetrators may have been anti-social or pathological individuals who were drawn to black metal

¹³⁶ Lowney 2008, p. 410.

¹³⁷ Crouch & Damphousse 2008

¹³⁸ Dyrendal 2000, p. 139.

¹³⁹ Dyrendal & Olander Lap 2008, pp. 344–347.

because it reflected their own already twisted mental state, rather than well-adjusted persons being warped by the influence of an extreme music subculture.¹⁴⁰

Several scholars have shown that the black metal subculture is not fundamentally Satanist. Nevertheless, after the burnings mentioned above, media continued to label black metal as Satanic and frame stories on the subculture in similar ways as news coverage on Satanic ritual abuse were framed, implicating they were both expressions of the same Satanic conspiracy.¹⁴¹

Taking these factors into account, the combination of Satanic slander in several different public media created a modern social construction of Satanism. It promoted an image of what Satanism is and the workings of Satanic ritual - often with a biased perspective no different from the witch hunters of early modern times or the Roman persecutors during the early days of Christianity. With a few exceptions in modern times, I have shown above that Satanic ritual is an activity often told of, and defined, from an outsider perspective. It has been used to slander and *other* the subversive, it has been used as polemics, scare-tactics and for entertainment. During the 21st century, we can see that Satanic ritual as we know it, is embraced by artists to make a statement of rebellion or dissent. But little have been told or shown from a first-hand perspective by Satanists themselves of how Satanic ritual manifests other than the rituals we see performed by the Church of Satan in *Satanis: The Devil's Mass*, discussed above. This thesis will contribute to ritual studies by reporting on first-hand accounts of Satanic ritual.

Here we conclude the introductory chapters in which I have presented the subject for this study and placed it into its historical

¹⁴⁰ Faxneld 2019, p. 344.

¹⁴¹ Dyrendal & Olander Lap 2008, pp. 347–348.

context. We have looked at who the Global Order of Satan are and what form of Satanism they practice in comparison to other Satanic groups. I have taken you through a chronological history of Satanic ritual and shown how this ritual have been attributed unto the “other” as a form of oppression or slander. We continue now to my study of GoS and their Satanic rituals.

Contemporary Satanic Ritual: A Survey in Four Acts

Below I will present my study in four sub-chapters, each pertaining to one of the designated categories I have deemed make up a contemporary Satanic ritual. I will present what information I gained from my interviews and conclude with a discussion.

Act I - Activism

One of the fundamental elements of Contemporary Satanism is the strive to contribute to a better and more just society through action. This, in fact underpins the very name Satanism: the symbol of Satan as a freer of the oppressed, bringer of knowledge and propagator for rational inquiry and curiosity is used metaphorically, while activism is their way of doing this metaphorical Satan’s work.

Historian of religions Bruce Lincoln has classified religion into three co-existing groups: religion of the status quo, religion of resistance and religion of rebellion. We will have a closer look at religion of resistance to clarify the connection between religion and activism within this study. The religion of the status quo would be the dominant fraction with its own set of fundamental values. Often it utilizes proselytizing to gain an ideological hegemony which serves those who hold power. In most western countries the status quo would be Christianity. Religion of resistance, then, would be a resistance towards the status quo. This would be put into effect by the ones alienated from or dissatisfied with the given

order of the status quo, usually with their own set of values that differs from the status quo. Lincoln thus characterizes them with a *negative* feature, in reference to their opposition and refusal to accept the status quo.¹⁴² At this point we need to pause and question Lincoln's characterization as in my opinion it doesn't fit fully with Contemporary Satanism. Contemporary Satanism doesn't exist merely in opposition to Christianity and shouldn't be defined as such. Nor do they oppose any specific religion exclusively, what they do oppose is religious oppression in any form. A *positive* feature would be more apt in this case in reference to Contemporary Satanism being an active force working towards the aim of a better society rather than existing in the negative opposition to something else.

Continuing, Lincoln postulates that the different values of the religion of resistance calls for modes of actions, practice of deviance or defiance of the status quo – enter ritual activism. Rituals, according to Lincoln, are an effective instrument of resistance as they promote group solidarity, uniting participants through their shared set of values and mobilizing them in solidarity against injustices that violate those values. As mentioned above, members of the religion of resistance often consist of people alienated from the status quo for different reasons, often implicating trauma aside from other forms of alienation. Perhaps the member of a religion of resistance was not accepted by the status quo because of their gender or sexual orientation. Or perhaps they had their bodily autonomy violated. Ritual also promotes healing while resisting the status quo, usually metaphorically. In practice that could be an “unbaptism” ritual done in order to throw off a forced membership of the status quo, or an initiation ritual to celebrate their joining a group of peers.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Lincoln 2003, pp. 79–83.

¹⁴³ Lincoln 2003, pp.83–85, Lincoln 2014, p. 74.

Considering this, one should bear in mind that the extent of resistance varies geographically and depends on the religious context of the country. Sweden is very much a secular country compared to the UK. Satanism here might not be as provocative as it is there, and Swedes in the same demographic group as my interviewees seldom have a background of a prominent Christian upbringing. This is quite noticeable when observing the tone and attitude of my interviewees, as those from Sweden seemed less concerned over expressing their Satanism in provocative terms. I got a distinct feeling that my interviewees from the UK took more care regarding provocation towards or accidentally offending Christians.

Furthermore, the variation of the structure of resistance is partly indicated through a multifariousness of focal points within GoS in the UK and Sweden. In Sweden, the group seem more concerned about pluralism and legal matters such as gaining the status of a recognized religious community (which they are since 2019) able to carry out legally binding rituals such as weddings and funerals while in the UK, the focus of GoS seem to lie in fundamental human rights which might have been suppressed by Christianity, such as LGBTQI+ rights.

Ritual as a Powerful Tool of Dissent

What drew my interest to contemporary Satanic ritual was seeing it performed in situations of protest. One of my interview questions, listed in Appendix A, addresses whether Satanic ritual is meant to have an impact on societal and political issues. I asked my interviewees if they thought this was the case and most would answer yes. However, several of my interviewees seem to agree there is a right place and a right time for Satanic ritual activism. Protesting sensitive issues such as abortion rights could fail and fan the flames of discord between pro-choice and pro-lifers to the

detriment of the pregnant person seeking healthcare services. Both Mitzie and Rosy exemplify with this particular issue. Rosy explained how the idea of activism and performance (their wording for ritual) can be a creative way of raising awareness, but you do not want Satanism to overtake the issue at hand, referring to Contemporary Satanism not being very well understood or misrepresented even. To do a Satanic ritual could thus risk-taking power away from the issue. “We got to be very careful not to make it about us.”¹⁴⁴ She proceeded to exemplify by condemning The Satanic Temple’s reactions after the recent abortion laws in Texas following the so-called *heartbeat protection act of 2021* (an act introduced by 41 men and one woman) which, in short, legislates a prohibition of abortion after the fetus’s heartbeat is detectable. This usually occurs after 6 weeks of pregnancy, a time when most women do not know they are pregnant yet.¹⁴⁵ TST responded by claiming that abortion is a Satanic ritual, detrimentally (say their critics) playing into the hands of those long lived tropes painting Satanists as baby murderers, and that under the *Religious Freedom Restoration Act* (RFRA) Satanists should be exempt from any abortion regulations.¹⁴⁶ In the opinion piece published by the Luciferian Dominion referred to above, the overshadowing of the issue at hand is heavily criticized. TST is being accused of conveying a dangerous narrative that only furthers the stigmatization of abortions.¹⁴⁷ This was also Rosy’s argument as she opined that the last thing needed is to equate Satanism with healthcare, because it is not helpful. She said it’s different joining a larger uniting movement against something, because then you have so many groups of people taking part that the Satanic protest is just a piece of the puzzle, whereas taking over the issue and

¹⁴⁴ Interview #6 “Rosy”.

¹⁴⁵ American congress, “heartbeat protection act”, <https://www.congress.gov/bills/117/congress/house-bills/705/text> .

¹⁴⁶ *The Satanic temple*, Advocacy, Ongoing Campaigns, Religious Reproductive rights, <https://announcement.theSatanictemple.com/rrr-campaign41280784>.

¹⁴⁷ Strange 2021.

calling abortion a Satanic ritual “for me, that’s the last thing needed [...] I felt very uncomfortable with the Satanic Temple and their abortion ritual, and I feel a lot of other Satanic groups and Satanists did as well.”¹⁴⁸

Mitzie responded similarly and illustrated her opinion with the typical abortion clinic protests where two groups can be found: aggressive anti-abortion protesters with signs and fetus dolls, and the people going into the abortion clinic for help. Mitzie said that if a Satanic group showed up and held a non-aggressive ritual, not being hateful in any way, then they would create a balance. By showing a neutral and empathetic side based on common sense, they provide another alternative for people to join. By doing this the Satanists wouldn’t kidnap the right to abortion as such but provide a voice of reason in support of bodily autonomy, a fundamental part of contemporary Satanic philosophy and the second of GoS’s six pillars. Mitzie particularly mentioned that they would be an alternative voice to religious proselytizers “the side that’s not ‘the Bible says this, so you must do this.’ I think just by showing up and being the flipside of things, we can make a difference. Whether that be specifically going to perform a ritual, a big showy something where we gain a lot of attention or if we were just there to protest, lend our voice.”¹⁴⁹

Dio also related to how the group are very guarded regarding public rituals and will not do them unless they are very happy with the circumstances of the situation they were in. Not only do they risk overshadowing the issue, but there is also a risk of people “ruining” it for them. By this I assume Dio meant someone physically or verbally intervening in a violent or threatening way. Dio related that while it is important to utilize their right to voice their opinions in a pluralistic society, especially if only one

¹⁴⁸ Interview #6 “Rosy”.

¹⁴⁹ Interview #1 “Mitzie”.

perspective is being heard, they do not perform their rituals solely for the reason of politically standing up to people - they have a deeper meaning. Dio called it sharing information. A ritual might be a piece of activism, but it might also be a piece of sharing information. Ritual activism, Dio said, is part of the Satanic foundation, adding that dispelling rumors of infant cannibalism and virgin sacrifice is naturally also part of it.¹⁵⁰

Rosy's example of activist ritual being part of a bigger movement and thus accepted to a higher degree was GoS's ritual in protesting Brexit which they performed outside Downing Street. Lando explained the ritual was titled a *destruction ritual* and amounted to the group standing around in a drawn pentagram circle clad in robes, cursing and chanting unpleasant things about prime minister Boris Johnson. It drew the attention of media who gave the group a chance to be interviewed and explain what their goals and aims were. Why they were against the conservative government. "It allowed us to draw attention to the issues we wanted to talk about. "So, do we think ritual can have an effect? Yes, we do."¹⁵¹ Ritual activism as part of a bigger movement is not a new phenomenon and was performed by performative feminist groups during the women's liberation movement of the 1960's and 70's who called themselves W.I.T.C.H, originally an acronym for Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (which would change depending on the subject matter being protested). W.I.T.C.H, who would dress themselves up in robes and witches hats, performed a "hex" on the financial district of New York during their inaugural action on Halloween in 1969 where they wanted to protest capitalism which according to them promotes sexism and oppress women.¹⁵² A newly formed chapter of W.I.T.C.H performed one of their rituals inside a pentagram

¹⁵⁰ Interview #10 "Dio".

¹⁵¹ Interview #3 "Lando".

¹⁵² On W.I.T.C.H, see: Eller 1989, Echols 1993.

on a square in Chicago in February 2016 to support affordable housing and protest gentrification.¹⁵³

Public ritual activism can also be done online, and this obviously minimizes the risk of threatening interference. In 2019 when the “Law and Justice” party (PiS), a conservative, right-wing populist party who drives an aggressive anti-LGBTQ+ agenda, were re-elected in Poland, the GoS decided to support their Polish LGBTQ+ friends through a ritual aimed at the Polish state. The video can be seen on Youtube and received extensive media attention. It contains mixed footage of masked and robe clad GoS members performing a ritual at separate locations due to Covid restrictions, they can be seen burning papers with words such as “prejudice” and “bigotry” as well as bible pages from the Book of Leviticus. The group named the ritual a Black Mass. Why did you call it a Black Mass? I asked. “For the effect” answered Dio.¹⁵⁴ Dio explained how they wanted to make a point against the PiS who uses their religion to justify bigotry and the controlling of women and LGBTQ+ people, and the ritual was a way of doing that through an open and caring approach. Lando said they wanted to get the goat of the Polish government and the Polish media in order to steer people’s attention to the issue at hand. Because of the crackdowns on LGBTQ+ people and women’s rights they deliberately set out with the intention of using the most well-known title to grab people’s attention (I will further discuss the concept of the Black Mass below). Lando continued to explain how using the title of Black Mass and performing the ritual put them all over Polish mainstream media from which GoS is now banned. “People were shocked, it was very effective, I’m quite happy with that one.”¹⁵⁵ The ritual was led by a person in a black

¹⁵³ Greene 2016.

¹⁵⁴ Interview #10 “Dio”.

¹⁵⁵ Interview #3 “Lando”.

robe and skull mask whose voiceover leads the audience through the ritual. It transcribes as follows:

I welcome each of you to this, our Black Mass for Poland.

Witham was, and Hail Satan!

/Everyone:/ Hail Satan! */Bell tolls/*

We light these candles to invoke Lucifer, the Lightbringer!

Hail Lucifer!

/Everyone:/ Hail Lucifer!

As Satanists, we hold the autonomy of body and mind to be of highest importance. Our second pillar states that we should respect the inviolable body, autonomous will and sovereign right of every individual to guide their own life and being. Remembering that enjoyment of these rights is predicated on respect for the same in others. We are pained to hear the news of lesbian, bisexual, gay, trans, queer and other people being attacked and arrested in Poland merely for expressing themselves, with their persecutors often using religion as an excuse for their bigotry. It is here we feel our need to express our opposition through OUR religion, through OUR Satanism, to show that we are against these acts of oppression. To show our support to those being persecuted, and to show that whilst awful things are being done in the name of their God we can do beautiful things in the name of Satan. */Bell tolls/*

We invoke the names of hell to aid us. We take up the name of Belial */bell tolls/* to show our friends true worth and that they are free from any yoke.

We take up the name of Behemoth [bell tolls] to confound our enemies and block their way.

We take up the name of Lilith */bell tolls/* to inspire our friends and embrace the metaphorical mother of all rebellion.

We take up the name of Beelzebub [bell tolls] to lift up our friends and protect them from their plight.

We take up the name of Babylon [bell tolls] mother of prostitutes and so-called abominations of the earth, to reclaim the narrative from our enemies.

We take up the name of Satan *[bell tolls]* to show wrath to our enemies to disarm them in their use of the demiurge to hurt others.

We take up the name of Lucifer *[bell tolls]* to encourage pride in our friends and to make them unafraid of showing who they truly are.

Światło ponad ignorancję miłość ponad nienawiść *[Light over ignorance, love over hate]*, Hail Satan!

[Everyone:] Niech wygra miłość *[Let love prevail]*, Hail Satan!

We now celebrate the gift of knowledge and awareness over lies and ignorance. When Satan in the garden led Eve to the tree of knowledge, he said to her:

‘Why then, was this forbid? Why, but to awe?’

Why, but to keep ye low and ignorant, his worshippers?

He knows that in the day ye eat thereof, your eyes, that seem so clear, yet are but dim, shall perfectly be then open and clear, and ye shall be as Gods, knowing both good and evil, as they know’

Let us then be as gods! Let us partake of the fruit of knowledge! Let us be subservient to none! Hail Satan!

[Notice reference to the Bible and the usage of Christian context to emphasize contemporary Satanic ideas.]

[Everyone:] Hail Satan! *[bell tolls]*

We have invoked the names of Hell to stand with our friends and against our enemies. We have partaken of the feast of enlightenment, to celebrate the victory of wisdom and knowledge over bigotry and lies. Our Black Mass is drawing to a close. We finish with a final invocation.

We stand now against the forces of ignorance, bigotry, and hatred. Unfettered and unbowed by arcane doctrine born of fearful minds in unenlightened times. We follow the Satanic impulse to eat freely from the tree of knowledge. We revel in our freedom from societal norms, and we

share this knowledge and these freedoms with those who would except them gladly. That which will not bend must break and that which can be destroyed by truth should never be spared its demise.

It is done.

Hail Satan!

/Everyone:/ Hail Satan!

*/bell tolls/*¹⁵⁶

Ritual activism can also be partly public. Lando told me about a bloodletting ritual which took place at a ticketed event at a venue in north London as part of a Satanically themed evening. The ritual was done in protest of the gay blood ban in the UK and blood donor laws which unfairly targets gay men. The ritual was both a protest and a deeply personal ritual for the people involved. Lando explained that in the UK at the time (2017) you were not allowed to donate blood for a period of six months following homosexual intercourse. Since the ritual was performed the wording of the law has changed so that if one, regardless of sexual orientation, engages in anal sex with a new partner you cannot donate blood for at least three months.¹⁵⁷ This still unfairly targets gay men who are most likely to engage in anal sex. Lando, who have not been able to donate blood for seven years, commented on how gay people usually are hyper-aware of sexually transmitted diseases and go for regular checkups, unlike most straight people. Thus, the unfairness in penalizing persons who are careful with their sexual health rather than the ones who are very relaxed about the same.

The intent of the ritual was to use the trappings of grand Satanic rituals, playing on the stereotypical tropes of bloodletting in the name of Satan, but done in positivity and protest. The ritual

¹⁵⁶ Global Order of Satan – A Black Mass for Poland,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sgN-HXsKgAA&t=393s>.

¹⁵⁷ NHS.

supplicant, or “sacrifice” if you will, were a practicing bisexual who had been screened and tested for any transmittable disease and declared completely healthy prior to the ritual, they were also a medical professional. They, explains Lando, would’ve been a fantastic donor who should been able to give blood, but due to their bisexuality they had been denied. The supplicant was brought forth during the ritual and with their consent exactly one pint of blood was extracted from their arm by a medical professional, the same amount which would be taken in a donor transfusion. It was poured into a large ewer held up by Lando who acted as the ritual celebrant and Lando paraphrases what was said then; “this blood could’ve been used as a lifesaving gift, it has been given freely, but because of the homophobic and unfair laws of this country which are based on the persecution and stereotypes of homosexuality brought about by religion, it won’t be used. This gift is cast back unto you.” Upon which they poured the blood back over the supplicant’s head.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ Interview #3 “Lando”.



Figure 8 - Pouring blood over participant in the anti-blood ban ritual. Image courtesy of "Lando".

Through my interviews I deduct that ritual activism is more common of a phenomenon in the UK. In Sweden, rituals are not officially organized Det Satanistiska Samfundet (DSS, affiliate of GoS), they are only performed through individual initiative. Generally, I detected a stronger reluctance to talk about ritual among the Swedish interviewees, indicating that ritual is something both deeply personal, and something only shared between people within the group. The feeling could be exemplified by such answers as Shelley gave me when I asked their opinion on definitional suggestions: “There’s a difference when you are part of a group or outside of it. When you are part of the group it is easier to detect differences and understand that differences are based on pretty small things not clear to the outsider.”¹⁵⁹ When I asked why DSS hasn’t performed much ritual activism Aron said: “Firstly, there has been a pandemic. But I’m

¹⁵⁹ Interview #9 “Shelley”.

sure we could participate in something activistic to show that we're in this together because collective ritual does have an effect."¹⁶⁰ One of their rare public rituals was performed in 2018 which Merrit told me about, although they did not call it "ritual" but preferred to use the term "event" or "campaign". Merrit opined that "ritual" is something performed exclusively within the group, something private and often personal which is repeated regularly. An "event" can all the same have ritualistic elements and use the Satanic imagery or metaphorical language with a specific purpose of protest.¹⁶¹

At the time DSS was an affiliate of TST, before the schism and ensuing alignment of DSS with GoS, the group organized a ritual at Medborgarplatsen, a popular square in central Stockholm. In it, they gathered in a circle to protest the religious hegemony of public space. The intention was to question the religious soundscape in public environments and who has the privilege to be heard. St. Eriks Catholic Cathedral from where regular mass ringing's can be heard, is located close to Medborgarplatsen. The ringing of church bells has and continues to be a natural and unquestioned part of the public environment in most western countries, while the silent mosque also located close to Medborgarplatsen has been treated like a looming threat of impending cultural upheaval. Newspapers in Sweden have often published articles on the debate regarding whether the adhan should be permitted or not and in 2019 Sweden democrat (a right-wing populist party) politician Jonas Andersson put in a motion to introduce a statutory prohibition against the adhan claiming the call to prayer violates the freedom of religion.¹⁶² Part of DSS

¹⁶⁰ Interview #2 "Aron"

¹⁶¹ Interview #4 "Merrit".

¹⁶² Nationellt förbud mot böneutrop från religiösa byggnader https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/motion/nationellt-forbud-mot-boneutrop-fran-religiosa_H802497; An example of a collection of articles on the subject can be found here: <https://www.svd.se/story/debatten-om-boneutrop>.

purpose was to demonstrate how Christianity's monopoly of the public religious soundscape goes against religious pluralism and that other religions exist who has the right and wish to share that space. The ritual consisted of making their own version of a prayer call or bell ringing. A few members of DSS gathered in a circle, holding hands around a speaker playing a prerecorded song "with very low-pitched electric guitars and drums which we blared, and on top of that we had a death-metal singer from Umeå who sort of hissed... at that time we were TST affiliates, so it was one of their incantations but translated to Swedish. So, we stood there among the speakers in closed ranks. It was a little exciting."¹⁶³

The Black Mass

When initiating this study, I had an ambition of detangling the concept of "The Black Mass". As illustrated above in my historical chapter, the term has been used in a variety of circumstances for a very long time and it is hard to say from whence it originates. Until the founding of the Church of Satan it was almost exclusively used as a means of othering, and since it's been widely used within popular culture and often interchanged with the more generic "Satanic mass" to describe any and all types of Satanic ritual. But what exactly counts as a Black Mass? Can any Satanic ritual be called a Black Mass or is it a specific type of ritual with certain requirements? Those were the questions which I related to the interviewees who, it goes without saying, as contemporary Satanists should be able to define their own practice. I write this as a comment on the Catholic Church's habit to define the Black Mass for them, even claiming that people who carry out this act does not understand what it really is. In 2014, when TST attempted to carry out a Black Mass on the grounds of Harvard

¹⁶³ Interview #4 "Merrit"; The ritual can be seen in an article from *Mitt i Stockholm*, <https://www.mitti.se/nyheter/hor-det-Satanistiska-brolutropet-pa-medis/reprek!5CNacLWYkgDxq0tjeEU3MA/>.

University they were condemned by The Catholic Action League of Massachusetts, stating:

A Black Mass is an occult, obscene, and demonic parody of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, intended to effect a ritual desecration and humiliation of the Holy Eucharist. It is impelled by a preternatural hatred of God, the Person of Jesus Christ, and the Catholic and Apostolic religion.

As the entire purpose of a Black Mass is to debase the Blessed Sacrament, assertions by the organizers that unconsecrated bread will be used ought not to be taken at face value. Black Masses invariably entail the theft of consecrated hosts, a crime made easier in recent years by the lamentable practice of communion in the hand.¹⁶⁴

The Archdiocese of Boston publicly announced on their Facebook page:

For the good of the Catholic faithful and all people, the Church provides clear teaching concerning Satanic worship [...]

When engaging with others on this topic, make sure first they understand what a Black Mass is and isn't. It is not a religious rite on its own, and just a ceremony developed by the practitioners of a different faith. It is by design and intent a mockery of the Mass, every Catholic prayer turned into its inverse, culminating in the desecration of a consecrated Host, the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Our Lord in the Eucharist, in acts that are too foul and disgusting to write here. You may find that people who are defending the carrying out of this act do not understand what it actually is.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Doyle, C.J., The Catholic Action League of Massachusetts 2014.

¹⁶⁵ Archdiocese of Boston 2014.

As Laycock comments, these statements seek to deny practicing Satanists to define their own rituals and implies that the Catholic institutions of Massachusetts possess the “correct” knowledge on Satanic ritual and how to carry it out. By hindering TST from performing the ritual they ensured to uphold the long-time attributed image of what a Black Mass is.¹⁶⁶ A general understanding of a Black Mass is that it is a form of inversion of the Catholic mass, where catholic elements such as the transubstantiation components of the host and the wine, symbolizing the flesh and blood of Christ, are used in a mocking or counteractive manner. Other elements like chanting verses similar to the ones used in catholic liturgy but switching the names of God, Jesus or Christ into Lucifer, Satan, or other demons. Clerical-like dress and altars can also be used.

One of few self-proclaimed Satanist who has defined the Black Mass on a theoretical level is Anton LaVey. In his book *The Satanic Rituals* (1972) LaVey defines the Satanic Black Mass as a ritual of transformation. Not a ritual but a “psychodrama”, deconditioning the individual from negative socialization and reducing stigma acquired from past indoctrination. According to LaVey it is necessary the Black Mass contains enough blasphemy to have an effect in breaking the rules of said past indoctrination. It is intended as a form of mental exorcism from Christian society, values, and dogma. For it to have effect, one must leave critical thinking behind and fully give in to the fantasy and spectacle of the ritual.¹⁶⁷ In other words, in LaVeyan Satanism, the Black Mass could be considered an early form of the unbaptism, a ritual performed by contemporary Satanists to throw off an unwanted or forced baptism. One of the Black Masses performed by LaVey included a naked woman on an altar into whose vagina was

¹⁶⁶ Laycock 2021.

¹⁶⁷ Dyrendal 2009, p.68; Dyrendal et al. 2016, pp. 77–78.

inserted a host-like wafer, a Jesus-impersonator being flogged by a cat-o-nine-tails, urination on figures of saints, dancing naked nuns and more. All this was presided over by Mr. LaVey himself dressed in a black cape and behorned plastic skullcap. In creating this ritual LaVey drew inspiration from sources of esoteric history and popular culture like Huysmans and the La Viosin affair et cetera.¹⁶⁸ Considering this, it would be clear that, according to LaVey, the Black Mass was a very specific type of ritual and not a catch all term. I make this statement with a caveat as I have not invested enough time investigating LaVey's writings and recordings to take an exact measure on when and how often he used the term. However, it is safe to say LaVey laid a groundwork by bringing together elements from the catholic mass and descriptions from popular culture. Thus, he created a new ritual, with a purpose of promoting the self and to free oneself from religious oppression, based on familiar elements. This tradition is kept up by contemporary Satanists.

Within this context it would be apt to bring in the concept of *interrituality*. Interrituality refers to the practice of putting together elements or acts from other rituals when designing new ones. When carefully choosing elements, symbols or acts already given a value and defined as traditional and rearranging them with a new framework, the group in question can introduce a new ritual grounded in meaning and authority. It can be taken seriously in its playfulness rather than being rejected as a charade. Historian of religions Ann-Christine Hornborg, who conducts her study with the Mi'kmaq first nations in Canada, explains how the "playful seriousness" of creating new rituals must respect certain boundaries or risk the new ritual being reduced to mere "playful invention".¹⁶⁹ In the case of the Black Mass, I would claim the chain of events developing the other way around. The

¹⁶⁸ Van Luijk 2016, pp. 294–295.

¹⁶⁹ Hornborg 2017, pp. 17–27.

carnavalesque ritual of LaVey has turned into a contemporary Black Mass taken with the utmost serosity, not grounded in attacking or smearing the sacrament of other religions but with a positive purpose, protesting religious oppression and representing the alternative path. Interrituality is practiced across the board regarding contemporary Satanic ritual, not just the Black Mass. In fact, there seemed to be a consensus among my interviewees that “Black Mass” is an outdated and context-dependent term only to be used where it makes sense to protest Christian oppression.

“I don’t know... Black Mass... already in the 70’s black sabbath sang about it. It’s a bit blasé *[sic!]* 2022. It’s almost a little show offish.”¹⁷⁰ Aron explained that performing a Black Mass could work in a certain context, while in Sweden its irrelevant because of our secularity. But in Catholic environments characterized by conservatism the use of the Black Mass specifically would be effective and powerful to a greater degree. This was the case with the Black Mass for Poland. Not to attack Catholicism but to point out injustice and religious oppression. Lando explained they wanted to use the well-known title to grab headlines and people’s attention, but the content of the ritual “... wasn’t a traditional Black Mass, we were still doing our thing, stating our intention against homophobia and misogyny, rather than us trying to ape the traditions of the Catholic Church. We hadn’t stolen and desecrated wafers from a church or anything like that.”¹⁷¹ Mitzie, who lives in a Catholic country and participated in the Black Mass for Poland related how the Black Mass is something you see in movies, it’s not real. What the GoS is doing is inverting people’s ideas rather than anything else. “... you’ll find that very little in our group sneers at religion. We were not there with upside-down crosses or anything because we are not interested in that. It’s not our goal to piss off Christian people. It happens but it’s not why

¹⁷⁰ Interview #2 “Aron”.

¹⁷¹ Interview #3 “Lando”.

we're doing it."¹⁷² A remarkable statement considering how Satanism has been attributed and projected throughout history. Mitzie continued by comparing the contemporary Satanic Black Mass to the catholic mass:

Mass is, when you go to a Catholic Church, if you have a wedding then you have a mass and sort of stick the wedding onto the end of it, there's a purpose to it. And to us it was exactly the same, the purpose was to show our support to LGBT people in Poland. But it could be used for anything, we could change the language. Its kind of like a show, a performance, that's got spiritual elements.¹⁷³

In practice, according to Mitzie, Black Mass and Satanic ritual are interchangeable since the Black Mass is not what we are used to seeing on TV, the Black Mass does not contain mockery of catholic liturgy, it is only a title and a means to oppose ideas.

Dana opined how the Black Mass as a concept is outdated and heavily polluted by Christian points of view. It is something that could "... take place in an old splatter movie."¹⁷⁴ Dana relayed that even though LaVey modernized the Black Mass, what he did was simply keeping the stereotypical components but ridding it of any spiritual claim. Thus, the term is not compatible with the contemporary Black Mass, which Dana claimed is a term only used for "[...] brand appearance, while in reality they are only and purely rituals."¹⁷⁵ This statement can be compared to the Black Mass for Poland where the term was used for attention while the ritual content was not in fact an inverted catholic mass. Rosy's and Mickey's' arguments agreed that the Black Mass is something closely connected to the Church of Satan and that you cannot call

¹⁷² Interview # 1 "Mitzie"

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Interview #5 "Dana".

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

any Satanic ritual a Black Mass. Mickey confessed that they did not know a lot about it other than it could be used to promote counterculture. Moreover, the Black Mass highlights what they are *not*, which is to say, they are not anti-Christian. Again, referring to the Black Mass used in name only and not by the inverted catholic mass content.¹⁷⁶

Shelley's arguments stood in stark contrast to the others. Upon my question if a contemporary Satanic ritual could be called a Black Mass, referring to a ritual defined as an inverted catholic mass Shelley answered:

I definitely think so [...] it is a great catch all term. Because it is what we do to a degree. If you say Black Mass everybody knows what you're talking about. If you didn't want to work with already existing symbolism, Satan is already a very loaded symbol, you would've come up with something new, like the flying spaghetti monster. There is a will to tease. I believe many Satanists think there is an absurdity about Christianity and what they're doing, and by aping after and mocking, highlights that absurdity.¹⁷⁷

These arguments sound counterproductive to the image of Contemporary Satanism the other interviewees tried to convey, and more conforming to the practice of the Church of Satan. It could be a testament to the individuality and newness of the religion within which a common pool of set terminology is lacking. This could also be a testament of a so-called "woke" and politically correct culture clashing with what (certain Satanists) deem obvious, however controversial, and far-fetched that conclusion might be.

¹⁷⁶ Interview #6 "Rosy", Interview #7 "Brik".

¹⁷⁷ Interview #9 "Shelley".

Concluding, based on the ten Satanists in this study, the emic definition of the contemporary Black Mass is evidently something very different from what has been portrayed in popular culture. The Black Mass as a ritual is something more abstract, an inversion of ideas rather than an inversion of liturgy, used in a specific context where the term carries significant meaning rather than a catch all term for Satanic ritual. According to most of my interviewees, not meant to shock or attack. Rather, to counteract, specifically religious oppression or bigotry by using a familiar term (usually without the disrespect of mockery) and taking back a term that has been used within Christianity to demonize the other.

In this subchapter I have accounted for ritual activism within Contemporary Satanism grounded in the Lincolnian theory of religions of resistance. Religions of resistance oppose injustice practiced by the status quo through action which unites them in solidarity against those injustices. As seen in my theoretical chapter I have assigned Contemporary Satanism with a *positive* feature referring to it being a religion trying to create change through positive means rather than merely existing in opposition to the status quo. This is especially obvious in their practice of the Black Mass which is used not in mockery of Christianity but in name only as a counter position against oppression and bigotry in contexts where this is relevant. It is relevant to point out that this study concerns ritual only. Thus, other types of Satanic activism have not been researched. As seen above, activism is firmly grounded in GoS six pillars and the group regularly engages in other forms of activism such as partaking in pride parades, organizing counter protests against pro-lifers and organizing clean-up outings at their local nature reserve.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ "Håll rent för Satan"; "Satanistiska Samfundet i Stockholm Pride Parade 2019; "Tillsammans för aborträtt".

Act II: Play

In Tao Thykier Makeeffs dissertation on polytheists in Greece, he applies Dutch historian Johan Huizingas ludic theory on play, first accounted for in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1938). Makeeff initiates his chapter on theory addressing the fact that people often ask him, regarding the polytheists and their rituals, if they are serious or just role-playing?¹⁷⁹ I believe the same question would probably pop into people's minds regarding Satanists and their rituals. Are they serious or is it just, what, a show? During my interviews I have come to understand that there are certainly elements of play, as well as elements of seriousness to the Satanic ritual.

According to Huizinga there is a fluid dichotomy between seriousness and play, a fundamental symbiosis as play, imagination and freedom is the fundament of human civilization. And the elements of culture often consist of both play and seriousness.¹⁸⁰ Huizinga's definition of play is that it's *free*. It does not hail from necessity, biological need, or moral duty – and can be suspended at any time. It is moreover separated from the world of coercion. This becomes especially prevalent in contemporary Satanic ritual, where consent is a principal requirement. Secondly, play is *disinterested*, play adorns life – it does not make life possible and stands apart from vital needs. As several of my interviewees kept repeating, part of performing ritual is because it's "fun". It's something they "enjoy" and even because it "looks cool".¹⁸¹ Thirdly, Huizinga defines play as *separated* from ordinary life. It lives in its own temporary sphere of time and space. As Lando described to me, however they demarcate the ritual space, be it through the pentagram symbol on the floor or something else "...it is to establish the space we are in. The space we are using is

¹⁷⁹ Makeeff 2019, p. 58.

¹⁸⁰ Lambrow 2021, pp. 821–822

¹⁸¹ Interview #1 "Mitzie", Interview #9 "Shelley", Interview #7 "Mickey".

now a sacred space. This is a space that only we're allowed to be in, and that nothing can come in and nothing we say can come out. Anything that's here is ours and we control it, and we use it."¹⁸²

Huizinga also argues that play *is* order, creates its own order within its own sphere, much like Lando hinted at in the above quote.¹⁸³

This "only pretending" quality of play betrays a consciousness of the inferiority of play compared with "seriousness", a feeling that seems to be something as primary as play itself. Nevertheless [...] the consciousness of play being "only a pretend" does not by any means prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture and, temporarily at least, completely abolishes that troublesome "only" feeling. [...] The contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid. The inferiority of play is continually being offset by the corresponding superiority of its seriousness. Play turns to seriousness and seriousness to play.¹⁸⁴

The quote above beautifully depicts what my interviewees tell me of Satanic ritual. The ritual is taken at the utmost seriousness, it is an expression of who the Satanists are, their identity, their moral principles, and their devotion to each other. But ritual is also an opportunity to have fun and be creative.

The day that we're going 'Oh my god it's time to do the ritual again, I can't be bothered' is the day that I'll stop doing rituals. When it becomes a chore, when it becomes a task like going to church on Sundays, I hated it. It was like 'oh god its Sunday we have to do that again don't we'. A ritual is something that everyone wants to be involved

¹⁸² Interview #3 "Lando".

¹⁸³ On Huizingas ludic play theory: Seligman et al. 2008, pp. 71–72, Makeeff 2019, pp. 61–63.

¹⁸⁴ Huizinga quoted in Makeeff 2019, p. 62.

with and is excited about, so, ritual is fun. Ritual is engaging. Ritual is... good fun.¹⁸⁵

Ritual as Creative Expression and Acts of Enjoyment

Ritual contains a fundamental element of play which became evident during my interviews. Play is often manifested in creative ritual design and purposes of pleasure and enjoyment. By design I refer to the use of props, script, and choreography, sometimes carrying a symbolic value, other times not. Mickey (they/them) gave me a detailed description of a ritual performed partly for fun and enjoyment, partly for cementing their identity within the Satanic community (spirituality and the self will be discussed in the next chapter). They claim that choosing to be a Satanist is to challenge the problematic established order which can be done by using taboo symbolism since sacred objects as such do not exist within Contemporary Satanism. This, they claim, is both a means of challenging the stigma of standing outside that order as well as a fun expression of aesthetic choice. They like to lean on the aesthetic of the Satanic panic shock horror to reclaim that image. The ritual in question was equally grounded in Mickey's partaking of both the Satanic community and the kink community, and was devised as part Satanic pseudo bloodletting ritual, part impact play kink scene. It was organized through private initiative by and for Mickey and was not an official GoS ritual.

When Mickey told me about their ritual, they repeatedly mentioned how they do things because it's fun or for no other particular reason than that's what they like, very much in accordance with the "disinterested" criteria of Huizinga's theory. Often, the "just for fun" mentality is adopted through creative choices like Mickey's ritual robe. "The robe is not necessary", Mickey explained. Wearing the robe, putting on a red light,

¹⁸⁵ Interview #3 "Lando".

putting on make-up, burning incense and meditating for a while beforehand result in an introspective headspace and “I think I get more out of it.”¹⁸⁶ Mickey made their robe themselves since there is no official GoS uniform. Personalized, unique robes are common within Satanism, explains Mickey, because it adds to whatever aesthetic the practitioner wants to achieve. At the time of our interview GoS UK had a planned weekend retreat to workshop and make robes together. “I can’t wait, it’s gonna be so sweet” said Mickey and continued to show me the fabrics they planned to use for their robe - they were bright teal, yellow and orange colored.¹⁸⁷ Their current robe, which I also got to see during our interview, was black silk with black embroidery and a large hood lined with red velvet “because it’s soft and it’s comfortable and it looks edgy. I also have a little patch with kittens on it and a rosette that says, ‘demon fucker’.”¹⁸⁸

Robes aside, Mickey also use make-up, a harness and thigh high boots during their rituals as well as runes painted on their body with ash and icing sugar. When I asked about the runes Mickey explained they didn’t know what they meant or what they are supposed to do, they had screen-dumped the runes from video game *Doom 2016* and used them because they looked cool. “That’s all that really matters. And then I played some metal music, a bit of Gojira, not that there’s any religious significance to that, I don’t think there’s any other Satanists that would steal runes from a video game and play that particular band, but they are things I personally like.”¹⁸⁹ The symbolism of these props and costume choices have a mental effect on the Satanic practitioner, as Mickey explained - it puts them in that introspective mood. But contemporary Satanists does not believe in magic or supernatural intervention, and Mickey underlined the symbolism

¹⁸⁶ Interview #7 ”Mickey”.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

is purely that, the usage of a robe or painting of runes will not magically cause something to happen.

The center play of Mickey's ritual was the implementation of "impact play" and pseudo bloodletting. Impact play is essentially the beating of a person who finds pleasure in it. According to Mickey, the pain of impact play generates adrenaline and endorphins which puts them in an intensive headspace, apart from being something they thoroughly enjoy and something which improves bonding between Mickey and the "top" i.e., the person doing the beating. Consent and safety are important when performing impact play. I asked Mickey if there was a certain choreography to be followed but once entered the generated headspace it is hard to communicate well which is why a discussion is carried out beforehand on what is going to happen, to decide on which "safe-words" to use, which places are okay to touch, what boundaries there are and the amount of impact. Once the play has started it usually carries out organically and the participant is dependent on the top being able to read non-verbal cues (as Mickey relayed, they sometimes enter a non-verbal state). The actual impact is performed with a variety of instruments which cause different levels of pain. Mickey showed me their collection of tools, a pink, bendy rubber paddle causing a stingy surface pain which is used at the start of the ritual before switching to more heavy-duty instruments like a thick, half inch, leather rod with two prongs that "stings just a little bit more" and a blue wooden bat with bruising force. While being beaten Mickey was handcuffed with his own personal cuffs bought at a pet store and tied to a bed.

The second part of the ritual involved pseudo bloodletting.¹⁹⁰ Mickey had looked into performing real bloodletting but decided

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

against it due to safety reasons. Instead, they used a carbonfibre wax knife about six inches long which wasn't sharp enough to cut but replicated the feeling when scraped against the skin. Hot wax from special soy candles with a melting point of 54 degrees was poured over Mickey and scraped off with the knife. "It's hot enough to create an intense feeling but not enough to burn me. And they have a nice smell to them, so it gives me that feeling of 'oh I'm getting my special toys out, I'm gonna have a special experience'."¹⁹¹ This balance between fun and creative aesthetic choices coupled with the deeply meaningful and enjoyable impact play demonstrates the fluid dichotomy between seriousness and play in Huizingas theory on play. Fundamental elements of life like identity and belonging are expressed through highly creative (and not to be taken so seriously) aesthetic choices. The connection between Mickey's ritual activities and identity will be further expounded upon in the next chapter.

As established, Satanic ritual can take several expressions. In my interview with Rosy, she told me about her initiation ritual into GoS which is an example of the kind of spontaneity with which some of the rituals are created. The group had rented an air b'n'b for the occasion and were forced to work with whatever props they could find on location since they didn't bring anything other than wine and robes. "We all knew we were gonna do a ritual at some point and then early in the evening it was like 'shall we just do it now? Okay let's just do it'".¹⁹² The result was a makeshift, spontaneous ritual. They found some birthday candles in a drawer which were too small for any candleholder, so a soft candy as candleholder had to do. They also needed seeds for the ritual, which are used to mark a transition in life or growth of a person. Suitable seeds were found in a box of breakfast granola.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Interview #6 "Rosy".

And they needed to know if we wanted to be initiated with ash or oil and we both said ash and they're like 'okay, we need to get ash, what do we burn...' So it was a real McGuyveresque setup. Me and the other person being inducted weren't involved in *that* side, we just sat there watching everybody else prepare [...] and then when they had everything me and her went outside while everybody else where inside setting up and assigning roles. Me and the other girl had white robes that the initiates wear at the beginning, and we were outside feeling quite nervous, but not scared nervous like 'oh god what is this going to be', it's quite a big thing [...] I guess it's performance anxiety in a way. [...] there were a few glitches because the other person getting inducted took too many seeds, you're only supposed to take three, but she kept eating them. But it's not something very serious where if you do something 'wrong' you'd be admonished for it, it's fine. [...] the transformation from the ritual space to the non-ritual space afterwards for me is quite funny because you have all these people in robes who for the previous ten minutes have been very serious and solemn are like 'oh its done now, can someone help me get this robe off, the necktie is tied too tightly', people making sure robes didn't hit candles and yeah if you'd walk straight in from the street without knowing what was going on you'd think it was quite comical.¹⁹³

Rosy described a ritual very much free from coercion with its own chosen order or non-order of things where play and seriousness co-exists in a fluidness. "[...] rituals don't have to be prescriptive, there's no rule following in that way although obviously they were trying to conform to certain 'rules' and I say that in quotes."¹⁹⁴ I deduce that Satanic ritual liturgy is highly individual and caters to each Satanist's whims, wants, lusts, feelings, and tastes. It is a body

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

of liturgy built in any which way around an exoskeleton of certain core elements like candles, robes, oil, call and respond, demarcation of space and special intent - like initiation.

Despite exceptions like Mickey's colorful tools described above, there is evidently a commonality of adopting a dark guise or aesthetic during these rituals, a play on the already existing trope of something sinister, for effect. Shelley said "we lit candles in a circle, and we had a fire and wore black hoods, because it felt cool. I think many Satanists do these things to feel cool, more than they want to acknowledge, it's supposed to look a little edgy and dangerous." As an observer I get a distinct feeling that there is a palpable differentiated view on Satanic ritual depending on where you live. Testimonies from my interviewees in the UK are very similar to each other and they seem to agree upon the trappings of Satanic ritual whereas in Sweden testimonies are much more varied and conflicted. Aron bluntly steered the discussion away from any preconceived notions I might have had regarding Satanic ritual during our conversation. "it's not like we draw a pentagram on the floor, light candles and evoke Lilith... maybe some do but there is no fixed ritual like that. Maybe that is a disappointment for you to hear."¹⁹⁵ This quote is remarkable since the majority of my interviewees give testimonies of using symbols such as pentagrams. Dio even said they are *usually* used when describing a typical contemporary Satanic ritual. And Lilith is invoked on several occasions, albeit not in the belief the female demon will actually appear. For example, her name was invoked both during the ritual for Poland and in the ritual performed by members of DSS described below. Aron instead emphasizes the importance of DSS wanting to be able to legally perform established, universal rituals like weddings, funerals, and baptisms, which is something they are working towards. This focus shift in our conversation

¹⁹⁵ Interview #2 "Aron".

regarding ritual as well as the tone of voice and body language used by Aron left me with the feeling they might consider other types of Satanic rituals not particularly serious or even farcical. If indeed the consensus was, as Shelley claimed, that Satanists only do their rituals the way they do to “look cool”, Aron’s stance would be understandable.

The individuality of Contemporary Satanism is very noticeable when comparing geographically. Dana, who works in a very dangerous military profession told me that he and his Satanist colleagues (he calls them “comrades”) often perform rituals using their equipment as ritual props. The aim of one particular ritual was to focus on “gain[ing] more force and to fight better when we have to go outside our base.”¹⁹⁶ During the ritual they consecrated the equipment to work better and smeared it with pig fat so it could not be stolen and used by the “insurgents”¹⁹⁷, meaning Muslims, since Muslims regard it as impure. However, Dana clarified they did not believe in any sort of divine intervention, the ritual was purely for psychological reasons – to reach a state of mind that would bring them back alive when their mission was completed. This has to do with the power of performance which is a recurrent in my interviews. Dio stated that ritual is almost like a play, they want a bit more drama because it adds an extra layer of psychological impact.¹⁹⁸ Mitzie told me about the props used for the ritual in support of LGBTQ+ people in Poland described above and added that it brings a bit of theatricality. “You know it’s the 21st century, I suppose you could just do it by e-mail if you really wanted to but this [meaning the usage of props, performing ritual at nighttime, and making use of hammer horror elements, invoking demons etc.] just makes it an *event*, something that is

¹⁹⁶ Interview #5 “Dana”.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Interview #10 “Dio”.

really memorable, I was on a high for days afterwards. [...] it's kind of like a show, a performance, that has spiritual elements.”¹⁹⁹



Figure 9 - The Satanic Wine "Svartvardsvin", curtesy of "Burt".

Reporter Lotta Ilona Häyrynen published an article on the Swedish Social Democratic online news platform “Frihet!” (Freedom!) after participating in a Satanic ritual organized by members of DSS in the Haga Park in Stockholm. During the ritual, props with strong connotations to Christian liturgy were used. There was “Black Mass” wine, they ate wafers reminiscent of communion wafers and anointed each other with oil by drawing the shape of an upside-down cross.²⁰⁰ These choices do not seem consistent with the fact that many contemporary Satanists do not wish to be perceived as existing merely in opposition to Christianity. There seem to be a fine line between mocking other religions and expressing an ideology of their own. I asked Burt who participated in the ritual if there was a purpose behind using such obvious symbolism, and if there was a wish to provoke? Upon which he answered yes, at least partly. Because Christian iconology is so well-known, inverting it with a purpose of promoting a different philosophy or ideology can be a very powerful tool. However, “you will always provoke *someone*, whether you want to or not.”²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Interview #1 “Mitzie”.

²⁰⁰ Häyrynen 2019.

²⁰¹ Interview #8 “Burt”.

The consensus, however, seems to be that Satanic ritual is not about inverting Christian rituals but inverting the preconceived idea of what contemporary Satanic ritual is, even though the demarcation of counterculture varies. In fact, as described above, Christians were the ones who originally “designed” Satanic ritual in a sense. Using elements from those invented rituals is not mocking Christianity, it is adopting a preconceived notion of what Satanic ritual is and infusing it with new meaning. “Taking some of the Hammer horror elements and making them our own we reclaim them so that we have a ritual that means something to us, but nothing spooky happens and no one gets hurt. We prove to the world Satanic ritual is good.”²⁰² In my theory chapter I pondered what people would ask should they witness a contemporary Satanic ritual; would they ask if it’s just a show? The answer would be yes and no. Theatrical elements in these rituals are inherent, they are a natural part of the creative and individualistic nature of Contemporary Satanism, and they are the oscillating pendulum swinging back and forth between seriousness and play. They do not determine what the Satanists are and aren’t, they are a means of expression, not falling under any particular jurisdiction determining the rules of that expression, it is indeed *free* in line with the Huizinga theory, free from moral duty – it is not necessary for contemporary Satanists to design their religious expression based on whom they may or may not offend.

Act III: Identity

Several of my interviewees described their journey into Satanism as beginning with a discontent with the Christian milieu they grew up in or the atheist milieu they then sought out. Some had been part of both before finding Satanism. They explained how Christianity clashed with their personal philosophy and principles,

²⁰² Interview #10 “Dio”.

not believing in a deity, or accepting religious authority. When seeking out like-minded peers some tried out atheism. But as Lando reported, “Atheism isn’t enough. There are fantastic atheistic organizations out there, don’t get me wrong. But being a Satanist gives me an identity, gives me a goal, something to strive towards, a sense of purpose and being.”²⁰³ Satanism provides a community of peers, but it is foremost a religion of the self, where the individual is the primary “God” as such, practicing self-exploration, self-care, and personal development in order to exercise empathy, humanity and activism.

The roots of Contemporary Satanism reach back to spiritualities of the so-called “left-hand path” - a term originally derived from India, but which has come to designate a specific set of western occult currents from the 1960’s onwards. Although only a kernel of the ideology could be said to apply to Contemporary Satanism, it has been more prevalent in earlier Satanic organizations like the Temple of Set, but nonetheless still relevant to mention in connection to spirituality and the self. The basis of the left-hand path is that it acts as the counter polar to the right-hand path, or the objective universe - at least as explained by Stephen Flowers in his *Lords of the Left-Hand Path: A History of Spiritual Dissent*. The left-hand path is primarily concerned with the individual and their spiritual development, the subjective universe where the consciousness, soul and the self is in focus. “It takes into account the manifest and deep-seated desire of each human being to be a free, empowered, independent actor in his or her world.”²⁰⁴ However, the left-hand path ideology have often set the individual apart from the collective, creating the sort of elitism which can be seen within the Church of Satan. This does not align with Contemporary Satanism as they reject any form of hierarchy or religious authority. There is also a belief-element of deities and

²⁰³ Interview #3 ”Lando”.

²⁰⁴ Flowers in Petersen 2009, p. 241.

magic within the left-hand path which does not apply to Contemporary Satanism.²⁰⁵ A complementary and to a greater extent more relevant definition of left-hand path would be that of history of religions scholar Kennet Granholm who utilize the term to denote different factions of “dark spirituality”, including forms of Satanism. This, he claims, is because it lacks the negative connotations connected to the term “Satanism” by the general population. According to Granholm, a pure form of the left-hand path can be considered esoteric currents distinguished by the ideology of individualism, the goal of self-deification and an antinomian stance. However, to be defined as left-hand path a certain current does not need to tick all these boxes, rather they serve as common denominators.²⁰⁶

Contemporary Satanism could be considered part of the *subjective turn* and the *spiritual revolution* as described by Heelas & Woodhead. In Heelas earlier work he describes religion of the self as recognizing what is wrong with the world, a vision of the goal of perfection and a set of methods to achieve it.²⁰⁷ The utilitarian individualist, as he calls it, satisfies their own interests first, and uses their own ability to reason, their own power and will in order to gain the most out of life. The self is separate and prioritized.²⁰⁸ The subjective turn is the theory of a cultural shift within which people turn away from traditional “objective” roles of obligation and expectations into a way of life where they embrace their own subjective needs and desires, abandoning a higher authority to become one’s own. Translated to religion and spirituality, this would mean that Satanism is part of the spiritual revolution in which people abandon hierarchal and authoritarian religion for subjective spirituality where the individuals own subjective life is in focus and where activities connected to

²⁰⁵ Excerpt from Flowers in Petersen 2009, pp. 239–245.

²⁰⁶ Granholm 2012 (Faxneld & Petersen ed.), pp. 212–213.

²⁰⁷ Heelas 1996, pp. 18–20.

²⁰⁸ Ibid pp. 160–168.

subjective life surpass traditional congregational activities.²⁰⁹

However, as far as the linguistic concept goes, Satanism is very much a (non-theistic) religion and not solely a vague spiritual endeavor. GoS in Sweden (Det Satanistiska Samfundet/DSS) is a registered religious body, and the organization refers to themselves as a religion on their official website.

Ritual Empowering the Self

As established, contemporary Satanists do not believe in magic nor in any divine intervention, the existence of any devils, demons, gods or other deities. The religion is foremost a religion of the self, and the self is usually what is meant to be promoted or supported through the Satanic ritual. This becomes evident when looking at the purpose of the performed ritual. Several of my interviewees have told me about “unbaptism” rituals, “initiation” rituals, “destruction” rituals and “self-care” rituals, all promoting the self and the individual’s progress. Even rituals not focused of the self often contain elements of selfcare such as affirmations. I have detected a pattern of uncertainty concerning the line between ritual and plain self-care during my interviews. Some of the participants seemed unwilling to call certain habits ritual and some arrived at the insight after a bit of discussion they might in fact be practicing solo rituals, they had just never thought about it in that way before. Others perform full solo rituals with props and affirmations on a regular basis. In this chapter I will present a few examples of the presence of self-care and identity in Satanic ritual.

Lando described their solo rituals as introspective meditations:

So, for me a solo ritual would normally look like, like lighting a candle, maybe tracing a pentagram on the table I’ve lit my candle on and then just sitting there in silence reflecting on my thoughts and my day or any challenges

²⁰⁹ Heelas & Woodhead 2005, pp. 2–7.

I've come up against or anything I want to look ahead to the future to take care of. And just allow those thoughts to develop and allow myself to dwell on them for a while.²¹⁰

A practice like this is connected to, as a Satanist, being your own highest (moral) authority. There is no external deity to look to for spiritual or mental insight and wisdom, only yourself. There is a somewhat stronger connection between Satanic solo rituals and the ideology of Satanism than between group rituals and the ideology of Satanism since solo rituals seems to be a bit more closely connected to the core values of Satanism; who you choose to be as a person, what choices you make in life, how thoughtful, aware and responsible you choose to be in connection with the people and society around you. Solo rituals usually focus on the wish and effort to better yourself as a person. Lando compared the solo rituals with prayer which “in my opinion never, ever worked in the past because God doesn’t exist.”²¹¹ But it is similar in the notion of taking time to stop and contemplate and taking the time to reflect on possible issues: “is it something I’m panicking about unnecessarily or is there something you can do to address it? Do you need to reach out to other people or is it something you can solve yourself?”²¹² So rather than reaching out for the help of a deity it is *reaching in* and valuing your own ability to handle issues in your life. In that way, solo rituals could be either active (actually trying to solve a problem) or contemplative (something more similar to meditation and affirmation).

Shortly before our interview Lando had gone for a job interview which they prepared for through ritual.

[it] was a ritual of intent, the purpose was essentially to embody the person who could get that job. I was

²¹⁰ Interview #3 ”Lando”.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid.

manifesting the idea of Satan in myself which was confidence, the ability to communicate and speak clearly about myself, to not shy away and to articulate why I was suitable for the job. So I did this very self-empowering ritual the night before my interview and went in full of pride, confidence and power as though I had taken that embodiment of Satan that I wanted. Again, in that respect it's all psychological, in no way believing I'm *actually* embodying Satan, it's the idea of setting your mind to something and doing this ritualistic, physical, sacred thing that really focuses the mind and sets the intention.²¹³

Lando use several tools and props while performing this ritual to enhance the headspace they want to achieve. They used glasses to chime and create a bell effect, lit candelabras and a personal talisman or totem to help focus and project feelings and intent. Others do not employ any particular tools but focus on affirmation. "Shelley" said she starts each day by repeating the words "wisdom, compassion and justice" to remind herself those are the values she wishes to permeate her life.²¹⁴ She said it doesn't have to take much to perform solo rituals. "If no one sees what you're doing what's the point of wearing a black hood etc.? I don't get much out of that if it doesn't provoke someone. Solo rituals are more philosophical, I meditate and... think smart things in my head."²¹⁵ Others, like Rosy, simply take a walk to clear their head. "If you'd like to say that that's a ritual well it is. That I go out and wander for an hour and think. Ritual for me is about showing your devotion to yourself and the people around you and the way I do that is by doing something I enjoy which is taking a walk."²¹⁶

When I asked Mickey if they perform solo rituals the answer was "No, I don't. I do things like mediation, reflection and have a little

²¹³ Ibid

²¹⁴ Interview #9 "Shelley".

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Interview #6 "Rosy".

journal recommended to me by a therapist.”²¹⁷ This was interesting seeing Mickey didn’t classify the described activities as rituals while others do. This was also a tricky situation for me as a researcher. I wanted to press Mickey on this question and find out why they didn’t consider it a ritual without coercing them or accidentally leading them into any conclusions. I asked why they wouldn’t call those activities a ritual.

I mean, I do it on a regular basis, it’s always on my desk. But I’m not forcing myself to do it every day because the days I don’t I will feel like a failure. [...] It’s the same as I’m trying to do with my Satanism, improve myself and support my peers and community, but I don’t put on my robe and call it a ritual. I don’t need to put on my robe to write in my journal, I call those Satanic activities, not religious activities not rituals, because I don’t need the name and the aesthetic to help me do those sorts of things.²¹⁸

This answer perplexed me even more as Mickey expressed a reluctance to calling it “religious” activities. They explained that they don’t have a need to identify as religious and that they don’t like the connotations which the word “religion” bear to other, theistic, religions. At the same time, they want to challenge the existing view on what religion can be and how it can affect things like jurisdiction and culture at large. In that sense it is important to call Satanism a religion but on an emic level they do not feel religious because they do not fit into that classic category of believing in a God. I explained to Mickey that this was interesting to me because of my own wish to widen the perception of what religion could be, and that an underlying aim of the thesis is to show how versatile religion can be and how outside the mold it can be. After a moment’s reflection, Mickey declared “I’m gonna

²¹⁷ INterview #7 “Mickey”.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

think about it now. Next time I write in my journal, next time I meditate, whether I class this as a Satanic ritual and I might end up changing that. You've kind of changed my mind now."²¹⁹ Since I am attempting a definitional study, this example is worth highlighting because it reveals that there aren't any exact, coherent agreements and proxys regarding what counts as solo Satanic ritual. Again, it is up to the individual, as so much else within Contemporary Satanism. Dio said that there's isn't any one tried and true way to do Satanic ritual. If you want to sit in a field and wave a yellow flag and call that a Satanic ritual, then that's fine.²²⁰ Scholarly conduct would not allow me to omit the fact that I might have affected my interviewee in this circumstance, however. Would Mickey ever had "changed their mind" if I didn't confront them with my perspective? In a developed version of this study, a larger number of interviewees could garner a higher degree of objectivity regarding this question.

Some, like Aron, devote themselves almost solely to solo rituals. In Aron's case they use tarot cards. "There is no hocus pocus, it's not like I'm doing divination, it is purely psychological. The tarot cards function as activators of the unconscious [...] it's sort of a self-therapy. The cards are used to lure out thoughts and feelings in response to certain issues or questions."²²¹ Aron compared this to seeing an actual therapist which could be difficult and awkward and lead to withholding feelings. The solo ritual works as a replacement for that. "Since there is no one 'true' way to be a Satanist we cannot make demands on how to perform ritual. It is up to each individual to decide how to live their life and how to be as a person. This also entails ritual."²²²

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Interview #10 "Dio".

²²¹ Interview #2 "Aron"

²²² Ibid.

Some solo rituals are performed as a group for a specific individual. An example of this would be Mickey's ritual described in the previous chapter. During the ritual Mickey was stripped of their name, only using it/its pronouns, and referred to as "the sacrifice". This was a destruction ritual in the sense it was symbolically meant to destroy or sacrifice the given name, body, gender, and life force they were born with but does not conform with. Destruction rituals are usually described by the interviewees as burning a specific object like a Bible or perhaps a letter to free oneself from the ties those objects bear. The ritual can also be intended to free oneself from ties to a previous religion or to free oneself from a previous relationship or anything else that could weigh them down. It could also be about destroying an object with ties to previous behaviors which the Satanist wish to break, an addiction or the like. Mickey's example is somewhat different.

It was like creating a separation from the body and life and identity that I had been given but did not want and am struggling to get rid of. It's like 'I'm gonna break all that shit off, throw it away, fuck it, the name and the body. We are gonna break it so I can rebuild it and go forward with this new identity that I have crafted myself within the community that I like' If I can go through a process as intense as this then I can go through the challenges of hormone therapy and deal with shit from cis-people. So, for me it's a very helpful step in affirming my identity which is part of the reason why I did it. [...] the idea is I'm not passing on the responsibility of the change I wanna see to some deity, it's in my own hands.²²³

This is a testimony to how important community is within Satanism as well as the support of others in one's own endeavors, which is why the next chapter will address "community". In this

²²³ Interview #7 "Mickey".

particular ritual, all people involved were trans as per Mickey's wishes to address the common difficulties they are met with in a cis- and heteronormative society.

The practice of several people gathering to celebrate the progression of one person is also prevalent in the common "unbaptism" ritual within Satanism. The purpose of an unbaptism is to free or release the participant from an earlier forced entry into religion. They might have been baptized when they were a child without ever being asked and want to break away from that connection to an unwanted religion. An unbaptism is not a demand within Satanism, much like nothing else is demanded of a Satanist, but it can contribute to a grand sense of release. Lando reveals they've been unbaptized twice. Once as a performance ritual and once in a more intimate setting: "For me it was that real moment of where I could go 'I don't have to give into any of the posed moral that was forced upon me by Christian religion, I can completely leave that behind now'".²²⁴ Several of my interviewees told stories along the same lines. Dio told me about a public unbaptism performed at a theatre before a film screening. In the ritual, which is available to watch on the GoS's YouTube channel, participants are seen wearing black robes, holding lit black candles and burning incense from censers in front of an oil and water psychedelic backdrop. The people about to be unbaptized are led forth wearing white robes, blindfolded. The ritual celebrant reads from a black book in a call and response type ritual.

[...] we gather now to be cleansed. The foundation of Satanism is built on the self and in carrying out his work with humanity. This work is done when we give voice to the voiceless when we challenge authoritarianism and injustice, in the acts of compassion and practice of empathy, and it is done when we pursue truth and

²²⁴ Interview #3 "Lando".

knowledge. Not just the knowledge contained within written words, but also the knowledge of oneself. It is only through self-knowledge and self-love and with a vigilant practice of self-care that we can find our self needs met to give freely to others with ease and without expectation. For the virtue of compassion shall open the gates of hell and make us whole. [At this point the white robed participants raise their bound hands] These bindings represent the involuntary imposition upon each of you by an arbitrary and oppressive system of control intended to shackle, restrain, stigmatize, and shame your individual actions, image, sexuality, and spirit. Forced to bow to tyrants, to supplicate grace and mercy, they call this faith. They would have you grovel at the foot of an over lord who claims all of your victories, punishes your failures and would have you believe he suffers for your actions. But it is we alone who triumph, who revel in the edifying experiences of victory and failure alike. We bide our destinies and reject the baseless purity cast upon us by false morals. For our bodies and spirits are inviolable, subject to our own will. You are here today of your own volition, having repudiated existing ties to fallacious systems of oppression and it is your desire to renounce the spiritual servitude which was thrust upon you without consent. Do you reject the punitive absolutism of the false God of Abraham?

-I do

Do you believe in yourself? The only sovereign power of your own life

-I do

Do you wish to be free of the faith of your past and reject the servile bonds of baptism forever?

-I do

Behold, your bonds shall be cut away. With the blood of Lucifer we bestow upon you a free will. You are no longer part of an archaic faith, crushed by conformity and forced to kneel your power is your own. You are free to walk your own path, without spiritual persecution, to follow your own

will and to fly on your own wings. It is done. In the name
of Lucifer you are free. Hell Satan!
-Hell Satan!²²⁵



*Figure 10 - Global Order of Satan "Unbaptism ritual" 18-11-09, YouTube screen print.
Courtesy of the Global Order of Satan*

Towards the end of the ritual the participants bond was cut away and they were offered to drink from a goblet while having an upside-down cross drawn on their forehead with the ash of a burnt Bible. The ritual is thus an antithesis to their Christian baptism. During our interview I asked Dio what it is that makes a solo ritual Satanic as opposed to just being meditation or reflection and received the answer that a ritual is plainly Satanic because you are a Satanist and you are doing it this way. And because Satanists believe in the powerful individual rather than a God, some might even say they are Gods themselves because they feel they can manifest their own destiny, they don't need to ask favors or pray. It's a way of reaffirming themselves - they have the belief in themselves, ergo they can make it. Ultimately, it is a worship of themselves.²²⁶

²²⁵ Global Order of Satan – Unbaptism Ritual 2018.

²²⁶ Interview #10 "Dio".

Shelley contributed with a different testimony of an unbaptism ritual. She claimed to have been a Satanist for several decades and performed the unbaptism ritual “[...] before The Satanic Temple started doing it. It was a ‘bonding’ thing we wanted to do; I don’t know where it came from.”²²⁷ They didn’t call the ritual an unbaptism although the purpose was the same. To “wash away” the Christian baptism, which they did with water in an outside setting next to a lake. Performing the ritual by a lake was grounded in twofold reasons, partly to feel the distance and disconnect to any churchly environments and partly because, according to Shelley, many Satanic rituals draw inspirations from new age spiritualities like Wicca and the like. But also, because it’s just plain nice “[...] like a black metal video, hehehe”²²⁸

Incorporating introspective elements in group rituals is a commonality. Often, the ritual will allow for moments of affirmation, either silent or spoken. However, these affirmations are deeply personal and none of my interviewees reveal how those affirmations are worded or even what subject matter they could be about. There is a very tight lid on this information for the purpose of protecting each member’s privacy. Lando is the only one who divulged a little information on these affirmations. He informed me of a ritual they were to have a couple days after our interview: “It will probably be a lot of, sort of asking people what their intentions are, what they want to cover in the new year, how do they want to manifest themselves and their form of Satan in the coming year, so, asking people to present their manifestation of Satan to the group, what does it take on, how do you want to achieve that, what do you want for the future, how can the group support you in this etc.”²²⁹ He also filled me in on a ritual the group recently performed where part of the ritual was for everyone to

²²⁷ Interview #9 “Shelley”.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Interview #3 “Lando”.

read a personal mantra which the group would repeat back to them. The process created a great chorus of everyone promoting and affirming each other.

This subchapter has illustrated how ritual and the self are connected within Contemporary Satanism and how that connection manifests. The self constitutes a fundamental cornerstone and point of ideological and philosophical departure in the religion Contemporary Satanism. It is only natural that a large part of ritual, be it solo or group ritual is dedicated to the self. The practice is grounded in the philosophy of the left-hand path which is concerned with the individual and their spiritual development. However, within Contemporary Satanism the individual and their identity and personal development takes precedence as contemporary Satanists are not spiritual (in the sense that they do not adhere to or believe in any external deity). They could be described by Heelas' term utilitarian individualists, as they prioritize their own needs first and use their own power and reason in order to gain the most out of life, become a better person and do good for the greater cause. They are part of the "spiritual revolution" looking towards the self first rather than any external being. Many of my interviewees divulge stories similar to each other, they describe coming from a background (often religious) which suppressed who they were as a person. Seeking out the freedom to express their identity has led them to Satanism, a religion which allows them to explore, support and improve their true selves. Ritual is evidently an important tool in that endeavor. However, ritual in support of the self is not always practiced solo. All of my interviewees stress the importance of the Satanic community. For some, the community is the entire reason they became Satanists. Contemporary Satanism operates in a community/individual symbiosis where in some cases the individual leans a great deal on the community. This is particularly evident in the examples of ritual that I have

discussed so far and will continue to be prominent in the next chapter on the topic of community.

Act IV: Community

In Èmile Durkheims classic definition of religion he argues that religious beliefs are always held by a collective who are bound together through those beliefs, and who practice the rituals that go with them. They share a common conception of the sacred and its relation to the profane world. More precisely “a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions – beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church.”²³⁰ All of my interviewees stress the importance of community, for some it’s the entire point of being a Satanist and for others it is a pleasant perk of being a Satanist, nevertheless, across the board community is important. As Jon P. Bloch adequately puts it “current society often is characterized by a paradoxical strain between the need for self-autonomy and solidarity ties with others based on shared normative expectation.”²³¹ The truth of this argument will become apparent in the chapters below. None of the interviewees, however, use the word “church” to describe their religion. The odd person even hesitated to use the word religion because of unpleasant connotations to a previous involuntary life within the Christian church. In lieu of this they simply refer to their community as Satanism. In this study, Durkheim’s use of “church” could therefore be translated to “Satanism”. The word “sacred” is used with some restraint by my interviewees and sometimes with a caveat of it being “loaded language” which can be dangerous to use.²³² This would be in reference to the word’s connotations of the sacred in for example Christianity where the opposite of

²³⁰ Durkheim (1912) 2008, p. 42, 46.

²³¹ Bloch 1998, p. 7.

²³² Interview #10 “Dio”.

sacred would be the sinful or sacrilegious. To Satanists, “the sacred” would simply represent something meaningful, like the ritual space itself and the bonding created within. In this way I believe that “sacred” as used by Satanists (instead of, for example, Christians) is more in accordance with Durkheim’s definition, since it is sacred not because of the supernatural but due to something else. It is, as Durkheim argues, set apart as something superior and powerful and deserving of great respect. But it is not of a supernatural character as, let’s say, the relic finger of a saint, or even a God, would be. Contemporary Satanists do not believe in the supernatural.

When Durkheim relates his theory to ritual, his conclusion is that worship of the totem in Australian Aboriginal religion, is in fact a worship of the society itself. The rituals are the core of the clan’s life together and their purpose is to promote the clan and to have its members feel included. With this logic, ritual elements or ritual objects in a sense become interchangeable as they are not the principal object in focus. This in fact would be the bond, or the circle as Durkheim describes ritual as. The circle between the individual and the society where the individual receives the best part of themselves from the society; a distinct character, intellectual and moral culture, and the society itself which only exist through individuals.²³³ This becomes evident in Rosys’ retelling of their initiation ritual into Global Order of Satan which took place in a rented house. As the group only had access to whatever could be found in the house they had to make do with “pomegranate” seeds from a granola box, birthday candles from a kitchen drawer and soft candies as candleholders. Rosy says about Satanic ritual:

²³³ Pals 2022, pp. 96–101.

It's an affirmation to the group rather than anything else, it's like, you are there for me, you are there with a group of people. You're not there for a deity or something else [...] It is the joining together of the people there [...] having *things* there doesn't (mean anything). To me it's more the words and what people say.²³⁴

Durkheim have of course been criticized for his aggressive reductionism. He insisted that social need shapes religion and not the other way around. Reducing religion in such manner is a scientific approach which has left theorists divided. I'm wanting to agree with Pals on that religion or ritual cannot be boiled down to mere social functionalism.²³⁵ It is, however, a useful approach to incorporate in a theoretical hybrid make-up of ritual like the one I am attempting, where religious adherents clearly state ritual provides much more than a social function.

To build upon the social perspective of ritual for the sake of relevance and diversification I will incorporate some of the basic ideas from Michael Houseman's theory on relationality which revolves around ritual behavior being the acting out of relationships. In this context, the relationship in question could be that of celebrant/initiate, friends consummating their commonality in a shared philosophy or the self connecting to the self (internal relationship) with the support of like-minded individuals. Naturally, the relationship could also be between the self and a meaningful non-entity – like a Satan symbol. The quality of the ritual, according to Houseman, often derives from the relational configuration. There is almost always a clear before and after, a process of recontextualization regarding ritual relationality; the initiate has become part of a group or the self have reconciled with oneself through, for example, an unbaptism. Houseman

²³⁴ Interview #6 “Rosy”.

²³⁵ Pals 2022, pp. 106–109.

points out that rituals construct a mutual social reality. Usually in a ritual context this is a somewhat constricted pattern of behavior (stand there, drink this, lift your hand like so etc.).²³⁶ Contemporary Satanic ritual, as we will see, is refreshingly free in its behavioral design which tells us a great deal of the relational nature between contemporary satanists. Contemporary Satanic ritual is many times made up of spontaneous elements or adapted after the needs of the individuals participating, elements of play and spectacle are also important in enacting ritual relationality.

Ritual as Social Bonding

Aside from identifying with Satanism on an ideological and philosophical level, the search for a community and a belonging were described by my interviewees as the most important aspect of their Satanic practice. Bonding is often perceived as derived from a shared sense of otherness with people who adhere to the same moral principles and often hail from a similar background of an experienced oppression. For some, like Mickey and Burt, community is the main reason they became Satanists. “I feel like I’d might not identify as a Satanist on my own, the reason why I actually choose to be a Satanist is because of the community.”²³⁷ Burt informed me the most important part of Satanic ritual is the social aspect, the social aspect is needed to perform a ritual otherwise there is no point. “If I’d want to feel like a Satanist when I’m on my own in my chamber I don’t need a ritual for that, I’ll just go online and chat with other Satanists instead.”²³⁸

Burt and Merritt both explained that the main reason for the ritual performed at the Haga Park, described above, was specifically to strengthen the communal bond, Merritt called it a “gathering” meant to “pep” each other while Burt confirmed it was also to

²³⁶ Houseman (Kreinath et al. ed.) 2006.

²³⁷ Interview #7 “Mickey”.

²³⁸ Interview #8 “Burt”.

acknowledge each other as Satanists.²³⁹ Clearly, relationality is a driving force behind the implementation of ritual. Merritt continued by explaining that when each participant was invited into the circle during the ritual, they were asked if they entered the circle with “a free will and open mind”, he said this symbolizes the curiousness and willingness to explore shared by the group, cementing that Satanism is an endeavor they are venturing out on together and that they have each other’s backs. This, again, supports the closed-loop relationship between the self and the group, the evolvment of one is largely dependent on the other. Merritt also reiterated that the ritual was for “members only”, private, not for anyone outside the group. This seems to be common; Satanists choose carefully which rituals to make public and often that kind of ritual will be performed in support of a specific cause in a carefully chosen venue. This has a lot to do with creating safe spaces and consent, the idea of which is mentioned by all the interviewees as essential.

As we have seen, many Satanists hail from a background of various oppressive degrees, be it in on a physical level, a mental level, in connection to laws, state or government, or otherwise. They have sought out Satanism to be free, free to display their identity, their beliefs, their ideology, and act on it. Freedom naturally entails the freedom to make your own choices, and this idea is heavily implemented in Satanic ritual. The ritual needs to feel safe and every participant needs to be there of their own free will and consent to every aspect of the ritual. In most of the group rituals shared with me, the participants were a small, tight-knit group with close ties to each other. This was the case during Mickeys’ ritual. The participants were all trans and connected in their Satanic philosophy even though they were not all part of GoS. Mickey explained how important that aspect was since they

²³⁹ Ibid; Interview #4 “Merritt”.

needed a safe space and understanding from the participants what they were experiencing as well as an understanding of why the ritual was necessary. Involving outsiders meant risk. As Mickey pointed out, in some communities and in some countries, you could get harassed, arrested, or even murdered for being gay, trans and/or a Satanist. The threat of unjust persecution is present in most of the testimonies I listen to, and safety is sought within the group. Dio told me its “jarring” knowing that people could come along and try to ruin it for them. Thus, they are very picky with circumstances for public rituals. “You know we... it doesn’t always please a lot of people.”²⁴⁰

When Lando designs a ritual, there is always a striving to achieve a ritual which gels with all the participants varying ideas of how to become their true and highest selves and doing that as a community.

The Satanic rituals that I do are all about consent, about positivity, about what *you* want to do. So, all my rituals start with asking the participants ‘do you want to be here, are you sure this is for you?’ often there will be a brief explanation of what the ritual will entail beforehand and it’s gaining that consent in saying yes, were going be doing this together and it’s a positive thing. No one is forced to and anyone can stop at any time.²⁴¹

Lando continued by explaining that the juxtaposition of what they as Satanists find shocking versus what other people find shocking is often something bonded over. They frequently feel very close to the people around them when sharing the experience of ritual together, especially when performing rituals like the blood-letting ritual described above, where Lando was the one to pour the

²⁴⁰ Interview #10 “Dio”.

²⁴¹ Interview #3 “Lando”.

tapped blood over their partner's head. Initiation rituals are also about fostering a sense of community and safeness. Lando says it's about promoting well-being amongst the group and when they do private rituals for communal bonding, they are very much attuned to people and the group setting. It is considerably less about shock and awe, like some of the more activistic rituals, and more introspective.²⁴²

In some cases (as that of Dana who work in the military) the ritual participants do not only depend on each other for a sense of community and safeness, they depend on each other for literal survival. In the ritual Dana described to me, the "squad leader" was the master of ceremony and the "squad medic" was his assistant. Since they travel together, work together, and share their Satanic practice, communal bonds become very strong. Dana explained when he is at home, he rarely feels the need to ritualize but if he does, he will perform a brief ritual in the honor of a fallen friend.²⁴³ Since my interview with Dana was carried out via e-mail, the details regarding his ritual activity are limited. But it shows an interesting variation on how communal ritual can differ.

Contemporary Satanism is a relatively small religion and if you do not live in a big city, the distance to other Satanists can sometimes be rather great. Shelley mentions this as she talks about how Satanists tend to be solitary. The wish and longing for communal bonding sometimes result in Satanists wanting to perform the same ritual as other Satanists in order to feel part of a group when you do not have access to said group. "There is an allure in feeling connected to a group through ritual [...] it is the group that puts value on the 'thing' you are all a part of" she said and compared with traditional rituals like receiving your diploma and grades at

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Interview #5 "Dana".

the end of a school year “the paper itself it not worth anything, it’s the group of people, the society, who validates the paper.”²⁴⁴

Distance is mentioned by other interviewees as well. Mitzie lives far from any of her Satanic friends and had to wait over a year before attending her first ritual, however, she said she still feels included despite the large distance. For her, ritual is first and foremost a social gathering but due to covid-19 the format of that social gathering had to change for a time. The ritual in support of Polish LGBTQI+ people described above consisted of many different constellations of Satanists, recording their own part of the ritual where they were located.

It just made us all look incredible, even though we weren’t together it was a video of all of us together and it was great. For me principally, our own private rituals would be creating that bond. I think we got the option because of technology and all that sort of thing. Even if we can’t all physically meet up for a ritual we can still all participate together, even though we may not be in the same room, and that to me is enough. Which is why I do not feel the need to ritualize on my own that much.²⁴⁵

Rosy said Satanism is rejecting the idea of being alone. Now she has a group to do things with (like ritual) rather than just being the outsider by herself. She, like several others of my interviewees, grew up in a religious setting. Being familiar with ritualizing as something normal and something which connects you to a group. When leaving that context and searching for a group of one’s own, Rosy, like many others, first found atheism before Satanism. She said that atheism seemed to be not just a rejection of beliefs but also a rejection of the group, whereas Satanism is the idea that you

²⁴⁴ Interview #9 “Shelley”.

²⁴⁵ Interview #1 “Mitzie”.

now have a group you are connected with and people within that group you can form meaningful relationships with.²⁴⁶ Along the same lines, Lando reminisced about their childhood where, growing up in a catholic community, ritual was very much something you *did* as a community. “I feel that there is a genuine benefit to humanity for taking part in a group ritual. In doing something collective as a society.”²⁴⁷ That collective ritual is also what they missed when leaving the Catholic context behind.

As I grew up and left that small town, moved into the world and became agnostic and then atheist and quickly discovered that atheism what not what I expected it to be when I was religious [...] and was expecting ‘right, how do we join the atheistic army and how do we, where is it all happening?’ and everyone was like ‘uhm, we don’t do anything’ you know, just sitting around being atheist. It’s like, okay, that’s not for me. [...] Atheism isn’t enough. [...] I truly believe in ritual, I still believe that humans have done this for as long as we’ve been humans because it serves some purpose for us, some positive purpose. So, I believe that taking part in collective activities focused around the similar or same goal does have a benefit to us. I found that atheism is lacking that sense of cohesion, you know, the idea of ritual and joining together as a group.²⁴⁸

Lando said Satanism takes the positive of religions’, the community, a feeling of self-empowerment and a feeling of support network and impose those positive traits in one another. Within a society of social creatures who naturally form bonds, religion and ritual is a given thing. Dio questioned what makes a religion, “is it ritual, or is it something... is it the community?”²⁴⁹ Dio argued that Satanism as a religion does not merely exist as a

²⁴⁶ Interview #6 “Rosy”.

²⁴⁷ Interview #3 “Lando”

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Interview #10 “Dio”

political tool, they are not *just* some political jokers or *just* a community of outsiders doing weird rituals, all of it combine to create a profound effect on people. They feel combines with the people they perform Satanic rituals with, fulfilling the things they stand for while doing it and joins them with the people they are doing it with.

We finish this chapter with some hard numbers by circling back to the internet. In a study conducted by James Lewis, a questionnaire was asked to be filled in by people fitting under the umbrella term “paganism”, including Satanists. As of 2010 the study had closer to 7000 respondents. In this study 39.6% and 31.6% of the Satanists claim to communicate *daily* with other Satanists via public and private internet respectively. This entails public message boards, blogs, private e-mails, and messages etc.²⁵⁰

One can only assume those numbers have risen, probably remarkably so, since the study was conducted - considering it was before the formation of both TST and GoS. Burt claims the online Satanic community is essential since they are geographically spread out. “Most of my Satanic friends are Americans.” There are several closed groups on Instagram moderated by GoS, a main group and subgroups for the local chapters. There are also Facebook groups dedicated to Satanic literature, so called Satanic “shit-posting” (using online forums to post satirical memes of poor, ‘trollish’ and sometimes aggressive nature to garner a reaction) and other topics under which Satanists come together. As described above, Facebook is usually the preferred organizational tool when preparing for upcoming events or gatherings as you can create pages to describe and schedule events. This has been done often by DSS when organizing their communal protests or gatherings. A larger study on this subject would preferably include a survey of online activity and

²⁵⁰ Lewis [Faxneld & Petersen ed.] 2013, pp. 157–159.

communication to map how significant the internet is in connection to the Satanic community and its coherency.

To theorize the Satanic community and ritual I have used Durkheim's theory on religion and society and Houseman's theory on ritual relationality. In Durkheim's definition of religion, he argues that religious beliefs are held by a cohesive group who are bound together through those shared beliefs and practice rituals together that go with those beliefs. In this case it would be rather more apt to call it philosophy or ideology than beliefs. The word belief has such strong connotations to faith - i.e., faith in the divine. This chapter has shown that all my interviewees pronounce the importance of community although to which degree varies. For some it's the foundation of their entire practice and for others the social network plays a smaller part. Houseman's theory on relationality explain ritual behavior as being the acting out of relationships and that the quality of the ritual derives from the relational configuration. One could say it also works the other way around, the effect of the ritual is a stronger relational configuration as contemporary Satanic ritual acts as a vehicle to enforce relationships founded on a communal philosophy, i.e the *before* roles of celebrant/initiant/participants, *after* becomes a cohesive group.

In my theory chapter I quoted Jon P. Bloch saying, "current society often is characterized by a paradoxical strain between the need for self-autonomy and solidarity ties with others based on shared normative expectation."²⁵¹ This chapter has shown that ritual, the self and community seem to exist in a natural symbiosis within Contemporary Satanism. One does not seem to take precedence over another, but the self finds support within the community and the community is made stronger by unique

²⁵¹ Bloch 1998, p. 7.

individuals, the ties between the self and the community are built upon through ritual. The latter is often a personal affair grounded in a feeling of safeness within the group, and consent. In a sense, the devotion to oneself is a devotion to the community and vice versa. This relates to Durkheim's theories of the worship of the totem in Australian Aboriginal religion; it is in fact a worship of the society itself. The rituals are the core of the clan's life together whose purpose is to promote the clan and create inclusivity. The circle, the symbiosis, between the individual and the community in which the individual receives the best part of themselves; an identity, intellectual and moral culture and principles, and the community itself which only exist through individuals.²⁵² As implied in my theoretical chapter. The nature of Durkheim's theory is general, it identifies general characteristics of religion and thus work best as used in this thesis - as a complement or rather a building block in the theorizing of ritual, which is why I have chosen to implement the ideas of Houseman in pursuance of a well-rounded and more up to date analysis of the social functionality of ritual.

Curtain Call: a Definitional Attempt on Contemporary Satanic Ritual

This study has been an attempt to answer the question "What is contemporary Satanic ritual?" I have, throughout my interviews, deduced that it is possible to categorize the practice of Contemporary Satanic ritual into four areas: activism, identity, community, and play - as these were the reoccurring ritual building-blocks mentioned in my interviews. Each area has been supported by a theoretical framework grounding them in social science and religious studies. To reiterate, the sub-questions used to reach the aim of this study pertained to 1) The difference between the popular culture version of Satanic ritual and actual contemporary Satanic ritual. 2) Whether the contemporary

²⁵² Pals 2022, p. 96–101.

Satanic ritual is a Black Mass 3) What the purpose of contemporary Satanic ritual is and why there is a need for it? 4) What a contemporary Satanic ritual looks like? 5) What symbolism is used? 6) What creative choices are made? 7) If there are any rules? 8) Who can participate and what it means to the practitioner? 9) How has the Satanic ritual evolved into what it is today? And 10) How does one theorize Contemporary Satanism?

In pursuing an answer to the first and last of the sub-questions I have detailed the history of Satanic ritual through an extensive background chapter. Theory permeates this entire thesis, to clarify question no. 10 I have placed my theoretical chapters within the study and not before. The remaining questions are answered throughout the main chapters of this study. Act I cover contemporary ritual and activism. The latter is firmly grounded as fundamental within Contemporary Satanism and usually manifests through ritual, as all my interviewee's attest. I have shown how contemporary Satanists use ritual to protest injustice and oppression, be it abortion laws, blood bans or imbalanced rights to be heard in the public environment. Contemporary Satanists perform public and private ritual to unite in the resistance against injustice and the status quo as per the Lincolnian theory of religions of resistance. Most of my interviewees seem to agree there is a right time and space for activist Satanic ritual. There are situations where discretion needs to be practiced as the ritual could cause more harm than help, as in the example with abortion laws in the US. In this chapter, I tried to pin down the Black Mass and find an answer to whether the contemporary Satanic ritual could be called a Black Mass, and if so, what that would entail. My interviewees describe the Black Mass as something outdated, a term connected to the ritual which Christians have used to demonize the other. Within the Christian narrative, Satanists perform the Black Mass as an inverted Christian mass, desecrating the Christian sacred host and other

liturgical symbols. This is a narrative which was adopted in the Black Masses performed by Anton LaVey and the CoS in the 60's. Today, the term "Black Mass" is seldom used and should not be considered a catch all term for contemporary Satanic ritual. Some of my interviewees argue that the term could be useful in certain contexts to grab attention and steer it towards the issue they wish to highlight, which was the case with the Black Mass for Poland. Most (although not all) of my interviewees seem to agree that the purpose is not to invert or mock the catholic mass, nor to specifically target Christian people. But rather to invert the stereotypical ideas regarding Satanism and use the underdog position of Satanism to highlight injustice and make positive change.

Act II describes contemporary Satanic ritual in its connection to play and creativity grounded in the ludic theory by Johan Huizinga. Huizinga's works derives from the notion that there is a fluid dichotomy between seriousness and play, a fundamental symbiosis as play, imagination and freedom being the fundament of human civilization. As demonstrated, this is also true in regard to contemporary Satanic ritual. Throughout the chapter I give examples of the highly individual variations of ritual and how participants use props and symbols to their liking in designing a ritual meaningful to them. There is a marked disregard for rules or order. Rather, the ritual design seems to cater to each person's individual whims, wants, lusts, feelings, and tastes. I have shown that contemporary Satanic ritual can be grounded by Huizinga's theory as it meets the criteria of freedom, it does not hail from necessity, biological need, or moral duty – and can be suspended at any time. It is separated from the world of coercion, is characterized by *disinterest*, and the ritual play adorns life – it does not make life possible and stands apart from vital needs. As several of my interviewees kept repeating, part of performing ritual is because it's "fun". It's something they "enjoy" and even

do because it “looks cool”.²⁵³ Thirdly, Huizinga defines play as *separated* from ordinary life, it exists in its own temporary sphere of time and space. Most of my interviewees iterated how the use of props and tools during a ritual puts them in a certain headspace, a mental state of awareness or focus. In some rituals symbols will be used to demarcate a separate space, like a pentagram on the floor or the fact that the ritual takes place behind closed doors. Huizinga also argues that play *is* order, creating its own order within its own sphere. Within contemporary Satanic ritual, what order or rules to follow is up to each individual. No participant is ever bound to a ritual and can leave at will. There are no set rules or praxis to follow, ritual is an opportunity for creativeness.

Act III explores contemporary Satanic ritual in connection to the self as grounded in the idea of the left-hand path, which focuses on the individual and their spiritual development, and Heelas & Woodhead’s theory of the *subjective turn* and the *spiritual revolution*. Heelas describes religion of the self as recognizing what is wrong with the world, a vision of the goal of perfection and a set of methods to achieve it.²⁵⁴ He talks about the utilitarian individualist who satisfies their own interests first, and use their own ability to reason, their own power and will in order to gain the most out of life. The self is separate and prioritized.²⁵⁵ This is very much the idea my interviewees testify. Ritual is used to strengthen the self and to strengthen identity. As described above ritual can be used as an unbaptism to clear oneself from earlier forced entrance into an unwanted religion, to rid oneself of an imposed identity one does not conform with or to practice self-care and find focus. The support of the self can be practiced in both solo and group rituals and is done so to varying degrees. One of my interviewees says she exclusively practices solo rituals while

²⁵³ Interview #1 “Mitzie”, Interview #9 “Shelley”, Interview #7 “Mickey”.

²⁵⁴ Heelas 1996, pp. 18–20.

²⁵⁵ Ibid pp. 160–168.

others argue there is no point in practicing solo ritual since the support of the group is what's important. The self constitutes a fundamental cornerstone and point of ideological and philosophical departure in the religion Contemporary Satanism, the GoS pillar no. 1 states that self-fulfillment and personal understanding allow us to support ourselves and therefore others, which again, points to the co-dependent relationship between the self and the community regarding ritual, something I explore in Act IV.

Act IV is grounded in Èmile Durkheim's definition of religion as a collective who are bound together through beliefs and practice the rituals that go with them; they share a common conception of the sacred and its relation to the profane world – and Michael Houseman's theory on ritual relationality. When Durkheim relates his theory to ritual, he concludes that the worship of the totem in Australian Aboriginal religion is in fact a worship of the society itself. The rituals are the core of the clan's life together whose purpose is to promote the clan and create inclusivity. The bond, or the circle as Durkheim describes ritual, is what is experienced as most important. The circle between the individual and the society where the individual receives the best part of themselves from the society; a distinct character, intellectual and moral culture, and the society itself which only exists through individuals.²⁵⁶ This is how I perceive the relationship between the self and the community within Contemporary Satanism to work. The community and relationships formed within the group is described by many of my interviewees as the most important aspect of their involvement in Satanism. The sense of shared otherness and solidarity, shared values and a support system which is promoted through ritual are all key elements. Rituals which focus on the communal bond could include affirmation

²⁵⁶ Pals 2022, p. 96–101.

work shared with and responded to by the group. It can include initiation rituals where the new members are received through a shared experience of creativity, or identity work and exploration of the internal relationship with oneself supported by peers struggling with similar issues. It always includes consent and a feeling of being safe within the group.

A few of my interviewees mentions privilege. I would like to devote a brief concluding section to discussing this, as it bears importance in how to interpret the results of this study. The group which I have interviewed could be considered fairly privileged, highly privileged even. They are all white, middle-class, some highly educated, living in developed western countries and most relevant – they all openly claim to be Satanists. One of the first things I considered when deciding upon a thesis topic was who had the privilege to call themselves a Satanist? And could a study like this be representative considering it's only the privileged voices I hear? There is nothing to say that people who regard themselves as Satanists, who practice contemporary Satanic ritual may not exist in many other countries but due to oppressive laws they cannot openly talk about their religion, leading to the result of this study being decided by the privileged, as it is impossible to take into account unprivileged Satanists. I discussed this with Rosy who argues the fact that in most communities in Western countries it is relatively “safe” to reject, for example, a Catholic religion and become a Satanist. But for others there may be issues concerning intersectionality or persecution. Someone leaving a Mormon religion or Jehovah Witnesses might be shunned for the rest of their life. Considering this issue through an intersectional lens, a person experiencing oppression because of the color of their skin might not want to openly declare belonging to a heavily stigmatized religion which would add an extra layer of oppression and persecution.

Rosy talks about the privilege of being an “out-Satanist” which is the point I want to make. It is something highly dependent on your circumstances, where you live, identity, age, race, class, and ability. Mickey ponders this issue as well, informing me that some participants in public rituals choose to wear masks to hide their identity and avoid possible backlash from their community or family. “But for me I find it fun, I like the fact that I can actively engage in a space that’s persecuted. I can be... because in certain places in the world if I was a Satanist, if I was a queer person, I could get literally murdered for it.”²⁵⁷ For Mickey, there seems to be a wish to challenge the stigma on a different level than say, the level on which an inversion of ideas would be. However, Mickey is fortunate to have the privilege to do so. I see an issue in not reaching unprivileged voices and a more extensive study could explore what options could be used to succeed in this. Anonymous questionnaires or encrypted and anonymous message boards could be possible solutions. But perhaps a start would be to begin a process of destigmatizing Contemporary Satanism in order to create a broader general understanding of the religion and thus open the space for non out-Satanists to come forth. Hopefully this study contributes to that.

Although I did arrive at a series of tentative conclusions with this study, I would like to point out that the results are foremost an attempt. The nature of Contemporary Satanism is much too individual, and my interviews were much too few to arrive at a definitive definition, if such a thing is even possible. I have studied only a part of the contemporary Satanic scope. Further studies should include members of TST. This group is, according to themselves, the largest and primary Satanic organization, and many members of GoS started out in TST.²⁵⁸ Lately, newer contemporary Satanic organizations like the Luciferian dominion

²⁵⁷ Interview #7 “Mickey”.

²⁵⁸ “The Satanic Temple vs Church of Satan”

have been established and naturally their involvement would be necessary. To receive a proper sense of what goes on at these rituals, to understand the “headspace” described by so many of my interviewees, it would be necessary to conduct extensive field studies. This was something I hoped to be able to do during my research but due to covid-19 this was not possible. I was also hoping to spend a larger portion of this study conducting netnology. However, as my existing material proved to be larger than expected and relatively time consuming to transcribe and analyze, I have not been able to research social media to the extent I had wished. This would assuredly be something to implement in a larger study. As shown above, contemporary Satanists are highly active online and websites like Facebook contain a pool of material to be analyzed (with the authors consent naturally) regarding views on the self and community, moral principles, ritual design, and purpose as well as a large variation of other discussion topics.

I have named this study “Celebrations in Dark Guise” because this is what I perceive contemporary Satanic ritual to be. They are celebrations of the self and celebrations of the Satanic community. Moreover, even protests are celebrations of the values and principles Satanic adherents wish to see in society. Developing the Lincolnian theory I have characterized Contemporary Satanism with a *positive* feature as contemporary Satanic ritual does not, as has been the stigma for so long, exist merely in opposition to Christianity or the status quo. Contemporary Satanic ritual operates with its own agenda of positive change in self and community.

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Interview #4 "Merritt"

Interview #5 "Dana"

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The Seventh Victim (dir. Mark Robson, 1943)
To the Devil, A Daughter (dir. Peter Sykes, 1976)
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The Wicker man (dir. Robin Hardy, 1973)
The Witches of Eastwick (dir. George Miller, 1987),

Appendix A – Interview Questions

- Could you describe your personal Satanic philosophy?
- What is Satanic ritual?
- Could you, in as much detail as possible, describe a Satanic ritual that you have participated in?
- Do you think that Satanic ritual can have an impact on societal and political issues? Is there such an agenda?
- If you compare contemporary Satanic ritual with the historical, stereotypical ritual referred to as “hammerhorror” ritual, what are the similarities and/or differences?
- What is the purpose of ritual objects and symbols?
- How do you feel about the concept “Black Mass”? Could any Satanic ritual be called a Black Mass?
- Do you perform solo rituals? If so, how, and why?
- How important is ritual to you personally and as part of your religion?
- How would you label your Satanism?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?