

Transgressive Representations: Satanic Ritual Abuse, Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth, and *First Transmission*

Danielle Kirby

Introduction

Articulating the acceptable and unacceptable limits of representation is an unquestionably fraught undertaking. In this issue, Norman Simms astutely states that when it comes to the artistic the very notion of representation suffers “epistemological and aesthetic problems,” limited by the fact that art and literature are “in essence duplicitous, acts of imitation and products of deceit.”¹ Late Western modernity provides ample illustration of the often-contentious nature of representation, with recent events supplying a surfeit of examples where normative limits of representation have been uncomfortably transgressed, often generating public outcry and claims of wrongdoing. This article explores one such instance, the 1992 broadcast of an episode of the Channel 4 programme *Dispatches*, entitled ‘Beyond Belief,’ in the United Kingdom. Now, twenty years after the fact, this episode and its broader context provide a fascinating, if disturbing, view into an extraordinary, though somewhat predictable, series of events. Taking the inherent ambiguity posed by the notion of the limits of representation as a starting point, this article will address the incident through a framework of transgression, seeking to articulate some of the varying ways in which such limits were breached, exceeded, and redefined.

Beyond Belief

On 19 February 1992, the UK television programme *Dispatches* aired an episode entitled ‘Beyond Belief.’² The episode purported to provide evidence

Danielle Kirby is a Lecturer in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University.

¹ Norman Simms, ‘Representations of Nature Limited and Unlimited: A Speculative Essay,’ *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2011), p. 3.

² It should be noted that this incident has many conflicting accounts, and details often vary. The provenance of the footage is equally unclear, and is often attributed to Psychick TV rather than TOPY. Priority has been given here to the account in David Keenan, *England’s Hidden Reverse: A Secret History of the Esoteric Underground* (London: SAF Publishing, 2003), pp. 223-231. For other approaches, see, for instance, ‘Bogus Devil Video Rekindles Satanic Panic,’ *The Sub-culture Alternatives Freedom*

of Satanic ritual abuse (SRA), backing its claims with survivor accounts and graphic footage. The show was hosted by Andrew Boyd, an active proponent of the reality of SRA and author of *Blasphemous Rumours*, a book on the topic.³ Immediately after the episode, a helpline for callers was advertised, commissioned by Channel 4 and run by Broadcasting Support Services.⁴ The episode of *Dispatches* had been previewed by Eileen Fairweather in the *Observer Magazine* three days prior to its release, in an article entitled 'Video Offers First Evidence of Ritual Abuse.'⁵ Although gestures were made towards journalistic objectivity, the article was both extremely hostile and unequivocal in condemning the footage, whilst asserting its evidential force. References to both law enforcement agencies and the opinions of medical experts, combined with an interview with the (now debunked) cult survivor 'Jennifer' mentioned in the programme, reinforced the image of rampant ritualised abuse of both women and children:

[t]he video shows the abuse of young adults in what is clearly a ritual context...It shows obscene rituals involving a hooded man having ritual symbols carved into his flesh, a naked woman tied up and raped, and an apparent abortion on another restrained and possibly drugged woman. Another scene shows a young female tied up and involved in a violent sexual act. One of two doctors consulted by *The Observer* believes she may be no more than 13 years old. These sequences are inter-cut with fleeting shots of explicit sex, human skulls and Satanic symbols.⁶

In at least some circles, the video footage was taken as providing substantiation of the then-assumed presence of active Satanic groups engaging in ritual abuse, and certainly 'Beyond Belief' presented that image. What was not initially made clear, although it fairly swiftly came to light, however, was that the footage used as evidence within the episode was in fact an experimental film created slightly less than a decade earlier by the occult and artistic collective

Foundation, at <http://www.saff.ukhq.co.uk/devilvid.htm>. Accessed 21/12/2011; and Desmond K. Hill, 'Transmedia Exiles,' *Rogue: das Kulturmagazin*, at http://aka.ip-technik.net/rogue/archiv1/transmedia_exile.html. Accessed 21/12/2011.

³ Andrew Boyd, *Blasphemous Rumours: Is Satanic Ritual Abuse Fact or Fantasy?* (London: Fount, 1991).

⁴ Sara Scott, 'Beyond Belief: Beyond Help?,' *Child Abuse Review*, vol. 2 (1993), p. 244.

⁵ Eileen Fairweather, 'Video Offers First Evidence of Ritual Abuse,' *Observer Magazine* (16 February 1992), p. 4. It is important, and somewhat distressing, to note that the journalist who wrote this article was also a researcher working on the program *Dispatches*.

⁶ Fairweather, 'Video Offers First Evidence of Ritual Abuse,' p. 4.

group of Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth (TOPY).⁷ Moreover, the footage itself had been partially funded during the 1980s by Channel 4, used previously as part of a programme on experimental British cinema,⁸ and as an element of various performances by associated bands including the experimental outfit Psychick TV.

Journalistic reportage, in general, swiftly turned against the initial interpretations of the episode, and publications such as the *Observer Magazine*, amongst others, moved to a much more cautious position within days of the broadcast:

a Channel 4 *Dispatches* programme last Thursday screened excerpts from the video [*First Transmission*], in which a naked man is beaten and repeatedly cut with knives, a young woman scarred with another sharp implement and a pregnant woman apparently subjected to an abortion...Far from providing any definitive answers to the question of the existence of large-scale 'Satanic' cults, it is clear that the Channel 4 programme has given rise to still more heated debate, with sceptics passionately arguing that the video is evidence not of a Satanic cult but of a bizarre performance art.⁹

Nonetheless, the incident resulted in raids upon the homes of TOPY members and the seizure of materials, including much of the back catalogue of members of various bands and other professional artistic works. Individuals came forward to accuse TOPY members of inappropriate behaviour, such as offering drugs to children and writing sexually explicit letters.¹⁰ Founder and member, Genesis P-Orridge (b. Neil Megson, 1950) and his family, who were out of the country at the time of the broadcast of 'Beyond Belief,' chose not to return home to England. While P-Orridge was never in fact charged with anything, his and his family's self-imposed exile was in large part due to the incident.¹¹ This episode is contextualised more broadly by a heightened normative pressure, occurring as it did towards the latter end of the moral panics regarding Satanism and particularly SRA throughout the 1980s and early

⁷ For a detailed and extremely interesting account of the incident from a TOPY perspective see Keenan, *England's Hidden Reverse*, pp. 223-231.

⁸ Keenan, *England's Hidden Reverse*, p. 225.

⁹ David Rose, 'Scotland Yard Seizes Videos and Books After TV Film of "Ritual Satanic Abuse"', *Observer Magazine* (23 February 1992), p.11.

¹⁰ Rose, 'Scotland Yard Seizes Videos and Books,' p. 11.

¹¹ Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, 'AS IT IS...', in *Thee Psychick Bible*, ed. Jason Louv (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 1994), pp. 500-503; Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, 'Tagged For Life Or How I Learned To Leave England And Love the Tate Without Really Trying,' at <http://www.genesisbreyerporridge.com/texts-tagged.html>. Accessed 21/12/2011.

1990s. It should also be made clear from the outset that, since the incident in question, all implications of criminal or non-consensual behaviour have been laid aside.

Beyond being an appalling instance of what appears to be, at best, negligent misrepresentation resulting in the active persecution of many involved persons, this incident is a fascinating instance of the limits of representation on a number of levels. Returning to what Simms has said about the duplicitous nature of art, it is worth highlighting the deliberately duplicitous, that is two-fold, nature of experimental art, such as that made by TOPY. The philosophical and magickal premises of TOPY, as we shall see, are hinged on a multi-layered understanding of truth and reality, which in turn endows their creative work with a miscellany of meanings. The key to unlocking the 'hype' surrounding *First Transmission* is the notion of transgression, both in the way that the film footage is in itself a transgressive piece of art, and the way that *Dispatches* chose to manipulate this through (mis)representation, distorting its meaning in a damning and reckless manner.

This article seeks primarily to contextualise the situation in question, with a view to both clarifying the incident from a scholarly perspective and to also locate the episode within the broader context within which it occurred. In doing so, not only is the 'Beyond Belief' incident itself opened up for a broader discussion, but it also provides a clear example of some of the very real and urgent problems that may emerge from extreme forms of representation and misrepresentation. While the particular contexts within which 'Beyond Belief' occurred are somewhat distanced from current social and cultural concerns, there are parallels that are nonetheless potentially useful in viewing more contemporary issues. Satanic Ritual Abuse may have generally ceased to be a major issue of public concern,¹² for example, but recent instances such as the Bill Henson scandal¹³ demonstrate that representation, particularly in conjunction with perceived issues of child abuse and sexuality or sexual deviancy, can and do still give rise to extreme responses and misunderstandings.

¹² James T. Richardson, Jenny Reichert, and Valerie Lykes, 'Satanism in America: An Update,' *Social Compass*, vol. 56, no. 4 (2009), pp. 552-563.

¹³ For discussion on this issue, see, for instance, Abigail Bray, 'The Gaze that Dare Not Speak Its Name: Bill Henson and Child Sexual Abuse Moral Panics,' in *Getting Real: Challenging the Sexualisation of Girls*, eds Melinda Tankard and Noni Hazlehurst (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2009), pp. 155-166; and Kate MacNeill, 'When Subject Becomes Object: Nakedness, Art and the Public Sphere,' *Media International Australia* vol. 135 (2010), pp. 82-93.

The notion of transgression is used here as a lens through which to view the broadcast and other related incidents. The term has a wide set of understandings, ranging from the explicitly theological through to the more general and secularised notions of naughtiness. Anthony Julius, for instance, lists a number of oft-used meanings of the term, and comes to four essential meanings: “the denying of doctrinal truth”; “rule breaking”; “the giving of serious offense”; and “the exceeding, erasing or disordering of physical or conceptual boundaries.”¹⁴ The last definition will be most pertinent to this discussion. An integral element of the notion of transgression is the limit being breached, and the utterly relational nature of the two. Utilising transgression as a framework is not only appropriate insofar as it directly addresses the articulation and nature of the boundary between the acceptable and unacceptable, but in that it also accurately describes the tensions inherent within the set of sexual, artistic, metaphysical, and magical approaches that are at the core of this incident. Again, journalist Eileen Fairweather’s angst-inducing prose encapsulates the anxious environment at the time:

[y]et the question must arise whether the video – which seems to have been available by mail order through occult publications – is the tip of a unseen iceberg of Satanic cults, or the work of a handful of extremists who believe their sadistic activities to be ‘performance art.’¹⁵

Satanic Ritual Abuse and Moral Panics

The practice of Satanism in contemporary society has a somewhat ambivalent history. For example, James T. Richardson, Joel Best, and David G. Bromley note that scholars are undecided as to whether the infamous Church of Satan, established by Anton LaVey in 1966, should be regarded as a spoof designed to provoke Christians, or a genuine expression of faith. LaVey’s brand of Satanism, the most pervasive doctrine of its kind, is best understood as a self-serving philosophy where Satan is seen as the embodiment of the adversary and the ego, rather than a deity.¹⁶ Yet, as Philip Jenkins has aptly summarised, “[d]uring the 1980s, Satanism in Britain was transformed from a joke to a menace.”¹⁷ The drama surrounding the ‘Beyond Belief’ episode transpired

¹⁴ Anthony Julius, *Transgressions: The Offences of Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), p. 19.

¹⁵ Fairweather, ‘Video Offers First Evidence of Ritual Abuse,’ p. 4.

¹⁶ James T. Richardson, Joel Best, and David G. Bromley, ‘Satanism as a Social Problem,’ in *The Satanism Scare*, eds James T. Richardson, Joel Best, and David G. Bromley (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991), p. 9.

¹⁷ Philip Jenkins, *Intimate Enemies: Moral Panics in Contemporary Great Britain* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1992), p. 158; Philip Jenkins, ‘Satanism and Ritual

within a wider context of general moral panics, which by no means were limited to specific Satanic allegations but which more broadly articulated a strict and conservative moral standard.¹⁸

Emerging throughout the 1980s, there had already been a series of rising public fears revolving around sexual crime. As Jenkins notes, “[t]he rapist, the serial killer, the child molester, the ritual or satanic child abuser, and the child murderer... As the 1980’s progressed, the different stereotypes became increasingly intertwined.”¹⁹ The increase in SRA claims in the United Kingdom throughout the 1980s and early 1990s demonstrates clearly the growing public interest in and fear of such issues: Nottingham, London, Rochdale, Strathclyde, Derbyshire, and Merseyside all saw cases involving Satanic Ritual Abuse, as did Manchester and the Orkney Islands. While these various legal proceedings were eventually dismissed or overturned, they nonetheless indicate both the public fear and a degree of willingness to act on assumptions of truth around ritual abuse.

Also of note is that the public concerns and moral panics surrounding SRA were by no means limited to the United Kingdom throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, but were also clearly evident within other elements of the western world, most notably the United States of America,²⁰ but also present in other countries including Australia.²¹ Moreover, these parallel concerns involved at least some degree of mutual reinforcement, with American ‘experts’ in SRA sharing their knowledges and services with their English counterparts, for instance.²² America similarly saw cases involving child abuse and accusations of Satanic Ritual Abuse, as is evident in the McMartin and the Jordan cases.²³

Abuse,’ in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, ed. James R. Lewis (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁸ It should also be noted that members of TOPY and associated individuals had, previous to the ‘Beyond Belief’ episode, struggled with authorities. Large amounts of material had been seized, homes raided, and Mr Sebastian charged with assault as a part of Operation Spanner.

¹⁹ Philip Jenkins, *Intimate Enemies*, p. 9.

²⁰ Jeffrey S. Victor, ‘Moral Panics and the Social Construction of Deviant Behaviour: A Theory and Application to the Case of Ritual Abuse,’ *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 41, no. 3 (1998), p. 545.

²¹ James T. Richardson, ‘The Social Construction of Satanism: Understanding an International Social Problem,’ *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 32, no. 1 (1997), pp. 62-86.

²² Philip Jenkins, *Intimate Enemies*, pp. 220-231.

²³ David Bromley, ‘Satanism: The New Cult Scare,’ in *The Satanism Scare*, eds Joel Best, James T. Richardson, and David G. Bromley (New York: Aldine de Gruyter,

The phrase 'ritual abuse' is often used to connote systemic sexual molestation and/or psychological harassment, usually by adults to children, that in some way evokes supernatural themes.²⁴ As Morandir Armson notes, physical assaults are often characterised as severe and sadistic, with other commonly reported occurrences being animal sacrifice and cannibalism.²⁵ When it is specifically Satanic ritual abuse, one assumes that symbols, icons, rites, and ethics associated with the figure of Satan, the worship of Satan, or the practice of Satanism, as observed by religious organisations like the Church of Satan, are involved. Satanic rituals are often envisioned as inversions of Christian sacraments, the Black Mass and the desecration of the host being popular examples. During the 'Satanic Panic' of the 1980s and 1990s, it was deemed irrelevant whether or not such rituals have any historical validity or what meaning they hold for living Satanists, if indeed they performed such rituals at all; rather the *image* of Satanism was more powerful than the truth.

The origins of the significant public fear regarding Satanism and its assumed associated abuses have been explained as a convergence of a number of broader social themes. Aside from the development of 'Satanic churches,' Richardson, Best, and Bromley point to the rise of fundamentalist Christianity, the anti-cult movement, the new wave of child saving, and the survivor/recovery movement²⁶ as significant contributing factors. A range of social discourses contributed to the persuasiveness of SRA claims. The belief in Satanism inherent within fundamentalist Christianity and its corollary function as nemesis. The heritage of the anti-cult movement in notions of brainwashing and deprogramming and its goal of protecting youth; the actual existence of organised Satanism as exemplified by the Church of Satan; an increasingly broad definition of and interventionist approach to child abuse; and the emergence and medicalization of survivor narratives and memory recovery combined in such a way to make SRA claims tenacious and even perhaps authoritative.

Such public fears and concerns did not simply manifest within specific arenas such as social work or church groups, however, but also within more

1991); and Victor, 'Moral Panics and the Social Construction of Deviant Behaviour,' p. 545.

²⁴ Grant Charles, 'The Assessment and Investigation of Ritual Abuse,' in *True and False Allegations of Child Sexual Abuse: Assessment and Case Management*, ed. Tara Ney (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1995), p. 305.

²⁵ Morandir Armson, 'Signs of the Devil: The Social Creation of Satanic Ritual Abuse,' in *On A Panegyric Note: Studies in Honour of Garry W. Trompf*, eds Victoria Barker and Frances di Lauro (Sydney: Sydney Studies in Religion, 2007), p. 146.

²⁶ Richardson, Best, and Bromley, 'Satanism as a Social Problem,' pp. 2-4.

formalised structures of law enforcement. One of the more notorious, and particularly relevant, instances of this era was the results of Operation Spanner.²⁷ Operation Spanner was an investigation run by the Obscene Publications section of Scotland Yard, which resulted in charges for sixteen individuals in 1990. Initially represented as a child pornography ring,²⁸ individuals were then charged with a “conspiracy to corrupt public morals,”²⁹ later prosecuted as a gay pornography ring,³⁰ and at last sight appears to have been a network engaged in consensual adult sadomasochistic practices.³¹ Although this incident originated from the seizure of videos by the Obscene Publications section of Scotland Yard, it is also noteworthy that they were apparently not ever intended for public use or sale. This incident resulted in the legal reframing of such consensual sex acts as assault, as well as the incarceration of a number of those involved.³² Rock journalist and popular cultural commentator Jon Savage articulated the invasive outcome of the case in a 1992 article, saying:

[t]his ruling has effectively tightened legal control over the body: SM sex which involves the breaking of the skin is now effectively illegal, as is body piercing where sexual pleasure and intent is involved.³³

Within a social framework where private consensual sexual behaviours become the basis for criminal action, it is perhaps unsurprising that *First Transmission*, as presented in ‘Beyond Belief,’ would evoke such an immediate and critical response. In 1992, the *Observer Magazine* reported that Scotland Yard was to establish “a small nationwide Satanic abuse squad to investigate evidence of links between devil worship and child abuse.”³⁴

²⁷ Jenkins, *Intimate Enemies*, pp. 85-86.

²⁸ Jenkins, *Intimate Enemies*, p. 85.

²⁹ Jon Savage, ‘S & M: Sex and Martyrdom,’ *Observer Magazine* (29 November 1992), p. 51.

³⁰ Savage, ‘Sex and Martyrdom,’ p. 50.

³¹ This type of interpretative drift was not isolated, but can be seen as part of a broader pattern of interpretative frameworks taken by authorities throughout the 1980s and 1990s. See Debbie Nathan, ‘Satanism and Child Molestation: Constructing the Ritual Abuse Scare,’ in *The Satanism Scare*, eds James T. Richardson, Joel Best, and David G. Bromley (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991), pp. 80-83.

³² Fifteen individuals were sentenced to prison, four of whom had suspended sentences. Savage, ‘Sex and Martyrdom,’ p. 52.

³³ Savage, ‘Sex and Martyrdom,’ p. 50.

³⁴ Kevin Toolis, ‘Scotland Yard Sets Up Satanic Abuse Squad,’ *Observer Magazine* (5 January 1992), p. 3.

Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth

Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth (TOPY) is an occult group with a focus upon experiential approaches to magical and metaphysical understandings, as well as being heavily engaged in various forms of performance (art, film, music, etc.). *Thee Psychick Bible* describes the Temple as “a platform to proselytize an occultural perception of L-IF-E” conceived of by “Brother GENESIS” (Genesis P-Orridge), stating that:

[h]e intended it to become a vehicle for the demystified dissemination of specific sexual magick and ritualized neurological techniques and skills; a means of transporting the Individual into a deep sense of self-examination and clarity of intent; a dedicated post-nuclear, mutually acknowledged and supportive tribal focus of WILL.³⁵

Originating in the early 1980s, TOPY was (and to a degree still is)³⁶ one manifestation of various endeavours of a particular collection of magicians, musicians, artists, and the like. Psychick TV, Throbbing Gristle, COUM Transmissions, Current 93, and Coil are some of the associated bands, whose members include well-known subcultural figures such as Genesis P-Orridge, Peter Christopherson, and Cosi Fanni Tutti.³⁷ These groups in general, and Throbbing Gristle especially, are commonly hailed as some of the originators of the Industrial Music scene, as well as being formative in the origins of various forms of electronic music and early English rave and dance cultures. Certainly all these performance groups maintain a following today, as do the ideals and approaches of TOPY.

These various groups, both musically and magically, constitute an integral element of what Christopher Partridge calls ‘occulture.’ Occulture, a neologism attributed to Genesis P-Orridge, has come to express a socio-spiritual *milieu* encompassing “those often *hidden, rejected and oppositional* beliefs and practices associated with esotericism, Theosophy, mysticism, New

³⁵ Genesis P-Orridge, *Thee Psychick Bible*, ed. Jason Louv (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2009), p. 505.

³⁶ It should be noted that, while TOPY still exists in various forms, the original incarnation was technically disbanded in 1991, just prior to the incident in question. Although current groups holding the same name certainly appear continuous in spirit and language to the original group, they should not be assumed to be connected with any of the original members. Unless otherwise specified, the discussion here is representative of the original iteration, spanning a decade from 1981-1991.

³⁷ See, for instance, Simon Ford, *Wreckers of Civilization: The Story of COUM Transmissions and Throbbing Gristle* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 1999); Keenan, *England's Hidden Reverse*.

Age, [and] Paganism,” amongst other subcultural ideas and lifestyles.³⁸ Partridge refers to a number of musical outfits that have drawn from the occultural pool, either intentionally or subconsciously, sometimes to represent their own genuine spiritual beliefs, and at other times to pretend.³⁹ TOPY was distinct in that it occupied a uniquely public space as an authentic magical group, with the performative and creative band Psychick TV as its mouthpiece.⁴⁰ The group was also unusual insofar as it did not draw strict lines between performer, artist, and magician. Many fans of Psychick TV became involved with TOPY and other related endeavours, such as the Family ov Psychick Individuals (FOPI).⁴¹ As stated in *Thee Psychick Bible*, “What would happen if a band took its fans seriously and chose to encourage them to explore...ANYTHING?”⁴² While it has been argued that this inclusive approach has later created problems for the founders with misunderstanding though dedicated participants,⁴³ the attitude nonetheless appears both integral to and continuous with their overall goal to “break thee preconceptions, modes ov unthinking acceptance, expectations...discard ALL concepts and definitions irrevocably” in order to re-emphasise “thee Self.”⁴⁴

Magical and Ritual Practice

TOPY has been heavily influenced by the schools of Western esotericism such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and Aleister Crowley’s Thelema, as well as more modern groups like the Illuminates of Thanateros.⁴⁵ Creative individuals like Austin Osman Spare, William S. Burroughs, and Bryon Gysin, have also been particularly influential, as have the general categories of Chaos

³⁸ Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture* (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2005), vol. 2, p. 68.

³⁹ Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, p. 151.

⁴⁰ Jay Kinney, ‘Music, Magic, & Media Mischief,’ *Chaos Matrix*, at <http://www.chaosmatrix.org/library/chaos/topy/gpo-int.txt>. Accessed 21/12/2011.

⁴¹ Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, p. 148.

⁴² Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, ‘Acknowledgements,’ in *Thee Psychick Bible*, ed. Jason Louv (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2009), p. ii.

⁴³ Berk Vaher, ‘All Grass is Flesh: Genesis P-Orridge and TOPY as Subcultural Innovators,’ in *British Studies in the New Millennium: The Challenge of the Grassroots*, eds Pilvi Rajamäe and Krista Vogelberg (Tartu: University of Tartu, 2001), pp. 168-176.

⁴⁴ Malik, ‘Short-Circuit Control,’ in *Thee Psychick Bible*, ed. Jason Louv (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2009), p. 130.

⁴⁵ Jason Louv, ‘Introduction,’ in *Thee Psychick Bible*, ed. Jason Louv (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2009), p. 18.

magick and sex magick.⁴⁶ TOPY, however, have denied adherence to any one form of practice, rather stating that gathering and disseminating experiential and literary information is the group's major priority.⁴⁷ *Thee Psychick Bible*, for instance, contains a variety of essays relating to the practice of sex magic, sleep related magic, psychick discipline, and media-based magical and ritual practice. Clearly not Satanic in either a theological or magical sense, they appear much more a product of esoteric and occult ideologies. Indeed, as an experiment in creating 'occulture,' TOPY seem extremely comfortable utilising material from any source, from Eastern meditative techniques to material sourced from magical/psychological disciplines like those of the Process Church, a splinter group from the Church of Scientology.⁴⁸ Of specific interest here is the group's use of sex magic, which was considered a direct and instantaneous way to bring practice back to the self, rather than relying on external persons.

Sex magic is by no means a new phenomenon, but has been present within the western esoteric tradition since the Middle Ages.⁴⁹ As a category of magic within modern western esoteric and occult practice it encompasses a wide variety of particular orientations, and may utilise techniques ranging from the non-physical through to paired, grouped, or onanistic practices. Outcomes may be similarly varied, with practitioners perhaps seeking, for instance, spiritual insight, personal power, control over others, or to charge specific magical rituals, objects, or sigils.⁵⁰ Magic of this type is often considered by practitioners to be extremely powerful, as well as being a comparatively accessible form of practice:

[w]hat might be called the conventional magician, say, trained in the Golden Dawn methods, will spend a great deal of time and effort undergoing mental discipline...The "ordinary" person's (myself) reaction to this approach is "I can't do that." It's only after a long

⁴⁶ Genesis P-Orridge, 'Magick Squares and Future Beats: The Magical Processes and Methods of William S. Burroughs and Bryon Gysin,' in *Book of Lies*, ed. Richard Metzger (New York: Disinformation Company, 2003).

⁴⁷ Danielle Kirby, 'Occultural Bricolage and Popular Culture: Remix and Art in Discordianism, the Church of the Subgenius, and The Temple of Psychick Youth,' in *The Handbook of Hyper-real Religions*, ed. Adam Possamai (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), forthcoming.

⁴⁸ Timothy Wyllie, *Love Sex Fear Death: The Inside Story of the Process Church of the Final Judgement* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2009), pp. 177-180.

⁴⁹ Hugh B. Urban, 'Magia Sexualis: Sex, Secrecy, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 72, no. 3 (2004), p. 700.

⁵⁰ Urban, 'Magia Sexualis,' pp. 703-708; Keenan, *England's Hidden Reverse*, p. 103.

time, if at all, that you see any results...Sex magic provides a more accessible approach, combining immediate results with a system of mental training. Being more accessible, it reduces the need for gurus and gives the individual a chance to develop.⁵¹

Imbricated with the practice of sex magic in this context is also the underlying philosophy of chaos magic. Chaos magic is premised in a fairly anarchistic approach to the world, and tends to promote both a non-traditional approach to magical practice as well as holding to an underlying philosophy of personal liberation.⁵² As Urban so articulately summarises, “The aim of Chaos Magic is no longer simply transgression of social and sexual taboos, no longer an ideal of political liberation, no longer even the transgression of the boundaries of the self; rather the aim here is the transgression of reality, the shattering of all known conceptions of the universe, and the liberating ecstasy of infinite transformation.”⁵³ The particular techniques which are used by individuals are relevant only to the said individual; outcomes, rather than specific beliefs or techniques, lie at the heart of chaos magic.⁵⁴

Another particularly interesting element of the TOPY approach to metaphysics was an orientation towards mixing media and magic. Their inclusive attitude meant that, alongside more traditional ceremonial and ritual approaches, they also utilised media content and forms. Both using extant material and making original creative works were by no means necessarily distinct from one another, nor were they treated discretely from magical practice; the various areas of endeavour not only informed one another, but to all intents and purposes appear to have been continuous, if not one and the same. In the timeframe in question they tended to focus on televisual magic, at least in part due to its location as the dominant media form of the time. This somewhat unusual approach to practice was complimented by a similarly noteworthy combination of the performance of art and magic: the distinction between the two fields was never particularly maintained within the group,⁵⁵ and from an outsider perspective certainly appeared to be continuous. This is, of course, intrinsic to the general attitude of TOPY towards creative chaos, the exceeding of limits, and the redefining of endings and beginnings.

⁵¹ TOPY, ‘Magick,’ in *Thee Psychick Bible*, ed. Jason Louv (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2009), p. 215.

⁵² Carole Cusack, ‘Discordian Magic: Paganism, the Chaos Paradigm and the Power of Parody,’ *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2011), p. 137.

⁵³ Hugh B. Urban, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 239.

⁵⁴ Carole Cusack, ‘Discordian Magic,’ p. 142.

⁵⁵ Kinney, ‘Music, Magic, & Media Mischief.’

It is also important to note that the magical approach of TOPY would generally be termed as erring on the side of the Left Hand Path, while not necessarily being limited by it. Orientation is generally denoted by divisions into the Left Hand and Right Hand Path within Western contemporary magical practice, which are often simplistically (and inaccurately) thought to equate to black and white magic. This terminology, and indeed the division, is derived from Left Hand Tantra in Hinduism and Buddhism, and implies the use of ritualised transgression and often transgressive sexual practices such as spiritual exercises.⁵⁶ Such methods greatly influenced the formulation of Aleister Crowley's sex magick,⁵⁷ which in turn has been drawn upon by TOPY. From a practitioner perspective, the Left Hand Path has been defined as "the path of non-union with the objective universe."⁵⁸ Recalling the description of transgression provided by Julius, it is possible to understand how such ritualised subversiveness succeeds in the "exceeding, erasing or disordering of physical or conceptual boundaries."⁵⁹ In fact, TOPY intentionally encompass all the definitions of transgression (denying of truth, rule-breaking, causing offence) in their efforts to construct a sense of self outside of normative boundaries.

First Transmission

The footage used in the 'Beyond Belief' episode of *Dispatches* was drawn from *First Transmission*, a piece of video art which "faked an arcane ritual incorporating sex, cutting and genital mutilation, alongside a scene of a bound and hooded John Balance [a member of the group] being urinated on."⁶⁰ As well as a number of members of TOPY, the film also featured the voice of film director Derek Jarman (1942-1994), and tattoo and piercing artist Mr Sebastian, who were both well known within subcultural circles.⁶¹ The film itself is unquestionably disturbing and graphic, and it is unsurprising that unintentional viewers, believing it to be documentary evidence of abuse, would find it an extremely uncomfortable experience. Even outside of that, for anyone

⁵⁶ Graham Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth* (Kent Town: Wakefield Press, 1997), pp. 97-99.

⁵⁷ Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, pp. 124-125.

⁵⁸ Stephen Flowers, *Lords of the Left-Hand Path: A History of Spiritual Dissent*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Rûna-Raven Press, 1997), p. 3.

⁵⁹ Julius, *Transgressions*, p.19.

⁶⁰ Keenan, *England's Hidden Reverse*, p. 224.

⁶¹ While I would not comfortably use the term 'faked' in a ritual or performative context, the point here is that the individuals involved were not grievously harmed as suggested by 'Beyond Belief.'

unfamiliar with the aesthetics and practices of sex magick, the Left Hand Path, or Bondage, Discipline, Sadism and Masochism (BDSM), the imagery would likely be shocking.

The film itself is a fascinating example of a conflation of categories, and is indeed an excellent site for problematising the very notion of representation. From an interpretative position, *First Transmission* can be equally successfully read as a record of a previous magical act, an active and ongoing magical ritual in its own right, a tool for individual magical practice, a piece of performance art in the same terms of either documentation or active existence, BDSM pornography, an experimental video, and so on. Given the general attitude of TOPY, one might be inclined to understand the piece as purposefully encompassing all of these varying interpretative possibilities simultaneously. This circumstance troubles the notion of representation insofar as this suggests that *First Transmission* is not so much a representation of something as a thing in itself. By being simultaneously magical and publicly performative, active and archival, art and ritual, *First Transmission* challenges any static idea of representation as a simulation, or as Simms says, a duplicitous or deceitful rendering of an event. It is epistemologically challenging because it utilises performance and mimicry, but as a final product it is sincere in its purpose as a tool for magical practice and awareness. In accordance with the TOPY philosophy, the ‘reality’ of the events *First Transmission* depicts is largely irrelevant, as the individual is responsible for creating his or her own version of reality. Unfortunately, the producers of ‘Beyond Belief’ took a similarly glib view of authenticity, and chose to misrepresent *First Transmission* by aligning TOPY’s spiritual experiments in transgression with alleged cases of Satanic ritual abuse.

Victims of Abuse

A final element of the ‘Beyond Belief’ incident to be mentioned here was the helpline that was run by Broadcasting Support Services and Channel 4.⁶² Potential viewers of ‘Beyond Belief’ were told, “to avoid offense, only short clips from the video will be shown...A professional help-line will be run afterwards.”⁶³ Organised to function immediately after the broadcast of the episode, the helpline was intended to provide information and support for concerned viewers. It was staffed by counsellors from the Ritual Abuse Information Network and Support (RAINS), who had, as inferred by the name, already been involved in providing support in a number of previous instances

⁶² All data presented here regarding the helpline is drawn from Scott, ‘Beyond Belief: Beyond Help?’, unless otherwise stated.

⁶³ Fairweather, ‘Video Offers First Evidence of Ritual Abuse,’ p. 4.

involving claims of ritual abuse in the UK. Participating counsellor Sara Scott has stated that Channel 4 and the helpline severely underestimated the volume of calls, saying:

British Telecom recorded 595 attempted calls in the first 5 minutes after the helpline number appeared on screen and 4500 attempted calls in the helpline's first hour of operation.⁶⁴

In practice, the helpline was only able to take 191 of the calls, and of them approximately 50% of the conversations were about ritual abuse and 39% self-identified as victims of ritual abuse. There were also forty calls received from victims of sexual abuse.

The helpline is noteworthy in this context as it displays one of the broader issues inherent in the situation. Even if only a fraction of the 4,500 attempted calls were made by victims of abuse, of whatever type, this still represents a significant number of individuals seeking help and support. To have offered such support, only to be unable to deliver it, seems ethically fraught at best. Indeed, it is hard to avoid the somewhat cynical assumption that evoking this type of response was perhaps a deliberate agenda of 'Beyond Belief.' The combination of extremely graphic imagery presented as fact, horrific survivor narratives focusing upon topics such as forced abortion and sexual slavery, and the not particularly tacit assertion of a vast and sprawling network of evil Satanists bent upon child abuse, is difficult to read as anything other than a deliberate incitement to fear. When those who have been the victims of abuse receive such material, it is, in fact, easy to imagine that the situation itself could lead to a heightened experience of trauma.

Transgressions: Some Conclusions

As it occurred twenty years ago, 'Beyond Belief' provides an unusual vantage point from which to view both the original footage and the corollary responses to its misrepresentation. Shorn of the immediacy and sensationalism that so often blurs contemporary issues, and distanced from the entrenched public fear of Satanism apparent at the time, the incident nonetheless encompasses a series of transgressions that provide insight into the misuses of representation. When it comes to transgression, Julius reminds us that "a 'transgression' is the name of the worst offences and of any offence."⁶⁵ *First Transmission*, within the context of 'Beyond Belief,' the seizure of materials and the exile of P-Orridge, is a definitive, if occultural, instance of offense and transgression. Within more contemporary subcultural discourse, the incident itself is largely represented as an exemplary case of persecution emanating from a broader societal

⁶⁴ Scott, 'Beyond Belief: Beyond Help?', p. 245.

⁶⁵ Julius, *Transgressions*, p. 18.

antagonism, if, indeed, it is known at all. While not disagreeing with such an interpretation, I would suggest that reframing the incident as a series of imbricated transgressions allows for a broader and more inclusive understanding of the circumstances. The exceeding and disordering of conceptual boundaries that is so central to the ideals and practices of chaos and sex magic, and so apparent within the specific approaches of TOPY, is also evident in the misuse of their materials. While unarguably functioning on a different level to the intentional and metaphysical practices of TOPY, the misrepresentations of the *Dispatches* episode, whether deliberate or otherwise, demonstrates a comparable disordering of conceptual boundaries. Such disordering is also paralleled in the wider context of Satanic Ritual Abuse claims with the conflation of child abuse with fears of ritual and sexual crime, and in the case of Operation Spanner in the eventual conflation of private consensual sex acts with assault. These transgressions not only provide a constant theme against which to view the broader incident, but emphasise that the corollary issues arising from the episode were not necessarily limited to occultural practitioners.

‘Beyond Belief’ was a broadcast that did great disservice to many involved: to the members of TOPY, whose artistic, sexual, and magical practices were publicly misrepresented to their detriment and danger; to the public, whose fears were exploited and further exacerbated; and to the self-identified victims of abuse, whom were unable to access support services offered. When Julius speaks of transgression as causing offence, the actions of the producers of ‘Beyond Belief’ and the media that irresponsibly contributed to the hype can be seen to be the most offensive outcomes of this incident. Indeed, while TOPY go out of their way to exceed the limits of representation by toying with the very meaning of the word, the media have too redefined limits, imposing them dishonestly in order to distort the story. Although twenty years after the fact, the circumstance still provides, at the very least, a cautionary tale of the fraught nature of transgressive representation.