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The Agency of Affectivity in Ritual Abuse Moral Panic¹

ABSTRACT: This paper aims to contribute to the analysis of ritual abuse moral panic through the development of insights on the role of affectivity in triggering anti-Satanist fantasies and consequently leading to social control practices. The proposed argument intends to demonstrate that in addition to the social sciences' dominant explanation about the crucial role of the interest groups in stirring the early modern Europe witch craze and late 20th century ritual abuse scare, the emergence and maintenance of satanic panic should be also perceived within the perspective of the subject's libidinal dynamics.

KEYWORDS: Affect • ritual abuse • moral panic • anamorphosis

Ritual abuse scare

In the early 1980s in the U.S. media began to disseminate information about cases of ritual murder, allegedly committed here and now on children and adults by secret organizations named by journalists as “satanic”². Descriptions of satanic practices in the press, in the confessions of people presenting themselves as “survivors” of ritual crime as well as in literature produced by the organizations specializing in alarming about “satanic conspiracy” comprised graphic scenes of cruel and perverted behaviors (e.g. acts of cannibalism, vampirism, mutilation, bloody sacrifices of infants and children, forced abortion, burying victims alive, incarceration in cages and isolated rooms, *etc.*). According to these allegations, deviant acts have always been practiced in venues featuring “satanic” symbols and the perpetrators were clothed in cultic hooded robes. Anti-cult experts argued that almost two million ritual gangsters penetrated various social spheres in the United States, and each year cultic gangsters ritually murdered about 150 thousand

¹ It is acknowledged that the crucial insights of this article have been formulated during the Research Council of Norway funded scholarship at the University of Bergen (2010–2011).

² J. La Fontaine, *Speak of the Devil*, Cambridge 1998; J. Victor, *Satanic Panic: The Creation of Contemporary Legend*, Chicago 1993.

victims, mainly children³. The worshipers of Satan were to belong to eight thousands different groups and churches at the local, state, nationwide and international levels⁴.

The members of these organizations allegedly represented all social classes and professional categories (e.g. Satanists were to be found in the ranks of senior police officers, which made understandable – in the opinion of “believers” – why it was so complicated to establish evidence of the existence of satanic crimes)⁵.

Although the alarm about the satanic conspiracy was based on no material evidence of a crime (no corpses of alleged victims, pornographic materials, tools, ritual, adult witnesses etc.), the conviction of the lurking danger threatening especially children spread among significant segments of American society: a nationwide survey conducted by Redbook Magazine in the mid-1980s showed that 70 percent of Americans believe that at least some people claiming to be victims of satanic ritual abuse are telling the truth⁶. Alarm about the threat emerging from a subversive community triggered panic behavior, which however was not unfolding according to pattern of collective hysteria – panic was quickly institutionalized itself and agents of social control took formal measures in order to “do something about” the “criminal Satanists”. In the United States during 1983–1990 the police and prosecutors were investigating more than one hundred child day-care centers in order to find evidence of ritual abuse⁷. As a result, nearly two hundred people were arrested and tried⁸. The most famous cases of satanic abuses were “discovered” in Bakersfield (California), Manhattan Beach (California), Jordan (Minnesota), Edenton (North Carolina), Wenatchee (Washington), San Diego (California)⁹. Alongside the “satanic crimes” committed against children in day-care centers, allegations about ritual abuse were also voiced by adults who were recovering from memories of satanic abuse that they

³ J. Johnston, *The Edge of Evil: The Rise of Satanism in North America*. Dallas 1989.

⁴ L. Blood, *The New Satanists*, New York 1994.

⁵ J. Coleman, *Satanic Cult Practices*, [in:] V. Sinason (ed.) *Treating Survivors of Satanist Abuse*, London 1994.

⁶ J. Victor, 1993, *op.cit.*; J. Victor, *Moral Panics and the Social Construction of Deviant Behavior: A Theory and Application to the Case of Ritual Child Abuse*, “Sociological Perspectives”, 41 (3), pp. 541–565, 1998.

⁷ D. Nathan, M. Snedeker, *Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of the Modern Witch Hunt*, New York 1995.

⁸ M. De Young, *The Day Care Ritual Abuse Moral Panic*, Jefferson 2004.

⁹ *Ibidem*; P. Jenkins, *Moral Panics: Changing Concept of the Child Molestor in Modern America*, New Haven 1998.

experienced in childhood¹⁰. “Survivors of Satanic crime” pointed the finger at family members, school staff, representatives of various public and private enterprises. Despite the lack of tangible evidence to support these allegations, in the 1980s more than fifty employees were sentenced to many years in prison on ritual abuse charges¹¹.

Similar (though with significant structural differences) cases of satanic panic occurred in the UK¹². In the early 1990s anti-satanic formation emerged in whose “ranks” were present Christian fundamentalists, feminists, social workers, anti-porn campaign activist, *etc.*, who aimed at the criminalization of the social problem defined as ritual abuse¹³. The scope of British satanic panic was less significant than its arch-model in the US, nevertheless anti-Satanist campaigners managed to frame a social problem that eventually led to several interventions of social workers who took into custody children from the families suspected of being involved in criminal cultic activities¹⁴. As the panic grew nearly a hundred “endangered children” were “saved” by social workers¹⁵.

Existing interpretations

Satanic scare gained certain attention of scholarly literature, particularly social scientists produced a significant volume of scholarship on it. These occurrences have been explained within the framework of the concept of moral panic¹⁶, urban legend¹⁷, subversive myth¹⁸, dominant imagery of children in the contemporary social control practices¹⁹, interest groups of

¹⁰ R. Ofshe, *Inadvertent Hypnosis Turing Interrogation: False Confession Due to Dissociative State; Misidentified Multiple Personality and the Satanic Cult Hypothesis*, “The International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis”, Vol. XL, 3, p. 125–156, 1992.

¹¹ T. Charlier, S. Downing, *Justice Abused: A 1980s Witch Hunt*, “Memphis Commercial Appeal”, January 17–22, 1988. M. De Young, 2004, *op.cit.*

¹² J. La Fontaine, 1998, *op. cit.*

¹³ P. Jenkins, *Intimate Enemies. Moral Panics in Great Britain*, Hawthorne 1992, pp. 175–176.

¹⁴ I. MacKinnon, *Sister in Ritual Sex Trial Lied Over Names*, “The Independent”, 19 November, 1991; R. Waterhouse, *Satanic Cults: How Hysteria Swept Britain*, “The Independent”, 16 September, 1990.

¹⁵ P. Jenkins, 1992, *op.cit.*, p.177.

¹⁶ M. De Young, 2004, *op. cit.*; J. Victor, 1998, *op. cit.*; P. Jenkins, 1992, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ B. Ellis, *Raising the Devil: Satanism, New Religions, and the Media*, Lexington 2000.

¹⁸ D. Bromley, *Satanism: „The New Cult Scare”*, [in:] D. Bromley, J. Best, J. Richardson (eds.) *The Satanism Scare*, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ J. Best, *Threatened Children: Rhetoric and Concern about Child Victims*, Chicago 1990.

fundamentalist and therapeutic industry²⁰, hegemonic logic of aligning dispersed fears of the public²¹. This paper focuses on the anthropological current of this scholarship as elaborated by Jean La Fontaine²² who asserted that twentieth century satanic panic symbolic content revealed some fundamental structural similarities with the traditional witch-hunt myth. In light of La Fontaine's research, who using cross-cultural and trans-temporal methods of social anthropology, in which the past is treated as "another country" and a "different culture" combined historical data on the 1500s and 1600s witch hunts with her archive collected during studies on satanic panic in the UK in the mid 1990s commissioned by the Department of Health. La Fontaine accumulated compelling arguments demonstrating that the rumors of satanic crimes emerging at the end of the twentieth century should be perceived as a direct historical reproduction of the basic narrative structures of the Sabbath theme, especially consistent with a narrative which developed during the witch trials in early modern Europe. According to La Fontaine, witches were persecuted because they earned the label of "devil worshipers" of their time²³. Analyzing the structural continuity of the symbol of "demonic evil", linking different historical periods, she noticed that the figure of the Satanist exceeds the boundaries of humanity: Satanists and witches conspire against the society and moral order, and the main victim of their terror is a symbol of humanity's reproduction, that is, children. Satanists are the very opposite of humans – they violate the natural order that is founded on the categorical differentiation between what can be eaten, and what cannot be eaten (human flesh), and engage in sexual intercourse with unnatural partners (animals, demons)²⁴.

Another element that links the witch hunt craze and satanic panic is the lack of evidence that would corroborate the atrocities attributed to this sinister activity, or to put it differently: there is no ground beyond subversive text that slides backward to the point where history flows into the abyss of myth²⁵. The

²⁰ P. Jenkins, D. Maier-Katkin, *Satanism: Myth and Reality in Contemporary Moral Panic*, [in:] *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 17, pp. 53–75, 1992; S. Mulhern, *Satanism and Psychotherapy: A Rumor in Search of an Inquisition*, [in:] D. Bromley, J. Richardson, J. Best. (eds.), *The Satanism Scare*, op.cit.

²¹ R. Smoczynski, *The Hegemonic Practices in Ritual Abuse Scare*, [in:] I. Borowik, M. Zawila, M. (eds.) *Religions and Identities in Transition*, Kraków 2010, pp. 198–213.

²² J. La Fontaine, 1998, op. cit.; *idem*, *Concepts of Evil, Witchcraft and the Sexual Abuse of Children in Modern England*, "Etnofoor", 1/2: 6–20, 1992.

²³ *Idem*, 1998, op. cit., pp. 31–32.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 85–86.

²⁵ G. Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate: Basque Witchcraft and the Spanish Inquisition 1609–1614*, Reno 1980; N. Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, St. Albans 1976; D. Frankfurter,

twentieth-century narrative of the subversive anti-human cabal is a modified version of the 16th century equivalent of the anti-subversive myth, which in turn was a reworked version of the fantasy distributed during the trials of the Knights Templar in the fourteenth century. This structure, however, was also just a “clone text” drafted earlier by the hunters of the Orleans heretics in the eleventh century, and this text was a slightly revised copy of the atrocity tale from the persecutions of the Fratticeli community, which obtained its symbolic substance from the anti-Waldensian craze, whose “inhuman” image was in turn a modified version of a text about Christian practices of infanticide that was distributed by the Romans, the same fantasy with minor adjustments repeated the narrative used by Alexandrians during the hunt against the Jews a hundred years earlier²⁶. The structure of the imagery based on an inversion of the basic cherished symbols of the human community featuring, among others, symbols of infanticide, sexual orgies, cannibalism – as shown by Cohn²⁷ was widespread in the ancient Mediterranean world, and at a time of social tension, anti-subversive stereotype was activated and it was used as one of the means of reaffirmation of the dominant collective identities.

Historical and sociological literature emphasizes the role of interest groups that were crucial in triggering panic occurrences in the 16th and 17th centuries; witch craze could have not emerged without clergy experts²⁸, similarly, the emergence of satanic panic is unconceivable without the predominant expert institutions of the psychotherapeutic industry supported by fundamentalist centers distributing “anti-satanic knowledge”. Articulations of American and British “survivors” bear a striking similarity in the distribution of key themes, (e.g. sacrificing infants, forced pregnancies, multigenerational satanic families, devil worshipers’ relationship with the world of politics, culture and finance). This similarity is a result of the key role of experts in the process of crafting and maintenance of Satanic panic narrative, which was usually a result of the cooperation between the “survivor” and the expert²⁹.

Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History, Princeton 2006.

²⁶ N. Cohn, 1976, *op. cit.*

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. ix–x.

²⁸ H. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Harmondsworth 1990.

²⁹ J. La Fontaine, 1998, *op. cit.*, pp. 154–155; J. Victor, 1993, *op. cit.*, p. 93–94; P. Jenkins, D. Maier-Katkin, 1991, *op. cit.*; S. Mulhern, 1991, *op. cit.*

Affective agency

Far from denying the significance of the above mentioned interpretations of satanic panic I intend to shed some light from a different angle on the genealogy of the contemporary witch hunt. In line with the framework of psychoanalysis as applied to social sciences I seek to demonstrate the importance of interpretative framework that grants privilege to the agency of affectivity that, as I try to argue, has contributed to the surge of anti-satanic fantasies. In doing so, I am less interested in the recent elaborations which Clough³⁰ called the “affective turn” in the humanities and social sciences that, for example, explore the relationship between technology, digitization and the body, as demonstrated by Hansen³¹, or examine the expansion of bio-politics as articulated by Michel Foucault and his followers who demonstrate that once control over the individual body is seized, there is an advent of new power that targets the whole population. Instead, I narrow myself to the Lacanian analytical perspective and draw on literature that shows the relevance of the libidinal category of *objet petit à* in explaining the working of fantasies in the public square and their impact on social outcomes, as for example in Fotaki’s³² paper providing a comprehensive exploration of the British health system policy underpinned by *objet petit à*, or in Stavrakakis³³ critique of nationalism, where he argues “that attachment to the nation cannot be reduced to rational self interested motivations, economic conditions, and institutional dynamics”, but it also involves affective factors. Importantly, Stavrakakis, in line with recent theoretical scholarship of Ernesto Laclau³⁴, asserts that identification processes cannot be reduced only to linguistic performativity:

No matter how much a national identification is deconstructed there is still something that resists and this is why shifting such attachments is so difficult. Above all else, the ecumenical appeal of discourses like nationalism rests on their ability to mobilize human desire for identity and to promise an encounter with our lost/ sacrificed (national) enjoyment³⁵.

³⁰ P. Clough, *The Affective Turn. Political Economy, Biomedica and Bodies*, “Theory, Culture and Society”, 25 (1), pp. 1–22, 2008.

³¹ M. Hansen, *Embodying Technesis: Technology Beyond Writing*. Ann Arbor 2000; M. Hansen, *The Time of Affect, or Bearing Witness to Life*, “Critical Inquiry” 30, pp. 584–626, 2004.

³² M. Fotaki, *Why Do Public Policies Fail So Often? Exploring Health Policy-Making as an Imaginary and Symbolic Construction*, “Organization”, 17 (6), pp. 703–720, 2010.

³³ Y. Stavrakakis, *Discourse, Affect, Jouissance: Psychoanalysis, Political Theory, and Artistic Practices*, “Paper in Arts and Desire Seminars”, Istanbul, June, 2010.

³⁴ E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London 2005.

³⁵ Y. Stavrakakis, *op. cit.*, 2010.

This is precisely the agency of lost enjoyment (Lacan called it *das Ding*) which requires our attention in order to grasp the affective dynamics that drove the 20th-century satanic panic as well as maintained the reproduction of the historical fantasy of sinister community conspiring against humanity. I will argue that affectivity not only contributes to mobilizing well defined collective identities as analyzed by Stavrakakis, but it might explain the emergence of more volatile collective structures, as the formation of British and American proponents of moral panic involved various dispersed subjects (e.g. Christian fundamentalists, the psychotherapeutic industry, social workers.) Witch craze in early modern Europe or in late modern America reveals circular logic of fantasies underpinned by the libidinal drive that is characterized by the suspension and self-dispersal, and as in the anti-Semitic fantasy described by Žižek³⁶ the libidinal satisfaction of anti-Satanist fantasy is focused not so much on the object of the hunt as on hunting itself.

I wrote extensively elsewhere³⁷ about the libidinal agency that through triggering fantasies provides orientation for the subject within the inter-subjective network. Here it is sufficient to summarize some of the fundamental aspects of affective dynamics that organizes a coherent picture of the symbolic order. The Lacanian description of the emerging subjectivity and symbolic order is marked by the intervention of the signifier (known also as the Intervention of the Name of Father), which separates the imaginary unification of the subject with the unmediated reality of the infant and mother³⁸. This exclusion – as Žižek³⁹ asserts – constitutes both failed subjectivity and an “empty space” of the symbolic, where the constant hegemonic struggle is carried out that aims at filling in the particular signifiers with the elusive universal meanings⁴⁰.

I am drawing below on my earlier articulations⁴¹: *Das Ding* enters the scene exactly within the context of this irreducible separation: the remnant of the lost primordial enjoyment of the undivided mother-infant dyad governs the relation between the failed subjectivity and the barred order of the

³⁶ S. Žižek, *Enjoy your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, New York 1992.

³⁷ R. Smoczynski, *Lacan and Merleau-Ponty: Affective Intentionality*, [in:] A. Gleonec, T. Hammer, K. Novotny, P. Specian (eds) *Thinking in Dialogue with Humanities. Paths into the Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, Bucharest 2011a, pp. 154–167; R. Smoczynski, *Naming and Affect. The Ontological Function of Ideology in the School of Essex's Discourse Theory*, [in:] “Educação e Filosofia”, 25/50: 655–674, 2011b.

³⁸ J. Lacan, *The Psychoses*. New York 1993, p. 96.

³⁹ S. Žižek, *Holding the Place*, [in:] J. Butler, E. Laclau, S. Žižek (eds), *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, London 2000, p. 257.

⁴⁰ See also E. Laclau, C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London 1985.

⁴¹ R. Smoczynski, *op. cit.* 2011a; R. Smoczynski, *op. cit.* 2011b.

symbolic⁴². Importantly, Lacan shows that the agency of *das Ding* is related to the affective economy of the subject who is immersed in the corporeal modus of existence. *Das Ding*, by generating fantasies acts as a crucial factor that provides the ontological consistency of the relationship between the subject and the symbolic order. These are thus the bodily skills that links the subject and the symbolic order through the logic of sublimation: *das Ding* as Laclau showed causes investment in partial objects, that is, in empty signifiers, or in other words, *das Ding* organizes an affective frame that provides libidinal support for the order of contingent signifiers which are capable of temporarily embodying the desired fullness of the lost primordial undivided object prior to the emergence of historicity⁴³. In this investing mechanism we see libidinal perspective of longing for the lost wholeness that supplements contingent objects with the excessive entity called by Lacan *objet petit à* that in the perspective of fantasy reconstructs the shape of partial objects, namely, the partial objects are elevated to the position of an imaginary *Das Ding*⁴⁴.

Here we face a different name of anamorphosis, which overlaps with sublimation logic: objects by themselves are deprived the literality of meaning, they receive various meaningful shapes within the libidinal interactions embedded in the corporal modus of being in the world. Thus satanic scare, through the lens of sublimation, might be analyzed not only as the result of struggle for hegemony when particular demands raised by the moral panic proponents assumed position of hegemonic universality, but we also see here the anamorphosis logic when signifiers were rearticulated into phantasmatic ideologies that assumed the metaphorical shapes which concealed their contingent origins. This operation was neatly put by Kaplan⁴⁵: “Empty signifiers are fetishes that derive their efficacy from collective belief in their reality and that consequently confront the believers as apparently objective and independent powers”.

As Žižek and Stavrakakis argued *objet petit à* as a leftover of the pre-symbolic undifferentiated reality serves as a “shortcut” between the subject and the symbolic order, which conceals their ontological inconsistencies and through the movement of sliding fantasy provides the subject with the sense of reality perceived as a coherent whole⁴⁶. What is important, fantasy

⁴² J. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, London 2008, p. 70; see also Y. Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, London 1999, pp. 31–32.

⁴³ E. Laclau, *op. cit.* 2005, pp. 114–115; see also R. Smoczyński, *op. cit.* 2011a

⁴⁴ See E. Laclau, *op. cit.* 2005, pp. 117–120.

⁴⁵ M. Kaplan, *The Rhetoric of Hegemony: Laclau, Radical Democracy, and the Rule of Tropes*, “Philosophy and Rhetoric”, 43(3): 253–283, 2010.

⁴⁶ Y. Stavrakakis, *op. cit.* 1999, p. 47; S. Žižek, *Da Capo Senza Fine*, [in:] J. Butler, E. Laclau, S. Žižek (eds.), *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, London 2000a.

in the Lacanian tradition, does not necessarily take the form of an idyllic narrative⁴⁷, which clearly demonstrated the Gothic symbolism of satanic panic. Phantasm is primarily to justify the libidinal needs of the failed subjectivity, the literal content of fantasy is inherently contingent, it is just about to fill in the empty space left by the lost object. Fink⁴⁸ points out that fantasy operates as a mechanism aiming at the restitution of the unmediated reality that is structured as *jouissance*. Analyzing clinical cases, including the paradigmatic case of the Freudian Human Rat, Fink indicated that *jouissance* is obtained through acts of imagination, in which contradictory experiences are interwoven, exactly the way ritual scare, and more broadly speaking, Sabbath mythology exposed: pleasure and pain, sexuality and violence. What is crucial, all fantasies are always interpreted retroactively, their meaning (moral, aesthetic, *etc.*) is of negligible importance for the corporeal justification of the subject possessed by them. Whatever their meaning, evaluated positively or negatively, conscious or unconscious, phantasm lifts the subject above its lack, it temporarily restores its undistorted mode of being⁴⁹.

We have arrived at a point where libidinal transformation of partial objects into anamorphic shapes gains special relevance for an understanding of social dynamics of ritual scare. It is visible either while examining systematic social control practices exercised during the 1980s and 1990s in the US and Britain or during volatile panic occurrences. We will start with the former example.

Nonexistent society

While analyzing the discourse of the anti-Satanist formation it is possible to delimit the core of its ideology comprising the ideal of society that is not threatened by the Satanist. This ideal of society not hindered by the “cultic enemy-within” is particularly linked to articulations produced by the Protestant branch of the anti-Satanist formation, it was clearly a phantasmatic object of a “non-existing society”⁵⁰ that has achieved a spectral substantiality of *objet petit à* confronted with the material visibility of the demonic perpetrator. Thus, anti-satanic ideological projects functioned only as the implementation of various strategies inscribing phantasmatic occurrences into tangible social control practices. The empty signifier “com-

⁴⁷ See also R. Boothby, *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology after Lacan*, London 2001.

⁴⁸ B. Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, Princeton 1995, p. 60.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 60–61.

⁵⁰ I am referring here to Žižek’s example on general Jaruzelski’s communist regime of 1980s. S. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London 1999, p. 178.

munity free of satanic threat” has been invested with the ability to dominate the field of significance only in the reciprocal relation with a series of signifiers representing demonic antagonism that hindered society in its effort to constitute itself. I demonstrated elsewhere⁵¹ the operation of the Christian Right that was deploying discursive strategies explaining why the Christian nation cannot be fully constituted due to internal enemies blocking the advent of “family values society”; similarly, the collective identity of the anti-satanist formation was determined by its constant confrontation with the hidden Satanic conspiracy. This demonic negativity was gaining symbolic density in the numerous mythologies disseminated in the press and in the form of anti-Satanist testimonies (e.g. the underground world was classified into groups, subgroups, grottos, various satanic specializations in corrupting children were depicted, anti-Satanists explained the meaning of deviant sexual practices and the metaphysics of occult murder etc)⁵². Moral panic proponents have identified the physical signs of Satanic invasion left in the bodily attitudes of victims, Bromley⁵³ called subversive stigmata borrowed the medicalized terminology of social control from anti-cult campaigns: the ritual abuse victims – according to this positivization of negativity – bore the stigmata of changes in the tone of voice, they had a “glued smile”, “glass eye”, pale skin, and children seemed to show interest in the death of parents, spoke of the devil, etc.⁵⁴.

Consequently, the heterogeneous anti-satanic formation that was articulated along the lines of empty signifiers (e.g. “safety of children”), does not allow to isolate a fixed conceptual content that would be shared by all the participants of this formation⁵⁵. The same inability to establish a stable semantic content of what a society free of satanic menace would mean, also applies to a narrower category of moral panic participants – Christian fundamentalists. According to the fundamentalist ideology which arguably acted as a core moral panic expertise “society free of satanic menace” could be translated into a tautological phrase: “society where we can carry on our

⁵¹ R. Smoczynski, *Strategies of the Polish Christian Right. Identification, Imitation and Conflict*, [in:] J. Juhant, B. Zalec (eds), *Humanity after Selfish Prometheus. Chances of Dialogue and Ethics in a Technicized World*, Berlin-Munster-Zurich 2011c, pp. 185–193.

⁵² S. Kent, *Deviant Scripturalism and Ritual Satanic Abuse: Possible Masonic, Mormon, Magic and Pagan Influences. Part 1*, “Religion” 23: 355–367, 1993.

⁵³ D. Bromley, *The Social Construction of Subversion: A Comparison of Anti-Religious and Anti-Satanic Cult Narratives*, [in:] D. Bromley, A. Shupe (eds.) *Anti-Cult Movement in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, New York 1994, p. 64.

⁵⁴ R. Hicks, *In Pursuit of Satan*, Buffalo 1991, pp. 245–246.

⁵⁵ J. Victor, 1993, *op. cit.*; M. De Young, 2004, *op. cit.*; R. Smoczynski, 2010, *op. cit.*

Christian way of life”⁵⁶. Following this Zizekian⁵⁷ examples we may assert that the positive content of anti-satanist ideology assumed the form of *objet petit à*, represented an elusive objectivity that was the most valuable and at the same time inexpressible, it was the quintessence of communities *jouissance*, which Satanists could not have and that was the very reason of their invasion. We are grasping here the affectivity that functioned as ontological glue that guaranteed the ontological consistency of the anti-Satanist group, and this insight is especially well developed by Zizek in his analysis of the consistency of national community towards the Thing [*Das Ding*], that is, its “enjoyment incarnated”:

National identification is by definition sustained by a relationship toward the Nation qua Thing. This Nation-Thing is determined by a series of contradictory properties. It appears to us as “our Thing” (perhaps we could say *cosa nostra*), as something accessible only to us, as something “they”, the others, cannot grasp; nonetheless it is something constantly menaced by “them”. It appears as what gives plenitude and vivacity to our life, and yet the only way we can determine it is by resorting to different versions of the same empty tautology. All we can ultimately say about it is that the Thing is “itself”, “the real Thing”, “what it really is about”, *etc.*⁵⁸.

Volatile panic and Anamorphosis

On the other hand, the circulation of anamorphosis effects increased particularly during the volatile satanic panic when affectivity while aligning panicked individuals opened up numerous fantasies that allowed to read different institutions, people and situations as the signs of the satanic conspiracy. The anamorphosis discussed here recalls Sarah Ahmed’s⁵⁹ notion of the rippling effect of emotions, while they move “through ‘sticky’ associations between signs, figures, and objects” and they “do things”. We can consider how affectivity works and mediates the interactions between subjects and social using the example of the arguably largest single satanic panic of 20th century that took place in Manhattan Beach, California in the early 1980s. Fantasies which emerged at that time about the omnipresence of

⁵⁶ I am clearly drawing here on Zizek’s often quoted example of the tautology of nationalist fantasies. *Idem*, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, Durham 1993, pp. 201–202.

⁵⁷ S. Zizek, 1992, *op. cit.*, pp.122–123.

⁵⁸ *Idem*, 1993, *op. cit.*, pp. 201–202.

⁵⁹ S. Ahmed, *Affective Economies*, “Social Text” 79 (22), pp. 117–139, 2004.

devil worshipers who have the alleged ability to turn into any person in every possible site of social stratification resembles the Nazi fantasy of formless Jew, excellently described by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy⁶⁰. According to this fantasy, the Jew is an abstract, formless substance (as opposed to a well defined single man), seeking in its parasitic compulsion formed identities which this shapeless Jew wants to imitate. The Satanists who were discovered, arrested and sentenced during the 1980s in California, like formless Jews should be understood as an emptiness that hates the human race and, simultaneously, their lack of form poses a serious difficulty of hunting them. If the enemy is formless, the defense must be organized appropriately to the risk profile. Therefore, anti-Satanists perceived danger in every, even the most innocent-looking situation: any person, under these assumptions could be a Satanist. Anti-satanic literature emphasized that ritual crime could not have taken place without the support of the powerful, secret conspiracy, thus when the panic was unfolding its proponents started to “see” the appearances of a secret conspiracy. Under the pressure of leading questions in early 1985 hundreds of children on the southern outskirts of Los Angeles claimed to have been sexually abused by a satanic pedophiles⁶¹. Children narratives stirred by anti-satanic experts and panicked parents revealed a similar pattern with gothic features (e.g. sadistic sexual practices, slaughtering animals, gruesome costumes and masks, human sacrifice, cannibalism)⁶².

The sideways movements of “affective economy” which “shapes the surfaces of bodies and worlds”⁶³ had social and material effects: in Manhattan Beach, and in the broader South Bay area, seven day-care centers were shut down due to their personnel’s involvement in ritual abuse⁶⁴. Children “perceived” as participants of satanic orgies, preschool and nursery school staff, priests and pastors, shop assistants, models seen on a television screen, aerobics instructors, well-known journalists, coaches of sport teams; rituals were allegedly carried out in supermarkets, hospitals, gyms, local airport hangars or in cemeteries⁶⁵. It turned out – to the dismay of many South Bay residents – that everyone could practice satanic rituals and they could take place anywhere⁶⁶. Panicked parents quickly informed the police about

⁶⁰ P. Lacoue-Labarthe, J.L. Nancy, „The Nazi Myth”, in: *Critical Inquiry*, 16(2), pp. 291–312, 1990; I am drawing here also on Žižek’s appropriation of “The Nazi Myth”, *op. cit.*, 1992.

⁶¹ D. Nathan, M. Snedeker, *Satan’s Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of the Modern American Witch Hunt*, New York 1995, p. 89.

⁶² M. De Young, 2004, *op. cit.*; P. Jenkins, 1992, *op. cit.*; J. Victor, 1993, *op. cit.*

⁶³ S. Ahmed, 2004, *op. cit.*

⁶⁴ D. Nathan, M. Snedeker, 1995, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 90.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 89–91.

people and households identified by the children as satanic. Some South Bay residents organize themselves in self-defense teams that patrolled the streets, wrote down the plates of suspicious cars, took note of the numbers of arriving and departing aircraft, for some parents the remains of dead animals, including frogs and snakes symbolized satanic rituals leftovers, so they informed about it the police⁶⁷.

This ability to see satanic conspiracy was confirmed by the expertise of one of leading anti-Satanists Lawrence Pazder, who – while visiting Manhattan Beach – warned residents that the scale of satanic conspiracy was “inconceivably great”⁶⁸. Clearly, panic circulations were not rigidly related to empirical evidence, thus the affective sideways movements between particular objects and signs could have caused peculiar contamination effect of loose association between empty signifiers which were invested with fantasmatic contents. The physicality of this contamination between objects, intensified the panic affect and confirmed Ahmed’s assertion about the metonymic “sticky relation” between signs within the affective economy:

Fear works as an affective economy, despite how it seems directed toward an object. Fear does not reside in a particular object or sign, and it is this lack of residence that allows fear to slide across signs, and between bodies. This sliding becomes stuck only temporarily, in the very attachment of a sign to a body, whereby a sign sticks to a body by constituting it as the object of fear, a constitution taken on by the body, encircling it with a fear that becomes its own⁶⁹.

This ability of sliding of which Ahmed writes, leads us directly into the very anomorphosis dimension I mentioned earlier. The “libidinal seeing” exceeds objective intersubjective network, the affective subject distorts the shape of reality, it sees this “excess” in objects because as Žižek⁷⁰ has noted: *objet petit à* is an object perceptible only for the desiring subject, while the object is retroactively constituted as materialization of this libidinal distortion. Now we can understand why within the affectively distorted perspective any “neutral object” could indicate satanic cult and literally everybody could be perceived as criminal Satanist. When Lawrence Pazder informed the residents of Manhattan Beach that a devil worshiper may be the most innocent-looking doctor, teacher, priest, husband and wife, he offered

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 88-91

⁶⁸ *Ibidem* 1995, p. 90

⁶⁹ S. Ahmed, 2004, *op. cit.*

⁷⁰ S. Žižek, *Patrząc z ukosa. Do Lacana przez kulturę popularną*, tłum. J. Margański, Warszawa 2003, p. 26–27.

precisely this anamorphic state of overdetermination, which retroactively rearticulated the social meaning of objects, structures and institutions. Of course this “seeing ability” explains the career of anti-Satanist experts, who as Dianne Core from the British Child Watch, could act as a consultant for the police and the social services in Hull at the turn of the 1980s and the 1990s, during the heat of moral panic in the UK. At that time, several times a month she informed the police, prosecutors, social workers and even members of parliament about the discovery of a new group of Satanic conspiracy she had seen them in the local parishes, in the stores, etc. If the Core lived during the moral panic period in Liverpool or Glasgow, both these cities probably would have also been populated by significant numbers of Satanists, because their visibility was determined by Diana Core’s “seeing ability”. This distortion of perspective applied not only to individuals, as it actually embraced a broader social field, as demonstrated by the satanic panic of 1988 in Jamestown, NY, when local police station received hundreds of reports from people who had seen hanged dogs on the municipal lanterns, the students saw black roses sent to them by Satanists, ordinary strollers saw satanic graffiti on the walls allegedly produced to threaten them, *etc.*⁷¹.

In every act of this “seeing”, a curvature of the symbolic structure is present; we may thus understand why satanic panic could not have ceased by the simple act of appealing to the “objective reality” or by indicating the fact of lacking empirical evidence. Moral panic proponents could not be challenged by this sort of materialist skepticism that did not take into account an excessive *objet petit à* that guaranteed the consistency of the moral panic belief. Those involved in anti-Satanist formations were involved in chasing the “ritual conspiracy” not only for reasons they were proclaiming in the press or in the courtrooms, but these were retroactively stated reasons standing for the funding belief in a “satanic conspiracy”. Anti-Satanist discourse was essentially a product of a tautological figure: its proponents were arguing about the satanic conspiracy in order to justify their belief in this conspiracy, which had preexisted this articulation. 

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⁷¹ J. Victor, 1993, *op. cit.*