KILLER PORTRAITS: AN URBAN LEGEND AND MORAL PANIC IN THE 1990S

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Abstract: The article is about an urban legend that was disseminated through certain parts of Russia in 1996–1997. At this time rumours about Satanists were current in Russia, as in many countries, and sometimes gave rise to the so-called 'moral panics' that have been described in the scholarly literature. According to the rumours that circulated in Sverdlovsk Oblast and the area surrounding Moscow in 1996–1997, between the photograph and the frame of children's portraits taken by professional photographers, photographs of parts of other people's bodies, funeral appurtenances, and other unrelated objects would be inserted, with the result that the child in the photograph would be harmed. People who heard these rumours took studio portraits that they had out of their frames and showed them to experts — psychics or churchmen. As well as material from newspapers and television broadcasts of the 1990s, a memoir of these events recorded by the author is analysed, and for comparison, variants of the same urban legend published on the Internet in the 2000–2010s are adduced. The concept of moral panics is used as a theoretical approach. The questions of the reasons for the explosive proliferation of the urban legend and of the forms this proliferation took are raised. As the article shows, ideas of the portrait as a double of the person portrayed, and of the possibility of doing harm to someone by means of an image (which caused the disturbances about 'hell-depicting icons' in the nineteenth century and still exist in Russia today) played a part in igniting the moral panic of the 1990s.

Keywords: Satanism, moral panic, urban legend, witchcraft, photographs, 1990s.

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The article is about an urban legend that was disseminated through certain parts of Russia in 1996–1997. At this time rumours about Satanists were current in Russia, as in many countries, and sometimes gave rise to the so-called 'moral panics' that have been described in the scholarly literature. According to the rumours that circulated in Sverdlovsk Oblast and the area surrounding Moscow in 1996–1997, between the photograph and the frame of children's portraits taken by professional photographers, photographs of parts of other people's bodies, funeral appurtenances, and other unrelated objects would be inserted, with the result that the child in the photograph would be harmed. People who heard these rumours took studio portraits that they had out of their frames and showed them to experts — psychics or churchmen. As well as material from newspapers and television broadcasts of the 1990s, a memoir of these events recorded by the author is analysed, and for comparison, variants of the same urban legend published on the Internet in the 2000–2010s are adduced. The concept of moral panics is used as a theoretical approach. The questions of the reasons for the explosive proliferation of the urban legend and of the forms this proliferation took are raised. As the article shows, ideas of the portrait as a double of the person portrayed, and of the possibility of doing harm to someone by means of an image (which caused the disturbances about 'hell-depicting icons' in the nineteenth century and still exist in Russia today) played a part in igniting the moral panic of the 1990s.

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Introduction

In 2006, at a time when I was never parted from my Dictaphone, I happened to record, from someone I knew who had spent her adolescence not far from Moscow, the story that provided the stimulus for this article.

So, this is how it happened. My mother came home from work and said that their whole school was in turmoil because it had turned out that in the eighties there had been some sect in the area around Moscow that had been harming children by black magic. And the form this black magic took was that the photographs taken at kindergarten — I suppose everyone has some... Well, say, in my case it was a photograph where I'd been dressed up as a cosmonaut, and they'd pinned a brooch on me so that I didn't look like a boy, I don't know, some sort of ribbons, so. And the photograph, the most important thing is that it was attached to a piece of cardboard with a stand. And it turns out that underneath the photograph there was another photograph of a child who had already been harmed by magic, and through this magic <…> in short, the spell was placed on the person whose photograph was

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on top. It turned out that there were people who had already opened up these photographs, and there really were photographs of sick children inside, who were, as it were, feeding on the energy of good healthy children, and that was how they [the healthy children] *were harmed. Mother came and said 'We must open up the photographs at once,' because we had such photographs at home, particularly of me. 'Mom,' I said, 'that is all total rubbish,' and so on and so forth. Nevertheless my mother was convinced that it must be done and without delay. This was in winter time. It was dark, and the two of us were by ourselves. The rest is like a fairy-tale. We took the photograph, and peeled off the cardboard with its stand. And what do you think? Underneath my photograph there really was a photograph of a completely sick child. That is, the girl was, probably... well, if I was* [in the photograph], *I think, about five, so the girl was probably about five too. And to look at she was in a simply dreadful state, such a degree of obesity, and so on, and so forth... My mother's hair stood on end: 'There, that's what's wrong. They harmed you with black magic when you were a child.' So what to do now? We decided to burn the whole thing. That photograph, and mine as well, and let that be an end of it, as they say. We tried to burn it, and it would not burn at all. So why, how to burn it? We needed some special container. So we got a bowl, lit a fire in it, tried to burn it — damned if it would burn. Because it was a photograph, with negatives, all that stuff. In the end we somehow managed to destroy it all, and then we threw the ashes on the rubbish dump. Afterwards, then, there is the question of what to do next. How can you carry on living with that sort of black magic? We were advised to go and see a wisewoman. We didn't go and see her; I went to church and lit a candle. And I'm fine* [AFM 2006].

The events recounted in the interview, and which I examine in this article, took place in the 1990s. At that time there were rumours about Satanists circulating not only in Russia, but in many other countries, and these sometimes led to panics and prompted people to take active measures to defend themselves or their children. At the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s the newsletter of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research, *FOAFtale News*,[1] regularly published under the heading 'Eye on Satanism' reports from various places, for example that farmers in England and Sweden had uncovered suspicious harm to their cattle, that Bill Clinton looked like the Antichrist on the cover of *Time*, and that children in Orkney had been forced to take part in satanic rituals ['Eye on Satanism' 1993]. Jeffrey Victor has described satanic panics from material from the USA [Victor 1993], Jean La Fontaine from Britain [La Fontaine 1998], Bill Ellis from Britain, the USA and

[1] Issues are available online: <http://www.folklore.ee/FOAFtale/>.

Canada [Ellis 2000], and Gabriel Cavaglion and Revital Sela-Shayovitz from Israel [Cavaglion, Sela-Shayovitz 2005].

In Russia concerns about Satanism proliferated in the 1990s. In 2000 in a broadcast 'On Satanism' on Radio Svoboda, Yakov Krotov characterised the current situation in this way: 'Why do the fashion for Satanism and the fashion for fear of Satanism come in waves? Amongst us it was perhaps not even heard of even in 1991 or 1992, and now there is some sort of mention every month in every newspaper' [Krotov 2000]. In 1996–1997, when the events described in this article took place, *Izvestiya* wrote about churches being set on fire by Satanists in Lithuania [Lashkevich 1997], *Rossiyskaya gazeta* about the proliferation of nocturnal orgies with blood sacrifices among young people in Romania as a result of listening to rock music [Morozov 1996], and *Kommersant* that graves had been desecrated by Satanists in Tashkent [Chernogaev 1997]. The Russian press claimed that Satanists had burnt bodies in a morgue in Moscow Oblast ['V morge…' 1996], that there had been preparations to cause an explosion in a cathedral in Moscow by 'one of the Moscow groups of worshippers of Antichrist', which 'counted about two hundred people' as its members and had its roots in Norway [Rokhlin 1997a], and that there were plans for the ritual murder of adolescents 'on Satan's orders' in Tyumen Oblast [Snegirev 1997]. The same years saw the publication of the books *Taynyy mir satanistov* (The Secret World of Satanists) [Sandunov 1997] and *Put k apokalipsisu* (On the Road to the Apocalypse), with a section 'Voices from the Abyss' specially devoted to Satanists [Vorobevskiy 1997]. Deacon Andrey Kuraev published *Satanizm dlya intelligentsii* (Satanism for the Intelligentsia) [Kuraev 1997], and Aleksandr Dvorkin a collection of articles entitled *Kapkan bezgranichnoy svobody* (The Snare of Unlimited Liberty), the authors of which argued that the founder of scientology was a Satanist [Dvorkin 1996]. The next year, 1998, a detective story, 'Chislo zverya' (The Number of the Beast), about an investigation into the crimes of Satanists, came out [Petrov 1998]. Thus, in the years in question Satanists were depicted in this country in the press, in religious literature and even in fiction as a really existing threat.

It is not my aim to give a full description of the notions of Satanism current in Russia in the 1990s: they still await someone to research them. Nevertheless some aspects of home 'Satanist panics' of this period have already been described in the scholarly literature: Maria Akhmetova has examined religious communities' ideas of threat, including Satanism [Akhmetova 2011]. My examination of the urban legend of killer portraits, which existed in some Russian towns in 1996–1997, will be a contribution to the study of notions of Satanism based on Russian material. Although 'Satanic panics' were very widespread all over the world at this time, I have not discovered

in publications dedicated to the study of folklore any description of this urban legend from any other part of the world. This subject is also absent from the two-volume collection of urban legends published in 2001 [Brunvand 2001]. The urban legend of killer portraits is a specifically local example of Satanist moral panics, and in this article I raise the questions of the reasons for the explosive proliferation of this urban legend and of the forms that it took.

My sources, in the search for answers to these questions, besides the one recorded interview, were publications in the press of Moscow, Yekaterinburg and Nizhny Tagil in the 1990s, and recordings of the television programme *9½* put out by the Yekaterinburg channel ASV. As supplementary material, Internet publications from the 2000s and 2010s were used. I do not discuss the differences between variants of the subject and the events connected with it in different parts of Russia or different places within an oblast, since it is not possible from the available sources to discern any significant differences between local instances.

The theoretical approach

The term 'moral panic' that I shall use as an analytical tool for the analysis of my materials is, according to the definition by one of the originators of this term, Stanley Cohen, a series of events in which 'a condition, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible' [Cohen 2002: 1]. Cohen draws attention to the 'folk devils', antagonists who are portrayed as responsible for whatever has provoked a panic in society; their behaviour is defined as a threat to social values and interests. Against these antagonists there stand 'moral entrepreneurs'.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda have extended Cohen's model. They list five criteria of moral panic: concern existing in society, hostility to the group thought to be the source of the threat, consensus in society that the threat is real, serious and caused by the actions of that group, disproportionality of the concern in comparison with the scale of the threat, and volatility, that is, an inconstancy of social mood [Goode, Ben-Yehuda 1994: 156–159]. They identify three models for the emergence of moral panic: one in which the source of the panic are elites, another where it is promoted by interest groups ('moral entrepreneurs', such as religious organisations and suchlike), and the third is the 'grassroots level', when the panic originates in society

'from below' [Goode, Ben-Yehuda 1994: 159–166]. Goode and Ben-Yehuda write that there would be no panic if there were no latent fear in society, but that that fear needs to be directed and given form.

By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century the term 'moral panic' had begun to be used so widely by researchers, and to overlap with so many other scholarly concepts, that it is now necessary to distinguish it from other phenomena. To this end Klocke and Muschert have combined and further developed Cohen's and Goode and Ben-Yehuda's models [Klocke, Muschert 2010]. Among the features distinguishing moral panic from other forms of social disturbance, they list provocative language describing the antagonists, definition of the degree of threat as high, and the spreading of the panic beyond the local level or a single episode [Ibid.: 300].

In the second edition of his classic work of 1972, Cohen writes that accusations of Satanism, which began to proliferate in the USA about 1983, were 'one of the purest cases of moral panic' [Cohen 2002: XVII]. Other researchers also include the American and British Satanist cases among moral panics [Jenkins, Maier-Katkin 1992; Thompson 1998; Klocke, Muschert 2010; Krinsky 2013]. In our case, the events were described by contemporaries as 'rumours' and 'a panic' [Bocharova 1996], but can that panic be called 'moral'? Evaluations of the (in)correctness of what was happening and judgments about the threat to the interests of society are to be found in all the publications concerning insertions into photographs that I have analysed (for example: 'In any case, there is nothing to be said about its moral evaluation. In the form of criminal negligence or a criminal experiment it has caused unambiguous harm' [Ibid.]). There is, of course, no point in giving the phenomenon an academic label if this has no heuristic value. Defining the case as a moral panic allows it to be included among a series of events described by other researchers, and to examine the similarities and differences between them, and therefore I accept it.

The events of 1996–1997 in the mass media of the time

Chronology and geography of the events

The events in which we are interested began approximately in February to April 1996: that is how they are dated at the beginning of a television report from Yekaterinburg of June 1996 [Nekrasov, Lazarev 1996], and in the June edition of the Sverdlovsk regional youth newspaper *Na smenu!* An article published in that issue states the case as follows: 'About four months ago people started to find insertions in photographs that they had ordered (incidentally, poor quality ones at low prices). Some portraits "came to light" accidentally, some people pulled the photographs apart out of curiosity, others

took one, as the only image of a relative who had fallen inexplicably ill, to a psychic that they knew, and that was where its dreadful underlay was revealed. Rumours began. People began to open up portraits, even ones in iron frames, to check. People began to make phone calls. To the diocesan office, to magician-healers, to the offices of private psychics... A panic began' [Bocharova 1996].

In 1996, rumours were recorded in the towns of Verkhny Ufaley (Chelyabinsk Oblast), Pervouralsk and Revda (Sverdlovsk Oblast), the villages of the Systertsky Town District, the Beloyarsky Town District and the Beloyarsky District of Sverdlovsk Oblast, and also in small towns included within the city of Yekaterinburg — Koltsovo, Uralniiskhoz and Kompressornyy — and city districts — ZhBI, Elmash and Vtorchermet. By June 1996, the regional newspapers and Yekaterinburg television had joined in spreading the rumours. In the autumn of 1996 rumours about insertions in children's photographs began spreading in Nizhny Tagil.

Rumours sometimes arose with the participation of the press, sometimes without, but with the assistance of interested professionals such as psychics. A television report from Yekaterinburg commented: 'Such rumours are circulating in various settlements in the province, and it is remarkable that they all began only recently and somehow suddenly and among large numbers of people' [Nekrasov, Lazarev 1996]. The same presenter described an episode when a rumour started: 'A girl was involved in a car crash, not killed, but hurt her head. A folk healer came to her and said "It's no accident you were hit, dear, there's black magic against you in the photograph." The old woman got to work with her tentacles and worked out that there was part of a white head[1] in the portrait photograph. The rumour spread through the village, and everyone who had portraits opened them up and started to burn them all together in the yard' [Ibid.].

The recipients of the rumours checked the children's portraits that they had at home, and when they discovered underneath a child's portrait something that should not be there, they turned to specialists and passed on the rumours. The specialists performed actions intended to deliver them from black magic: priests said prayers over the photographs and burnt them, and psychics 'rendered them harmless'. There is mention of a refusal to hire a photographer to record graduation day at a kindergarten.

More than once rumours were passed on via a kindergarten or school: one of the employees or mothers would have opened up suspicious photographs, and then told her colleagues or other parents about her

[1] The meaning is not clear in the text: this could mean part of a photograph of someone with white hair, or a section of an over-exposed, 'white', photograph. Our thanks to Dr Boitsova for this clarification [Eds.].

discoveries. Schools and kindergartens were fertile ground for the passing on of information about portraits for two reasons: on the one hand, as places where people come together and have the opportunity to talk and exchange information, and on the other, because their clients are parents, and those in their care, children (given that the subject of the rumours was harm done by black magic to children). In the instance described in my interview, the information had also been acquired at a school. My informant explained: 'My mother simply found out about this from the teachers at school, and they referred to some newspaper, apparently a local one' [AFM 2006].

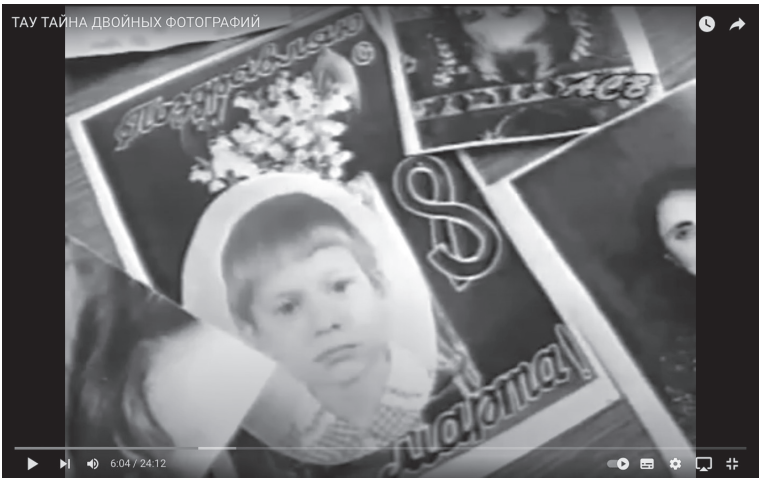
Using Goode and Ben-Yehuda's model, one could say that the outbreaks of panic about the portraits could sometimes occur at the grass-roots level, i.e. among ordinary people, but interest groups and the mass media in the Sverdlovsk and other oblasts picked up the panic and spread it. The teacher who was the heroine of the Yekaterinburg television report addressed viewers with the emotional exclamation 'And I want all of you who have these portraits to know what's going on, and check right away what's in them!' [Nekrasov, Lazarev 1996].

In the winter of 1997 the rumours were conveyed via the mass media from Sverdlovsk Oblast to Noginsk, near Moscow, where they spread in the same manner and caused the same panic. On 8 February 1997 *Moskovskiy komsomolets* carried an article entitled 'Satan's Consumer Services Opens a Branch in Noginsk', which told of an outbreak of panic and said 'What happened in Noginsk was preceded by quite ordinary events. One of the locals came upon a paper from Nizhny Tagil with an unusual note' [Rokhlin 1997b]. *Moskovskiy komsomolets* was evidently the paper that had caused the panic at the school where my informant's mother worked.

Individual publications continued to appear in 1997 (thus the article in *Moskovskiy komsomolets* was reprinted in its entirety with an indication of its source in the Nizhny Tagil paper *Konsilium*, 20–26 February 1997, and thereby the authority of a paper from the capital legitimised the panic that by then already existed in Nizhny Tagil). Afterwards, as has happened with moral panics in a number of other cases, the fuss faded out. The events under examination did not have any consequences in the form of prosecutions, such as the Satanic panics in the USA and Britain had.

The content of the rumours

The rumours that circulated concerned different types of studio portraits: those varnished in the 'Palekh' style, those with metal frames, and those 'on cardboard with a stand' as in the recorded interview. It is worth noting that the photo portraits were sometimes



Ill. 1. Screenshot from the television programme *9½*, Yekaterinburg television channel ASV. 1996. <https://youtu.be/hYjn3cNCGcI>

described as 'poor quality', which, in the light of what was happening, served as a further negative characteristic.

The inserts were also of various kinds: 'photographs of long-dead people, parts of faces or other "sections of the body", cemetery railings and even… Brezhnev's body in his coffin' and 'an irregularly written inscription in ink, "as the grass withers, so wither the mother and child"' [Bocharova 1996], 'mourning ribbons, broken crosses, exposed negatives, headless matches, badges with incomprehensible symbols, drawings of people with inverted crosses about their heads' [Rokhlin 1997b], 'decomposing bodies, tapeworms and other unclean objects' and also the Latin letter S — the 'symbol of Satanism', the first letter of Satan's name[1] [Nekrasov, Lazarev 1996]. Judging by the visual content of the broadcast, an ampersand, used instead of the figure 8 in an 8 March greetings card, was taken for a letter S (Ill. 1).

The harm which, it was asserted, was inflicted by the portraits, also varied: it could be damage to health, or a personality change, or a worsening of family circumstances, i.e. a wide spectrum of problems. A connection, on the principle of similarity, between the insert and the result of the spell was often mentioned, for example: 'There was an insertion behind the child's portrait: a negative of the portrait

[1] In a collection of articles edited in 1996 by Aleksandr Dvorkin and directed against the scientologists, particular attention is paid to this letter. 'The letter S and two triangles are the chief symbols that can be found in practically all scientologist texts and publications. S apparently stands for san-ontology, and the two triangles stand for affinity-reality-communication <…> and knowledge-responsibility-control. But there is another possible interpretation of this symbol. The sign S, looked at separately from the triangles <…>, looks extremely like a serpent <…>. For Crowley the letter S was always the sign of the serpent-tempter — Satan' [Atack 1996: 92].

on photographic paper. In this case they had simply inserted contrariness into his character, i.e. the ungovernable and incoherent nature of his thoughts and actions. Behind a child's portrait of eighteen years ago there was an insertion which showed a bride of about thirty-five or forty, in a veil, with an injured finger on her right hand. The young man, already grown up now, has a finger missing on his right hand, that is, that information had been inserted at the bioenergetic level since his childhood. At the same time, they foretold for him the fate of being the eternal bridegroom, that is, constantly changing his life-partner' [Katrus 1997].

The gravity of the consequences varies from the lethal to the much less serious, for example those that one victim, subtitled 'An indignant father', recounts in the broadcast: 'She lost her appetite. Lost her appetite completely. My wife couldn't make her eat. And then, again, for no reason at all, she would, er, she would do strange things. That is, she might throw the mirror at her younger daughter, who... her sister, who was one year old at the time. And then how can you explain that she began to lose weight over the time, since that damned por... that damned photograph, portrait, was done? I don't know how to explain it all. I simply believe that certain powers exist. That's what I believe' [Nekrasov, Lazarev 1996]. These words make one recall the criterion of 'disproportionality' in a moral panic in Goode and Ben-Yehuda's model.

In the interview that I recorded there is no mention of any particular problem that beset the girl in the portrait. The damage done is described in two general phrases: 'There, that's what's wrong. You were bewitched as a child' [AFM 2006]. Here one can see the mechanism by which the rumours work: if there is evidence that harmful powers were in operation, then signs that harm was done are taken on trust.

Interest groups: the media

In all the publications of 1996–1997 about the panic that I have analysed, the journalists express similar opinions about the insertions in the photographs as black magic. Moreover, they consider the very fact of a printed source to be a proof of the proposed interpretation: 'I could not disbelieve my colleague's research, nor the living examples — the two friends Olya and Yulya, and Svetlana, Katyusha's mother' [Titorenko 1996a].

As the subject passed from paper to paper, the number of victims increased. Thus the article in *Na smenu!* began with an example of a child's death. The account began with the words 'Once upon a time there was a little girl,' after which there came a story which, the reader might suppose, could be either truthful or fictional. The name

of 'the girl who died' was not given, and after her story it said: 'This, or more or less like this, is how a lover of thrillers might tell of the events that took place in Yekaterinburg' [Bocharova 1996]. In this way, the author allows the reader either to suppose that 'the little girl' really existed, or to suppose her a fictional character from a hypothetical example. In the next article, in *Pravo plyus*, 'the girl who died' becomes real: 'Larisa [Bocharova] gives chilling examples. One little girl died' [Titorenko 1996a].

In all the media sources analysed, the 'materialist' explanation of the events, if it is given at all, is rejected: 'One man who refused to give his name rang and said that all these bits of photographs inserted between the portrait and the cardboard, have a functional purpose. He said that all professional photographers do this. We consulted some professionals, and found that this was bosh. Even formal logic tells us that a little piece of some other photograph has nothing to do in a large portrait. And even if it were so, why should all these pieces be of the same sort: a corpse or a human organ or body part' [Nekrasov, Lazarev 1996]. The explanation that photographs are fixed in their frames using used photographic paper (from other photographs) is called 'absurd' by Larisa Bocharova, and likewise by Irina Titorenko, who wrote: 'It turns out that the inserts were needed in order to cover the iron pins on the inside of the frames. But why with images of death?' [Titorenko 1996a]. Other arguments against the idea of black magic are also rejected by the mass media: 'Against the suggestion of black magic speaks, in the first place, the fact that the photographs have been hanging on walls for years and until now have had no effect on the health of the person portrayed. Although practitioners of magic contacted by reporters from *M[oskovskiy] k[omsomolets]* have assured us that a curse may be put on several generations ahead' [Rokhlin 1997b].

Thus all the journalists who wrote about these events chose to explain the phenomena in terms of black magic, thereby supporting the panic. They were acting in the interests of their own group — offering readers and viewers the most shocking news possible.

Interest groups: moral entrepreneurs

In the question of how the insertions in photographs should be explained and what should be done with them, the Orthodox Church and the healers formed competing groups. In so doing, when they expressed opinions in the newspapers and on television, they were partly at odds with each other, and partly formed a common front in their interpretation of the events. The priests quoted by television journalists and the writers of the articles in the papers did not reject the view that the insertions in the photographs were black magic: 'Indeed,' said the rector of the Church of the Dormition, confirming

the apprehensions of his parishioners, 'there are some strange coincidences. For example, someone brought me the photograph of a little girl with her eyes put out. It had been found in a childhood photo of a young man of twenty who not long ago had suddenly begun to lose his sight...' [Rokhlin 1997b].

The priests, however, told people not to consult psychics. All the same, the television journalist gave airtime not just to representatives of the Orthodox Church, but to Anna Kiryanova, the leader of a 'spiritual centre', whom he introduced as 'one of the most distinguished specialists in the field of astrology, parapsychology and other spiritual matters'. Another journalist, in similar vein, presented priests and psychics as equally plausible alternatives: 'People who were given the good advice to turn to the Church for help, or the address of G. G. Garnova, the specialist on parapsychology <…> are sincerely grateful' [Titorenko 1996b]. The 'psychologist and folk-healer' Sergey Shapovalov advised people to go to the Church, adding 'If after following the above recommendations the state of alarm remains and you are unsatisfied at heart, request a consultation with those healers in our town whom you trust' [Shapovalov 1996]. N. N. Katrus, a 'dowser', writes: 'Therefore my advice is, never burn the insertion by yourself, but go to a specialist who will break the link at the level of the field, then you must without fail check whether the link remains, and only then destroy the insertion. It is better to break the link, as indicated in the aforementioned articles, with the help of the Church' [Katrus 1996]. In this way psychics sometimes directly advise turning to the Church.

However, they cannot be unaware of the opinion of them held by representatives of the Orthodox Church, and sometimes react to that opinion. The author of an article in *Na smenu!* gives Anna Kiryanova's advice: 'You know, let everyone act according to their faith. I know, many people have rung up the diocesan office, and the Church gave a clear reply: burn both the portrait and its frame. But the mother of a child whose photograph she had destroyed in this way consulted me. The child had a temperature of nearly 40°, the doctors couldn't say anything, and the child felt extremely poorly... After all, when you have a tumour you don't cut it out with a knife... I would advise consulting specialists whom you trust. But in no circumstances, those who take money for "healing". We too could fill our pockets from that if we chose,' after which the journalist continues in her own words, 'In [Bishop] Nikon's encyclical "to the beloved flock" there is indeed a paragraph about the fraudster Anna Kiryanova and her links with unclean spirits, and a sarcastic assessment of her psychic "panacea". <…> But good is good irrespective of what religion it belongs to; as the canon himself asserts, the tree is known by its fruits' [Bocharova 1996]. In this extract, an opposition between the group of psychics and the Church can be traced, and the journalist cautiously

takes the side of the psychic — not in order to triumph over the Church, but to reconcile the two groups of specialists, who should unite in the face of a common calamity.

Both sides use the opportunity offered to them to express their opinions in the mass media in order to advance the interests of their group and reinforce their authority. Thus, one TV journalist's interlocutor, identified in the subtitles as 'Father Dmitriy', confirms the existence of bewitchment through photographs, then adds 'But this only happens to people who have little or no faith in God' [Nekrasov, Lazarev 1996]. The psychics assert their status as experts (so, in one interview on the subject of the photographs Anna Kiryanova says 'I am just an expert' [Bocharova 1996]). However, they qualify such claims to expertise by saying that while there are 'self-taught' people, there are also worthy representatives of the profession: '*For God's sake don't consult untested, amateur psychics or dowsers, folk-healers, not only won't they help, they can even do harm.* An amateur's pendulum or dowsing rods, when checked, will indicate something, will seem to work, but this effect is caused by an ideomotor response,' writes a dowser [Katrus 1996; italics in the original. — *O.B.*]. Moreover, all the media sources from the 1990s analysed have confidence in the psychics they interview. It may be concluded that the chance to express their opinion to the media of these events became, among other things, an opportunity for a group of psychics to distinguish themselves in the eyes of society from black magic, and to place themselves in opposition to Satanists.

The supposed antagonists

On the television programme *9½*, the expert invited on air, Anna Kiryanova, began by plainly pointing out three men as 'Satanist photographers', even describing their appearance and giving the name of one of them — 'Sysoev'. The journalist presenting the programme was not constrained in his expressions about the unknown supposed guilty parties, calling them 'photo-devils', 'photo-devil's spawn' and 'photo-demons', and also using the word 'sect' to describe them. In another edition of the same programme, Anna Kiryanova said 'So far we cannot say for sure that this is the work of an order of Satanists, who, incidentally, are very active in our city. But I can say unambiguously that these photographs do harm the people into whose portraits they are inserted' [Nekrasov, Lazarev 1996].

In the next edition, the journalists explicitly named the municipal enterprise Fotoportret in Yekaterinburg, where, allegedly, at least since 1970 used photographic paper had been used as lining material for portraits. The journalist gave the address of the enterprise, named its director, and even allowed her to speak in a short interview. She appealed to her standing and experience, and used professional

terminology, that is, she drew on her symbolic capital and tried to use the media in order not only to answer the accusation, but, in turn, to accuse the 'moral entrepreneurs': 'I don't know who needs this. Evidently the psychics wanted to eat better, that people would turn to them to lift the curse' [Nekrasov, Lazarev 1996].[1]

However, the journalist contested the materialist explanation put forward by the director. Although in the different editions of the programme there was a consistent progress from 'the dreadful unambiguous conclusion' that 'a gang of demons has been active in the city for six years, sucking the energies out of the population by means of cheap photography' to the more cautious conclusions that followed, no one was in a hurry to lift the incriminating accusation from the photography studio. At the same time, after giving the address of Fotoportret and the name of its director, the journalists expressed themselves a little more carefully than before: 'The most hot-headed among the people will of course say: 'It's a sect, witches, they've decided to ruin the population between the three of them.' Although that is what everything suggests, we would recommend thinking and not committing any attacks on the ladies. <…> We cannot rule out that there is a demonic sect that is inserting into portraits special black magic pictures, but not here; here everything is being done through ignorance' [Nekrasov, Lazarev 1996]. It is understood that there really are Satanists, a dangerous sect or wicked wizards at large in the city, but whether they are these specific employees of the photographic studio or not is still unclear, though 'that is what everything suggests'.

The 'dowser' Katrus, the author of remarks in the newspaper *Konsilium*, likewise does not express a definite opinion on the question of who actually cast the spells: 'I will not undertake either to affirm or deny that in the case of the portraits it was done deliberately' [Katrus 1996]. Aleksandr Rokhlin in *Moskovskiy komsomolets* ascribed the curse to a Satanist photographer, but hesitated about what the latter's motives were. Was (s)he seriously intending to cause harm by black magic, or simply having fun? [Rokhlin 1997b].

There were also cases where the threat was relocated abroad, in the spirit of the religious discourse relating to the end of the world that was described in an article by Maria Akhmetova [Akhmetova 2011]. An instructive case is that of a journalist who, in an article published in 1996, wrote, citing a 'psychoenergetic therapist', 'They are turned into zombies abroad, with the aim of destroying Russia', and even tried using that to explain why the panic began in the Urals, 'where the people are famed for their robust health and firm moral principles':

[1] In other descriptions of 'Satanic panics' there are cases where the antagonists (the 'folk devils') have found their voice and successfully diverted the accusation from themselves [deYoung 2013].

'There is something to draw on here' [Titorenko 1996a]. But then in her very next publication, the journalist completely changed her tune, using instead the conventional religious term, 'the chastisement of the Lord': 'Don't be in too much of a hurry to weep inconsolably over this ill-omened "lining" — look inside yourselves. Have you really not done anything black in your life, have you really never offended your neighbour? The answer lies in your soul' [Titorenko 1996b].

The lack of definiteness regarding who exactly was to blame is an interesting peculiarity of the Russian panic of 1996–1997. This feature shows that at that time our native ideas of Satanism were not so powerful and not so widespread in society as to provoke any official reaction, criminal charges, or changes in legislation, as happened in other countries. Although some accusations of Satanism in Russia at that period did result in verdicts with actual terms of imprisonment [Makaricheva 1999], in those cases it was a matter of actual murders; the investigation was shaped by the interests of law enforcement, which was under pressure to solve the crime and punish the guilty parties.

'Killer portraits' in the twenty-first century

In the 2000–2010s the subject remained alive on the Internet, by now in the form of an urban legend. The story was told in an edition of the electronic mailing 'X-FILES: The Unexplained' of 6 May 2002. The link to this version <http://content.mail.ru/arch/7338/128980.html> has since become inaccessible (the author has a copy of the article), but the story was copied word for word and published in the communities 'Paronormal Phenomenons' on Odnoklassniki, 19 May 2013[1] and 'HORROR STORIES' on VKontakte, 7 March 2015,[2] and also on the site hStor. Strashnye rasskazy, misticheskie istorii, kripipasta[3]. It was retold in abridged form on Mrakopediya (Wickedpedia) ['Detskie fotoportrety'], and the same version, with further cuts, was put on a blog [Andor 2010]. The 2002 text was rewritten by another author, in his own name, with additions from his own childhood in a small town in Sverdlovsk Oblast, and published on the sites Zhutkoe[4], 4stor.ru. Strashnye istorii[5] and on a blog [Buzhan 2020]. I have listed those versions for which the text of 2002 can be established with certainty as a primary source, but there are other Internet publications of this urban legend, mostly on fora, but also on Mrakopediya [chetushka 2010; 'Detskie fotoportrety'].

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1 <https://ok.ru/group/51531285921970/topic/62045787089842>.

2 <https://vk.com/wall-86941908_178>.

3 <https://hstor.ru/stories/portrety-ubiycy>.

4 <https://jutkoe.ru/tayna-detskih-portretov>.

5 <https://4stor.ru/histori-for-life/114344-tayna-detskih-portretov.html>.

The 'X-FILES: The Unexplained' mailing of 2002 contained an indication of the author's expert status: 'The philosopher and psychoanalyst Anna Kiryanova tells stories from her practice.' In this text Kiryanova is not introduced as 'an expert on demons' (as she was called in the subtitles to the television broadcast in 1996) and does not write that she took part in the events as a healer and psychic, though she does mention her 'patients'. But in 2002 she still uses this story to affirm her position as an expert, as follows from the indication of her status. The republications of this text on social networks in 2013 and 2015 and on the hStor site were unsigned, though the first-person narrative was retained, and are in character purely entertainment, like the anonymous retelling on Mrakopediya — 'the open online compendium of dark folklore, urban legends, simple horror stories, in other words — creepy'. The blog publication of 2020 was aimed at attracting new readers and increasing the blogger's popularity, using the same tactics as the journalists of the 1990s: the blogger contests the materialistic explanation and insists on a mystical one.

In the twenty-first-century texts, in comparison with the newspaper versions of the 1990s, more attention is paid to one particular family that suffered. Of the many variants of the harm caused that were discussed in the 1990s, the most fateful (death) is chosen, and of all the victims, the one who evokes the most sympathy (a little girl). Probably the same hypothetical girl from the 1996 newspaper article in *Na smenu!*, who then became a little girl who had certainly died in *Pravo plyus* in 1996, and by the 2000s (by the 2002 version at the latest) had acquired the name of Katya.[1] While in 1996 the newspapers said nothing about her diagnosis, the urban legends of the 2000s add certain details about her death: blood poisoning at a skating rink, or in another Internet version, 'apparently from cancer, though she had never been ill in her life'.[2] As Patrick Mullen writes, the inclusion of concrete details like place names is characteristic of urban legends: it makes them more believable [Mullen 1972: 98–99]. Furthermore, the details ('Yekaterinburg', the name 'Katya', the 'skating rink' (in Russian *katok*)) may be preserved in the legend on account of the phonetic repetition, which assists their resilience in transmission: in those versions which are not verbatim copies, but retellings of the 2002 story, both 'Yekaterinburg' and 'Katya', and sometimes also 'skating rink' remain.

On the Internet in the 2000s, the people responsible were nowhere called 'Satanists' (the only exception was the publication on Sergo

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[1] Among the victims in the note from Nizhny Tagil [Titorenko 1996a] there was a little girl called Katya, but she suffered much less.

[2] <http://forum.aria-best.su/index.php?showtopic=1986&st=60?s=3b92b45aa64a44b7ce19950db00e2733>.

Buzhan's blog, partly based on the Yekaterinburg broadcast that I have analysed, whence the mention of Satanism), though the Latin letter S still surfaced in Anna Kiryanova's story of 2002: 'On the back of the boy's portrait the inscription "Satan" was found. The letter S was written in the Latin manner. I have seen a similar letter on some other portraits.'[1] In the 2000s the threat of Satanism did not seem as present in society as in the 1990s, so if it was necessary to name the guilty in the stories of killer portraits, some 'sect' was mentioned. My informant in the interview conducted in 2006 also called the people responsible a 'sect' [AFM 2006].

The stories of killer portraits in the form of rumours on the Internet in the 2000s were mostly transmitted as entertainment, and there were no large-scale instances of panic in the 2000s and 2010s, as there had been in the 1990s in Sverdlovsk and Moscow Oblasts. In the stories of the 2000s the time of the event is clearly distinguished from the time of the narration, using words such as 'some years ago'. One publication even has an indication of the period of history in its title 'Photographs from the 1990s' [chetushka 2010], and the collocation 'the wild nineties' occurs in the text. Here the urban legend of witchcraft is used, among other things, by the author to construct the image of that dreadful decade from the perspective of the more prosperous 2000s: it is presumed that this story could have happened in 'the wild nineties', but certainly not in the present day.

Portraits as doubles in Russia

Why did the urban legend about killer portraits find such fertile soil for its dissemination in Russia in the 1990s? One reason is the tenacious belief that a depiction is a double of the person depicted, and that it is possible to make an impact on a person by manipulating his / her portrait.

These views have a long history. Ideas of the portrait as a double of the person portrayed, widespread at the end of the nineteenth century, were collected by Dmitriy Koropchevskiy in a sketch of 1892. This sketch begins with old women in St Petersburg Governorate being afraid to pose for an artist — afraid of 'harm and even a threat to their lives from having their portrait painted' [Koropchevskiy 1892: 5] — and ends with evidence of the same fear from various parts of the world in respect of both painted portraits and photographs, and a conclusion of 'a fear of one's portrait, that is, an apprehension that it might fall into the hands of an ill-intentioned person who might harm the original' [Koropchevskiy 1892: 11]. In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer notes the existence of this fear in material from various cultures [Frazer 1911: 96–100], and Freedberg develops and supplements his

[1] <https://ok.ru/group/51531285921970/topic/62045787089842>; <https://vk.com/wall-86941908_178>.

observations [Freedberg 1989: 278–282]. The photograph, though, which is a depiction irrevocably attached to its object as a trace of that, in other words, it is connected to its object both by similarity, and by proximity, is particularly well suited to magic, and this in part explains its wide dissemination in that sphere [Boitsova 2016].

The fear of a person's being acted upon by means of his / her portrait was not a distant or exotic thing for the Russia of the 1990s and 2000s. In the beliefs of modern Russians, photographs, as substitutes for persons, can be used in magic to cause deliberate harm (see, for example: [Pukhova 2009: no. 110, 111; Khristoforova 2010: 223; Moroz 2013: 169, no. 200]). There are also ideas that the evil eye can be put on a person using a photograph of him / her (see, for example: [Shchepanskaya 2001: 246]).[1] The same idea is expressed in two publications by an author I have already mentioned, Anna Kiryanova,[2] the video clip 'The Secret of Photographs' [Kiryanova 2011] and the publication 'What to Do with Old Photographs' [Kiryanova 2018]: 'You should probably not give out your photographs to all and sundry, or put photographs of your nearest and dearest, particularly children, on your desk at work, because there are many stories connected with artists and photographers telling how they showed portraits of people they loved to many people, for example, the painter Shilov was always drawing his daughter's portrait, and it is generally known that the girl died at the age of sixteen from an incurable disease, because very many eyes had looked enviously on the picture of the pretty girl, and it ended in tragedy' [Kiryanova 2011]. A viewer has shared her own story in the comments to this clip: 'We had had a good holiday and got nice photographs that I uploaded to Instagram, but a few days later my health got worse, I quickly deleted my successful photos, and soon I was feeling as well as I had been at the start of my holiday.'[3]

According to our contemporaries' ideas, a person may be bewitched using a photograph by means of contagious magic, for example 'If you put somebody's photograph into a coffin with a dead person, death will take him' [Glebov 2011: no. 394].[4] In the legend of the killer portraits, to effect harm on people, their photographs did not have to be in direct contact with, say, a grave; a picture of the grave or some other such sinister object could harm them on its own.

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1 In the research tradition the difference between bewitching and the evil eye is understood as the difference between doing harm deliberately or not, but the bearers of the culture themselves may not make any distinction between them [Petrov 2014].

2 Anna Kiryanova, the holder of two degrees, now has a blog, 'The Philosophy of Life', on Yandex Zen, and a YouTube channel 'On Life', which, at the time of writing, had 506,000 subscribers.

3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lBTwxSovv_o&lc=UgyempE6hfLFMl0bCmt4AaABAg>.

4 Cf.: 'A mother, beside herself with grief, put their children's photographs into [her husband's] coffin, to keep him company in the next world. Father was buried, and the children fell ill, although hitherto they had been well' [Domosedova 2006].

By contrast, contact with a 'good' picture is recorded among the means of lifting the spell. Thus, a newspaper article about bewitchment recommends touching the affected parts with a picture of a healer [Vladen 1996].[1] It is not only the person, but his / her photograph that can make contact with a 'good' picture: '"I am a 'white' witch, I heal using prayers, by means of icons, and herbs..." and indeed, there are many icons on Natalya Ivanovna's walls. And each icon, be it of the Saviour or of the Mother of God, has somebody's photograph on it, placed "face to face"' [Tatarinov 2000]. Thus, there is a modern practice of placing photographs against icons.[2] In the instances of the moral panic of 1996–1997 that I studied, I also came across another means of lifting the spell using an icon: 'Light a (church) candle beside the icon, place the photograph opposite it and pray, saying the Lord's Prayer three times without hurrying, and paying attention in your heart' [Shapovalov 1996].

Ideas of the possibility of acting through an image on the person portrayed gave rise to panics in certain parts of Russia as early as the nineteenth century. This was the case with the folkloric subject of the 'hell-depicting icons', which tells of 'diabolical' images found beneath the paint of apparently holy icons. Disturbances among the peasants when hell-depicting icons appeared were recorded in the nineteenth century in the Penza, Oryol, Poltava, Kharkiv and Moscow Governorates: 'At times the hunt for "hell-depicting" icons took on the nature of an epidemic' [Ivanov 1996: 388]. Nikita Tolstoy thinks it doubtful that anyone could have painted a holy image and a diabolical picture on the same board [Tolstoy 1995: 266]; however, as Sergey Ivanov writes, irrespective of whether there were pictures of the Devil beneath the paint of icons, people certainly 'read' such images in 'cracks, natural discolouration in the wood and runs in the paint, and especially old images, which, when an icon was repainted, rustic icon-painters were in the habit of turning upside-down' [Ivanov 1996: 388].

The fear of a hidden image as a source of secret influence is common to our topic and to that of hell-depicting icons. The idea of a hidden image as the cause of secret maleficence has at different times been the source of many moral panics. Alexandra Arkhipova and Anna Kirzyuk, for instance, point to numerous instances of such panics from the USSR in the 1930s, and later of panics about secret signs allegedly left by invisible enemies [Arkhipova, Kirzyuk 2020: 74–159]. The same idea is also reflected in a subject at first sight distant

[1] Cf. the answer of a priest on the site of the Church of the Smolensk Icon of the Mother of God: 'It is permissible to touch the affected part with the front of an icon, but one must be careful that this is done reverently, and not blasphemously' <http://pravoslavie.dubna.ru/3/questions.php?year=2006&month=2&id=1707>.

[2] On this practice see, for example, the Orthodox sites: <https://tv-soyuz.ru/vopros-otvet/duhovnaya-zhizn/mozhno-li-prikladyvat-fotografii-k-svyatynyam>; <http://hramnagorke.ru/question/8052> (the first publication on YouTube is dated 2012, the second 2009).

from our own, that of subliminal advertising [Boese 2006].[1] Maria Akhmetova has recorded fear of the subliminal advertising in the milieu around the church at Diveevo Monastery at the beginning of the 2000s [Akhmetova 2011: 149–150]. She also cites the story of one of her Orthodox informants, recorded in 2003, of how he had received a little icon at the monastery 'turned it over, and there was a taxpayer identification number drawn there' (Akhmetova thinks it is likely this means a barcode). A cross was stuck over it 'and the icon became fragrant' [Ibid.: 156–157].

Arkhipova and Kirzyuk regard both the panic around the hell-depicting icons in nineteenth-century Russia and the discovery of secret messages from the enemy — that is ascribing significance to the background and identifying signs deliberately left by hostile powers — as examples of hypersemiotisation. They list the conditions required for hypersemiotisation: first, a feeling of heightened alarm and a sense of loss of control over events; second, the idea that it is essential to discover the supposed enemy signs in order to avoid grave danger; and third, the wide dissemination of the idea of an invisible, powerful enemy that has control over our life [Arkhipova, Kirzyuk 2020: 100–101]. With some qualifications, it may be said that these conditions obtained in Russia in 1996–1997: firstly, there was a sense of loss of control, secondly, extensive involvement by the media, and thirdly, a ubiquitous belief in the idea that Satanism was a serious threat.

An interesting peculiarity of the subject of the killer portraits is that its substance could be checked. Unlike such subjects of urban legends as infected needles in cinemas, poisoned chewing gum and fingernails in pies, many of the people who heard about killer portraits had the opportunity to discover the threat they had been told about right there in their own homes. If Ivanov's contentions about hell-depicting icons that I cited earlier have substance, verifiability may be another feature that these have in common with 'killer pictures'. Equally, the chance of finding at home exactly the phenomena described in the urban legend could increase its effect on people's behaviour, enhancing what Arkhipova and Kirzyuk call the 'ostensive charge' or 'ostensive potential' of the urban legend [Arkhipova, Kirzyuk 2020: 60].

No small part in the fear evoked by the urban legend was played by the 'dreadfulness' of the 'lining' discovered in the portraits. If people were depicted on the inserted photographs, they were assumed to be 'the dead', or, as my informant said in the interview, 'the photograph of a completely sick child,' who 'to look at was in a simply dreadful state' [AFM 2006]. Pieces of a photograph on which there were parts of the body could be frightening because they evoked the notion of

[1] On the subject of subliminal advertising see also: [Mikkelson 2011].

dismemberment (in the idea of the photograph as the double, a photographic portrait is not just a piece of photographic paper, and cutting it up bears symbolic weight). Besides, many of the insertions that figure in the rumours were connected with funeral appurtenances, and in the contemporary urban culture of Russia there is a fear of everything connected with death (compare the words of an Orthodox priest: 'That is, by and large, dead people are, kind of… They provoke fear, they can cause some sort of misfortune. <…> That is, all these fears are traditional, they do all exist, yes. That is, people dream of the dead, people have to have their home blessed after dead people, they're afraid they could, so to speak, drag other people after them — dead people mustn't be touched' [AFM 2009].

Charles Perrow's book *Normal Accidents* [Perrow 1984] describes an experiment that shows that people are most frightened by threats that cannot be controlled, cannot be seen, and the consequences of which are deferred in time and are fatal. All these signs are present in the subject of the killer portraits.

Conclusion

Many researchers into moral panics have written that their genesis is to be explained by social and psychological reasons. Kenneth Thompson considers moral panics as a symptom of change. He names three groups of changes to which society reacts with a moral panic: firstly, structural changes (economic restructuring and the lifting of restrictions, immigration, changes in the division of labour), secondly, technological innovations, and thirdly, cultural changes such as multiculturalism and the growing role of culture industries in the life of society [Thompson 1998].

The 1990s in Russia were indeed a time of change: the collapse of the USSR, the formation of a new state, the radical economic stratification of society and the transformation of the social hierarchy. The panic surrounding the photographs in 1996–1997 reflected a reaction to the sense of loss of control produced by the changes of that time. The revelation of the reasons for the secret harm supposedly inflicted on them through the portrait gave the people involved in disseminating the moral panic the illusion of control over the situation. The attractiveness of the urban legend was increased by its wide explanatory potential. It gave the opportunity of naming the reason for a whole range of problems and failures, both new and old: health-related difficulties, unpleasant incidents in life, accidents, and bad character. The agents who spread the panic promised not only to explain the unwanted situation, but also to put it right by performing certain actions.

Among the reasons for moral panics named by Klocke and Muschert are media attention to the problems that are causing the panic and

disquiet about these problems already present in society [Klocke, Muschert 2010: 301]. In the 1990s fear of Satanists was widespread in Russia, as in many other countries of the world, and Satanism was discussed in the central Russian mass media. In this respect the outbreak of a moral panic concerning Satanism in the Sverdlovsk and Moscow Oblasts was not surprising. The cultural changes of this period in Russia included religious pluralism, which opened the opportunity for new religious practices and spiritual explorations, and brought in an enthusiasm for the esoteric, but also a fear of 'sects'. In those years, two 'interest groups' that took part in the events — Orthodox priests and psychics — had great authority for the mass media. For all the differences between them, both groups to a certain extent came together over the moral panic, and the psychics took the opportunity of demonstrating that in their actions they were opposing evil in the form of the Satanists.

A part was also played in the explosive proliferation of the subject by the belief, prevalent at that time, that photographs could be used to wreak harm by black magic, a belief that had already caused panic in the nineteenth century, and which still exists in Russia today.

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Abbreviations

AFM 2006 — Author's field material: interview with a woman born 1976

AFM 2009 — Author's field material: interview with a man born 1967 (an Orthodox priest)

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