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Hyper-Real Religion, Lovecraft, and the Cult of the *Evil Dead*

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The article examines the media franchise “Evil Dead.” The author addresses why it grew from a low-budget independent film to a popular culture phenomenon. This popularity cannot be explained simply by the fact that it has become a transmedia phenomenon (musical, theater, video games, comics, remake, TV series, etc. . .). The author believes that the demand for the franchise is explained, among other things, by the influence of Howard Lovecraft, whose work is of particular importance in the context of hyper-real religion and, in particular, for the original “Evil Dead” trilogy. First, the article clarifies the concepts of “popular culture” and “fantasy” and applies both to the “Evil Dead” franchise. It then discusses whether the franchise can be associated with a type of new religiosity, using Adam Possamai’s concept of “hyper-real religion.” Such “religion” is based upon the products of popular culture and only has representations with no real referents (“simulacra”). Although “Evil Dead” cannot be recognized as a proper hyper-real religion, it can be classified as a hyper-real cult. This concept is associated with the phenomenon of the cult cinema and includes ritualized viewing practices among the fans.

Keywords: popular culture, sci-fi, fantasy, hyper-real religion, cult cinema, horror, The Evil Dead, Lovecraft, zombies.

THE *Ash vs Evil Dead* TV show (2016–2018), the sequel of the original *Evil Dead* film trilogy (*Evil Dead* [1981], *Evil Dead: Dead by Dawn* [1987], *Army of Darkness* [1992]), ended after three seasons in 2018. Shortly thereafter, in the summer of 2019, the director of the three original films, Sam Raimi, announced a fourth installment, possibly starring Bruce Campbell, who played Ash Williams, the lead in the earlier films (Sharf 2019). The reprised cult trilogy, with its army of fans around the world, became a massive franchise and transmedia phenomenon that captured the attention of popular culture enthusiasts. In this study, I explore what makes the *Evil Dead*¹ franchise iconic and long-lasting and whether the franchise can be connected with new forms of religiosity. To do this, I use Adam Posamai's concept of hyper-real religion.

My hypothesis is that *Evil Dead's* cult status may be rooted in new forms of religiosity that have a growing presence in popular culture. In pursuit of this goal, I will focus on the following topics. First, I will discuss several conceptual issues related to the terminology I use in the article (including hyper-real religion, popular culture, fantasy, etc. . .) to outline the core methodological principles of the project. Secondly, I will briefly describe cult cinema and its connection to various forms of religiosity, including ritual practices. Thirdly, I will explain the hyper-real religious content of Howard Phillips Lovecraft's mythology, which makes up the core of the original trilogy, and I will show that *Evil Dead* may, in fact, be considered a hyper-real cult, if not a form of religion.

Popular Culture, Fantasy, and Hyper-real Religion

Any mass-produced product aimed at entertaining an audience and making a profit can be considered popular culture. Additionally, any phenomenon, which many people recognize and which is accessible through various forms of media (e.g. cinema, comic books, television, video games, music, etc. . .), can be classified as popular culture. In fact, some scholars claim that all contemporary culture is popular, as almost all its phenomena are available for mass consumption in one form or another and perform a commercial function (Igilton 2012, 177).² These cultural phenomena are becoming so popular

1. This article will use *The Evil Dead* when referring to Sam Raimi's first film (*The Evil Dead* [1981]) but will use *Evil Dead* to refer to the trilogy or the franchise as a whole.
2. Even though some scholars separate the terms "folk culture," "mass culture," and "popular culture," I will be using the latter two synonymously.

that they gain an army of followers. Many consumers become fans and, in the end, experience emotions toward elements of popular culture that are similar to religious feelings of worship. As early as the 1970s, some scholars wrote that the hyperbolic rhetoric of fan fiction reads as though it was literally “written in the spirit of. . . religious devotion” (Jewett and Lawrence 1977).

Scholars have been particularly interested in studying the convergence and interconnections of popular culture and religion. Religion has always had close ties with folk culture, particularly during periods when religion dominated culture, making these ties inevitable. Nowadays, although popular culture acts predominantly in the *secular* sphere, it still produces new phenomena functionally compatible to religion. Thus, in this case it is possible to speak of a *sacred* meaning in individual phenomena of mass culture; a sacred link that becomes foundational, deeper and more penetrating even than ties between “religion and culture,” which, as I will demonstrate later, may simply engage in a dialogue.

Ties between religion and culture can be imagined in various ways. Bruce David Forbes believes that these ties manifest in four ways: religion in popular culture, popular culture in religion, popular culture as religion, and a dialogue between religion and popular culture (Forbes 2005, 10). Recently, scholars have turned to investigating interconnections between popular culture and religion. Many connect religion and popular culture and in fact consider the latter to be a substitute of the former. Thus, a new theme has emerged, the sacred meaning of popular culture. Yet, there is no consensus on how to describe this substitute, and different authors offer their own interpretations. For example, scholars and philosophers see in popular culture “new forms of religiosity of Western society” (Kaputo 2014), “invented religion” (Cusack 2010), “implicit religion” (Pärna 2010), “religion based on fiction” (Davidsen 2012), “hyper-real religion” (Possamai 2012b), etc. . . . Regardless of how scholars describe these new religions, their interest revolves around popular culture and the ways in which “new believers” incorporate it into their everyday practices. Thus, Karen Pärna claims that an implicit religion (presence of an exceptional object seen as an absolute by “believers”) can be found in any product of culture. Drawing on religious ideas, Pärna argues that the internet is a form of an implicit religion because it instilled a new *faith* among its users (Pärna 2010). In the same vein, Kathryn Lofton examines popular culture and consumerism and asserts that religion is the best way of explaining and understanding everyday consumption norms (Lofton 2017).

Other scholars examine the products of mass culture. Using the example of *Star Wars*, John Caputo, a scholar of postmodernist theology, phrased the search for new sacred meanings as follows:

...I would say that something *else* is also astir *outside* the churches, that something is slipping beyond or outside the boundaries of the traditional faiths, that a certain religion flourishes without these traditional religions, a religion without religion, and that the sense of religious transcendence has begun to assume new and other forms. The traditional faiths contain something that they cannot contain, and there is an unmistakable tendency today to wrest religious phenomena free from the religions, to reproduce the structure of religion outside the traditional faiths and outside the classic oppositions of religion and science, body and soul, this world and the next. *Star Wars* offers many young people today a high-tech religious mythology, a fairly explicit “repetition” or appropriation of elemental religious structures outside the confines of the institutional religious faiths. Religious transcendence is beginning to transcend the traditional religions. If some of this is just New Age nonsense and superstition, *Star Wars* is a fascinating *mélange* of mysticism and science fiction that bears witness to a strange symbiosis of religion and postindustrial technologies (Kaputo [Caputo] 2014, 140).

Other scholars of popular culture, primarily those examining other sci-fi franchises, have went even further. Michael Jindra characterizes *Star Trek* fandom as a cultural religion, and John Morehead calls the teachings of *Matrix* fans Matrixism (Jindra 2005; McCormick 2012; Morehead 2012). It is important to note that it is fantasy, one of the most high-demand genres of popular culture, in which most scholars search for new forms of religion.

Before examining *Evil Dead*, it is necessary to explain how an independent horror film, shot in Tennessee and Michigan, became a multi-modal pop culture sensation (Riecki 2019, 82-93). One way was that the film became a transmedia phenomenon as multiple platforms and modes of media depicted its fictional universe, creating more entry points for the audience (Jenkins 2006, 101-108, 113-22). The release of the original films was followed by the production of video games, a musical, the official remake (2013), a series of rip-offs (illegal remakes), porn parodies, as well as a mash-up theater performance (a combination of a classic work of fiction and a mass culture phenomenon, in this case, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and *Army of Darkness*). Moreover, the *Ash vs Evil Dead* TV show (2016–2018) reprised

the original films. Continuous references to the franchise or even direct reproductions of its plot twists are encountered in other products of popular culture. For example, the *Simpsons* “Treehouse of Horror” Halloween specials in 1992 and 2016 paid homage to the franchise. Furthermore, the first films of the trilogy are included in lists of the top horror films of all time. All in all, a local story of a group of young people who evil spirits terrorized in a secluded cabin in the woods transformed into an intertextual myth, well-known in contemporary popular culture.

It is also important to clarify the term “sci-fi.” It is somewhat surprising that *Evil Dead* is often associated with the *science fiction* genre, whose main tropes are computers, robots, space and time travel, aliens, depictions of the future, etc. . . ., since horror would seem to belong in a different category. Moreover, it is important to remember that sci-fi often implies a possible (hence the “science”) fictional world, which typically takes place in the future. In contrast, fantasy narratives refer to impossible fictional worlds (dragons and magic replace robots and spacecraft) and are most often set in the past. Delineating the genres of sci-fi and horror, the film studies expert Barry Keith Grant notes that while both depict the supernatural, the former looks up and into space and the latter looks down and at the body (Grant 2006). It often happens, however, that these two genres merge, as was the case in the *Alien* franchise, which successfully combined the tropes of space, monsters, physical fear, transformations, and claustrophobia.

Although fantasy, sci-fi, and horror represent different genres with their own conventions, they can be brought under the common denominator of what the structuralist Tzvetan Todorov called the fantastic. In Todorov’s understanding, “The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (Todorov 1999, 25). For Todorov, the emphasis is on the hesitation (uncertainty over whether to believe in the event or not) because as soon as the audience chooses an answer, the work is no longer fantastic, but of the genres of the unusual or the wondrous. However, for this study this stipulation is of no particular significance. Although some “believers” have doubts about the existence of *The Necronomicon*, described by Lovecraft, many people believe in it even though they realize that it has no embodiment in reality. Moreover, *Evil Dead* is not simply horror or one of its unique sub-genres “slasher” (in which a monster murders a group of people) or “splatter” (in which the emphasis is on the bloodbath and corporal mutilations), but something larger. The

horror trilogy engages with a specific mythology similar to sci-fi, and in the third film, horror morphs into fantasy, when the main character travels to the past, to the Middle Ages of King Arthur (time-travel is also an important trope of sci-fi). The franchise even contains elements of sci-fi even in the narrow sense. For example, the image of a cyborg is very important for the franchise. The main character even cuts off his own arm, which is possessed by an evil spirit, and fashions a saw to the stump, before later replacing it with a mechanical hand.

Now that the *Evil Dead* franchise has been placed in the context of popular culture and sci-fi, it is necessary to connect it to new forms of religiosity. Here, the concept of hyper-reality introduced by Adam Possamai and developed by the author's colleagues will be useful (Possamai 2005; Possamai 2012b).³ I chose this concept for the following reasons. First, a study based on the theory of implicit religion has already been done (Khillis 2019). Secondly, the authors of the hyper-reality concept do not investigate the Internet or consumerist practices, as done by other scholars, but products of popular culture themselves. Thirdly, within the framework of this concept, scholars mostly study sci-fi works, their cultural phenomena, and how they have become new "religions." Finally and most significantly, it was within the framework of hyper-reality that a scholar tried to describe the influence of Lovecraft on phenomena of mass culture that have a religious dimension.

Hyper-real religion implies the absence of real referents, substituting them with representations. According to Possamai, an example of this is that TV viewers often discuss TV characters as real people. Hyper-real religion "represents a social world built with models or simulacra, which have no basis in any other reality except their own: these are, for example, theme parks that represent Hollywood films or Mickey Mouse cartoons, not 'reality' itself" (Possamai 2012a, 1). Possamai believes that forms of twentieth-century hyper-real religion used popular culture vicariously (e.g., the Church of Satan was inspired by Lovecraft's stories, and some neopagan groups took inspiration from sci-fi). Moreover, twentieth-century hyper-real religions had their own "sacral" corps, which were largely independent of mass culture. Hyper-real religions of the twenty-first century (e.g., Jediism) use

3. After Possamai wrote the 2005 work, in which the concept is introduced, other scholars joined this paradigm, and with Possamai serving as editor published a 2012 volume on hyper-real religions.

works of popular culture as main “sacral” subjects. Possamai claims that Lovecraft or *Discworld* (a series of books by Terry Pratchett and video games based on them) are not sacral per se, but *Star Wars* is (Possamai 2012a, 6). Even though Possamai is generally right about twentieth-century hyper-real religions, I offer a disclaimer. In the late 1970s, the scholars Robert Jewett and John Lawrence used Joseph Campbell’s concept of the monomyth to claim that sci-fi shows such as *Star Trek* and their followers constituted a secular faith, a “bizarre digital religion... in progress,” exemplified by the hyper-real religion of trekkies in the last quarter of the twentieth century (Jewett and Lawrence 1977, 24; Jenkins 1992, 13).

Based on Jean Baudrillard’s arguments, Adam Possamai defined hyper-real religion as follows: “A hyper-real religion is a simulacrum of a religion created out of, or in symbiosis with, commodified popular culture which provides inspiration at a metaphorical level and/or is a source of beliefs for everyday life” of its followers and consumers” (Possamai 2012a, 20). Possamai distinguishes three types of actors who engage with hyper-real religion. First, there are active consumers of popular culture who create practices of hyper-real religions (e.g. Matrixism, a religion based on worship of the *Matrix* franchise). Secondly, there are coincidental consumers of popular culture who may be connected to hyper-real religions. For example, although Jediism is the most widely known hyper-real religion in the twenty-first century, this phenomenon also includes those who are religiously inspired by popular culture in video games, such as *World of Warcraft*, because although the latter phenomenon is not as “sacral” as *Star Wars*, it still allows users, often unknowingly, to undergo hyper-real experiences. Thirdly, there are religious and secular actors, who oppose the consumption of popular culture when it creates hyper-real religions around itself (Possamai 2012a, 3-6). Thus, the volume edited by Possamai contains a chapter on the Roman Catholic Church’s crusade against the *Harry Potter* franchise in Poland. Henry Jenkins analyzes a similar case but describes two types of reactions of Christian groups toward *Harry Potter* in the United States — a vehement protest as well as an attempt to adapt the franchise to their needs, emphasizing the harm of magic and exploiting the moral content of books and films (Jenkins 2006).

Actors of all three types described above are present around *Evil Dead*. That being said, the franchise is not as popular as Harry Potter or Star Wars. In part, this is why I prefer to avoid calling it a religion, but rather a cult with a hyper-real religious dimension.

Cult Cinema and Fan Rituals

Although the *Evil Dead* trilogy is undoubtedly considered cult, it remains a highly problematic case in the study of cult movies. There is no consensus even on which part of the trilogy is cult. For example, film critics Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik included only the first film (*The Evil Dead*) in the British Film Institute's list of the hundred greatest cult films (Mathijs and Mendik 2011, 85-7); the media scholar Christopher J. Olson nominated the second film (Olson 2018, 68-71); the critic Jennifer Eiss listed the first and the third (Eiss 2010, 219, 229); and the film scholar Kate Egan, though classifying the entire trilogy as a cult, is convinced that the first part has the most cult status and atmosphere due to its imperfections (Egan 2011, 100). In the book *101 Cult Movies You Must See Before You Die*, *Evil Dead* is not listed at all, but in another collection from the same series, *101 Horror Movies You Must See Before You Die* (in which most films are cult), the second instalment of the trilogy is listed (Schneider 2010; Schneider 2009, 316-19). In 2019 a consensus was reached that the franchise as a whole, the musical, video games, the remake, etc. . . must be considered cult (Riecki and Sartain 2019). Even accepting the entire trilogy as cult, it is important to bear in mind that there are media-specific interpretations of what is cult. I will now clarify the term "cult movie."

The cult movie is a complex concept. Scholars are still debating its definition, to say nothing of regular viewers' misconceptions. Now, it seems that most authors agree that a film can be considered cult if it is featured constantly in the field of cult discourse, (that is, films that consistently appear on specialized lists of cult movies), if it is considered cult in the media space in general or in the scholarly space, or if it is cited in other films, creating cultic intertextuality. In the latter case, many motion pictures that claim cult status create their own discourse (and, in a way, visual) cult space by citing other popular cult films. For example, in the *Happy Death Day* (2017) and *Happy New Death Day* (2019) diology there are three posters of cult films that appear on the walls of the main character's room — *They Live* (1988), *Repo Man* (1984), and *Back to the Future* (1985). All this, however, says little about the nature of cult movies or their attributes, but it is an important first step to take toward understanding the empirical category of cult films.

There are several types of cult movies, and each viewer prefers their type — "so bad it's good," midnight movies, classic B movies, exploitation movies, specific national cinema, etc. . . This is not the entire

list, but it makes relatively clear that cult movies are often para-cinematography, that is, what falls outside the category of regular cinema (Hollywood hits, classics, arthouse, indie, festival films, etc. . .). Obviously, cult movies have their own creators, some of whom are well known in specific genres — bad (Ed Wood), vulgar (Tony Scott), proponents of bad taste (John Waters), or unique mainstream directors (David Lynch and Quentin Tarantino), etc. . . In general, if a film remains popular for some reason (regular reruns, viewers' interest, consistent quoting, merchandise collection and special editions, etc. . .), it can be considered cult.

Considering the diversity of types of cult movies, it is difficult to talk about inherent attributes of this phenomenon except with extremely vague “para” prefixes. Scholars, however, attempt to describe the nature of cult films. For example, Canadian film critic Barry Keith Grant delineated cult movies as a priori transgressive, distinguishing three types of transgression — settings (the author deliberately provokes and shocks the audience), themes (discussed in society — cannibalism, sexual perversities, dismembering human bodies, religion, etc. . .), and style (Grant 1991; Grant 2000). In the latter case, the film should not only be visually intense and offer a unique authorial perspective, but possibly also be conventional within its genre or subgenre. Examples of such films include *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* by George Miller (1981) and *Dead Alive* by Peter Jackson (1992). The first installment of *Highlander* (1986) can also be placed in this category as it was worshipped by fans who enjoyed its visual overload. The first two parts of *Evil Dead* should also be mentioned as some scholars see their visual style as an explanation for the films' popularity with cult film fans.

Although scholars have been engaging with the ties between cult movies and religion less and less (because, apparently, they have reached a consensus), it is still important to discuss this aspect separately. When academics began studying cult movies, they felt it necessary to investigate the ties between cult movies and religion. Some connected cult movies to Gnosticism (secret knowledge of the truth, or in this case, the idea that fans possessed a connection with what Hans Jonas understood as Gnosis), focusing mainly on films in which the cosmos plays a significant role: *Repo Man* (1984) and *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) for example (Lavery 1991). Discussing 1970s midnight movies, critics Jonathan Rosenbaum and J. Hoberman compared this phenomenon to a positive cult, as understood by Durkheim (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1983). The critic Danny Peary noted a specific form of religiosity, in which viewers feel privileged and bless-

ed when they recognize something in a film that critics and the rest of the audience misunderstood (Peary 1981, xiii). Film scholars Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton also connected cult movies and religion by describing the process of consuming the former as Dionysianism (ecstatic, outlandish practices of consumption — mirth, constant applause; carnivalesque elements — viewers come dressed in character costumes; repeating quotes in chorus, which often disturbs the average viewer) (Mathijs and Sexton 2011, 133-5). I would like to emphasize that most of these viewpoints, excepting Mathijs' and Sexton's, were expressed long ago, and the connection between cult movies and religion is of little interest to scholars these days.

Scholars have also examined the viewer or the special category, of the “fan,” to study religious belief and pop culture. In the early 1990s, Henry Jenkins pointed out that fans have an obvious religious (negative) connotation because the term, itself, is derived from the word “fanatics.” However, Jenkins insisted on refraining from scandalizing the term “fan” and urged colleagues not to marginalize fans as social and cultural groups. A function of fan culture was actualizing an alternative social community, which Jenkins characterized as a “utopian community” (Jenkins 1992, 12-24, 285). In the early 2000s, Matt Hills took this a step further, asserting that cult fandom should be distinguished from broader discussions about fans. Specifically, Hills claimed that a comparison between a religious cult and a film cult could be declared absurd because the term “religious cult” carried negative undertones, whereas a cult around a film, in the author's opinion, had no such connotations. Nonetheless, Hills distinguished three components that bring these two categories together: both are considered marginal in society; both are characterized by the “practical unconscious,” that is that, without necessarily understanding why they love the subject, fans adore it; and finally, the individualized nature of cult beliefs (Hills 2002, 117-23).

Scholarship examining cult movies and the concept of the “sacred,” which use concepts such as “Gnosticism,” the idea that viewers may feel privileged or “blessed,” or Durkheim's “positive cult” are not sufficient, however, as the concept Dionysianism is too narrow. I propose adding the concept of rituality to Dionysianism because external manifestations of religiosity around many cult movies are not Dionysian but ritualized and may be described through the category of the sacral (for example, young female fans of the first film of the *Twilight* (2008) franchise built altars). Midnight showings are frequently accompanied by rituals: when watching *The Room* (2003),

viewers throw spoons at the screen and greet one of the characters by shouting “Hi, Denny!,” when the character makes an appearance, and “Bye, Denny!,” when the character leaves, etc. . . Fans of *The Wicker Man* (1973), which centers around a fictional pagan cult, have even organized a festival, at which they reenact the rituals shown in the film (Pavlov 2016, 150).

Some cult movies became sources for hyper-real religions. Apart from the above-mentioned Jediism and Matrixism, there is Dudeism (aka The Church of the Latter-Day Dude). Dudeism is a legitimate religious movement that grew out of worshipping the mythology of *The Big Lebowski* (1998) and its main character, who is called the Dude. Those who practice this “slowest spreading hyper-real religion” believe it has roots in Daoism. Dudeism has a scripture, a calendar of holidays, a film quote haiku generator, etc. . .⁴ Moreover, anyone can join this church and even become ordained after receiving an official certificate. If the idea of Dionysianism of cult movies involves merry-making during viewings, the category of rituality is broader as it implies other practices including non-collective ones.

There are rituals around the *Evil Dead* trilogy as well. As critics thought, *The Evil Dead* was a prime candidate to become a midnight cult film (a film shown at special theaters at night for many years). However, when the first film came out, the phenomenon of midnight movies gave way to video, and *The Evil Dead* became a leader in video rentals and home viewings (Eagan 2011, 99). Nowadays, however, midnight showings are more common, and as a result, theatres, predominantly those in the United States, frequently show *The Evil Dead* on Friday and Saturday nights. During these showings, the audience repeats the most memorable remarks of the protagonist, Ash, chanting in chorus “Groovy!” and “Give me some sugar, Baby!” Moreover, fans buy plastic toys based on all three parts of the trilogy — Ash, the “Deadites” (people possessed by a demon), and *The Necronomicon* (the book of the dead that awakens old demons). Necronomicon smartphone cases are also popular as are collectors’ editions of the films that come in Necronomicon cases. For more zealous fans there are other practices. Although the cabin in the woods (which would become a trope of horror films) that was the location of the original film burned down, its owners kept the stone-lined fireplace. Since then, fans who visit this sacral space take away stones, and the structure is

4. See: Dudeism [<https://dudeism.com/>, accessed on August 20, 2019].

gradually vanishing.⁵ Furthermore, in early 2016, fans of the second part of *Evil Dead* rebuilt the cabin and the shed, announced a crowd-funding campaign on Kickstarter to install the horror devices, and easily obtained funding.⁶

Moreover, in the past, cult movies were hard to procure or were under harsh restrictions (since the emergence of the internet, however, it has become much easier to access these films). Searching for a cult film and watching it was, itself, a special pleasure and experience. Returning to Adam Possamai's third dimension of hyper-real religion (religious and secular opposition toward new popular culture), also sheds light on the franchise's hyper-reality. In the early 1980s in Great Britain, when videos for home viewing became a widespread phenomenon, a moral panic erupted over the so-called "video nasties." This led to a 1984 decision to ban the distribution of certain films. *The Evil Dead* headed that list (Cleary 2019). Officially, the film was not released until the early 1990s in a censored version with several shocking scenes redacted.

Since I act as an acafan (an academic scholar with a biased interest to the subject of study), I will allow myself to share a memory of reception of the *Evil Dead* trilogy during the video boom in Russia in the early to mid-1990s, of which I was a witness and a participant (Read 2003). After watching the film, my friends in my apartment building called the first two films of the trilogy, the scariest horror films they had ever seen. We had regular discussions of what we saw and organized several group viewings. Although someone would occasionally mention *Star Wars*, *Evil Dead* sparked the most interest. In 1993, when *Army of Darkness* (the third film) came out, an elder friend procured the videotape somewhere and gave it to me. This happened on a Friday night, when I was leaving for the dacha. I turned on the video that same night and only stopped playing it on Monday morning when it was time to go back and return the tape. Some of my acquaintances even novelized the films, writing down everything they saw on the screen. This did not happen with any film. Some fans even search for their favorite translations and create homemade releases that bring the audio tracks together. And although certain American conventions are inaccessible to me and I do not have the ability to travel to filming

5. See: Book of the dead, [http://www.bookofthedeath.ws/website/the_evil_dead_locations.html], accessed on August 20, 2019].

6. See: Evil dead, [https://evildead.fandom.com/wiki/The_Cabin], accessed August 20, 2019].

locations in Michigan, I continue to love these films. I have a collection of plastic toys from the franchise, old videotapes — foreign licensed releases and Russian pirate recordings, several editions of DVDs, etc. . . I also ritually re-watch the films on a regular basis and follow everything scholars produce on the franchise.

These are but a few aspects of *Evil Dead* fandom. Thus, the franchise has all the attributes of being cult. However, the main question still stands: Why are fans so infatuated with the *Evil Dead* universe and everything around it?

Lovecraft, *The Necronomicon*, and the *Evil Dead* Trilogy

As the *Evil Dead* trilogy is considered cult and the term “cult” carries religious connotations, one may assume that scholars have discussed the franchise in the context of (hyper-real) mythology, but this has not taken place. In fact, scholars specializing in cinema studies have only recently examined the *Evil Dead* phenomenon. In the 1980s, Tania Modleski described the original film as a postmodernist horror, but did not distinguish it from other films and only discussed it within the context of other franchises, such as *Halloween*, *Friday, the 13th*, and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Modleski 1986). In the academe substantial discussions of *Evil Dead* began in the mid-1990s. In 1996 the film scholar Julian Hoxter commented on the evolution of genre diversity in the trilogy, in 2002 Angela Ndalianis examined narrative attributes of the franchise, and in 2007 Tyson Pugh focused on the transformation of “masculinity” in the main character in the third part of the trilogy (masculinity is in quotation marks because the character is cowardly, selfish, and a trickster) (Hoxter 1996; Ndalianis 2004, 73-81; Pugh 2007). The closest a scholar came to addressing religious themes in the films was Julian Petley’s 2007 study, which describes Lovecraftian motifs in the trilogy (Petley 2007). In 2014, Jeffrey Weinstock drew the attention of the academic audience to the franchise once more. Weinstock described *Evil Dead* as a postmodernist text, showing that it was more than simply an illustration of postmodernism, but could itself be understood as a postmodernist theory (Uainstok [Weinstock] 2014). Kate Eagan offered the most complete and substantial study of the original films. Eagan considers the history of the franchise’s creation and its reception and analyzes each film (Egan 2011). Finally, in 2019 a collection of essays was published, in which authors attempted to describe all the products of the franchise from the films to the porn parody, applying to them such categories as queer, liberal individualism,

and convergent culture. Although the franchise is framed as cult in the title, the Lovecraftian theme and its link to hyper-real religion is rarely mentioned in the collection (Riecki and Sartain 2019). In fact, none of the contributors touches upon religious themes in the franchise.

The question that arises is thus whether the cult franchise should even be studied in religious contexts. Most, after all, associate the film's cult status with its visual style. Mathijs believes that the original gained cult status mainly due to its innovative visual style, Olson emphasizes the genre idiosyncrasies of the franchise, and Eiss underscores its cinematographic ingenuity in juxtaposition to its low budget (Mathijs and Mendik 2011, 85-7; Olson 2018, 69-70; Eiss 2010, 219, 229). Kate Egan breaks with this interpretation, however, and demonstrates that the film as a product of its creators' friendship as well as the history of its debut and subsequent popularization were much more critical to its cult status than its plot, content, or cinematography (Egan 2011, 93-103). Although Egan briefly touches upon Lovecraftian motifs in the first film, the film scholar does not connect them to the trilogy's cult reputation. This seems an oversight, as one of the main reasons for the establishment of the *Evil Dead* cult and its increasing cultural significance is its connection to Lovecraft's works.

Howard Lovecraft was not just a popular writer; as the author's work gained a wide audience (posthumously), Lovecraft became an icon. Lovecraft created a powerful religious mythology that has influenced many pop culture works and cult classics. Thus, there are many studies of Lovecraft's influence on popular culture in general, and on sci-fi in particular (Smith 2006). However, sometimes connections between Lovecraft and sci-fi are not as obvious. A conspicuous example is the Swiss surrealist artist Hans Rudolf Giger, who took inspiration from Lovecraft's works. Giger titled one series "Necronomicon"; the "Necronom IV" from that series even brought about the image of the Alien (xenomorph) featured in Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) and became one of the most recognizable contemporary monsters. According to the film critic Roger Luckhurst, the latest installments of the franchise are also inspired by Lovecraft, particularly "Prometheus" (2012). In Luckhurst's opinion, *Alien* "pulls into the orbit of Lovecraft films a powerful philosophy of 'cosmic indifference,' devolutionary fantasies and dynamics of slime, utterly Darwinian, materialistic and historic" (Luckhurst 2014, 58).

Nowadays Lovecraft's legacy receives much attention from scholars of all types. Some scholars used Lovecraft's works to pose new philosophical challenges, offering projects of "nonhuman phenom-

enology” (Trigg 2017; Kharman 2019). And others placed Lovecraft into the context of “horror theology,” using the author’s arguments of a “blasphemous life” (Taker 2017). Thus, it is no surprise that Lovecraft also had an influence on new religious movements of the twentieth century. For example, some scholars list groups of “magic organizations” (e.g. the “Illuminates of Thanateros” and the “Autonomatrix”), which reject the differences between fiction and reality and take inspiration for their magic directly from Lovecraft’s stories, as new religious movements (Hanegraaff 2007). Moreover, it is known that Lovecraft’s mythology influenced such religious movements as the Chaos Magicians and the Church of Satan. Even though Lovecraft, an agnostic, repeatedly emphasized that the stories were fictional, many cited them as reality. There are also many, who do not belong to new religious movements, but believe that Lovecraft’s stories were not simply products of the author’s imagination, but also transcripts of knowledge about evil forces hidden from our world (Possamai 2012a, 4).

As I mentioned before, few scholars have engaged in a detailed analysis of Lovecraft’s influence on *Evil Dead*. In Riekii’s volume on the franchise’s cult, only one author discusses the subject, using texts by Sartre and Bataille. The goal of this essay is to show that Sam Raimi succeeded in depicting the absolute “mystical evil of literature” or the visualization of “evil books.” And Kate Egan focuses more on reiterating Julian Petley’s conclusions than on performing new analysis (Egan 2011, 73-5).

Petley mostly concentrates on the visual elements of the films, through which “Lovecraft’s love for an utterly evil and destructive force” comes alive (Petley 2007, 46). Specifically, the film scholar notes that Raimi uses the subjective camera, where action is portrayed in the first person from the point of view of the demon, to demonstrate that humans are “at the mercy of forces completely indifferent to their fate” (Petley 2007, 47). This perspective, according to Petley, links into the “pessimistic mindset” described in Lovecraft’s works (Petley 2007, 46). Depicting objects from “demonic” angles (e.g. a closeup on a swing pummeling the wall of a house) to frighten the characters may be connected to Lovecraft’s idea that our familiar world is but a surface layer hiding the abyss of evil beyond (Petley 2007, 41). It is very important that Petley reads the *Evil Dead* films as though they are infused with Lovecraftian spirit. This aura is indeed present; even without mentioning Lovecraft’s name, Emily Edwards writes:

Like all movies in the *Evil Dead* franchise, the 2013 film belongs to the gothic subgenre of horror, which relies on supernatural or occult elements of myth, folklore, or urban legend for its gruesome story. The narrative in *Evil Dead* depends on the abandoned belief that ancient gods, demons, or spirits inhabit the world in its mysterious, unseen dimensions and that with occult or hidden knowledge these entities can be awakened with terrible consequences (Edwards 2019, 60).

Accepting all these important conclusions unequivocally, I would like to discuss the plot around *The Necronomicon* in more detail. Lovecraft described a pantheon of deities called the Old Ones (Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth and Nyarlathotep), who slumber in darkness awaiting to return to Earth and conquer humanity. In “The Nameless City” (1921), Lovecraft told a story of a mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred, who wrote *The Necronomicon* after years of wandering the ruins of Babylon and Memphis and who, upon finishing, became mad and was never heard of again. The book, bound in human skin and written with human blood, is said to reveal all the secrets of the universe, particularly those of the Old Ones (Possamai 2012a, 4). According to legend, the manuscript was translated to Greek in the tenth century CE and in the Middle Ages its copies were repeatedly burned, but several copies could still be found in the twentieth century. Lovecraft claimed to have read the original at the library of the Miskatonic University (also fictional).

Douglas Cowan believes that one of the central components of hyper-real religious innovations in new religious movements is *The Necronomicon* itself. Cowan writes that “Although it [*The Necronomicon*] was nothing more than a literary device Lovecraft invented to lend both an eldritch atmosphere and an aura of authenticity to his work, books alleged to be translations of the real *Necronomicon* began to appear in the 1970s” (Cowan 2012, 256). In accordance with Todorov’s understanding of the fantastic:

Some enthusiasts, however, continue to argue that *The Necronomicon* is real, that Lovecraft perhaps read a copy in a university library, and that this caused the nightmares that plagued him throughout his life and on which he drew for much of his fiction. Others maintain that Lovecraft himself was a black magician who sought the secrets of the dead through the book and only barely disguised his efforts in short story form. Still others want *The Necronomicon* and the dark magics it is said to contain to be real(ised) (Cowan 2012, 256-7).

The Necronomicon is central to the narrative and mythology of *Evil Dead*. Still, Kate Egan questions Lovecraft's direct influence on the original film, as the book that awakens the ancient evil is titled *Naturum Demonto* (Egan 2011, 73). However, there can be no doubt about its influence. In the film, the *Naturum Demonto* was discovered by an archeologist in the fictional location of Candar (hence "Candarian demon"). The youth who found the book listened to the archeologist's message that was left in the cabin in the woods: "Here I continued my research undisturbed by the myriad distractions of modern civilization and far from the groves of academe. I believe I have made a significant find in the Candarian Ruins. A volume of Ancient Sumarian burial practices and funerary incantations. It is entitled *Morturom Demonto* — roughly translated, *Book of the Dead*" (Raimi 1981). Even at this point, Lovecraft's influence is obvious. And by the second film the book is already called *Necronomicon Ex-Mortis*, it is bound in human skin and written with human blood, and its authorship is credited to a mad Arabic poet, Abdul Alhazred.

When the spells from the book are performed, the evil possesses humans and invades their bodies. Part of the reason that *Evil Dead* came to be so popular was because it altered the mainstream American tradition of zombie representation (Kempner 2019). Zombies (corpses that come alive and crave live human flesh) first appeared in George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). The title of this film purposely uses the word "dead," just as *Evil Dead* does. Whereas Romero's dead were simply alive, Raimi's dead were literally evil. As the British scholar Jamie Russell notes, though *Evil Dead* films were not zombie movies per se, they were often considered in the context of zombie films (Russell 2005, 156). *The Necronomicon*, however, opens a door into this world to spirits (later called "Deadites"), who invade human bodies and make them into the "evil dead." "Deadites" are not zombies, nor do they resemble the possessed from *The Exorcist* (1973). Raimi depicted a monster somewhere in between the two existing versions of the "dreadful other" (zombies and the possessed). In contrast to exorcism movies, in the *Evil Dead* universe there is no other religion to confront the awakening of ancient Lovecraftian evil; on social media, however, the franchise's fans debate the existence of God in the franchise. Although more interested in the cosmic horror of nature, that "endless grim universe of midnight darkness and tenebrous icy cold," the philosopher Dylan Trigg writes: "The affective response of horror — far from an aestheticizing of alien existence — is the nec-

essary symptom of experiencing oneself as other. . . In the writings of H.P. Lovecraft, we gain a sense of the body as the site of another life” (Trigg 2017, 107). In short, the Lovecraftian theme of an invaded body in *Evil Dead* instills such fear because it is nearly impossible to exorcise the demons from human bodies.⁷

In the second part of *Evil Dead* (*Evil Dead II*, aka *Evil Dead 2: Dead by Dawn*), Lovecraftian mythology is developed further. The viewer learns more about *The Necronomicon*: specifically, that the book’s missing pages contain a prophecy about a hero who defeats the evil and about a spell that unlocks a portal in space and time. The viewer also sees spirits that materialize in forms other than bodies like, for example, a giant tree. And in the third part, the protagonist, Ash, is transported to early fourteenth-century England to fight “Deadites.” Even though *Army of Darkness* is no longer a horror but rather a fantasy comedy, fans still love it mainly because it preserves Lovecraftian mythology, even if to a lesser degree. The popularity of the franchise is contingent upon the hyper-real religious influence (of Lovecraft) on its narrative. Thus, Valerie Guyant notes that though the 2013 remake, *Evil Dead*, was a box office success, fans of the original trilogy were discontented with the new version, largely because it lacked the style and the plot twists that had made the original films cult classics (Guyant 2019, 170).

Conclusion

In their analysis of the *Star Wars* phenomenon, Mathijs and Mendik write that the franchise grew from a cult to a religion (Mathijs and Mendik 2011, 188). Such a religion, as Possamai demonstrates, is called a hyper-real religion. Around *Evil Dead* there is a cult that has not yet reached the scale of religion. Nonetheless, the franchise is expanding in various mediums, its mythology is developing, and its fictional universe gains more followers every day. This means that this “fantastic” text, whose popularity can be explained by its Lovecraftian mythology, is increasingly penetrating popular culture and shaping it. Though *Evil Dead* might not become a religion as powerful as Jediism, as I demonstrate, it is a cult that can be described and analyzed through the category of hyper-real religion.

7. The only exception is the main character. In the second film a Candarian demon inhabits Ash’s body and leaves it at dawn.

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